

Arabists and their Interpretations of the Movement of the Early Fātimid Caliphate or

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO YEMEN...

Many historians, with varying degrees of success and believability, have tried to come up with the reasons for the Fātimids' abiding desire to take Egypt. With respect to timings, the Dutch orientalist de Goeje suggests that al-Mu'izz was inspired to attack

Egypt. We may be tempted to speculate that the heavens argued not only a favourable occasion, but provided the very motive for the conquest of Egypt. Indeed, 'Ubaydallāh is said to have relied on his astrologers for the designations of an auspicious moment ground for al-Mahdiyyāh. Moreover, "it is known that the Fātimids expected that a new era, the era of the true religion, would begin with a state of the heavens due in 316 H (928)⁴ Creswell admits of this astrological reasoning but tries to show that it was Ya'qub b. Killis who played the most important role in the taking of Egypt that he «longed to be revenged on Egypt» and so «adopted a simple technique, viz: to encourage the country in which he had taken refuge to attack that from which he had to flee.»⁵ Creswell continues: «Abū'l-Mahāsīn... says that he (Ya'qub) was one of the most important factors in inducing al-Mu'izz by suitable propaganda»⁶ to contemplate Egypt.

Although it can be perilous to look at effects or outcomes to determine motives, in the absence of more compelling evidence what the Fātimids accomplished in Egypt remains an interesting possible indication of what they wanted to achieve. For von Grunbaum, what the Fātimids sought can be subdivided into four interconnected categories. First, recongnition and designation as a benevolent dynasty, on the strength of its ability and success in displacing, without bloodshed, a disliked régime.⁷ The Fātimids, in effect, followed the 'Abbasids' own example and appealed to the emotions and faith of those who thought that matters had run afoul arguing that only an *imām* from the House of the Prophet (*ahlal-bayt*) could restore Islam to its true path. Second, an opportunity to charge life with religious tension and fervour, the subsequent decrease of which proved, detrimentally, «beyond the manipulative power of the Isma'ili leadership».⁸ Third, the desire to bring 'conspiracy' under control by, essentially, monopolizing it.⁹ It is in von Grunbaum's fourth sub-category, 'self-assurance' — a quality which he writes «allowed the exploitation of the geo-political potential» — that may perhaps be found the most tangible outcome of the occupation of Egypt and, therefore, the most compelling motives for its conquest. One can surmise, but with a fair degree of certainty, that al-Mu'izz saw that «the disruption of the international trade route passing through Iraq in consequence of the disintegration of the caliphate gave Egypt an unsought opportunity to become focus and entrepot of the India (and China) commerce.»¹⁰ In fact, the trading houses of Egypt, many of them Jewish, forged mercantile links between India and North Africa on a fairly large-scale, resulting in considerable financial and economic benefit for Egypt.

There has always been a competition between the two primary trade routes leading to the further East: the one from Egypt through the Red Sea, and the other from Iraq and Iran through the Persian Gulf. Control of both was optimal, but if only one was under control, then the blocking of the other became economically advantageous.¹¹ The Fātimids seem to have been aware of this:

As far as is known, there is no direct or explicit evidence on Fātimid eastern

Jawhar (d. 381/991), loyal and successful general of the Fātimid Caliph al-Mu'izz (reigned 341-65/953-75), occupied Egypt in the Summer of 969 (mid - Sha'bān 368¹). In so doing, he succeeded where his predecessors had failed² and gave al-Mu'izz a new stronghold in the East, politically, ecumenically and, as we shall see, in the crucial and easily forgotten economic sense, too: a stronghold from which to conduct the operations of the state. Indeed, al-Mu'izz eventually moved the capital of the dynasty and empire (dawlah) from al-Mahdiyyah - founded by his great grand-father 'Ubaydallāh (properly 'Abdallah) al-Mahdi, tucked away "on a piece of land which projected into the sea in the Gulf of Gabes between Sūsa and Sfax" - to the newly-founded al-Gāhira, Cairo.³

