THE FATIMIDS AND THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE CRUSADES IN MODERN ARABIC HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

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Abstract

A major theme throughout the first seventy years of the Crusader presence in the Near East is that of war and diplomacy with the Fatimid caliphate of Cairo. The fact that the official ideology of the Fatimids was Ismāʿīlī Shīʿism made them rivals of the Sunnī Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad and added a further complicating factor to the political history of the period. The subject of Crusader-Fatimid relations has attracted considerable interest among contemporary Arab researchers and this article will trace the general contours of the body of historical scholarship which has been produced by historians in the Arab World on the topic. In particular, we will consider the issue of how contemporary ideological and sectarian positions have crept into some treatments of this topic, and the struggle of maintaining historical objectivity and professional standards in the face of such external pressures. Selected works from the Egyptian, Iraqi, and Algerian schools of historiography will be analyzed as case studies.

Introduction

The subject of the Fatimids' relations with the Crusader principalities that were established by European invaders in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries A.D. has attracted the attention of modern Arab historians due to the fact that these entities were created on lands that the Fatimids had previously ruled, and as a consequence the Fatimids at first exerted considerable military effort to liberate these regions, though later on their

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policy changed to one of diplomatic relations with the Crusader states which reached the point of alliance in the 1160s. This aroused the resentment of the Zankids in Bilād al-Shām led by Nūr al-Dīn Zankī (541/1147 – 569/1174) whose deputies intervened in Egypt, established control over the country, and finally eliminated the Fatimid Caliphate in 567/1171.

In this paper we will evaluate and analyze the considerable body of modern Arabic historical scholarship concerning Fatimid-Crusader relations and we will also show that contemporary sectarian and political disputes have influenced some of these works. We suggest that these studies can be broadly divided into three categories: those that take a sectarian Sunnī position that is hostile to the Fatimids, those that take a sectarian Shīʿī position which is simultaneously apologetic in its treatment of the Fatimids while viewing Sunnī dynasties from the same period such as the Zankids in a negative light, and those studies that take an overall objective, critical stance and uphold the standards of professional historiography.

The modern Arabic studies connected with the theme of this paper had their beginning in Egypt at the hands of the founder of the Arab school of Crusade studies Saʿīd ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ ʿĀshūr who published an extensive study on the subject in 1969 which paved the way for other Arab researchers. Scholars from three Arab countries in particular have shown considerable interest in the topic of Fatimid-Crusader relations, namely Egypt, Iraq, and Algeria, though there have been individual contributions from other Arab countries as well such as Mauritania and Saudi Arabia.

In Egypt, ʿĀshūr was followed by Zaynab Abū ʿAlī, a professor at al-Azhar University, whose master's thesis concerned Fatimid relations with the Crusaders and delved into the topic in greater detail and with more sources than ʿĀshūr's study. Fāʾiz Najīb Iskandar studied the key battle of al-Bābayn (562/1167) in which the allied forces of the Crusaders and the Fatimids fought against the Zankid army in Egypt. It was this battle that marked the appearance of Yūsuf b. Ayyūb Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (564/1169 – 589/1193) on the stage of history, who would lead Muslim resistance to the Crusaders after the death of Nūr al-Dīn Zankī (541/1147 – 569/1174). The Iraqi and Algerian contributions to the subject of Fatimid-Crusader relations have sought to widen the scope of ʿĀshūr's initial foray into the subject, though they remain influenced by the Egyptian school.

Historical Background

The first Fatimid caliph, ʿUbaydallāh al-Mahdī (297/909 – 322/934), established the Fatimid caliphate in Ifrīqīya in 296/909 with the city of al-Mahdīya as its capital. However, Al-Mahdī and his successors did not regard al-Mahdīya as the permanent capital of the new empire since in their view they were the rightful rulers of the entire Islamic World. In order to fulfill their mission, they needed to expand eastwards. Naturally their gaze fell upon Egypt, which, due to its plentiful resources, large population, and its strategic location, would afford the caliphate greater stability and a platform for further expansion into the Near East. To this end, the Fatimid caliphs expended great efforts which finally resulted in the conquest of Egypt in 358/969. The caliph Al-Muʿizz li-Dīn Allāh (341/953 – 365/975) moved his residence to Egypt in 362/972, the same year that Cairo was built as the new capital, and from that date the destiny of the Fatimid Caliphate was bound to Egypt. In the following years the Fatimids expanded east to conquer Bilād al-Shām and the Ḥijāz. The height of Fatimid expansion in the east was briefly attained during the reign of the caliph Al-Mustanṣir (427/1036 – 487/1094) when a rebellious Abbasid commander, Arslān al-Basāsīrī, proclaimed the Fatimid *daʿwa* in Baghdad in 450/1058. This coincided with the arrival of the Sunnī Seljuk Turks who wrested Iraq and most of Syria from Fatimid control.

In 491/1098 the Crusaders entered northern Syria. At first the Fatimids did not realize the nature and goals of the Crusading movement and they entered into diplomatic correspondence with its leaders. However, as the Crusaders proceeded southwards their intentions became clear to the Fatimids. In 492/1099 they captured Jerusalem from the Fatimids and continued to advance through Palestine until only ʿAsqalān remained in Fatimid hands. This city was the site of several battles between the Fatimids and the Crusaders. The Fatimid Caliphate survived in Egypt until Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Yūsuf b. Ayyūb (Saladin) abolished it in 567/1171, thus for 73 years it bordered the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem from the south. During this period numerous battles between the two sides occurred as well as diplomatic exchanges which reached the point of alliance.

