Poetry and History

The Value of Poetry in Reconstructing Arab History

Edited by
Ramzi Baalbaki
Saleh Said Agha
Tarif Khalidi
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At the high point of the Fatimids’ two hundred and fifty plus years of rule, their territory spanned large parts of the Islamic realm — all of North Africa, Egypt, Sicily, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, the Ḥijāz, and even the Abbasid heartlands of Iraq, with additional covert mission cells in Byzantine Armenia and Anatolia, Central Asian lands, and places as far away as India.1 Traditional historical sources supply ample data regarding the Fatimids’ appearance on the political scene in the Maghrib, their conquest of Egypt and their move there, and their battles in Syria and Iraq. Internal histories of the Fatimid and Ṭayyibī “daʾwa” even provide some doctrinal commentary. (The term “daʾwa”, which denotes the Fatimid’s religio-political mission of education, proselytizing, and activism, is used frequently in this paper). But neither the external nor the internal histories discuss the motivation steering these conquests, and many questions about whys and wherefores remain — such as why the Fatimids moved east from North Africa rather than continuing there or going north into neighboring Spain; in what manner they differed from other more opportunistic and locally ambitious North African dynasties like the Aghlabids whom they replaced; and the nature of the claims they made in their challenge of the Abbasid caliphate. We could turn to the Fatimid theological and philosophical tracts for answers, but although these provide detailed expositions about the imam’s role in the spiritual and temporal leadership of the world, they are less concerned with factual details of political history. It is primarily the literary materials, and particularly Fatimid poetry, that systematically bring together both categories of information, the mundane and the abstract. There are limitations, of
course, to the use of poetry as a historical source, for it is dense and intense,
and it alludes to actions and ideas without actually spelling out a cohesive
narrative of events. But when utilized alongside the traditional sources,
the poetry tells us what specific historical events mean in their ideological
framework, connecting military actions with the doctrines that drove them.
In this paper, I analyze the verse of four major poets spanning the heyday
of Fatimid power in the 4th/10th and 5th/11th centuries — the caliph-imam
al-Qāʿim bi-Amr Allāh (d. 334/946), the court poet Ibn Hāniʾ al-Andalusī
(d. 362/973), the royal prince Tamīm b. al-Muʿizz (d. 374/984), and the
chief dāʿ ī (missionary and activist) al-Muʿayyad fī l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d.
470/1078) — with a view to identifying the lands the Fatimids sought to
rule, and understanding the multifaceted mahdist ideology of the imamate
that underpinned their gradual conquest of large parts of the Islamic empire.

Within the Fatimid poetic tradition, certain types of poetry and particular
brands of poets provide data particularly relevant to hegemonic aspirations.
While genres such as wine and love poetry have little or no bearing on affairs
of state, poems composed in praise of the caliph-imams (or certain of their
commanders), and verse written in challenge to the Abbasids, offer much
insight on this issue. Among these, the lines composed by poets closely
connected with the Fatimid daʿwa and its leadership — particularly our four
poets noted above — afford us precious inside information about military
agendas and ideological rationales.2

At the time of their original dissemination, Fatimid panegyrics and poems
of challenge were a valuable public relations tool. Giving voice to aspirations
of hegemony, they also played a role in realizing them. Suzanne Stetkevych
has shown how the poems of Akhṭal in the Umayyad period, those of Abū
tammām and Mutanabbī in the Abbasid era, and the verse of Ibn Darrāj al-
Qaṣṭallī in Andalusia, legitimized the ruling party.3 There are differences
between the ideological bases of the Fatimids and those other dynasties,
and these differences are discussed later in the concluding remarks; but in
a similarly legitimizing vein, the panegyrics of the Fatimid poets verbally
confronted enemies, proselytized among the uninitiated or vacillating, and
uplifted hopes among loyal followers and subjects. We know for certain that
the Fatimid poems were read and heard by a public audience across political
and sectarian lines, for poets in Baghdad composed formal retort verses
(muʿāraḍas) confronting Qaʿim’s own,4 Ibn Hāniʾ expressed satisfaction at
his own poems reaching Baghdad and Syria,5 and Muʿayyad claimed that his
poetry propagated the Fatimid daʿwa.6

In addition to the few collected dīwāns extant (including those of three of
our poets: Ibn Hāniʾ, Tamīm, and Muʿayyad), a quantity of Fatimid poetry
(such as the verse of Qaʿim) is preserved only in the later synthetic histories,
mostly da wa sources, such as al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān’s (d. 363/974) Iftitāḥ al-
daʿwa and dāʾī Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn’s (d. 872/1468) ʿUyūn al-akhbār. Several poems are also recorded in the Muqaffâ of the Mamluk historian Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442), and sporadic verse citations are found in his other works as well as in the writings of his fellow historians. But the authors of these medieval narratives quote poems for the most part as simple historical artifacts, as records of literary events that have political or religio-political bearings, without analyzing them for historical data, much less for issues of ideology and motivation.

Modern scholars of Fatimid poetry have established that a significant proportion of its themes were devoted to politico-historical and doctrinal issues. In his book on Ibn Hāniʾ’s poetry, Muḥammad al-Yaʿlāwī discussed at length these two aspects of his dīwān; R. Rubinacci in the Cambridge History of Arabic Literature mentioned the highly political nature of Fatimid verse in general; ʿAbdalraḥmān Hijāzī discussed in some detail the political discourse of Fatimid verse; and in my own work on Muʾayyad’s daʿwa poetry, I analyzed its theological ideas, and constructed the poet’s life and career largely from his verse. Moreover, as Muḥammad Kāmil Ḥusayn correctly pointed out in his seminal work on Fatimid belles-lettres, it was primarily due to the doctrinal references in Fatimid poetry that the succeeding Ayyubids suppressed it in a radical Sunnī backlash against the ideology it espoused. A case in point is the Ayyubid scribe ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī, who, as he himself tells us, deliberately omitted from his anthology the praise poetry of Āmir’s dāʾī Ibn al-Ḍāyf for its “ideological exaggeration” (li-farṭi ghuluwwihi), and of Ẓāfīr al-Ḥaddād, for his being among the “panegyrists of the Egyptian” (muddāḥ al-Miṣrī); this, despite the high quality of their verse, again as ʿImād himself took pains to note. As this polemical source and the studies cited above confirm, many Fatimid poems combined political and religious themes. This combination is clearly visible in the verse of the poets who referenced the conquest aspirations of the Fatimids.

In their celebration of Fatimid victories, poets focused on two major religio-political themes. Firstly, they elucidated the Fatimid accession to power and subsequent expansion as a fulfillment of God’s promises (waʿd) of victory (fatḥ) and victorious aid (naṣr) to believers made through the Qurʾān, and through the words of earlier prophets; together with Muḥammad’s pronouncements regarding the coming of the righteous savior or ‘mahdī’ in his line, who would establish light and justice in the world. Several Islamic movements, both Sunnī and Shīʿa, legitimized hegemony through mahdist arguments, but the Fatimids were arguably one of the most successful in length and compass of rule. Nuʿmān in his Sharḥ al-akhbār provided the most comprehensive Fatimid recounting of mahdist hadīth (and prophecies attributed to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and the early Shīʿa imams) foretelling the realization of the imam’s terrestrial power, which may be summarized in seven main points: (1) The
mahdī would be from the progeny of Fāṭima (daughter of Muhammad and wife of ʿAlī). (2) He would appear at the end of the third century A.H., as (3) the sun rising from the West (al-maghrib). (4) He would conquer the “eastern and western lands of the earth” (مَقَارِنَة الأَرْضَ وَمَغَارِبَهَا). (5) He would fill the earth with “justice and righteousness” (عَدْلًا وَقِسْطًا) after it had been enveloped in “oppression and tyranny” (جُوُرًا وَظَلْمًا). (6) God had pledged that all this would come to pass at the decreed time. (7) Some of these ḥadīth add that the Mahdī would conquer Constantinople and Antioch, namely, the Byzantine territories. Fatimid poets consistently referenced these motifs in their panegyrics, usually several in any given poem. The second major theme they focused on (and which they connected to the first broad theme of messianism) was that of righting past oppression. The Fatimids understood their victory as just retribution for the blood of the family of the Prophet, particularly of the Prophet’s grandson and the Fatimids’ own ancestor Ḥusayn, spilled collectively by the ruling Abbasids, and their spiritual forbears: the Umayyads and the first three Sunnī caliphs. This reckoning, too, the Fatimid poets depicted as inevitable, a realization of God’s promise. These two broad doctrinal underpinnings of Fatimid conquest aspirations — a mahdist ideology and a quest for retribution — directed the physical path of their hegemonic strategy.

The Fatimids’ aspirations for temporal leadership were based on the spiritual authority they claimed was vested in them by God. Being the “absolute (i.e., perfect) human being” in any age, the Imam of the Age was for the entire human race of his time the sole temporal ruler and spiritual master. Not just a sovereign who held the scepter of worldly power, he was the exclusive and direct conduit of God’s communication to humankind, the divinely guided guide. His seeking of conquest was thus not a pursuit of power, but rather a ruling ordained by the Creator. Even when his temporal authority was not manifest, all God’s realms in reality still belonged to him. But when the time was right, he would rule — “God’s kingdom would come through his pious servants.” The Fatimid poets’ underpinning of world conquest through mahdist motifs is based on this larger ideology. Through just governance and pious guidance, they say, the Imam’s rule would fulfill humankind’s quest for godly living in this world and salvation in the hereafter.

In the following pages, I explore through the eyes of the poets (chronologically, and supplemented by historical, theological, and other literary prose sources) the confluence of the Fatimids’ ideology and history as they arrived on the political scene, established their rule, and expanded their territory, and the doctrinal reasons for their continuing hopes, even as their power declined. (All translations — of poetry and other materials — are my own.) I conclude with a summary analysis of the geographic compass and doctrinal underpinnings of Fatimid aspirations of conquest.
The Establishment of the Fatimid Empire in North Africa: Verses by Pre-Empire Poets

Towards the end of the 3rd century A.H. (beginning of 10th c. C.E.), decades before the establishment of their empire in North Africa, the ancestors of the Fatimid caliphs lived in hiding in Salamiyya in northern Syria. From here, they sent dāʿīs to proselytize in secret to far-flung places of the Islamic world and beyond.

Among these dāʿīs was one Abū l-Qāsim Ibn Ḥawshab whom they sent in 268/881 to the Yemen, where he had much success and came to be known as the “Manṣūr al-Yaman” (the Victor of Yemen). Nuʿmān in his Iftitāḥ al-dāʿ wa tells us that when the dāʿī was praised with this epithet, he quoted a line by an anonymous earlier poet saying that the title belonged more accurately to “the manṣūr (victor) from [the prophet] Aḥmad’s progeny” who would rise and defeat the Abbasids:

When the manṣūr (victor) from the Progeny of Aḥmad appears, say to the Abbasids, “Get up [to leave] and be fearful!”

The messianic underpinnings of the Fatimid movement in its pre-empire stage — in the reference to the appearance of the manṣūr — are evident in this verse. For in addition to the appellation mahdī (the rightly guided one), the ḥadīth cited by Nuʿmān alternatively referred to the awaited savior as the qāʾim (the one who would stand forth), or the manṣūr (the one aided with God’s victory) — the appellation used in this verse. (The fact that the first three Fatimid caliph-imams, Mahdī, Qāʾim, and Manṣūr, used these very epithets in their regnal titles is evidence of their subscription to this doctrine. Indeed, the title “Fāṭimid” may also be taken, among other things, as a mahdist appellation, for, as Nuʿmān’s reports maintain, the mahdī was expected to be a descendant of Fāṭima.)

Dāʿī Abū l-Qāsim had sent in 280/893 a fellow missionary named Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Shīʿī to North Africa. Dāʿī Abū ʿAbdallāh had great success in converting large portions of the Maghribī populace (particularly the Kutāma Berbers) to his cause. Lending voice to the mahdist context of pledge fulfillment and establishment of justice, he engraved his signatory seal ring with the Qur’ānic verse “The word of your Lord has been fulfilled in truth and justice…” (وَقَالَ رَبِّي كَلَّمَتُكَ رَبُّكُ صَدَقًا وَعَدَلاً).

In North Africa, Shiʿite poets not apparently connected with the Fatimid daʿwa had also anticipated the coming of a mahdī at the end of the third hijri century, as demonstrated by their references to mahdist ḥadīth. In 280/893, the
very year dāʾī Abū ʿAbdallāh arrived in Kutāma territory or shortly thereafter, a poet named Muḥammad b. Ramaḍān from Billīzma (in the north of present-day Algeria) prophesied: “The days of the empire of the qāʾīm, the mahdī, are imminent — the [prophetic] Tradition has foretold them!” A little before 289/902, an elderly shaykh from Tunis named al-Ḥarbī al-ʿArabī declared: “God’s sun will rise from the West … a man from the sons of Fāṭima … [will] fill God’s Earth with justice.” In the following decades and centuries, poets of the Fatimid dynasty would tap into this more general mahdist tradition; they would consistently refer to the various themes of mahdist hadīth and highlight the mahdist titles; in their treatment of empire-related topics, they would combine the mahdist discourse with Qur’ānic vocabulary of imminent victory to produce a specific Fatimid religio-political vision.

