

PART 1

State-building



The Origins of the Aghlabids

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This essay has a simple objective: to investigate how the Aghlabids, a comparatively obscure family of Arab descent but based in northeastern Iran at the time of the Abbasid Revolution of 747–50, came to be the first independent Muslim rulers of Ifriqiya.¹ In order to do this, we have to look back at the history of the Muslim occupation of the area, consider the evolution of independence and what it meant, and how the Aghlabid family was able to assert its authority over the process to become, by the death of the third emir, Ziyadat Allah, in 838, the effective rulers of a self-governing Muslim polity.

The history of Ifriqiya between the end of the Abbasid Revolution in 750 and the emergence of the Aghlabid emirate is a confusing and in many ways unedifying story.² Warfare against the Kharijite rebels and the constant insurrections of the *jund*, which was supposed to uphold Abbasid rule in the province, dominate the sparse historical narratives on which we depend for understanding the course of these complex events.

1 *Ifriqiya*, derived of course from the Latin word for Africa, is the name given by the Arabic sources to the lands of modern Tunisia, western Libya, including Tripoli, and parts of eastern Algeria.

2 The main Arabic narrative source for Ifriqiya in the early Abbasid period is the *Kitab al-bayan* of Ibn 'Idhari al-Marrakushi (d. after 1310), which gives us a bare chronological narrative. Throughout this paper, I have relied on Ibn 'Idhari's careful chronology for the dates of appointments and dismissals of governors and other important events. The history of Ifriqiya is covered in vol. 1. Also of use is the *Hullat al-siyara* of Ibn al-Abbar (d. 1260), which gives us short biographies of notable figures in the history of the province. Although compiled many centuries after the events, both works preserve material from much earlier works. The *Tarikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk*, the work of the great annalist of the eastern Islamic world, Abu Ja'far al-Tabari, really only mentions Ifriqiya when figures from the Abbasid court like Harthama b. Ayan are involved. On the other hand, Ahmad b. Yahya al-Baladhuri gives a short but very interesting account of the rise of the Aghlabids in the *Futuh al-buldan* (233–4), which has the merit of having been composed within a century of the events at a time when the Aghlabids were still ruling Ifriqiya. The secondary sources for this period of the history of Ifriqiya are very meager. The main account is Mohamed Talbi's *Lémirat aghlabide*, which is dated but basically reliable. See also Brett and Fentress, *The Berbers*. For the most recent account, with full bibliography, see Manzano, "The Iberian Peninsula," 581–622.

The problems of governing the province were intractable and in many ways it is surprising not that the caliphs abandoned it, but rather that they held on to it for so long. The first of these problems was the continuing resistance of the native Berber populations to Arab and caliphal rule. This took the form of repeated Kharijite rebellions, normally confined to the mountainous and desert margins but sometimes penetrating the center of the province in the fertile lands around Kairouan and Tunis. The Abbasids, notably the caliph al-Mansur, committed a huge amount in both men and money to maintaining caliphal rule. The second major problem was that the *jund*, sent from the East to contain the Berber threat, needed to be paid on a regular basis and the resources of the province simply could not provide for the salaries of this large military establishment. This could only be done with financial subsidy from Egypt, which could not always be guaranteed.

The governors appointed by the caliphs were in an extremely difficult position. They were caught between the need to defend the province against the Kharijites, the even more pressing need to pay the *jund*, and the increasing reluctance of the Baghdad government to provide the necessary financial support. Only a governor like Yazid b. Hatim al-Muhallabi, with his resources of commercial and kinship links, could square the circle for a while. In the end, the Aghlabids were able to establish and maintain their independent power because they were themselves scions of the *jund*, but also because the caliphs in Baghdad and Samarra, as well as their governors in Egypt, apparently abandoned the province after the death of the caliph Harun al-Rashid in 809. Even then Aghlabid rule was challenged by the disaffected *jund* and only saved by the opening of the conquest of Sicily and the additional resources and opportunities that provided.

The origins of the Aghlabids were fairly obscure. The unusual name Aghlab seems to mean “thick-necked,” in the sense of proud or strong. It is also one of the many Arabic words for lion, lions having thick necks. They claimed to be descendants of the great tribe of Tamim of northeastern Arabia and had probably settled in the Iraqi garrison cities, either Kufa or Basra, after the first Arab conquests. From there they moved on to the expanding frontier in Khurasan and are said to have established themselves at the small town of Marv al-Rud, now on the northwestern frontier of Afghanistan. Again, like many families of similar origin, they joined the armies of the Abbasid Revolution, but they were not among the highest-ranking *quwwād* (army commanders) and we hear nothing of them during the campaigns which brought the Abbasids to power. Al-Aghlab was probably recruited into the guard of the caliph al-Mansur. According to Maghribi sources,³ he was one of the men who murdered Abu

3 Ibn al-Abbar, *Hullat al-siyara*, 68–9 (this chapter references the 1963 edition).

Muslim on the caliph's orders, but al-Tabari and the other eastern sources know nothing of this. It was natural that a man of his origins and status would join the *jund* recruited by Muhammad b. al-Ash'ath al-Khuza'i to establish Abbasid rule over Ifriqiya.