The Egyptian School

The first scholar who shed light on the attitude of the Fatimid Caliphate towards the Crusaders was the pioneer of Crusade Studies in the Arab World, Saʿīd ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ ʿĀshūr (1922-2009) in his study entitled "The Character

of the Fatimid State During the Crusades" which was published in 1969. At the beginning of this work, ʿĀshūr referred to one of the main reasons for the success of the Crusading movement and its endurance for two centuries in the Near East, namely the struggle between the Sunnī camp led by the Abbasids and the Shīʿī camp led by the Fatimids which hindered the formation of a unified Muslim front against the Crusaders.[1]

ʿĀshūr attempted to explain the reluctance of his predecessors to study the role played by the Fatimids in confronting the Crusaders. According to him, there were three reasons for this neglect: firstly because by the time the Crusaders arrived on the scene, the Fatimids were already in the period of their final decline, secondly because scholars were more interested in the history of Muslim resistance to the Crusades in northern Bilād al-Shām rather than in the southern part where the Fatimids were, and thirdly because Egypt itself only became a theater of Muslim-Crusader conflict at the very end of the Fatimid Caliphate, which led historians to consider this aspect of the Crusades a part of Ayyubid history rather than of Fatimid history.[2]

ʿĀshūr sought to lift the veil from the factors that influenced Fatimid-Crusader relations of which the most important was the weakened condition of the Fatimid state as a result of internal conflicts between the various military contingents and between the important officials, especially the viziers who controlled access to the caliphs and prevented them from governing the state. A second factor was the mutual suspicion and distrust between the Shīʿī Fatimids and the Sunnī Seljuks, especially in Damascus. This divided the attention of the Fatimids between monitoring the actions of the Seljuks and in equal measure those of the Crusaders. As a result, the Fatimid Caliphate was unable to play a role in the Islamic resistance to the Crusaders that was proportionate to its strength and strategic location. ʿĀshūr also notes that some of the Fatimid caliphs were not eager to completely expel the Crusaders from the Holy Land because they saw them as a firm buffer against the Seljuks. Finally, there was the nature of the Fatimid military expeditions against the Crusaders which were characterized by negligence and chaos in the Fatimid command structure, and which thereby led to missed opportunities on the battlefield.[3]

[1] Saʿīd ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ ʿĀshūr, "Shakhṣīyat al-Dawlat al-Fāṭimīya fī al-Ḥurūb al-Ṣalībīya", *Al-Majalla al-Tārīkhīya al-Miṣrīya*, vol. 16, no. 16 (1969): 15.

[2] ʿĀshūr, "Shakhṣīyat al-Dawlat al-Fāṭimīya", 17-18.

[3] ʿĀshūr, "Shakhṣīyat al-Dawlat al-Fāṭimīya", pp. 18-19.

ʿĀshūr also remarked on the negative influence of the bloodshed within Fatimid ranks which even drew the blood of the caliphs themselves, particularly in the middle of the sixth century A.H./twelfth century A.D. when, for example, the Fatimid vizier ʿAbbās b. Abī al-Futūḥ (548/1153 – 549/1154) and his son were involved in the murder of the caliph Al-Ẓāfir (544/1149 - 549/1154). This was apart from the struggle among the powerful commanders over the office of vizier, the most notable example of which was the struggle between Shāwar (557/1162, 559/1164 – 564/1169) and Ḍirghām (558/1163 – 559/1164) which opened the door to direct Crusader interference in the internal affairs of the Fatimid state, thereby prompting the intervention of the amir Nūr al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Zankī, who ruled over northern Syria and the Jazīra, through his vassals the Ayyubids under their leader Asad al-Dīn Shīrkūh (d. 564/1169) in 559/1164, and the subsequent struggle between Shīrkūh and the Crusaders for the domination of Egypt. The final result of this contest was the expulsion of the Crusaders from Egypt, the abolition of the Fatimid Caliphate by Shīrkūh's nephew and successor Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn in 567/1171, and the nominal unification of Egypt with a portion of Syria under Nūr al-Dīn Zankī.[4]

While the Sunnī-Shīʿī conflict was one of the factors that enabled the long presence of the Crusaders in the Near East, the absence of trust between the Byzantines and the Crusaders was a major reason for the inability of the Christian powers to halt the *jihād* movement led by Nūr al-Dīn Zankī. This was apparent in the failure of the joint Byzantine-Crusader assault on Damietta in 564/1169 which confirmed Zankid control over Egypt and paved the way for Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn to peacefully abolish the Fatimid Caliphate by replacing the name of the last Fatimid caliph Al-ʿĀḍid (555/1160 – 567/1171) with that of the Abbasid caliph Al-Mustaḍīʾ (566/1170 – 575/1180), a move that did not provoke any popular resistance.[5]

ʿĀshūr's pioneering study encouraged other researchers in the Arab World to devote attention to the topic of Fatimid-Crusader relations. Zaynab Abū ʿAlī, now a professor of medieval history at Al-Azhar University, wrote her MA thesis on "The Role of the Fatimid State in the Crusades" at the urging of her supervisor, the medievalist ʿAfāf Ṣabra, herself a pupil of ʿĀshūr.[6] Indeed, ʿĀshūr himself was consulted by Zaynab Abū ʿAlī during the

[4] ʿĀshūr, "Shakhṣīyat al-Dawlat al-Fāṭimīya", pp. 45-46.

[5] ʿĀshūr, "Shakhṣīyat al-Dawlat al-Fāṭimīya", 61-66.

[6] Zaynab Abū ʿAlī, "Dawr al-Dawlat al-Fāṭimīya fī al-Ḥurūb al-Ṣalībīya", *MA dissertation,* Al-Azhar University, 1993.

preparation of her dissertation due to his expertise on the topic. The thesis begins with a survey of the condition of the Muslim powers at the moment of the Crusaders' arrival in the Levant, followed by a discussion of the Fatimids' reaction to the First Crusade and their attempts to defend the Syrian ports from the Crusaders. Then the thesis takes up the Crusaders' campaigns against Fatimid Egypt until the expulsion of the Crusaders from Egypt by the Zankid expeditionary force and the abolition of the Fatimid Caliphate. Abū ʿAlī takes a balanced view of the Fatimids' position towards the Crusaders, showing that they resisted the latter with tenacity and shedding light on their repeated attempts to save many cities in Bilād al-Shām from falling into the Crusaders' hands. She also sheds light on a number of the smaller Islamic principalities that existed in this period such as the Banū Mazyad of al-Ḥilla in Iraq.[7] She notes the determination of the Crusaders from their first appearance in Palestine to conquer Egypt, and as a curious aside, she mentions that after King Baldwin I of Jerusalem (1100 – 1118) died while on campaign in Egypt in 1118 A.D. and was carried back to Jerusalem for burial, the Egyptians named a lake in the northern part of the country Lake Bardawīl, in memory of his presence there. Finally, she also studies the relations and tensions between Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī, who became commander of the Zankid expeditionary force in Egypt following the death of his uncle Shīrkūh in 564/1169, and his nominal overlord Nūr al-Dīn Zankī until the death of the latter in 569/1174.[8]