Consolidation of the North African Empire and Campaigns to Egypt in the Reign of the Caliph-Imam al-Mahdī bi-L-lāh (r. 297-322/910-934): Poems by the Crown Prince Qāʾīm

In 296/909, the Fatimid dāʾī Abū ʿAbdallāh defeated the ruling Aghlabids, who were vassals of the Abbasids and the major power in North Africa at the time. Meanwhile, the scion of the Prophet’s family who would become the first Fatimid caliph-imam had traveled secretly from Salamiyya to Sijilmāsa in the western Maghrib, whence Abū ʿAbdallāh conveyed him to the conquered Aghlabid capital of Raqqaḍa. There in early 297/909, a large portion of the notables of the Maghrib pledged allegiance to him as the Mahdī. The Fatimid empire was born. Upon Mahdī’s investiture, the former Aghlabid court poet Saʿdūn al-Warjīnī (or Warjīlī) congratulated him with a clear mahdist reference, proclaiming that all Muslims had won with his triumph, for they had “won his … justice.” Over the next sixty-three years, the first four Fatimid caliph-imams would consolidate their control of the Maghrib, but they had very early begun to look eastward. In 302/914, just five years after Mahdī’s inauguration, the crown-prince and future caliph-imam Qāʾīm led the first Fatimid army east to Egypt; in 306/918, he commanded a second Egyptian campaign. He did not take Egypt from its Ikhshīdid rulers, but continued to push an agenda for its conquest; his poetry confirms these hopes.

In four poems composed in the context of his Egyptian campaigns, Qāʾīm lengthily expounded ideologically rooted ambitions of dominion. In each of these poems, he addressed a different audience, but the (mahdist) message was the same: The Fatimid caliph-imams were the descendants of the Prophet and the righteous leaders of the Muslims; they would defeat the Abbasids and conquer the East; and God would fulfill His pledge to the prophets through them.
In a 23-verse bāʾiyya composed during his initial military expedition to Egypt, Qāʾim aggressively questioned people living under the Abbasids about the validity of their Islamic ritual practice in the absence of a legitimate imam. The questions explained why Qāʾim was going to conquer them: Their ritual prayer, their hajj, their fighting [of the Byzantines] — in all of these deeds, he said, they were led by ungodly people, “drinkers of wine” (vv. 8-9). After the Prophet Muḥammad, he asked, then ʿAlī, then Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, then the noble early imams, was it possible that the imam of the Muslims, the one who was charged with establishing God’s religion on earth, would be an upstart rascal (vv. 11-12)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Arabic Text</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>أيا أهل شرق الله زالت حُلُومكم أم احتدعت من قلّة الفهم والأدب</td>
<td>O people of God’s East, have your minds been lost, or have they been deceived through paucity of understanding and morals?!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>فويلحكم خالفتم الحق والهدى ومن خاد عن أم الهدية لم يصب</td>
<td>Woe to you! You have opposed truth and right-guidance, and whosoever turns away from the mother-road of guidance will not hit the mark.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>صلاتكم مع من وحجكم بمن وغزوكم فيمن أجبوا بلا كذب</td>
<td>Who leads your prayers? Who leads your hajj? Under whose [leadership] do you battle? Answer without lying!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>صلاتكم والحج والغز ويلكم بشرا حمر عاكفين على الريب</td>
<td>Your ritual prayer, your hajj, your battle — Woe to you! — are [led by] drinkers of wine, men who are incessant in their performance of unlawful deeds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>أفكر في أفعضالك وأموركم وفي دون ما عائِنْتَه أعزب العبب</td>
<td>I ponder your acts and your affairs, and a fraction of what I have seen produces utmost wonder:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|11| أبغض النبي الله ثم ابن عمه وسبطك والهادين والسادة التجب| Is it possible that after the Prophet of God, his paternal uncle’s son [ʿAlī], his two grandsons [Ḥasan and Ḥusayn], and the rightly guiding ones, the noble chiefs [imams in Ḥusayn’s line],
Qāʿīm went on to state that he had long endured this subversion (presumably in the sense that he was the heir of the true imams who, over many centuries, had endured it); until finally, upon God’s resolve to strengthen His religion, he rose up to fight (vv. 13-14), calling upon the people of the West, who answered (vv. 16-18):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I forbore, and in forbearance is success, when perhaps another commander might have rushed in — mistakenly, and without hitting the mark;</th>
<th>v. 13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>صبرتُ وفي الصبر النجاحُ وَزَمَّا تعجلَ ذو أُمرٍ فَآَخَطَا ولم يُصِبْ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>until such time when God decided to strengthen His rule and I stood up to establish God’s religion, anticipating [His heavenly reward].</td>
<td>v. 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>إلى أن أرادَ اللَّه إعْزَازَ أُمَّرهُ فَقُمْتُ بِدِينِ الله قوَّةَ مُخْتَسِبَ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I called out to the people of the West, being a man trusting [in God], generous in his giving; he who follows him will not lose!</td>
<td>v. 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>وناديتَ أهل الغرب دعوةً واثِقٍ كريمِ العطاءٍ مَنْ تَوَلَّهُ لم يَخِبْ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I marched towards your lands bringing God’s cavalry; the face of death shining through gaps in veils.</td>
<td>v. 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>وسَرَتْ بِخِيلِ الله نَفْعًا أُردِضَكَ وقد لَّا خَوْجٌ عَلَى الْهَوْت مِنْ خَلَلِ الحُجَب</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next, Qāʿīm brought up another fundamental motif in the Fatimid ideology of conquest, and one that all later Fatimid poets would loudly reiterate: God had fulfilled His pledge (waʿd), bringing “aid” (nasr) and “victory” (fath) (v. 21). He combined in this line references to three key Qur’anic concepts: victory verses, such as “Aid from God and victory are nigh!” (نَصْرٌ مِنَ اللَّه وَفَتْحٌ قَرِيْب; فَتْحٌ Q 87:26) verses asserting the veracity of God’s pledge, such as “[This is] God’s pledge — God does not renege on His pledge” (وَعَزَّ اللَّه لَا يَخْلُفُ اللَّه وَعْدَه; Q 2:261) and verses declaring that the godfearing would “inherit” the lands, such as “… the earth will be inherited by my pious servants” (أَنَّ الأُرْضَ بَرَيْنِهِ عِبَادِيِ الصَّالِحُون; Q 3:29).
Until, when the [triumph] that I had been promised arrived, God’s aid (naṣr) hastened with victory (fath).

By the grace of God, that which you know came to pass — I won the arrow of success, victorious aid (naṣr), and conquest (ghalab — also a Qur’ānic term).

This will be my custom — as long as I remain — and your custom, so watch out for a war that blazes like flames of fire.

Presumably because of its challenge to the ideological bases of Abbasid rule, coupled with the military fright afforded the Abbasid vassals by Qāʾim’s attacks upon Egypt, this poem appears to have made quite a stir in the eastern lands. As mentioned earlier, Maqrīzī recorded in the Muqaffā indignant response poems in the same rhyme and meter — muʿāraḍa — by some of the “chief [Abbasid] poets”, including Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī (d. c. 335/946) and Abū Bakr b. Durayd (223-312/838-933).29

Also during his first expedition to Egypt, Qāʾim sent two poem-letters to his father Mahdī promising victory over Baghdad. He opened a 17-verse lāmiyya sent from Alexandria with the declaration that he, Qāʾim, was a sword for God and for the Prophet’s descendent [Mahdī] (v.1), and that he would not cease to strike until he made God’s justice manifest in Baghdad (v. 3). He used the next few lines (vv. 4-7) to laud Mahdī’s rightly guiding role, as well as his inheritance of the “robes of Revelation”, in a deliberate blending of the religious ideas in these praise verses with the political agenda of conquest expressed in verses before and after. He went on to name the countries he had on his list of future conquests, saying that his father had sent him to take Egypt, Syria, Khurasan, and the two Iraqs (v. 8), and he would vanquish, more generally, the West and the East (vv. 9-10). After some lines of fakhr, Qāʾim ended in a beautifully flowing verse with the by-now familiar promise that God would fulfill in Mahdī His pledge to the prophets (v. 16) of victories (futūḥ) and aid (naṣr) at the banks of the Nile, the Euphrates, and the Tigris (v. 17).30
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Arabic Text</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>v. 1</td>
<td>أنا سيفُ اللهِ وابنِ رسولِ اللهِ قطبُ الهدى وللناس قبلاً</td>
<td>I am the sword of God and of God’s Messenger’s descendant, pole of right-guidance, prayer-direction (qibla) for the people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 3</td>
<td>يُصَلِّي القُرْنُ دُونَ بغداد حتَّى يُظْهَرَ اللهُ بالعرافِينَ عدله</td>
<td>Fighting will focus on Baghdad, until God manifests His justice in Iraq and Persia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 4</td>
<td>يا إمامَ الهدى ومه طيب الله أفرعه وطيب أصله</td>
<td>O imam of right-guidance, he whose branches God has perfumed, whose roots He has perfumed…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 8</td>
<td>ثم أنْتَحتني لمصصر وشام وخراسان والعرافين جمله</td>
<td>You sent me to Egypt and Syria and Khurāsān, Iraq, and Persia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 9</td>
<td>فآنا سيفك الذي يفلك الهم فـلا نبْوَة له إنْ تفُلْه</td>
<td>I am your sword which splits the skull. If you unsheathe it, nothing can blunt it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 10</td>
<td>يفوق الغرب والمشرق منه وتكل الجموع من أنْ تغلبه</td>
<td>The West and the East fear it. Full armies are too weak to dull it. …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 16</td>
<td>فانتظر يا خليفة الله ما قد وعد الله فيه من قبل رسله</td>
<td>So await, O Caliph of God, that which God has pledged in you to Messengers earlier:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 17</td>
<td>من فتوح تلقاك بالعر والنصم لدى النيل والفرات ودجله</td>
<td>of victories that will meet you with [His] might and aid at the Nile, the Euphrates, and the Tigris!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the juxtaposition of religious and political themes in these verses, we see a clear link between the aspiration to conquer Baghdad and the Fatimid mahdist ideology of the imam as the only just and rightful ruler of the Islamic empire. The other poem-letter that al-Qāʾīm sent to Mahdī from Alexandria began and ended each of its eleven verses with the word “Allāh”, emphasizing the poet’s dependence on and support from God in his military endeavors. Qāʾīm prophesied victory in the East and West (v. 5), for God had decreed that this was the time for the emergence of “His mahdī” — the epithet, combined with its pronoun, clearly implying a righteous ruling of the world (v. 8).  

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31. v. 31
32. v. 32
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Arabic Text</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>v. 5</td>
<td>ﷲ فَتَّاحُ شَرْقَهُ ﷲ وَغُرَابُ طُرًّا يَفْتَحُ ﷲ وَالغَرْبَ ﷲ ﷲ أَعْطَانَا الَّذِي ﷲ دَرَى ﷲ غَطِيَّةٌ ﷲ بِيَّااللَّهُ</td>
<td>God will conquer the East for us and the West — God will conquer all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 6</td>
<td>लाَّسَيِّمَا ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ كُدْرَى ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ</td>
<td>God has given us [the victories] you see, a gift that God has been generous with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 8</td>
<td>ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ</td>
<td>God has revealed his Mahdī, His proof — God has made him manifest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 11</td>
<td>ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ ﷲ</td>
<td>God is my sufficiency, after all this. How good is the one whose sufficiency is God!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 316/928, a decade after the second expedition to Egypt, Qāʾim marched west to put down rebels at Wādī Ṣalāf near Tahert. In a 43-verse lāmiyya in a fakhr mode addressed to his followers, he spelled out in great detail hopes for larger (eastern) victories and their theological substrata. In the introductory segment (vv. 1-12), he offered greetings and praise to the progeny of the Prophet, then vaunted his own descent from Muḥammad, ’Alī and Fāṭima, a construction foreshadowing the ideological base of the poem. In the next twelve lines (vv. 13-21) he affirmed that he had thus far purified the West; this segment served as a bridge to the key theme of eastern conquest. In the first five verses (vv. 22-27) of that final section, he called “the followers of Truth” (shīʿat al-ḥaqq) to arms, to answer “God’s dāʿī” (dāʿī Allāh), viz., himself; to join with his cavalry in taking Egypt and then Iraq, for out of all stopping places, he declared, “Baghdad is my goal” (Baghdādu hammī) 33. |
to gain from me that which you desire:
protection from every fear and apprehension?

If you have heard the caller (dāʿ ī) to the Truth, then come to me in haste, swooping like hawks.

My cavalry has come to you hastening, traversing the lands of God, lands with many stages,
to the soil of Egypt and Iraq, and beyond —
For Baghdad is my goal, among all stopping places.

Next, Qāʿīm supplied vital information about his reasoning and goals in the endeavor for conquest: he would bring down the Abbasids’ injustice (jawr, note mahdist term); moreover, it was but self-defense, for the Abbasids sought to kill the Fatimids. He continued from the earlier line about targeting Baghdad thus:

There is glaring oppression and sedition in [Baghdad], and its people are like camels pasturing without direction.

They harbor enmity for us unjustly, and desire to kill us —
O how many bitter cups of bereavement have they made us swallow [in the past]!

