13 | Rulers, Ḥanābila, and Shiʿis: The Unravelling Social Cohesion of Fourth/Tenth-Century Baghdad

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Introduction

Historians of Abbasid history describe the second part of the ninth/third and early tenth/fourth centuries as the period in which the caliphate gradually lost its grip over vast areas of its empire.[1] In the provinces, for example, local dynasties such as the Sāmānids (204–395/819–1005), Ṭūlūnids (254–92/868–905) and the Ṣaffārids (247–393/861–1003) dominated huge regions that fell from the orbit of Abbasid power.[2] According to some of these accounts, the main reason for the breakup of the Abbasid empire was incompetent administration which led to diminishing revenues and the inability to maintain powerful armies.[3] Muḥammad A. Shaban goes so far as to characterize the central government as acting "very much like a colonial power whose only interest was to exploit its domains without regard to the interests of its subjects."[4] The Abbasids' poor administration and myopic policies, that led to the decline of their armies, gradually reduced their capability to counter military threats and defend their subjects from rebel forces. The last and seemingly irreversible stage of this decline occurred during the rule of al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–32),

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[1] For a detailed discussion of the Abbasids' military and administrative decline, see Muhammad A. Shaban, *Islamic History, A New Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 (1976)), 2:115–58; Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam, Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974) 2:12–13; Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London and New York: Longman, 1986), 200. Another historian who mentions the "breakup of the ʿAbbasid empire" and explains it in similar terms is Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 136. For an overview of this era, see Michael Bonner, "The Waning of Empire, 861–945," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, volume 1, *The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries*, ed. Chase F. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 305–59.

[2] On the Ṭūlūnid effort to redefine their relations with the caliph by instating "new-style loyalties," see Matthew S. Gordon, "Swearing Abū al-Jaysh into Office: The Loyalties of Ṭūlūnid Egypt," chapter 5 in this volume.

[3] Hodgson, *The Venture*, 2:13; Kennedy, *The Prophet*, 199; Lapidus, *A History*, 136.

[4] Shaban, *Islamic History*, 89.

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whose twenty-five-year-long reign is seen as disastrous.[5] His regime was followed by those of al-Qāhir (r. 320–22/932–34) and al-Rāḍī (r. 322–29/934–40), whose attempts to apply caliphal authority in Baghdad by imposing their religious policies were ruinous and led to social upheaval and the intensification of violence in the empire's capital.

As the caliphate disintegrated and a new political framework that was composed of numerous political entities appeared, societies also underwent far-reaching changes. Ira Lapidus observed that in those years "Islamic religious associations became the almost universal basis of Middle Eastern communal organization."[6] More specifically, "[F]rom the tenth to the thirteenth century the Middle Eastern masses came to be identified with the Sunni schools of law, Sufi brotherhoods, Shiʿi sects."[7] The new states and institutions ushered in new types of social interactions and ties. For example, based on ideological affinity and interests, the Sunni schools of law entered local politics in several cities. Similarly, from the twelfth/sixth century, Sufi brotherhoods grew in size and influence, forcing regimes to take their interests and views into consideration. As these mass institutions expanded, they became significant political participants that empowered ordinary believers and transformed them into weighty social and political actors.

The breakdown of the old order in the tenth/fourth century and the evolvement of a novel one that was based on new institutions and communal bonds exemplify the plasticity of social ties. Their adaptability has been noted in the Introduction of this volume, in which it is observed that social ties can unravel or, as is demonstrated in several articles, they can either be openly challenged or tacitly circumvented.[8] This chapter will focus on one aspect of such changes – how social ties endure when the lives and possessions of individuals are in jeopardy. Interestingly, in this specific case in which the Qarāmiṭa struck major cities in southern Iraq and the ḥajj caravans, we can discern several different reactions. In some, local ties were strengthened and the residents of different cities fought together but with

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[5] Maaike van Berkel *et al.*, "General Conclusion" in *Crisis and Continuity at the Abbasid Court, Formal and Informal Politics in the Caliphate of al-Muqtadir (295–320/908–32)* eds. Maaike van Berkel *et al.* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 215.

[6] Lapidus, *Islamic Societies*, 232.

[7] Ibid.

[8] On ties that were challenged and unfastened, see Edmund Hayes and Petra M. Sijpesteijn, "Introduction: The Ties that Bound the Societies of the Islamic Empire," in this volume; Gordon, "Loyalties of Ṭūlūnid Egypt," chapter 11 in this volume; Noëmie Lucas, "A State Letter from a Marwanid Caliph to His Governor of Iraq. A Historiographical Investigation into Khālid b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qasrī's Downfall," chapter 9 in this volume.

no outside help. In others, ties with the regime were consolidated and the residents collaborated with the Abbasid armies. In others still, the local ties and commitments were ignored and the residents fled their homes. Elsewhere, as in Baghdad, political ties faded, and the inhabitants demonstrated against their political elite whom they perceived as inept or, even worse, treasonous. Furthermore, in Baghdad, some of them confronted their rulers due to religious and intellectual controversies and fought their neighbors who belonged to other sects of Islam.

