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Legitimacy and Authority in Medieval Islamic Historiography

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Abstract

Usurpation is a common term used by Western historians to describe the illegitimate change of political supremacy in the context of medieval Muslim states. The taking over of any state without authority is considered an illegal occupation of a legitimate state and its leader is considered illegitimate or usurper. This paper attempts to shed some lights on the notion of political legitimacy and authority in Islamic tradition and its application in the context of medieval Syria, particularly during the Zengid dynasty. This period experienced the coming of the second crusade to the East with the revitalization of the spirit of jihad was on its way among the Syrian Muslims. This paper argues that the Zengid dynasty was trying to uphold the institution of the caliphate through recognizing the spiritual leadership of the 'Abbasid caliph of Baghdad as well as acquiring political legitimacy to administer their subject on behalf of the caliph and the Seljuq sultan. Through adherence to the Sunni tradition of political legitimacy, Zengi (d. 541/1146) and Nur al-Din (d. 569/1174) succeeded in promoting Sunnism by means of Muslim unity and jihad enterprise. As a result, after the annexation of Egypt from the Fatimid caliphate in 565/1171, Muslims in Syria and Egypt were unified under the banner of Sunnism with Nur al-Din as their new legitimate ruler.

Keywords: Medieval; Political Legitimacy; Nur al-Din; Syria; Jihad.

1. Introduction

During the course of the end of eleventh to mid-twelfth centuries, the Muslims in the East faced a crisis of legitimacy and authority within their own realm. Apart from the calamity caused from political disunity and religious schism, they were dramatically facinga more ideological and theologicaldispute on the notion of political legitimacy. Gibb [1] in his brief introduction of the translation of Ibn al-Qalanisi's chronicle asserts that 'the complexity of the political situation in Syria at the end of the eleventh century and during the early decades of the twelfth, a complexity verging almost upon anarchy, is an element of the first im - portance in the history of the Crusades'. Evidently, Syria fascinated so many forces, outsiders as well as insiders, to gain control over its boundaries. Moosa [2] highlights that 'the region known today as the Middle East was plagued with constant warfare among the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Seljuq Turks, the Armenians, and others, with a great deal of violence, devastation and bloodshed'. The contest not only involved different kinds of sovereignty and rulership but extended into part of a huge ethnic and religious squabble.

The common attitude of Western scholars when discussing the changing of power between Muslim sta tes in the context of medieval Syria especially with the emergence of a number of autonomous lordships was to associate it with illegitimate usurpation. For instance, when Salah al-Din took over the power from Nur a l-Din's heir, al-Salih Isma'il, he was seen as an usurper instead of a legitimate ruler. This paper attempts to shed some lights on the Muslim quest for political legitimacy based on evidences recorded in selected medieval Muslim historiographies during the end of eleventh to mid-twelfth centuries with special reference to the ceremonialprocesses that took place between the Zengids, the Seljuq sultanate andthe 'Abbasid caliphate. Before exploring the historical narratives on the cause and consequences of the crisis of legitimacy, it is necessary to understand the notion of political legitimacy within its broader context and further analyse it within the eyes of medieval lens.

2. Background

The discourse on political legitimacy and legitimate authority has been a debateable issue in Islamic tradition as well as in Western scholarship. Before discussing the difference of opinion within Islamic and Western traditions, it is pertinent to define the meaning of legitimacy. For instance, in outlining the concept of legitimacy, Humphreys [3] asserts that '…legitimacy is an elusive concept, in part because different

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societies confer it upon their rulers for such disparate reasons and through such varies mechanisms. In the

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most general sense, however, all forms of legitimacy rest on the recognition by a society's politically rele - vant groups that one or a few men possess lawful authority to make fundamental decisions on their behalf to determine the distribution of wealth and power, to adjudicate conflicts, to use force to maintain order and stability. On a practical level, we might say that legitimacy is simply the right of a regime to make mistakes and still remain in power; a legitimate government can offend even its most powerfulsubjects and continue to command their voluntary submission. Overwhelmingly the kings and princes of the Islamic world in these two centuries did not enjoy that right. A few major errors in policy and they were dead or in exile.'