After that, Qāʿīm provided a list of the lands that he meant to conquer: first and foremost, Iraq (“Babylonia”, emphasized by deliberate repetition of the name, v. 30), as well as the Syrian towns of Raqqā (lit. al-Raqqatayn, comprising the adjoining cities of Raqqā and Rāfiqā in northern Mesopotamia on the Euphrates near Aleppo, later known collectively as Raqqā, v. 32), Bālis (in Syria, between Aleppo and Raqqā, v. 32), Damascus (v. 39), Ḥimṣ, Salamiyya, and the frontier towns (thughūr and maʿāqil), up to the highlands of Armenia (v. 40); also Kabul (v. 37). All this will happen in battles, he promised, just like the earlier battle in Egypt which he had already won (v.
In talking of these battles, Qāʿim produced yet another rationale for the overthrow of the Abbasids: blood revenge for the Prophet’s grandson and Qāʿim’s forbear Ḥusayn, who had been slain by the Umayyads — the Abbasids’ culpability arising from their ‘spiritual descent’ from the Umayyads, as elaborated in some later Fatimid poems (details shortly). Note that the verse about remembering Ḥusayn (v. 35) is linked to the line about the Euphrates (v. 34), for it was at the banks of this river that Ḥusayn and his small band of family and followers were denied water for three days, and then killed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Go forward in the name of God, O my cavalry, and gird your loins [for the march] to Babylon, until you dismount at Babylon.</th>
<th>v. 30</th>
<th>في سبيل على اسم الله الحليم وشمسري إلى بابل حتى يختلى ببابيل</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A day [of victory awaits] us at Raqqa, Rāfiqa, and Bālis, in which their necks will pile up, ...</td>
<td>v. 32</td>
<td>ويوم لنا في الراقتين وبالس يكون لهم فيها امتياز трائل</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when they gather from each woodland and come forth in haste from the opposite bank of the Euphrates.</td>
<td>v. 34</td>
<td>إذا أجمعوا من كل غاب وأقفاوا على الفور من شاطي الفرات المقابل</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I remembered Ḥusayn, my eyes filled with tears and I said: I shall not forget my forbears!</td>
<td>v. 35</td>
<td>ذكرت حسني فاستنحت مدامعي وقلت فإني لن أسنى أوطاني</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will kill each leader and follower among [the oppressors], I will leave them all prostrated among the fallen rocks.</td>
<td>v. 36</td>
<td>ساقف منهم كل رأس وتباع وأتركهم ضرعي بمقلى الجنادل</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My cavalry will night-march beyond the Nile, seeking the enemies of religion, until it rests in [far away] Kabul.</td>
<td>v. 37</td>
<td>وشمري جهولي من وزا النيل تبغي عدى الدين حتى تستقر بكابل</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I were to categorize all my battles, my explanation would be long, as would my epistles.</td>
<td>v. 38</td>
<td>ولو أتني صنفت كل وقائي لطال بها شرجي وطالت رسائي</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
O how many [will lie] prostrated among the rocks in Damascus; how many bereaved mourners, clusters of widows, in Ḥimṣ and Salamiyya, and the frontier towns, and those living in them, up to the mountains of Armenia, and the inhabitants of the frontier forts.

Like a battle day in Egypt, [so grave that] “its child is not summoned” [to participate], when my cavalry hastens, and my troops come forth.

| v. 39 | (وكم بدمشق من سريع مجدل ومن تأكل باك وجمع أرامل وحمنس وسلم والثوار ومن بها إلى نجد أرمين وأهل المعاقل) |
| v. 40 | (شلم والثغر وممن بها كيوم بمسر لا ينادي ولده إذا أزمعت خيلي وجائت جحاقي) |
| v. 41 | (فمن كان في سلمي ففي الأمن سادر ومزمى المعادي في جميع المقاتلين) |

Qāʿim then closed the poem by making a statement about his intention to give security to all who came peacefully and to strike all those who would fight him (v. 43):

| v. 43 | (فمن كان في سلمي ففي الأمن سادر ومزمى المعادي في جميع المقاتلين) |

As we have seen in these poems, Qāʿim consistently referred to the continuity of the imamate and the genealogy of the Fatimid imam. Doctrinal treatises of the dynasty provide further details of the cyclical conception of Fatimid religio-political ideology, and of the inevitable arrival of God’s aid for his vicegerent on earth at the right time, that Qāʿim’s poetry (and the poetry of our later poets) was grounded in. Conceiving of the imam as the only true salvation guide for the entire world, the authors of these works claimed that he was also its sole rightful political leader. The imamate continued in an unbroken chain from the primordial imam, father appointing son, and Muḥammad and ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib were in his line. Cosmic cycles of time were rooted largely in the manifestation or concealment of the Imam of the Age, but whether he was manifest among the people or concealed, he was the link between God and humans, his physical existence was necessary, and he was the possessor of God’s trusteeship, the true caliph-imam.

Other Shiʿa dynasties in the tenth and eleventh centuries C.E., such as the Hamdanids and Buyids, acknowledged the supremacy of a Sunnī caliph, but the Fatimids rejected the claims of the Abbasids, and declared themselves
the only rightful incumbents of the leadership of the Islamic world. Indeed, Qāʾim himself was offered suzerainty over northern Egypt by the Abbasid commander Muʾnis if he would accept the overlordship of Baghdad — Qāʾim refused in a biting letter asserting his own superior claim to the Islamic caliphate. The Fatimids claimed to be the inheritors of the spiritual and temporal authority of their forefathers Muḥammad and ʿAlī. With this mandate, declared their poets, the Fatimids would defeat the Abbasid usurpers and restore the true leadership of Islam, first in the lands of the central Islamic empire, then beyond in the frontier lands of the Byzantines as well as India and Sind, and finally in “the eastern and western lands of the earth.”

Qāʾim’s verse is our weightiest source of information about Fatimid hegemonic aspirations. Not only does it form the largest set of poems from this earliest period of their rule, but being from the pen of the imam-to-be, it constitutes the most direct record of how the Fatimid leadership — indeed, the Fatimid caliph-imams themselves — conceived of their messianic role.

Preserving the Empire from the Onslaught of the Khārijite Rebel “Dajjāl” during the Reigns of al-Qāʾim bi-Amr Allāh (r. 322-334/934-946) and al-Manṣūr bi-L-lāh (r. 334-342/946-953): Sermons by the Caliph-Imam al-Manṣūr bi-L-lāh

In 322/934, six years after Qāʾim composed his lāmiyya, Mahdī died and Qāʾim succeeded to the caliphate-imamate. In contrast to his earlier public role as the supreme military commander who consolidated the West for the Fatimids and began the push eastward, Qāʾim remained during his entire twelve-year caliphate in complete seclusion in the palace city of Mahdiyya. Also, he composed no more poems, or at least none that have come down to us.

Towards the end of Qāʾim’s reign began the tumultuous four-year rebellion of the Khārijite Berbers, led by Abū Yazīd Makhład b. Kaydād — the “Dajjāl” (The Great Deceiver or The Antichrist), as he is known in Fatimid sources — which almost overthrew the Fatimid caliphate. Qāʾim sent his son and successor al-Manṣūr bi-L-lāh (whom he appointed publicly at that time) into the battlefield against the rebels. He himself died soon thereafter, and Manṣūr concealed his father’s death for reasons of political prescience. After a campaign that lasted for two hard years, Manṣūr defeated the Dajjāl in 336/947. Upon the captured rebel’s death a few days later, he made known to the people his father’s demise and proclaimed his own caliphate.

While in pursuit of the Dajjāl, Manṣūr had composed and sent two poignant poems to his son and successor Muʾizz, in which he detailed the physical hardships he faced on the battle trail, and emphasized his willingness to endure them for God; but these poems contained no larger aspirations of
hegemony. Similarly, none of the many poems in praise of Manṣūr composed by the eminent dāʿ ī Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman, who was present during the campaign, revealed such hopes. The lacuna probably derives from the focus of Fatimid attention inward in those two years on the preservation and defense of the daʿwa and state. During this period of civil unrest, the goal of further expansion was on hold; it had to be, for the heart of the empire was under attack.

However, at one point during the campaign in Muḥarram 335/946, when Manṣūr won a significant victory over the Dajjāl’s forces and evicted the rebel from the important town of Qayrawān, he reminded the people that Fatimid imperial desires were still very much alive. Farhat Dachraoui argues that unlike Mahdī and Qāʾim, who thought of themselves as Easterners, Manṣūr and Muʿizz (until the very end of his caliphate), being born and bred in the West, had no aspirations to the East. But Manṣūr’s sermons and letters (and those of Muʿizz, as we shall see) provide evidence to the contrary. This was not a personal identification. It was a dynastic ideology. In a public victory epistle addressed ostensibly to (the deceased) Qāʾim, Manṣūr wrote that God had strengthened the religion of Qāʾim’s forebear, the Prophet Muḥammad (in contrast to Manṣūr’s earlier private poems, the aspirational verbiage of this epistle undoubtedly had a propaganda context, as the missive was “to be read out on the pulpit”): “Today,” he wrote, “the eastern and western lands of the earth have been conquered!” We can read from this line that the Dajjāl was the major impediment to the Fatimid imperial mission; once he had been removed, they could get back to their larger plans and move on eastward. Almost a year later, on the occasion of ʿĪd al-Adḥā in 335/947, during what was to be the final siege of the Dajjāl in the Kiyāna mountains, Manṣūr preached a sermon in which he again spoke publicly of wider ambitions for dominion. In the ending prayer segment, Manṣūr supplicated: “May God accept my [good deeds] and yours. May He decree for me and for you [performance of] the pilgrimage to His Holy House, an arrival at His great meeting places and His noble stations, by strengthening our aid, bringing our affair to completion, and fulfilling His earlier pledge to us. Verily, He does not break [His] pledge, and what He intends does not elude Him.”

The juxtaposition of the two entreaties (the plea for an opportunity to perform ḥajj alongside the plea for God to fulfill His pledge) makes clear that this was not just an appeal for the opportunity to fulfill the religious obligation of the pilgrimage. It was certainly that, but in addition it was also a prayer for political and military control over the sacred cities. This interpretation is further borne out by Manṣūr’s words to an eminent North African Ismāʿīlī
judge on this same day. The Mamluk historian Ibn Žāfir reports that the qāḍī Abū Jaʿfar Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Marwarūdhī told him the following:

“I recited to [Maṇṣūr] some verses in which I encouraged him to take the pledge for his son Muʿizz. [Maṇṣūr] replied: ‘Indeed, I hope that prayers will be invoked for [Muʿizz] upon the pulpits of Mecca and Medina, and elsewhere, in addition to these places [in North Africa].’ And that came to pass.”

Maṇṣūr did not mention the Abbasids or Baghdad directly, but his prayers and hopes for control of Mecca and Medina were an explicit articulation of hopes for dominion over the heartlands of the Islamic empire.

The Conquest of Egypt and Hegemony over Syro-Palestine and the Ḥijāz during the Reign of al-Muʿizz li-Dīn Allāh (r. 342-365/953-975): Poems by the Court Poet Ibn Hāniʾ al-Andalusī

Maṇṣūr died in 342/953. In the first ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā sermon his son and successor al-Muʿizz li-Dīn Allāh delivered after his father’s death, he too prayed for the opportunity for ḥajj, spelling out clearly the connection between such a plea and aspirations of dominion. Praying that he reach the holy places “with his banners”, he asked God (just as Qāʾim and Maṇṣūr had) to fulfill His pledge to his forefathers promising such a victory:

O my God, help me with your victory-giving aid. Grant me success over your enemies, revivifying religion and giving might to the creed of Muḥammad, chief of the messengers. Give us the opportunity to visit his grave, to ascend his pulpit, to reside in his abode, to undertake the ḥajj to your Sacred House, to stand in those noble places with our banners, having renewed our might and the might of our followers — at a time when you have helped us and them with your victory-giving aid, honored us with triumph, given us victory over the party of oppressors, and humbled for us the necks of the disobedient rebels. A pledge came forth from you of old to [our] forebears and progenitors — and your pledge will never be broken, your command never turned away. But let us accept and submit to what you decree, [whether you] advance or postpone [our victory].

