

FROM SLAVES TO SUPPORTERS:  
THE ROLE OF THE SLAVS IN THE  
FATIMID MEDITERRANEAN EMPIRE  
IN THE FOURTH/TENTH CENTURY

*Shainool Jiwa*

THE founding of the Fatimid state in North Africa in 297/910 led to the establishment of a Shi'i Ismaili caliphate on the shores of the Mediterranean. From 297/910 to 361/972 the Fatimid state was centred in the North African province of Ifrīqiya (present-day Tunisia and Algeria), its borders extending from the shores of the Atlantic in the west to Libya and Sicily in the east. The move to Egypt in 361/972 marked the transformation of the Fatimid state from a regional polity to a Mediterranean empire that came to include Syria and parts of Arabia, and it was from Egypt and the newly founded capital of al-Qāhira al-Mu'izziya (Cairo) that the empire reached its zenith over the following century, eventually meeting its demise in 567/1171.

Among the distinctive features of the initial sixty-year phase of the North African era was the growing prominence of the Ṣaḡālība—slaves of Slavic origin—across major areas of Fatimid administration and in the affairs of the Fatimid household. The military and administrative involvement of the Slavs in early Fatimid history has been a subject of earlier scholarship, but the more recent availability of a number of Fatimid texts providing intimate, eyewitness accounts of the role of the Ṣaḡālība among the Fatimids invites a fresh exploration of the subject. Drawing upon these texts as well as a range of non-Fatimid sources, this study examines the social and political developments in the nascent North African Fatimid state that led to the rise of the Ṣaḡālība to prominent positions in the Fatimid administration and in the military and naval forces. The circumstances that enabled the Ṣaḡālība to secure senior, trusted positions in the caliphal household and the reconfiguration of the Slavs' social status through their religious allegiance to the Ismaili imam-caliph will also be examined.

The study postulates that the slave status and foreign origins of the Ṣaḡālība situated them as outsiders to the indigenous tribal affinities and factional rivalries that permeated the North African milieu in the fourth/tenth century. Moreover, articulations of religious allegiance to the person of the Fatimid

imam-caliph enabled them to transcend the slave-master strictures of their age. They could thus serve as trusted personal agents of the imam, unfettered by the tribal, ethnic, and factional bonds of other state officials. This role gained further salience in view of the fact that none of the four Fatimid imam-caliphs who reigned in North Africa appointed senior household members other than the designated heir-apparent, the *walī al-‘ahd*, to senior military or administrative positions in the state. Yet select members of the *Ṣaqāliba* came to serve in these positions as the imam-caliph’s trusted functionaries in the state administration, the regional government, the military and navy, and within the Fatimid household.

#### CHALLENGES OF FATIMID RULE IN NORTH AFRICA

The rise of the Fatimids in North Africa was fostered by the promotion of the Ismaili *da‘wa* (religio-political mission) in Ifrīqiya by the *dā‘ī* Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Shī‘ī over a number of decades in the third/ninth century.<sup>1</sup> Gaining adherents among the Kutāma Berbers of Ifrīqiya,<sup>2</sup> it called for the proclamation of the universal rule of the Shi‘i Ismaili imam and rejected the legitimacy of the Abbasid caliphs and Umayyad rulers of Spain. Having secured victory over Qayrawān, the capital of Ifrīqiya, in 296/909, the *da‘wa* proclaimed the Ismaili imam ‘Abd Allāh al-Mahdī bi’llāh as the sole legitimate imam and caliph over the Muslim world, thus founding the Fatimid state.

The reign of the first Fatimid imam-caliph, al-Mahdī bi’llāh (297–322/909–34), saw the consolidation of the nascent state as exemplified by the building of the new capital at al-Mahdiyya. During his reign, however, al-Mahdī bi’llāh

<sup>1</sup> The term *dā‘ī* refers to those involved in the propagation of the Ismaili cause and corresponds broadly to the profile of being a missionary. *Dā‘ī* Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Shī‘ī arrived in the lands of the Kutāma of Ifrīqiya in 280/893 having been dispatched there by the leading Ismaili *dā‘ī* of Yemen, Ibn Ḥawshab (d. 302/914). The year after the proclamation of the Fatimid state, al-Shī‘ī was involved in a conspiracy against the Fatimid imam-caliph leading to his execution. See Heinz Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi: The Rise of the Fatimids*, trans. Michael Bonner (Leiden, 1996), 95–121; and Michael Brett, *The Rise of the Fatimids: The World of the Mediterranean and the Middle East in the Tenth Century CE* (Leiden, 2001), 49–73.

<sup>2</sup> Once dominating the region of Lesser Kabylia in present-day Algeria, the Kutāma Berbers served as the mainstay of the Fatimid *da‘wa* and formed the bulk of the Fatimid infantry well into the Egyptian phase of their rule. With their chieftains becoming prominent political actors in the early Fatimid state, their religious loyalty was reflected in the title of *awliyā’* (friends) often used to describe them in relation to the Fatimid imam. Likely to be identified as the *Ucutumani* Berbers of the Classical period, they were deeply embedded in the tribal rivalries of the region. See Brett, *Rise of the Fatimids*, 85.

had to calibrate the varied expectations and rivalries of the subject populace, which contributed to the rise of the *Ṣaqāliba* in the Fatimid administration. These included the necessity of the new imam-caliph to negotiate between the demands of the Arab dominated urban centres and those of the Berber-dominant rural peripheries. It also required mitigating the rivalries between various Berber confederations, and recalcitrant opposition from the Sunni Mālikī scholars [*‘ulamā’*].<sup>3</sup> These regional rivalries were in turn fuelled by the Umayyads of Andalusia expressing their own desire for dominance of North Africa, and exacerbated by their centuries old rivalry against the ‘Alids, from whom the Fatimids claimed their descent.<sup>4</sup> Critically, al-Mahdī’s task of state formation also meant navigating the demands of the exclusivist messianic expectations of some members of the Ismaili *da‘wa* while also laying the foundations of a Fatimid state apparatus that took cognizance of the ethnic and religious diversity of the North African populace.<sup>5</sup>

The second Fatimid imam-caliph, al-Qā’im bi-Amr Allāh (322–34/934–46), succeeded to a state that spanned from Morocco to Libya and included Sicily, yet the later part of his reign witnessed a major revolt led by the Khārijī leader Abū Yazīd al-Nukkarī (d. 336/947), who belonged to the hostile Zanāta confederation of the Berbers. The revolt gained further momentum, as it garnered support from other detractors of the Fatimids noted above. With the survival of the Fatimids in the region hanging in the balance, al-Qā’im passed away, to be succeeded by his son, who spent the early years of his reign in repelling this existential threat to the continued Fatimid presence in the region. The third imam-caliph, al-Manṣūr bi’llāh (334–41/946–53), publicly declared his succession to the Fatimid caliphate following his defeat of Abū Yazīd and the latter’s death. Soon thereafter, he created rapprochement with the Mālikī establishment of Qayrawān, appointing a Mālikī judge

<sup>3</sup> As representatives of the dominant legal school [*madhhab*] of North Africa on the eve of the Fatimid arrival, the Mālikī scholars viewed the rule of a Shi‘ī imam-caliph, who was imbued with supreme authority in law and doctrine, as a threat to their religious and social status. See particularly Wilferd Madelung, “The Religious Policy of the Fatimids towards Their Sunni Subjects in the Maghrib,” in *L’Égypte Fatimide, son art en son histoire. Actes du colloque organisé à Paris les 28, 29 et 30 mai 1998* (Paris, 1999), 97–104. On the particular challenges of al-Mahdī bi’llāh’s reign, see Halm, *Empire of the Mahdī*, 141–275; Brett, *Rise of the Fatimids*, 73–100; and Farhad Daftary, *The Ismā‘īlīs: Their History and Doctrines*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, 2007), 116–28, 137–40.

<sup>4</sup> Halm, *Empire of the Mahdī*, 392–96.

<sup>5</sup> On the evolution of Fatimid model of authority in relation to the above mentioned tensions, see Shainool Jiwa, “Governance and Pluralism under the Fatimids,” in *The Shi‘ī World: Pathways in Tradition and Modernity*, ed. Farhad Daftary et al. (London, 2015), 111–31.