The initial Muslim conquest had begun in 642 but proceeded sporadically until the final conquest of Carthage from the Byzantines in 698–9.⁴ However, the defeat of the Byzantines did not bring peace; far from it. The plains of Tunisia, always the most densely settled and urbanized parts of the Maghrib, were bordered on the west and south by more arid and mountainous areas. Many of the people of these lands were Berbers living nomadic or transhumant lives and grouped into a number of tribes. They were determined to maintain their independence, a determination which must have been made all the fiercer by the fact that the Muslim presence was characterized by large-scale slave-raiding. The Arabic sources are clear and unapologetic about this: it was all part of God's bounty to the Muslims. Berber women were especially highly sought after by elite families in the Islamic Middle East. It is worth remembering that the mothers of 'Abd al-Rahman b. Mu'awiya, first Umayyad ruler of al-Andalus (756–88), and the second Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur (754–75), were both Berbers. In the case of 'Abd al-Rahman, there can be little doubt that this maternal connection was one of the reasons he chose to flee to the West and secured protection when most of his family was destroyed by the victorious Abbasids. Al-Mansur may well have maintained contacts with groups in his mother's homeland and he is said to have been knowledgeable about Ifriqiya, and only sent members of his elite (*khāṣṣa*) as governors of the province.⁵ It may be that this was one of the reasons he was prepared to invest considerable military resources into asserting Abbasid control over the area in defiance of military and especially financial logic.

Berber resistance to Arab rule continued throughout the Umayyad period, with major revolts in 697–8, led by the famous and mysterious Kahina, and in 740–1. This second rebellion almost resulted in the complete destruction of Arab rule, despite the dispatching of a very large Syrian army by the Umayyad caliph Hisham. The period from 735 onwards saw another element emerge onto this complex scene. The Kharijite sect had emerged in the decades which followed the first Muslim conquests in Iraq and Iran as a protest movement of Arab Muslims against the domination of the state by a privileged elite and against enforced sedentarization and the payment of taxes. The movements were strongest at first in southern Iran and the environment of the great port

4 On this see Kaegi, *Muslim Expansion*, and Kennedy, *Great Arab Conquests*, 200–24.

5 Ibn 'Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:78 (this chapter references the 1948 edition edited by G. S. Colin and E. Lévi-Provençal).

city of Basra in southern Iraq. The most militant group, the Azariqa, was effectively destroyed by Umayyad forces led by al-Muhallab b. Abi Sufra al-Azdi (d. 702), but other groups, notably the Sufriya and the Ibadiya, survived by dispersing and finding support in outlying and marginal areas like Oman, where the Ibadiya are still an important element in the population, and some of the Berber areas of North Africa. With their rejection of the Quraysh elite and their resistance to compulsory taxation and tribute, Kharijite ideology appealed to many of the Berbers who adopted it as a separate and distinctive Muslim identity. Despite the origins of Kharijism in the thoroughly Arab milieu of early Islamic Basra, the sources make it clear that the vast majority of the adherents of the sect in the Maghrib were Berbers, living in tribal groups in the mountain areas surrounding the plains of Tunisia. They were to become the most formidable of the enemies of caliphal power in the area, but we know little about their society or organization. The Arabic sources give us only the names of tribes or the leaders of major revolts. They are the “other,” with almost no individual identities or speaking parts in the narratives.

At the end of the Abbasid Revolution in 750, the settled areas of central Ifriqiya were under the authority of a semi-independent governor, ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Habib al-Fihri, scion of a Qurayshi family and a direct descendant of ‘Uqba b. Nafi’, who had played such an important role in the initial Muslim conquests of the Maghrib. He was assassinated by his son in 755 and in the ensuing mayhem the Kharijite Berbers took advantage of the situation. In 758 the Ibadite tribes of the Nafusa and the Hawwara from the lands south of Tripoli, under the leadership of their imam Abu’l-Khattab, took Kairouan itself. While Abu’l-Khattab remained in Tripoli, Kairouan was ruled by an associate of his, a man of Iranian origin called ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Rustam. It seemed as if the Arab conquest had been completely reversed and that the Maghrib would now be ruled by Berber-speaking Ibadites separate from, and fundamentally antagonistic to, the eastern caliphate.