During the critical dozen years 311/923–323/935, in which the threat to the lives and property of the inhabitants of southern Iraq increased, the regime's incompetence grew painfully clear, and as a consequence its subjects' fury and disrespect became evident. As the Qarāmiṭa's raids exposed the regime's inefficiency, the Ḥanābila took to the streets and aroused the caliphs' wrath. Furthermore, these were the years during which the relations between the Shiʿis and the Ḥanābila deteriorated and were altered profoundly. One of the main points that this chapter emphasizes is that the violence between the Ḥanābila and the Shiʿis broke out before the Buyids entered Baghdad. Thus, the unstitching of Baghdad's social fabric was the outcome of a decades-long dynamic which brought about a new pattern of intercommunal violence that would remain for the next three centuries or so. The disputes and violence between the Ḥanābila and the Shiʿis also indicate that the term ʿāmma does not refer to a single, unified social entity but is an expression that describes a large socio-economic group that stands apart primarily from the courtly elite and the functionaries serving the regime, yet concurrently is divided into several ideological and political currents. Therefore, in saying that the general public have become more active politically, we are pointing to the fact that they were fragmented into different ideological currents that on some occasions battled each other and on others confronted the political elite.

However, despite the role that Baghdad's populace played in the political and religious spheres during those years, they have received relatively little attention from modern historians. Whereas scholars of Abbasid history have composed in-depth studies of the caliphs and elites of this era, they mention the general public only in passing.[9] It is, I believe, critical to take account of the religious thought and political involvement of the lower

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[9] For in-depth studies of these elites, see Harold Bowen, *The Life and Times of ʿAlī Ibn ʿĪsā ʾThe Good Vizier'* (New York: AMS Press, 1975 [1928]); van Berkel *et al.*, *Crisis and Continuity*. For historical surveys that cover this period and focus on the political elite, see Shaban, *Islamic History*; Kennedy, *The Prophet*.

classes in Muslim societies in general and Baghdad in particular, since they were active participants in forging religious sensibilities and political dynamics. Following an historiographic turn in the history of early modern European historiography, which was led by Edward P. Thompson and Nathalie Zemon-Davis, historians of Muslim societies, particularly of the Mamluk period and later, have published several studies that examine the social and political involvement of the lower classes.[10] However, the masses in the early Abbasid period have received relatively little attention.[11]

In order to partially address this lacuna, the present study will examine the political and military behavior of the general public in the circumscribed region of south Iraq and Baghdad during the twelve years in which they suffered from numerous Qarāmiṭa raids. The first part of the chapter examines the ways in which the Qarāmiṭa attacks were perceived by inhabitants of Iraq and their various reactions to them.[12] The focus then shifts to one group, the Ḥanābila, who came together on the basis of religious values and fashioned a unique style of socio-religious activism that left a distinct mark on Baghdadi politics. Finally, I discuss the way in which the ruling elite confronted the Ḥanābila. These three perspectives concentrate on the unravelling of the socio-political commitments in Baghdad and the role played by the general populace in the undoing of its social cohesion.

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[10] For classic studies on crowd participation in social and religious confrontations, see George Rudé, *The Crowd in History, A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1848*, (London: Serif, 2005 [1964]); Edward P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," in *Past and Present* 50 (1971), 76–136; Natalie Zemon-Davis, "Rites of Violence. Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France," in *Past and Present* 59 (1973): 51–91. For a recent study that focuses on late Antiquity and makes a similar argument, see Julio Cesar Magalhães de Oliveira, "Late Antiquity: The Age of Crowds?" in *Past and Present* 249 (2020): 3–52. For studies that examine the crowds in Middle Eastern societies, see Shoshan Boaz, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); James Grehan, "Street Violence and Social Imagination in Late-Mamluk and Ottoman Damascus (c. 1500–1800)," in *Subalterns and Social Protest, History from Below in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (London: Routledge, 2008), 25–49; Amina Elbandary, *Crowds and Sultans, Urban Protest in Late Medieval Egypt and Syria* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2015).

[11] An important exception to this observation is Simha Sabari, *Mouvements populaires à Bagdad à l'époque ʿabbasside, IXe–XIe siècles* (Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1981).

[12] The Qarāmiṭa were a Shiʿi sect that branched off Ismaili Shiʿism. In the second half of the third Hijri century/ninth century AD, they attempted to make inroads into the Sawād. Over time, and despite the failure of the first two waves, they established a base in northeastern Arabia and raided southern Iraq from there. For the Qarāmiṭa attacks, and their ideology, see Kennedy, *The Prophet*, 287–92; Farhad Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs, Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 116–20, 132–33, 160–64; Shaban, *Islamic History,* 128–33.

The General Public

The background to – and, in some instances, the trigger for – many of the events that will be described in this paper are the Qarāmiṭa raids into south Iraq. The Qarāmiṭa, whose military exploits sapped the strength of the Abbasid empire between 311/923 and 319/931, aroused strong reactions among its populace, ranging from panic to resistance. Therefore, the first step in studying the public's conduct is to discern their patterns of behavior in the face of the Qarāmiṭa threat.

In their description of the events of 313/926, the chronicles note the alarm that spread through Iraq as the Qarāmiṭa forces defeated the Abbasid army in Kūfa and looted the town for six days. Interestingly, although the Qarāmiṭa headed back south after taking whatever they could carry, news of the Abbasids' defeat aroused panic in Baghdad, and we are informed by Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) that "[T]he people of Baghdad were seriously alarmed, and most of those who lived on the Western bank migrated to the Eastern."[13] A similar reaction occurred in 314/927 in Mecca, when there were rumors that the Qarāmiṭa were in the city's vicinity, and again in 315/928 after another Abbasid defeat near Kūfa.[14] Thus, these reports indicate that the inhabitants of the region took an interest in events that could develop into military threats and reacted very strongly to them, to the point of deserting their homes on the basis of rumors.

