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# From Slaves to Supporters The role of the Slavs in the Fatimid Mediterranean Empire in the Fourth AH /Tenth CE century

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The founding of the Fatimid state in North Africa in 297 AH / 910 CE led to the establishment of a Shi'i Ismaili caliphate on the shores of the Mediterranean. From 297-361 AH / 910-972 CE, the Fatimid state was centred in the North African province of Ifriqiya (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 AH / 972 CE marked the transformation of the Fatimid state from a regional polity to a Mediterranean Empire that came to include Syria and parts of Arabia. It was from Egypt and their newly founded capital of al-Qahira al-Mu'izziya (Cairo) that the empire reached its zenith over the following century, eventually meeting its demise in 567 AH / 1171 CE.

Among the distinctive features of their initial sixty-year phase of the North African era was the growing prominence of the Saqaliba – 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, eye-witness accounts of the role of the Saqaliba 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 Saqaliba to prominent positions in the Fatimid administration and in their military and naval forces. The circumstances that enabled the Saqaliba 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 Saqaliba situated them as outsiders to the indigenous tribal affinities and factional rivalries that permeated the North



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African milieu in the fourth AH / tenth CE 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, who were unfettered by the tribal, ethnic and factional bonds of other state officials. This role gained further salience in view of the fact none of the four Fatimid imam-caliphs who reigned in North Africa appointed senior household members other than the heir-apparent, the *wali al-‘ahd*, to senior military or administrative positions in the state. Yet select members of the Saqaliba 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 Ifriqiya by the *da‘i* Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Shi‘i over a number of decades in the 3<sup>rd</sup> AH / 9<sup>th</sup> CE centur[1] Gaining adherents among the Kutama Berbers of Ifriqiya,[2] 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 Qayrawan, the capital of Ifriqiya, in 296 AH / 909 CE, the *da‘wa* proclaimed the Ismaili Imam ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi bi’llah 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-Mahdi bi’llah (297-322 AH / 909-934 CE) saw the consolidation of the nascent state, as exemplified by the building of the new capital at al-Mahdiyya. During his reign, however, al-Mahdi bi’llah had to calibrate the varied expectations and rivalries of the subject populace, which contributed to the rise of the Saqaliba in the Fatimid administration. These included the necessity of the new imam-caliph to negotiate between the demands of the Arab dominated urban centres as well as those of the Berber-dominant rural peripheries. It also required mitigating the rivalries between various Berber confederations, and recalcitrant opposition from the Sunni Maliki scholars [‘*ulama*’].[3] These regional rivalries were in turn fuelled by the Umayyads of Andalucía 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.[4] Critically, al-Mahdi’s task of state formation also meant



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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 cognisance of the ethnic and religious diversity of the North African populace.<sup>[5]</sup>

The second Fatimid imam-caliph al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah (322-334 AH / 934-946 CE), 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 Khariji leader Abu Yazid al-Nukkari (d. 336 AH / 947 CE), who belonged to the hostile *Zanata* 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-Qa'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-Mansur bi'llah (334-341 AH / 946-953 CE) publicly declared his succession to the Fatimid caliphate following his defeat of Abu Yazid and the latter's death. Soon thereafter, he created rapprochement with the Maliki establishment of Qayrawan, appointing a Maliki judge [*qadi*] over the city in a gesture which Madelung has noted as "a momentous development in Islamic government."<sup>[6]</sup>

The fourth Fatimid imam-caliph, al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (341-65 AH / 953-75 CE), 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 AH / 969 CE led by a Saqlabi, general Jawhar (d. 381 AH / 992 CE), 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 Saqaliba were entrusted with pivotal roles, as will be discussed below.

## Sources

To date, the most significant study of the Saqaliba in early Fatimid history is that published by Ivan Hrbek in 1953.<sup>[8]</sup> While scholars have contributed to the discussion,<sup>[9]</sup> much of the



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overall conclusions regarding the Saqaliba 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 force. 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 Saqaliba in the Fatimid Empire from the onset of Fatimid rule until the end of the reign of al-Ḥakim bi-Amr Allah (386-411 AH / 996-1021 CE), 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 was further engendered by their distinct loyalty to the Fatimid Imams, which he argued 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 Saqlabi slaves, denied them the opportunity to develop a cohesive “national” identity over this period. This was compounded by the fifth Fatimid imam-caliph al-‘Aziz bi’llah.<sup>[11]</sup>

The focus of Hrbek’s pioneering scholarly effort was to identify prominent figures in the Fatimid administration as belonging to the Saqaliba; the lengthy excurses on the background of al-Qa’id Jawhar serving as a case study.<sup>[12]</sup> Accordingly, he negated earlier arguments that had postulated a Sicilian, rather than Slavic origins 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 Saqlabi origins of these slaves, have generally upheld Hrbek’s arguments.<sup>[13]</sup>

In providing the context for the presence of the Saqaliba 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



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historians of North Africa between seventh AH / thirteenth CE and ninth AH / fifteenth CE centuries. Among these are the works of Ibn Hammad (d. 628 AH / 1231 CE),<sup>[14]</sup> Ibn al-Athir (d. 630 AH / 1233 CE),<sup>[15]</sup> al-Tijani (d. c. 711 AH / 1311 CE),<sup>[16]</sup> Ibn Idhari (d. 711-712 AH / 1312 CE)<sup>[17]</sup>, Ibn Khaldun (d. 784 AH / 1382 CE)<sup>[18]</sup> and al-Maqrizi (d. 845 AH / 1442 CE).<sup>[19]</sup> In discussing the role of the Saqaliba in Fatimid Egypt and Syria, he draws upon Ibn al-Qalanisi (465-555 AH / 1073-1160 CE),<sup>[20]</sup> and in establishing the origins of Jawhar, whether he was al-Rumi, al-Saqlabi or al-Siqilli, Hrbek draws upon a wider pool of Sunni writings.<sup>[21]</sup> When establishing the geographical imprints of the Saqaliba on urban settlements, he occasionally relies on Ibn Ḥawqal (fl. Second half of fourth AH / tenth CE 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 Saqlabi raiders, notably the *Chronicon Cantabrigiense*.<sup>[23]</sup>

The sources utilised 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 Ḥammad, are known for their anti-Fatimid bias, while only a few, such as Ibn Khaldun and al-Maqrizi, 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 Saqaliba in the Fatimid administration were inherently limited.

