

Governors and Provincial Elites in Umayyad Egypt: A Case Study of One “Rebellion” (709–10 CE)*

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Abstract

This article focuses on the confrontation that broke out sometime in 709 or 710 CE between a hundred men led by members of the Banū Fahm and the Umayyad governor of Egypt, Qurra b. Sharīk. After presenting the case in question, the article explains who participated in the conflict, what their motives and expectations were, and how the failure of these expectations resulted in the confrontation with the governor and his troops. I suggest that although early Muslim historians depicted the conflict in religious terms, it was also a result of the specific power dynamics between the governor and provincial Arab elites and of competition over the material and social privileges of elite families in Egypt.

Introduction

In 709 or 710 CE, a group of Egyptian Arab notables conspired to assassinate the Umayyad governor Qurra b. Sharīk (in office 709–14 CE). The governor, however, found out about the plan and had the leaders of the conspiracy killed. Competition between provincial elites and governors was one of the most frequent sources of discord in the Umayyad period. Such tensions sometimes led to the peaceful replacement of the governor, but they could also trigger confrontations aimed at deposing the governor (when initiated by elites) or at suppressing opposition in the provinces (when initiated by

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the governor).¹ The planned murder of the governor Qurra is reported in three later sources that portray the conflict in religious and ideological terms. Taking into account the complicated relationship between caliphs, governors, and provincial elites in the Umayyad period, this paper uses the identity and motives of the plotters to examine the different layers of the confrontation, from its direct cause to underlying developments, as well as its subsequent treatment in Arabic chronicles in light of social, political, and religious factors. I argue that although the Arabic chronicles allude to religious and ideological strife as the cause of the confrontation, the social and political context of the event suggests an alternative explanation: that the violence was the reaction of members of a disgruntled tribe to changes that the governor had implemented in the administration of the province, and that their reaction was an attempt not to change the entire political system but rather to correct one element in it.

Religious Motives behind the Rebellion

The confrontation between Qurra b. Sharīk and some Arab notables in Egypt is recounted in three sources.² The authors of all three texts were Egyptian and therefore had an interest in preserving Egyptian history. Two of the sources date to the tenth century, whereas the third one is originating from the much later Mamlūk period. I will summarize the three versions of the story and consider the significance of the differences between them but I will mainly focus on one version: that of al-Kindī (d. 961 CE).

Ibn Yūnus (d. 958 CE) compiled two biographical volumes on notable personae in Egypt. One is dedicated to Egyptians and the other to visitors to the province. His work, known as the *History of Ibn Yūnus*, does not survive as a whole, but it has been assembled and edited on the basis of citations in other works.³ In his section on Qurra's governorship, Ibn Yūnus reports, citing the authority of Ḥukaym b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Qays, that it was the Ibāḍiyya, well known for their strict upholding of Qurʾānic piety, who plotted to kill the governor because Qurra was behaving in a nonreligious manner. At a time when the mosque in Fuṣṭāṭ was under construction (712 CE), the governor would use it to party:

When the craftsmen left the building, Qurra b. Sharīk would call for wine, percussion, and drums, and would drink wine in the mosque all night long, saying: "Ours is the night, and theirs is the day." He was the worst of God's creation; the Ibāḍiyya decided

1. See the discussion on this dynamic in P. Cobb, *White Banners: Contention in ʿAbbasid Syria, 750–880* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 13–23.

2. I use the term "Arab" here to refer to the groups and individuals (and their descendants) who came out of Arabia and settled in Egypt after the conquests of the 640s CE. I adopt this broad definition in order to highlight the role that pre-Islamic social and political bonds such as tribal affiliation played well into the eighth century and beyond, as discussed below.

3. Ibn Yūnus, *Taʾrīkh Ibn Yūnus al-Miṣrī*, ed. ʿA. F. F. ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2000); F. Rosenthal, "Ibn Yūnus," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill Online). Insightful discussion on Ibn Yūnus's historical venture can be found in S. Bouderbala, "Ġund Miṣr: Étude de l'administration militaire dans l'Égypte des débuts de l'Islam 21/642–218/833" (PhD diss., Université de Paris 1–Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2008), 57–69.

to kill him, and they made an oath to assassinate him. He [Qurra] was informed of that [plan] and killed them.⁴

Ibn Taghrī Birdī (d. 1470 CE) also mentions this episode in his *al-Nujūm al-ẓāhira*, which covers the history of Egypt from its conquest to his time.⁵ His account is similar to that of Ibn Yūnus, with the only difference concerning the rebels' identity: whereas Ibn Yūnus calls them 'Ibāḍiyya, Ibn Taghrī Birdī identifies them as Azāriqa.⁶ Both thus pin the blame on groups well known to oppose the government.⁷ However, the two historians' identifications are, interestingly, rather far apart. The Azāriqa are generally considered to have been much more extremist and more liable to take up arms against rulers than the Ibāḍiyya were.⁸ On the other hand, it would be very surprising to find Azāriqa in Egypt at this time, as they are generally known to have been active in the Maghreb and Iraq in this period.⁹