[*qāḍī*] over the city in a gesture noted by Wilferd Madelung as “a momentous development in Islamic government.”<sup>6</sup>

The fourth Fatimid imam-caliph, al-Mu‘izz li-Dīn Allāh (341–65/953–75), built on the edifice of his three predecessors, learning from their struggles in creating approaches to governance that allowed for inclusivity of a broader cross-section of the North African populace.<sup>7</sup> Over time, his reign witnessed the zenith of Fatimid rule in North Africa, ushering in a period of stability and prosperity as well as cultural and doctrinal efflorescence. The Fatimid conquest of Egypt in 359/969 led by a Ṣaqlabī, general Jawhar (d. 381/992), came to be seen as the epitome of Fatimid success during his reign, as it propelled this North African dynasty to a Shi‘i Mediterranean empire. Through the challenging course of each of these four Fatimid sovereigns, select Ṣaqlāliba were entrusted with pivotal roles, as will be discussed below.

#### SOURCES

To date, the most significant study of the Ṣaqlāliba in early Fatimid history is that published by Ivan Hrbek in 1953.<sup>8</sup> While other scholars have contributed to the discussion,<sup>9</sup> much of the overall conclusions regarding the Ṣaqlāliba in the Fatimid period rely on this work. Hrbek provides a comprehensive review and analysis of some of the key Slavs, their origins, and their involvement at the Fatimid court and in the armed forces. Yet it is limited by the nature and range of sources that were available to him at the time.

Hrbek sought to account for the context and background of the Ṣaqlāliba in the Fatimid Empire from the onset of Fatimid rule until the end of the reign of al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh (386–411/996–1021), and he argued for their distinct prominence during this time particularly in the Fatimid military, which essentially stemmed from the “warlike” background of their “race.”<sup>10</sup> Their prominence, he argued, was further engendered by their distinct loyalty to the

<sup>6</sup> Wilferd Madelung, “A Treatise on the Imamate of the Fatimid Caliph al-Manṣūr Billāh,” in *Texts, Documents and Artefacts: Islamic Studies in Honour of D. S. Richards*, ed. Chase F. Robinson (Leiden, 2003), 60.

<sup>7</sup> See Jiwa, “Governance and Pluralism,” 120–26; and Sumaiya A. Hamdani, *Between Revolution and State: The Path to Fatimid Statehood* (London, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Ivan Hrbek, “Die Slawen im Dienste der Fāṭimiden,” *Archiv Orientalní* 21 (1953): 543–81.

<sup>9</sup> See Halm, *Empire of the Mahdi*, 278–98; Brett, *Rise of the Fatimids*, 144; Yaacov Lev, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt* (Leiden, 1991), 74–77; and C. E. Bosworth, “Ṣakāliba,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2d ed. (online edition).

<sup>10</sup> Hrbek, “Die Slawen,” 580.

Fatimid imams, which resulted from the fact that their foreign origins linked them to the fate of those rulers who were disliked by the general populace. Their religious inclination as followers of the Ismaili imam was for Hrbek incidental. He adds, however, that the dissipation of their ethnic identity, resulting from a loss of linguistic identity and inability to replenish *Ṣaqḻabī* slaves, denied them the opportunity to develop a cohesive “national” identity over this period. This was compounded by the favouring of the *Daylamī* and Turkic slaves during the reign of the fifth Fatimid imam-caliph, al-‘Azīz bi’llāh.<sup>11</sup>

The focus of Hrbek’s pioneering scholarly effort was to identify prominent figures in the Fatimid administration as belonging to the *Ṣaqālība*, and the lengthy excurses on the background of al-Qā’id Jawhar served as a case study.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, he negated earlier arguments that had postulated a Sicilian rather than Slavic origin of these slaves. Hrbek argued that the source materials point to Slavic origins, and that customs regulating the *dhimma* populations of conquered lands, as well as the reluctance of ruling authorities to promote indigenous officials from conquered regions to senior positions of power, contributed to the limitations of recruiting Sicilian slaves. Subsequent scholarship on the *Ṣaqḻabī* origins of these slaves have generally upheld Hrbek’s arguments.<sup>13</sup>

In providing the context for the presence of the *Ṣaqālība* in the Fatimid realms, Hrbek was necessarily limited by the range and provenance of the sources at his disposal. Fatimid scholarship then was still emerging as a field of study, particularly as regards the availability of source materials. In the main, Hrbek relied on Arabic sources written by Sunni Muslim historians of North Africa between the seventh/thirteenth and ninth/fifteenth centuries. Among these are the works of Ibn Ḥammād (d. 628/1231),<sup>14</sup> Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233),<sup>15</sup> al-Tijānī (d. ca. 711/1311),<sup>16</sup> Ibn ‘Idhārī (d. 711–12/1312),<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 559–71.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Brett holds that Hrbek has “conclusively shown” Jawhar originated from the Adriatic rather than Sicily (Brett, *Rise of the Fatimids*, 236–37); this is seemingly also accepted by Bosworth (“*Ṣakālība*”).

<sup>14</sup> Muḥammad b. ‘Alī Ibn Ḥammād (Ḥamādu) al-Ṣanhājī, *Akhbār mulūk Banī ‘Ubayd wa-sīratuhum*, ed. and trans. M. Vonderheyen as *Histoire des rois ‘Obaïdides (les califes Fatimides)* (Algiers-Paris, 1927).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Izz al-Dīn Abu’l-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fi’l-Ta’rīkh*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh al-Qāḍī (Beirut, 1407/1987).

<sup>16</sup> Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad al-Tijānī, *Riḥla*, ed. H. H. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (Tunis, 1958).

Ibn Khaldūn (d. 784/1382),<sup>18</sup> and al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442).<sup>19</sup> In discussing the role of the Ṣaḡālība in Fatimid Egypt and Syria, Hrbek draws upon Ibn al-Qalānisi (465–555/1073–1160),<sup>20</sup> and in establishing the origins of Jawhar, whether he was al-Rūmī, al-Saqlabī or al-Siqillī, Hrbek draws upon a wider pool of Sunni writings.<sup>21</sup> When establishing the geographical imprints of the Ṣaḡālība on urban settlements, he occasionally relies on Ibn Ḥawqal (fl. second half of the fourth/tenth century),<sup>22</sup> whose Shi‘i pro-Fatimid proclivity is now well attested, and he also occasionally relies on medieval Italian sources for identification of Saqlabī raiders, notably the *Chronicon Cantabrigiense*.<sup>23</sup>

The sources utilized by Hrbek had their own limitations. They were often penned by authors writing in a milieu of Sunni doctrinal hegemony, in which anti-Fatimid polemic had become ingrained.<sup>24</sup> Authors such as Ibn Ḥammād are known for their anti-Fatimid bias, while only a few, such as Ibn Khaldūn and al-Maqrīzī, actively promoted a more neutral stance in writing about the Fatimids.<sup>25</sup> Critically, the type of information available to these medieval chroniclers, compounded by their own frameworks of historical writing, meant that their presentation of the Ṣaḡālība in the Fatimid administration was inherently limited.

Given that Fatimid writings were often kept within the hierarchy of the Ismaili *da‘wa* organization and were prone to censure and destruction, Fatimid source material pertaining to North Africa was not widely available to

<sup>17</sup> Ibn ‘Idhārī al-Marrākushī, *Kitāb al-bayān al-mughrib fī akhbār al-Andalus wa’l-Maghrib*, ed. G. S. Colin and E. Levi-Provençal (Leiden, 1948)

<sup>18</sup> ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Muḥammad Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-Ibar*, ed. Khalīl Shihādah, Suhayl Zakkār (Beirut, 1431/2001)

<sup>19</sup> Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī, *Ittī ‘āz al-ḥunafā bi-akhbār al-a‘imma al-fāṭimiyyīn al-khulafā*, vol. 1, ed. Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl (Cairo, 1967), vols. 2 and 3, ed. M. Ḥilmī M. Aḥmad (Cairo, 1971–73).

<sup>20</sup> Abū Ya‘lā Ḥamza b. Asad Ibn al-Qalānisi, *Dhayl ta’rīkh Dimashq*, ed. Henry F. Amedroz (Leiden, 1908).

<sup>21</sup> In addition to the sources mentioned, he draws on the works of al-Quḍā‘ī (d. 454/1062), Ibn al-Abbār (d. 658/1260), Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282), Abu’l-Fidā (d. 732/1331), al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/1333), Ibn Ḍuqmāq (d. 809/1406), Ibn Taghrī Birdī (d. 874/1470), and al-Suyūfī (d. 911/1505).