Perhaps, Humphreys draws his understanding from a secular point of views, which detach rulership from religious principles. In the common secular perspective, Weber [4] argues that there are three pure types of legitimate authority. He concludes that the validity of such claim of legitimacy over certain subject or group of people could be rendered into three different situations: a) Rational grounds that rest on a belief in the legality of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands (legal authority); b) Traditional grounds that rest on an established belief in the sanctity of im - memorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority under them (traditional authority); and finally c) Charismatic grounds that rest on devotion to the specific and exceptionalsanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him (charismatic authority). However, Schneidmüller [5] argues that the 'famous model de - veloped by Max Weber regarding the three types of legitimate rule ... fallshort of encompassing the alterity and plurality of politics in the Middle Ages'.

This particular view is in contrast with the Islamic concept of political legitimacy. In Islamic tradition, the discourse of political legitimacy is discussed within the much broader and diverse concepts namely *al-Siyadah* (sovereignty), *al-Khilafah* (vicegerency) and *al-Imamah* (rulership). The root of the concept could be traced back to the Quranic terminology '*khalifah*' mentioned in Chapter al-Baqarah, verse 30: 'Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a *vicegerent* on earth." They said: "Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood?- whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?" He said: "I know what ye know not."

Treatises on Islamic political concept and good governance had gradually emerged during the time of the Umayyads and 'Abbasids. Beginning with the discourse on *al-Siyar* (Islamic internationallaw), the notion of rulership and good governance had been developed by medieval scholars in such a way that it could initially provide an operational handbook for Muslim rulers on how to govern their subjects. It could also be argued that their treatises and writings on the subject of political legitimacy are in some way or another projected the scholars' intellectualresponse to practices of injustice, abuse of power and aggression by their contemporary rulers.

The period of instability among the Muslims has produced much reflection from scholars on the issue of legitimacy. Among notable medieval Muslim scholars who wrote on the subject are Abu al-Hasan al-Mawardi (d. 450/1058) in three different treatises; his magnum opus *al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah* (The Rules of Governance), *Tashil al-Nazar wa Ta'jil al-Zafar fi Akhlaq al-Malik* (Facilitation of Insight and Acceler- ation of Triumph Regarding the Ethics of the King) and *Durar al-Suluk fi Siyasat al-Muluk* (Pearls of Conduct Concerning the Administration of the Kings); and Abu Ya'la a l-Fa rra' (d. 458/1065) in *al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah* (The Rules of Governance) and *Rusul al-Muluk wa man yasluh li al-Risalah wa al-Sifarah* (Emissaries of the Kings and those who suit for Envoyship).

Interestingly, al-Mawardi and Abu Ya'la wrote their treatises while they were residing in Baghdad, the capital of the 'Abbāsid caliphate during the period in which there was a pressing need for the Muslim scholars to elucidate this particular concept to the rulers as well as to the public. Perhaps, the motivation behind composing such treaties could be linked to their aspiration to promote good governance according to Islamic values, which were previously practiced by Muslim caliphs and rulers.

Besides a l-Ma wardiand Abu Ya'la, a number of contemporary scholars also composed several significant treatises on various subjects related to political legitimacy, rulership and good -governance. For instance, a l-Juwa yni (d. 478/1085) composed *Ghiyath al-Umam fi Iltiyath al-Zulam* (People's Rescue from the Con- fusion of the Darkness), al-Sarakhsi (d. 483/1090) in *Syarh al-Sayr al-Kabir* (The Explanation of the Big Treatise in *al-Sayr*), Nizam al-Mulk (d. 485/1092) in *Siyasat Namah* (Rules for Kings), al-Ghazali (d.

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505/1111) in *al-Tibr al-Masbuk fi Nasihat al-Muluk* (The Forged Sword in Counselling the Kings), al-Tartusi (d. 520/1126) in *Siraj al-Muluk* (The Lights for the Kings), and al-'Adawi (d. 590/1198) in *al-Manhaj al-Masluk fi Siyasat al-Muluk* (The Way Engaged in the Administration of the Kings) .

Al-Ma wardi accepted the legitimacy of the 'Abbasid caliph in Baghdad even though previously he came to power through political struggle and violent warfare with the Umayyad. Khan [6] affirms that this is due to the fact that the 'Abbasid caliphs were keen to regulate Islamic law, establish justice and protect the Muslims and their lands from the oppressors. Therefore, it could be argued that al-Māwardī's stance was to accept legitimacy of any ruler as long as he would adhere to Islamic principles of law and justice; and ultimately implemented them in his administration even if he came to power through battle and warfare. Even though a l-Ma wardi's stance supports the legitimacy of the 'Abbasid after the struggle with the Umayyad, a l-Awza 'i was not in favour of it. Bouzenita [7] asserts that although a l-Awza 'i did not openly labeled the 'Abbasid as illegitimate, he took his own stance of being neither a pro -Umayyad nor quietism with regard to the 'Abbasid. He seems to have his own *ijtihad* of being a publicly trusted scholar who shall continuously reminds the rulers of their duties towards their subjects.