Given that Fatimid writings were often kept within the hierarchy of the Ismaili *da‘wa* organisation, and their writings were prone to censure and destruction, Fatimid source material pertaining to North Africa was not widely available to post-seventh AH / thirteenth CE century Sunni writers.<sup>[26]</sup> This limitation, however, was not absolute. The *Iftitah al-da‘wa wa Ibiḍtida’ al-dawla* by the eminent Fatimid scholar and *da‘i*, Qadi al-Nu‘man,<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 Zirid Shi‘i Ibn al-Raqiq were influential for later writers, and the verses of the Fatimid court poet Ibn Hani‘ made their way in the works of Ibn Hammad, 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



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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 Hammad's booklet-sized *Akhbar Muluk Bani 'Ubayd* sketches a terse overview of the major events in the reigns of the Fatimid imam-caliphs from al-Mahdi bi'llah to al-'Aḏhid (r. 555-567 AH / 1160-1171 CE). Ibn al-Athir provides more detailed accounts in his annalistic *al-Kamil fi'l-Ta'rikh*, and these tendencies of historical narrative writing also shaped the works of Ibn 'Idhari's *al-Bayaan al-Mughrib* and Ibn Khaldun's *al-Ibar*.

Al-Maqrizi's writings are distinct in this regard, as he provides multifaceted coverage of the Fatimids. In his dedicated history of the Fatimid caliphate, titled *Itti'az al-Hunafa' bi-Akhbar al-A'imma al-Fatimiyyin al-Khulafa'* (Lessons for the Seekers of Truth in the History of the Fatimid Imams and Caliphs), al-Maqrizi draws upon a range of Egyptian and Eastern sources, including Fatimid writings. This is also true of his voluminous biographical dictionary, *al-Muqaffa al-Kabir*, of which only fragments survive,<sup>[30]</sup> and his renowned work on the topography of Egypt, *al-Mawa'iz wa'l-'I'tibar fi dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-Athar*.<sup>[31]</sup> Al-Maqrizi'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-Maqrizi'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 by the absence of al-Ustadh Jawdhar in Hrbek's study. Jawdhar, who rose among the Saqaliba ranks to become the trusted confidante, chamberlain and chief minister to the Fatimid imam-caliphs, was possibly the most powerful of all the Saqaliba during this period.

The recent availability of sources written by Fatimid Ismaili authors from the fourth AH / tenth CE century, thus allows for a revisiting of the context and significance of the rise of the Saqaliba, the reasons for their prominence in North Africa and the tapering off of their influence in Egypt. These sources include *al-Majalis wa'l-Musayarat* by al-Qadi al-Nu'man<sup>[33]</sup> and *Sirat al-Ustadh Jawdhar* by Mansur al-'Azizi al-Jawdhari. Hamid Haji, in his recent critical edition and annotated translation of this *Sirat al-Ustadh Jawdhar*, has also provided an important scholarly apparatus for a more nuanced investigation of the role of the



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Saqaliba in this period.<sup>[34]</sup> Also important in this regard is the seventh AH / fifteenth CE century Ismaili writer Idris 'Imad al-Din's *'Uyun al-Akhbar* which relates accounts from Fatimid sources that are now lost.<sup>[35]</sup> Together, 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 understanding of the vitality of the Saqlabi involvement in the Fatimid venture.

The *Majalis wa'l-Musayarat* constitutes a collection of eyewitness accounts by Qaḍi al-Nu'man of a series of audiences and excursions in his accompaniment of the Fatimid imam-caliphs al-Mansur 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 Saqlabi affairs also feature in the *Majalis*.

The *Sirat al-Ustadh Jawdhar* was written in homage to the exemplary figure of the Saqlabi Ustadh Jawdhar by his personal secretary. Through the rendering of this memoir, Ustadh Jawdhar emerges as the third most important figure of the Fatimid state, after the imam-caliph and his heir apparent. The *Sira* 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 among the unique sources of the medieval Muslim world. Reproducing a rich tranche of archival documents, Jawdhar's letters to the Fatimid sovereigns are artefacts of fourth AH / CE tenth century North Africa and represent the earliest surviving documents through which the Fatimid-Saqaliba 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 Saqlabi slaves and the Fatimid imam-caliphs. They also highlight the role of the Saqaliba within the Fatimid administration and in the palace of the imam-caliph himself. In this regard, the *Sira* delineates the role of Ustadh Jawdhar as the pre-eminent official of the Fatimid state for over four decades, detailing his own



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rise and responsibilities, and together with al-Nu‘man’s *Majalis* allows for a rendering of the internal hierarchy of the Saqaliba and the inherent tensions in their social and religious standing vis-à-vis other major constituents of the empire, particularly the Kutama Berbers. The availability of these Fatimid sources therefore allows for explorations that had previously not been possible.

