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The End of the *Mihna**

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Abstract

Why did al-Mutawakkil end the *Mihna*? The usual answer to this question assumes that he was acknowledging the inevitable victory of the 'ulamā'. He is seen to be 'cutting his losses' by restoring and enforcing orthodoxy as the traditionalist 'ulamā' saw it. In this article I offer a different answer. Al-Mutawakkil ended the *Mihna* as one part of his broader effort to establish his position as sovereign and independent of the individuals and structures that had carried over from al-Wāthiq's reign. Eliminating the *Mihna* was one strategy deployed in undermining and eliminating the "kingmakers" who had placed him on the throne. He correctly surmised that if left in place these would impede his position and ultimately control him.

Keywords

Mihna, al-Mutawakkil, al-Wāthiq, Ibn Abī Du'ād, Īrāk

Why did al-Mutawakkil end the *Mihna*? The usual answer to this question assumes that he was acknowledging the inevitable victory of the 'ulamā'.¹ He is seen to be cutting his losses by restoring and enforcing orthodoxy as the traditionalists saw it. However, as Melchert has pointed out, he did not implement "traditionalist Islam."² In this article I will offer a new answer.

* Thanks are due to the members of the School of 'Abbasid Studies for their helpfully generous comments, particularly John Nawas for his able and insightful commentary. James Montgomery also deserves recognition for his editorial prowess. This article is much stronger as a result. Thanks are also due to Colby College for the generous Social Science Grant 01 2236 which funded the research for this article.

¹ For example see M. Miah, *The Reign of al-Mutawakkil*, Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1969, p. 101.

² C. Melchert, "Religious Policies of the Caliphs from Al-Mutawakkil to Al-Muqtadir, AH 232-295 /AD 847-908," *Islamic Law and Society* 3 (1996): 330. Melchert has since softened his stance a little. See C. Melchert, *Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2006, p. 17. That al-Mutawakkil had a religious policy is clear given his restrictions on the *dhimmi* and Shī'a. However, it is equally clear that he did not just replace the *Mihna* enforcing belief in the createdness of the Qur'ān with a *Mihna* to impose its opposite (the traditionalist position). As well, his policies did not amount to a 'restoration' of Sunnism as defined by the traditionalist *muḥaddithūn*. I must thank Amikam Elad for encouraging me to clarify my thinking on this.

Al-Mutawakkil ended the *Miḥna* as part of his effort to establish his position as sovereign, independent of the forces that had placed him on the throne. He eliminated individuals and structures that had carried over from the waning days of al-Wāthiq's reign, and also, implicitly, al-Ma'mūn's and al-Mu'taṣim's. He was specifically focused on undoing the influence of his brother's men.³ Ending the *Miḥna* was one strategy deployed in undermining and eliminating the kingmakers.⁴ He correctly surmised that if left in place these would impede his exercise of power, his position and ultimately control him. This, it seems, was what they intended to do. Al-Mutawakkil used the rivalries inhering between those figures to cause them to remove each other one by one. His actions were calculated and tactically shrewd. Given the timing these were not spontaneous falls from grace. By the end the only one left standing was Waṣīf, one of the main conspirators in the plot that killed him. It is also important to note that al-Mutawakkil was not just going after the members of the 'cabal' that enthroned him.⁵ He was generally asserting his dominance over the state. Ending the *Miḥna* was merely one part of this.

In an effort to maintain his authority, the Caliph al-Mutawakkil was engaged in factional politics, as were all of the caliphs. Al-Ṭabarī tells us that there was serious discord between Ibn al-Zayyāt and Ibn Abī Du'ād. In one instance in 229/843-844 Ibn al-Zayyāt instigated an investigation of Aḥmad b. Abī Du'ād and the *aṣḥāb al-mazālim* clearly challenging him in an area solidly under his purview.⁶ The Ṭahirid Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm was placed in charge of this action, although al-Ṭabarī, by using the passive, indicates that Iṣḥāq was only doing as he was told. The episode is a bit cryptic but it results in a

³ Almost all of whom were also his father's men literally and figuratively. See M. Al-Farrā, *A Critical Edition of Kitāb al-Buldān by al-Ya'qūbī*, unpublished PhD, University of Exeter, 1981, pp. 26, 28, where one finds all of these figures listed as present for and prominent at the foundation of Samarra. Al-Ya'qūbī also conveniently supplies a list of the major Turkish generals.

⁴ Lassner does not connect al-Mutawakkil's removal of the cabal figures to the cessation of the *Miḥna*. He discusses some of al-Mutawakkil's activities in the dispossession of elite figures but views this as a result of financial need. He does note that there was some 'settling scores' in the process (more on this below): J. Lassner, *The Middle East Remembered*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000, pp. 230-246. Kennedy notes that al-Mutawakkil was seeking independence of action but has a significantly different focus than I have here: H. Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2005, p. 236; also H. Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs*, New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 137. Gordon notes that al-Mutawakkil eliminated the kingmakers in order to consolidate his power but does not take this any further: M. Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001, p. 82.

⁵ There is some question as to whether there was a cabal, as we shall see.

⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M.J. de Goeje et al., III, Leiden: Brill, 1879, p. 1331.

number of figures (unnamed) being imprisoned.⁷ This anecdote gives a glimpse of the struggle going on behind the scenes, behind the veneer of caliphal power between three very influential figures that continued and intensified after al-Wāthiq's death.⁸ Ishāq's action at the behest of Ibn al-Zayyāt could explain why al-Mutawakkil used Ītākh, instead of Ishāq, to remove Ibn al-Zayyāt. As a result of that tie al-Mutawakkil could not rely on him to take care of this particular problem.⁹ These are, of course, manifestations of the complications of dynamic political interaction driven by factional power sharing. Given his reliance on them to do his dirty work al-Mutawakkil could not afford to alienate too many of them at any one time. He relied on them in varying capacities in order to balance the players on the field. He became more selective in assigning duties until he reached a point where he could remove one or the other.¹⁰ This would eventually break down. Let us now turn to three instances that will shed light more clearly on the problems of al-Mutawakkil's rise and his solutions.

There are differing accounts of the enthronement of al-Mutawakkil. Al-Ṭabarī's is the most well known.¹¹ Upon the unexpected death of al-Wāthiq in an oven (*tannūr*) the most important figures present in Samarra gathered.¹² The members of the *shūrā* were: Aḥmad b. Abī Du'ād, Ītākh, Waṣīf, 'Umar b.

⁷ It is unclear if this episode is to be considered part of al-Wāthiq's assault on the secretaries or not.

⁸ Al-Dhahabī, *Tā'rikh al-Islam*, ed. 'Umar Tadmurī, Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1990, p. 334 (for years 231-240), notes that there was enmity between Ibn al-Zayyāt and Ibn Abī Du'ād.