The evidence we have is indirect and inferential but persuasive. One aspect is Fātimid action in the Red Sea, the domination of which was vital to their larger plans. Their aim, clearly, was to control both the African and the Arabian shores of the Southern exil.¹²

For Bernard Lewis, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that, in addition to strengthening their own, the Fātimids were trying to disrupt the trade routes of their rivals.¹³ Here was *bona fide* economic warfare, but with the involvement of unusual soldiers: Tunisian, Egyptian, and Sicilian merchants from all over the Fātimid domains; missionaries, openly declared *da'is* as well as their unrevealed counterparts ('cells' or 'sleepers'); and diplomats, caliphal envoys, from Cairo, as much part of the economic network as of the espionage network.¹⁴

Susan J. Staffa sees the Fātimid conquest of and florescence in Egypt «in light of the weakness of 'Abbasid rule» which had reached its most profound decadence by the middle of the tenth century.¹⁵ She is equally certain that «there had been pro-'Alid leanings from the earliest days of Arab rule,» adducing as evidence the scribblings of Shi'is on the gates of the Mosque of 'Amr.¹⁶ Staffa speaks also of a «widespread underground propaganda network.» Her evidence is scanty but it is a contention we can perhaps accept. Marius Canard uses what is perhaps a more appropriate epithet than «widespread,» viz. «skilful.»¹⁷ Apparently, even the *qādi* and the Treasurer of the city were in communication with the Fātimid caliphs. With this kind of support, perhaps it was inevitable that Cairo fell to the Fātimids.

The transfer of the seat of power from Mahdiyyah to Cairo was not the first such move made by a Fātimid caliph. Over seventy years before, 'Ubaydallāh al-mahdi fled Syria for Egypt whence he was to make his way to Yemen. Instead he made for Ifriqiya. The reason for this change of mind or heart has eluded orientalisists but must, as in the case of al-Mu'izz's decision, have been motivated by specific concerns. What is more, this decision cost 'Ubaydallah two of his most powerful henchmen, both of whom furthermore abandoned the Fātimid cause. Iwanow suggests possible reasons for the defection of the *dā'is* Handān and Firdūz. «It is quite possible,» he suggests, «that both... experienced and intelligent men, realised quite well the risk connected with such extraordinary claims», i.e., claims that the Mahdi was indeed «the awaited one.»¹⁸ Perhaps this was an acid test. 'Ubayd Allah may have had his doubts about the loyalty of his aides and so decided to put them to the ultimate test of their allegiance, a test which they failed. Whether we are charitable and admit of an interpretation that sees their treachery paid for by the prevailing of right

over wrong, or whether we are cynical and see in 'Ubaydallah signs of political acumen, we must credit the Fātimid leader with considerable shrewdness in revealing his plans to make for Africa to no-one until the time was right for him to do so. As the sources show, this might well have saved his life. Some contend, after all, that he chose not to go to Yemen because of the possibility that 'Abbasid agents were lying in wait for him there. One of the tensions a Fātimid leader was forced to face was the frequent incongruence of the wishes of the missionaries and the needs of the state. This was doubtless one of the motives for secession, both in 'Ubaydallah's immediate past experience and later in the dynasty, «but the Fātimids, unlike the 'Abbasids, could not afford to break completely with the mission.»¹⁹ To do so would mean to relinquish the power base and the source of caliphal legitimacy.

Incidentally, Abu 'Abd Allah ash-Shi'i²⁰, to whose territory 'Ubayd Allah fled, also later dissociated himself from the Fātimid cause. But Iwanow's assertion in this connection is facile:

The reasons for the rebellion of Abu 'Abd Allah ash-Shi'i are more difficult to trace unless we admit that the realisation of his failure to make al-Mahdi merely a puppet in his hands played an important part.²¹

As with many of the most prominent figures in the missionary movement of the Fātimid structure, Abu 'Abdallah, a native of San'a', Yemen, was trained in the East, in his case 'Iraq.²² From here he was sent to Yemen where he apprenticed with Mansur al-Yaman (Ibn Hawshab), head of the *da'wah* there. He ended up in Berber territory upon joining a group of returning Kutama Berber pilgrims (teaching Ifriqiya 14 Rabi'I, 1280/3June 893) and established himself near IkJan and Saif.