<sup>22</sup> Abu’l-Qāsim Muḥammad Ibn Ḥawqal al-Naṣībī, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-arḍ* (Beirut, 1979).

<sup>23</sup> Hrbek, “Die Slawen,” 553.

<sup>24</sup> See Daftary, *Ismā‘īlīs*, 1–10.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion particularly focused on al-Maqrīzī’s attitude to the Fatimids vis-à-vis other eastern Sunni authors, see Shainool Jiwa, introduction to *Towards a Shi‘i Mediterranean Empire: Fatimid Egypt and the Founding of Cairo. The Reign of the Imam-Caliph al-Mu‘izz from al-Maqrīzī’s Ittī ‘āz al-ḥunafā* (London, 2009), 32–49. References to the *Ittī ‘āz* hereafter will be to this English edition.

post-seventh/thirteenth-century Sunni writers.<sup>26</sup> This limitation, however, was not absolute. The *Iftitāḥ al-da'wa wa Ibtidā' al-dawla* by the eminent Fatimid scholar and *dā'ī*, Qāḍī al-Nū'mān,<sup>27</sup> is known to have been a principal source for later chroniclers of Fatimid history writing about the dynasty's origins.<sup>28</sup> The mainly lost works of the Zīrid Shi'ī Ibn al-Raḳīq were influential for later writers, and the verses of the Fatimid court poet Ibn Hānī' made their way in the works of Ibn Ḥammād, as noted by Hrbek.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, the functional utility of what was drawn from the scarce Fatimid sources was filtered through the ideological biases of the later compilers. Moreover, the subject of their focus tended in the main to be on providing a chronological account of the major political events. Thus, Ibn Ḥammād's booklet-sized *Akḥbār Mulūk Banī 'Ubayd* sketches a terse overview of the major events in the reigns of the Fatimid imam-caliphs from al-Mahdī bi'llāh to al-'Āḍid (r. 555–67/1160–71). Ibn al-Athīr provides more detailed accounts in his annalistic *al-Kāmil fī'l-Ta'rīkh*, and these tendencies of historical narrative writing also shaped the works of Ibn 'Idhārī's *al-Bayān al-Mughrib* and Ibn Khaldūn's *al-Ibar*.

Al-Maqrīzī's writings are distinct in this regard, as he provides multifaceted coverage of the Fatimids. In his dedicated history of the Fatimid caliphate, entitled *Itti'āz al-Ḥunafā' bi-Akḥbār al-'Imma al-Fāṭimiyīn al-Khulafā'* (Lessons for the Seekers of Truth in the History of the Fatimid Imams and Caliphs), al-Maqrīzī draws upon a range of Egyptian and Eastern sources, including Fatimid writings. This is also true of his voluminous biographical dictionary, *al-Muqaffā al-Kabīr*, of which only fragments survive,<sup>30</sup> and his renowned work on the topography of Egypt, *al-Mawā'iz wa'l-'i'tibār fī dhīkr*

<sup>26</sup> The burgeoning of the Egyptian bureaucratic classes and their literary production during the Egyptian phase of Fatimid history meant, however, that many of their works, especially those related to administrative matters, were inherited by writers of successor dynasties. The book of Ibn al-Ṣayrafī (d. 541/1147) on the history of the viziers of Fatimid Egypt (*al-Ishāra ilā man nāl al-wizāra*) is a notable example of this. On the availability of Fatimid primary sources and their continuity in the later Egyptian tradition, see Paul Walker, *Exploring an Islamic Empire: Fatimid History and Its Sources* (London, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Al-Qāḍī Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nu'mān, *Iftitāḥ al-da'wa wa ibtidā' al-dawla*, ed. Farhat Dachraoui (Tunis, 1975). A recent annotated English translation of this work has been provided by Hamid Haji, *Founding the Fatimid State: The Rise of an Islamic Empire*, an annotated English translation of al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān's *Iftitāḥ al-Da'wa* (London, 2006). Further citations of the *Iftitāḥ* refer to Haji's edition.

<sup>28</sup> Brett, *Rise of the Fatimids*, 136–37.

<sup>29</sup> Hrbek, "Die Slawen," 572.

<sup>30</sup> Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Muqaffā' al-kabīr*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ya'lāwī (Beirut, 1981).

*al-Khiṭaṭ wa'l-Āthār*.<sup>31</sup> Al-Maqrīzī's principal focus, however, was Egypt, and therefore the Fatimids become of paramount interest to him after their arrival in his homeland. Thus, while coverage of the Fatimids in Egypt finds its greatest Sunni proponent in al-Maqrīzī's work, their North African phase is almost of incidental value to him.<sup>32</sup>

The limitations of the non-Fatimid sources are especially evident in the absence of al-Ustādh Jawdhar from Hrbek's study. Jawdhar, who rose among the Ṣaḡāliba ranks to become the trusted confidante, chamberlain, and chief minister to the Fatimid imam-caliphs, was possibly the most powerful of all the Ṣaḡāliba during this period.

The recent availability of sources written by Fatimid Ismaili authors from the fourth/tenth century thus allows for a revisiting of the context and significance of the rise of the Ṣaḡāliba, the reasons for their prominence in North Africa, and the tapering off of their influence in Egypt. These sources include *al-Majālis wa'l-Musayarāt* by al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān<sup>33</sup> and *Sīrat al-Ustādh Jawdhar* by Manṣūr al-'Azīzī al-Jawdhārī. Hamid Haji, in his recent critical edition and annotated translation of this *Sīrat al-Ustādh Jawdhar*, has also provided an important scholarly apparatus for a more nuanced investigation of the role of the Ṣaḡāliba in this period.<sup>34</sup> Also important in this regard is the seventh/fifteenth-century Ismaili writer Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn's *'Uyūn al-Akhhbār*, which relates accounts from Fatimid sources that are now lost.<sup>35</sup> Together,

<sup>31</sup> Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Mawā'iz wa'l-i'tibār fī dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa'l-āthār*, ed. Muḥammad Zaynhum and Madīhat al-Sharqāwī (Cairo, 1998). See also Walker, *Exploring an Islamic Empire*, 164–69, on the varied manuscripts and editions of this work.

<sup>32</sup> A case in point is al-Maqrīzī's rendering of the reign of the fourth Fatimid imam-caliph al-Mu'izz li-Dīn Allāh, who spent the majority of his twenty-two-year reign in North Africa, with only the last couple of years in Egypt. Yet, in writing about his reign, al-Maqrīzī spends only the first few pages of his 180-page oeuvre on developments in North Africa before moving on to relate at length the Fatimid move to Egypt and their settlement there. For a translation of al-Maqrīzī's coverage of this North African phase, see al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, trans. Jiwa, *Mediterranean Empire*, 53–66. For the remnant focusing on Egypt, see *ibid.*, 66–122, 187–217.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Qāḍī Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nu'mān, *Kitāb al-Majālis wa'l-Musayarāt*, ed. al-Ḥabīb al-Faqī, Ibrāhīm Shabbūh and Muḥammad al-Ya'lāwī (Tunis, 1978)

<sup>34</sup> Manṣūr al-'Azīzī al-Jawdhārī, *Sīrat al-Ustādh Jawdhar*, ed. Muḥammad K. Ḥusayn and M. A. Sha'ira (Cairo, 1954). The critical Arabic edition and annotated translation of this text is found in Hamid Haji, *Inside the Immaculate Portal: A History from the Early Fatimid Archives* (London, 2012). The volume contains both the translation and Arabic edition in separately numbered sections (the translation on pp. 19–166, the Arabic edition on pp. 1–181 in Indian numerals). References hereafter to al-Jawdhārī's *Sīra* are to this edition and will point to both the Arabic text (Ar.) and the translation (trans.).

<sup>35</sup> 'Imād al-Dīn Idrīs, *'Uyūn al-akhhbār wa funūn al-athār*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ya'lāwī as *Ta'rīkh al-khulafā' al-Fāṭimīyyīn bi'l-Maghrib: al-qism al-khāṣṣ min Kitāb 'uyūn al-akhhbār* (Beirut, 1985). An annotated translation of the chapter on the life of al-Mu'izz is found in

these sources offer an insider rendering of the developments, which allow for a more textured understanding of the social and religious dynamics as they unfolded, and a more composite account of the vitality of the Ṣaqlabī involvement in the Fatimid venture.