However, at this critical juncture, al-Mansur decided to take firm military action. According to one source, the initiative for this action came from a group of the “Arabs of Ifriqiya,” presumably descendants of those soldiers who had come to the province in Umayyad times, who sent a delegation to the caliph to request his support against the Berbers.⁶ He responded by sending a vast *jund*, an army of some 40,000 men⁷ led by twenty-eight *quwwād*,⁸ under the

6 Ibn ‘Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:72.

7 Ibn ‘Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:72. Al-Baladhuri, *Futuh* 232 says 70,000 or 40,000.

8 *Quwwād* (sing. *qā'id*) was the name given to military commanders in the Abbasid army who led, and in many cases recruited, the soldiers. See Kennedy, *Armies of the Caliphs*.

command of Muhammad b. al-Ash'ath al-Khuza'i. Ibn al-Ash'ath, like many of the leaders of the Abbasid military, was of Arab descent but his family had settled in Khurasan, the northeastern province of Iran. His troops too were largely drawn from Khurasan and it was natural that Aghlab b. Salim al-Tamimi should join them as one of the *quwwād*. Abu'l-Khattab and his Kharijite followers were defeated and Ibn al-Ash'ath was established as governor in Kairouan, which was fortified for the first time and which, along with the new coastal town of Tunis, formed the core of the province. Ibn al-Aghlab was sent to remote Tubna in the Zab, where he could keep an eye on the Berbers of the Aurès Mountains and the desert frontier.

This expedition represented an enormous commitment of men and resources. The total number of salaried soldiers in the Abbasid army was probably no more than 150,000 at the most and many of these were tied up in local garrison duties. When al-Mansur was faced with the major rebellion of the Alid Muhammad "the Pure Soul" in Medina and his brother Ibrahim in Basra in 762, he had only a thousand men with him in his newly founded capital of Baghdad. Another 30,000 were with his son Muhammad al-Mahdi in Rayy in central Iran, but the largest force in the Abbasid army were the 40,000 sent with Ibn al-Ash'ath to Tunisia.⁹

These troops and their descendants, known collectively as the *jund*, were to be the dominant military force in Ifriqiya for the next century and determined much of the political life of the province. At one level, they were fairly successful. They did protect Kairouan and the plains more or less effectively from the Kharijite Berbers, but at a price. The Abbasid army was a professional force. They were paid salaries (*aṭā*) by the state in coined money every month. The actual amount of these salaries is not exactly clear but sources suggest 60 dirhams a month, or 720 a year.¹⁰ If 40,000 men were receiving this sort of pay, the maintenance of the *jund* would have amounted to 28,800,000 dirhams per year. This was at a time when the tax yield of Egypt, the most valuable province of the caliphate after Iraq, was 1,920,000 gold dinars, equivalent to 42,240,000 dirhams. The same source says that the revenues of Ifriqiya amounted to just 13,000,000 dirhams and "one hundred at twenty carpets."¹¹ The *jund* of Ifriqiya, like the other units, was garrisoned in the major towns, Kairouan and Tunis,

9 Al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-rusul*, 3:304–5 (this chapter references the edition edited by M. J. de Goeje et al., published by Brill, 1879–1901); see Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 77 for a discussion of the total numbers.

10 Kennedy, "Military Pay," 157–69.

11 The figures are taken from the account of the revenues of the caliphate during the reign of Harun al-Rashid (786–809) given in al-Jahshiyari, *Kitab al-wuzara'*, 281–8.

and in smaller towns like Mila (Milev) and al-Urbus (Laribus) in the Jebel and Tubna in the Zab. They seem to have been city based and they were not dispersed in the countryside. They did not become landowners, farmers, or herds-men. They were totally dependent on the *ʿaṭā* for their livelihoods and would take violent action if necessary to ensure that they were paid.

It was normally accepted in Abbasid fiscal practice that the expenses of the local military would be paid from the revenues of the province in which they were stationed and that the surplus would be sent to the capital in Baghdad. However, as we have seen, the military establishment in Ifriqiya was very large, vastly greater than could be maintained by the resources generated from local tax revenues. There is some indication that revenues from Egypt were sent to Kairouan to try to meet the deficit but this was often problematic, especially when the financial administration of the caliphate was controlled by administrators like the famous Barmakid family, who were intent on ensuring that the center received its share.¹²

The *jund* of Ifriqiya was not a homogenous force. It arrived in two major waves: first with Muhammad b. al-Ash'ath and second, in 771, with Yazid b. Hatim al-Muhallabi, who is said to have arrived with 60,000 more men, which no doubt helped to keep the Berbers at bay but certainly increased the fiscal burden. They came from different regional armies in the East. The majority were almost certainly Khurasanis, but there were also substantial numbers of Syrians. We hear of troops from the *junds* (in this context, the districts into which Syria was divided for administrative purposes) of Damascus and Homs settled in particular areas, the *jund* of Damascus in al-Urbus and that of Homs in Mila, a process we can also observe in the early settlement of Muslim forces in al-Andalus, where different units settled in their own areas. The leaders of the *jund* in the eighth and the beginning of the ninth centuries almost all bear Arab names and tribal *nisbas* (affiliations), though many of them must have been of Iranian descent. Forces of the *jund* were settled in Kairouan and Tunis, where an arsenal (*dār al-ṣināʿa*) was established by the end of the century. There were also units in Tripoli, in Tubna, the capital of the Zab region, in Mila, where the *jund* led by Malik b. al-Mundhir al-Kalbi was stationed in 795,¹³ and in al-Urbus. Rivalries between the *junds* settled in Kairouan and Tunis were yet another source of division. All the smaller centers of the *jund* – Tubna,