However, the Qarāmita's forays into Iraq also elicited a very different reaction in other cities.[15] The chronicles report that in Anbār, Hīt, and Raqqa, local inhabitants fought the Qarāmiṭa and repelled their attacks – alone or with the help of the Abbasid armies.[16] The first clash occurred during the Qarāmiṭa campaign of 315/928, which began with their victory over Abbasid forces near Kūfa, mentioned above. After defeating the Abbasids, the Qarāmiṭa continued northwest and approached Anbār. The Abbasids dispatched several units to Anbār and the soldiers arrived a short while before the Qarāmiṭa. Miskawayh describes the events that unfolded: "On the Friday the people of Anbār and the commanders there saw the cavalry

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[13] Abū ʿAlī Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-Umam, The Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate*, ed. Henry F. Amerdoz, trans. David S. Margoliouth (Oxford: Basel Blackwell, 1920–21), 1:163. Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyaʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī) 11:173.

[14] On Mecca, see Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 164, and Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya* 11:174. On Kūfa, see Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 198.

[15] These events have been described by Hugh Kennedy, "The Reign of al-Muqtadir (295–320/908–32): A History" in van Berkel *et al.* eds., *Crisis and Continuity*, 38–39.

[16] These events have been described by Kennedy, "The Reign," *Crisis and Continuity,* 38–39.

of Abū Ṭāhir advancing from the Western side, and they hastened to break down the Anbār bridge."[17] Faced with resistance, the Qarāmiṭa turned to Hīt.[18] In Hīt, the inhabitants were even more tenacious, and over the course of the battle, many Qarāmiṭa soldiers were killed, and they retreated.

Perhaps the most dogged act of resistance occurred a year later, when the Qarāmiṭa attacked Raqqa. This clash is described by al-Qurṭubī (d. ca. 370/980) as follows: "the Qarāmiṭa advanced to al-Raqqa in order to assault its inhabitants. The inhabitants fought a fierce battle against the Qarāmiṭa, hurling at them water, dirt and bricks from the rooftops, and shooting at them poisoned arrows. The Qarāmiṭa lost approximately one hundred men, and they left defeated."[19] As in Hīt, Raqqa's residents were able to organize themselves, assemble weapons, build up the courage to confront a menacing enemy, and force them to retreat.

The Qarāmiṭa's raids and the public's reaction bring into relief two patterns of behavior. The first is that rumors aroused tremendous anxiety and caused the inhabitants of the cities to flee their towns or neighborhoods. The second is that when the public came face to face with the invaders they fought back, and fiercely at times.

Yet, the propensity of ordinary Abbasid subjects to stand up for their interests was not limited solely to fighting and acts of self-defense. The masses were also present in the public sphere via popular demonstrations, through which they expressed their fury over economic, political, or religious events or policies. For example, historians of the fourth/tenth century report an eruption of indignation in Baghdad, when its inhabitants learned of the massacre of the ḥajj caravan of 311/924 by the Qarāmiṭa. The mere act of attacking the ḥajj was enough to provoke outrage and confusion among Muslim believers. However, in this case the horror was intensified by the rumors that trickled in from the desert. It was told that the courtiers and members of the Caliph's household, as well as numerous other pilgrims, had been taken prisoner by the Qarāmiṭa. Perhaps even more gruesome were the stories about the rest of the pilgrims who had been sent through the desert, without camels, food, or water. Most of them died on their way back to Baghdad.

Miskawayh describes the wrath of the populace in the following words:

[17] Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 198; al-Hamdānī, *Takmila tāʾrīkh al-Ṭabarī* (Beirut: al-MaṬbaʿa al-Kāthūlīkiyya, 1961), 53.

[18] For references to the Qarāmiṭa changing direction and going to Hīt, see Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 11:177.

[19] al-Qurṭubī, *Ṣilat Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī* (Leiden: Brill, 1897), 134.

On both sides of the river Baghdad and its streets were in a ferment. Women came out barefoot, with disheveled hair, beating their faces till they were black, and shrieking in the roads. They were joined by the women of the ruined officials—ruined by Ibn al-Furāt [d. 312/924] … The spectacle was of unexampled hideousness. Ibn al-Furāt ordered Nāzūk [d. 317/929] to ride to the public mosques on both sides of the river on account of the public commotion (*bi-sabab ḥarakat al-ḥāmma*). He did this taking with him all his troops, cavalry, infantry and naphtha-shooters, and succeeded in quieting the mob (*ḥattā sakana al-ʿāmma*).[20]

This description corroborates the point made above about ordinary Abbasid subjects – the *ʿāmma*: they took an interest in military and political events and were keenly aware of the Qarāmiṭa threat to Baghdad. However, in contrast to their reaction in 313/925, when the Qarāmiṭa defeated Abbasid forces in the vicinity of Kūfa and the inhabitants of Baghdad fled their homes, in this case anger governed their reaction and they vented their fear by confronting the authorities, whom they considered inept.