The *Majālis wa'l-Musayarāt* constitutes a collection of eyewitness accounts by Qāḍī al-Nu'mān of a series of audiences and excursions in his accompaniment of the Fatimid imam-caliphs al-Manṣūr and al-Mu'izz. Among the Fatimid sovereigns' entourage were the leading figures of the Fatimid state as well as the Ismaili *da'wa*, and it is in their midst that significant issues relating to the intricacies of Fatimid statecraft as well as doctrine, local governmental policies, and foreign relations were deliberated. Notably, discussion of Ṣaqlabī affairs also feature in the *Majālis*.

The *Sīrat al-Ustādh Jawdhar* was written in homage to the exemplary figure of the Ṣaqlabī Ustādh Jawdhar by his personal secretary. Through the rendering of this memoir, Ustādh Jawdhar emerges as the third most important figure of the Fatimid state, after the imam-caliph and his heir apparent. The *Sīra* provides an unparalleled vantage point to the upper echelons of the Fatimid administration during the North African phase of Fatimid rule. It reproduces letters between this chief administrator and the Fatimid imam-caliphs on a wide-range of topics, from taxation and navy building to affairs of the Fatimid household, and as such becomes a unique source of the medieval Muslim world. Reproducing a rich tranche of archival documents, Jawdhar's letters to the Fatimid sovereigns are artefacts of fourth/tenth-century North Africa and represent the earliest surviving documents through which the Fatimid-Ṣaqlāliba dialectic can be examined.

These insider Fatimid sources of the time allow for a foregrounding of the social and religious dynamics that underpinned the relationship between the Ṣaqlabī slaves and the Fatimid imam-caliphs. They also highlight the role of the Ṣaqlāliba within the Fatimid administration and in the palace of the imam-caliph himself. In this regard, the *Sīra* delineates the role of Ustādh Jawdhar as the pre-eminent official of the Fatimid state for over four decades, detailing his own rise and responsibilities, and together with al-Nu'mān's *Majālis* allows for a rendering of the internal hierarchy of the Ṣaqlāliba and the inherent tensions in their social and religious standing vis-à-vis other major constituents of the empire, particularly the Kutāma Berbers. The availability of these Fatimid sources therefore allows for explorations that had previously not been possible.

Shainool Jiwa, *The Founder of Cairo: The Fatimid Imam-Caliph al-Mu'izz and His Era* (London, 2013).

## THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE ṢAQĀLIBA IN THE FATIMID ADMINISTRATION

The Ṣaqāliba were slaves [‘*abīd*], the vast majority of whom had their origins as prisoners of war, usually taken from the Balkans or the other homelands of the Slavic peoples in Central and Eastern Europe in the early medieval period. Traversing through well-established trade-routes, by the turn the fourth/tenth century a large number of Ṣaqḷabī slaves were found in Umayyad Andalusia as well as in Aghlabid North Africa, where in the latter dynasty they established a significant presence in the court and in the administration of the ruling *amīr*. It was after the demise of the Aghlabid state that the first of the Ṣaqḷabī slaves would pass into Fatimid hands.<sup>36</sup>

When Ziyādat Allāh, the last Aghlabid governor of Ifrīqiya (r. 290–96/903–9), fled eastwards before the onset of the Fatimid state, he is recorded to have taken with him one thousand Ṣaqḷabī slaves, highlighting the sense of personal loyalty that the Ṣaqāliba engendered in their rulers.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, numerous Ṣaqḷabī slaves remained in the abandoned Aghlabid palace and would soon become part of the inheritance of the Fatimid court.<sup>38</sup>

Among the early tasks that al-Mahdī bi’llāh undertook soon after his arrival in Raqqāda as the first Fatimid imam-caliph in 297/910 was an inspection of the household members and slaves, including a notable number of Ṣaqāliba, left by the previous regime. Their ownership was now subsumed to that of the new master, who held the legal right for their service and labour. The eyewitness accounts note that he personally oversaw their living provisions and clothing allowances and employed them in the state warehouses.<sup>39</sup> It is then that he first noticed Jawdhar (d. 362/973), a young Ṣaqḷabī lad, noting him to

<sup>36</sup> Dmitriy Mishin’s article on slaves in the Aghlabid administration, “The *Ṣaqāliba* Slaves in the Aghlabid State,” *Annual Journal of Medieval Studies at CEU* (1996–1997): 236–44, provides a useful backdrop for charting the role of the Ṣaqāliba in North Africa prior to the Fatimid arrival.

<sup>37</sup> Al-Nu‘mān, *Ifṭīḥ*, trans. Haji, 169.

<sup>38</sup> The presence of the Ṣaqāliba in circles outside the Aghlabid administration in the pre-Fatimid period can be further attested by the fact that Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Shī‘ī presented al-Mahdī with a Ṣaqḷabī slave named Bushrā as stated in the *Sīrat Ja‘far al-Ḥājib* (Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Yamānī, *Sīrat al-Ḥājib Ja‘far b. ‘Alī*, trans. W. Ivanow, *Ismaili Tradition Concerning the Rise of the Fatimids* [London, 1942], 210). Elsewhere in this text, this slave is expressly identified as a Ṣaqḷabī (216).

<sup>39</sup> Al-Jawdharī, *Sīra*, Ar., 4–5; trans., 22–23. For an account of how the supervision and maintenance of the remaining palace retinue of Ziyādat Allāh became initially the responsibility of the *dā‘ī* Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Shī‘ī, prior to the arrival of al-Mahdī bi’llāh, see al-Nu‘mān, *Ifṭīḥ*, trans. Haji, 176–78.

be “graceful” and “diligent,” and allocated him to serve his son, and future successor, al-Qā’im bi-Amr Allāh.<sup>40</sup> Thus began the journey of one of the most steadfast servants of the Fatimid era, who served four consecutive Fatimid imam-caliphs, and whose lifespan witnessed his stellar rise to eminence from his beginnings as a Ṣaqlabī slave to becoming among the most trusted confidants of the fourth Fatimid ruler, al-Mu‘izz li-Dīn Allāh.

Jawdhar was only one of a number of Ṣaqlāliba who began their rise to prominence during the reign of al-Mahdī. Other named Ṣaqlāliba included Mas‘ūd, Ṣābir, Naṣīm al-Fatā, and Sulaymān al-Khādīm, whose careers under al-Mahdī are illustrative of the range and scale of their involvement in the nascent Fatimid state and are indicative of the prospective impact of the Ṣaqlabī presence in Fatimid North Africa.

As attested in non-Ismaʿili sources, the earliest Fatimid Ṣaqlāliba seem to have been most prominent in the military. In 307/920, Sulaymān al-Ṣaqlabī jointly led a naval squadron supporting the second Fatimid expedition to Egypt under the command of al-Mahdī’s heir apparent al-Qā’im. Although the campaign was unsuccessful and Sulaymān was captured and killed,<sup>41</sup> the Ṣaqlāliba continued to flourish after him. Over the next decade, first the Ṣaqlabī Mas‘ūd and then Ṣābir continued the trend of leading Fatimid fleets.<sup>42</sup>

Under al-Mahdī, prominent Ṣaqlāliba were also entrusted with governorships. In 314/926–27, the previously mentioned Ṣābir was appointed as the Fatimid governor over Qayrawān, which needed vigilant yet tactful governance as it was a hotbed of dissent stirred by the anti-Fatimid Mālikī *‘ulamā*, and Ṣābir himself acquired this post after it had been held by Naṣīm al-Fatā, another trusted Ṣaqlabī.<sup>43</sup>

Over the same period, the scale of Ṣaqlabī involvement in the Fatimid court is highlighted with the appointment of a Ṣaqlabī as the *ṣāhib al-mīẓalla*, the parasol bearer over the Fatimid imam-caliph at ceremonial occasions, a prestigious role that offered direct access to the imam-caliph. Mas‘ūd al-Ṣaqlabī appears to have been amongst the first Ṣaqlāliba to have been selected for this role,<sup>44</sup> and he was succeeded in this post by Ghars al-Fatā,<sup>45</sup> a position that

<sup>40</sup> Al-Jawdharī, *Sīra*, Ar., 4–5; trans., 22–23.

<sup>41</sup> See Haji’s footnote in al-Jawdharī, *Sīra*, trans., 23 n. 39, citing al-Maqrīzī, Idrīs, and Ibn al-Athīr.