12 See al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-buldan*, 234, where he narrates that Ibrahim b. al-Aghlab, at the beginning of his rule, was only saved from the wrath of the *jund*, who demanded their *arzāq*, when money was brought to him from the revenues of Egypt. (This chapter references the 1866 edition edited by M. J. de Goeje.)

13 Ibn al-Abbar, *Hullat al-siyara*, 84.

al-Urbus, and Mila – had formerly been Byzantine garrison towns and were still protected by their Byzantine walls. This stressful economic position was the cause of many of the upheavals and problems which faced the Abbasid governors and which, ultimately, gave the Aghlabid family its opportunity.

At the time of the first Abbasid expedition to Ifriqiya, things in the province were very dismal for the Arab Muslim settlers in Kairouan and the surrounding areas. In 757–8, the city had been taken and burned by the Sufriya Kharijites, who were in turn driven out by the Ibadites under their formidable leader Abu'l-Khattab. As we have seen, in 761 the Abbasid army led by Muhammad b. al-Ash'ath arrived and recovered Kairouan, where Muhammad was installed as governor, while al-Aghlab b. Salim, who had come with him, took over the remote but strategically important town of Tubna. Successive Berber armies were defeated and forced to retreat to their mountainous homelands and the head of Abu'l-Khattab was sent in triumph to Baghdad. The new governor set about building walls for Kairouan at exactly the same time, Ibn 'Idhari notes, that al-Mansur was building the walls of Baghdad, and "he took a firm grip (*dabaṭa*) on Ifriqiya and its districts (*a'māl*)."¹⁴ He defeated the Ibadites of Zuwayla and in 762, surprisingly, "he calmed the situation of Ifriqiya and there was no movement (*ḥaraka*) against him."

The apparent peace did not last for long. By 765 relations between the *jund* and their commander Ibn al-Ash'ath had broken down completely and he was driven out, without bloodshed,¹⁵ by a military mutiny led by one of his *quwwād*, 'Isa b. Musa b. 'Ajlan. He was supported by "some of the Arabs¹⁶ and the *jund*," but he had no appointment (*'ahd*) from the caliph and no consent (*tarādīn*) from the general populace (*'amma*).¹⁷ This mutiny was the first of many in which the *jund* confronted the governors. We are rarely told the reasons for their apparently contrary attitudes, but they were almost certainly financial.

The debacle of this first period of Aghlabid rule was followed by a long period of domination by the Muhallabi family (771–93), one of whose members Yazid b. Hatim, provided the longest period of tranquility in the history of Ifriqiya in the eighth century. To understand why this should be so, certain features of the history of this remarkable family should be noted. The Muhallabis came from the tribe of Azd, which was mostly located in pre-Islamic times in Oman at the southeast of the Arabian Peninsula. In the aftermath of the first

14 Ibn 'Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:72.

15 Ibn 'Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:73 says, "They asked him to leave."

16 Though it is not entirely clear, this probably refers to Arabs who had settled in the province before the arrival of the *jund*.

17 Ibn 'Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:73.

Muslim conquests, they established themselves in Basra, where al-Muhallab b. Abi Sufra distinguished himself by leading the armies of Basra against the Kharijites, notably the fierce and bloodthirsty Azraqites. The Basra connection was important in two distinct ways. First, Basra was the center of the development of Kharijism in the early Umayyad period. Despite al-Muhallab's campaigns against the extremist Azraqites, relations between the Muhallabis and other Kharijite groups like the Sufriya and the Ibadiya were peaceful, even friendly.¹⁸ 'Atika, sister of the second great leader of the family, Yazid b. Hatim b. al-Muhallabi, was a fervent supporter of the Ibadiya in Basra. Although it is never explicitly stated in the texts, the fact that the Sufriya and Ibadiya, who had been so militantly hostile to Arab and Abbasid rule before, hardly caused any disturbances during the governorate of Yazid b. Hatim must surely be connected with the good relations which had been established in Basra.