### **The Evolving role of the Saqaliba in the Fatimid Administration**

The Saqaliba were slaves [*‘abid*], 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 AH / tenth CE century a large number of Saqlabi 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 *amir*. It was after the demise of the Aghlabid state that the first of the Saqlabi slaves would pass into Fatimid hands.[\[36\]](#)

When Ziyadat Allah, the last Aghlabid governor of Ifriqiya (r. 290-296 AH / 903-909 CE), fled eastwards before the onset of the Fatimid state, he is recorded to have taken with him one thousand Saqlabi slaves, highlighting the sense of personal loyalty that the Saqaliba engendered in their rulers.[\[37\]](#) Nonetheless, numerous Saqlabi slaves remained in the abandoned Aghlabid palace, and would soon become part of the inheritance of the Fatimid court.[\[38\]](#)

Among the early tasks that al-Mahdi bi’llah undertook soon after his arrival in *Raqqada* as the first Fatimid imam-caliph in 297 AH / 910 CE was an inspection of the household members and slaves, including a notable number of Saqaliba, 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.[\[39\]](#) It is then that he first noticed Jawdhar (d. 362 AH / 973 CE), a young Saqlabi lad, noting him to be ‘graceful’ and ‘diligent’, and allocated him to serve his son, and future successor, al-Qa’im bi-Amr Allah.[\[40\]](#) Thus begun 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 Saqlabi slave to becoming among the most trusted confidants of the fourth Fatimid ruler, al-Mu‘izz li-Din Allah.

Jawdhar was only one of a number of Saqaliba who began their rise to prominence during the reign of al-Mahdi. Other named Saqaliba included Mas‘ud, Sabir, Nasim al-Fata and Sulayman al-Khadim, whose careers under al-Mahdi are illustrative of the range and scale of their involvement in the nascent Fatimid state, and are indicative of the prospective impact of the Saqlabi presence in Fatimid North Africa.

As attested in non-Ismaili sources, the earliest Fatimid Saqaliba seem to have been most prominent in the military. In 307 AH / 920 CE, Sulayman al-Saqlabi jointly led a naval squadron supporting the second Fatimid expedition to Egypt under the command of al-Mahdi’s heir apparent al-Qa’im. While the campaign was unsuccessful and Sulayman was captured and killed,[\[41\]](#) the Saqaliba continued to flourish after him. Over the next decade, first the Saqlabi Mas‘ud, and then Sabir, continued the trend of leading Fatimid fleets.[\[42\]](#)

Under al-Mahdi, prominent Saqaliba were also entrusted with governorships. In 314 AH / 926-927 CE, the previously mentioned Sabir was appointed as the Fatimid governor over Qayrawan, which needed vigilant yet tactful governance as it was a hotbed of dissent stirred by the anti-Fatimid Maliki ‘*ulama*, and Sabir himself acquired this post after it had been held by Nasim al-Fata, another trusted Saqlabi.[\[43\]](#)

Over the same period, the scale of Saqlabi involvement in the Fatimid court is highlighted with the appointment of a Saqlabi as the *sahib al-mizalla*, the parasol bearer over the Fatimid imam-caliph at ceremonial occasions, a prestigious role that offered direct access to the imam-caliph. Mas‘ud al-Saqlabi appears to have been amongst the first Saqaliba to have been selected for this role,[\[44\]](#) and was succeeded in this post by Ghars al-Fata,[\[45\]](#) a position that subsequently continued among the Saqaliba until the reign of the fifth Fatimid imam-caliph al-‘Aziz bi’llah.[\[46\]](#)

Furthermore, from the *Sirat al-Ustadh Jawdhar*, the use of the Saqaliba as personal representatives of the imam-caliph in mediating disputes at this time becomes evident. When



a land dispute broke out among the Kutama supporters of al-Mahdi, 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 Kutama, who had been led by *da'i* Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i to secure the success of the Fatimid *da'wa* in North Africa, had become sensitised to the rift that had occurred between him and al-Mahdi, which had led to the *da'i* being accused of treason and therefore put to death. While al-Mahdi had subsequently managed to secure the support of the majority of the Kutama, 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-Mahdi chose trusted Saqlabi 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 whom he could draw upon 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-Mahdi in person led to the displacement of the previous power and influence of the Kutama shaykhs who had gained control over Ifriqiya in the revolution that led to the proclamation of the Fatimid state. Their subsequent displacement led to resentment among some of them, which was further fuelled by the fissure between *da'i* Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i and al-Mahdi. These turns of events meant that the loyalty of the Kutama officials could not be assumed. Furthermore, other segments of the North African population, such as the Arab population of Qayrawan, or other non-Kutama Berber confederations, were each vested with their own regional, factional and religious proclivities, which were oftentimes in conflict with each other. Under the circumstances, in the genesis of the Fatimid state, Saqlabi 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.



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During the reign of al-Qa'im, al-Mahdi's son and successor, the rise of Saqlabi slaves continued, three of whom – Maysur, Sandal and Bushra are noted by name in the sources in addition to the continued ascent of Ustadh Jawdhar. The fact that the former three Saqaliba 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 Saqaliba by the Fatimid imam-caliph.

The initial success in establishing Fatimid authority in the westernmost regions had been due to Masala b. Ḥabus, leader of a major branch of the Berber Zanata tribal confederation. However, Masala was killed in 312 AH / 924 CE by his cousin and rival, Musa b. Abi'l-'Afiya, 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-Qa'im turned to his Saqlabi generals to lead the Fatimid armies. Soon after (in 320 AH / 932 CE and then in 323 AH / 935 CE), al-Qa'im sent Fatimid armies commanded by Saqlabi generals Sandal and Maysur, 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 Khariji revolt of Abu Yazid erupted, and by 334 AH / 944 CE it had reduced Fatimid control of North Africa to the coastal plains of Ifriqiya.

During Abu Yazid's march towards the Fatimid capital, Saqlabi generals played a vital part in the Fatimid defensive lines. Bushra al-Fata was appointed over the city of Baghaya and defence of the turbulent city of Qayrawan was charged to the noted Saqlabi general Maysur, who commanded a contingent of Hawwara Berbers of the Banu Kamlan. These Hawwara, however, defected and put their Fatimid commander to death.<sup>[50]</sup> In the face of such defections to the Khariji rebels, the continued loyalty of the Saqaliba is notable.