Another important detail that should be noted in the description of the protests is the cooperation between the *ʿāmma* and the higher echelons of society, who are depicted in this paragraph as the relatives of the "ruined officials" (*asbāb al-mankūbīn*). In fact, the ties that bound the *ʿāmma* and the "ruined officials" come up in two separate instances, and in both they clashed with the *wazīr*. The first is the reference above, and the second is a report of how this coalition tried to force their way to the *wazīr*'s son and pelt him with bricks.[21] These accounts of the ad hoc coalition between the elite families and the masses suggest that in certain circumstances Baghdad's lower social strata would join the higher echelons of society in order to confront the rulers and advance their interests.[22]

In both of these instances, the demonstrators accused Ibn al-Furāt and his son al-Muḥassin (d. 312/924) of belonging to the Qarāmiṭa. In the first case, Miskawayh writes: "The mob shouted in the streets that Ibn al-Furāt was the Great Qarmatian, and that nothing would satisfy him but the annihilation of the people of Mohammed."[23] In the second case, after Ibn al-Furāt was arrested and the Caliph's men were searching for his son

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[20] Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 135. See also al-Hamdānī, *Takmila*, 43; Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī Tārīkh al-mulūk wa-l-Umam* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1992), 13:239; Hilāl al-Ṣābī, *Kitāb al-Wuzarāʾ* (Leiden: Brill, 1904), 49.

[21] Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 140–41.

[22] On cooperation between the elites and the lower social strata in other Middle Eastern and European contexts, see Elbandary, *Crowds and Sultans*, 189–91. For the European context, see George Rude, *The Crowd in History* (London: Serif, 2005 [1964]).

[23] Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 135–36.

al-Muḥassin, they shouted, "The great Qarmatian has been arrested, there only remains the little Qarmatian."[24] The "Great Qarmatian," as al-Miskawayh explains, was the elderly Ibn al-Furāt, and the "little Qarmatian" was his son al-Muḥassin.

The accusation that Ibn al-Furāt and his son al-Muḥassin were from the Qarāmiṭa adds a new twist to the plot. The two of them were not only perceived as incompetent officials who could not protect the *ḥajj* caravan and put an end to the Qarāmiṭa's raids, but also the allegations now took on a more severe tenor, as the wide populace accused them of being crypto-Qarāmiṭa. Thus, the Qarāmiṭa were perceived as a fifth column that had entered and corrupted the Sunni caliphate's highest echelons. In the words of Hugh Kennedy: "The [Qarāmiṭa] threat was made more alarming by the rumors, probably untrue, that there were elements in the Abbasid *sulṭān* who were secretly in league with them."[25]

In the year following the downfall of the *wazīr* Ibn al-Furāt and his son, rumors about the Qarāmiṭa's infiltration into Baghdad spread and intensified. As a consequence, the authorities searched for secret adherents of the Qarāmiṭa. In 313/926 they asserted that they had found what they were looking for – clandestine devotees of the Qarāmiṭa. The evidence tying a few dozen denizens of Baghdad with the Qarāmiṭa was found in the Barāthā mosque, located in the Karkh quarter, where many Shiʿis lived.[26] Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) describes the events:

> Al-Muqtadir was informed that the *Rāfiḍa* gathered in the Barāthā mosque and cursed the (Prophet's) friends, and he sent Nāzūk to arrest whomever was present. This occurred on the last Friday of the month of Ṣafar. There were thirty persons who prayed the Friday prayer and declared disassociation from anyone who follows al-Muqtadir. They were arrested, the mosque was searched, and they found seals made of white clay, upon which a man called al-Kaʿkā impressed: 'Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl, the imam, the *mahdī*, the *walī* of Allāh,' and they seized [the participants] and incarcerated them. Al-Khāqānī applied himself to the destruction of the Barāthā mosque. He brought a paper with a *fatwa* from the jurists, claiming [the Barāthā mosque] to be a Mosque of Dissent (*masjid ḍirār*), disbelief and fragmentation among the believers, stating that if it will not be destroyed it will serve as a refuge for the Qarāmiṭa propagandists.

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[24] Miskawayh, *Tajārib,* 140–41.

[25] Kennedy, "The Reign," *Crisis and Continuity*, 36.

[26] On al-Karkh, see Nassima Neggaz, "Al-Karkh: The Development of an Imami-Shiʿi Stronghold in Early Abbasid and Buyid Baghdad (132–447/750–1055)," *Studia Islamica* 114 (2019): 265–315; on the Barāthā mosque, see 285.

Al-Muqtadir ordered to destroy it, and Nāzūk destroyed it. And al-Khāqānī ordered to make it into a cemetery, in which he buried some of the dead, and burned the rest.[27]

According to Ibn al-Jawzī, the destruction of the Barāthā mosque was the outcome of a collaboration between al-Muqtadir, Nāzūk, his chief of police, and jurists, who sanctioned the destruction of a mosque. Furthermore, the information leading to al-Kaʿkā and his subversive activities was attained after a period of investigations.[28] Thus, in contrast to the spontaneous outburst of grief that occurred in 311/923, when Baghdadis first learned about the Qarāmiṭa attack on the *ḥajj*, the destruction of the Barāthā mosque two years later in 313/925 was the outcome of a calculated campaign.[29] It was also aimed at the community as a whole, and not against a handful of men suspected of aiding the Qarāmiṭa, such as Ibn al-Furāt and his son. The deliberate and sustained effort on the part of the Sunni community to uncover crypto-Qarāmiṭa seems to have been a reaction to the ongoing attacks by the Qarāmiṭa against Sunni communities and the pilgrims making the *ḥajj*.