⁹ Note that Ishāq had imprisoned Ibn al-Ba'ith, under orders from al-Mutawakkil, but Bughā l-Sharābī, along with others, convinced him to furlough him. He promptly took flight as a result. There are other hints of this unreliability as well: al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, p. 1380. Generally speaking he has been viewed as a loyal and unambitious enforcer for the 'Abbasid caliphs that he served. On closer examination, he is a much more complex character. On the Ṭahirids see M. Ka'bi, *Les Tahirides*, Paris: Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1983.

¹⁰ Miah, *Reign of al-Mutawakkil*, p. 28, states that al-Faḍl b. Marwān's removal was part of al-Mutawakkil's attempt to collect "stronger allies in order to remove Ītākh..."

¹¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, pp. 1368-1370.

¹² The circumstances of his death have always struck me as inordinately suspicious. Al-Ṭabarī states that he suffered from edema (*istiḡsā'*) of the abdomen, from which he found relief in heat. Three members of the cabal that appointed al-Mutawakkil were present when his predecessor died by being left in an oven (*tannūr*) too long: Ibn Abī Du'ād, 'Umar b. Faraj, and Ibn al-Zayyāt: al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, pp. 1363-1364. Al-Yā qūbī briefly mentions the oven (which he describes as a pit in the ground, "like an oven [*tannūr*] heated by tamarisk wood"): *Tā'rikh*, ed. 'Abd al-Amīr Muḥannā, II, Beirut: Mu'assasat al-'Ulamī li-l-Maṭbū'āt, 1993, p. 446. T. El-Hibri, "The Image of the Caliph al-Wāthiq: A Riddle of Religious and Historical Significance," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 19 (2001): 41-60, discusses al-Wāthiq's death but does not address its suspiciousness.

Faraj, Ibn al-Zayyāt, and Aḥmad b. Khālid Abū l-Wazīr.¹³ They quickly decided on al-Wāthiq's minor son Muḥammad but Waṣīf objected. The others concurred that he was far too young; such an appointment would be manifestly illegitimate. They then wrangled back and forth until they chose what they presumably thought to be the weakest, least objectionable and most controllable adult candidate, al-Wāthiq's 26 year old brother Ja'far.¹⁴ After proving to him that al-Wāthiq was really dead, Ibn Abī Du'ād anointed him Caliph by placing robes upon him and addressing him as Commander of the Faithful. Ja'far then turned to the most pressing business and gave out pay for the troops, four months worth for the army and the *Shākiriyya*. The *Hāshimiyyūn* received eight months while the *Maghāribā* were offered three.¹⁵ Ibn al-Zayyāt drew up the oath which everyone was to swear and the *shūrā* then settled down to the task of choosing a regnal title. The first option, al-Muntaṣir bi-Allāh, suggested by Ibn al-Zayyāt was in favour until early the next morning when it was supplanted by Ibn Abī Du'ād's recommendation of al-Mutawakkil 'alā Allāh.¹⁶ These events took place on the 23rd of Dhū l-Ḥijja, 232/August 10, 847 before sunset.¹⁷ Whether this occurred as al-Ṭabarī describes it is certainly open to debate but one point clearly comes through: al-Mutawakkil was not a man in charge of his own destiny. Al-Ṭabarī's narrative of his reign is tied together with the thread of al-Mutawakkil's struggle to become so. His first act as Caliph was to send Ītākh to arrest and torture Ibn al-Zayyāt, which he did on the 7th of Ṣafar 233/September 22, 847. He lingered about a month before dying.¹⁸

¹³ Al-Farrā, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, p. 28: al-Ya'qūbī places the four civilians in this group with al-Mu'taṣim at the founding of Samarra (and the announcement of the purchase of the land). On p. 26 he lists the names of the major Turkish slaves of al-Mu'taṣim, including Ītākh, Waṣīf and Simā l-Dimashqī, whom he had purchased during the reign of al-Ma'mūn.

¹⁴ In recounting the reasons for al-Mutawakkil's anger towards Ibn al-Zayyāt, al-Ṭabarī paints a portrait of al-Mutawakkil as a weakling, bullied by and submitting to everyone. It is readily apparent that al-Wāthiq's officials did not seem overly concerned to position themselves in al-Mutawakkil's favor in preparation for his eventual succession. They all seemed to presume that al-Wāthiq's son would be the next caliph. This is borne out by the failed attempt to make this the case. But for Waṣīf's irrefutable objection it would have been thus.

¹⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, pp. 1369-1370.

¹⁶ Perhaps this is the first inkling of a power shift initially in favor of Ibn Abī Du'ād.

¹⁷ For all date conversions to the Gregorian calendar I used an online utility at <http://www.islamicity.com/PrayerTimes/hijriconverter1a.htm>. These coincide with those given by Kraemer in his translation: al-Ṭabarī, *Incipient Decline*, trans. J. Kraemer, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

¹⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, pp. 1376-1377. Al-Dhahabī, *Tā'rikh*, p. 334 (for years 231-240) hints that it was Ibn Abī Du'ād who tortured and killed Ibn al-Zayyāt.

Al-Ya'qūbī's version is, as always, more succinct. In this case it is vastly different but with some interesting similarities.¹⁹ First, there was no cabal. The oath was taken to al-Wāthiq's son before he died in the oven. With no explanation of the discrepancy, we are then told that al-Mutawakkil became Caliph at the end of Dhū l-Ḥijja 232: "the first to take the oath of allegiance to him were Sīmā l-Turkī, known as al-Dimashqī and Waṣīf al-Turkī."²⁰ These two, within the hour, were dispatched to distribute eight months pay to the troops. This seems to have been instrumental in maintaining order and ensuring a smooth transition. Then the children of seven caliphs were gathered to take the oath of allegiance to the new Caliph. The list is an impressive representation of 'Abbasid familial support, in stark contrast to that not afforded to al-Ma'mūn.²¹ The list of names is as follows: al-Manṣūr b. al-Mahdī, al-'Abbās b. al-Hādī, Aḥmad b. al-Rashīd, 'Abd Allāh b. al-Amīn, Mūsā b. al-Ma'mūn and his brothers, Abū Aḥmad b. al-Mu'taṣim and his sisters, and finally Muḥammad b. al-Wāthiq.²² Immediately following this list of names we are told that forty days later al-Mutawakkil brought low and tortured to death Ibn al-Zayyāt. Al-Ya'qūbī adds that no one was likely to miss him very much as he was a rather loathesome fellow. As an intriguing but speculative sidenote, Ibn al-Zayyāt was credited with the creation of the *tannūr*, a torture device resembling an iron maiden. In a poetic turn, he was made a victim of it in his last days. This would be all the more poetic if we read al-Wāthiq's death in an "oven" not literally but as a euphemism for Ibn al-Zayyāt's device.²³ This can be no more than speculative, however connecting up the suspiciousness of al-Wāthiq's death, the presence of Ibn al-Zayyāt (and the others) at it and the odd reference to dying in an oven would make greater sense of it. It also highlights the extreme precariousness of al-Mutawakkil's position. Radical and rapid action was needed. Returning from the realm of speculation to the firmer ground of reality, the forty-day interval before removing Ibn al-Zayyāt coincides with a mourning period and is exactly the same chronological framework as that found in al-Ṭabarī — although al-Ṭabarī makes you count the days while al-Ya'qūbī explicitly tells you the number. In any case, al-Ya'qūbī makes clear that at the earliest opportunity al-Mutawakkil began to go after

¹⁹ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Tā'rikh*, II, pp. 446-447; al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-mā'ādin al-jawhar*, ed. 'Abd al-Amīr Muḥannā, IV, Beirut: Mu'assasat al-'Ulāmī li-l-Maṭbū'āt, 1991, p. 94 is even more succinct.