In fact, a l-Ma wardi's practicalverdict developed from a much stricter concept of political legitimacy, which was practiced during the time of the Four Righteous Caliphs and the Umayyads to a more sensible and acceptable thought that suited the condition and contemporary state of affairs in medieval Syria. In fact, Khan [8] asserts that 'in actual practice, the 'Abbasid were considered legitimate due to reverting to the traditional Sunni theory'. If a l-Ma wardiand other scholars were to reject this notion of political legitimacy, what would be the Islamic regulation towards rulers and governors in medieval Syria wh o controlled their petty states and at the same time gave an oath of allegiance to the caliphate of Baghdad which was theoretically illegitimate?

In this case, al-Mawardi's opinion has to be seen as an independent *ijtihad* with certain aim to resolve the dispute amongthe Muslims as how to contextually perceive the issue of political legitimacy, authority and leadership during the period. In this regards, Hallaq [9] emphasizes that *ijtihad* could be fairly defined as a process of legal reasoning and hermeneutics through which the jurist-mujtahid derives or rationalizes law on the basis of the Quran and the Sunnah. This certain type of *ijtihad* which particularly involves matters related to *siyasah syar'iyyah* (Islamic Principles of Political Administration) is within the context of permissible *ijtihad* mentioned in a hadith of Prophet Muhammad: 'If a judge gives a verdict according to the best of his knowledge and his verdict is correct (i.e., agrees with Allah and His Messenger's verdict), he will receive a double reward, and if he gives a verdict accordingto the best of his knowledge and his verdict is wrong (i.e., against that of Allah and His Messenger) even then he will get a reward.' [10]

Being himself a jurist, a chief judge and a diplomat, who involved directly in state administration and witnessed the political turmoil of the Muslims, he precisely understood the text and approached it in its socio-historical context. Since the governance of the Seljuq was in the form of semi-independent, it could also be argued that they acquired semi-legitimacy from the caliph as well as continuing support from their subjects. Delegation of power from the caliphs in Baghdad authorized the Seljuq sultans to administer their states, acting as the caliph's deputy in Syrian political affairs.

In contrast, Humphreys [11] argues that, although the concept of legitimacy was widely accepted, practically this concept made no operative distinction between one claimant to power and his contender. This eventually led both of them to using it in order to suit their own ends. Humphreys then sums up that this concept could be understood in two different perspectives: 1) For any ruler to claim legitimacy, it has to be in the form of a delegation of authority by the Caliph. In the context of medieval Syria, the 'Abbasid caliph as the head of the Muslims has the sole legitimate power to appoint rulers, governors and officials. Therefore, the consequenc e is tha t only those who were given officia l a uthority to a dminist ra te a ny sta te or regio n from the Caliph could claim unquestioned legitimacy; and 2) Legitimacy is a God -given authority to any ruler. He was considered as freely chosen by God to uphold justice and establish divine law to his subject according to his legitimate role as the vicegerent of God in earthly affairs. Consequently, the ruler is only responsible to God and not to the Caliph.

In addition, Humphreys asserts that this perspective was taken from neo-Sassanian or Perso-Islamic theory of kingship which basically emerged in the mid-eighth century. In medieval context, this notion received its definitive treatment through the treatise of Nizam a l-Mulk, the *Siyasat Namah*.

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3. Materials and Methods

The study employs historical methodology utilising textual and contextual analyses. The sources used are chronicles, annals and historical narratives in Arabic primarily written by twelfth and thirteenth centuries Muslim historians. They include Ibn a l-Qa lanisi, Ibn ‘Asakir, Ibn a l-Ja wzi, Ibn a l-Athir, Ibn a l-‘Adim, Abu Shamah a l-Ma qdisi, Ibn Kathir and others. A number of secondary sources are also utilised in the study.

4. Discussion

Putting the framework in the context of medieval Syria, particularly during the time when there were several petty states emerging, some of them were directly under the Seljuq sultans, who were the legitimate rulers on behalf of the caliph in Baghdad while others were not, is quite an intricate task. These pett y states were administered through the concept of autonomous lordship. Therefore, in order to comprehend the actuality behind such problematical state of affairs in history, reference to primary sources which record official correspondence or appointments is vital so that some significant insights on the issue could be offered.