In comparison to ʿĀshūr, Abū ʿAlī uses a greater number of primary sources and modern studies, both Arab and Western, in her study of Fatimid-Crusader relations. This may be due to the great time gap between the appearance of both studies, since ʿAshūr's article was published in 1969 and Abū ʿAlī's thesis appeared in 1993. During the interval between these two studies, many Arabic and Latin primary sources were edited and published and the academic field of Crusade studies grew significantly resulting in numerous articles, monographs, and other studies on all aspects of the Crusades. As a result, Abū ʿAlī was able to benefit from a larger and more varied bibliography than ʿĀshūr had when he published his pioneering study.

Fāʾiz Najīb Iskandar, professor of medieval history at the University of Banhā in Egypt, has also devoted attention to the struggle between the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem and the Zankid Sultanate for control of Egypt

[7] Abū ʿAlī, "Dawr al-Dawlat al-Fāṭimīya", pp. 3-5.
[8] Abū ʿAlī, "Dawr al-Dawlat al-Fāṭimīya", p. 13.

during the last years of the Fatimid Caliphate. He has produced a study on the fateful battle of Al-Bābayn (562/1167) in the modern Egyptian governorate of Al-Minyā, between the Ayyubids under Asad al-Dīn Shīrkūh (who were then still vassals of the Zankids) and a combined Crusader-Fatimid force under the Fatimid vizier Shāwar and the King of Jerusalem, Amalric I (1163 – 1174).[9] Despite being outnumbered and low on supplies, Shīrkūh and his nephew Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn led the Ayyubids to victory. Though the battle was not decisive, it enabled Shīrkūh to swiftly advance northwards and temporarily occupy Alexandria where he left Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn in charge with a garrison while he returned to Syria with the bulk of the Zankid army.

One of the strengths of Iskandar's study is his extensive use of medieval European primary sources, as well as the classical Arabic sources and modern scholarship, both Arab and Western. He made good use of his mastery of French, both medieval and modern, as well as English. Among the most important medieval sources used by Iskandar is William of Tyre's (d. 1186) *History of Deeds Done Beyond the Seas*. Iskandar corrected William of Tyre's false assumption that Shīrkūh was in direct contact with the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad and that he even visited the latter at his court to seek men and money for his expedition to Egypt and that the caliph wrote to all corners of the Islamic world requesting reinforcements for Shīrkūh.[10] Iskandar also highlighted the courage and endurance of Shīrkūh, as for instance when in 562/1167 he took a difficult inland route through the Sinai Peninsula in order to avoid interception by ship-borne Crusader forces.[11] This route left Shīrkūh and his soldiers exposed to sandstorms and the loss of their animals, and the men themselves would all have perished if not for the skill of Shīrkūh who led them out of the Sinai Desert with minimal losses so that they appeared suddenly at Aṭfīḥ, only 70 kilometers south of Cairo. This bold feat prompted the Fatimid vizier Shāwar to appeal to King Amalric of Jerusalem for assistance. The latter eagerly responded, motivated both by the wealth of Egypt and by fear for the fate of the Crusaders if the Zankids succeeded in opening a southern front against them in Egypt.[12]

[9] Fāʾiz Najīb Iskandar, "Al-Ṣalībīyūn wa al-Fāṭimīyūn wa al-Zankīyūn fī Maʿrakat al-Bābayn", *Majallat Kullīyat al-Ādāb*, University of Al-Minyā, vol. 42, no. 2 (2003): 79-107.

[10] Iskandar, "Al-Ṣalībīyūn wa al-Fāṭimīyūn", p. 80.

[11] Iskandar, "Al-Ṣalībīyūn wa al-Fāṭimīyūn", pp. 82-83.

[12] Iskandar, "Al-Ṣalībīyūn wa al-Fāṭimīyūn", p. 106.

ʿĀlāʾ Ṭāḥā Rizq wrote a study on "The Necessity of Egyptian-Syrian Unity in Light of the Crusader-Byzantine Assault on Damietta in 1169 A.D.".[13] This battle followed the establishment of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn as vizier of the last Fatimid caliph, Al-ʿĀḍid, in the spring of 564/1169, which greatly alarmed the Crusaders who agreed with the Byzantines to launch an expedition against Egypt. However, the mutual distrust between the Crusaders and Byzantines, the steadfastness of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, the support of the Fatimid caliph, and Nūr al-Dīn Zankī's relentless attacks on the Crusaders' territories in Syria, forced King Amalric to break off the siege of Damietta. Rizq affirms that the results of this failed campaign were the very opposite of the Crusaders' goals, for not only did they fail to occupy Egypt and benefit from its wealth, but their invasion of Egypt encouraged greater unity among the Muslims and a transformation of their military posture from a defensive one to an offensive one.[14] It is apparent from Rizq's study that the joint Byzantine-Crusader campaign against Damietta was a desperate response to the Zankid victory over the Crusaders in Egypt and an attempt to salvage their position in the country. Rizq shows that the Christian military orders played an increasingly important role in the Crusader expeditions as exemplified by the grand master of the Hospitallers, Gilbert of Assailly, who encouraged Amalric to invade Egypt in the hope of acquiring booty the likes of which had been taken after the sack of Bilbays in the eastern Delta in 564/1168.[15]

Rizq insisted on his preconceived notion of the treachery of the last Fatimid caliph Al-ʿĀḍid, making him equally culpable with the deceitful vizier Shāwar. The latter played every side against each other in order to come out the winner, until he finally fell victim to his own plotting and double dealing and was executed by strangulation. In fact, Al-ʿĀḍid was completely powerless and he could do no more than send messengers asking for help from Nūr al-Dīn Zankī in 562/1167. Had the hapless caliph possessed any real political power, then he would not have been a plaything in the hands of the viziers Shāwar and Ḍirghām, nor would he have permitted Shāwar to open the doors to direct foreign intervention in the affairs of Egypt.[16] Finally, we should note that Rizq insists on the security dimension with frequent use of

[13] ʿAlāʾ Ṭāḥā Rizq, "Ḥatmīyat al-Waḥda bayna Miṣr wa al-Shām fī Ḍawʾ Aḥdāth al-Ḥamla al-Ṣalībīya al-Bīzanṭīya ʿalā Dumyāṭ 1169 m.", *Majallat Kullīyat al-Ādāb*, Manṣūra University, vol. 34, no. 34 (2004): 551-578.