<sup>42</sup> Hrbek, “Die Slawen,” 553; Halm, *Empire of the Mahdī*, 279. Both authors here cite Ibn ‘Idhārī.

<sup>43</sup> Halm, *Empire of the Mahdī*, 279, citing Ibn ‘Idhārī.

<sup>44</sup> Hrbek, “Die Slawen,” 554, citing Ibn Ḥammād.

<sup>45</sup> Halm, *Empire of the Mahdī*, 279.

subsequently continued among the Ṣaqaḷiba until the reign of the fifth Fatimid imam-caliph, al-ʿAzīz biʿllāh.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, from the *Sīrat al-Ustādh Jawdhar* the use of the Ṣaqaḷiba as personal representatives of the imam-caliph in mediating disputes at this time becomes evident. When a land dispute broke out among the Kutāma supporters of al-Mahdī, the imam-caliph sent a “trusted Slav” to investigate and report the matter to him.<sup>47</sup> The incident assumed salience in view of the fact that the Kutāma, who had been led by the *dāʿī* Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīʿī to secure the success of the Fatimid *daʿwa* in North Africa, had become sensitized to the rift that had occurred between him and al-Mahdī, which had led to the *dāʿī* being accused of treason and therefore put to death. While al-Mahdī had subsequently managed to secure the support of the majority of the Kutāma, the wound was yet raw. The matter therefore needed careful calibration by a person who was not seen to be encumbered by vested tribal interests or ethnic affiliations, as well as one whom the imam-caliph could trust to provide an informed assessment on the issue.

The fact that al-Mahdī chose trusted Ṣaqaḷabī slaves to fulfil a range of administrative, military, and diplomatic roles during his reign is telling on two counts. First, he did not at this stage have the pool of family members from whom he could draw to appoint in significant areas of Fatimid governance. This was reflective of the contingencies of his arrival from Syria into North Africa, as a fugitive accompanied only by his young son and a small band of trusted servants.<sup>48</sup> Second, the assumption of authority by al-Mahdī in person led to the displacement of the previous power and influence of the Kutāma shaykhs who had gained control over Ifrīqiya in the revolution that led to the proclamation of the Fatimid state. Their displacement led to resentment among some of them, which was further fuelled by the fissure between the *dāʿī* Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīʿī and al-Mahdī. These turns of events meant that the loyalty of the Kutāma officials could not be assumed. Furthermore, other segments of the North African population, such as the Arab population of Qayrawān, or other non-Kutāma Berber confederations, were each vested

<sup>46</sup> Hrbek notes that the Slavs were the bearers of the parasol from the beginning of the Fatimid dynasty, and that this office was one of the offices that remained longest in their hands. He further adds (citing al-Maqrīzī) that under al-Muʿizz this was held by the Slav named Ṣafī al-Ṣaqaḷabī, and that Rayyān al-Ṣaqaḷabī was once the parasol-bearer of al-ʿAzīz (“Die Slawen,” 572–73, 575).

<sup>47</sup> Al-Jawhdarī, *Sīra*, Ar., 7; trans., 24.

<sup>48</sup> Al-Yamānī, *Sīrat al-Ḥājib*, trans. Ivanow, 184–223; al-Nuʿmān, *Iftitāh*, trans. Haji, 121–26.

with their own regional, factional, and religious proclivities, which were often in conflict with each other. Under the circumstances, in the genesis of the Fatimid state, *Ṣaqlabī* slaves offered a viable alternate source of personnel who by the very nature of their status and presence owed their principal allegiance to the imam-caliph and whose social and ethnic linkages while present, were subsidiary to their individual functioning at the Fatimid court.

During the reign of al-Qā'im, al-Mahdī's son and successor, the rise of *Ṣaqlabī* slaves continued, three of whom—Maysūr, *Ṣandal*, and Bushrā—are noted by name in the sources in addition to the continued ascent of Ustādh Jawdhar. The fact that the former three *Ṣaqlāliba* served as Fatimid military commanders leading armies that were mainly composed of Berber contingents is indicative of the priorities facing the Fatimid administration and the increasing reliance on the *Ṣaqlāliba* by the Fatimid imam-caliph.

The initial success in establishing Fatimid authority in the westernmost regions had been due to Masāla b. Ḥabūs, leader of a major branch of the Berber Zanāta tribal confederation. Masāla, however, was killed in 312/924 by his cousin and rival, Mūsa b. Abī'l-ʿĀfiya, who reneged to the arch-rivals of the Fatimids, the Umayyads of Andalusia. The Fatimid hold on the western regions was thus shaken by the Umayyad resurgence and the inherent instability of tribal politics. It is pertinent that at this critical juncture, al-Qā'im turned to his *Ṣaqlabī* generals to lead the Fatimid armies. Soon after (in 320/932 and then in 323/935), al-Qā'im sent Fatimid armies commanded by *Ṣaqlabī* generals *Ṣandal* and Maysūr, who alongside the pro-Fatimid tribal chiefs were able to restore the western regions to Fatimid rule.<sup>49</sup> The success was short-lived, however, as less than a decade later, the great Khārijī revolt of Abū Yazīd erupted, and by 334/944 it had reduced Fatimid control of North Africa to the coastal plains of Ifrīqiya.

During Abū Yazīd's march towards the Fatimid capital, *Ṣaqlabī* generals played a vital part in the Fatimid defensive lines. Bushra al-Fatā was appointed over the city of Baghāya and defence of the turbulent city of Qayrawān was charged to the noted *Ṣaqlabī* general Maysūr, who commanded a contingent of Hawwāra Berbers of the Banū Kamlān. These Hawwāra, however, defected and put their Fatimid commander to death.<sup>50</sup> In the face of such defections to the Khārijī rebels, the continued loyalty of the *Ṣaqlāliba* is notable.

<sup>49</sup> Brett, *Rise of the Fatimids*, 151, 233.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 168. See also Haji's note in al-Jawdhārī, *Sīra*, 98 n. 209.

Beside the increasing prominence of the *Ṣaqāliba* on the battlefield, Ismaili sources provide insight on the growing role of al-Ustādh Jawdhar during the reign of al-Qā'im. By now, Jawdhar had been appointed by al-Qā'im to be in charge of his palace and his household while al-Qā'im was on the battlefield during the reign of his father;<sup>51</sup> then, upon al-Qā'im's own accession, Jawdhar was additionally entrusted with oversight of the treasury and the supervision of the royal textiles and warehouses.<sup>52</sup>

Yet the most significant gesture that marked Jawdhar's rise to prominence occurred in the final phase of al-Qā'im's life. While the battlefield was still ablaze, al-Qā'im became seriously indisposed and passed away. The nomination of his son Ismā'īl al-Manṣūr bi'llāh (r. 334–41/946–53) as successor was kept secret, so as not to add further anxiety to the dire political and military straits in which the Fatimid regime found itself. Notably, Ustādh Jawdhar had been made privy to the succession of al-Manṣūr by al-Qā'im prior to the burial of al-Mahdī seven years earlier, as he reports in his *Sīra*.<sup>53</sup>

The need to maintain secrecy was further vindicated by the fact that ruptures had emerged within the now-expanded Fatimid household regarding the right to succession.<sup>54</sup> The sources note that al-Qāsim, the eldest son of al-Qā'im bi-Amr Allāh, was the cause of some strife in relation to alternate claims supporting Aḥmad, another son of al-Mahdī, as the true contender to the Fatimid throne. After al-Qā'im's succession, the imam-caliph remained wary of this familial rivalry, which continued to fester across generations within the Fatimid house. This had a direct bearing on the continued non-involvement of the caliphal family members in the Fatimid administration. The significance of the trust invested by al-Qā'im in Ustādh Jawdhar is noteworthy, particularly because of the incendiary circumstances which the Fatimid house was facing, externally as well as internally. The abandonment of

<sup>51</sup> Al-Jawdhārī, *Sīra*, Ar., 10; trans., 26.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., Ar., 10–11; trans., 27.

