

The Caliphate of al-Mutawakkil ‘alā llāh Through a Syrian Lens

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The religio-political context:

The 3rd / 9th century is widely recognized as a phase of crucial importance for the development of Islamic law that is closely related to the gradual formation of religio-judicial persuasions. In this context, a central role must be assigned to al-Mutawakkil ‘alā llāh (r. 232 / 847 – 247 / 861) who, by abolishing the *khalq al-Qur’ān*-dogma and introducing the subsequent policy of *al-sunna wa l-jamā’a*, marked a milestone towards Sunnī Islam as a dominant religious denomination. His endeavour to codify dress regulations for *dhimīs* as well as the demolition of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī’s tomb in Karbalā’ may be evaluated in a similar manner.



Portrait of al-Mutawakkil on a contemporary medallion
Kunsthistorisches Museum,
Vienna
Photo: Stefan Heidemann

Additionally, al-Mutawakkil’s personnel policy is of great importance as he not only replaced many of his predecessors’ officials with his own confidants, but also sought to constrain the influence of the officers of the Central Asian *atrāk*. In the light of his approach a group of *atrāk* around the chief commander Bughā al-Sharabī appears to have cast their lot with al-Muntaṣir who, according to numismatic evidence, had forfeited his status as heir apparent already in 240 / 854-5. Notably, the role of al-Muntaṣir in the *atrāk*’s murdering of al-Mutawakkil is ambiguous. However, the literary sources specify his coalition with the *atrāk* in the collusion against his half-brothers al-Mu’tazz and al-Mu’ayyad immediately afterwards, who seem to have been the actual heir apparents at that time. In fact, the assassination of al-Mutawakkil ultimately marked the beginning of a phase of political instability, known as the “anarchy at Sāmarrā”.

Bilād al-Shām within the Islamic Empire:

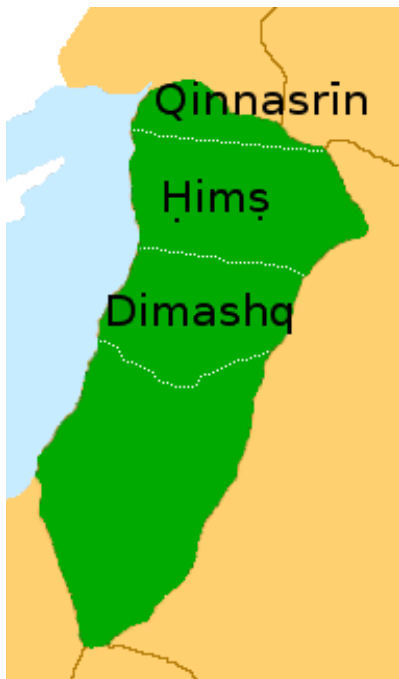
Having been the centre of power during the Umayyad period, the importance of Bilād al-Shām decreased considerably under the ‘Abbāsids. The province was in some regards neglected and partly even ceded to different tribal groups. Accordingly, literary sources in favour of the caliphal perspective provide a number of anecdotes about the untrustworthiness of Syrians in general and several accounts on uprisings in the name of al-Sufyānī, a pretender-figure associated with the Umayyads.

Nevertheless, al-Mutawakkil had a great interest in Bilād al-Shām: on the one hand he vehemently oppressed the consecutive uprisings in the region – he is said to have ordered draconian punishments, including a number of crucifixions, particularly against the Christian population of Ḥimṣ in 241 / 855. On the other hand he enforced the conscription of troops from the Banū Qays who had been considered notorious opponents to the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate by some of his predecessors. In 244 / 858 al-Mutawakkil even chose to take up residence in Damascus for several months. As the literary

sources mention the transfer of the royal *dīwāns* to the city, there has been some speculation about al-Mutawakkil intending to make Damascus the administrative seat of the caliphate.

Connecting the regional to the imperial perspective:

For the period in question regionalization appears to be a key word, which becomes obvious at the latest from Hārūn al-Rashīd's succession plan in 186 / 802 onwards. Though, Tāhirid governorship over Khurāsān after al-Ma'mūn's return to Baghdad in 204 / 819 may be the best example for dependent but in large parts autonomous rule over one of the empire's provinces.