For the first seventeen years of Muʿizz’s reign, Fatimid fleets and cavalry consolidated the dynasty’s authority in North Africa and the Mediterranean. They were led by his Slavic general al-Qāʾid Jawhar al-Ṣiqillī. During Jawhar’s western campaign in 347/958 or 348/959, the eminent Andalusian
panegyrist Muhammad b. Hāniʾ first made contact with the Fatimids.\footnote{47}

Ibn Hāniʾ sent one of his earliest praise poems of Muʿizz to the caliph-imam in 351/962 or thereabouts, the year the Byzantines raided Aleppo, Antioch, and other frontier towns, then controlled by the Abbasids. From the very beginning of his acquaintance with the Fatimids, this professional poet got right to the heart of their larger political agenda. He declared that Syria was overrun and every place not under Muʿizz’s protection was embattled (vv. 32-35), but that very soon, even in distant Armenia, the cross would relinquish its control (v. 55). The clear implication was that the Abbasids (and their Hamdanid vassals) just weren’t up to the job; the Fatimids were needed to protect Islam and its domains. In sarcastic derision of both the Byzantines and the Abbasids, Ibn Hāniʾ addressed Muʿizz thus:\footnote{48}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have not seen a visitor of enemies like your sword — Is there greeting and welcome among Byzantine skulls?</th>
<th>v. 24</th>
<th>ولَمْ أَرَ زَوَّاراً كَسيفك للعَدْى فَهلْ عِندَ هام الْرُّوْمِ أَهل وَتْرُحِيبُ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perhaps what lures the [Armenian Church Patriarch] Catholicos to Aleppo is the [easy] booty to be looted there,</td>
<td>v. 32</td>
<td>ولكنْ لَعْلَ الجَاثِلِقَ يُغَرُّهْ على حَلِبْ نَهْبٌ هَالَكْ مُهْبُوبٌ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a frontier town on the borders of Syria laid waste, the discord of views [of its Abbasid commanders], infirm anyway, and [its] rampant destruction.</td>
<td>v. 33</td>
<td>وَغَرْ باَطِرَافِ الشَّامِ مُضِيعٌ وتَفْرَيقُ أهِواء مَراضٌ وَتَخْرِيبٌ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The darkness [engulfing] the Straight Religion will be removed by pavilions of sun, set up over land and sea ...</td>
<td>v. 53</td>
<td>سيجَلُو دُجَى الْذِّينَ الْحَنيفِ سْرَادُقٍ من الشَّمس فوق البَرِّ والبحرِ مضروب</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenia and her inhabitants will be surrendered by the cross, established [there] to corrupt the Armenians.</td>
<td>v. 55</td>
<td>ويُسْلَمُ أَرْمَيْنِيَّة وَذواتٌ مَنْصُوبٌ صليب لِفَسْحَ الأَرْمَيْنِيَّين مَنْصُوب</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

About two years later in 353/964, the Fatimids achieved a naval victory over the Byzantines closer to home in Sicily. Ibn Hāniʾ, who had joined Muʿizz’s personal entourage that same year, composed another poem in which he stated that Syria could wipe away her tears (the ones she had shed over the recent
Byzantine attacks upon her soil). He again prophesied Fatimid victory over her frontier towns, saying these would go as far as Armenia (vv. 53-56).49

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The land [of Sicily] which the Byzantine High Commander Domestikos tried to attack, [was protected by] a sword drawn for God’s cause.</th>
<th>إِنّ النَّمَى رَامَ الدُّمْسِقُ حَرِبَهَا لِلَّهِ فِيهِ يُصَارِمُ مَسْلُولُ</th>
<th>v. 53</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Its earth is not Aleppo, its courtyards not Egypt, [its] waterways not the Nile.</td>
<td>لَا أَرْضُهَا حَلْبُ وَلَا سَاحَانَا مَصْرُ وَلَا عَرْضُ الخَليْجِ النَّمْلُ</td>
<td>v. 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would that [the Byzantine Emperor] Heraclius had appeared there [and stayed] till the end, [to see] the Domestikos [covered in] humiliation and abasement.</td>
<td>لَبِتَ الْهِرَقْلُ بَدَا بِهَا حَتَّى انْقَـشِتْ وَقَدْ اَنْبَحَتْ عَلَى الدُّمْسِقِ ذِلَّةً وَحُمُولُ</td>
<td>v. 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That which [the Fatimid forces] have thrown upon them [in Sicily] is the chest, but it [also] has a neck in the land of the Armenians!</td>
<td>تلك التي ألقى عليهم كَلْكَلاً وَلَهَـما بِأَرْضِ الأَرْمَيْنِ ذِلِّلُ</td>
<td>v. 56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sometime before 358/969, a few years later when the Fatimids were planning their next campaign to conquer Egypt, Ibn Hāniʿ addressed the Abbasids saying that the time to return the usurped caliphate had come (v. 9). He claimed that the Egyptians, or perhaps Egypt herself, embraced “longings for the coming of [the Fatimids].” The following are some verses from this looking-to-Egypt poem:50

| So say to the Abbasids, return that which [you] have usurped! The time to return that which was usurped has come | فَقُلْ لِبَنِي العْبَاسِ رَدُّوا مَظَالِمَمَا فَقُدْ آنَ منْمَكُمْ أَنْ تَرْدُّ الْمَظَالِمُ | v. 9 |
| O sons of the shining state [i.e., the Fatimids], look to your swords — for them I predict the Iraqi kingdom | بَنِي الدُّولَةِ الْفِرَاءِ شَيُوْفَكُمْ فَإِنَّ لَهَا الْمِلْكِ الْعَرَاقِيُّ شَائِمُ | v. 25 |
In Egypt, there are longings towards you, and long have you been parted — alas for a beloved who is parted!

Quench her thirst with your armies, for indeed, she is the forsaken heart, and they are the brave lions [i.e., lovers]!

In 358/969, the desired moment arrived, and the Fatimids began their final, successful push into Egypt, with Muʿizz appointing Jawhar to lead an army east to Alexandria and Fusṭāṭ. Upon this occasion, Ibn Hāniʾ composed a long poem describing the Fatimid army and acclaiming Muʿizz’s honoring of Jawhar. The poem has a famous opening line: “I beheld with my eye [a sight] far beyond what I had heard” (رأيت بعيني فوق ما كنت أسمع). Anticipating Fatimid victories in the region, Ibn Hāniʾ declared that “two Iraqs” were in panic, Baghdad (referred to here with irony by its descriptive title “The Abode of Peace”) was all a dither, and Palestine (and within it Ramla) had indicated submission; that in fact, this campaign had opened up the entire East for the Fatimids, up to the far limits of Khurasan:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The earth of the two Iraqs felt fear such that “The Abode of Peace” (Baghdad) almost shook with it.</th>
<th>v. 68</th>
<th>وقد أشعت أرض العراقين خيفةً</th>
<th>وقد أشعت أرض العراقين خيفةً</th>
<th>تكاذب لها دار السلام تضضع</th>
<th>وقد أشعت أرض العراقين خيفةً</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Palestine gave over her reins, as did her inhabitants, no area within her boundaries remained defended.</td>
<td>v. 69</td>
<td>واعطت فلسطين القيادة وأهلها</td>
<td>واعطت فلسطين القيادة وأهلها</td>
<td>فللم يبق منها جانب يمتمع</td>
<td>واعطت فلسطين القيادة وأهلها</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramla the well-protected is not the first land that finds no escape from you ...</td>
<td>v. 70</td>
<td>وما الزمان المقصورة الخطو وخذها</td>
<td>وما الزمان المقصورة الخطو وخذها</td>
<td>واول أرض ما لها عنك مفزوع</td>
<td>وما الزمان المقصورة الخطو وخذها</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You (Jawhar) journeyed to Fusṭāṭ in the most auspicious journey with the most auspicious augury for the [battle for] which you had gathered [goodly forces].</td>
<td>v. 75</td>
<td>رحلت إلى فسطاط أيمن رحله</td>
<td>رحلت إلى فسطاط أيمن رحله</td>
<td>بأيمن قاف في الذي أنت مجمع</td>
<td>رحلت إلى فسطاط أيمن رحله</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you spurred on the army, there shone forth for its soldiers a road to the far end of Khurasan, wide and clear.</td>
<td>v. 76</td>
<td>ولما خلت الخييش لأخ لأله طريق إلى أقصى خراسان مهييع</td>
<td>ولما خلت الخييش لأخ لأله طريق إلى أقصى خراسان مهييع</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In all these early praise poems, Ibn Hāniʾ grounded his themes of conquest in the larger Islamo-Arabic political and literary panegyric traditions. Other than the “returning of usurped territories” (v. 9 in the “looking-to-Egypt” poem), there is little specific Fatimid ideology evident. Rather, we see in these poems traditional themes of courage, strength, and auspicious auguries, and a conventional melding of love and war imagery.

Muʿizz’s vast army led by Jawhar deposed Egypt’s Ikhshīdid rulers in the same year (358/969) easily and largely without the use of force. Jawhar took control of Egypt and began building a new first city for his master near Fusṭāṭ. Four years later, in 362/973, Muʿizz left the Zīrid princes in charge of North Africa and, accompanied by his books, his family, and the coffins of the first three Fatimid caliph-imams, moved to his new capital of Cairo: in Arabic, al-Muʿizziyya al-Qāhira, “The Victorious City of Muʿizz”, a name clearly deriving from the Fatimids’ imperial aspirations.

Ibn Hāniʾ composed a poem upon the conquest of Egypt which is perhaps his most famous. Offering felicitations to the caliph-imam, the poet predicted the follow-up conquest of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Contrary to his earlier poems, he proffered for these prophecies a clearly ideological context. Using theological allusions to praise the Imam as the descendent of the Prophet, he explicitly predicted the conquest of Baghdad. Declaiming in one of the strongest opening lines in Arabic poetry, Ibn Hāniʾ mocked the Abbasids, and their being taken completely unawares by the Fatimid victory, thus:

| The Abbasids say: “Has Egypt been conquered?” | v. 1 | ﴿تقولُ بنو العبّاس هل فتحت مصر ﴾ | ﴿فقل لنبي العبّاس قد قضى الأمّر﴾ |
| Say to the Abbasids: “Your kingdom is finished!” | Jawhar has confronted Alexandria, Glad tidings ‘confront’ him, and victorious aid comes to him | v. 2 | ﴿وقد طالع الإسكندرية جوهر نطلالعة البُشَرى ويقدّمه النصر﴾ |

About fifty verses of praise later, Ibn Hāniʾ declared that the [promised] time had drawn near. Waxing ideologically lyrical, he asserted that the fragrance of the imam who was the descendent of the builder of the House perfumed the precincts of the Kaʿba, so it was unsurprising that the House itself yearned for him (vv. 58-60). Referring to the official colors of the Fatimid and Abbasid states, white and black respectively, he stated, “If you come to it, the covers of [the Kaʿba] will be removed, and its dusky sites will shine white.” In a more traditional frame, he declared that the imam’s dealings with Egypt were so virtuous that Baghdad wished it could be Egypt (v. 72).
| v. 53 | Give glad tidings to the Honored House [i.e., the Ka’ba] of [the Imam’s] imminent coming [at the next hajj season] when enthusiastic circumambulation and nafr (departure from Minā to Mecca at the end of the pilgrimage) takes place.

| v. 54 | Lo! It is as though he has already visited it, and Tayba (Medina) and Surr (in the Ḥijāz) have broken away from the kingly palaces [of the Abbasids].

| v. 55 | Is the House, the House of God, anything but his sanctuary? Can the one exiled from [his] abode bear to be away from his abode?

| v. 56 | His first stopping places are the ones which long for him — He cannot endure falling short of or being restricted from them!

| v. 57 | They are the places where his grandfather obtained grace, whence came to [Muḥammad] the words of God, and the secret and manifest.

| v. 58 | If the House wishes for [the imam’s arrival], indeed, its time has drawn nigh, and “after hardship comes ease.” [Q 94:5-6]

| v. 59 | If it yearns with longing for you, verily [that is because], its atmosphere is perfumed from your sweet fragrance.

| v. 60 | Are you not the son of its builder? If you come to it, its covers will be removed, and its dusky sites will shine white.
The vale of Mecca would adore a season in which Mecca and its holy site of the Ḥijr greet Maʿadd [Muʿizz]...

It is as though I see him — having dealt with the [Egyptians so virtuously] that Baghdad wishes it could be Egypt!

v. 61

v. 72

Congratulatory odes offered to Muʿizz on the same occasion by poets less connected with the daʿ wa also touched briefly upon the major themes of Fatimid conquest ideology, but without contextualizing them in wider Fatimid theology, and not as fully as Ibn Hāniʿ in his congratulatory rāʾīyya cited above. A poet named ʿAlī b. ʿAbdallāh al-Tūnisī referred to God’s pledge, but he did not anticipate the conquest of Baghdad, which, as a reference to mahdist-based expansionist ideas, would have been particularly apropos at this moment of Fatimid triumph. The Twelver Shiʿite poet ʿAbdallāh b. al-Ḥasan al-Jaʿfarī al-Samarqandī offered in his poem of felicitation the most detailed explanation of any Fatimid poet for the implication of the Abbasids in Ḥusayn’s blood by accusing them harshly, “you spilt the very blood [of the Prophet’s kin] for which you sought vengeance [from the Umayyads]”, and by threatening, “You must be made to drink from the same cup you made the [Prophet’s family] drink from.” Samarqandī also mentioned the Imam’s justice, a mahdist idea. But, like Tūnisī, he did not touch upon world hegemonic aspirations.

Ideological influence on Ibn Hāniʿ’s later poetry can also be noticed in a khāʾiyya in which he mentions a future Fatimid move to conquer India and Sind. The poem is not definitively dateable, but looking mainly to Baghdad, it could be from about the time of the Egyptian conquest. Even though South Asian lands were distant from the central Islamic heartlands, the Fatimid daʿ wa was active there; Nuʿmān tells us that Mansūr al-Yaman dāʿ ī Abū l-Qāsim had sent dāʿ īs before the Maghribi appearance of Mahdī to “Hind (India) and Sind.” Afterwards, Mustanṣir would also send dāʿ īs there, again through the conduit of the Yemeni daʿ wa. Being religio-political activists, these dāʿ īs aspired to convert the people of those territories, and eventually also to gain political dominion. Ibn Hāniʿ declared in his poem that the kings of India and Sind lay sleepless in fearful anticipation of Fatimid armies.
In the binding of the turban-crown [upon your head], what you are going to achieve is evident, and possession of East and West is written.