Qurra earned a reputation as a bad and tyrannical ruler in Islamic historiography, and he was reportedly hated by the caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz (r. 717–20 CE). Thus, we are told that when the news of Qurra's death arrived at the caliph's court in 715 CE, its arrival coincided with the announcement of the death of al-Ḥajjāj (the governor of Iraq 694–715 CE), and 'Umar rejoiced at both pieces of news.¹⁰ In another report, 'Umar criticizes his predecessor al-Walīd (r. 705–15 CE) for having appointed Qurra and allowed his un-Islamic behavior.¹¹ Positioning Qurra alongside the notorious al-Ḥajjāj and casting him as the enemy of 'Umar, the most pious Umayyad caliph, demonstrate a historiographical tendency to depict Qurra as an unjust tyrant, which might help explain historians' choice to portray opposition to Qurra in religious terms.

Another window on this event is provided by the account in al-Kindī's *Kitāb al-Wulāt*. A contemporary of Ibn Yūnus, al-Kindī collected stories and narratives about Egypt's governors and chief *qāḍīs*. His book is a valuable source for understanding the province's

4. Ibn Yūnus, *Ta'rikh*, 1:186: وإن قررة بن شريك كان إذا انصرف الصنّاع من بناء المسجد، دخل المسجد، ودعا بالخمير والطّبل والمزمار، فشرب، ويقول: لنا الليل، ولهم النهار. وكان قررة بن شريك من أظلم خلق الله، وهمّت الإباضية بقتله والفتك به، وتبايعوا على ذلك، فبلغه ذلك، فقتلهم

5. Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *Al-Nujūm al-ẓāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira*, ed. W. Popper (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1929–56).

6. Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *al-Nujūm*, 1:218.

7. J. Wilkinson, *Ibādism: Origins and Early Development in Oman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 122–23; A. Gaiser, *Shurāt Legends, Ibāḍī Identities: Martyrdom, Asceticism, and the Making of an Early Islamic Community* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2016), 3; K. Lewinstein, "Azāriqa," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed., ed. K. Fleet et al. (Leiden: Brill Online).

8. Wilkinson, *Ibādism*, 2–3; Gaiser, *Shurāt Legends*, 68.

9. Gaiser, *Shurāt Legends*, 115; E. Savage, "Survival through Alliance: The Establishment of the Ibāḍiyya," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 17, no. 1 (1990): 5–15, at 10. Nabia Abbott already noted the improbability that either group was present in Egypt at that time: N. Abbott, *The Kurrah Papyri from Aphrodito in the Oriental Institute* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 62–63.

10. See, for example, Sibṭ b. al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-zamān*, ed. Muhammad Barakāt et al. (Damascus: Dār al-Risāla, 2013), 10:102; Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *al-Nujūm*, 1:218; Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. 'U. al-'Amrawī (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995), 49:309.

11. Sibṭ b. al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-zamān*, 10:102.

administrative apparatus and social and political life in Fustāṭ, as it reports the appointments and sackings of important office holders such as the *ṣāḥib al-shurṭa*.¹² Although al-Kindī also uses terms with religious connotations, his account of the plot to assassinate Qurra differs in key respects from those of Ibn Taghrī Birdī and Ibn Yūnus.

Much like Ibn Taghrī Birdī and Ibn Yūnus, al-Kindī refers to the conspirators with a term that is associated with Khārijism: *shurāt* (شُرَاة). This term is more general than the previous two, as it used for all types of Khārijite rebel groups, including the Azāriqa and the ‘Ibāḍiyya.¹³ Is it possible that the rebels were in fact part of, or related to, a Khārijite group and that their motive to assassinate the governor was therefore ideological, rooted in a fundamental rejection of the caliph’s authority and that of his recognized agents? What indications do we have in al-Kindī’s version of the story that the governor’s opponents were indeed Khārijites?

Al-Kindī’s version, quoted in full below, is more elaborate than those of Ibn Yūnus and Ibn Taghrī Birdī. First, he dates the confrontation to the AH year 91 (709 or 710 CE). Second, he writes that there were altogether about a hundred rebels. And third, he gives us the names and tribal affiliations of three of the rebel leaders, including the agreed commander (*raʿīs*) of the rebellion—al-Muhājir b. Abī Muthanna, who was, in al-Kindī’s words, “one of the Banū Fahm.”¹⁴ Al-Muhājir and the other two leaders are, moreover, identified as belonging to the Banū Tujīb, to which the Fahmīs also belonged.