²⁰ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Tā'rikh*, II, p. 446. For more on these two see al-Farrā, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, p. 32. Sīmā and Waṣīf received large allotments in Samarra seemingly on par with Ītākh.

²¹ For more on that see John Nawas' article in this volume.

²² Note that the last listed is the failed heir of al-Ṭabarī's version. Of course, the list follows the order of the caliphs.

²³ Thanks go to James Montgomery for helping me see this possibility.

his brother's men. No intermediaries are listed as doing the job for him, or deemed important enough to mention.

In the year 233/847-848 four of the six members of the cabal were eliminated from power and discussion of either the createdness or uncreatedness of the Qur'ān was forbidden.²⁴ The fifth (Ītākḥ) was eliminated in early 235/849 and the sixth (Waṣīf) as noted above would outlive al-Mutawakkil.²⁵ Lassner notes that Waṣīf became chamberlain immediately before Ītākḥ's removal but then disappears from the chronicles for ten years, resurfacing as the target of al-Mutawakkil's dispossession brigade and thus also in the plot to kill him.²⁶ He argues that going after Waṣīf in 247/861 (i.e. before the assassination) was solely motivated by financial need and that this exigency drove most of the dispossessions. Clearly there was monetary gain to be had. However I see other impulses at work. The fiscal incentive might have been one way to get someone to do the 'shake-down' of a rival but the net effect was to empower the Caliph at the expense of everyone else. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that for every anniversary of enthronement (early in his reign at least) al-Mutawakkil removed an important figure. This is the context of the ending of the *Miḥna*. Ītākḥ tortured Ibn al-Zayyāt to death.²⁷ Ibn Abī Du'ād had a stroke.²⁸ Al-Faḍl b. Marwān was removed from the *Dīwān al-Kharāj* in the middle of Ramaḍān 233/848.²⁹ 'Umar b. Faraj was arrested in the same month by Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm.³⁰ Aḥmad b. Khālid Abū l-Wazīr was also humiliated three months later in Dhū l-Ḥijja, on the first anniversary of al-Mutawakkil's enthronement.³¹ For reasons left unclear Abū l-Wazīr,³² 'Umar b. Faraj and

²⁴ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Tā'rikh*, II, p. 447; al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, p. 1412. Al-Ṭabarī tells us as part of narrating the events surrounding the burial of Aḥmad b. Naṣr al-Khuzā'i that al-Mutawakkil forbade this discussion at the beginning of his reign. Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi'iyya al-kubrā*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad al-Ṭanāḥī, II, Cairo: 'Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1964-1976, p. 54, says that it was in 234.

²⁵ Unfortunately, al-Dīnawarī and Khalifa b. Khayyāṭ's chronicles end before this episode. Lassner, *The Middle East Remembered*, p. 253, notes that Waṣīf was the only one of the cabal to survive.

²⁶ Lassner, *The Middle East Remembered*, p. 245.

²⁷ Al-Dhahabī, *Tā'rikh*, p. 334 (for years 231-240) gives credit to Ibn Abī Du'ād for this. He also gives Ibn al-Zayyāt's death year as 233: see p. 335. Al-Ya'qūbī, *Tā'rikh*, II, p. 448, does not say who gets credit but al-Mutawakkil orders it and it is done.

²⁸ Al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq bayna l-firaq*, Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Ma'ārif, 1910, pp. 159-160, states that he had his stroke after being imprisoned by al-Mutawakkil; al-Ya'qūbī, *Tā'rikh*, II, p. 448, is ambiguous on this due to lacunae.

²⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, p. 1379.

³⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, p. 1377. He adds that 'Umar was then released.

³¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, p. 1378.

³² Abū l-Wazīr was subjected to al-Wāthiq's ire as he assaulted the secretaries in 229/843: al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, p. 1335.

al-Faḍl b. Marwān survived. The plot against ʿĪtākḥ began in 234/849 on the second anniversary of his enthronement. Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm would die on the third anniversary in 235/850 followed almost exactly one solar year later by both his son and his brother Muḥammad in 236/851.³³

For further insights let us now turn to the descriptions of the demise of Aḥmad b. Abī Duʿād and caliphal regrets for the *Miḥna*.³⁴ Al-Ṭabarī says that he died in Muḥarram 240/854 and that his son predeceased him by twenty days.³⁵ However his political activities ended long before his dispossession and later death. Ibn Abī Duʿād suffered a debilitating stroke in Jumādā II 233/848 and was paralyzed.³⁶ Hence, he was removed as a player six months after al-Mutawakkil's enthronement and three months after the death of Ibn al-Zayyāt. Thus he went on to survive for approximately seven more years as an invalid. This appears to be straight forward but there is a complication in al-Ṭabarī's account as he mentions that in Ṣafar 237/August 851, slightly more than four years after enthronement, al-Mutawakkil was infuriated by Ibn Abī Duʿād and thus it was at this point that he dispossessed both him and his sons.³⁷ Al-Ṭabarī explicitly states that he was paralyzed, and thus not dead. Therefore, almost four years after his stroke al-Mutawakkil moved against him. I posit that given that Ibn Abī Duʿād was incapacitated and that the sons were certainly less influential than the father, there was, from a power perspective, little need to go after them immediately — i.e. they could be put on the back burner and dealt with later. They were no longer an immediate threat.

Al-Yaʿqūbī says that “paralysis befell him.”³⁸ The context agrees with al-Ṭabarī's dating of the stroke in 233/848. Al-Yaʿqūbī then goes on to tell us that al-Mutawakkil appointed Ibn Abī Duʿād's son Muḥammad in his stead.³⁹ Unfortunately this is followed by a lacuna. The text tantalizingly resumes “and indeed he was imprisoned because of the falsity of his words.”⁴⁰ In agreement with al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Abī Duʿād's son was arrested in 237 on account of his

³³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tāʾriḫ*, pp. 1403, 1404-1407; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī l-tāʾriḫ*, ed. C.J. Tornberg, VII, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1965, p. 52.