<sup>53</sup> “Then he bestowed upon me a favour whereby he preferred me to everybody and singled me out from among all the missionaries and believers. Indeed, when he wanted to bury al-Mahdī bi'llāh, he summoned me to the exclusion of everybody and said to me, while I was alone with him on the edge of the grave in which he wanted to lower al-Mahdī bi'llāh, ‘O Jawdhar, it is not permissible to the *hujja* succeeding the imam to bury the imam until he has appointed his own *hujja*. Thus it is not permissible for me to do so until I have appointed my own *hujja*. I am satisfied with you to confide you with this trust to the exclusion of everybody’” (al-Jawdhārī, *Sīra*, Ar., 11; trans., 27).

<sup>54</sup> Within two decades, the Fatimid family expanded significantly; al-Mahdī himself had six sons and seven daughters, his eldest son al-Qā'im had eight sons and four daughters, and al-Qā'im's eldest al-Manṣūr was father to ten, five of whom were male. For a comprehensive survey, see Haji's depiction of the early Fatimid family tree in al-Jawdhārī, *Sīra*, Table 1.

Fatimid forces by many among the previously allied Berber tribes and their collusion with Abū Yazīd added further constraints on the Berber involvement in the Fatimid administration. Conversely, the continued loyalty of the majority of the Ṣaḡālība in the face of defections from the Fatimid cause added to their reliability and their further involvement in the higher echelons of Fatimid governance under the third Fatimid imam-caliph, al-Manṣūr bi'llāh.

Al-Manṣūr began his reign in the battlefield, with the Ṣaḡālība being given key roles in his struggle against Abū Yazīd. Whilst some succumbed to the sword, others rose in the ranks to replenish them, including figures such as Rashīq al-Rayḡhānī, Marām al-Fatā, Ṭāriq al-Ṣaḡlabī, Faraj, Qaysar, and Muẓaffar. Many of them played vital roles in the struggle against Abū Yazīd. Rashīq led the Fatimid naval force that played a crucial role in lifting the siege of Sousse,<sup>55</sup> Ṭāriq al-Ṣaḡlabī fought alongside al-Manṣūr on the battlefield,<sup>56</sup> Qaysar al-Ṣaḡlabī was also involved in subduing recalcitrant Berber tribes, and later, towards the end of al-Manṣūr's reign, the Ṣaḡlabī Faraj once more led the Fatimid naval expeditions in 340/951–952.<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, the policy of appointing select Ṣaḡālība as governors continued under al-Manṣūr. The victory of al-Manṣūr over Abū Yazīd's forces at Qayrawān was undoubtedly the turning point of the Khārijī-Fatimid war, and having achieved this breakthrough, al-Manṣūr entrusted the Ṣaḡlabī Marām to be the commander over the restive city of Qayrawān.<sup>58</sup> When al-Manṣūr left the site of victory to pursue Abū Yazīd, he ordered the construction of a new capital city on the site of his symbolic victory, and it was to this same Marām that oversight of the construction of al-Manṣūriyya was entrusted.

Among the most prominent Slavs who rose to distinction under al-Manṣūr were Qaysar and Muẓaffar.<sup>59</sup> Qaysar fought alongside the pro-Fatimid Ṣanhāja Berber chieftain Zīrī b. Manād in successfully quelling the Khārijī rebellion, and he was then appointed by al-Manṣūr as the governor of Baghāya and its provinces. Muẓaffar, who began his career as a tutor to the young al-

<sup>55</sup> Idrīs, *ʿUyūn al-Akḡbār*, ed. Ya' lāwī, 307.

<sup>56</sup> See al-Jawdhārī, *Sīra*, trans. Haji, 29 n. 54, citing al-Maqrīzī and Idrīs. Ṭāriq al-Ṣaḡlabī is amongst the few present in the final hours of al-Mu'izz li-Dīn Allāh. See al-Maqrīzī, *Ittī'āz*, trans. Jiwa, *Mediterranean Empire*, 210.

<sup>57</sup> Hrbek, "Die Slawen," 556, citing Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Khaldūn.

<sup>58</sup> Marām is alternatively spelt Mudām, Madām, or Mera (Hrbek, "Die Slawen," 555).

<sup>59</sup> Hrbek provides a discussion on these two Ṣaḡlabī figures in his article (Hrbek, "Die Slawen," 558). Haji similarly provides important information on them; see al-Jawdhārī, *Sīra*, trans. Haji, 29 n. 53.

Mu‘izz, was made governor of Tripoli.<sup>60</sup> In time their power grew and it was reported that between them they held governorship of the east and the west in the period after al-Manṣūr’s reign. Yet in spite of their seemingly major role and influence in the Fatimid state, little was known about them other than the fact that al-Manṣūr’s successor al-Mu‘izz had them executed in 349/960. The cause given is an often-repeated account, found in al-Maqrīzī’s work, which relates that al-Mu‘izz had them both put to death because he was rankled by the fact that they had sworn against him in the Slav language. The incredulity of the tale increases when the sources go on to relate that al-Mu‘izz took it upon himself to learn several languages including Berber, Greek, Sudanese, and Slav, to decipher what they had said.<sup>61</sup>

Hrbek rightly dismisses the account and cites Ibn Khaldūn in remarking instead that their downfall occurred because they had become too powerful.<sup>62</sup> When the few additional details made available in the Ismaili sources are pieced together, however, they provide further useful leads regarding the cause of the downfall of these two Ṣaqlabīs.

The *Sīra* mentions that both Qaysar and Muẓaffar had been placed under the authority of Ustādh Jawdhar, who had them imprisoned for committing a crime the nature of which is unknown. The two young Slavs managed to secure their release through the intervention of al-Manṣūr, then the heir-apparent, who wrote to Jawdhar advising leniency and compassion.<sup>63</sup> Al-Manṣūr must have retained his distinctive regard for them, such that by the end of his reign Qaysar and Muẓaffar wielded significant influence.

Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān in his *Majālis wa’l-Musayarāt* sheds light on the cause of their execution in 349/960. Both are expressly castigated in a conversation between al-Mu‘izz and Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān for their disloyalty, their insincerity to the imam, and for seeking to establish their own power-base.<sup>64</sup> Elsewhere in the *Majālis*, and quoted verbatim by Idrīs in the *‘Uyūn*, al-Mu‘izz is noted as censuring the actions of Qaysar, this time in front of a Kutāma audience. Qaysar is expressly rebuked by the imam for preventing the Kutāma from accessing him and for telling them that the imam had no need of them and did not have any need to see them.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, *Ittī‘āz*, trans. Jiwa, *Mediterranean Empire*, 65.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>62</sup> Hrbek, “Die Slawen,” 559.

<sup>63</sup> Al-Jawdharī, *Sīra*, Ar., 13–14; trans., 29–30.

<sup>64</sup> Al-Nu‘mān, *Majālis*, 427.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 487. This statement is reproduced in Idrīs, *‘Uyūn*, trans. Jiwa, *Founder of Cairo*, 152.

These Ismaili sources thus provide insight into a hitherto opaque episode in Fatimid history. It was not simply that they had become too powerful and therefore had to be executed. After all, the influence of Jawhar and Jawdhar under al-Mu‘izz was equally prominent, yet they continued to remain in high regard. Rather, the execution of Qaysar and Muḏaffar resulted from the charge that they had abused their authority and were guilty of insubordination and, critically, of seeking to isolate the imam by distancing him from the Kutāma, thereby asserting themselves as the locus of power. The anecdote provides a useful insight into the intricacies of the Ṣaqāliba relationship with the Fatimid imam-caliphs. It also sheds light on the internal dynamics among the Ṣaqāliba, and the pivotal role of Ustādh Jawdhar in their upbringing and in socializing them to serve in the Fatimid administration.

Under the reign of al-Manṣūr the career of Ustādh Jawdhar continued its ascent. Prior to his advance against Abū Yazīd, al-Manṣūr “invested the *ustādh* with authority over the royal palace and the entire country and gave him the keys of the safes of the Treasury.”<sup>66</sup> Thereafter, Jawdhar comes to perform the role of a vizier though without being vested with the formal title. Upon his return, the imam-caliph performed a grander gesture and manumitted Jawdhar. Now a freedman, Jawdhar was conferred the title “Client of the Commander of the Faithful” [*mawla amīr al-mu‘minīn*], a title which was to be included in all official correspondence.<sup>67</sup> Further, al-Manṣūr expressly commanded that Jawdhar’s name was to be inscribed on all the *ḫirāz* fabrics that were produced in the royal factories.<sup>68</sup> The gesture was not insignificant, as mention on state-produced *ḫirāz* was a sign of highest honour. As these fabrics would be distributed amongst the Fatimid elite, this was therefore a public proclamation of the eminent status of this Ṣaqalabī *mawla* of the imam. Al-Manṣūr further honoured Jawdhar, sending him gifts, and granting him the unprecedented honour of dining at the royal table. As Haji notes, the former Ṣaqalabī slave now became “the third most important person in the Fatimid state, after the imam and the heir apparent.”<sup>69</sup>

It is undoubtedly during the reign of al-Mu‘izz li-Dīn Allāh (r. 341–365/953–75) that Jawdhar and the Ṣaqāliba attain the apogee of their power and

<sup>66</sup> Al-Jawdhārī, *Sīra*, Ar., 18; trans., 33–34.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, Ar., 27; trans., 42.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, Ar., 28; trans., 43.