[14] Rizq, "Ḥatmīyat al-Waḥda", p. 553.

[15] Rizq, "Ḥatmīyat al-Waḥda", p. 554.

[16] Rizq, "Ḥatmīyat al-Waḥda", p. 555.

terms such as "Arab security" and "Islamic security" and he also harshly criticizes the Fatimids. These aspects are not surprising when we learn that Rizq had a military background before he began his university career which no doubt influenced his academic output along with a deep attachment to the Sunnī sect of Islam and strong patriotic sentiment towards Egypt.

Ḥijāzī ʿAbd al-Munʿim Sulaymān (d. 2020) has studied one of the most important contemporary sources for the Zankid-Crusader conflict in Egypt, the works of the poet ʿUmāra al-Yamanī (d. 569/1174) in an article entitled "Observations on the Historical Writings of ʿUmāra al-Yamanī".[17] ʿUmāra was involved in a plot against Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn that attempted to restore the Fatimids to power with the aid of a Crusader invasion of Egypt. The conspiracy was uncovered before it could be launched and ʿUmāra was executed along with the other plotters. What distinguishes the historical references in ʿUmāra's works is that he conveyed the official Fatimid point of view during the period when the Fatimid state was in its death throes, oscillating between hatred of the Crusaders and reluctant alliance with them in order to stave off the Zankid threat from Syria.

Despite the importance of ʿUmāra's role in the events of the late Fatimid period and the value of his writings, his works provide limited details. Ḥijāzī seeks to be neutral as far as possible in his evaluation of ʿUmāra given the contradiction between ʿUmāra's profession of the Sunnī creed while giving his loyalty to the Shīʿī Fatimids and his treacherous behavior towards Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, actions for which many historians have criticized him. Ḥijāzī notes the varied sources upon which ʿUmāra depended. These included oral reports which he had access to due to his closeness to the centers of decision-making in the Fatimid court. Indeed not only was ʿUmāra a recorder of history but he also participated directly in the political affairs of his time and he traveled widely throughout Egypt gaining access to many useful sources of information.[18] Ḥijāzī notes some of the defects in ʿUmāra's accounts, for example his habit of confusing the Byzantines or *Rūm* with the Crusaders and his purposeful omission of information on Shīrkūh and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn whom he resented for their role in causing the downfall of the Fatimids. Despite his aversion to mentioning Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, ʿUmāra did record the Crusader-Byzantine assault on Damietta in 564/1169.

[17] Ḥijāzī ʿAbd al-Munʿim Sulaymān, "Mulāḥaẓāt ʿalā al-Kitāba al-Tārīkhīya ʿinda ʿUmāra al-Yamanī", *Ḥawlīyat Siminār al-Tārīkh al-Islāmī*, Al-Jamʿīyat al-Miṣrīya li al-Dirāsāt al-Tārīkhīya, vol. 4, no. 4 (2014): 283-319.

[18] Sulaymān, "Mulāḥaẓāt ʿalā al-Kitāba al-Tārīkhīya", pp. 287-288.

Ḥijāzī observes that ʿUmāra accompanied each of his historical accounts with lines of poetry describing the events mentioned in the preceding narrative, a testimony to his poetic background and love of literature.[19] In a succinct verse ʿUmāra exhibited his poetic genius and ability to encapsulate the tragedy of the final decline of the Fatimid Caliphate under its last viziers: "No one trained the Fatimids' officials as Al-Ṣāliḥ Ruzzayk trained them, no one exterminated so many of their nobles as Ḍirghām did, and no one squandered the wealth of the Fatimids like Shāwar and his family".[20]

ʿUmāra al-Yamanī is also the subject of a study by the Kuwaiti scholar Musāʿid Jābir al-ʿAnzī entitled "The Relation of a Man of Letters to Authority in the Late Fatimid and Early Ayyubid Period: the Case of ʿUmāra al-Yamanī".[21] This study attempts to explain ʿUmāra's obstinate hostility towards Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, even though they both adhered to the same religious sect, along with his unwavering loyalty towards the Fatimids and adoption of all of their positions, even that of alliance with the Crusaders. Al-ʿAnzī notes that ʿUmāra's attitude towards Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and the Zankids underwent a reversal, for initially he praised Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn along with his father and his brothers in the hope of receiving largesse from him. However, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn disappointed him in this regard, perhaps because he had misgivings about ʿUmāra's well-known affection and nostalgia for the Fatimids. Al-ʿAnzī also sheds light on another factor that may have driven the poet's hostility towards Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, that of ethnicity, for ʿUmāra was of Arab stock like the Fatimid caliphs while Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and the Ayyubids were Kurds. He notes the following verse: "Their sect in generosity is that of habitude [*sunna*] even if they differ with me in their profession of Shīʿism".[22]

Though this theory is attractive, I do not find it convincing because it ignores the reality that during the Middle Ages religious and sectarian affiliation was usually more important than ethnicity, after all the great

[19] Sulaymān, "Mulāḥaẓāt ʿalā al-Kitāba al-Tārīkhīya", p. 296.