Beside the increasing prominence of the Saqaliba on the battlefield, Ismaili sources provide insight on the growing role of al-Ustadh Jawdhar during the reign of al-Qa'im. By now, Jawdhar had been appointed by al-Qa'im to be in charge of his palace and his household while al-Qa'im was on the battlefield during the reign of his father;<sup>[51]</sup> then upon al-Qa'im's own



accession, Jawdhar was additionally entrusted with oversight of the treasury and the supervision of the royal textiles and warehouses.[\[52\]](#)

Yet the most significant gesture that marked Jawdhar's rise to prominence occurred in the final phase of al-Qa'im's life. While the battlefield was still ablaze, al-Qa'im became seriously indisposed and passed away. The nomination of his son Isma'il al-Mansur bi'llah (r. 334-341 AH / 946-953 CE) as successor was kept secret, so as not add further anxiety to the dire political and military straits in which the Fatimid regime found itself. Notably, Ustadh Jawdhar had been made privy to the succession of al-Mansur by al-Qa'im prior to the burial of al-Mahdi, seven years earlier, as he reports in his *Sira*.[\[53\]](#)

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.[\[54\]](#) The sources note that al-Qasim, the eldest son of al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah, was the cause of some strife in relation to alternate claims supporting Ahmad, another son of al-Mahdi, as the true contender to the Fatimid throne. After al-Qa'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-Qa'im in Ustadh Jawdhar is noteworthy, particularly because of the incendiary circumstances which the Fatimid house was facing, externally as well as internally. The abandonment of Fatimid forces by many among the previously allied Berber tribes and their collusion with Abu Yazid, added further constraints on the Berber involvement in the Fatimid administration. Conversely, the continued loyalty of the majority of the Saqaliba 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-Mansur bi'llah.

Al-Mansur began his reign in the battlefield, with the Saqaliba being given key roles in his struggle against Abu Yazid. Whilst some succumbed to the sword, others rose in the ranks to replenish them, including figures such as Rashiq al-Rayhani, Maram al-Fata, Tariq al-Saqlabi, Faraj, Qaysar and Muzaffar. Many of these played vital roles in the struggle against Abu Yazid.



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Rashiq led the Fatimid naval force that played a crucial role in lifting the siege of Sousse,[55] Tariq al-Saqlabi fought alongside al-Mansur on the battlefield,[56] Qaysar al-Saqlabi was also involved in subduing recalcitrant Berber tribes, and later, towards the end of al-Mansur's reign, the Saqlabi Faraj once more led the Fatimid naval expeditions in 340 AH / 951-952 CE.[57]

Similarly, the policy of appointing select Saqaliba as governors continued under al-Mansur. The victory of al-Mansur over Abu Yazid's forces at Qayrawan, was undoubtedly the turning point of the Khariji-Fatimid war, and having achieved this breakthrough, al-Mansur entrusted the Saqlabi Maram to be the commander over the restive city of Qayrawan.[58] Notably, when al-Mansur left the site of victory to pursue Abu Yazid, he ordered the construction of a new capital city on the site of his symbolic victory, and it was to this same Maram that oversight of the construction of al-Mansuriyya was entrusted.

Among the most prominent Slavs who rose to distinction under al-Mansur were Qaysar and Muzaffar.[59] Qaysar fought alongside the pro-Fatimid Sanhaja Berber chieftain Ziri b. Manad in successfully quelling the Khariji rebellion, and was then appointed by al-Mansur as the governor of Baghaya and its provinces. Muzaffar, who began his career as a tutor to the young al-Mu'izz, was made governor of Tripoli.[60] In time their power grew such that it was reported that between them they held governorship of the 'east and the west' in the period after al-Mansur'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-Mansur's successor al-Mu'izz had them executed in 349 AH / 960 CE. The cause given is an often-repeated account, found in al-Maqrizi'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.[61]

Hrbek rightly dismisses the account and cites Ibn Khaldun in remarking instead that their downfall occurred because they had become too powerful.[62] However, when the few additional details made available in the Ismaili sources are pieced together, they provide further useful leads regarding the cause of the downfall of these two Saqlabis.



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The *Sira* mentions how both Qaysar and Muḏaffar had been placed under the authority of Ustadh 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-Mansur, then the heir-apparent, who wrote to Jawdhar advising leniency and compassion.<sup>[63]</sup> Al-Mansur must have retained his distinctive regard for them, such that by the end of his reign Qaysar and Muḏaffar wielded significant influence.

Qadi al-Nu‘man in his *Majalis wa’l-Musayarat* sheds light on the cause of their execution in 349 AH / 960 CE. Both are expressly castigated in a conversation between al-Mu‘izz and al-Qadi al-Nu‘man for their disloyalty, their insincerity to the Imam, and for seeking to establish their own power-base.<sup>[64]</sup> Elsewhere in the *Majalis* and quoted verbatim by Idris in the *‘Uyun*, al-Mu‘izz is noted censuring the actions of Qaysar, this time in front of a Kutama audience. Qaysar is expressly rebuked by the Imam for preventing the Kutama 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>

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, their execution resulted from the charge that they had abused their authority, were guilty of insubordination and critically, of seeking to isolate the Imam by distancing him from the Kutama, thereby asserting themselves as the locus of power. The anecdote provides a useful insight into the intricacies of the Saqaliba relationship with the Fatimid imam-caliphs. It also sheds light on the internal dynamics among the Saqaliba, and the pivotal role of Ustadh Jawdhar in their upbringing and in socialising them to serve in the Fatimid administration.