It remains difficult to determine the plotters’ ideological identities with certainty. What is clear, however, is that by the tenth century CE, stories circulated attributing the confrontation to the governor’s unreligious behavior as reported in Ibn Yūnus’s and Ibn Taghrī Birdī’s accounts, and all three historians use terms that are related to Khārijite groups. However, the label “Khārijite” is often applied to any kind of rebellious movement in the historical sources because of the Khārijites’ identification as the opponents of the state par excellence.¹⁵ We should also recognize the image of Qurra as a tyrannical governor in Islamic historiography. Bearing all this in mind, I propose a further explanatory layer in the clash. Although the conspirators’ opposition might have been cast in religious and ideological terms, even perhaps by themselves, an examination of the social and political background of the rebels takes us beyond religious motives and allows us to see them as political actors. In what follows, I consider possible other explanations and contributing factors behind this event.

12. Al-Kindī, *Kitāb al-Wulāt wa-kitāb al-quḍāt*, ed. R. Guest (London: Luzac, 1912), 65. On al-Kindī, see M. Tillier, *Al-Kindī: Histoire des cadis égyptiens* (Paris: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 2012), 2–4; Bouderbala, “Ġund Miṣr,” 47–57.

13. See the discussion on this term in Gaiser, *Shurāt Legends*, 1–3.

14. I was not able to identify this person or confirm his background in other sources.

15. H.-L. Hagemann, *The Khārijites in Early Islamic Historical Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 73, 158; H.-L. Hagemann and P. Verkinderen, “Kharijism in the Umayyad Period,” in *The Umayyad World*, ed. A. Marsham, 489–517 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 501.

The Revolt

The sociopolitical dimension of the conflict is evident in al-Kindī's description of the events, which diverges in this respect from the versions of Ibn Yūnus and Ibn Taghrī Birdī. Al-Kindī omits any mention of the governor's misbehavior. Conversely, he includes more information on the rebels, including their numbers and the identities of their leaders. His account thus provides insight into the power dynamics in the province. According to al-Kindī, shortly after his arrival in Egypt, Qurra had appointed a member of the Banū Fahm, ʿAbd al-Malik b. Rifāʿa, to succeed his uncle as commander of the *shurṭa*, that is, the chief of police. After about one year we are told that another person took over the position—ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muʿāwiya b. Ḥudayj, who had already served in that position during the governorship of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (in office 685–705 CE).¹⁶ Here is al-Kindī's description of the events:

Qurra went out to Alexandria and appointed over the *shurṭa* ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muʿāwiya b. Ḥudayj in the year 91 [709 or 710 CE]. Thereafter, the *shurāt* in Alexandria made a pact to kill Qurra. And their leader was al-Muhājir b. Abī al-Muthanna al-Tujībī, one of the Banū Fahm b. Idhāh b. ʿAdī al-Tujībī, and among them was also Ibn Abī Arṭāt al-Tujībī, and they were about a hundred [men altogether]. And they agreed to appoint [as their leader] Ibn Abī al-Muthanna in the lighthouse of Alexandria. Close to them was a man whose nickname was Abū Sulaymān, and he informed Qurra of their plans, and he [Qurra] came to them before they dispersed and ordered their arrest at the base of the lighthouse of Alexandria (*amara fī ḥabsihim fī aṣl minārat al-Iskandariyya*). And Qurra assembled the notables (*wujūh*) of the *jund* (military forces of the province), turned to them, asked them, and consulted them [on the matter]. They agreed, and he killed them [i.e., the rebel leaders]. A man who supported the rebels passed by. He went to Abū Sulaymān and killed him. And when Yazīd b. Abī Ḥabīb wanted to talk about something that should remain hidden from the ruler, he would look around and say: “Beware of Abī Sulaymān.” Then one day he said: “All people are Abū Sulaymān.”¹⁷

Al-Kindī's account is straightforward. Governor Qurra replaced the head of police, Ibn Rifāʿa of the Banū Fahm, with ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muʿāwiya b. Ḥudayj, who belonged to a different family within the clan of Tujīb. Subsequently, about a hundred men gathered at Alexandria's lighthouse to discuss how to react. Using the governor's visit to Alexandria as an opportunity, they decided to assassinate the governor and appointed leaders to carry out this act—all members of the Banū Fahm. Unfortunately for them, their plans were exposed by a certain Abū Sulaymān, whose identity is otherwise unknown. The governor, now aware of the plot, rushed to arrest them. Qurra then gathered the province's Arab notables to judge the conspirators, and at the former's advice he killed the rebel leaders.

But the main interest in al-Kindī's version is the light it sheds on the complicated sociopolitical interactions among the Arab rulers of Egypt. It is clear that sacking the chief

16. Al-Kindī, *Wulāt*, 65.

17. *Ibid.*, 64.

of police was not a decision that the governor should take lightly. In fact, such a seemingly simple replacement of a holder of public office could trigger extreme events, such as the killing of the ruling governor. Below I will discuss in more detail why the Banū Fahm might have experienced this as a direct affront, but first let us first turn to understand who were the actors in this event.