Where is the fortress that would try to block you, when your cavalry waters in the muddy waters of [the Baghdadi neighborhood of] Karkh?!

Indian kings and Sindi ones have been tested by nights that left the elephant [which formed an important component of the Indian armies] lowing like a young camel.

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In 359/970, a year after the Fatimid conquest of Egypt, when Muʿizz (and Ibn Hāniʾ) were still in North Africa, it was feared that Mecca and Medina would be overrun by the Byzantines. In his most ideologically rooted aspirational poem yet, Ibn Hāniʾ encouraged Muʿizz to leave Egypt in Jawhar’s hands and proceed in all haste to Iraq; presumably the Abbasids did not have the strength to protect the holy places (v. 39), and Muʿizz should now assume this role.58

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Addressing the caliph-imam as the descendant of the Prophet who had walked the streets of Mecca (v. 42), Ibn Hāniʾ predicted victories for him in the Ḥijāz, using the religious symbols of the Prophet’s mantle (v. 45) and ʿAlī’s sword Dhū l-Faqār (v. 46). He claimed that the planks of the Prophet’s pulpit would rejoice with Muʿizz’s coming (v. 47). Alluding to the ḥadīth in which Muḥammad had stated that between his grave and his pulpit was a paradisiacal flowerbed (rawḍa), Ibn Hāniʾ predicted that soon the Flowerbed (the imam himself, according to Fatimid esoterics) would return to its original freshness (v. 48). He further declared that the sites of the ḥajj rituals — Marwa, Ṣafā, Ḥijr, and Rukn — all yearned for the imam’s coming (vv. 50-51):
| v. 41 | It is as though I see [your] army, by [whose multitudes] the land of the Hijāz has become straitened, advancing slowly in the pilgrimage seasons. |
| v. 42 | And I see you, O son of the one who walked the [Meccan] vales, become the rain cloud for the drought stricken and the seeker [of water]. |
| v. 44 | [I see you] visiting the grave of your father, the grave of Muḥammad, surrounded by God’s sublime angels; |
| v. 45 | climbing onto the [pulpit] that he climbed, standing in the place where he stood, in a mantle, shedding copious tears [of joy]; |
| v. 46 | girding two swords, God’s sword of victorious aid, and your own sword, the finely honed Dhū l-Faqār; |
| v. 47 | so that the planks of Muhammad’s] pulpit cool [their eyes in happiness] under you, and cease their grief and agony; |
| v. 48 | and you return his Flowerbed (rawda) to its first appearance, being [fresher] in it than plants. |
| v. 49 | I see myself reciting [the liturgical responses of the hajj], and walking gently in the alleys of Mecca and Ṣafā. |
| v. 50 | I see the banner of your victory waving, hovering and fluttering between Ṣafā and Marwa, |
and the Hijr leaning forward to see you in longing, and the Rukn, tremblingly bending to look at you.

Most importantly from an ideological point of view, Ibn Hāniʾ again affirmed that God’s pledge would be fulfilled, couching this affirmation in his wish to see himself preaching a sermon for the Fatimids in Mecca and Baghdad (vv. 52-56):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[I see] myself asking the Lord of the House, in [the name] of his Prophet’s son, having taken you as the intercessor who brings me close to Him, thus being brought close.</th>
<th>v. 52</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>وَسَأَلْتُ رَبَّ الْبَيْتِ بِاَٱبْنِ نَبِيِّهِ</td>
<td>وجعلتُك الزُّلْفَى اإليه فَاأُزْلِفَا</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preaching in front of the people an authoritative sermon praising you — while the pledge of your Lord has been fulfilled! —

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>having preached in Zawrâʾ Baghdad another like it, having stood this very standing before you [there]!</th>
<th>v. 55</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>وخَطَبْتُ بالزَّوْرَاءِ اأُخْرَى مِثْلَهَا</td>
<td>ووَقَفْتُ بَيْنَ يَدَيْكَ هَذا المَوْقِفَا</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 360/971, Ibn Hāniʾ composed a poem in praise of Muʿizz in which he expressed happiness over the fact that the Fatimid caliph-imam had conquered Egypt and Syria all the way to Aleppo, and predicted that his cavalry would soon drink from the Euphrates in Iraq (vv. 46-48). He reiterated his earlier statement that Mecca was calling out to the imam to come perform the hajj (v. 63).^{59}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[You are the] one who subdued the East and the West in their vastness, including all residing in them, king or hero.</th>
<th>v. 46</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>مَنْ صَعَرَ الْمُسْتَقْرِفِينَ العَظِيمِينَ إِلَى مَنْ فِيهِمَا مِنْ مَلِيكِ الأَمْرِ أَوْ نَبْلِ</td>
<td>وَوُضِيَّقَ الْأَرْضَ مِنْ مَسْرَحَةٍ إِلَى حَلْبِ حَيْلَا وَرَجَالًا وَلُفْسَ السَّهْلِ بِالْجِبَلِ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[Who] covered the earth from Egypt to Syria In cavalry and infantry, and wrapped up plains in mountains.</th>
<th>v. 47</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>وَلِيَقِرَّ الْأَرْضَ مِنْ مَسْرَحَةٍ إِلَى حَلْبِ حَيْلَا وَرَجَالًا وَلُفْسَ السَّهْلِ بِالْجِبَلِ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whose cavalry watered at the Euphrates, not leaving until they had drunk fully and become satiated.</td>
<td>v. 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>وأوردت خيله ماء الفرات فما صدرن حتى وصلن الال باليهل</td>
<td>واأوردت خيله ماء الفرات فما صدرن حتى وصلن الال باليهل</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freed from the business of warfare, you can now perform the hajj. If you were to ask Mecca, she would say “Come here!” So go!</td>
<td>v. 63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>فرعت للحج من شغل الهياج فلو سالت مكة قالت هيت فارتحل</td>
<td>فرعت للحج من شغل الهياج فلو سالت مكة قالت هيت فارتحمل</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two years later in 362/973, when Mu‘izz had moved or was moving to Cairo, Ibn Hāni‘ wrote a long 202-verse poem in his praise which is particularly interesting for its declaration that blood revenge for Ḥusayn would soon be achieved (picking up on Qā‘im’s earlier threats in the same vein), for although Ḥusayn had been killed, his waliyy al-dam, Mu‘izz, was alive (v. 137). In these verses, the moral equivalence that Ibn Hāni‘ assumed between the Umayyads and the Abbasids as perpetrators of these crimes becomes clear, for while he made Yazīd responsible for the battle of Karbala (v. 132), while he warned Marwanid women of impending widowhood (v. 130) and cited Umayyads as the killers (v. 146), he subordinated this entire Umayyad-naming section to earlier verses threatening the Abbasids in Iraq of imminent ruination at Fatimid hands (v. 123 ff.):

[Swords are rising in wrath to protect] the kingdom [of Islam] in Baghdad, for its throne has been turned over to an arm (‘adud = ‘Adud al-Dawla, the Buyid sultan) without a palm or a wrist.

It is as though you [O Mu‘izz] have removed doubts from [these] affair[s], no right is [now] denied or swallowed up.

The waves of the Euphrates have run bloody — it is unlawful for one who waters at it to perform ritual ablutions rather than the tayammum (the substitute ablation with earth)
May stallions not bear the cavaliers of war
if you do not visit the [Abbasids]
with bay and dusky horses!

May limpid water not run sweet for
[its] drinker
while there is a Marwanid woman
on earth who is not widowed!

Lo! A Hāshimite hawk hovers over
them,
making the butterfly-thin bones of
the skull from each bodily frame
fly away,

Just like the battle day of Yazīd,
when
the captured [Hāshimite] women
were sent away in exile
on rough camels with swaying
sides.

But even if the best of
Muḥammad’s two grandsons
(Ḥusayn) has been killed,
indeed, the avenger of his blood
has not been killed.

Lo! Revenge for them [note the
plural — Ḥusayn and the imams
in his progeny] will not be lost —
and seekers of revenge from among
you [O Fatimids] are not asleep.

This is in all likelihood Ibn Hāniʾ’s last poem. After accompanying Muʿizz
on his journey towards Cairo as far as Barqa, Ibn Hāniʾ turned back to collect
his family before proceeding to Egypt; a few days later he died.

The Tunisian historian Ibn Abī Dīnār (fl. end of 5th/11th c.) reports an
interesting conversation between the Fatimid Caliph-Imam Muʿizz and a
Byzantine envoy to his court in Cairo, who had earlier called on him in North
Africa. In this dialogue, Muʿizz reminded the ambassador Nikūlā: “Do you
remember that when you visited me in Mahdiyya I told you that you would
come to me in Egypt and I would be king over her? I tell you now that you
will come to me in Baghdad and I will be king over her.” Muʿizz never
achieved actual dominion over the Abbasid capital, but in his time, major
steps were taken towards larger Fatimid hegemony, and as we have seen
through Ibn Hāniʾ’s poetry, his takeover of Abbasid lands was particularly successful. Shortly after the conquest of Egypt, the Fatimids made their initial thrust into Syria, and the amīrs of Mecca and Medina also announced fealty. During the rest of Muʾizz’s reign, the khutba was pronounced for him in the two holy cities, as well as in other parts of the Hijāz, large parts of Syria and Palestine, and in Sicily in the Mediterranean, in addition to the large stretch of land extending from the farthest Maghrib across North Africa and Egypt to the Red Sea.

The Muʿizzī conquests, particularly the events leading up to the capture of Egypt and the immediate aftermath, are nowhere better expressed than in the verse of Muʿizz’s court poet Ibn Hāniʾ, as are the specifics of the imperialist intentions that accompanied them and gained momentum under them. I have discussed nine of these poems here, and there are many more. Yaʿlawī (who edited and analyzed Ibn Hāniʾ’s dīwān) appositely commented thus: “There is no doubt that when [Ibn Hāniʾ] prophesizes these desired victories, he is verbalizing the opinion of the caliph and announcing [concrete] upcoming military programs. It is as though his poetry were a speaking book regarding the manifest and hidden aims of the State.” However, although Ibn Hāniʾ’s themes of hegemonic desires contained allusions to Fatimid ideology, they were not steeped in it in the same manner as the poems of the Caliph-Imam al-Qāʾim, or the dāʿīs Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman and Muʿayyad Shīrāzi, or even prince Tamīm. Ibn Haniʾ was not a dāʿī himself, and may not have been versed in the deeper Fatimid doctrines. In declarations of impending Fatimid victories in his later poems, he did use some ideas of the imamate (he had, after all, become close to Muʿizz, perhaps even converted to the Fatimid madhhab and studied its doctrines). But on the whole, particularly in his earlier panegyrics, his presentation grounded itself in the commonly shared literary traditions of political panegyric from the Arabic heritage.

Widening Aspirations in the Reign of al-ʿAzīz bi-L-lāh (r. 365-386/975-996): Poems by the Royal Prince Tamīm b. al-Muʿizz

During the reign of Muʿizz’s son and successor al-ʿAzīz bi-L-lāh, Fatimid hegemony in the territories conquered by his father stayed essentially constant. Egypt remained the seat of their empire, the Maghrib and Sicily more or less loyal, and large parts of the Hijāz and Yemen in acknowledgement of their suzerainty. Syria and Palestine continued to be an arena of military tussle among the Fatimids, the Abbasids, the Byzantines, and the local rulers. ʿAzīz personally led armies into Syrian territories and achieved victories there.

Amīr Tamīm — eldest son of Muʿizz, brother of ʿAzīz, and a distinguished poet — composed several poems praising ʿAzīz. During Muʿizz’s reign Tamīm had perhaps been overshadowed by Ibn Hāniʾ, but in ʿAzīz’s time
he came into his own. In four panegyrics for his brother the caliph-imam, he
dwelt upon Fatimid hopes for dominion, particularly the conquest of Baghdad
and the two holy cities of the Ḥijāz.

In 368/978, Tamīm composed a 76-verse poem in alif congratulating ‘Azīz
upon a major victory under the caliph-imam’s personal command near Ramla
over the former Buyid-Abbasid commander [Aftakīn] “al-Turkī.” The poet
declared that news of ‘Azīz’s triumph was “making the rounds in Baghdad
driving sleep from the eyes of the heretic [Abbasids]” and “scorching the
souls of the Daylamite Buyid sultans” who ruled Baghdad in their name
(vv. 61-66). Let them realize — said Tamīm, like other Fatimid poets before
him — that “the time had drawn nigh” and the kingdom of the Abbasids
would come to a “terrible end” (v. 67).⁶³

You showed them battles that exceed [in glory]
the battles of the earlier ages.

Its report is making the rounds in
Baghdad,
driving sleep from the eyes of the heretics.

The souls of her Daylam[ite
sultans] spend the morning
and evening [scorched] by live
coals of deliberate eye-closing.

When they heard of [the imminent
arrival of] Imam ‘Azīz,
they knew the worst [would
happen] and unbinding their
turbans, [stood up to run].

Fearing from his might a battle
grinding them like the pivot of the
grinding stone.

Būya [progenitor of the Buyid
sultans] calls out to his sons
[warning them] of it —
he mourns them, while he himself
is pledged to putrefaction.