Approximate map of Bilād al-Shām during the reign of al-Mutawakkil

This particular project, however, is concerned with Bilād al-Shām during the reign of al-Mutawakkil. Based on the *junds* of Dimashq, Ḥimṣ, and Qinnasrīn it aims to expose the structures of power within the province as well as their significance for the Islamic empire as a whole. This, of course, requires to consider supra-regional events in order to identify possible influences on local affairs. Nevertheless, a focus on the three above-mentioned *junds* is inevitable, since the inclusion of the whole of Bilād al-Shām would go beyond the scope of this project.

In this context attention should be drawn to al-Mutawakkil's succession plan of 235 / 850. He named al-Mu'ayyad governor of Dimashq and Ḥimṣ along with al-Urdunn and Filasṭīn, thereby ruling most of Bilad al-Shām. Crucially, at the same time al-Muntaṣir became governor of Qinnasrīn along with al-'Awāṣim, al-Thughūr, most of al-Ġazīra and other vast parts of the empire. Accordingly, the *jund* of Qinnasrīn appears to have played a specific role for the border regions with Byzantium and might have to be regarded in a different framework.

In order to thoroughly connect the history of a single province to the history of the empire, a comparison between regional and imperial historiography is of fundamental importance. Accordingly, the authors primarily consulted at an early stage are Ibn 'Asākir, representing the regional perspective, and al-Ṭabarī, representing the imperial gaze. However, already in this phase numerous cross-references to the works of Ibn 'Adīm, Ibn al-Athīr, al-Dīnawarī, al-Ya'qūbī, and others cannot be excluded. Once the essential data is established, it has to be refined and supplemented by a broader range of literary sources.

Establishing a database, grouping it in sections, and operating with it:

Preliminary results are applied to a database, which is grouped in two sections. The first one is concerned with hierarchical structures and sub-structures in Bilād al-Shām, encompassing the period between the two wars of succession: firstly between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, starting in 195/811, and secondly between al-Musta'in and al-Mu'tazz, ending in 252/866. The second section deals with

the personnel associated with al-Mutawakkil, being subdivided into courtiers, military brass, dependents, as well as *fuqahā'* and *'ulamā'*.

In both cases the upper levels of power, such as the caliphal kin, governors, and high ranking military officers, are rather easy to detect. However, it becomes much more difficult to carve out the sub-governors and to “zoom” deeper into the smaller units, the districts, towns, and villages. This is not only due to the shortage of literary sources, but also because of their imprecise terminology: the term *wālī*, for example, is regularly used for the governors who in most cases resided at the caliphal court and for their deputies in the provinces at the same time. Thus, while identifying the lower levels of power, it is difficult to dissect the overall hierarchy in a precise manner.

Further, the accurate dating of events is of crucial importance in order to map hierarchies in reconciliation with biographical information. Unfortunately, the dating of events as provided by the literary sources is quite irregular. It ranges from exact dating, even including the day of the week, to vague indications about an event taking place after another. As in this last case the corresponding period might be anything between a couple of days and some years, carving out accurate dates of certain events in some cases turns out to be a major challenge, which requires the inclusion of a wide range of sources – whether literary or material. Due to the emphasis on personnel structures and dating of events, dealing in large parts with such equivocal evidence, specific research questions primarily arise from the sources themselves.

Work plan:

The fundamental work for the project consists of reconstructing the formal political hierarchy in Bilād al-Shām, as dealt with in the first section of the database. This Syrian prosopography will be extended in order to comprise further elites, such as legal and religious scholars. For their adequate identification current elite theories have to be factored into the analysis. Further, a number of other aspects need to be considered: as most literary sources favour the caliphal perspective and portray the people of Bilād al-Shām largely as opponents to the 'Abbāsīd claim to power, centripetal forces must not be overlooked. While Syrian opposition to 'Abbāsīd authority is largely associated with the tribes, dominating vast parts of Bilād al-Shām, tribal affiliation seems to be only one particular among several issues within different anti-'Abbāsīd factions. Additionally, political, legal, and religious aspects as well as economic structures within the province have to be taken into consideration. Once the province's elites are identified and grouped, the derived structures have to be reconnected to the structures within the ruling elites at the caliphal centre of power, as dealt with in the second section of the database. In order to exemplify patterns of interaction between the provincial and the caliphal level within the Islamic empire, reconnecting the regional, Syrian, with the imperial perspective appears to be the most viable method.