³⁴ Part of what follows is based upon Appendix B of J. Turner, *Inquisition and the Definition of Identity in Early ʿAbbasid History*, unpublished PhD, University of Michigan, 2001, pp. 290-292.

³⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tāʾriḫ*, III, p. 1421; al-Dhahabī, *Tāʾriḫ*, p. 46 (for years 231-240); al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, IV, p. 108; Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Ṭabaqāt al-Muʿtazila*, ed. S. Diwald-Walzer, Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1961, pp. 62-67. Unhelpfully, Ibn al-Murtaḍā does not mention a death date.

³⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tāʾriḫ*, III, p. 1379; al-Dhahabī, *Tāʾriḫ*, p. 46 (for years 231-240), mentions the extent of the paralysis without specifically dating it.

³⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tāʾriḫ*, III, pp. 1410-1411.

³⁸ Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tāʾriḫ*, II, p. 448.

³⁹ Al-Ṭabarī does not include this information.

⁴⁰ Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tāʾriḫ*, II, p. 448.

father and then he died.⁴¹ Here occurs yet another unfortunate lacuna, which when considered along with al-Ya'qūbī's phrasing leaves open the possibility that Muḥammad died at a later date. But, the context indicates 237. However, very importantly al-Ya'qūbī does not give a death notice for Ibn Abī Du'ād. We are not even told that he died. He ceases to appear in the text after noting his paralysis. This gives credence to my position that Ibn Abī Du'ād's importance waned to the point that al-Mutawakkil could put off dealing with him until later in his reign. Now let us turn to two intriguingly different accounts.

The version related by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī begins with someone telling al-Mutawakkil that Aḥmad b. Naṣr al-Khuzā'ī⁴² severed head recited the Qur'an until it was buried after being impaled for six years on a pole.⁴³ Al-Mutawakkil is greatly distressed by this news and the next time Ibn al-Zayyāt, as vizier, comes into his presence, he asks who killed Aḥmad b. Naṣr. He replies: "O Commander of the Faithful may God burn me in the fire if the Commander of the Faithful al-Wāthiq killed him for anything other than unbelief." He then asks Harthama,⁴⁴ who happens to walk by at that moment, the same question. He responds: "O Commander of the Faithful may God cut me limb from limb if the Commander of the Faithful al-Wāthiq killed him for anything other than unbelief." Then Ibn Abī Du'ād also happens to walk by and is greeted with the same question. He proclaims: "O Commander of the Faithful may God strike me with paralysis if the Commander of the Faithful al-Wāthiq killed him for anything other than unbelief." Then al-Mutawakkil notes that:

As for Ibn al-Zayyāt, he was consumed by the fire and as for Harthama he fled and went into the desert and passed by the tribe Khuzā'a and a man in the tribe

⁴¹ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, p. 453.

⁴² Aḥmad b. Naṣr was involved in a revolt in Baghdād in 231/846 and was executed by al-Wāthiq as a result of failing to answer correctly in the *Miḥna*.

⁴³ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rikh Baghdād*, ed. Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā', V, Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānījī, 1931, p. 178 (entry for Aḥmad b. Naṣr); Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*, X, Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'āda, 1932-1939, p. 306, includes al-Khaṭīb's version verbatim up to the last line.

⁴⁴ Harthama b. Naṣr appears as part of the clean up surrounding Ītākḥ. He was Ītākḥ's deputy in Egypt. He was dispossessed as well: al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, p. 449. His name is given as Harthama b. Naṣr al-Jabalī in al-Kindī, *The Governors and Judges of Egypt*, ed. R. Guest and A.A. Askalami, London: Gibb Memorial Trust, 1912, pp. 196, 197: in the year 233 as part of the allegiance oath in Miṣr for al-Mutawakkil (p. 196); the full entry for him is included on p. 197. The editor identifies him with Harthama b. Naṣr al-Khuttālī: see al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, III, p. 1267. That person was part of the 'Abbās b. al-Ma'mūn plot. He was released and made governor of al-Dīnawar by al-Afshīn. According to al-Kindī, al-Mutawakkil wrote to him in 234/848-9 forbidding discussion about the Qur'an. Harthama died apparently soon afterwards and was replaced by his son.

knew him and he said: “O assemblage of the Khuzā’a, this is the man who killed the son of our uncle, Aḥmad b. Naṣr’ and they cut him limb from limb.”⁴⁵ As for Ibn Abī Du’ād then indeed God imprisoned him in his body.⁴⁶

There is a version similar to this in ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī’s older *al-Farq bayna l-Firaq*, although it is significantly different.⁴⁷ Thumāma b. Ashras denounces Aḥmad b. Naṣr to al-Wāthiq who then has him killed.⁴⁸ Al-Wāthiq almost immediately regrets killing Aḥmad and repents. He then turns to blame Thumāma, Ibn Abī Du’ād,⁴⁹ and Ibn al-Zayyāt. Ibn al-Zayyāt protests: “If killing him were not the answer then may God, most high, kill me between the water and the fire.” Ibn Abī Du’ād, not to be outdone, adds: “May God, most high, imprison me in my skin if killing him were not the right answer.” Thumāma intones: “May God, most high, give the sword power over me if you were not correct in killing him.” Naturally, the divine response is swift:

God, most high, heard the call of each one from among them. As for Ibn al-Zayyāt then verily he was killed in the baths. He fell in his clothes and died between the water and the fire. As for Ibn Abī Du’ād then al-Mutawakkil, may God bless him, imprisoned him and the stroke befell him in his prison and he remained a prisoner in his skin by paralysis until he died. As for Thumāma, then verily he left for Mecca and so the Khuzā’a saw him between al-Ṣafā and al-Marwa. A man from among them called out and said “O people of Khuzā’a, this is who denounced (brought evil upon) your companion Aḥmad b. Naṣr⁵⁰ and he causes evil in his blood.” And so the Banū Khuzā’a gathered about him with their swords until they had killed him.⁵¹ Then they carried out his corpse from the *Ḥaram* and so the beasts of prey ate him outside of the *Ḥaram*. And so this was just as God, most high, said: “so he tasted the evil result of his disbelief, and the consequences of his disbelief was loss.”⁵²

This version is included in a discussion of the “heretical beliefs” of Thumāma. Thus he comes at the end, as he is the focus of the narrative.⁵³ These narratives

⁴⁵ I have yet to find an account of Aḥmad b. Naṣr’s trial in which Harthama was involved.

⁴⁶ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, V, p. 178; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, X, p. 306, adds “meaning by paralysis — God smote him before his death by four years. . . .”

⁴⁷ Al-Baghdādī, *Farq*, pp. 159-160.

⁴⁸ As with Harthama, I have yet to find an account in which Thumāma was involved.