The second, and connected, factor was, of course, that Basra was a great trading center and the Kharijites, especially the Ibadites, developed strong trading networks. These networks stretched from Basra west into the Maghrib but also east to Sind, which had been conquered at least to some extent from 712 onwards. Again, the texts do not spell it out but the fact that the Muhallabis had interests in Sind and, for example, the fact that the first Muhallabi governor, 'Amr b. Hafs, transferred directly from the governorate of Sind to that of Ifriqiya, from Multan to Kairouan, illustrates the breadth of Muhallabi interests and their coincidence with the interests of Ibadite merchants. It was Yazid b. Hatim who "organized the souks of Kairouan and put each trade in its place,"¹⁹ and it seems likely that part of the arrangement between the Kharijites and the Muhallabis was that the former should have access to these new markets. As Dr. Johnson observed, "Men are seldom so innocently employed as when they are making money," and the long years of peace may have been a result of this planning.

Muhallabi rule was established by Yazid b. Hatim. Described as a member of Caliph al-Mansur's inner circle (*khāṣṣa*), he had already served as governor in Armenia, Sind, Azerbaijan, and Egypt. Like his famous grandfather, al-Muhallab b. Abi Sufra, he was well known for his generosity, determination, and perspicacity, duly celebrated by the poets of the time, even those who had never met nor seen him.²⁰ He also benefited from the support of his numerous family (al-Muhallab is said to have had over 300 children, male and female), many of whom served him in subordinate positions. Nonetheless, Muhallabi

18 For these connections, see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. "al-Ibāḍiyya."

19 Ibn 'Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:78.

20 Ibn 'Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:81.

rule was established by a mighty influx of military power. Yazid b. Hatim brought with him an army said to have numbered 60,000 men from Syria, Iraq, and Khurasan. Al-Tabari says that al-Mansur spent the vast sum of 63,000,000 dirhams on the army.²¹ They first stopped in Tripoli, where Abu Hatim, the Kharijite leader, was defeated and killed. The army then moved on to Kairouan, where Yazid established himself in 772.²² The next year he sent a relative of his, al-'Ala b. Sa'id al-Muhallabi, to take over Tubna and the Zab.²³

In addition, he consolidated his rule in the capital. In 774–5 he renewed the building (*jaddada binā'*) of the Great Mosque of Kairouan. It is also in this period that we can see the growing influence of the proto-Maliki judges of Kairouan. When the qadi 'Abd Allah b. Ziyad died in 778–9, apparently after eating a dish of fish and yogurt at the governor's table, there was a huge crowd at his funeral and Yazid himself led the mourners.

Yazid died in February 788 having remained in power from the caliphate of al-Mansur, through the reigns of al-Mahdi and al-Hadi, into the beginning of the reign of Harun al-Rashid.²⁴ It was a hard act to follow. As soon as he was dead, another rebellion was raised by the Ibadites in the Jabal Baja, which was only put down with difficulty. Nonetheless Muhallabi rule survived in the person of his elder brother, Rawh b. Hatim, described as a dozy and senile old man.²⁵

An interesting illustration of the powerful connections that still existed between the Abbasid authorities in Iraq and Ifriqiya can be seen in the story of the appointment of Nasr b. Habib al-Muhallabi as governor in 791. When it was apparent that Rawh b. Hatim was declining, Nasr b. Habib and the *qā'id* Abu'l-'Anbar wrote to Harun al-Rashid saying how worried they were "because Ifriqiya is a large frontier zone (*thughr kabīr*) which would not be safe without a strong ruler (*bi ghayri sultān*)."²⁶ Nasr had been *ṣāhib al-shurṭa* (chief of police) to Yazid b. Hatim in Egypt and Ifriqiya so Harun wrote to him secretly appointing him as governor. When Rawh eventually died, the oath of allegiance was taken to his son Qabisa by the people gathered in the Kairouan mosque. Meanwhile Abu'l-'Anbar and the *ṣāhib al-barīd* (head of the postal service) went to Nasr with Harun's *'ahd* (document of appointment) and they then rode with him to the mosque, where they found Qabisa sitting on the

21 Ibn 'Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:78–82.

22 Al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-rusul*, 3:373.

23 Ibn 'Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:79.

24 Al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-rusul*, 3:569.

25 Ibn 'Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:84–5.

26 Ibn 'Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:85.

farāsh (cushion). They made him get up and Nasr sit in his place and told the people (*al-nās*) what the position was. They read out Harun's letter and the people "heard and obeyed" and accepted their new ruler.