In facing the Qarāmiṭa menace, Iraqi communities reacted in a variety of ways. Most of them, when under attack, came together, defended their homes, and in some cases inflicted heavy losses on their attackers. However, when these communities were not attacked directly, they split, often along the lines of existing tensions. One axis of tension was between the subjects and the ruling elite, as is evident in the demonstrations against the *wazīr*s. Another was the campaign against the Shiʿis, which peaked when the caliph and his police destroyed the Barāthā mosque. Yet, the main foci of friction during the first decades of the fourth/tenth century were the Ḥanābila, who stood at the forefront of the anti-Shiʿi campaign.

The Ḥanābila

The masses of Baghdad were not a unified entity but a composite made up of various ethnic, religious, professional, and economic groups. In terms of the inhabitants' ideological leanings, there were two major communities, the Shiʿis and their nemesis the Ḥanābila.[30] When we examine the Ḥanābila's social and political influence during the closing decades of the ninth/

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[27] Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam*, 13:247–48.
[28] Ibid. 13:247.
[29] On the destruction and rebuilding of the Barāthā mosque, see Neggaz, "Al-Karkh," 285, f. 95.
[30] Ibid. 297–305.

third century, it is evident that they were growing more powerful and less tolerant. They were a *madhhab* with an unbending approach to a variety of religious disciplines: they embraced a conservative legal methodology, refused to ascribe sanctity to tenets of faith that were articulated in theological discussions, and were aggressive and at times violent towards other Muslim movements and individuals who did not abide by their moral outlook.[31] They also considered themselves to be the guardians of morality and pure Sunni theology, and were all too eager to confront every individual or movement that did not accept their interpretation of Islam.

The Ḥanābila's vigilantism has attracted the attention of several historians.[32] One of them, Michael Cook, explains their growing self-confidence and violence by pointing out two changes. The first was the growing number of Ḥanābila. Citing the geographer Muqaddasī (fl. fourth/tenth century), he notes that "Ḥanbalites and Shiʿites predominated in the population of the city."[33] This observation is significant, since it suggests that the clashes between the Ḥanābila and Shiʿis, which would continue in Baghdad for over a century, were between the two biggest communities in the capital. The second was the waning of the caliphs' power.

One of the first recorded indications that the Ḥanābila had become a powerful presence in the streets of Baghdad is an anecdote that appears in *al-Kāmil*, the chronicle of Ibn al-Athīr (d. 606/1210). According to his account of the year 296/908, when Ibn al-Muʿtazz (d. 296/908) challenged al-Muqtadir for the caliphate and realized that he was about to lose the battle, he sent his servant to announce in the streets: "Oh ye people of the community, call unto your Sunni caliph al-Barbahārī (d. 329/941)." Ibn al-Athīr remarks upon this strange appeal to a religious leader that "the common people considered him [al-Barbahārī] to be the leader of the Ḥanābila and the Sunnis, and they held him in great esteem, and [Ibn al-Muʿtazz] wanted to attract them to his cause."[34] If this account is true, it seems that as early as 296/908, the Ḥanābila were perceived as being numerous and organized enough to intervene and make a difference in a struggle over the caliphate.

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[31] For a survey of the Ḥanābila's views and activism, see Nimrod Hurvitz, "From Scholarly Circles to Mass Movements: The Formation of Legal Communities in Islamic Societies," *The American Historical Review*, 108 (2003): 985–1008.

[32] Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 121–24; Roy Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 24–25; Shaban, *Islamic History*, 144, 152.

[33] Cook, *Commanding Right*, 121.

[34] Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādr li-l-Ṭabāʿa wa-l-Nashr, 1966) 8:16.

The appeal to a leader of a *madhhab*, such as al-Barbahārī, was not an ordinary political move, since few of them were capable or interested in mobilizing the masses, or participating in the power struggle over the caliphate. Yet, al-Barbahārī was not an ordinary leader. Whereas most of the leaders of the *madhāhib* were respected scholars, al-Barbahārī was not. Although he is mentioned in the Ḥanābila's biographical compendium, the *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila*, as the *shaykh al-Ṭāʾifa* (leader of the faction, i.e. the Ḥanābila) of his age, the authors of the text did not depict him as an outstanding scholar.[35] His biography lists only two teachers, who themselves were second or third-rate scholars, and makes no mention of students. This is in stark contrast to most scholarly entries, that start with lists of teachers and students, hence placing the scholars within their intellectual network. However, although the Ḥanābila's biographical dictionary did not ascribe to him scholarly credentials, it does portray him as a fierce fighter against theological deviants. And as we shall see, much of the hostility towards the Shiʿis and friction with the caliphal court was the outcome of his leadership.