Local Arab Notable Competition

Qurra b. Sharīk arrived at the mosque of Fuṣṭāṭ in 709 CE to take up the governorship of Egypt. He was an outsider to the province; he hailed from a Qaysī tribe in Syria and was related to the caliph al-Walīd's mother.¹⁸ His arrival came as a surprise to the members of the provincial elite present at the mosque, as they had not been informed of the upcoming change of governor. Al-Kindī and Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam (d. 871 CE) recount Qurra's arrival in the province with minor differences, and both agree on the basic course of events: Qurra and his two companions dismounted their horses, entered the mosque, and prayed there in the governor's spot. The current governor, ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbd al-Malik, was away from the capital at the time. Qurra and his companions were immediately confronted by the guard at the mosque and some of the governor's men, who demanded that they pray elsewhere. The short discussion between Qurra and the guards ended with the arrival on the scene of a member of the Banū Fahm. This person acknowledged Qurra as the new governor, and in response Qurra recited a poem praising the Banū Fahm. The identity of the Fahmī who acknowledged Qurra is unclear: Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam claims that it was ʿAbd al-Aʿlā b. Khālīd al-Fahmī, the chief of police who had been appointed viceroy of Fuṣṭāṭ in the governor's absence, whereas al-Kindī suggests that it was Ibn Rifāʿa, adding that he did so without permission.¹⁹ The relations between Qurra and the Banū Fahm, however, deteriorated quickly. A year later, al-Kindī tells us, the confrontation between these two sides broke out. But before returning to that event, let us discuss who the Banū Fahm were.

The Banū Fahm was one of several families that made up what we can call the Arab-Muslim elite of Egypt (*wujūh*). The family had arrived in Egypt as part of the great Arab conquests of the mid-seventh century and had settled in Fuṣṭāṭ.²⁰ As early settlers in Egypt, the tribe, along with several others, was familiar with and integrated into the provincial political and administrative system put in place by the conquerors. This made the Banū Fahm a valuable asset for the governor, and Fahmīs seem to have played an important role in the province under ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbd al-Malik. As suggested by the account of Qurra's

18. On Qurra, see C. E. Bosworth, "Qurra b. Sharīk," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.; Abbott, *Kurrah Papyri*, 57–70; A. Papaconstantinou, "The Rhetoric of Power and the Voice of Reason: Tensions between Central and Local in the Correspondence of Qurra ibn Sharīk," in *Official epistolography and the language(s) of power. Proceedings of the 1st International Conference of the Research Network Imperium and Officium: Comparative Studies in Ancient Bureaucracy and Officialdom*, University of Vienna, 10–12 November 2010, ed. S. Procházka, L. Reinfandt, and S. Tost, 267–281 (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015). I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out the connection.

19. Al-Kindī, *Wulāt*, 62; Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam, *The History of the Conquest of Egypt, North Africa, and Spain, Known as Futūh Misr of Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam*, ed. C. Torrey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1922), 238.

20. Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam, *History*, 111.

arrival, some Fahmīs served in key positions as *ṣāhib al-shurṭa* and viceroy of Fustāṭ and enjoyed the governor's trust.²¹

The second important provincial family relevant to this story is that of ʿAbd al-Malik b. Muʿāwiya b. Ḥudayj, also from the clan of Tujīb. This family's ancestor, Muʿāwiya b. Ḥudayj, was a famous general who participated in the conquests of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt and led various expeditions into North Africa. He was also known as a supporter of the caliph ʿUthmān (r. 644–56 CE) and as the one who captured and murdered (in a somewhat horrifying fashion) Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr, the designated governor sent to Egypt by the subsequent caliph Alī b. Abī Ṭālib in 658 CE. Muʿāwiya b. Ḥudayj's role as a military leader probably meant that in cases of necessity, he could mobilize troops from the *jund*.²² The conquests had brought Muʿāwiya great wealth. When he led the military campaign to Ifrīqiya in 655 CE, he took one-fifth of the booty for himself and handed out to the soldiers half of the total booty collected in a show of gratitude (*nāfila*). After the foundation of the Umayyad caliphate, Muʿāwiya's influence in the province grew further, as he was one of the closest companions of the governor Maslama b. Mukhallad who ruled over Egypt from 667 CE until his death in 672 CE. He was obviously one of the most powerful individuals in Umayyad Egypt and acted on his position of social and political prestige.