The time has drawn nigh, so let
them acknowledge
an imminent decline and an evil
fate.

You showed them battles that exceed [in glory] the battles of the earlier ages. v. 61

Its report is making the rounds in Baghdad, driving sleep from the eyes of the heretics. v. 62

The souls of her Daylamite sultans] spend the morning and evening [scorched] by live coals of deliberate eye-closing. v. 63

When they heard of [the imminent arrival of] Imam ‘Azīz, they knew the worst [would happen] and unbinding their turbans, [stood up to run]. v. 64

Fearing from his might a battle grinding them like the pivot of the grinding stone. v. 65

Būya [progenitor of the Buyid sultans] calls out to his sons [warning them] of it — he mourns them, while he himself is pledged to putrefaction. v. 66

The time has drawn nigh, so let them acknowledge an imminent decline and an evil fate. v. 67
In the next few lines (vv. 68-73), Tamīm further underscored the doctrinal rationale behind such conquest by addressing ʿAzīz as the descendant of the Prophet, the son of ʿAlī and Fāṭima, and also — in an interesting use of taʾwīl motifs — the “son” of the holy ḥajj sites of Ṣafā, Marwa, and the Ḥaṭīm.

Further elaborating these same motifs in a short rāʾiyya, Tamīm celebrated the fact that “the dāʾī” had prayed for ʿAzīz “publicly” (muʿlinan) in Mecca during the ḥajj season, such that the ritual was blessed for that year’s pilgrims (v. 1). The hills of Ṣafā and Marwa, and the well of Zamzam — all part of the ḥajj rites — longed for the caliph-imam to come, and the Rukn and the Hijr — also holy sites in the Kaʿba — plainly prayed for his well-being (vv. 2-3). Being the son of the Prophet who had brought Islam and the Qurʾān, ʿAzīz was the legitimate possessor of the lands in which the Qurʾān had been revealed and Islam had gained might (vv. 4-5):⁶⁴

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The dāʾī prayed for you publicly at Mecca, and the ḥajj and its culmination became pleasing for the people of the holy season.</th>
<th>v. 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The pastures and meadows of the verses of the Qurʾān — In them, belief became apparent, and disbelief was overcome.</td>
<td>v. 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Šafā and Marwa yearned for you, as did [the well of] Zamzam. The Rukn and the Hijr overtly pronounced benedictions upon you.</td>
<td>v. 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A land in whose courtyards Revelation promenaded, and by [the hands of] whose inhabitants Islam was aided —</td>
<td>v. 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You, O son of the Prophet Muhammad, are worthier of it, if the shining proofs [are viewed].</td>
<td>v. 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In using the term “dāʾī”, Tamīm could be referring to a Fatimid missionary, but in all likelihood he was alluding to the official khaṭīb, as the following contextualization of the poem by Idrīs in his ʿUyūn al-akhbār indicates (my paraphrase): “The khutba had earlier been proclaimed in Mecca...”
for al-Muʿizz. In the reign of ‘Azīz, no ḥajj attendees — Abbasid princes included — were allowed to ‘challenge the ‘Azīzite [dominion] with their own.’ Indeed, ‘all official ceremonies (marāsim, presumably among them the khutba just referred to) were conducted, and the ḥajj took place, on this basis.’

In a longer poem in “I” combining ghazal with fakhr, Tamīm threatened the Abbasids that he would soon lead an army to defeat them (vv. 56-69).Historically, there is no evidence that Tamīm was ever involved in any military activity, so this may be just a way of saying that the Fatimids — not specifically Tamīm — would soon conquer Baghdad. Using some of the by now familiar rationales for such a conquest, he threatened blood revenge (thaʿr, v. 55) for all the Fatimid blood spilled, attributing it to the Abbasids and their spiritual forbears (vv. 47-54), and declared that the promised time for such revenge had come:

| O progeny of ‘Abbās, you are blood revenge targets for the sons of [Fāṭima] al-Zahrāʾ — and the time has drawn near. | v. 55 | يا أَلْ عِبَّاسُ أَنتُمُ لِبَنِي الْزَّهْرَاءِ لَأُدْخَلْنَا الأَجَلَ | لَا صَحِبَتْنِي يَدِي وَلَا أَسْتَعْتُ إِلَى بَنَوَعَ الْعُلَى بِي السَّبْلُ |
| May my hand not accompany me, and roads not usher me to exaltedness, | v. 56 | إِنِّي لَمْ أَزُرُكُمْ بِجَحْفَلٍ لَجِبٍ | لَا يُلْضِعُوْنَا الْبَيْضُ وَالْفَنْاَلْ الذِّبْلُ |
| if I do not visit you with a wave-crashing army whose sky is [formed by] shining blades and lean spears, | v. 57 | بَيَّتُ سَرَقَ الْدُّنَا وَمَغْرَبَهَا | بِهِ الكِمَاطُ الْصَّرَاغُمُ الْبَرْزُ |
| the East of the world and her West filled by its braves, experienced lions. | v. 58 | فَكُفُّوْا بَني العباِ فَقَدْ اَانَّ اَنْ نَغْزُو بِكُلِّ مَكَانٍ | 

Tamīm used “the time has approached” motif again in a nūniyya felicitating ‘Azīz for the ‘Īd, declaring that the decreed time for Fatimids to rise up had arrived (v. 9).

| O sons of ‘Abbās, cease your defiance of us, for the time has come for us to fight in every place. | v. 9 | فَكُفُّوْا بَني الْعِبَاسِ عِنَّا جَمَاحً كَمَانِ | فَقَدْ أَنَّ أَنْ نَغْزُو بِكُلِّ مَكَانٍ |

Although Tamīm penned more wine and love poems than panegyrics, the latter are beautiful illustrations of classical Arabic literature, and powerful examples of Fatimid praise poetry. As the texts cited here demonstrate, the
doctrinal aspect in Tamīm’s praise verses is deep. More so, it appears, than in Ibn Hāniʾ’s poetry, for although not active in proselytizing or preaching, Tamīm was a prince of the palace; he identified closely with the family and its ideology, and one presumes that the imam and his dāʿī had trained him in the doctrines of Fatimid esoterics (taʾwil) since childhood. Tamīm differed from Ibn Hāniʾ in another way as well. Contrary to that court poet (and also different from Qāʾim in this regard), the prince named no specific places as targets of conquest in his serenade of Fatimid victories. But (like Qāʾim), he couched his laudations in Fatimid doctrine: themes of divine pledge fulfillment, holy images of Meccan ḥajj sites, allusions to the Qurʾān and Revelation, and motifs of descent from Muḥammad. And he tied these aspects firmly with the person of the Caliph-Imam Ṭāzzī.

The Conquest of Baghdad in the Reign of al-Mustanṣir bi-L-lāh (r. 427-487/1036-1094) and the Beginning of the End: Poems by the Chief Dāʾī al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī

Following Ṭāzzī, the reigns of al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh (r. 386-411/996-1021) and al-Ẓāhir li-Iʾzāz Dīn Allāh (r. 411-427/1021-1036) did not see much further expansion, but during this period Fatimid borders remained more or less stable. There are no major poets of this era whose dīwāns are extant, but numismatic and epigraphic materials speak to the continuity of a Qurʾānic-based mahdist conquest ideology: Ḥākim’s coinage (like dāʾī Abū Ṭālīlah’s seal ring much earlier) bore the Qurʾānic pledge fulfillment verse “The word of your Lord has been fulfilled in truth and righteousness. None can alter His words. He is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.”\(^{69}\) And the plaque over the main entrance of the Ḥākim mosque (officially named al-Jāmiʿ al-Anwar) in Cairo cites another such Qurʾānic verse “We intend to bestow our favor on those who have been made weak in the earth, to make them imams, to make them the heirs.”\(^{70}\)

It was during the long 58-year reign of Ṭāhir’s son and successor al-Mustanṣir bi-L-lāh (r. 427-487/1036-1094) that — as Maqrīzī tells us\(^{71}\) — the expanse of the Fatimid empire reached its apogee, and also began its decline. Al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī was Mustanṣir’s chief [spiritual] gate (bāb al-abwāb) and chief missionary (dāʾī l-duʿāt). A master expounder of Fatimid doctrine, he connected it firmly with Fatimid political aspirations, as we know from his eight hundred Majālis Muʾayyadiyya, where, among many
other such mahdist ideas, he praised the Fatimids as “imams for the people of the East and the West.” In 448/1056, Muʿayyad escorted supplies to Syria in readiness for a Fatimid attack on Baghdad, to be led by a former Abbasid general, Abū l-Ḥārith al-Basāsīrī. At this time, the Buyid protectorate of the titular Abbasid caliph in Baghdad had been taken over by the Saljuks and was headed by the Sultan Ṭughril Bēg. Having negotiated hard and effectively to unite the refractory Syrian princes under the Fatimid banner, Muʿayyad declared in a stylized paronomasia filled fakhr poem that his campaign had been the most successful of all those aimed at felling the rival power. He coupled his vaunting of the physical blows he had dealt to the Abbasid caliphate with the verbal blows he had inflicted on their authority with his “wise” and “rational” expositions, his correspondence with the Syrian rulers, his discourses among the believers, and his poems:

| Baghdad’s eye has never seen | v. 8 | وَعَيْنُ بِغَدَادَ مَــــــــا رَأَتْ آيَةً أَيْنَداً  |
| dust like the dust raised by my feet. | | ْنَفَعَ اَتَّهَرَةَ َْذَمَـْطـي |
| After I stopped the palms of a tyrant | v. 9 | مِنْ بَعْدِ كَفِّيْ أَكْفَ طَاغِيَةٍ |
| [Ṭughril], | my pen clipped the nails of his evil. | ْقَلَّمَ أَطْفَـِـِـِـِ~ُْـا شَرَّها ُْـمِي |
| ... | | |
| Indeed, the salvation of souls is in | v. 11 | إِنَّ نِجَاةَ النُّفُوْدُ في حَكْمِيْ |
| my wise words, | | ْعَقْلُ فِيْمَا اَأَبَيْنَ حَكْمِيْ |
| and the intellect is my arbiter in | | |
| what I bring forth. | | |

In 450/1058 — largely due to Muʿayyad’s dexterous negotiating efforts — the Fatimids conquered Baghdad. The major milestone in the Fatimid hegemonic calendar had been achieved: Basāsīrī deposed the Abbasid caliph, crucified his vizier, and pronounced the khutba for Mustanṣir on the pulpits of the Abbasid capital.

Muʿayyad composed a poem thereupon with an explicitly ideological register. Glorifying over his own prime role in the victory, he said he had strengthened the might of the “Children of Aaron” (v. 10, Aaron meaning ʿAlī in Fatimid esoteric interpretation, “brother” of the Moses of the Age, Muḥammad), and destroyed the edifice of the “Children of Hāmān” (second hemistich of v. 10, meaning the enemies of the Fatimids, here the Abbasids, just as Pharoah’s vizier Hāmān was Moses’ enemy).
A scowling day for the son of ʿAbbās, in which he met Death, appearing in person in front of his eyes.

[The Abbasid caliph] spent the night stumbling in the train of humiliation[’s robes] exchanging his audience hall for the narrow confines of a cell.

He saw on the mast [his vizier] Ibn Muslima, from whose violence the mouth of Islam had screamed [for help].

May God water with buckets of his mercy, the earth of the grave in which [Mu‘ayyad’s father] Abū ʿImrān lies!

Indeed, how many difficult situations has his son stood firm in, with steadfast heart and tongue, in order to raise the banners of the Prophet and his progeny, and to strike and pierce their enemies.

How well does he shore up the strength of the sons of [the Prophet’s] Aaron, and how well does he destroy the edifice of the children of his Hāmān.

A year later, Ṭughril recaptured Baghdad and reinstalled the Abbasid caliph. For the Fatimids, this was the beginning of the end. Although their empire lasted for another century, from now on its borders rapidly diminished. Some important dates in this regard are 468/1076, when the Saljuks took Damascus away from the Fatimids for good; and 492/1099, when the Crusaders conquered Jerusalem. At the death of Mustanṣir’s grandson al-Āmir bi Aḥkām Allāh in 524/1130, Fatimid boundaries encompassed only Egypt. This situation continued until in 567/1171, Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī, the vizier of the last Fatimid (Ḥāfiẓī) Caliph ʿĀḍid, offered the khutba for the Abbasids and inaugurated the sovereignty of their Ayyubid vassals in.
the Fatimid heartlands. Although their spiritual daʿwa continued in Yemen, India, and elsewhere, the political hegemony of the Fatimids, along with their immediate aspirations for world rule, came to an end.