Approximately fifteen years after Ibn al-Muʿtazz's appeal to al-Barbahārī, when the renowned scholar al-Ṭabarī died (310/923), the Ḥanābila were again mentioned as a powerful force in the streets of Baghdad. Not only did they harass and refuse to meet al-Ṭabarī towards the end of his life, but sources inform us that they also denied him a decent burial and went so far as to accuse him of being a Shiʿi.[36] The chronicles report that due to the Ḥanābila's behavior after al-Ṭabarī died, he was buried secretly during the night. According to Rosenthal, the Ḥanābila's aggression towards him may have been a reaction to al-Ṭabarī's condescension regarding them. Rosenthal cites the fact that al-Ṭabarī did not mention Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) in his *Ikhtilāf*, which meant that he did not consider him to be a jurist, and noted that "he had not seen anyone transmitting legal opinions from Ibn Ḥanbal or any followers of his that were considered authoritative …."[37] Another potential explanation was the competition between the two evolving *madhāhib*, that of the Ḥanābila and al-Ṭabarī's followers, who were vying for recognition and authority.[38] However, from the point of view of

[35] On al-Barbahārī's leadership and authority, see Nimrod Hurvitz, "Authority within the Hanbali *Madhhab*: The Case of al-Barbahari," in *Religious Knowledge, Authority, and Charisma: Islamic and Jewish Perspectives,* eds. Daphna Ephrat and Meir Hatina (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2014), 36–49.

[36] Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 11:167. On the relationship between the Ḥanābila and Ṭabarī, see also Bowen, *The Good Vizier*, 187–88.

[37] Franz Rosenthal, "General Introduction" in *The History of al-Ṭabarī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 1:70.

[38] Ibid. 71.

this study, it is not the Ḥanābila's motivation to humiliate al-Ṭabarī and blemish his memory that is significant but their ability to deny a leading Sunni scholar a respectable funeral on the pretense that he was a Shiʿi.[39]

In 323/935, approximately a dozen years after the Qarāmiṭa began their attacks on Sunni communities in major cities and on the *ḥajj*, relations between the Shiʿis and their Sunni neighbors deteriorated to a new low. During that year, chroniclers report that a number of fires erupted in the Shiʿi quarter of Karkh. One of them was linked directly to the Ḥanābila. Al-Hamdānī (d. 334/945) writes: 'Forty-eight rows of market stalls were burned, set on fire by a group from the Ḥanbaliyya ….'[40] Not only did al-Hamdānī know who the culprits were, he also knew that they set the market ablaze "when Badr al-Kharshanī arrested a companion of al-Barbahārī, who went by the name of Dallā."[41] It seems that the fire set by the Ḥanābila in Karkh was an act of retaliation against the persecution of their leaders.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that the Ḥanābila were associated with arson, and from that point on they would be depicted as serial arsonists who burned down the quarter of Karkh time and again.[42] It is therefore a highly significant moment in Sunni–Shiʿi relations. Up until this point, members of the belligerent communities, the Ḥanābila and the Shiʿis, did not fight each other. In the words of Hugh Kennedy, "During the reign of al-Muqtadir, there is no evidence of Sunni–Shiʿi strife in Baghdad …. It is striking that in the confused violence of al-Muqtadir's reign, no one attempted to raise the Sunnis against the Shiʿis or vice versa …."[43] Thus, before al-Rāḍī's reign, the conflict between Sunnis and Shiʿis was played out between Shiʿi rebels and Sunni authorities. Rebellions of this nature erupted throughout the third/ninth century and, in all of them, rebels clashed with government armies. The fire attributed to the Ḥanābila in 323/935 changed the nature of the conflict, since it was the first time that ordinary members of the Sunni community attacked their Shiʿi neighbors.[44] Therefore,

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[39] See Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 11:167; For a similar description, see Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 93–94.
[40] Al-Hamdānī, *Takmila*, 92.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Neggaz, "Al-Karkh," 298; Kennedy, *The Prophet*, 230.
[43] Kennedy, *The Prophet*, 229.
[44] A similar assessment appears in Kennedy, *The Prophet*, 229, where he writes that in the year 323/935 "… the caliph was obliged to issue a decree to prevent the Ḥanbalis attacking the Shiʿa, the first sign of popular violence."

it constitutes a transition from clashes between armies and rebel forces to intercommunal violence.[45]

Rulers

The background to the Ḥanābila's propensity to confront ideological and moral adversaries, as Cook noted, included their growing numbers and the decline in the rulers' ability to govern. This seesaw effect, in which the strength of the regime descended while the strength of the Ḥanābila ascended, was also mentioned by Shaban: "Unable to cope with all these disturbances, the authority of the central government began to weaken and the reactionary Ḥanbalites of the capital were quick to take advantage of the situation and to assert their own strength."[46] Yet, whereas the seesaw effect explains what enabled the Ḥanābila to enter the arena of public activism, it does not shed much light on their motives. To understand why they evolved into an unruly vigilante movement, we need to broaden the scope of our discussion and take into account their disappointment with the caliphs' new religious policies.

Whereas throughout al-Muqtadir's reign the Caliph sided with the Sunnis and confronted the Shiʿis when the masses placed pressure on him, as can be seen by the execution of Ibn al-Furāt or the destruction of Barāthā mosque, subsequent caliphs al-Qāhir and al-Rāḍi sided with the Shiʿis and confronted the Ḥanābila. One of the first examples of such a shift occurred under al-Qāhir, in 321/933. Ibn al-Athīr's writes about this moment:

> In that year [321/933], before he was arrested, ʿAlī b. Yalbaq and his secretary al-Ḥasan b. Hārūn, ordered to curse Muʿāwiyya b. Abī Sufyān and his son Yazīd, from the pulpits in Baghdad, which agitated the masses (*al-ʿāmma*). ʿAlī b. Yalbaq wanted to arrest al-Barbahārī, the chief of the Ḥanābila and his companions, who have stirred sedition. [Al-Barbahārī] learned about this ploy and escaped. ʿAlī b. Yalbaq got hold of a group of al-Barbahārī's senior companions, who were arrested, and sent on boats to Oman.[47]

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[45] The shift from "large-scale civil wars" to inner-city riots has been noted by David B. Cook, "Fitna in early Islamic History," in *Encyclopedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett Rowson. (Leiden: Brill). Consulted online on 30/04/22 <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.bgu.ac.il/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_27151>.