Muʿāwiya's descendants benefited from his achievements and used their high status in the province to embark on administrative and political careers. Muʿāwiya's son, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, served simultaneously as *ṣāhib al-shurṭa* and as chief *qāḍī* under the governorship of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Marwān (in office 685–705 CE).²³ He lost both positions when his patron died and the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik sent his son, ʿAbd Allāh, to the province with orders to replace anyone in the administration who was still loyal to ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz.²⁴ ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's political and administrative career was not over, however, as he was later reinstated as *ṣāhib al-shurṭa* under the governorship of Qurra b. Sharīk. It was under the latter's governorship that the family regained control over Egypt's most important offices (other than that of the governor himself). Indeed, Qurra appointed Muʿāwiya's son ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muʿāwiya b. Ḥudayj to the office of chief *qāḍī*.²⁵ This same Muʿāwiya b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān later became one of two final candidates for the office of governor when ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz was appointed caliph.²⁶ Two members of the family, ʿAbd al-Waḥīd and ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, served as chief *qāḍī* and *ṣāhib al-shurṭa*, respectively, under the caliphate of the last Umayyad caliph, Marwān.²⁷ When the Abbasids took over the province, ʿAbd Allāh continued to serve as the head of police for a brief period. In 760 CE he was reinstated in office for nine years, and eventually he was appointed governor

21. Ibid., 239; al-Kindī, *Wulāt*, 58.

22. C. Pellat, "Muʿāwiya b. Ḥudayj," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.

23. On this person, see al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Muqaffā al-kabīr*, ed. M. al-Yaʿlāwī (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1991), 4:101 and 6:52; Ibn Yūnus, *Taʾrīkh*, 1:313–14.

24. I discuss this event below.

25. Al-Kindī, *Wulāt*, 64; Ibn Yūnus, *Taʾrīkh*, 1:212–13.

26. Al-Kindī, *Wulāt*, 65.

27. Ibn Yūnus, *Taʾrīkh*, 1:328.

of the province until his death in 772 CE.²⁸ ‘Abd Allāh’s son Hāshim also became *ṣāhib al-shurṭa*, and the position remained in the hands of members of the same tribe for one more generation when Hāshim’s son Hubayra took over the job.²⁹ The Banū Mu‘āwiya b. Ḥudayj lost their importance only in the beginning of the ninth century CE, when the province was divided as a consequence of the fight over the caliphate in Baghdad between al-Ma’mūn and al-Amīn. In the year 816 a mob attacked their family’s estate in Alexandria and killed most of its members, an act that seems to have put an end to Banū Mu‘āwiya’s long influence in the province.³⁰ This family, much like the Banū Fahm, enjoyed various aspects of elite status: respected lineage, great resources, and political influence.³¹

The coexistence of elite families in Egypt meant that provincial governors had to balance a complex and delicate sociopolitical arrangement. In fact, it is this intra-elite and elite-governor competition that forms the background to our story. On the one hand, the members of the elite were potentially valuable allies, as they enjoyed access to land, military power, and prestige as well as knowledge that was crucial in helping the governor maintain a level of cooperation between the court and the province’s Arab elite. On the other hand, it was precisely these advantages that could pose a threat to the governors in the province. If not handled correctly, local notables could become an opposition to the governor, participating in revolts and risking his authority. It was thus one of the governor’s main tasks to deal, negotiate, and work with these actors.³² The provincial notables expected to preserve their roles and privileges in the political system by holding high positions and offices such as that of the police chief that provided them with added social prestige, access to the governor’s and caliph’s courts, and financial benefits. For our purposes here, it is important to observe how this group acted and to recognize that rebellion was one option within a wide spectrum of possible actions. With this in mind, I will now discuss the immediate trigger of the rebellion as well as its broader causes.

An Insult

The immediate cause of the Banū Fahm’s act of rebellion might have been the removal of a Fahmī from the office of *ṣāhib al-shurṭa* by the order of Qurra b. Sharīk. This office was one of the most important positions in the political system of Egypt at the beginning of the eighth century and the governor needed loyal people to fill it, as the police chief’s armed forces served as the governor’s guards and maintained order in the province. Being

28. Al-Kindī, *Wulāt*, 88, 241.

29. *Ibid.*, 92, 119.

30. See summaries on this family in H. Kennedy, “Central Government and Provincial Élites in the Early ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 44, no. 1 (1981): 26–38, at 35–36; and H. Kennedy, “Egypt as a Province in the Islamic Caliphate, 641–868,” in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, *Islamic Egypt, 640–1517*, ed. C. F. Petry, 62–85 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), at 66–70, 81–82.

31. See the discussion in H.-L. Hagemann, K. Mewes, and P. Verkinderen, “Studying Elites in Early Islamic History: Concepts and Terminology,” in *Transregional and Regional Elites: Connecting the Early Islamic Empire*, ed. S. Heidemann and H.-L. Hagemann, 17–46 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020); and in particular the general definition at 30–31.