[20] Sulaymān, "Mulāḥaẓāt ʿalā al-Kitāba al-Tārīkhīya", p. 298; Najm al-Dīn Abū Muḥammad ʿUmāra b. Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ḥakamī al-Yamanī (known as ʿUmāra al-Yamanī), *Al-Nukat al-ʿAṣrīya fī ʿAkhbār al-Wuzarāʾ al-Miṣrīya*, ed. H. Derenbourg (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Muthannā, 1968) p. 88. Al-Ṣāliḥ Ruzzayk held the vizierate from 549/1154 until his murder in 556/1161. He was known as a capable vizier and a great patron of learning.

[21] Musāʿid Jābir al-ʿAnzī, "Mawqif al-Muthaqqaf min al-Sulṭa fī Awākhir al-ʿAṣr al-Fāṭimī wa Bawākīr al-ʿAṣr al-Ayyūbī: ʿUmāra al-Yamanī Anmūdhajan", *Ḥawliyāt Kullīyat al-Ādāb*, ʿAyn Shams University, vol. 50, no. 15 (2022): 27-47.

[22] Al-ʿAnzī, "Mawqif al-Muthaqqaf", p. 40; ʿUmāra al-Yamanī, *Nukat*, p. 288.

historian Will Durant called the medieval period "The Age of Faith". It seems more likely to me that ʿUmāra was motivated by pure personal interest in his attachment to the Fatimids.

The subject of Fatimid-Crusader relations has remained a focus of attention for Egyptian historians even now in 2023 as we can surmise from Maḥmūd ʿAbd al-Munʿim Amīn's article "The Embassies Exchanged between the Fatimids and the Crusaders in Syria".[23] Amīn is concerned with the use of diplomacy as a means of communication and understanding between Crusaders and Fatimids through which each party sought its own interests in the hope of emerging with the greatest gain at the smallest cost. This article shows that diplomatic contacts between the two sides began the moment the Crusaders set foot in the Levant and continued until the last years of the caliphate when the Crusaders managed to interfere directly in the quarrels between Fatimid viziers. Amīn makes clear the shortsightedness and lack of understanding on the part of the Fatimid vizier Al-Afḍal (487/1094 – 515/1121), who was the first Fatimid statesman to correspond with the Crusaders, when he proposed to them the division of Syria. This shows that the Fatimids had poor intelligence about the Crusaders and their intentions and it indicated to the Crusaders' leadership the ease with which they could divide the Muslim powers.

Among the reasons behind the lack of understanding of the nature of the Crusading movement by the Fatimids are, according to Amīn, the fact that the Fatimid caliphs no longer had political power but had become mere playthings in the hands of their viziers, and secondly, a naïve and short-sighted belief that the Crusaders could be used against the Seljuks. Nonetheless, the embassy of Al-Afḍal failed once the Crusaders revealed their intention to conquer the entire Levant and take Jerusalem by the sword, rejecting the Fatimid proposal that they enter Jerusalem as peaceful pilgrims.[24]

Diplomatic relations between the Fatimids and Crusaders were cut off until Shāwar corresponded with the Crusaders in 559/1164 seeking their assistance in expelling the Zankid forces from Egypt. He wrote to them a second time in 562/1167 when the Zankids were on the verge of invading Egypt again, and a third time in 564/1168 seeking a defensive alliance with the Crusaders which was signed in Cairo with the reluctant compliance of the

[23] Maḥmūd ʿAbd al-Munʿim Amīn, "Al-Sifārāt bayn al-Dawlat al-Fāṭimīya wa al-Ṣalībīyīn fī al-Shām", *Sūbak li al-Dirāsāt al-Tārīkhīya wa al-Ḥaḍārīya,* vol. 5, no. 1 (2023): 109-133.

[24] Amīn, "Al-Sifārāt bayn al-Dawlat al-Fāṭimīya", pp. 109-121.

caliph Al-ʿĀḍid, who had no power to refuse the wishes of his vizier. Despite the brevity of the study and its need for further explanation and elaboration of the embassies themselves as well as the period in which there were no diplomatic relations between the two sides, along with its need for a more complete bibliography both of the primary sources and modern studies, Amīn's article is still of importance in studying the attitudes of the Fatimids towards the Crusades in general, and it will no doubt encourage other researchers to explore the topic further and in greater detail.

The Iraqi School

The Iraqi historian Ḥusayn Ḥadīth Jāsim has written a more precise article entitled "An Assessment of the Decision by the Fatimid Caliph Al-ʿĀḍid li Dīn Allāh to invite the Forces of Nūr al-Dīn into Egypt".[25] The aim of his study is to evaluate the measure taken by the caliph Al-ʿĀḍid in 564/1168 of requesting from Nūr al-Dīn Zankī the dispatch of a third Zankid expeditionary force to Egypt in order to expel the Crusaders from the land, which had suffered greatly from the depredations of the Crusaders after the Zankid forces had evacuated Egypt for the second time in 562/1167. He begins with a discussion of the reasons for the Crusader-Zankid contest over the control of Egypt, noting Egypt's strategic importance due to its location, its great wealth, and large population, all factors that would give a decisive advantage to the party that managed to occupy it. The weakness of the Fatimid Caliphate during this period meant that there was no force within Egypt itself capable of resisting external intervention. The caliphs were mere puppets in the hands of their viziers, and the vizierate itself was the object of constant conflicts between rival commanders and factions, best exemplified by the struggle between the two military commanders Ḍirghām and Shāwar for control of the vizierate, which opened the door to foreign intervention.