Muʿayyad had sadly but defiantly proclaimed in his autobiography (Sīra) that the Fatimids may have lost Baghdad, but their dream of universal dominion would nevertheless be realized. He asserted that God’s pledge that His kingdom would come through His “pious servants” would be fulfilled. If it was not to be for Muʿayyad’s imam Mustanṣir now, then such hegemony would become a reality for an imam from his progeny in the future. When the destined moment arrived, a Fatimid imam would conquer the world, and bring light and justice to all.⁷⁶

…even though what happened, happened — regarding loss after gain and overthrow of leaders — the impression of the Mustanṣirite daʿwa, and the call of “Come to the best of deeds” (حَيَّ عَلَى خَيْرِ الْعَمَل, a key Shiʿite formula in the call to prayer) from the tops of miʾdhana and minarets remained on pulpit heights in the land of the two Iraqs. “God will complete His light despite the pagans’ abhorrence” (وَلَهُ مُتِمُّ نُورُه ولو كَرِهَ الكافرون/Q 61:8) and He will fulfill His promise when He says “We have written in the Psalms after the Remembrance that the earth will be inherited by [our] pious servants” (وَلقد كَتَبْنَا ف الزَّبُوْرِ مِنْ بَعْدِ الذِّكْرِ اأَنَّ الأَرْضَ يَرِثُهَا عِبَادِي ال الصَّالِحِيْوَن/Q 21:105 — if God Almighty wills.

Geographic Compass of Fatimid Conquest Aspirations: The Islamic Empire and Beyond

The Fatimids hoped for universal dominion. Qāʾim’s declaration that “God would conquer the East for us and the West, God would conquer all” (v. 5, “Allāhu”-rhymed poem),⁷⁷ was not mere rhetoric; it meant literally East and West, as the ideological context of this and other poems indicates, as does the historical record of Fatimid conquests in the East. But as their poetry also reveals, they early on had a series of specific steps in mind to reach their final goal. Notwithstanding the considerable time and resources spent on securing rule and building infrastructure in North Africa — including two new capital cities, Mahdiyya and Manṣūriyya, large mosques, grand palaces, and a major harbor — they had never intended to stay on. In broad strokes, their poetry tells of the following geographic intentions: After the consolidation of their western empire, they first planned to conquer Egypt, whence they intended to overthrow the Abbasids and capture Baghdad (both of which they did, although in the case of Baghdad the dominion was short lived). Then they hoped to go on to defeat the Byzantines, secure the frontier domains, extend
their power base as far away as India, and eventually — without actually identifying places further distant — achieve worldwide hegemony.

As we have seen, the verse of Qāʾīm and Ibn Hānīʾ (and to a lesser extent Tamīm and Muʿayyad) specifies the lands the Fatimids intended to conquer, and using concurrent ideological motifs, it frames these expected conquests in the broader Fatimid perception of themselves — the progeny of the Prophet — as the sole rightful rulers of the Islamic world.

The poets most often targeted Baghdad. Capital of the Abbasids, it was not only the physical hub of their power, but also the symbol of their caliphate. If Baghdad fell, the Fatimid caliphate would have no serious rival in the Islamic world. Beginning with the pre-establishment poets in Yemen and North Africa, we see prophecies of Abbasid downfall at the hands of the mahdī from the Banū Fāṭima, with the declaration by dāʿī Abū l-Qāsim, “Say to the Abbasids, get ready to leave!” These prophecies persisted and gathered specificity and strength as the decades went on — Qāʾīm loudly and clearly proclaimed: “Our fighting will focus on Baghdad” (v. 3) and “Baghdad is my goal” (v. 27, lāmiyya) — until they crescendoed in the poems of Ibn Hānīʾ just before and after the Fatimid conquest of Egypt, an Abbasid vassal-state. When Fustāṭ fell, Ibn Hānīʾ immediately urged Muʿizz “Onward to Iraq! Leave Egypt to [Jawhar’s care]!” (v. 39, fāʾīyya). Prince Tamīm continued to emphasize the inevitability of Fatimid victory over Baghdad, pronouncing in the wake of ʿAzīz’s victorious battle with Aftakīn in Syria that “its report was making the rounds in Baghdad, driving sleep from the eyes of the heretic [Abbasids].” Muʿayyad in his verse celebrated the actual victory in 450/1058, saying it had been “a scowling day for the [captured and deposed] son of ʿAbbās” (v. 4, nūniyya) and that he, Muʿayyad, had “raise[d] the banners of the prophet and his progeny” (vv. 8-9, nūniyya) by striking at the core of the Abbasid empire.

Egypt was another key land mentioned as a potential conquest by the Fatimid poets. Not only was it a necessary capture if the Fatimids wanted to take Baghdad, but in its own right, it was a wealthy, self-sustaining province strategically placed in the center of the Islamic lands — the perfect hub from which to launch a program of universal dominion. Early on in the dynasty, Qāʾīm had led two expeditions to Alexandria in 302/914 and 306/918, and had declared in his poetry that he would conquer Egypt. In one of his poems he said, “My cavalry hastens towards … Egypt” (vv. 26-27, lāmiyya) and in another, he invited his father Mahdī who had “sent [him] to Egypt” (v. 8) to “await victories at … [the banks of] the Nile (and the Euphrates and Tigris)” (vv. 16-17, lāmiyya). In 358/969, Qāʾīm’s grandson Muʿizz conquered Egypt. Ibn Hānīʾ celebrated the victory, portraying it as the prelude to the conquest of Baghdad. Mocking the Abbasids, he intoned “The sons of ʿAbbās ask: ‘Has Egypt been conquered?’ Say to the sons of ʿAbbās: ‘[Your
kingdom] is finished.’” (v. 1, rāʾiyya). In a variant reading of the same verse, he connected the Egyptian victory even more directly to a larger plan: “Make ready to attack Baghdad, for Egypt is conquered!” (v. 1, rāʾiyya). The later Fatimid poets Tamīm and Muʿayyad had no need to express hopes of its conquest for the obvious reason that Egypt was already subjugated.

Mecca and Medina had symbolic value. Earlier maintained for the Abbasids by their vassals from Egypt, they came into the Fatimid fold along with their conquest of Egypt. As the two holiest places of Islam, all Muslims were required to visit them at least once in their lifetime. The Fatimid poets inverted the metaphor. Ibn Ḥāniʾ and Tamīm declared that it was not only the Fatimid imam who yearned to visit the House, but the House itself, and the sacred sites of the ḥajj, all ardently desired the imam’s coming. Ibn Ḥāniʾ avowed, “The vale of Mecca would adore a season in which Mecca … greet[ed Muʿizz]” (v. 61, rāʾiyya), and Tamīm declared to ‘Azīz, “Ṣafā and Marwa yearn for you, as does [the well of] Zamzam” (v. 2, rāʾiyya). The poets enhanced the hegemonic symbolism of Mecca and Medina by images of the imam, with his banners of triumph, arriving in Medina, and after long centuries of darkness reinstating the true rule of God. Ibn Ḥāniʾ envisaged Muʿizz “visiting the grave of [his] [fore]father Muḥammad surrounded by angels” (v. 44, fāʾiyya) and “climbing [Muḥammad’s] pulpit … wearing a mantle and … the sword Dhū l-Faqār” (vv. 45-46, fāʾiyya). Although the Fatimid imam was never able to personally visit the Ḥijāz, the amīrs of Mecca and Medina proclaimed the khutba for him on and off for about a hundred years in the second half of the fourth and the first half of the fifth centuries A.H., from the reign of Muʿizz through half of Mustanṣir’s. Tamīm expressed joy at one such instance of recognition, saying to ‘Azīz: “The dāʿī prayed for you publicly in Mecca” (v. 1, rāʾiyya; probably, as I said earlier, referring to the preacher’s invocation for the ruling caliph in the official khutba).

Syria, with its adjacent lands northward up to Armenia, was an arena where the Muslims and the Byzantines constantly struggled for control; as was the comparatively less consequential Mediterranean island of Sicily. Qāʾim expressed intentions to conquer several Syrian towns in the interior of the dār al-Islām and the imams’ earlier daʿwa center Salamiyya, but he as well as Ibn Ḥāniʾ focused more on Syrian towns on the frontier with Byzantine dominions, portraying them as crying out for the Fatimid imam’s help. Qāʾim declared “A day [of victory awaits] us at raqqa, rāfiqa, and Bālis … How many [of our enemies will lie] prostrated among the rocks in Damascus … and Ḥimṣ, and Salamiyya, and the frontier towns … up to the mountains of Armenia …” (vv. 32, 39-40). In two poems targeting the Byzantines, Ibn Ḥāniʾ also mentioned Aleppo, proclaiming to Muʿizz: “I have not seen a visitor of enemies like your sword — Is there greeting and welcome among
Byzantine skulls? What lures the Catholicos to Aleppo is the [easy] booty to be looted there … [But] the darkness … will be removed … the cross will relinquish control over Armenia” (vv. 24, 32, 53, 55, ḏāʾiyya). Elsewhere, Ibn Hānī’ compared the Fatimids’ success against the Byzantines in Sicily to the Abbasids’ poor record in Syria: “The land which the Domestikos attacked (i.e., Sicily) was protected by a sword drawn for God’s cause (i.e., the Fatimid imam). Its earth is not Aleppo (which, being under the Abbasids, is poorly defended) …” (vv. 53-54, lāmiyya). The Fatimids, said their poets, would safeguard the domains of Islam from the marauding Christian armies in a way that the Abbasids could not.

Palestine and its city of Ramla (near Jerusalem) were singled out by Ibn Hānī’, who declared in his tribute to Jawhar’s forces (which were then moving towards Egypt) that “Palestine has given over her reins, no area within her boundaries remains defended. Ramla the well-protected is not the first place to find no refuge from you[r strike]” (vv. 69-70, ʿayniyya).

Khurasan, Kabul, Sind, and India — lands successively east of the central Islamic lands — also figured in the Fatimid scheme of conquest. After defeating the Abbasids and taking control of Iraq and Persia, the Fatimids hoped to extend their control ever further eastward. Early on in the dynasty, Qāʾīm addressed his father saying, “You sent me to conquer Egypt, Syria, Khurasan, Iraq and Persia (lit. the two Iraqs) in their entirety” (v. 8, lāmiyya). Half a century later, Ibn Hānī’ declared in the same vein that with Muʿizz’s taking of Egypt “there [had] shone forth … a road to the far end of Khurasan” (v. 76, ʿayniyya). Eyeing lands yet further east, Qāʾīm in another poem avowed “My cavalry will night-march beyond the Nile seeking the enemies of religion until it rests in Kabul!” (v. 37, lāmiyya). “Kabul” fits the rhyme scheme of his lāmiyya poem, and this could be the literary reason Qāʾīm brought it up, but seen as a logical subsequent step east from Khurasan towards India, it could also have been a real target. The next eastern country of consequence was India, and Ibn Hānī’ connected the awaited defeat of the Abbasids with a forward march east, prophesying in one verse Baghdad’s fall, then asserting that “Indian kings and Sindi ones have been tested by nights [of fearful anticipation of the Fatimids’ coming]” (v. 54, khāʾiyya).

As mentioned earlier, the western and north-western parts of the Indian subcontinent were home to a covert Fatimid mission overseen by the daʿwa in the Yemen.

In addition to the lands that the Fatimids aspired to, it is interesting to think about which ones did not interest them as much and why, particularly the obvious one just across the Mediterranean to the north from the Maghrib — Andalusia. At the onset of the Fatimid empire, Muḥammad b. Ramaḍān prophesied the downfall of the Spanish Umayyads, the “Banū Marwān” (v. 12, rāʾiyya) and later, Ibn Hānī’ assured Muʿizz that “the Umayyads … are
stunned [by Jawhar’s victories in the western Maghrib c. 348/959], such that they imagine you appearing” (v. 42, ḥāʾiyya).79 But by and large, Andalusia does not appear to have figured as an important target conquest in Fatimid poetry. In addition to possible military and political reasons for the Fatimids’ relative indifference to Spain, our poetry highlights an ideological one: their long-term plan to move eastward. Spain was too far away from the central Islamic realms to play a role in aspirations for the conquest of the latter, and the Fatimids saw themselves not just as a peripheral dynasty, but as rulers of the Islamic world.