32. On this issue, see also Cobb, *White Banners*, 13–23.

the head of the *shurṭa* was thus a very high position, since it provided access to great power.³³ As we have seen, the need for personal loyalty and reliance on local Arab elites were common challenges for all provincial governors in Egypt but a particularly pressing one for a governor such as Qurra, who came from outside the province and could not rely on his own tribe for support in case of immediate need.³⁴ The story of Qurra's arrival shows how important the *wujūh* were in establishing the governor's authority. The symbolic act of praying in the governor's space in the mosque could be completed only after the local tribes' formal acknowledgment of the new governor. The governor's recitation of a poem praising the Banū Fahm suggests that he wanted to flatter the family from the beginning and to establish close ties with it. At this stage, then, the governor was apparently trying to bring it closer as he needed its support to establish himself in Egypt.

Al-Kindī's narrative does not expand on the change of personnel, but we can conjecture that one of the following things had happened: either Qurra preferred 'Abd al-Raḥmān over 'Abd al-Malik b. Rifā'a or he wanted for whatever reason to show his dissatisfaction with the latter. But his replacement of the police chief could also be explained as a sign of a shift in alliances from one tribal group to another. I would suggest that the personnel change probably contributed to the drastic and dangerous decision to kill the governor taken by members of the Fahmī tribe, who would have seen the tribe's loss of this prestigious office as a crucial blow, one that justified a conspiracy against the caliph-appointed governor. They were willing to take this step even though they were aware of the risks it carried, including to their very lives—which they indeed ended up forfeiting.

Why was losing the office of *ṣāhib al-shurṭa* seen as such a crucial injury by the Fahmīs, worth risking so much for? The importance of the office was due to two main factors. The first one was resources: the office offered financial benefits and opportunities to its holder, and it provided social prestige, as explained above. The second reason was the tribe's place in the sociopolitical hierarchy in the province. In an environment of competition over offices, resources, and prestige, losing a key office signified a setback in this competition and thus threatened the fabric of the arrangement. The fact that Qurra called the Arab elite together to consult on the fate of the rebels points precisely to this broader danger for the Fahmī family.

We can reconstruct the changing trajectories of Arab elite families in Egypt as follows. When Qurra first came to the province, he kept the old structure in place, relying on the Banū Fahm's support and rewarding it with important positions. But once he had assessed

33. On this role, see Kennedy, "Central Government," 37; M. Ebsstein, "Shurṭa Chiefs in Basra in the Umayyad Period: A Prosopographical Study," *Al-Qanṭara* 31, no. 1 (2010): 103–47, at 120–22; A. M. Rashid, "The Role of the Shurṭa in Early Islam" (PhD thesis, Edinburgh University, 1983); F. M. Donner, "The Shurṭa in Early Umayyad Syria," in *The Fourth International Conference on the History of Bilad al-Sham during the Umayyad Period: Proceedings of the Third Symposium on the History of Bilad al-Sham*, ed. M. A. al-Bakhit and R. Schick, 2:247–62 (Amman: University of Jordan, 1989); and H. Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs: Military and Society in the Early Islamic State* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 13–14, 35, 37. For the *shurṭa* in Egypt, see M. S. A. Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt: Religion, Identity and Politics after the Arab Conquest* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 139–43.

34. As noted earlier, Qurra came from Syria. On the implications of an outside governor, see Kennedy, "Central Government," 26–30; idem, "Egypt as a Province," 65–66.

the power relations in the province, he implemented his own strategy vis-à-vis the local elite families by forming new alliances and reshuffling the relative positions of the notables who made up the military and administrative elites. In fact, it is conceivable that it was in the new governor's interest to break the power of the Banū Fahm, whose position had clearly remained strong for a long time, and to elevate instead another family, which had lost its position in the preceding years. The disproportionate power that the single family of the Banū Fahm had gained would have made it harder for the governor to act freely, seriously curtailing his own influence. Qurra's appointment of a member of the Mu'āwiya b. Ḥudayj family to the powerful office of *ṣāhib al-shurṭa* can thus be seen as a way both to undermine the Banū Fahm's position and to increase the standing of the Banū Mu'āwiya b. Ḥudayj. Bringing in other elite members to witness and even be complicit in this change in the hierarchy reinforced Qurra's decision. One way in which the governor could keep the political situation under control was exactly by playing on the existing rivalries and turning competing families against each other.

In all three versions, the story about the conspiracy to kill Qurra ends with the governor's triumph over the rebels. He finds out about the rebels' plans, thereby saving his own life, and as he punishes the rebel leaders, his policy of undermining the position of the Banū Fahm by taking the office of the *ṣāhib al-shurṭa* away from them remains unaltered. On the one hand, then, the narrative of al-Kindī serves to demonstrate the victory of the governor over local elites who overplayed their hand, while on the other it illustrates those elites' powerful position, which was a factor that every governor had to reckon with.