Under the reign of al-Mansur the career of Ustadh Jawdhar continued its ascent. Prior to his advance against Abu Yazid, al-Mansur “invested the *ustadh* 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 without however carrying 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



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Commander of the Faithful' [*mawla amir al-mu'minin*], a title which was to be included in all official correspondence.[67] Further, al-Mansur expressly commanded that Jawdhar's name was to be inscribed on all the *tiraz* fabrics that were produced in the royal factories.[68] The gesture was not insignificant, as mention on state produced *tiraz* 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 Saqlabi *mawla* of the Imam. Al-Mansur further honoured Jawdhar, sending him gifts, and granting him the unprecedented honour of dining at the royal table. As Haji notes, the former Saqlabi slave now became "the third most important person in the Fatimid state after the imam and the heir apparent".[69]

It is undoubtedly during the reign of al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (r. 341-365 AH / 953- 975 CE) that Jawdhar and the Saqaliba attain the apogee of their power and influence.[70] Among the numerous Saqaliba 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 western most 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 subsequently lead the Fatimid expedition to Egypt.[71] After lengthy deliberations with al-Mu'izz, Jawhar set out eastwards at the head of the grand Fatimid army in 358 AH / 968 CE, 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.[72] The name of this Saqlabi 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 AH / 969-73 CE), Jawhar al-Saqlabi 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-Mansuriyya to al-Qahira. This culminated in the arrival of al-Mu'izz himself into Egypt in 362 AH / 973 CE, 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 Amir al-Mu'minin*, the same title as the one previously granted to Ustadh Jawdahr by al-Mansur.[73]



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Under al-Mu‘izz, the prominence of the Saqaliba is indicated by the large number of senior Saqaliba in eminent positions within the Fatimid state. Between the years 359 AH / 970 CE and 364 AH / 975 CE, for example, Ustadh Jawdhar was the chief minister of state, and Jawhar was the highest-ranking commander and governor of Egypt. Aflah al-Nashib was the governor of the eastern province of Barqa;[\[74\]](#) Rayyan al-Saqlabi was appointed as the governor of Tripoli, after the Fatimid expansion into Syria;[\[75\]](#) Abu’l-Faḍl Raydan served as the parasol bearer,[\[76\]](#) followed by Shaff‘ al-Saqlabi, who accompanied al-Mu‘izz to the pulpit when the imam-caliph gave his ‘Id sermon in Cairo;[\[77\]](#) and Nusayr served, at various times, as Jawdhar’s deputy in al-Mahdiyya,[\[78\]](#) as the head of the treasury[\[79\]](#) and governor of Tripoli.[\[80\]](#) Each of these individuals had a long standing history of having served in the Fatimid house, however, none more so and with greater longevity and illustriousness than Ustadh Jawdhar.

Soon after al-Mu‘izz’s accession, Ustadh Jawdhar was invited to relocate from al-Mahdiyya to al-Mansuriyya 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.[\[81\]](#)

The elderly Ustadh Jawdhar followed al-Mu‘izz in the departure from Ifriqiyya to Egypt but died on route at Barqa in 364 AH / 973 CE. The regard that al-Mu‘izz had for him is evident when the imam-caliph himself made special arrangements for the Ustadh 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 Saqlabi, “as a brother would do to his brother”, and they record the Ustadh’s own sentiment that as “a slave, a foreigner, and a Slav” his sole merit lay in being illuminated by the imam’s guidance.[\[82\]](#) Thus, it is Jawdhar’s religious allegiance to the Fatimid Imam that enables the transcendence of his legal status as a manumitted slave of Saqlabi origins.





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

The end of the reign of al-Mu‘izz therefore marks a suitable point to briefly examine some of the internal features of the Saqaliba as a social group. The Saqaliba 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 Saqlabi chieftains, hence Sulayman al-Saqlabi is termed a *ra’is* (head) of the Saqaliba in the *Sira*, but none were more prominent than Ustadh Jawdhar. The chiefs had the responsibility of the material upkeep of the junior Saqaliba. Accordingly, they were invested with the right to discipline them, and were tasked with their education and training.<sup>[83]</sup> Many Saqaliba 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 Muzaffar amongst others. Further, it was through the revenues of apportioned land granted by the imam-caliph, that the income and upkeep of these Saqaliba 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 Saqaliba under his control.<sup>[85]</sup> Anticipating the Mamluks who followed them, the Saqaliba were also a self-perpetuating group; that is, they often recruited younger Saqaliba, and facilitated their promotion through the ranks of the state. The purchasing of al-Qa’id Jawhar and his being handed over from one Saqlabi to another is illustrative of this.<sup>[86]</sup>

The Saqaliba had their share of internal rivalries. A number of incidents are related in the sources regarding inter-Saqlabi disputes, such as those between Ustadh Jawdhar and Rayyan al-Saqlabi,<sup>[87]</sup> or between Jawdhar and Rabi’ al-Saqlabi.<sup>[88]</sup> A well-known one is that of Aflah al-Nashib, the Saqlabi governor appointed by al-Mu‘izz over Barqa who was willing to pay an extraordinary sum to avoid dismounting in the presence of al-Qa’id Jawhar, likely so as not to appear to be beneath him in social status.<sup>[89]</sup>



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Ismaili sources also help shed further light on the relationship of the Saqaliba with other social groups. The appointment of Jawhar, a Slav slave, as the Fatimid general over a mainly Berber Kutama 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 Kutama prior to their march to the battlefield. He tells the Kutama 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 Kutama to treat the slaves as their 'brothers' and not to regard the slaves as kin-wise different from them, emphasising their shared loyalty to the imam as the unifying factor.<sup>[90]</sup>

This leads to a seemingly unique feature of the Saqaliba amongst contemporary slave-elites, that their social status was principally conditioned by their loyalty to the Ismaili imam. For those Saqaliba 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 following pronouncement by al-Mu'izz, which he made in relation to an inheritance issue raised by Jawhar, prior to his manumission:

All our slaves who adhere to our cause should be treated like freemen are treated in Maliki 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 Saqaliba thus transcended their legal status as slaves. Elsewhere, as referenced in Idris' *'Uyun*, a number of them were called *awliya'*,<sup>[92]</sup> a term ascribed to the loyal affiliates of the Imam. Until then in Fatimid usage, the title of *awliya'* had generally been reserved for the Kutama, but now came to include the Saqaliba 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 Saqaliba 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