<sup>69</sup> Hamid Haji, “A Distinguished Slav Eunuch of the Early Fatimid Period: al-Ustādh Jawdhar,” in *Fortresses of the Intellect: Ismaili and Other Islamic Studies in Honour of Farhad Daftary*, ed. Omar Ali-de-Unzaga (London, 2011), 263.

influence.<sup>70</sup> Among the numerous *Ṣaqālība* in al-Mu‘izz’s time, none is more outstanding than Abu’l-Ḥasan Jawhar. Appointed by al-Mu‘izz to lead a major Fatimid expedition to the Maghrib, that is, the westernmost regions of North Africa, to consolidate their authority across the region, Jawhar’s reconquest of Fes and subsequent apprehension of the leading anti-Fatimid rebels at the time set him up as the ideal candidate to lead the Fatimid expedition to Egypt.<sup>71</sup> After lengthy deliberations with al-Mu‘izz, Jawhar set out eastwards at the head of the grand Fatimid army in 358/968, and upon his arrival in Egypt he conducted negotiations with the leading notables to secure a peaceful entry, issued a public “guarantee of safety” for the populace, and laid the foundations of the royal city of Cairo.<sup>72</sup> The name of this *Ṣaqḷabī* general remains etched in the city’s history to this day, with one of its thoroughfares named after him. For the next four years (358–62/969–73), Jawhar al-*Ṣaqḷabī* functioned as the Fatimid governor-general of Egypt, establishing Fatimid rule there while also paving the way for the transference of the Fatimid capital from al-Manṣūriyya to al-Qāhira. This culminated in the arrival of al-Mu‘izz himself into Egypt in 362/973, thus underscoring the transition of Fatimid authority from North Africa to Egypt. To mark his achievement, al-Mu‘izz manumitted Jawhar and conferred on him the title *Mawla Amīr al-Mu‘minīn*, the same title as the one previously granted to Ustādh Jawdahr by al-Manṣūr.<sup>73</sup>

Under al-Mu‘izz, the prominence of the *Ṣaqālība* is indicated by the large number of senior *Ṣaqālība* in eminent positions within the Fatimid state. Between the years 359/970 and 364/975, for example, Ustādh Jawdhar was the chief minister of state and Jawhar was the highest-ranking commander and governor of Egypt. Aflaḥ al-Nāshīb was the governor of the eastern province of Barqa;<sup>74</sup> Rayyān al-*Ṣaqḷabī* was appointed as the governor of Tripoli after the Fatimid expansion into Syria;<sup>75</sup> Abu’l-Faḍl Raydān served as the parasol bearer,<sup>76</sup> followed by Shafī‘ al-*Ṣaqḷabī*, who accompanied al-Mu‘izz to the pulpit when the imam-caliph gave his ‘Īd sermon in Cairo;<sup>77</sup> and Nuṣayr served, at various times, as Jawdhar’s deputy in al-Mahdiyya,<sup>78</sup> as the head of

<sup>70</sup> Hrbek, “Die Slawen,” 558.

<sup>71</sup> See Idrīs, *‘Uyūn*, trans. Jiwa, *Founder of Cairo*, 133–53.

<sup>72</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, *Ittī‘āz*, trans. Jiwa, *Mediterranean Empire*, 66–86.

<sup>73</sup> Al-Jawdhārī, *Sīra*, Ar., 159–60; trans., 149–50.

<sup>74</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, *Ittī‘āz*, trans. Jiwa, *Mediterranean Empire*, 60.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 194, 202.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>78</sup> Al-Jawdhārī, *Sīra*, Ar., 122; trans., 120.

the treasury,<sup>79</sup> and as governor of Tripoli.<sup>80</sup> Each of these individuals had a longstanding history of having served in the Fatimid house, however, none more so and with greater longevity and illustriousness than Ustādh Jawdhar.

Soon after al-Mu‘izz’s accession, Ustādh Jawdhar was invited to relocate from al-Mahdiyya to al-Mansūriyya and was housed in the palatial compound by the imam-caliph, where he continued to serve as al-Mu‘izz’s leading counsel and trusted advisor. Much of the significant correspondence to the Fatimid sovereign was channelled through Jawdhar. The range of matters with which Jawdhar was involved is noteworthy: defence of the realm, financial administration, foreign affairs, military affairs and preparations, and resolution of internal crises and disputes, including the management of at times fractious familial issues.<sup>81</sup>

The elderly Ustādh Jawdhar followed al-Mu‘izz in the departure from Ifrīqiya to Egypt but died on route at Barqa in 364/973. The regard that al-Mu‘izz had for him is evident when the imam-caliph himself made special arrangements for the Ustādh to be carried in his litter to a place where he could meet him in person. Here the Ismaili sources evocatively retell the imam-caliph’s embrace of the Ṣaqlabī, “as a brother would do to his brother,” and they record the Ustādh’s own sentiment that as “a slave, a foreigner, and a Slav” his sole merit lay in being illuminated by the imam’s guidance.<sup>82</sup> Thus, it is Jawdhar’s religious allegiance to the Fatimid imam that enables the transcendence of his legal status as a manumitted slave of Ṣaqlabī origins.

The transfer of the Fatimid state to Egypt had significant consequences for the Ṣaqlabī involvement in the Fatimid enterprise, and under al-Mu‘izz’s successors their star began to wane. While the imam-caliph al-‘Azīz employed the services of a number of Ṣaqlāliba and under al-Ḥākim the figures of Barjawān, Rayyān al-Ṣaqlabī, and Ḥusayn b. Jawhar attained positions of eminence, effectively the Ṣaqlāliba in Egypt were unable to attain the position of influence that they had enjoyed during the North African phase.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., Ar., 132; trans., 128.

<sup>81</sup> Haji, “Distinguished Slav Eunuch,” 264–65.

<sup>82</sup> Al-Jawdharī, *Sīra*, Ar., 173; trans., 161–62: “He leaned into the litter and hugged (the ustādh) as would do a brother to his brother or a friend to his friend. . . . (The ustādh) told him, ‘O my lord, by God, your slave is not of a rank that deserves what you have done for him, because I am just a slave, a foreigner, a Slav, without any merits to which I could lay claim other than the fact that I am your slave, illuminated by the light of your guidance.’” Idrīs (*Uyūn*, trans. Jiwa, *Founder of Cairo*, 258) provides a direct quotation of this statement by Jawdhar, indicating his access to the text of the *Sīra*.

The end of the reign of al-Mu‘izz therefore marks a suitable point to examine briefly some of the internal features of the Ṣaqālība as a social group. The Ṣaqālība were a slave-elite, a distinct social group who functioned within the upper-echelons of society. As slaves, they came under the direct authority of the Fatimid imam-caliph, yet they also retained an internal hierarchy. At the top were the Ṣaqḻabī chieftains, hence Sulaymān al-Ṣaqḻabī is termed a *ra‘īs* (head) of the Ṣaqālība in the *Sīra*, but none was more prominent than Ustādh Jawdhar. The chiefs had the responsibility of the material upkeep of the junior Ṣaqālība. Accordingly, they were invested with the right to discipline them and were tasked with their education and training.<sup>83</sup> Many Ṣaqālība became landowners,<sup>84</sup> or were involved in private trade, and some became very wealthy. Considerable estates were granted to figures such as Jawdhar and Muẓaffār amongst others. Further, it was through the revenues of apportioned land granted by the imam-caliph that the income and upkeep of these Ṣaqālība and those under their care and command was secured. For example, considerable property in al-Mahdiyya was earmarked for Jawdhar to pay for the upkeep of the Ṣaqālība under his control.<sup>85</sup> Anticipating the Mamluks who followed them, the Ṣaqālība were also a self-perpetuating group; that is, they often recruited younger Ṣaqālība and facilitated their promotion through the ranks of the state. The purchasing of al-Qā‘id Jawhar and his being handed over from one Ṣaqḻabī to another is illustrative of this.<sup>86</sup>

The Ṣaqālība had their share of internal rivalries. A number of incidents are related in the sources regarding inter-Ṣaqḻabī disputes, such as those between Ustādh Jawdhar and Rayyān al-Ṣaqḻabī,<sup>87</sup> or between Jawdhar and Rabī‘ al-Ṣaqḻabī.<sup>88</sup> A well-known one is that of Aflaḥ al-Nāshib, the Ṣaqḻabī governor appointed by al-Mu‘izz over Barqa who was willing to pay an extraordinary

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, al-Jawdharī, *Sīra*, Ar., 12–15; trans., 29–30 (for imprisonment) and Ar., 135; trans., 130 (for education).