The humiliating terms from the Crusaders which Shāwar had agreed to in 562/1167 added insult to injury. The hapless young caliph was forced by his all-powerful vizier to assent to the presence of a Crusader garrison in Cairo and to accept the flagrant breach of court protocol by the Crusader envoy Hugh of Caesarea who demanded to shake the caliph's ungloved hand. Jāsim believes that these circumstances drove the caliph to appeal for help from Nūr

[25] Ḥusayn Ḥadīth Jāsim, "Dirāsa Taqwīmīya li Qarrār al-Khalīfa al-Fāṭimī al-ʿĀḍid li Dīn Allāh bi Istidʿāʾ Quwwāt Nūr al-Dīn ilā Miṣr", *Majallat Jāmiʿat Takrīt li al-ʿUlūm al-Insānīya* vol. 17, no. 8 (2010).

al-Dīn Zankī, who was after all still a fellow Muslim prince despite the difference in sect. This action supposedly caused Shāwar to rebuke the caliph, who is reported to have replied that he preferred that Egypt remain Muslim rather than become a vassal of the Crusaders, even if it would cost him his throne.[26] His appeal to Nūr al-Dīn brought about the desired intervention which ultimately expelled the Crusaders from Egypt. Jāsim argues that the decision of Al-ʿĀḍid to overlook sectarian differences and appeal to the Sunnī ruler Nūr al-Dīn for aid in evicting the Crusaders from Egypt, even while cognizant of the long-term threat the Zankids posed to the continuation of his own dynasty, had a positive influence on the course of Muslim resistance to the Crusader project in the Near East.[27]

In 2016, Raʿd Yūnus ʿAbbās published an article on "The Fatimids and the First Crusade".[28] He begins with a look at the factors which paved the way for the invasion of the Levant by the Crusaders. He notes the role of the Byzantines as intermediaries between the Fatimids and the Crusaders, a factor which he suggests may have contributed to the Fatimids' initial failure to understand the nature and true aims of the Crusaders, though these became all too apparent after the failure of all attempts at negotiating with the Crusaders. He also examines the military response of the Fatimids, noting some successes but remarking that these were mitigated by the weakness of the caliphs and the incessant internal conflicts within the Fatimid state. He notes that paradoxically, the smaller military expeditions launched by the Fatimids were more successful than the large expeditions that were preceded by extensive preparations.[29]

A study by Muḥammad Kāẓim al-Rubayʿī pays particular attention to Shāwar whom he believes played a pivotal role in events and to whom he assigns the greatest blame for the downfall of the Fatimid state.[30] This study focuses on the struggle over the vizierate which produced personalities who were incessantly in conflict with one another, seeking their personal interests while ignoring completely the welfare of the Fatimid state and the defense of the Islamic lands from the Crusaders. Shāwar played a double game for his

[26] Jāsim, "Dirāsa Taqwīmīya", p. 494.

[27] Jāsim, "Dirāsa Taqwīmīya", p. 496.

[28] Raʿd Yūnus ʿAbbās, "Al-Fāṭimīyūn wa al-Ḥamlat al-Ṣalībīya al-Ūlā", *Majallat Kullīyat al-Tarbīya al-Asāsīya*, vol. 22, no. 93 (2016): 70-92.

[29] ʿAbbās, "Al-Fāṭimīyūn wa al-Ḥamlat al-Ṣalībīya", p. 469.

[30] Muḥammad Kāẓim al-Rubayʿī, "Al-Wazīr Shāwar wa Dawruhu fī Isqāṭ al-Dawlat al-Fāṭimīya", *Majallat Abḥāth Maysān* vol. 13, no. 25 (2017): 70-92.

personal gain, siding at times with the Zankids and at times with the Crusaders, and the victim of his actions was the Fatimid Caliphate which, intentionally or not, he played a large part in destroying. Nonetheless, Shāwar's son Al-Kāmil contradicted his father's positions, for he advocated the idea of Islamic unity in the face of the Crusaders and favored alliance with the Zankids against them. Indeed he openly opposed his father's attempt to ally with the Crusaders after Shīrkūh's third expedition against Egypt in 564/1169. He made the following famous remark recorded by Al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) in his history of the Fatimid dynasty entitled *Ittiʿāẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ*: "If we are to be killed it is better that we are killed as Muslims while the country is ruled by Muslims than to be killed with the country in the hands of the Franks".[31] Al-Rubayʿī notes that although both Ṣhīrkūh and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn served the Zankid state as its deputies in Egypt, there was talk in secret amongst them and their companions about creating an independent Ayyubid state in Egypt.

Jāsim Muḥammad ʿAbbās has made Nūr al-Dīn's attempts to unite Egypt and Syria the focus of two studies published in 2021. The first of these entitled "The Influence of the Crusader Attacks on the Extension of Zankid Power into Egypt" is concerned with the Crusader designs on Egypt which motivated Nūr al-Dīn Zankī to intervene in that country so as to prevent it from falling into the Crusader camp.[32] He also saw it as an opportunity to gain favor with the Abbasid caliph who desired to place the entire Islamic world under his spiritual authority. This is revealed in a letter preserved by the historian Abū Shāma (d. 665/1267) from the Abbasid caliph Al-Mustaḍīʾ (566/1170 – 575/1180): "It is necessary to strive for this goal in order to enjoy the great blessing and noble virtue, before the onslaught of death and the intervention of distance, especially because the *imām* of the age eagerly desires it, and it is his greatest hope".[33] Afterwards Nūr al-Dīn Zankī enjoined his deputy Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn to bring this hope to fruition following the latter's appointment as

[31] al-Rubayʿī, "Al-Wazīr Shāwar wa Dawruhu", p. 83; Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Maqrīzī, *Ittiʿāẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ bi Akhbār Al-Aʾimmat al-Fāṭimīyīn al-Khulafāʾ*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥilmī Muḥammad Aḥmad, 3 vols. (Cairo: Al-Hayʾa al-ʿĀmma li Quṣūr al-Thaqāfa, 1999) vol. 3, p. 300.