[46] Shaban, *Islamic History*, 152.

[47] Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, 8:204. References to this incident are also found in Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 11:195; al-Hamdānī, *Takmila*, 75; Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 295–96; Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam*, 13:316–17.

One of the interesting aspects of this anecdote is the way that Ibn al-Athīr shifts his focus from the masses (ʿāmma) to the Ḥanābila. Although the anecdote starts out by referring to ʿAlī b. Yalbaq's agitation of "the masses (al-ʿāmma)", in the subsequent sentence it moves to the Ḥanābila and speaks of ʿAlī's effort to arrest "al-Barbahārī, the chief of the Ḥanābila", and his companions, because they agitated the masses and stirred social disorder. This remark suggests that the Ḥanābila were part of Baghdad's general public, and that they and their leaders were deemed to be militant activists who radicalized the rest of the Sunni population. And it is this role that they played in Baghdad that illustrates what Shaban described as their taking advantage of the government's weakness and asserting their own strength.

This description of al-Qāhir and his courtiers' hostility towards the Ḥanābila reflects the profound change that the caliphal court underwent during those years. Whereas al-Muqtadir confronted the Shiʿis, as in the case of Ibn al-Furat and the Barāthā mosque, and chose to avoid clashing with the Ḥanābila when they prevented al-Ṭabarī's pubic burial, al-Qāhir's courtiers chose to humiliate the Sunni masses by cursing Muʿāwiyya and Yazīd and arresting the Ḥanābila's leadership.

However, al-Qāhir's, and later al-Rāḍī's, oppressive policies did not put an end to the Ḥanābila's activism. In fact, judging by the Ḥanābila's behavior over the next few years, the antagonistic caliphal policy caused them to become all the more confrontational. Ibn al-Athīr describes their zealotry in the following words:

> In that year (323/935) the Ḥanābila affair intensified and their harm increased. They entered the homes of the leaders (quwwād) and the general populace (wa-l-ʿāmma), and if they found wine (nabīdh) they spilled it, and if they found a songstress they beat her, and broke the musical instruments. They interfered in the buying and selling and the men who walked with women and youths. When they saw such a couple they asked the man about those who were accompanying him, and the man told them. If he did not answer, they would beat him, and drag him to the police, and testified that he committed an indecent act, causing discord and factionalism in Baghdad.[48]

Ibn al-Athīr's observations, which were made in hindsight, are very similar to the views of the tenth-century caliph al-Rāḍī, who reacted to the Ḥanābila's attacks and their invasion of privacy with an edict that prohibited them from assembling together: "On the 10th of Jumādā al-Ākhira, Badr al-Kharshanī, the chief of police, rode through different parts of Baghdad

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[48] Ibn al-Athīr, al-Kāmil, 8:229–30.

and declared that any two Hanbalis, who were followers of Abī Muḥammad al-Barbahārī, were not to gather, argue about their doctrine (*fī madhhabi-him*), nor lead a prayer ….”[49] With this step, the caliphal struggle against the Ḥanābila ratcheted up, setting limits to their ability to organize and operate as a movement, to disseminate their ideas in society, and hold the respected role of leaders of prayer.

After addressing the Ḥanābila's riotous conduct and issuing an edict that endeavored to eradicate their influence in society, the Caliph took them to task specifically over their attitude towards the Shiʿis:

> Then [there are] your accusations against the select leaders, and attribution of disbelief and straying from the truth to the followers of Muhammad's family (*shīʿat āl Muḥammad*). Then [there are] the invitations you extend to the Muslims to join the creed, by performing apparent innovations and debauched ways that are not confirmed by the Qurʾan. Your refusal to permit the visitation of the imams' graves, condemning such visitations as innovations, whereas you agree regarding the visitation of the grave of a common man (Ibn Ḥanbal) (*rajul min al-ʿawwām*), who does not possess eminence and is not related or connected to the Messenger of Allah. And you enjoin [the populace] to visit his grave and you implore him for miracles of the prophets and saints.[50]

The most surprising point in this statement was that a Sunni caliph sided with the Shiʿis against his fellow Sunnis, the Ḥanābila. Al-Rāḍī's alliance with the Shiʿis against the Sunnis is a telling example of the gap between the caliphs and mainstream Sunnis, depicted by Mottahedeh: “The *ahl al-sunnah* saw that in the presence of alien and occasionally hostile governments they had to rely largely on themselves to preserve the achievement of earlier consensus-minded Muslims, and to prevent deviant speculation from pulling the community in so many directions that it would be irretrievably rent.”[51] Abandoned by their religio-political leader, the Ḥanābila decided to take the fate of their community into their own violent hands. Their harassment of the Shiʿis, lambasted by al-Rāḍī, was in fact their effort to “prevent deviant speculation.”