<sup>84</sup> Apart from the extensive lands granted to Ustādh Jawdhar, see, for example, the houses of Maysūr (al-Jawdharī, *Sīra*, Ar., 95–96; trans., 98) or the domains of Muẓaffār (ibid., Ar., 129; trans., 125).

<sup>85</sup> Al-Jawdharī, *Sīra*, Ar. 129; trans., 125–26.

<sup>86</sup> Note the comment in Idrīs, *‘Uyūn*, trans. Jiwa, *Founder*, 138: “Al-Qāḻī al-Qudā‘ī said: ‘Jawhar was originally from Byzantium. A servant called Ṣābir brought him. Ṣābir handed him over to Khayrān, who passed him on to Khafīf who took him to imam [al-Manṣūr] to whom he became well known and who accompanied him in his battles.’” Ṣābir and Khafīf are undoubtedly amongst the aforementioned Ṣaqālība.

<sup>87</sup> Al-Jawdharī, *Sīra*, Ar. 84; trans., 89.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., Ar., 139; trans., 134

sum to avoid dismounting in the presence of al-Qā'id Jawhar, likely so as not to appear to be beneath him in social status.<sup>89</sup>

Ismaili sources also help shed further light on the relationship of the Ṣaḡālība with other social groups. The appointment of Jawhar, a Slav slave, as the Fatimid general over a mainly Berber Kutāma army may have caused some friction, especially amongst the latter's tribal chiefs. This is evident in al-Mu'izz's exhortation to the newly enlisted Kutāma prior to their march to the battlefield. He tells the Kutāma that while they are capable of leading themselves, he had appointed Jawhar over them to act as his "eyes and ears." Further, he ordered the Kutāma to treat the slaves as their "brothers," emphasizing their shared loyalty to the imam as the unifying factor.<sup>90</sup>

This leads to a seemingly unique feature of the Ṣaḡālība amongst contemporary slave-elites: their social status was principally conditioned by their loyalty to the Ismaili imam. For those Ṣaḡālība who believed in the legitimacy of the Ismaili imam, a particular status was accorded that distinguished them from the other slaves in the Fatimid realms, as is evident in the pronouncement made by al-Mu'izz in relation to an inheritance issue raised by Jawhar, prior to his manumission:

All our slaves who adhere to our cause should be treated as freemen are treated in Mālikī jurisprudence with regard to their successions and testimony, their acts and their situation as a whole; those who do not adhere to our cause should be treated as ordinary slaves who can only determine what their masters allow.<sup>91</sup>

The religious status of the Ṣaḡālība thus transcended their legal status as slaves. Elsewhere, as referenced in Idrīs' *Uyūn*, a number of them were called *awliyā'*,<sup>92</sup> a term ascribed to the loyal affiliates of the imam. Until then in Fatimid usage, the title of *awliyā'* had generally been reserved for the

<sup>89</sup> Al-Maqrīzī (*Khiṭaṭ* [as in n. 31 above] 2:92) reports that when Jawhar reached Barqa, its ruler offered to pay Jawhar 50,000 gold dinars in exchange for not having to dismount and walk by his side; Jawhar refused and insisted that he walk. Ibn Khallikān mentions the sum of 100,000 dinars being offered in lieu of dismounting (*Waḡāyāt al-a'yān*, trans. M. de Slane, *Ibn Khallikān's Biographical Dictionary*, 4 vols. [Paris, 1842–71], 1:342). The same report is to be found in al-Maqrīzī, *Muqaffā* (n. 30 above) 2:29, where the ruler is named as Aflah al-Ṣaḡlabī.

<sup>90</sup> Idrīs, *Uyūn*, trans. Jiwa, *Founder of Cairo*, 141: "... Treat the slaves whom I am sending with you as your brothers. Unite with them, as they are your support and strength. Your loyalty to me unites you to them; so do not distinguish between you and them. May God grant you good companionship and sound leadership."

<sup>91</sup> See the note by Haji in al-Jawdhārī, *Sīra*, trans., 134 n. 279.

<sup>92</sup> Idrīs, *Uyūn*, trans. Jiwa, *Founder of Cairo*, 81

Kutāma, but now it came to include the Ṣaqālība as well, with al-Mu‘izz expressly stating that the two were bound together through their loyalty to him.

It is in this vein that some of the Ṣaqālība themselves were bonded to one another, not through their legal status or ethnic affinity, but rather through their loyalty to the imam-caliph. In an instructive episode, al-Mu‘izz linked Jawhar and Jawdhar into a bond of brotherhood, instructing his two *mawlas* to call each other brother, which he likened to being “like that which our ancestor, the Messenger of God . . . established between his companions.”<sup>93</sup> The *mu‘ākhāt*, or the “making of brothers” was a symbolic precedent which al-Mu‘izz drew upon, whereby the Prophet Muhammad had linked members of distinct Arab tribes into a legally binding brotherhood through their bond of faith.

#### THE FATIMID MOVE TO EGYPT

The transfer to Egypt and the demise of al-Ustādh Jawdhar mark a watershed in the Ṣaqālība involvement in the Fatimid era in a number of ways. For decades, Jawdhar was the lynchpin in the selection, training, and positioning of the Ṣaqālība in the Fatimid state. While the Ṣaqālība formed a distinct ethnic and social group, nonetheless, the focal point of their sense of loyalty and belonging remained linked to the imam-caliph often through the mediation of Jawdhar. Consequently, with his passing away, there is a gradual withering of continued Ṣaqalabī involvement.

The transition of Fatimid rule from the west to the east also had a major impact, as did the political and social dynamics in Egypt and particularly in Syria, which were significantly different from those in North Africa and therefore required different kinds of personnel. This is evident in the way Jawhar’s forces and other Fatimid armies initially fared in Syria, leading to the subsequent introduction of the Turkish regiments by al-Mu‘izz’s successor, al-‘Azīz bi’llāh, and the gradual eclipse of the Slavs as well as the Kutāma, the two main elements contributing to the Fatimid success in North Africa. The drying up of the fresh supply of Ṣaqalabī slaves from their countries of origin in the later decades of the fourth/tenth century alluded to in the sources would have also undoubtedly affected their availability.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Al-Jawdharī, *Sīra*, Ar., 159; trans., 149–50, and also note *ibid.*, trans., 150 n. 304, where Haji discusses the *mu‘ākhāt*.

<sup>94</sup> Hrbek, “Die Slawen,” 573. Note especially the comment in al-Maqrīzī’s *Itī‘āz*, trans. Jiwa, *Mediterranean Empire*, 204: “[In this year] Ṣaqālība slaves were sought from all the people and were bought.”

Nonetheless, the contribution of Ṣaqlabī slaves in the first century of Fatimid rule remains exemplary and therefore noteworthy. In a milieu where the interplay of the various tribal, ethnic, and religious groups conditioned the social dynamics and political power wielded by the major figures in the region, the Ṣaqlāliba found a niche as personal agents of the Fatimid imam-caliphs. Placed in trusted positions, the Ṣaqlāliba were chosen to lead armies and navies, govern cities, head the treasury, and conduct sensitive diplomatic missions involving mediation between groups. Ṣaqlabī figures such as al-Ustādh Jawdhar also became instrumental in the regulation of the greater Fatimid household. Others such as al-Qā'id Jawhar subsequently become synonymous in Islamic history with the century long Fatimid settlement in Egypt.

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