⁴⁹ Whose name is given as Ibn Da’ūd.

⁵⁰ The text has a clear scribal error with Fahr instead of Naṣr.

⁵¹ One wonders if there is not an anti-Khuzā’a subtext; as violating the *Ḥaram* by assaulting and killing someone in *ihnām* would not reflect well on them even if the cause were manifestly just.

⁵² Al-Baghdādī, *Farq*, pp. 159-60, quoting Qur’an 65:9.

⁵³ I find it intriguing that this story is told in relation to the trial of Aḥmad b. Naṣr and not Ibn Ḥanbal. God exacts punishment upon them for their actions against Aḥmad b. Naṣr but not

are clearly literary in their purpose. For example, we know that ʾItākḥ killed Ibn al-Zayyāt. As well, Thumāma drops out and is readily replaced by Harthama. In al-Baghdādī's narrative time is compressed with the blame, regret and repentance all tied to al-Wāthiq. Although, note that al-Mutawakkil still receives credit for eliminating Ibn Abī Duʿād. As they were working apparently from the same source al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī was correcting for the fact that Thumāma had died during the reign of al-Maʾmūn. His changes have the side effect of focusing the episode more directly on al-Mutawakkil. Both seek to drive home the point that the *Miḥna* was something to be regretted and that the Caliph ended it to atone for the sin it entailed, while clearly vindicating Aḥmad b. Naṣr and his rebellion. Ending the *Miḥna* becomes, figuratively, atonement for that and this figure becomes representational and symbolic for the restoration of orthodox Islam as interpreted by the *ʿulamāʾ* approximately 200 years later. Of course al-Mutawakkil merely ended the *Miḥna* and did not enforce its opposite in its place. His religious policy was not restorational. It was geared to make him independent of those by whom he was surrounded. Both narratives give God credit for punishing those involved with the *Miḥna* and thus sanctioning the ending of it. It has been retooled such that al-Mutawakkil is praised for restoring Sunnism. In it the Caliph is merely an executive. It peels away any sense of caliphal power concerns and leaves only spiritual ones.⁵⁴ These stand in direct opposition to the conclusions one derives from the chronicles that the actions of the Caliph were methodically and strategically geared to enhance his power and independence. In the case of Ibn Abī Duʿād, al-Mutawakkil had no need to rush his assault on either him or his family as the father's paralysis did most of the job for him. This however was not a permanent solution as the son's influence could grow. Were it to do so it would do so through the implementation of the *Miḥna*. Thus al-Mutawakkil crushed it before it did. There was no sense in moving against him immediately after the stroke as there were more immediate threats abounding. To elucidate this point let us turn to the third episode to be examined.

There are two main accounts of the assault on ʾItākḥ.⁵⁵ The most cited is that of al-Ṭabarī.⁵⁶ As in many instances al-Yaʿqūbī's is different but much less so

because of how they behaved towards the paragon of Sunni steadfastness. I will have more to say on this in another venue.

⁵⁴ I am developing this idea more fully in a larger project.

⁵⁵ Portions of the following are based on segments of a paper on Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm presented to the 2002 MESA conference. It has been almost completely altered.

⁵⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾriḫ*, III, pp. 1384-1387; al-Dhahabī, *Taʾriḫ*, V, pp. 106-107 (for years 231-240), tells largely the same story as al-Ṭabarī, clearly using him as a source. He does not go into as much detail about ʾItākḥ being separated from his entourage.

here than elsewhere.⁵⁷ Al-Ya'qūbī has the events beginning in Dhū l-Qa'da, 234/June-July, 849,⁵⁸ shortly before the second anniversary of al-Mutawakkil's enthronement. Al-Ṭabarī's account concurs.⁵⁹ Al-Ṭabarī has the events come to a head in the beginning of the year 235/849 with Ītākḥ dying six months later in Jumādā II 235/December 849⁶⁰ exactly two years after Ibn Abī Du'ād was paralyzed. Al-Ṣafadī cites al-Ṭabarī incorrectly when he states that Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm and al-Ḥasan b. Sahl died on the same day in 236.⁶¹ Al-Ṭabarī does not say this. He states that Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm's son and brother Muḥammad died in the same month as al-Ḥasan b. Sahl.⁶² Ibn al-Athīr notes that al-Ḥasan b. Sahl died that year as well⁶³ but amends this later by saying that "it was said that al-Ḥasan died in the year 236."⁶⁴ The question of the dating of this episode is very important because if al-Ṭabarī and al-Ya'qūbī are accurate, then the equally important Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm died at most six months after Ītākḥ and exactly one year after arresting him.⁶⁵ Consequently he also died on the

⁵⁷ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Tā'rikh*, II, p. 449; al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, pp. 1383-1387.

⁵⁸ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Tā'rikh*, II, pp. 448-449.

⁵⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, pp. 1383-1384, gives three dates for the departure on pilgrimage: 18th Dhū l-Qa'da 234 (June 849), sometime in the year 233, and 17 Dhū l-Ḥijja 233 (July 848). Given the order of presentation he clearly prefers the 234 date. Al-Dhahabī, *Tā'rikh*, p. 107 (for years 231-240) places the death date as Jumādā I, 234/848; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, VII, pp. 46, 47, agrees with al-Ṭabarī and states that Ītākḥ died in Jumādā II 235; al-Ṣūlī, *Kitāb Al-Awrāq (Kniga Listov)*, ed. V.I. Baliaev and A.B. Khalidov, St. Petersburg: Tsentr Peterburgskoe vostokovedenie, 1998, p. 502 briefly mentions it under the year 235. Miah gives two sets of dates based on al-Ṭabarī (however al-Ṭabarī gives three) for the onset of these events — 18th Dhū l-Qa'da of 233 or 234. He argues that the 234 date is more accurate: Miah, *Reign of al-Mutawakkil*, p. 38. He also accepts Ītākḥ's death date as given by al-Ṭabarī.

⁶⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, p. 1386.

⁶¹ Al-Ṣafadī, *al-Wafī min al-wafāyāt*, ed. Muḥammad Yūsuf Najm, VIII, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1981, p. 397.

⁶² Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, p. 1406. The cause of al-Ḥasan's death is given as a result of a medicinal draught he drank on either the 25th of Dhū l-Qa'da or the first of Dhū l-Ḥijja. His appearance here is more than a little odd, as John Nawas pointed out to me, given the conventional wisdom that he had a nervous breakdown after the murder of his brother al-Faḍl at the beginning of al-Ma'mūn's reign. However on closer examination he does appear to have remained an active, but not particularly good, astrologer at court. Al-Ṭabarī has him predicting a long 50 year reign for al-Wāthiq ten days before his demise: al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, p. 1364. He also apparently died with a great deal of debt.

⁶³ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, VI, p. 52.