Before moving on to discuss possible motives for 'Ubayd Allah's flight from Salamiyah²³ to the Maghrib, it may be fruitful to discuss the meaning and nature of *da'wah*.²⁴ Von Grunbaum, in an interesting, if at times tangential, article speaks at length of the possibility of characterizing *da'wah* as a form of 'conspiracy.'²⁵ The success of which is one of the great hallmarks of Fātimid achievement. He himself rejects the term despite the secretive and often extra-legal operations that characterize the *da'wah*. Although we must allow that it was unified at the highest level organizationally and ideologically, the conspiracy was *not one*; indeed groups acted if not for, at any rate by themselves (*emphasis added*)²⁶

The Isma'ili movement, which Stern defines as originally founded as "an underground revolutionary movement, aiming at the overthrow of the 'Abbasid

caliphate»²⁷ was, in Stern's vision, organized in two concentric circles: the territorial domain, which extended from North Africa (lost in the middle of the fifth

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century Hijra) through Sicily, Egypt, Palestine, Yemen, the Hijaz,²⁸ Syria,²⁹ through to Multan in Sind;³⁰ and the infrastructure of the Isma'ili *da'is* who populated the missions in lands soon to be, but not as yet, conquered by the Fātimid armies. *Da'wah*, in the Fātimid context or, to borrow Canard's designation, "in the politico-religious sense," is the invitation to adopt the cause of some individual or family claiming the right to the imamate over the Muslims, that is to say civil and spiritual authority, vindicating a politico-religious principle which, in the final analysis, aims at founding or restoring an ideal theocratic state based on monotheism. The whole organization responsible for attracting the greatest possible number of people to this idea and for giving power to their representatives, as well as propaganda for this purpose, is called *da'wah* which can often be translated as mission or propaganda.³¹

In the dominion of the Fātimid empire only a small number of people are said to have actually joined the 'state religion.' Despite its avowed appeal to the disenfranchised masses, the Fātimid creed was only accepted in as much as its rulings were implemented through the judiciary by *qada*. The Chief Qadi was also often the Chief Da'i but this was not always the case, in which event the latter was sub-ordinate to the former.³²

The Chief Da'i appointed the various provincial or regional *da'is*. Stern has published a list of tenth-century *da'is* enumerated by the fiercely anti-Isma'ili Mutazili *qadi* of Rayy, 'Abd al-Jabbar, in which the following centres are mentioned: Cairo, Ramla, Tyre, 'Asqalan, Damascus, Baghdad, and Jabal as-Sunmaq.³³ One of the revealing things about this list is that it establishes that soon after the Fātimid conquest of Syria *da'is* are appointed there, further testimony to the thorough and pervasive influence of the propaganda movement. The religious books of the Fātimids, when speaking of the *da'wah* superstructure allude to the fact that it is something that has been strictly organized during the length of the whole history of mankind — ever since the Prophet Adam!

According to the chronicler al-Qadi an-Nu'man, the *da'wah* in the Maghrib seems to have started during the imamate of Ja'far as-Sadiq. In 145/762, he apparently dispatched two *da'is*, al-Hulwani and Abu Su'yan. But it is only with the arrival of the aforementioned Abu 'Abdallah ash-Shi'i that things really got under way. The earliest emissaries to Yemen were Ibn Hawshab (= Mansur al-Yaman) and 'Ali b. Fadl in the year 268/881. Al-Qadi an-Nu'man further reports that when Ibn Hawshab arrived at 'Adan La'a he found one Ahmad b. 'Abd Allah B. Khalif' already conducting *da'wah* activities. Presumably this Ibn Khalif's ground-work and the added impetus of the new *da'is* who set up in different parts of Yemen — is what allowed them all to openly preach in the name of 'Ubayd Allah after a matter of only two years, i.e. 270/883. (Yemen, which was a *jazira*, became a special case in the ecumenical set-up. It was a domain where the head of the mission was

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