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companions.”<sup>[93]</sup> The *mu'akhat*, 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-Ustadh Jawdhar mark a watershed in the Saqaliba involvement in the Fatimid era in a number of ways. For decades, Jawdhar was the lynchpin in the selection, training and positioning of the Saqaliba in the Fatimid state. While the Saqaliba 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 Saqlabi 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 to 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-‘Aziz bi’llah, and the gradual eclipse of the Slavs as well as the Kutama, the two main elements contributing to the Fatimid success in North Africa. The drying up of the fresh supply of Saqlabi slaves from their countries of origin in the later decades of the fourth AH / tenth CE century alluded to in the sources will have also undoubtedly affected their availability.<sup>[94]</sup>

Nonetheless, the contribution of Saqlabi 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 powers in the region, the Saqaliba found a niche as personal agents of the Fatimid imam-caliphs. Placed in trusted positions, the Saqaliba were chosen to lead armies and navies, govern cities, head the treasury and conduct sensitive diplomatic missions involving mediation between groups. Saqlabi figures such as al-Ustadh Jawdhar also became instrumental in the



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regulation of the greater Fatimid household. Others such al-Qa'id Jawhar subsequently become synonymous in Islamic history with the century long Fatimid settlement in Egypt.

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[1] The term *da'i* refers to those involved in the propagation of the Ismaili cause and corresponds broadly to the profile of being a missionary. *Da'i* Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i arrived in the lands of the Kutama of Ifriqiya in 280 AH / 893 CE having been dispatched there by the leading Ismaili *da'i* of Yemen, Ibn Hawshab (d. 320 AH /914 CE). The year after the proclamation of the Fatimid state, al-Shi'i 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: E. J. Brill, 1996), 95-121 and Michael Brett, *The Rise of the Fatimids: The World of the Mediterranean & the Middle East in the Tenth Century CE* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 49-73.

[2] Once dominating the region of Lesser Kabylia in present-day Algeria, the Kutama 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 *awliya'* (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.

[3] As representatives of the dominant legal school [*madhhab*] of North Africa on the eve of the Fatimid arrival, the Maliki scholars viewed the rule of a Shi'i 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 organise à Paris les 28, 29 et 30 mai 1998* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1999), 97-104. On the particular challenges of al-Mahdi bi'llah's reign see



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Halm, *Empire of the Mahdi*, 141-275; Brett, *Rise of the Fatimids*, 73-100; Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, 2007) 116-128, 137-140.

[4] Halm, *Empire of the Mahdi*, 392-396.

[5] On the evolution of Fatimid models of authority in relation to the above mentioned tensions, see Shainool Jiwa, "Governance and Pluralism under the Fatimids" in *The Shi'i world: Pathways in Tradition and Modernity*, ed., Farhad Daftary et al. (London, 2015), 111-131.

[6] Wilferd Madelung, "A Treatise on the Imamate of the Fatimid Caliph al-Mansur Billah," in *Texts, Documents and Artefacts: Islamic Studies in Honour of D. S. Richard*, ed. Chase F. Robinson (Leiden, 2003), 60.

[7] See Jiwa, "Governance and Pluralism," 120-126, and Sumaiya A. Hamdani, *Between Revolution and State: The Path to Fatimid Statehood* (London, 2006).

[8] Ivan Hrbek, "Die Slawen im Dienste der Fatimiden" in *Archiv Orientalní* 21 (1953): 543-81

[9] See Halm, *Empire of the Mahdi*, 278-98; Brett, *Rise of the Fatimids*, 144; Yacov Lev, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt* (Leiden, 1991), 74-77; and C. E. Bosworth, "Sakaliba," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2d ed. (online edition).

[10] Hrbek, "Die Slawen," 580.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 559-571.

[13] For example, Brett holds that Hrbek has "conclusively shown" Jawhar originated from the Adriatic rather than Sicily (Brett, *Rise of the Fatimids*, 236-237); this is seemingly also accepted by Bosworth ('Şakaliba')



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[14] Muhammad b. ‘Ali Ibn Hammad (Hamadu) al-Sanhaji, *Akhbar muluk Bani ‘Ubayd wa-siratuhum*, ed., and French trans., M. Vonderheyen as *Histoire des rois ‘Obaïdides (les califes Fatimides)* (Algiers-Paris, 1927).

[15] ‘Izz al-Din Abu’l-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kamil fi’l-Ta’rikh*, ed. ‘Abd Allah al-Qadi (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘ilmiyyah, 1407/1987).

[16] Abu Muhammad ‘Abd Allah b. Muhammad al-Tijani, *Rihla*, ed., H. H. ‘Abd al-Wahhab (Tunis, 1958).

[17] Ibn ‘Idhari al-Marrakushi, *Kitab al-bayan al-mughrib fi akhbar al-Andalus wa’l-Maghrib*, ed. G. S. Colin and E. Levi-Provençal (Leiden, 1948).

[18] ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-‘Ibar*, ed. Khalil Shihadah, Suhayl Zakkar (Beirut, Dar al-Fikr, 1431/2001).

[19] Taqi al-Din al-Maqrizi, *Itti‘az al-hunafa bi-akhbar al-a’imma al-fatimiyyin al-khulafa*, Vol. 1 ed. Jamal al-Din al-Shayyal (Cairo: 1967), Vols. 2 and 3, ed. M. Hilmi M Ahmad (Cairo: 1971-73).

[20] Abu Ya’la Hamza b. Asad Ibn al-Qalanisi, *Dhayl ta’rikh Dimashq*, ed. Henry F. Amcdroz (Leiden, 1908).