[32] Jāsim Muḥammad ʿAbbās, "Athar al-Hajamāt al-Ṣalībīya fī Basṭ al-Nufūdh al-Zankī ʿalā Miṣr" *Majallat Kullīyat al-Tarbīya,* Jāmiʿat Wāsiṭ, vol. 42, no. 2 (2022): 165-176,

[33] Shihāb al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Ibrāhīm al-Dimashqī (known as Abū Shāma), *Al-Rawḍatayn fī Akhbār al-Dawlatayn al-Nūrīya wa al-Ṣalāḥīya*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Zabīq, 5 vols. (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1997) vol. 2, p. 152.

vizier of the Fatimids and the execution of Shāwar. This gained him the support of the Abbasid caliph and renown throughout the Islamic World.[34]

ʿAbbās' second article published in 2021 is entitled "The Political Use of the Egyptian Military Expeditions of Nūr al-Dīn Zankī in Order to Realize the Zankid-Ayyubid Project in Egypt" and it complements the first article.[35] It aims to explain how Shīrkūh and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn transformed the Zankid project of putting an end to the Fatimid state and uniting Egypt with Syria in order to gain a strategic advantage over the Crusaders into an attempt to found an independent Ayyubid state based in Egypt. As proof of Shīrkūh's independent political ambitions he mentions the fact that Shīrkūh accepted the office of vizier from the Fatimids in early 564/1169 without consulting Nūr al-Dīn Zankī and that Nūr al-Dīn wrote to the Fatimid caliph Al-ʿĀḍid complaining about this but he was nevertheless unable to prevent Shīrkūh's appointment to the vizierate.[36] Furthermore, he argues that Nūr al-Dīn Zankī was also opposed to the idea of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn assuming the Fatimid vizierate later in that same year following the death of his uncle Shīrkūh, however, in the end, Nūr al-Dīn acquiesced because he believed that it would be a dangerous and complicated affair to abolish the Fatimid caliphate and that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn was the only one of his subordinates who could manage the task. ʿAbbās also claims that realpolitik trumped religious sentiment in the Islamic states during the period of the Crusades, particularly in what was left of the Abbasid Caliphate, and he does not believe that the Abbasid caliphs tried to play a unifying role among the Muslims during this period, citing as evidence the Abbasid caliph Al-Mustaḍīʾs insistence on ending the rival Fatimid Caliphate.[37] It should be noted that this is an opinion shared by other researchers sympathetic to the Shīʿī position.

The Iraqi historian Nāṣir al-Mullā Jāsim and his pupil Muḥammad ʿUbaysh have written a study on "The Struggle between Nūr al-Dīn Zankī and the Crusader King Amalric I for Control of Egypt in the Contemporary

[34] ʿAbbās, "Athar", p. 173.

[35] Jāsim Muḥammad ʿAbbās, "Al-Tawẓīf al-Siyāsī li Ḥamlāt al-Malik Nūr al-Dīn Zankī al-ʿAskarīya ʿalā Miṣr li Taḥqīq al-Mashrūʿ al-Zankī al-Ayyūbī fīhā", *Majallat Kullīyat al-Imām al-Kāẓim*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2021): 309-329.

[36] ʿAbbās, "Al-Tawẓīf al-Siyāsī", p. 316.

[37] ʿAbbās, "Al-Tawẓīf al-Siyāsī", p. 319.

Arabic and Crusader Sources" published in a journal in Mosul in 2022.[38] The article focuses in particular on the accounts of the Crusader presence in Egypt in the work of the historian William of Tyre. William's limits, biases and inaccuracies are noted, as for instance when he described the retreat of Amalric I's army from Egypt in 558/1163, after the Fatimid vizier Ḍirghām had opened the Nile dikes to hinder its advance, as a victory. Another clear example of exaggeration is when William described the Crusader army as being very small in the face of a vast Fatimid army. [39] On the other hand, the article notes that William of Tyre was fair and objective in his assessment of the Muslim leader Nūr al-Dīn Zankī after recording the latter's death.[40]

Studies from the Maghreb on Fatimid-Crusader Relations

While we have restricted our survey so far to research produced by Egyptian, Iraqi, and Kuwaiti scholars, it should be noted that some works on the topic of Fatimid-Crusader relations have also been written by researchers from the countries of the Maghreb. An example is the following study by the Mauritanian scholar Muḥammad b. al-Mukhtār al-Shinqīṭī entitled "Rapprochement between the Sunnīs and the Imāmī Shīʿa during the Period of the Crusades".[41] This article presents various episodes of resistance to the Crusaders by Sunnī and Shīʿī Muslims and attempts to show that the contributions of the Shīʿa to the struggle against the Crusaders were no less than those of the Sunnī Muslims. Nonetheless, the work is marred by the fact that the author is not a specialist in medieval history and he does not always give the full context of the events that he selects.

The Algerian researcher Khālid Kuraybī has published an article on "The Fatimids in the Crusades" which, despite its broad title, only focuses on the First Crusade which captured Jerusalem in 1099 A.D.[42] He argues that the

[38] Nāṣir al-Mullā Jāsim and Muḥammad ʿUbaysh, "Al-Ṣirāʿ bayn Nūr al-Dīn Zankī wa al-Malik al-Ṣalībī ʿAmūrī al-Awwal li al-Sayṭara ʿalā Miṣr fī Riwāyāt al-Maṣādir al-ʿArabiyya wa al-Ṣalībīya al-Muʿāṣira", *Dirāsāt Mawṣilīya*, no. 61 (2022): 1-16.

[39] Jāsim and ʿUbaysh, "Al-Ṣirāʿ bayn Nūr al-Dīn Zankī", p. 3.

[40] Jāsim and ʿUbaysh, "Al-Ṣirāʿ bayn Nūr al-Dīn Zankī", pp. 13-14.

[41] Muḥammad Mukhtār al-Shinqīṭī, "Al-Taqārub bayn Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Shīʿa al-Imāmīya athnāʾ al-Ḥarb al-Ṣalībīya", *Majallat Kullīyat al-Sharīʿa wa al-Dirāsāt al-Islāmīya fī Qaṭar*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2018): 183-200.