Muhallabid rule was brought to an end by the *jund*. In 793, for reasons which are not explained, Harun wrote to depose Nasr and appoint another Muhallabi, Fadl b. Rawh, who was then governor of the Zab. Installed in Kairouan, he then appointed his nephew, al-Mughira, as governor in Tunis. He was a man without experience or political awareness (*siyāsa*)²⁷ and he aroused the anger of the *jund*, which, under the leadership of one Abu'l-Jarud, besieged him at the *dār al-imāra* (government house) of the city and eventually drove him out to Kairouan. There was a long standoff, which resulted in the death of the governor Rawh at the hands of the *jund*. The upshot was that Abu'l-Jarud, now effectively in control, wrote to the caliph, who pardoned him and appointed him as governor.²⁸

The *dawla*²⁹ of the Muhallabis in Ifriqiya had come to an end after twenty-three years. As Talbi points out, although authority passed from one family member to another, the succession was controlled by the caliphal administration. Son was never allowed to succeed father, as Qabisa had found out when he was humiliated in the mosque at Kairouan. On the other hand, the caliphal government could not control Ifriqiya without an individual or family who could attract the respect of the *jund* and knew how to manage them.

For the next decade or so, the Baghdad government tried, unsuccessfully, to find a replacement for the Muhallabis. Now the caliph was granting not just a pardon, but the office of governor to a man, Abu'l-Jarud, who had just been responsible for the death of the man, Rawh, whom he had just appointed. The next few years saw the caliphal government trying various strategies to solve the problem of governing Ifriqiya. The first was the appointment of a man from the heart of the caliphal administration to take charge. Harthama b. A'yan, who arrived in the province in June 795, was one of Harun's most trusted advisers and operatives. As far as we know, he had no previous experience of the province and brought with him only a small (*kathīf*) army. He is said to have treated the people well and made overtures to the Berbers. He built the famous *ribāṭ* at Monastir, probably to provide a base from where he could defend himself against the unruly *jund*,³⁰ but "when he saw what he saw of the

27 Ibn 'Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:86.

28 Ibn 'Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:86–8.

29 Ibn 'Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:88.

30 Circumstances suggest that this is a more likely explanation for the founding of this building than defense from Byzantine raids.

conflict in Ifriqiya, the disobedience of its people, he sought to be excused and al-Rashid wrote to him giving him permission to return to the East” and he left in October 797.³¹

Despite this rebuff, Harun and the Barmakids still seemed to believe that Ifriqiya could be governed like any other province. The centralizing tendencies of Barmakid administration left little scope for accommodation with local interests; provincial elites were increasingly excluded from power in their provinces. After Harthama’s retirement, they appointed Muhammad b. Muqatil al-ʿAkki. He comes across in the sources as a gilded youth from the heart of the caliphal court, but a man with neither experience nor judgment and, possibly, a man with little enthusiasm for the arduous work of governing troublesome provinces. “This Muhammad,” Ibn ʿIdhari notes tartly, “was a man with no praiseworthy conduct.”³² His main claim to fame was that his father was one of the great men of the Abbasid *dawla*, a milk brother (*radī*) of the caliph, a distinction he shared with Jaʿfar the Barmakid.³³ He had, as far as we can tell, no experience in or contacts with the province before his appointment.

He aroused popular hostility by having Bahlul b. Rashid, the leading religious figure of the time, flogged and imprisoned so that he died. More dangerously, he reduced the wages (*arzāq*) of the *jund*, perhaps on the orders of his Barmakid masters, and oppressed the people. This united both the Khurasanis and the Syrians in the *jund*, who rebelled under the leadership of Tammam b. Tamim al-Tamimi, the financial administrator (*ʿāmil*) of Tunis. The united *jund* defeated the governor’s army and besieged him at his house (he had apparently left the official residence, the *dār al-imāra*). An *amān* was arranged, allowing Ibn Muqatil to leave with his family and his property and to establish himself in Tripoli.³⁴

Tammam now became governor of Ifriqiya, but he was, as Ibn ʿIdhari notes, a usurper (*mutaghallib*) without any deed of appointment (*ʿahd*) from Harun al-Rashid.³⁵ Subsequent events were to show how important this was, despite the apparent weakness of the caliphal government. It was this lack of legitimacy which gave Ibrahim b. al-Aghlab his chance. He was at this time governor of the Zab, as his father had been before him, and we must think that the area was something of a power base for the family. He rushed to Kairouan and, while

31 For Harthama’s rule in Ifriqiya, see al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-rusul*, 3:142, 645.

32 Ibn ʿIdhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:88.

33 Ibn ʿIdhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:89. His relationship with Harun al-Rashid and the Barmakids is discussed at some length in Talbi, *L’émirat aghlabide*, 82–5.