[21] In addition to the sources mentioned, he draws on the works of al-Quda’i (d. 454 AH / 1062 CE), Ibn al-Abbar (d. 658 AH / 1260 CE), Ibn Khallikan (d. 681 AH / 1282 CE), Abu’l-Fida (d. 732 AH / 1331 CE), al-Nuwayri (d. 733/1333), Ibn Duqmaq (d. 809 AH / 1406 CE), Ibn Taghri Birdi (d. 874 AH / 1470 CE), and al-Suyuti (d. 911 AH / 1505 CE).

[22] Abu’l-Qasim Muḥammad Ibn Hawqal al-Nasibi, *Kitab Surat al-ardh* (Beirut, 1979).

[23] Hrbek, “Die Slawen,” 553.

[24] See Daftary, *The Ismailis*, 1-10.

[25] For a discussion particularly focused on al-Maqrizi’s attitudes to the Fatimids vis-à-vis other eastern Sunni authors see Shainool Jiwa, introduction to *Towards a Shi’i Mediterranean*



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*Empire: Fatimid Egypt and the Founding of Cairo, The reign of the Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz from al-Maqrizi's Itti'az al-hunafa*, (London, 2009), 32-49. References to the *Itti'az* hereafter will be from this English edition.

[26] The burgeoning of the Egyptian bureaucratic classes and their literary production during the Egyptian phase of Fatimid history meant that many of their works, especially those related to administrative matters, were inherited by writers of successor dynasties. Ibn al-Sayrafi's (d. 541/1147) book on the history of the viziers of Fatimid Egypt (*al-Ishara ila man nal al-wizara*) 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).

[27] al-Qadi Abu Hanifa al-Nu'man, *Ifitah al-da'wa wa ibtida' 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-Qadi al-Nu'mans Ifitah al-Da'wa* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006). Further references to the *Ifitah* shall point to Haji's edition in the first instance.

[28] Brett, *Rise of the Fatimids*, 136-137.

[29] Hrbek, "Die Slawen", 572.

[30] Taqi al-Din al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-Muqaffa' al-kabir*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ya'lawi (Beirut, 1981).

[31] Taqi al-Din al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-Mawa'iz wa'l-'tibar fi dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, ed. Muhammad Zaynhum and Madihat al-Sharqawi (Cairo, 1998). See also Walker, *Exploring an Islamic Empire*, 164-169, on the varied manuscripts and editions of this work.

[32] A case in point is al-Maqrizi's rendering of the reign of the fourth Fatimid imam-caliph al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, who spent the majority of his 22-year reign in North Africa, with only the last couple of years in Egypt. Yet, in writing about his reign, al-Maqrizi 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-



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Maqrizi's coverage of this North African phase see al-Maqrizi, *Itti'az*, trans., Jiwa, *Mediterranean Empire*, 53-66. For the remnant focusing on Egypt see *ibid.*, 66-122, 187-217.

[33] Al-Qadi Abu Hanifa al-Nu'man, *Kitab al-Majalis wa'l-Mudayarat*, ed. al-Habib al-Faqi, Ibrahim Shabbuh and Muhammad al-Ya'lawi (Tunis, 1978).

[34] Mansur al-'Azizi al-Jawdhari, *Sirat al-Ustadh Jawdhar*, ed. Muhammad K. Husayn 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 pages 19-166, the Arabic edition pages 1-181 [in Indian numerals]). References hereafter to al-Jawdhari's *Sira* shall refer to this edition, and will point to both the Arabic text (ar.) and the translation (trans.).

[35] 'Imad al-Din Idris, *'Uyun al-akhbar wa funun al-athar*, ed. Muhammad al-Ya'lawi as *Ta'rikh al-khulafa' al-Fatimiyyin bi'l-Maghrib: al-qism al-khass min Kitab 'uyun al-akhbar* (Beirut, 1985). An annotated translation of the chapter on the life of al-Mu'izz is found in Shainool Jiwa, *The Founder of Cairo: The Fatimid Imam-Caliph al-Mu'izz and his Era* (London, 2013).

[36] Dmitriy Mishin's article, "The Saqaliba Slaves in the Aghlabid State", *Annual Journal of Medieval Studies at CEU* (Budapest: Central European University Department of Medieval Studies, 1996-1997), 236-44] on Saqlabi slaves in the Aghlabid administration provides a useful backdrop for charting the role of the Saqaliba in North Africa prior to the Fatimid arrival.

[37] Al-Nu'man, *Ifitah*, trans., Haji, 169.

[38] The presence of the Saqaliba in circles outside the Aghlabid administration in the pre-Fatimid period can be further attested by the fact that Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i presented al-Mahdi with a Saqlabi slave named Bushra as stated in the *Sirat Ja'far al-Hajib* (Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Yamani, *Sirat al-Hajib Ja'far b. 'Ali*, 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 Saqlabi (216).

[39] Al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, Ar., 4-5; trans., 22-23. For an account on how the supervision and maintenance of the remaining palace retinue of Ziyadat Allah became initially the responsibility of the *da'i* Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i, prior to the arrival of al-Mahdi bi'llah, see al-Nu'man, *Iftitah*, trans. Haji, 176-178.

[40] al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, Ar., 4-5; trans., 22-23.

[41] See Haji's footnote in al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, trans., 23 n. 39, citing al-Maqrizi, Idris and Ibn al-Athir.

[42] Hrbek, "Die Slawen," 553; Halm, *Empire of the Mahdi*, 279. Both authors here cite Ibn Idhari.

[43] Halm, *Empire of the Mahdi*, 279, citing Ibn Idhari.

[44] Hrbek, "Die Slawen," 554, citing Ibn Hammad.

[45] Halm, *Empire of the Mahdi*, 279.

[46] 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-Maqrizi) that under al-Mu'izz this was held by the Slav named Safi al-Saqlabi, and that Rayyan al-Saqlabi was once the parasol-bearer of al-'Aziz (Hrbek, "Die Slawen", 572-573, 575).

[47] al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, Ar., 7; trans., 24.