[42] Khālid Kuraybī, "Mawqif al-Fāṭimīyīn min al-Ḥurūb al-Ṣalībīya", *Rufūf*, University of Adrār, vol. 10, no. 2 (2022): 411-426.

capture of Jerusalem by the Fatimids from the Seljuks one year earlier in 1098 was the result of a secret agreement between the Fatimids and Crusaders in order to distract the Seljuks. Kuraybī's work shows a strong bias against the Fatimids, whom he blames for the failure of Muslim resistance to the First Crusade, based in part on the following improbable account from the chronicler Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233): "When the ʿAlawite rulers of Egypt saw the strength of the Seljuks and their conquest of Bilād al-Shām as far as Gaza, and that there was no other province remaining between the Seljuks and Fatimids, and thus nothing to prevent Aqsīs[43] from entering and occupying Egypt, they grew afraid and wrote to the Franks calling upon them to invade Bilād al-Shām and divide it with the Muslims, and God knows best!".[44] Finally, Kuraybī claims that the Fatimid expeditions against the coastal cities of Bilād al-Shām, especially under the vizier Al-Afḍal, were merely for show in order to assuage public opinion in Egypt and that these campaigns were neither serious nor did they result in any positive result militarily.[45]

Two Algerian researchers, ʿĀʾisha Tāzī and Fāṭima al-Zahrāʾ ʿAmmāra, published a study on the same subject entitled "The Role of the Shīʿa in the Fall of Jerusalem During the Crusades".[46] Their article centers around the Fatimids' position towards the First Crusade and in it they attempt to place the blame solely on the Fatimids for facilitating the occupation of Jerusalem by the Crusaders without objectively considering the many inter-related factors that produce a historical event. They both agree with Khālid Kuraybī that there was a secret agreement between the Fatimids and Crusaders which encouraged the entry of the latter into the Levant, again relying on the passage from Ibn al-Athīr's history quoted above.[47] Such a view holds no merit since the contemporary sources make it clear that the Fatimids did not understand who the Crusaders were when they first appeared in the Near East, and that they initially thought that the Crusaders were Byzantines or Byzantine mercenaries who had no intention of advancing beyond Antioch, which was

[43] Aqsīs, also known as Atsiz, was the Turcoman ruler of Damascus and Jerusalem in the middle to late 1070s. He was executed in 472/1079.

[44] Kuraybī, "Mawqif al-Fāṭimīyīn", p. 420; ʿIzz al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh*, ed. Abū al-Fidāʾ ʿAbdallāh al-Qāḍī, 11 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīya, 1987) vol. 9, pp. 13-14.

[45] Kuraybī, "Mawqif al-Fāṭimīyīn", p. 427.

[46] ʿĀʾisha Tāzī and Fāṭima al-Zahrāʾ ʿAmmāra, "Dawr al-Shīʿa fī Suqūṭ bayt al-Maqdis Zaman al-Ḥurūb al-Ṣalībīya", *Al-Akādīmīya li al-Dirāsāt al-Ijtimāʿīya wa al-Insānīya*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2022): 128-136.

[47] ʿTāzī and ʿAmmāra, "Dawr al-Shīʿa", p. 128.

the usual frontier between Byzantine and Muslim-controlled territory. They did not understand the motivations and intentions of the Crusaders, and the capture of Jerusalem by the latter came as a shock to the Fatimids, who nonetheless resisted the Crusader advance militarily. The two co-authors support their theory by pointing out that the Ismāʿīlī splinter-sect of the Nizārīs carried out the assassination of some of the Muslim leaders during the Crusades, implying that the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs were allies of the Crusaders, but in fact they also assassinated prominent Crusaders and thus the Nizārīs should be seen as having acted in their own self-interest after they split from the Fatimids in 487/1094 and not as allies of any particular state.[48]

The same subject has also been addressed by Ḥamza Qādirī in his study entitled "The Development of the Fatimid Position towards the Crusader Presence in the Shadow of the Sectarian Relations between the Muslim Powers: 1096-1121 A.D.".[49] As the title indicates, this study focuses on the early period of the Crusader invasions and on the attempts by the Fatimids to reach an understanding with other Muslim powers in order to put a stop to the Crusader expansion after their initial misreading of the Crusaders' intentions. The author asks an important question, which perhaps lies at the heart of the difference in approach between the historians from the eastern and western halves of the Arab World concerning Fatimid-Crusader relations: did the Fatimids play a role in the success of the First Crusade or is this merely a baseless accusation?[50] After a careful investigation of the sources, Qādirī arrives at the same conclusion made by ʿĀshūr and the Egyptian school long ago, namely that the Fatimids did not understand the nature of the Crusades in the beginning, but after confirming the hostile intentions of the European invaders they fought against them.[51]

Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen that the topic of Fatimid-Crusader relations has attracted considerable attention from historians across the Arab world. In these studies three main approaches are found. The first is an objective

[48] ʿTāzī and ʿAmmāra, "Dawr al-Shīʿa", p. 134.

[49] Ḥamza Qādirī, "Taṭawwur Al-Mawqif al-Fāṭimī min al-Wujūd al-Ṣalībī fī Ẓill al-Tajādhubāt al-Madhhabīya bayn al-Qiwā al-Islāmīya 1096-1121 m.", *Majallat Dirāsāt*, Algeria, vol. 13, no. 2 (2022): 73-101.

[50] Qādirī, "Taṭawwur Al-Mawqif", p. 78.

[51] Qādirī, "Taṭawwur Al-Mawqif", p. 95.

approach based on the primary sources which attempts to arrive as close as possible to the historical truth, and it is represented by the scholarship of the Egyptian school as well as that of some other researchers in the Maghreb and in the Arab East. The second approach starts from the assumption that the Fatimids were responsible for the failure of Muslim resistance to the First Crusade, and some of its adherents go as far as accusing the Fatimids of having had a secret alliance with the Crusaders against the Sunnī Muslim powers. This point of view has been advanced by some historians in the countries of the Maghreb. The third school of thought completely rejects the notion that the Fatimids played a role in weakening the Seljuk resistance to the Crusaders, and furthermore its proponents claim that the Sunnī powers neglected the struggle against the Crusaders in order to fight the Shīʿī Fatimids, rather than choosing cooperation with the Fatimids to expel the Crusaders from the Levant. They level this accusation in particular towards the Zankids.

The second and third approaches mentioned above are indicative of the influence of sectarian Sunnī and sectarian Shīʿī perspectives, respectively, on some contemporary Arab historical writing. It should go without saying that professional historians must not allow their personal religious prejudices to dictate how they write history and that they must do their utmost to avoid the trap of historical anachronism which occurs when one reads the history of the Middle Ages from the standpoint of twenty-first century political concerns rather than trying to understand the past on its own terms.

Translated by Amar S. Baadj