34 Ibn ʿIdhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:90.

35 Ibn ʿIdhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:90.

Tammam retired to Tunis, he went to the Great Mosque and ascended the minbar.³⁶ He was, we are told, a man of great eloquence and he used this to tell the assembled people that he had come only to support Muhammad b. Muqatil and assert the cause of Abbasid legitimacy. He wrote to Ibn Muqatil explaining what he had done and inviting him to return. That this played well with at least some elements of the population is suggested by an anecdote which has Ibn Muqatil walking in one of the alleys and hearing a woman in one of the vaulted passages (*tāq*) shouting at him, "I give thanks for he has restored to you the rule (*mulk*) of Ifriqiya!"³⁷

There then followed a period of three-point negotiations, with Tammam from his base in Tunis trying to convince Ibn Muqatil that Ibrahim b. al-Aghlab was only seeking his destruction. Ibn Muqatil, however, found Ibn al-Aghlab a more convincing ally and stuck with him. So Tammam led a great army (*‘askar ‘adhīm*) from Tunis against Kairouan. When this was defeated, Ibn al-Aghlab led a counterattack on Tunis and forced Tammam to seek an *amān*, which was duly granted. If the tangled events of this period tell us anything about the structures of power, it is that caliphal legitimacy was a powerful factor. Tammam's status as a usurper without an *‘ahd* played a major part in his defeat. Ibn al-Aghlab came to power not as a separatist rebel trying to set up an independent regime for himself, but, at least in public discourse, as a loyal servant of the Abbasid *dawla* intent on restoring legitimate government.

It was against this background that the caliph sent a letter dismissing Ibn Muqatil as governor and sending Ibrahim an *‘ahd* for the governorship of Ifriqiya. According to al-Baladhuri, our earliest source, Harun al-Rashid had asked Harthama, by now returned to the East, whom he would recommend to replace Ibn Muqatil and it was he who had recommended Ibrahim.³⁸ The letter of appointment arrived in the middle of Jumada II 184/June 800 and this can be said to mark the beginning of Aghlabid rule in the province, but not of the independence of Ifriqiya from Abbasid rule. The sources wax lyrical about Ibrahim's talents as a warrior, orator, and judge, not surprising given that fact that the chronicles on which our sources depend were largely compiled during the rule of his descendants. He seems to have been largely accepted by the *jund* and was on good terms with the Berbers. He also began consolidating his authority by building a new palace enclosure, later known as al-Qasr al-Qadim, about three miles from Kairouan. He moved the *dār al-imāra* there and

36 It is interesting to note that possession of the Great Mosque was a sign of control, much more than possession of the *dār al-imāra*.

37 Ibn ‘Idhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:90.

38 Al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-buldan*, 232.

secretly moved his arms and military supplies there, and settled his slaves and the people he trusted around it.³⁹

Al-Baladhuri gives a slightly more extended description:

Ibrahim built the White Palace (*qaṣr al-abyaḍ*) two miles south of Kairouan, gave the people plots of land around it and made it a *miṣr* and built a Friday mosque with plaster and baked brick and furnished it marble columns and a cedar roof, making it two hundred cubits square. He bought slaves and freed them, 5,000 in number, and settled them around it. He called the city al-ʿAbbasiyya and it is still populated and flourishing to this day.⁴⁰

But Ibrahim was no more immune to disturbances caused by the *jund* than his predecessors had been. He faced two major revolts, those of Hamdis b. ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Kindi in 802 and ʿImran b. al-Muqallad in 809. In both cases, he was able to defend himself from his new base in the *qaṣr* with the help of his slave soldiers (*ʿabīd*, never *ghilmān* or *mamālīk*, in the sources). It would be interesting to know more about these, but we have no indication about their origins or their skills and training. It is interesting that he was doing this a decade before the young Abbasid prince, Abu Ishaq b. Harun al-Rashid, later the caliph al-Muʿtasim, began recruiting the slave soldiers in Baghdad, a small private army which enabled him to seize power after the death of his brother al-Maʿmun in 833.

When Ibrahim died in July 812, he was succeeded by his son ʿAbd Allah. His short and unhappy reign ended with his death from natural causes in June 817 and he was succeeded by his younger brother, Ziyadat Allah, who was in many ways the second founder of the Aghlabid regime.

Before discussing his rule, however, it is interesting to look at the mechanism of succession in the family. Neither ʿAbd Allah nor Ziyadat Allah seems to have had the *ʿahd* of the caliph, which had proved so crucial to the success of Ibrahim in seizing and retaining power. The reason for this was the crisis in the caliphate, which had essentially paralyzed the caliphal administration. After the death of Harun al-Rashid there was a growing hostility between his two sons and heirs, al-Amin and al-Maʿmun, which erupted in open hostility in 810–11. In fact the successions occurred at exactly the time that the political and military leaders in Baghdad and Fustat (Egypt) were entirely preoccupied by the huge conflict between the brothers. Even if they had wished, they were

39 Ibn ʿIdhari, *Kitab al-bayan*, 1:92–3.

40 Al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-buldan*, 234.

in no position to assert the same caliphal influence over the succession that al-Mansur and his successors had done over the Muhallabi succession half a century before.