⁶⁴ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, VI, p. 53. Al-Ya'qūbī says that al-Ḥasan died "in this year" with the context indicating 235: al-Ya'qūbī, *Tā'rikh*, II, p. 449.

⁶⁵ Ibn al-'Adīm, *Bughyat al-ṭalab fi tā'rikh Ḥalab*, ed. S. Zakkār, III, Damascus, 1988, p. 1411 gives his age at death as 58 (or 56), which renders a birth date of 177/793. Given this chronology he was 29 years old (Hijrī) when appointed to Baghdad in 206/821; Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr, *Sechster Band Des Kitāb Bagdād*, ed. H. Keller, Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1908, p. 134; al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, p. 1062. Thus he was 41 at the beginning of the *Mihna*.

third anniversary of al-Mutawakkil's enthronement. That his son and brother died in the same month exactly one solar year after him adds further intrigue as the brother was executed and the son's cause of death is unstated. The elimination of Iṣḥāq and Ītākḥ, two very powerful rival focal points for power, within such a short time frame was certainly propitious for al-Mutawakkil.

Let us briefly consider the two main narratives while highlighting some of the differences.⁶⁶ The story begins with Ītākḥ asking al-Mutawakkil for permission to go on the Ḥajj shortly after they had had a drunken row. Al-Ṭabarī indicates that Ītākḥ was being set up and that he was tricked into asking to go by someone working for al-Mutawakkil.⁶⁷ Al-Ya'qūbī simply notes that a ruse was employed.⁶⁸ Clothing serves as an important literary marker in both accounts. Al-Ya'qūbī describes Ītākḥ as leaving in his best clothing.⁶⁹ This appears to be a subtle criticism that he was not embarking on the Ḥajj in a pious state. Al-Mutawakkil then set the plot into motion. In al-Ya'qūbī, al-Mutawakkil sent two figures to meet up with Ītākḥ at two different points on his return trip, in order to put him at ease; presumably to foster complacency.⁷⁰ In al-Ṭabarī's version one of these is instructed to bring gifts for this explicit purpose; to lower his guard when he is ordered to enter Baghdad with Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm.⁷¹ The subterfuge works and Ītākḥ enters willingly with him. This is where a striking divergence between al-Ṭabarī and al-Ya'qūbī occurs. Al-Ṭabarī delves into the elaborate measures that Iṣḥāq had to go through to isolate Ītākḥ from his troops. This is a clear assertion that Ītākḥ was able to project his power further afield than just Samarra and that Iṣḥāq had to be careful, even in his own powerbase of Baghdad. In al-Ya'qūbī there is no trickery to lure him into Baghdad or to separate him from his forces. Iṣḥāq comes out and orders the "removal of the black [clothing] and the sword and the belt. He brought him into Baghdad in a white *qabā'* and a white turban."⁷² Interestingly, al-Ṭabarī has him entering Baghdad under very different conditions but dressed in a white *qabā'* with a sword and sword belt.⁷³ This is speculative but one could read this as visually marking him as a rebel. In al-Ya'qūbī it was

⁶⁶ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, p. 449; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, III, pp. 1383-1387.

⁶⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, III, p. 1383.

⁶⁸ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, p. 449.

⁶⁹ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, p. 449.

⁷⁰ Ja'far b. Dīnār al-Khayyāṭ and Sa'īd b. Ṣāliḥ, the chamberlain.

⁷¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, III, p. 1384; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, VII, p. 46, includes the gift subterfuge as well.

⁷² Al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, p. 449. The *qabā'* also underlines his non-Arabness (although it is usually associated with Persianate peoples): see R.P. Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes*, Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2007.

⁷³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, III, p. 1385.

imposed on him, i.e. Iṣḥāq arrested him in the open outside Baghdad. In al-Ṭabarī he was not under duress, at least on entering the city. In stark contrast to the robes in which he had embarked upon the Ḥajj, Ītākḥ was stripped of the accoutrements of power and association with the 'Abbasid regime by Iṣḥāq who would naturally have been wearing the 'Abbasid black.⁷⁴ Thus the two figures stood side by side in contrasting black and white. Both al-Ṭabarī and al-Ya'qūbī agree that he was then imprisoned in Khuzayma's palace and stripped of all his possessions⁷⁵ and burdened with heavy chains.⁷⁶ Next, Iṣḥāq seized Ītākḥ's son al-Manṣūr and his secretaries (*kuttāb*), Sulaymān b. Wahb⁷⁷ and Qudāma b. Ziyād. Al-Ṭabarī states that the other son, Muẓaffar, was taken as well.⁷⁸ The two secretaries were flogged and curiously Qudāma converted to Islam. In al-Ya'qūbī's version they were made to rebuke Ītākḥ. The son is ordered to spit in his father's face but refuses to do so, asserting that while the two secretaries are servants and have to do the bidding of the Commander of the Faithful, he does not.⁷⁹ Note that this was taking place in front of Iṣḥāq and not the Caliph. It is not the Caliph who had ordered him to do this but he was clearly aware that Iṣḥāq's command must have had, on some level, the Caliph's approval. In this description we are able to observe one very powerful figure in factional court politics humiliating and degrading another with the Caliph's blessing. Next al-Ya'qūbī tells us that Ītākḥ lingered for a couple of days, died in Khuzayma's palace and then his body was ignominiously thrown into the Tigris. No cause of death is given but it was clearly not a natural one.

On this al-Ṭabarī's version differs. Ītākḥ died in Iṣḥāq's palace not Khuzayma's and the method of his death is explained. Al-Ṭabarī relates two versions.

⁷⁴ However, Ibn Kathīr states that Ītākḥ entered Baghdad in great splendour: Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, X, p. 313.

⁷⁵ Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords*, p. 84, sees the hand of the *abnā'* in all of this, as it is to the house of Khuzayma b. Khāzim that he is brought and in which he is captured. Khuzayma was from a prominent family that can be construed as belonging to the *abnā'*, but which is not explicitly labeled as such.

⁷⁶ Al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, p. 107 (for years 231-240). Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, VII, p. 47, mentions the 80 *raṭls* of chains as well.

⁷⁷ Ibn Khallikān relates that upon leaving Ītākḥ's service he went into the service of Ashīnās: Ibn Khallikān, *Ibn Khallikān's Biographical Dictionary*, ed. W.M. de Slane, I, Paris: Oriental Translation Fund, 1843-1871, p. 597. Miah, *Reign of al-Mutawakkil*, pp. 33-34, argues that the inclusion of Sulaymān b. Wahb was aimed at eliminating corruption in the "revenue administration." It is more likely that Sulaymān's removal on this occasion had a great deal more to do with his ties to Ītākḥ than anything else.

⁷⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, III, pp. 1385-1386. Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, VII, p. 47, notes that the two sons remained in prison until al-Mutawakkil died.

⁷⁹ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh*, II, p. 449. Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords*, p. 84, makes a similar observation.