Three key factors stood in the background of the Banū Fahm's rebellion. The first was the power held by provincial elites. This case clearly shows the potential risk to the governor involved in encroaching on the local elite's position. As the story shows, a single tribe could put together a considerable opposition force and pose a real threat to the governor's rule when the tribe's members felt their position was in danger. Through their access to weapons, wealth, and the governor's circle of close associates, the actions of disgruntled local elites could have an impact far beyond their own immediate tribal context. Moreover, the Fahmīs' plan to assassinate the governor constituted a forced intervention in the governance structure of the caliphate. It threatened not only the governor's authority but also that of the caliph, who was the governor's direct superior and the one responsible for his appointment. The Egyptian notables' desire to exert control over provincial appointments and thus over the province's considerable resources was a major issue confronting appointed governors. When the new governor of Egypt, Sa'īd b. Yazīd (in office 681–83 CE), arrived in the province, some local Arab families reacted with dismay: "May God forgive the *amīr al-mu'minīn*; there are among us a hundred men like you from whom he could have appointed one [to rule] over us [instead of you]!"³⁵ The local Arab elite was thus a force to reckon with for the governor, and controlling it through alliances, as well as generally balancing its power, was a constant concern.

The second factor was the governor's cooperation with other notable Arab tribesmen.

35. P. M. Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State: The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 62 n. 99.

When deciding how to punish the rebels, the governor assembled the members of the Arab elite and consulted them on the matter. On the one hand, this shows that the governor still relied on their cooperation to handle such a dramatic situation. He could not make a decision without taking their opinions into account. On the other hand, Qurra's appeal to the *wujūh* shows that he was able to mobilize them: the notables came when the governor called for them. By consulting them, the governor created a special relation of interdependence between himself and loyal *wujūh* that juxtaposed the latter with the rebellious Banū Fahm. Their role in determining the verdict of the rebellious leaders made the *wujūh* complicit and placed them firmly in the governor's camp against one of the most powerful and prestigious families among them. Finally, involving the *wujūh* allowed the governor to turn the Fahmī rebellion and the dramatic consequences for the rebel leadership into an example for the rest of the Arab community. Whatever the governor was attempting to achieve, we are left with the impression that the presence of the other elite families as participants and audience was a necessary and strategic element, precisely because of the extent to which the sociopolitical arrangement of the province depended on them.

The third contributing factor was formed by the structures and social practices of the Arab tribesmen in the province. This case allows us to better understand how the tribes worked as political actors and what kind of decision-making process they employed. The Banū Fahm's gathering in Alexandria to decide on an appropriate response to the deposition of 'Abd al-Malik b. Rifā'a is illuminating for a number of reasons. First, it shows that tribes were lively political and social units that decided on collective actions in gatherings at which, we can imagine, different views and perspectives were put forward. The Banū Fahm had its own *majlis* (gathering place), which gathered at important moments to decide on the best course of action. For example, when the same 'Abd al-Malik b. Rifā'a was later removed from his position as governor by 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz in favor of a member of the Qays tribe, he is said to have gone over to the *majlis* of the Qays in the mosque and congratulated the new governor.³⁶ It is interesting to note that on this occasion, Ibn Rifā'a retired from the position quietly, without any protests or attempts to contest the decision. This shows that the provincial elites (or the tribal councils) acted in accordance with their judgment of each specific situation. What is more, it shows that systems such as the tribal *majlis*, which had existed already in pre-Islamic times, still played a role in events during the Umayyad period alongside institutions of imperial administration and governance.³⁷

Another important point to note is that this was not the end of the story of the Banū Fahm. The tribe still had its supporters, and one of these supporters took revenge by killing Abū Sulaymān, the man who had informed Qurra of the Fahmīs' intention to assassinate him. And as already noted, when Qurra died in office about four years later, he was

36. Al-Kindī, *Wulāt*, 68.

37. For the functioning of tribal councils in pre-Islamic times, see, for example, the gathering of the Quraysh in Mecca to decide on how to deal with the emerging Muslim community: Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishāq's Sirat Rasūl Allāh*, ed. A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 166–67. For other roles of tribes and their importance, see, for example, the distribution of money to orphans and widows: al-Kindī, *Wulāt*, 304. For an overview of this office and its importance, see P. Crone, "'Arīf," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed.

succeeded as governor by the same ‘Abd al-Malik b. Rifā‘a whom he had dismissed from the office of *ṣāhib al-shurṭa*. Although we do not know whether Ibn Rifā‘a had supported the plot to assassinate the governor, clearly his career had not been ended by his membership in a rebellious family. Moreover, as the contributions of Hannah-Lena Hagemann, Reza Huseini, and Petra M. Sijpesteijn in this dossier show, although the leaders of rebellions were often punished severely, the rank and file and even lower military leaders typically walked free. We even often find members of important Arab families joining multiple successive rebellions.