At the time of Ibrahim's death, the Aghlabid family was still very much part of the elite of the Abbasid caliphate. When in 812 the caliph al-Amin retreated to the Round City in Baghdad in his final resistance to the attacks of his brother's general, Tahir, he had among his few remaining supporters Ibrahim's son, Muhammad, called in al-Tabari's account "al-Ifrīqī."⁴¹ While the desperate caliph hesitated about what to do, Muhammad made a radical suggestion:

"Your position and ours have come to what you see. We (Muhammad was acting in concert with a local Baghdad commander) have formed a plan, which we submit to you. Consider it and make up your mind, for we hope it will be right, and that God will make it prosper, if He will."

"What is it?" he asked.

"The men have scattered from you and the foe has encircled you on every side. Of your cavalry, 1,000 horses, the best and swiftest of them, remain with you. We think you should choose 700 of the *abnā*,⁴² men whom we know to love you. We will mount them on these horses and make a sortie by night from one of the gates [of the Round City], for 'the night belongs to its people' and no one will stand firm against us, God willing. We will go out until we reach al-Jazira and Syria. You will raise troops and gather taxes and with you will be a large kingdom (*mamlaka*) and a new domain (*mulk*). People will rally to you and the [enemy] soldiers will be prevented from pursuing you."

After initially agreeing, al-Amin rejected this advice because other courtiers were threatened by Tahir with the loss of all their property if the plan went ahead. Muhammad, of course, was immune from such pressure as his estates lay far to the west in Ifriqiya, well out of the range of Tahir and his men. The failure of this initiative meant the final end of the Aghlabid family's presence at the court of the caliphs and from this time on their activities were confined to the Maghrib.

Whether the words quoted were actually spoken or not is, of course, impossible to say, although it certainly reflects one of the options open to the cornered caliph, but, more importantly from our point of view, it shows how the

41 Al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-rusul*, 3:911–12. He must also be the "al-Ifrīqī" mentioned on p. 954.

42 Lit. "sons," the name given to the descendants of those Khurasani troops who had put the Abbasids in power in 750 and had settled in Baghdad.

Aghlabids were still very much a part of the caliph's inner circle in Baghdad and closely linked to the *abnā* from whom the Aghlabids themselves had sprung.

The reign of Ziyadat Allah saw the last, and possibly the greatest, confrontation between the Aghlabids and the *jund*. The revolt of the *jund* was led by one Mansur b. Nasr al-Tunbudhi, who took his *nisba* not from the Arab tribe from which he could claim descent, but from the fortress near Tunis, which he owned and from which he could dominate the route from Tunis to Kairouan. As before, the proximate cause of the trouble was financial. Ziyadat Allah is said to have been very hard on the *jund*, probably because he could not afford to be generous and in the new political circumstances there was no possibility of the financial aid from Egypt which had saved emirs on previous occasions. The revolt began in 824 and the rebels soon controlled most of the country apart from Qabes in the south, but Ziyadat Allah allied with the Berbers to regain the advantage and Mansur was captured and executed.

After the defeat of this revolt, the country seems to have become more peaceful and the basic structures of Ifriqiyan politics changed for good. Two factors were important in this change. The first was that the Kharijite Berbers had become less threatening and so the *jund* was not so essential to the survival of Aghlabid Ifriqiya. The fact that the Kutama of the Aurès region were now being converted by Shi'ite missionaries did not seem, at this time, a real threat. The second was the beginning of the conquest of Sicily. It is no coincidence that Ziyadat Allah set this in motion in 827, immediately after the defeat of Mansur's rebellion. This meant that not only was there a new outlet for the martial energies of the *jund*, but, more importantly, there were new sources of revenue which could help to solve the cash flow problems which had plagued Ifriqiya since the *jund*'s first arrival with Ibn al-Ash'ath.

It is perhaps interesting to consider the reasons why the Aghlabids established an independent dynasty. Since the nineteenth century, if not before, we have come to consider the striving for "national" independence as a natural human aspiration. Empires are intrinsically evil and all good men and true follow the example of the rebels of 1848 in their demands for states of their own. Yet this is not the only model for the disintegration of empires. If we want to understand the Aghlabid process in a comparative historical perspective, we might be better off looking at the collapse of the Soviet empire in Central Asia in the early 1990s. In both cases the new rulers were an integral part of the old imperial system and owed their status and advancement to its structures. Ibrahim, as we have seen, attained power as a supporter of Abbasid legitimacy against the usurper Tammam b. Tamim. In both cases, however, the empire collapsed from the center, leaving such provincial potentates high and dry. The caliphate, like the Gorbachev administration, could offer no structure of

legitimacy. Neither the new caliph al-Ma'mun nor his successors seem to have made the slightest effort to restore their authority in Ifriqiya or to reintegrate it into the caliphate. They simply had to invent a new legitimacy of their own devising, for no *'ahd* would arrive with the *barīd* to encourage their subjects to take the oath of allegiance. They had independence thrust upon them and had to fend for themselves as best they could.