The first does not give a cause of death other than it is attested that he was not beaten or otherwise marked up.⁸⁰ Iṣḥāq takes pains to demonstrate this to the public and to other officials.⁸¹ In the second version, he was allowed to eat his fill, and then water was withheld from him.⁸² This mode of execution had the virtue of leaving no marks and was not as visually apparent as starvation.⁸³ Thus the two versions in al-Ṭabarī are complementary, as are these with the one in al-Ya'qūbī. The cast is basically the same as is the gist. This is one of the few instances when al-Ṭabarī explicitly explains what has happened and why. He states that Ītākh had grown too powerful and that the Caliph had to have him killed outside of Samarra because otherwise he could have mounted a successful resistance. Al-Ṭabarī goes into great detail about the forces that the two commanders had alongside themselves. He also delves into the elaborate measures that Iṣḥāq had to go through to separate Ītākh from his cohort. One detail unsettles the reliability of his account; al-Ṭabarī does not relate what happened among Ītākh's forces once they became aware of the arrest. The fact that his forces offered no resistance is striking and lends an air of forgery to the story. None of the sources record an uprising or disturbance that one would expect from such a large force in Baghdad, given the circumstances.⁸⁴ There is one bit of information that al-Ṭabarī includes that further clouds the waters. Ītākh appealed to one of his jailers, "Go and greet the emir and say, 'Indeed you know what al-Mu'taṣim and al-Wāthiq commanded me about it concerning your matter. I defended you as much as was possible for me. And so this

⁸⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, pp. 1386-1387; al-Dhahabī, *Tā'rikh*, p. 107 (for years 231-240).

⁸¹ Other local government officials were called in to witness that Ītākh "died a natural death and there were no marks upon him": Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, p. 1386; al-Dhahabī, *Tā'rikh*, p. 107 (for years 231-240). It is worth noting that the raw exercise of power must be disguised even to other loyal officials.

⁸² Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, pp. 1386-1387. Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, X, p. 313, states that he died of thirst: they fed him but gave him no water. Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, VII, p. 47, includes this reason as well.

⁸³ This parallels the deaths of 'Abbās b. al-Ma'mūn, 'Ujayf b. 'Anbasa, al-Afshīn and others who had at one time been close confidants to the Caliph and then had somehow become a threat or disloyal. For al-Afshīn see J. Turner, "Al-Afshīn, Heretic, Rebel or Rival?," in: *Abbasid Studies II: Occasional Papers of the School of 'Abbasid Studies*, ed. J. Nawas, Leuven: Peeters, 2010, pp. 119-141. Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled*, pp. 238-239, discusses the shift to non-marking executions as a sign of the dignity/nobility of the executed for a later period. In this case at hand I think this unlikely to have been a mark of the dignity of Ītākh and more likely to have been a subterfuge to give plausible deniability to the Caliph. It also provided protection to the perpetrator as he could not have been charged with murder by the victim's relatives. See Lassner, *The Middle East Remembered*, p. 241.

⁸⁴ See Miah, *Reign of al-Mutawakkil*, p. 33, who states that Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm helped to stave off unrest in Samarra as a result of this incident. He repeats this on p. 39 but offers little evidence. He notes that Ītākh's fall did not precipitate a "crisis."

should be of good use for you'.⁸⁵ The implication of course is that this favor should now be repaid. He then made a plea for leniency for his two sons, which Iṣḥāq apparently honored. This is extremely odd because I can find no account of any event in which Ītākḥ interceded on Iṣḥāq's behalf. That is unless we consider this a reference to Iṣḥāq's encounter with al-Mu'taṣim when the latter asks him about what he had done wrong compared to al-Ma'mūn in choosing people to work for him.⁸⁶ However this seems an unlikely choice. The inclusion of these details causes one to find al-Ya'qūbī to be the more reliable of the two.

It is interesting to note the points upon which al-Ya'qūbī and al-Ṭabarī's accounts converge and thus confirm each other. They both note that al-Mutawakkil had to trick Ītākḥ into going on the Ḥajj.⁸⁷ They both agree that he entered Baghdad in a white *qabā'*. They both note that he was held for a few days at Khuzayma's palace. In al-Ya'qūbī he died and was thrown in the Tigris. In al-Ṭabarī, Iṣḥāq takes him on a boat on the Tigris up to his palace. Both al-Ya'qūbī and al-Ṭabarī agree that Sulaymān b. Wāḥb⁸⁸ and Qudāma b. Ziyād, as Ītākḥ's secretaries, were imprisoned. In al-Ya'qūbī they were made to spew invective at their former boss. Al-Ya'qūbī tells us of the one son being imprisoned with his father and his refusal to denigrate him. Al-Ṭabarī tells us that two sons were imprisoned and of Iṣḥāq's leniency towards them.⁸⁹ The convergences are as telling as the differences. What comes through clearly is that Ītākḥ was a threat to al-Mutawakkil who removed him using a rival as part of a calculated strategy. As a final note we can speculate as to the cause of Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm's death on the 23rd of Dhū l-Ḥijja⁹⁰ (July 8, 850) on the exact third anniversary of al-Mutawakkil's enthronement. The date alone argues against a natural death, as does the issuance of the succession arrangement three

⁸⁵ In al-Ṭabarī this anecdote is included as an addition, an afterthought. In Ibn al-Athīr it becomes an integral part of the story: al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, III, p. 1386; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, VII, pp. 46-47.

⁸⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, III, pp. 1326-1328. This is included under the year 227/842 but the dating is cloudy.

⁸⁷ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, p. 449; Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, III, p. 1383.

⁸⁸ He had the misfortune of having 400,000 dinars (or 200,00 dirhams or dinars) seized from him by al-Wāthiq in 229/843: al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, III, pp. 1331, 1335. Al-Ṭabarī is uncertain of the amounts and so gives a widely divergent range. In one place (p. 1331) it is 400,000 dinars and in another (p. 1335) the other number, with the equivocation about dinars/dirhams.

⁸⁹ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, VII, p. 47, notes that the two sons remained in prison until al-Mutawakkil died.

⁹⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, III, p. 1403; al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, II, p. 451; Ibn al-'Adim, *Bughya*, III, p. 1411; al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, p. 92 (for years 231-240).

days later.⁹¹ The elimination of his brother, Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm, in the following year (236/851) via being given surfeit of food with water withheld enhances the certainty of this as an elimination, as does the death of Iṣḥāq's son in the same month.