The second point that this quotation brings into relief is the caliphal court's condescension towards the Ḥanābila, whom they took to be simpletons and ignoramuses. From al-Rāḍī's and his courtiers' point of view, Ibn Ḥanbal, the eponymous founder of the Hanbali *madhhab*, did not possess

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[49] Ibid. 8:230. See also Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 363.
[50] Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, 8:230.
[51] Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*, 23.

an esteemed social pedigree; his followers lacked knowledge of the Islamic faith as well as the humility to allow those who did understand the Islamic faith to lead the religious community; and they were bigots who encouraged their followers to do what they prohibited others to do.

After expressing his anger, the Caliph threatened the Ḥanābila:

> God's curse, Satan has seduced you and led you to believe in these reprehensible actions. And the Commander of the Faithful swears by God an oath which he will strive to perform and to impose to the full, that if you do not abandon your reprehensible way and twisted path, he shall beat you soundly, and chase, kill and disperse you. He will place a sword to your necks and set fire to your homes and stores.[52]

The Caliph's threat and the events that took place in Baghdad during the dozen years under consideration reveal the complex relationship between al-Qāhir and al-Rāḍī on the one hand and the Ḥanābila on the other. Their decision to antagonize the Ḥanābila and certain segments of the masses by cursing Muʿāwiyya and prohibiting the gathering of the Ḥanābila was a major change in caliphal religio-political policy. However, the Ḥanābila did not budge from their traditional position and did not confront the caliphs. This reaction, to go into hiding rather than challenge the rulers, was probably due to several reasons. One of them was likely the religio-political tenet that a Muslim must not take up arms and rebel against a ruler, even if the latter imposes misguided policies.

Yet, although the Ḥanābila did not clash with the regime, they did become more fanatic and intolerant towards the Shiʿis in Baghdad. Due to the belligerent positions that all three players took – the Qarāmiṭa's attacks on Sunni communities, the Ḥanābila's incessant pestering of Shiʿis and eventual violence against them, and the caliphs' intervention in favor of the Shiʿis as well as their effort to imprison the Ḥanābila's leaders – Baghdad entered a new era of fragmentation and instability.

Concluding Observations

The Buyid takeover of 334/946 was a major political turning point that finalized the decline of the caliphate and transferred power in Baghdad into the hands of a new group of army leaders. In terms of political and military history, this was a defining moment which sheds much light on the

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[52] Ibn al-Athīr, al-Kāmil, 8:230–31.

jockeying for power between the army leaders and caliphs. However, if we focus on the residents of Baghdad and the violence that erupted between their communities, a different chronology comes into relief. The critical dynamic that occurred among Baghdad's inhabitants was the mounting mutual intolerance between the Sunni and Shiʿi communities. From this perspective, the turning point is approximately a decade earlier in 323/935.[53] It was during that year that the chronicles mention for the first time that the Ḥanābila ignited a fire in al-Karkh. This act reflects a profound transformation because, on the one hand, it was the climax of tensions that accumulated between Sunnis and Shiʿis, and on the other hand, it introduced a new pattern of violence as Baghdad suffered waves of arson and intercommunal violence. The lethal fires that became common practice in Baghdad reflect a new social reality in which the seams that held the fabric of Baghdadi society together were torn apart.

This chapter has suggested that the Qarāmiṭa's attacks were a major factor that contributed to the deteriorating relations between the Shiʿis and the Sunnis, since they had an unsettling effect on the Sunni inhabitants' sense of security. Furthermore, the Qarāmiṭa's attacks on the *ḥajj* pilgrims and the removal of the Black Rock humiliated the Sunni community that for centuries had perceived itself as the military and spiritual leadership of the Muslim world. The fear and dishonor wrought by the Qarāmiṭa were compounded by a change in religious policy during the reigns of al-Qāhir and al-Rāḍī. These two factors aroused the fury of the Sunnis in general and probably led to the radicalization of the Ḥanābila, who torched al-Karkh in 323/935.

The Ḥanābila's attacks on the Shiʿis were therefore an outcome of their mounting concern regarding the Shiʿi threat and their disillusionment with the Sunni caliphs. By the early fourth/tenth century the Sunnis in general, and the Ḥanābila in particular, seem to have felt they had only themselves to rely on. In the words of Roy Mottahedeh, "[W]hen the ʿAbbāsid caliphs lost actual control of vast provinces of the Islamic empire, it became clear that the Muslims could not rely on a central government to preserve a community of belief among Muslims."[54] The government's inability to "preserve a community of belief" moved the Ḥanābila to take matters into their own hands. It seems that, from their perspective, the Qarāmiṭa attacks and caliphal oppression upended the traditional social order, and therefore it

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[53] The observation that during 323/935 we witness the "first sign of popular violence" has also been made by Kennedy, *The Prophet*, 229.
[54] Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*, 23.

was justified in performing acts of aggression that transformed Baghdad into an arena of low-intensity civil war, which escalated during the Buyid era.

Interestingly, the Ḥanābila's propensity to destabilize Baghdadi society contributed to the forging of their own socio-religious movement. Based on an ethos of "loyal disobedience," that is, loyalty to the caliph against whom they dared not rebel, and concurrently, disobeying the caliph by attacking the Shiʿis in an effort to purify society of what they perceived to be deviants, they were able to attract a large following. Thus, the Ḥanābila introduced a new and unique form of social solidarity into Sunni circles that was based on moral principles and activism and evolved into a *madhhab*.

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