Some instances from primary sources which indicate appointments or the taking of an oath of allegiance from both parties will be discussed. According to Ibn al-Athir [12] and al-Khudari [13], after the death of the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadi bi Amrillah in Muharram 487/1094, his son Abu al-‘Abbas al-Mustazhir billah succeeded in power. Ibn a l-Athir [14] mentioned in detail on how the course of *bai‘ah* (the taking of an oath of allegiance) was performed. He states that: “…And after they performed the bai‘ah, the demise of a l-Muqta diwas then announced. After the bai‘ah was given to a l-Musta zhir, he (al-Mustazhir) then sent (an envoy) to Sultan Barkiyaruq so that he could performed the bai‘ah – eventually he was in Baghdad – (in which) he enforced his vizier ‘Izz al-Mulk ibn Nizam al-Mulk, his amir Bursuq and his commander of Baghdad Kuhra’in to take the oath of allegiance, and they performed it, while he also performed his. After the ceremony of the bai‘ah of the Sultan has completed, al-Ghazali, al-Shashi and other scholars had been brought into presence (in front of the caliph), and they performed the bai‘ah. Then (envoys) were sent to Ghaznah, Ma Wara’ al-Nahr, Kirman and al-Sham (so that the people could be well-informed) to perform the bai‘ah.”

The expression of Ibn al-Athir [15] in his magnum opus *al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh* is much more revealing. According to his words, the symbols of legitimacy were represented through three important characteristics: firstly the *khutbah* (sermon) in the name of the ruler; secondly the presentation of *khil‘ah* (special garment) from the caliph to his appointed vizier or amīr; and thirdly the use of *taqlid* with the caliph stamp on it. In the case of diplomatic relationship between Barkiyaruq and al-Muqtadi bi Amrillah, Ibn al-Athir has described in detail the ceremonial procedures of the caliph in order to officially grant authority to his newly - appointed rulers. Ibn a l-Athir mentioned this in the beginning of his description of events occurred in the year 487/1094 which starts with the account of the establishment of the khutbah (sermon) in Baghdad for Sultan Barkiyaruq. Ibn al-Athir [16] states that: “…On Friday the fourteenth of Muharram this year, the name of Sultan Barkiyaruq ibn Malikshāh was mentioned in the *khutbah* in Baghdad. He (Sultan Barkiyaruq) went to reside in Baghdad in later days of 486 /1093. He sent a request to the ‘Abbasid caliph, al-Muqtadī bi Amrillah, so that the khutbah could be established under his name and the caliph agreed. His name was mentioned in the *khutbah* and nicknamed as *Rukn al-Din* (The Pillar of Faith). Then, ‘Amid a l-Dawlah ibn Jahir, the vizier of the caliph brought the *khil‘ah* to Barkiyaruq and he wore it. He then presented the *taqlid* to the caliph so that he shall put his stamp on it, and it was stamped.”

Likewise, Ibn Kathir’s expression of the case provides more clarity. Using the word ‘*tawqi*‘’ (signature), Ibn Kathir [17] elucidates the fact that the ‘Abbasid caliph officiated the appointment of Barkiyaruq by putting his signature on the stamp. He affirms that: “…The *khutbah* was established in the name of Sultan Barkiyaruq Rukn al-Dawlah on Friday the fourteenth of Muharram, the same day in which al-Muqtadi bi Amrillah, the ‘Abbasid caliph died, after puttinghis stamp on his signature.”

It is understandable from the primary texts that there was a sort of of ficial ceremonial practice for the proclamation of legitimacy and authority, involving five important steps; *khutbah*, *khil‘ah*, *taqlid*, *tawqi‘* and *manshur* . This process was upheld and maintained by the caliphate institution and the Seljuq rulers so as to adhere to the principal of legitimacy and authority according to Sunni tradition.

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In contrast, what sort of practice was exercised by the Seljuq rulers towards their petty states amir (chief commander) to relay the degree of authority over their own subjects, particularly during the reign of Zengi and Nur al-Din? In order to justify the political legitimacy of Zengid dynasty over their subject in Syria, it is therefore essential to investigate the nature of the diplomatic relationship established between the Zengid and the Seljuq rulers and if possible with the 'Abbasid caliph in Baghdad.