All of the narratives that I have discussed underline that the Caliph's power, while imposing, was not absolute. He could bring low the mightiest of the mighty yet had to do so through subterfuge and long term planning. The necessity of the ruse and the disgracing and humiliation make the point of the violence and capriciousness of the caliphal exercise of power but at the same time clearly beacon and emphasize an underlying weakness of, or at the very least, an extreme insecurity in, power.⁹² In discussing the demise of Ītākh al-Ṭabarī portrays al-Mutawakkil as playing chess and as having positioned all of his pieces deliberately. Tellingly he replaced Ītākh as Chamberlain with Waṣīf when the former went on Ḥajj thus preemptively placating a potential troublemaker.⁹³ In both al-Ya'qūbī and al-Ṭabarī, Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm's motive for killing Ītākh is not stated however one can infer that the Caliph had placed two rivals in proximity and apparently gave Iṣḥāq an order to make use of the opportunity. Al-Dhahabī states that "Ītākh al-Turkī al-'Abbāsī, the agent (of the Caliph) was the sword of vengeance of the caliphate and al-Mutawakkil was indeed afraid of him."⁹⁴ Al-Ṭabarī says something very similar by way of introducing the episode of Ītākh's downfall and adds that Ītākh had been the one to kill al-Ma'mūn's sons by Sundus, Ibn al-Zayyāt in 233/847, and other powerful figures.⁹⁵ He had been active as a loyalist alongside al-Afshīn in opposing the plot of 'Abbās b. al-Ma'mūn and in so doing earned the respect of al-Mu'taṣim and a position of great power under him and al-Wāthiq. This balance of factions was a defining feature of the exercises of caliphal power. However, when al-Mutawakkil lost control of the balance the implications for the caliphal office and the independence of the 'Abbasid family were disastrous. It is interesting to ponder that unlike the third *fitna* leading to the overthrow of the Umayyads this series of events culminating in the murder of a caliph did not lead into an 'Abbasid style revolution. The 'Abbasid dynasty at this point in its history had been around for approximately the same amount of time as

⁹¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, III, p. 1395.

⁹² See Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs*, p. 137.

⁹³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, III, pp. 1383-1384; al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, p. 106 (for years 231-240). Also see Lassner, *The Middle East Remembered*, p. 245. However, Lassner does not see this in the same light.

⁹⁴ Al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, p. 92 (for years 231-240).

⁹⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, III, p. 1383: "and he whom al-Mu'taṣim and al-Wāthiq wished killed, Ītākh would imprison and kill."

the Umayyad had when it was destroyed.⁹⁶ The removal of Ītākḥ and those who had placed him on the throne was one part of the process by which al-Mutawakkil solidified his position and attempted to gain independence of action. Al-Ṭabarī certainly draws a link between the removal of Ibn al-Zayyāt and how he had treated al-Mutawakkil when he was just a prince. Al-Ya'qūbī, even though he mentions no *shūrā*, clearly links the events by relating that al-Mutawakkil's first act, after the acknowledgment of the 'Abbasid family, was to destroy Ibn al-Zayyāt. The Caliph had used Ītākḥ to eliminate Ibn al-Zayyāt and he used Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm to eliminate Ītākḥ.⁹⁷ Iṣḥāq arrested, tortured and dispossessed 'Umar b. Faraj,⁹⁸ 'Umar b. Faraj, Ibn al-Zayyāt, Aḥmad b. Khālid Abū l-Wazīr and Ibn Abī Du'ād were either disgraced, killed or paralyzed in one year. It is also during this period that he forbade discussion of the createdness/uncreatedness of the Qur'ān, thus beginning the end of the *Miḥna*. By the end of the summer of 233 only Ītākḥ and Waṣīf remained. Waṣīf maintained his powerful position until he was killed in 253/867. In 235/850 and 236/851 the three most important Ṭahirids in Baghdad had died. Al-Mutawakkil in the year 237/851 had the paralytic Ibn Abī Du'ād arrested and dispossessed along with his sons by 'Ubayd Allāh b. al-Sarī thus fully ending the *Miḥna*.⁹⁹ The Caliph was playing powerful rivals off of one another. Underlying this are the complications of dynamic political interaction driven by factional power sharing. The Caliph had to tread carefully and could not afford to alienate too quickly the individuals or they might unite against him. It is clear however that he moved with all due haste. I suspect that he was able to get away with this because his opponents underestimated him. This would tend to confirm that he was chosen because the powerful saw him as controllable, and sought to position themselves to do so while not taking into account agency on his part. They were each interested in settling scores but did not recognize until too late that they had lost in doing so. The Caliph was maintaining a balance of power between the rival forces in an effort to insure his independence but in the end played his hand too forcefully, skewed the balance of power and was assassinated. For al-Mutawakkil, the *Miḥna*, in this context, was but one component in that balance of power.

⁹⁶ The institutional infrastructure seems to have been able to withstand the firestorm unleashed but with profound implications for the caliphate as a whole. I will have more to say about this in a different venue.

⁹⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, pp. 1410-1411.

⁹⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, pp. 1377-1378; al-Ya'qūbī, *Tā'rikh*, II, p. 448.

⁹⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh*, III, p. 1411. He also had fought against the Ṭahirid family near Fuṣṭāṭ in 210/825-826. He fought 'Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir. Ibn al-Sarī lost and was given a safe conduct. Melchert places this (237/851) as the beginning of the end of the *Miḥna*: Melchert, *Religious Policies*, p. 325.

Appendix — Chronology of Events

232

23 Dhū l-Ḥijja (August 10, 847) — al-Mutawakkil enthroned

233

al-Mutawakkil forbids discussion of the Qurʾān

7 Ṣafar (Sept. 22, 847) — Ibn al-Zayyāt arrested

19 Rabīʿ I (November 2, 847) — Ibn al-Zayyāt killed

6 Jumādā II (Jan. 17, 848) — Ibn Abī Duʿād paralyzed by stroke

Ramaḍān (April-May, 848) — ʿUmar b. Faraj arrested by Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm

17 Ramaḍān (April 25, 848) — al-Faḍl b. Marwān removed from *Dīwān al-Kharāj*

Dhū l-Ḥijja (July-August, 848) — Aḥmad b. Khālid Abū l-Wazīr arrested

234

18 Dhū l-Qaʿda — Ītākḥ leaves on Ḥajj, replaced as *ḥājib* by Waṣīf

Dhū l-Ḥijja (July, 848) — Ītākḥ arrested by Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm

235

5 Jumādā II (December 21, 849) — Ītākḥ killed

23 Dhū l-Ḥijja (July 7, 850) — Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm died

26 Dhū l-Ḥijja (July 10, 850) — Succession Arrangement

236

Dhū l-Ḥijja (June, 851) — Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm killed

25 Dhū l-Ḥijja (June 29, 851) — Muḥammad b. Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm killed

237

24 Ṣafar (August 27, 851) — Ibn Abī Duʿād and family dispossessed

1 Shawwal (March 27, 852) — Aḥmad b. Naṣr al-Khuzāʿī's body buried

239

Dhū l-Ḥijja (May-June, 854) — Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Abī Duʿād died

240

Muḥarram (June-July, 854) – Aḥmad Ibn Abī Duʿād died