[48] al-Yamani, *Sirat al-Hajib*, trans. Ivanow, 184-223; al-Nu'man, *Iftitah*, trans. Haji, 121-26.

[49] Brett, *Rise of the Fatimids*, 151, 233.

[50] Ibid., 168. See also Haji's note in al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, 98 n. 209.

[51] Al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, Ar., 10; trans., 26.



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[52] *Ibid.*, Ar., 10-1 J; trans., 27.

[53] “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-Mahdi bi’llah, 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-Mahdi bi’llah, ‘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-Jawdhari, *Sira*, Ar., 11; trans., 27).

[54] Within two decades, the Fatimid family expanded significantly, al-Mahdi himself had six sons and seven daughters, his eldest son al-Qa’im had eight sons and four daughters, al-Qa’im’s eldest al-Mansur was father to ten, five of whom were male. For a comprehensive survey see H. Haji’s depiction of the early Fatimid family tree in al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, Table 1.

[55] Idris, *‘Uyun al-Akhbar*, ed. Ya’lawi, 307.

[56] See Haji notes in al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, trans., 29 n. 54 citing al-Maqrizi and Idris. Tariq al-Saqlabi is amongst the few present in the final hours of al-Mu’izz li-Din Allah. See al-Maqrizi, *Itti‘az*, trans. Jiwa, *Mediterranean Empire*, 210.

[57] Hrbek, “Die Slawen,” 556, citing Ibn al-Athir and Ibn Khaldun.

[58] Maram is alternatively spelt Mudam, Madam, or Mera (Hrbek, “Die Slawen”, 555).

[59] Hrbek provides a discussion on these two Saqlabi figures in his article (Hrbek, “Die Slawen,” 558]). Haji similarly provides important information on them, see al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, trans., 29 n. 53.

[60] Al-Maqrizi, *Itti‘az*, trans. Jiwa, *Mediterranean Empire*, 65.

[61] *Ibid.*, 65.

[62] Hrbek, “Die Slawen,” 559.



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- [63] Al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, Ar., 13-14; trans., 29-30.
- [64] al-Nu‘man, *Majalis*, 427.
- [65] Ibid, 487. This statement is reproduced in Idris, ‘*Uyun*, trans. Jiwa, *Founder of Cairo*, 152.
- [66] Al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, ar., 18; trans., 33-34.
- [67] Ibid., Ar., 27; trans., 42.
- [68] Ibid., Ar., 28; trans., 43.
- [69] H. Haji, “A distinguished Slav eunuch of the Early Fatimid period: al-Ustadh Jawdhar” in *Fortresses of the Intellect: Ismaili and Other Islamic studies in Honour of Farhad Daftary* ed. O Ali-de-Unzaga, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 263.
- [70] Hrbek, “Die Slawen,” 558.
- [71] See Idris, ‘*Uyun*, trans., Jiwa, *Founder of Cairo*, 133-53.
- [72] Al-Maqrizi, *Itti‘az*, trans., Jiwa, *Mediterranean Empire*, 66-86.
- [73] Al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, ar., 159-160; trans., 149-50.
- [74] Al-Maqrizi, *Itti‘az*, trans., Jiwa, *Mediterranean Empire*, 60.
- [75] Ibid., 194, 202.
- [76] Ibid., 105.
- [77] Ibid., 108.
- [78] Al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, ar., 122; trans., 120.
- [79] Ibid., 128.
- [80] Al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, ar., 132; trans., 128.
- [81] Haji, “A distinguished Slav eunuch”, 264-65.



[82] Al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, ar., 173; trans., 161-162, “He leaned into the litter and hugged (the Ustadh) as would do a brother to his brother, a friend to his friend...(The Ustadh) 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.’”. Idris (*‘Uyun*, trans., Jiwa, *Founder of Cairo*, 258) provides a direct quotation of this statement by Jawdhar, indicating his access to the text of the *Sira*.

[83] See for example al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, ar., 12-15; trans., 29-30 (for imprisonment) and Ar., 135; trans., 130 (for education).

[84] Apart from the extensive lands granted to Ustadh Jawdhar, see for example the houses of Maysur (al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, ar., 95-96; trans., 98); or the domains of Muzaffar (ibid, Ar., 129; trans., 125).

[85] Al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, Ar. 129; trans., 125-26.

[86] Note the comment in Idris, *‘Uyun*, trans. Jiwa, *Founder*, 138: "Al-Qadi al-Quda‘i said: 'Jawhar was originally from Byzantium. A servant called Sabir brought him. Sabir handed him over to Khayran, who passed him on to Khafif who took him to imam [al-Mansur] to whom he became well known and who accompanied him in his battles.' ” Sabir and Khafif are undoubtedly amongst the aforementioned Saqaliba.

[87] Al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, Ar. 84; trans., 89.

[88] Ibid., Ar., 139; trans., 134

[89] Al-Maqrizi (*Khitat*, [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 Khallikan mentions the sum of 100,000 dinars being offered in lieu of dismounting (Wafayat, trans., De Slane, *Biographical Dictionary*, 4 vols. [Paris, 1842-71], 1: 342). The same report is to be found in al-Maqrizi, *Muqaffa* (n. 30 above) 2:29, where the ruler is named Aflah al-Saqlabi.



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[90] Idris, *‘Uyun*, 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.”

[91] See the note by Haji in al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, trans., 134 n. 279.

[92] Idris, *‘Uyun*, trans., Jiwa, *Founder of Cairo*, 81

[93] Al-Jawdhari, *Sira*, ar., 159; trans., 149-150, and also note *ibid.*, trans., 150 n. 304, where Haji discusses the *mu’akhat*.

[94] Hrbek, “Die Slawen,” 573. Note especially the comment in al-Maqrizi’s *Itti’az*, trans., Jiwa, *Mediterranean Empire*, 204: “[In this year] Şaqaliba slaves were sought from all the people and were bought.”

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