At first sight, such recidivism could be seen as a sign of a weak caliph facing powerful provincial elites. However, it can also be interpreted as an indication that rebellions were not necessarily perceived as challenging the system or the caliph himself. To understand this point, we can turn to a very similar case in North Africa, in which members of the provincial elite killed the governor whom the caliph had sent. Immediately after assassinating the governor, they sent a letter to the caliph, expressing their loyalty to him despite their act.³⁸ Here, again, it is tempting to analyze the case as a matter of “weak” or “strong” government, but it is important to recognize that plots to kill governors were dealt with depending on the power relations in the particular situation and that the Umayyad political system allowed the reintegration of rebels, even at the very high position of provincial governor.

Rebellions and Other Mechanisms

Keeping in mind the risk involved in the assassination of a governor, we should ask what other options the rebels might have had to deal with the threat facing them. Just a few years before the Fahmī rebellion, a very similar case of a dispute between the governor and the provincial elite was handled very differently by Qurra’s predecessor, ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Malik. ‘Abd Allāh arrived in Egypt in 705 CE with instructions from his father, the caliph, to replace all provincial administrators who were suspected of being loyal to the caliph’s brother and rival for the caliphate, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz. Accordingly, ‘Abd Allāh tried to dismiss the head of police, Mu‘āwiya b. Ḥudayj.³⁹ But this proved a much harder task than the caliph had expected, as Mu‘āwiya appears to have been too powerful to be simply removed from his position. After failing to come up with a sufficient formal reason for deposition, ‘Abd Allāh finally doubled Mu‘āwiya’s stipend and appointed him viceroy of Alexandria. This episode illustrates the complex power play between governors and provincial elites, in which the removal of an influential notable from his position may prove too hard for a governor. What is more, it shows that governors had various ways of resolving disputes and that disputes did not necessarily have to end in a violent confrontation. From Sijpesteijn’s analysis of the rebellion of Ibn al-Jārūd in Iraq we also learn of the ways in which provincial

38. Al-Jahshiyārī, *al-Wuzarā’ wa-l-kuttāb*, ed. M. al-Saqqa et al. (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1983), 57; al-Ṭabarī, *The Empire in Transition: The Caliphates of Sulayman, ‘Umar, and Yazid, AD 715–724/AH 97–105*, trans. D. S. Powers, vol. 24 of *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, ed. E. Yarshater (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 165.

39. On the competition between the caliph and his brother, see: P. M. Sijpesteijn, “An Early Umayyad Papyrus Invitation for the Ḥajj,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 73, no. 2 (2014): 179–90, at 188–90.

elites could go over the governor's head and negotiate with the caliph directly by sending messages to the caliph and demanding the replacement of a certain governor—a not uncommon practice.⁴⁰ Another option that provincial elites could have employed was to meet directly with the caliph. This option was exercised by the abovementioned Maslama b. Mukhallad, who in 667–68 went to the caliph to complain about the governor of Egypt and ended up as the governor himself, according to al-Kindī.⁴¹ Although the right to go and meet the caliph without participating in an official delegation (*wafd*) might have been a privilege reserved for the very few, provincial elites could send letters or use other channels to complain about governors.⁴² Violent confrontation, in other words, could often have been avoided. Violence usually signaled the failure of other efforts to resolve a problem or the inability of the sides to reach agreement. Both governors and provincial elites could have used other existing mechanisms and practices to resolve disagreements before turning to armed confrontation.

Conclusion

This article focused on the confrontation that broke out sometime in 709 or 710 CE between a hundred men led by members of the Banū Fahm and the Umayyad governor of Egypt, Qurra b. Sharik. Some sources attribute the rebellion to ideological or religious motives, but I argue that what we know about the social and political situation in the province in the beginning of the eighth century prompts us to look for alternative explanations. Drawing on al-Kindī's account of the events, I identify competition among elite families in Egypt over material and social privileges as a potential trigger to the act of rebellion. Although we cannot be certain of what the motives of the plotters were, I contend that sociopolitical factors and identities (such as tribal affiliation and membership in the elite) played an important role alongside possible ideological or religious objections in the rebels' decision to assassinate the governor. Revolts, then, were an outcome of governors' reliance on provincial elites to run the province, which resulted in elites' expecting to hold several privileges and offices. When these expectations were not met, elites had the ability to act against the government.

The aim of the Banū Fahm's rebellion was thus both to change the current situation and to communicate displeasure with it. However, I would argue that the conspiracy reflected not dissatisfaction with the system as a whole but rather a specific act undertaken to get rid of a governor who had stripped the family of a privileged position it had grown accustomed to holding. The governor, in turn, perceived the gathering of the tribe and its collective decision to kill him as rebellious acts that deserved to be punished by death.

40. See, for example, Petra Sijpesteijn's contribution in this issue.

41. Al-Kindī, *Wulāt*, 31.

42. See the case of Ayyūb, in which the caliph ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz received complaints about the governor; *ibid.*, 69.

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