There are a number of instances recorded in primary sources concerning the case. For example, Ibn al-Athir [18] described the very initial appointment of Zengi over Mosul and Bilad a l-Ja zirah in which the negotiation process was completely organized by three important persons; al-Qadi Baha' al-Din 'Ali ibn al-Shahrazuri, Salah al-Din Muhammad al-Yaghisiyani and Nasir al-Din Jaqar. The negotiation between these people on behalf of Zengi with Sultan Mahmud's vizier, Anusharawan ibn Khalid resulted in the approval of the Sultan to authorize Zengi as the legitimate ruler of Mosul and Bilad a l-Ja zirah. In this particular case, Ibn al-Athir mentioned that the appointment was made through a *manshur* (public decree) which was sent to the 'Abbasid caliph in Baghdad. It seems that the prevailing convention was that the Seljuq sultan had the right to grant authority and power to any chief commander under him, without having to request official permission from the caliph.

Likewise, in the case of Nur al-Din, there is generous evidence, which highlights the way Nur al-Din received official decree or was appointed formally by the Seljuq sultan and the 'Abbasid caliph of Baghdad himself. For example, upon Nur al-Din's annexation of Damascus, the 'Abbasid caliph sent a let ter of appointment to Nur al-Din which officially granting him authority over Bilad al-Sham and al-Diyar al-Misriyyah. This was clearly mentioned by Ibn Kathir [19]: "…There came the news that a l-Za hir, the caliph of Egypt has been killed. He left a very young heir of five months old; they appointed him to be the caliph and nicknamed him al-Fa'iz. (So) the 'Abbāsid caliph of Baghdad sent a letter to Nur al-Din granting him authority over Bilad a l-Sha m and a l-Diya r al-Misriyyah."

From several pieces of evidence adduced above, the view that the institution of the caliphate at the time was acknowledged by Muslims as a symbolof religious and spiritual leadership is basically justifiable. The administration of its subject territory in various places, particularly in Syria, was managed through delegation of power to local Muslim rulers. It could fairly be argued that the caliphate lost its power and influence due to numerous reasons including the caliph's own weaknesses, power corruption and lack of accounta - bility. Among other contributing factors were new challenges in terms of cultural infusion and increasing incapacity to control such a vast land. This eventually affected ideological and operational aspects of the institution of the caliphate. In the wake of this hopeless institution, the Seljuqs acquired the political legit - imacy and it could be claimed, to some extent, that they were the 'real caliph' of the Muslims.

5. Conclusion

The Zengid dynasty actually acquired political legitimacy through two interrelated ways; directly from the caliph himself, and indirectly through Seljuq sultans. Therefore, recognition from the institution of the caliphate could be considered an official decree for the Zengid to administer the state in the name of the 'Abbasids. Moreover, their initiatives in the form of jihad and counter-crusade were politically allied to the caliph's agenda. Consequently, having acknowledged by the Muslims, they obtained much support in the form of military reinforcements. In the case of Zengi, particularly after the capture o f Edessa, he was bestowed with a string of honorific titles by a l-Muqta fi li Amrillah, the 'Abbasid caliph, in recognition of his triumph in the name of Sunnism. In the course of capturing several places including Harran, Aleppo, and Hamah, Zengi gained strong support from local people, who eventually incited him to take possession of those places from the Franks.

As an heir of Zengi, Nur al-Din positioned himself as a legitimate ruler within the existence of two major Sunni-Muslim powers; the 'Abbasid caliphate and the Seljuq sultanate as well as a number of autonomous lordships emerged in the wake of the decline of the 'Abbasid caliphate. Nur al-Din as one of the local Muslim leaders chose to rule independently in order to administer his state, but at the same time mainta ined close connection with the 'Abbasid caliph either directly or indirectly through Seljuq sultans. Furthermore, Nur al-Din established his own style of leadership predominantly toward a group of Muslim scholars and Sufī leaders in Syria and Baghdad. In a way, this approach strengthened his legitimacy which he gradually sought through support of the local community, led by those influential scholars. This paper establishes the fact that the changing of power, legitimacy and authority in the context of twelfth century Syria was made

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through official ceremonial process between the ‘Abbasid caliphate, the Seljuq sultanate and the Zengid dynasty. Hence, it invalidates the claim that it was an act of usurpation. The political legitimacy and authority over the state, which Zengi and Nur a l-Din acquired, justified their initiatives and further strengthened their call for jihad and struggle against the arriving foe from the West.

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