**Doctrinal Underpinnings of Aspirations of Conquest: Retribution for Earlier Injustices Suffered and Fulfillment of God’s Pledge**

While poets of other early Islamic dynasties also ascribed their patrons’ dominion to God’s will and aid, their verse was relatively less oriented towards religion, and generally did not bear messianic overtones. Moreover, although these poets celebrated their patrons’ immediate victories, they do not seem to have laid out plans for future conquests by him or his progeny. This difference becomes clear if we glance at victory odes composed by some of the preeminent poets of the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Spanish Umayyad dynasties (translated and analyzed by Stetkevych in her work on poetic legitimation mentioned earlier). Akhṭal, in his poem “The Tribe Has Departed”, asserted that “God made [the Umayyad Caliph ʿAbdalmalik] victorious [over the rebelling Ibn al-Zubayr],” where rather than the Qur’anic terms fāṭḥ and nāṣr he used the word ẓafar to mean victory, and where, although he used the weighty appellation “Caliph of God” for his patron, he applied no other overt religious doctrine.80 Abū Tammām, in his famous poem celebrating the Abbasid Caliph Muʿtaṣim’s conquest of the Byzantine fortress of Amorium that begins “The sword is more veracious than books”, utilized relatively more religious allusion: he used Qurʾānic references saying the caliph was “nourished on victory (nāṣr)” and in his line “God hurled you against her two towers”;81 and he connected his patron’s triumph over the Christians with the Prophet’s defeat of the Meccans, claiming that “The closest lineage connect[ed] the days of Badr to [the caliph’s] victorious days”.82 But despite this relatively copious religious base, Abū Tammām’s legitimation was quite different in character from that of the Fatimids messianic imamate doctrine. Unlike them, he used no references to the establishment of just rule on earth, or of expectations of retribution for past oppression; nor did he bring in allusions to universal hegemony and the fulfillment of God’s pledge. The later Abbasid poet Mutanabbī played on his patron’s title and constantly referred to him as the “Sword of God”, as in his poem celebrating Sayf al-Dawla’s defeat of the
Byzantine domesticus Bardas Phocas that began “Each man’s fate is fixed by his own custom”; but the sword-of-God motif is almost the full extent of theological thematizing in Mutanabbi’s poem. Although the Abbasids had come to power largely through a Shi’ite call for retribution which was itself underpinned by messianism (both of which were symbolized in their black banners), these two galvanizing themes appear to have disappeared from the Abbasid propaganda vocabulary after their accession to power, perhaps as a result of their early distancing of themselves from the Shi’a movements, which had formed the groundswell of their revolt. This ideological shift is clear in the absence of mahdist and retribution motifs from the poetry of their major panegyrists. As for the Spanish Umayyads, one of their famed poets, Ibn Darrāj, writing in Andalusia at the very time of the Egyptian Fatimid caliphate, came closer to the Fatimid doctrinal hegemonic motif of God’s pledge when he said to Sulaymān, his prince of Qurashī Meccan lineage, “Your house found repose in Mecca’s broad valley until the return of days whose promised time drew near”; but Ibn Darrāj’s “promised time” was for “processions of cavalry” and other items of military glory with no clearly professed religious connection: no reference to justice or other mahdist ideas, no references to the Ka’ba or ḥajj rites, and no other Islamic references.

In contrast, the Fatimids had a distinctive religious ideology driving their conquest aspirations. Their poets grounded hopes for conquests in Egypt, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere, as well as their broader desire for universal hegemony, firmly in their mahdist doctrine of the imamate. They characterized their anticipated conquests as the fulfillment of God’s pledge to humankind — to provide retribution for past injustices, and to realize divine rule on earth — through the victorious re-emergence (ẓuhūr) of the imam.

The set of poetic motifs that looked to the past sought retroactive justice for the collective Hāshimite blood spilled in the years following the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, particularly blood revenge (ṭharr) for his grandson Ḥusayn. Fatimid poets viewed the Abbasids as spiritual heirs of the Umayyad perpetrators, and as successors of the first three Sunnī caliphs who “laid the foundations” for the killings. On the other hand, the Fatimid poets regarded their imams as spiritual heirs of the victims, heroes who sacrificed their lives to save humankind. Yazīd’s army had slaughtered Ḥusayn, along with a small group of family and companions, after denying them water for three days on the banks of the Euphrates in Karbala. In our poetry, that river was often the symbol that glued together the two themes of rule and revenge, being at once the site of Ḥusayn’s suffering, and a symbol for Abbasid lands, for it flowed physically through them. In one poem, Qā’im mentioned the banks of this river as the site of a looming battle with the Abbasids: “Our souls shall be ‘quenched’ with their delicious blood … when they come [to fight us] … from the opposite bank of the Euphrates!” (vv. 33-35, lāmiyya),
and he followed this forecast with a line about the martyr who had died thirsty on its banks: “I remembered Ḥusayn, my eyes filled with tears, and I said: I shall not forget my forbears! I shall kill each leader and follower among the [enemy] …” (v. 36, lāmiyya). Ibn Hāniʾ used the very terms ṭhāʾr and witr (both meaning blood-revenge) to validate fighting the Abbasids, affirming ominously that “revenge (witr) for [al-Ḥusayn’s killing] would not be lost” (v. 139, mīmiyya). He declared that the Euphrates would run red with Abbasid blood, then lamented the suffering of Ḥusayn and his family, and affirmed in climax that “even if the best of Muḥammad’s two grandsons had been killed, indeed, the avenger of his blood [waliyy al-thāʾr, Muʿizz] is alive” (v. 137, mīmiyya). He went on to announce: “More worthy of blame than Umayya … are men who are the root of the disease … who nominated Taym [to the caliphate] (alluding to Abu Bakr who was from this clan) …” (v. 157, mīmiyya). The Twelver Shiʿite poet Samarqandī, in his praise of Muʿizz upon his conquest of Egypt, accused the Abbasids of spilling the very blood — i.e., of the same family, the Prophet’s kin — for which they had claimed to seek vengeance when they revolted against the Umayyads: “You have spilt the very blood that you sought vengeance (ṭhāʾr) for …” (v. 20, rāʾiyya). Prince Tamīm too, applied the term ṭhāʾr to the Abbasids when he stated: “O sons of ʿAbbās, you are blood-revenge targets (ṭhāʾr) for the sons of [Fāṭima] al-Zahrāʾ” (v. 55, lāmiyya).

In speaking of the immediate oppression of the Abbasids, the righting-of-earlier-injustices theme was channeled into the poets’ present. Qāʾim explained why he was intent upon conquering Baghdad by saying that “there is glaring oppression and sedition there … [the Abbasids] harbor unjust enmity for us, they wish to kill us, O how many bitter cups of bereavement have they made us drink [in the past]!”

In tandem with this retrospective rationale, the set of motifs that looked to the future anticipated the fulfillment of God’s pledge to His prophets that their heir, the righteous imam, the mahḍī in the line of the last Prophet and his legatee, would one day rule the earth. The kingdom belonged to him, and God would restore it to him. Within this philosophy of cyclical time, the Fatimid poets emphasized a dual suite of aspects: the injustice of Abbasid usurpation of the caliphate, and the imminence of its replacement with a reign of justice and light. At the beginning of the dynasty in a challenge poem to the Abbasids after his march on Alexandria, Qāʾīm used Qurʾānic phraseology to signal realization of the Almighty’s assurance, declaring: “When the [triumph] that I had been promised (kuntu mūʿadan bihi) arrived, God’s aid (naṣr) hastened [to me] bringing victory (fāṭḥ)” (v. 21, bāʾiyya). In the last few years of the North African phase, Ibn Hāniʾ belligerently instructed the Abbasids to return what they had stolen: “Say to the Abbasids, return that which you have usurped (ruddū mazāliman), for the time for
you to return usurped things has arrived!” (v. 9, mīmiyya), and anticipated invoking Mu‘izz’s name on the pulpits of Mecca and Baghdad “while the pledge of [Mu‘izz’s] Lord ha[d] been fulfilled” (v. 56, fā’iyya). Decades later in Egypt, Tamīm added his assertions — several times over — that the moment of triumph had approached. In a poem of congratulation to ʿAzīz, he intoned “The time has drawn nigh (qad garuba l-waqt), so let [the Abbasids] acknowledge their imminent decline …” (v. 67, alifiyya). Elsewhere, he connected the arrival of the awaited moment with the obligation upon his own Fatimid family to take up arms, stating “The time has come (fa-qad āna an naghzū) for us to fight in every place” (v. 9).

The poets pointed out that the imam was not undertaking this mission for personal gain. It would be the people who benefited from his just rule; it was they who longed for him to reveal his auspicious self. Indeed, not only people, but — inverting the metaphor as mentioned earlier — the very land of Egypt, the Ka‘ba, and the holy places of Mecca and Medina, all anxiously awaited his goodly presence among them. As Tamīm put it: “Ṣafā and Marwa yearn for your coming!” (v. 2, rā’iyya) and as Ibn Hāni beseeched: “Egypt longs for you … so quench her thirst …!” (v. 38, mīmiyya).

In the preceding pages, I have read Fatimid poetry for historical information, and shown it to be a dynamic interface between political ambitions and religious ideology. The verse of the Fatimid poets records their aspirations — even as they first came on the scene in North Africa — to overthrow the Abbasids, claim the full Islamic empire in progressive eastward stages, then go beyond to conquer the world. Furthermore, it tells us that they anticipated these victories in a mahdist frame, as retribution for past injustices suffered by their forbears, and as a fulfillment of God’s pledge to humankind in the Revealed Books that a righteous imam would one day establish just rule on earth. In this manner, the case of the Fatimids speaks for the vital relevance of poetry to the construction of a nuanced historical narrative.
Notes


2 In contrast, praise poems by the later non-Ismāʿīlī Ḥāfiẓī poets, Žāfir al-Ḥaddād (d. 528/1134) and ʿUmāra al-Yamanī (d. 569/1174), appear to be relatively less consequential for our purposes.


4 Maqrīzī, Muqaffā VI, 186-187.

5 Ibn Hāniʾ, Dīwān 278-279.


7 Some poems are also cited in Nuʿmān, Sharḥ al-akhbār, Maqrīzī, Ittiʿāẓ, and Khīṭat; Muʿayyad, Sīra, Ibn Ḥammād, Akhbār, and Dawādārī, Kanz.


10 Ḥijāzī (2005).


12 Ḥusayn (1950: 137-140).


14 The earliest mahdist movement was probably the one espoused by Mukhtār al-Thaqafi (d. 67/687) who proclaimed Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya (d. 81/700), son of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭalib, the Mahdī. For a broad history of mahdist beliefs and political movements in Islam, as well as details of Sunnī and Shiʿī sources of prophetic hadith foretelling the coming of the mahdī, see Madelung (2008).

15 Nuʿmān, Sharḥ al-akhbār III, 355-431; Urjūza 196, 201.

16 Q 21:105, regularly referenced by our poets.


18 The Abbasid caliphs had used these same titles, an indication of their own subscription to the mahdist doctrine.

19 Undermining the prevalent theory that the term “Fatimid” was a later back projection, we find the phrase “the Fatimid imam” (al-imām al-Fāṭimi) as early as 297/909, the very year the Fatimid caliphate was established, in a poem of the former Aghlabid poet Saʿdūn al-Warjīnī. Nuʿmān, Iftitāḥ 301; Idrīs, ʿUyūn V, 174;

20 Nuʿmān (*Sharḥ al-Akhbār* III, 413) reports that in 145/762, the fifth Fatimid Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq had sent two dāʿīs named Ḥulwānī and Abū Sufyān to North Africa, to “till the ground” in readiness for the one who would “sow the seeds” of Fatimid dominion.


22 Ibid., 73; idem., *Sharḥ al-akhbār* III, 419-421, citation of poem and context information, including poet’s name; Idrīs, *ʿUyūn* V, 55-56. Cited in *Yaʿlāwī* (1986: 24). Trans. by Haji in his trans. of Nuʿmān, *Iftitāḥ* (2006: 72). Nuʿmān (and following him Idrīs) tell us that Muḥammad composed this poem when he heard that Ibrāhīm II had treacherously killed a thousand Billizmians to whom he had given shelter in Raqqada; Ibn ʿIdhārī (*Bayân* I, 123) says this incident happened in the year 280/893.


26 Q 61:13.

27 Q 30:6. More than fifty Qurʾānic verses assert the idea of God’s pledge being fulfilled; cf. wʿd in any Qurʾān concordance.

28 Q 21:105.


31 Literally “the two Iraqs”. Passim.

32 Maqrīzī, *Muqaffā* VI, 184. Cited in *Yaʿlāwī* (1986: 101). Unfortunately, the impact of the echoing rhetorical trope of anticipating the rhyme word (radd al-ʿajuz ʿalā l-ṣadr) indicating this emphasis is lost in the translation. Due to differences in standard word order between the English subject-verb and the Arabic verb-subject sequence, the translation is unable to maintain the repetition of the word “God” at the end of each line.


34 Yāqūt, *Muʾjam* III, 15, 60.
“Its child is not called out to” is a proverb meaning “a grave matter in which the young are not called upon to participate, rather, [mature] middle-aged and older men are summoned.” Maydānī, Majma’ II, 390 (#4516).

Fatimid doctrines of the imamate are expounded in detail in daʿwa treatises, including: Nuʿmān, Daʿāʾim I, 3-78 (ch. on “Allegiance”); idem., Taʿwil al-daʿāʾim, passim; Kirmānī, Maṣābīḥ 36-75; Muʿayyad, Majālis, passim.


Ibn Ḥammād (Akhbār 46-47) cites it differently, with a more direct statement of intent to attack Baghdad:

Get supplies ready for Baghdad, for Egypt has been conquered, The dealing of the Age has fulfilled that which the Age had pledged

Ibn Ḥammād also gives the next two lines, which are identical to the lines in the Dīwān and Idrīs’s ‘Uyūn.

Idrīs in the ‘Uyūn has taqūlu, while the Dīwān has yaqūlu (both ed. by Yaʿlāwī).

Ibn Hāniʾ, Dīwān 136-143. Also cited by Idrīs, ‘Uyūn VI (Yaʿlāwī ed.), 687-688. The opening line, as cited here from the Dīwān and Idrīs’s ‘Uyūn, is quite famous. But the 7th/13th c. historian Ibn Ḥammād (Akhbār 46-47) cites it differently, with a more direct statement of intent to attack Baghdad:

Get supplies ready for Baghdad, for Egypt has been conquered, The dealing of the Age has fulfilled that which the Age had pledged
If you say you have killed the Umayyads by removing their errant seducer and nullifying their disbeliever.

We have found you to walk after them in worse paths and walks than theirs.

You have spilt the very blood that you sought vengeance for — Can the palm of the perpetrator grasp retribution?

Blood of noble ones, whose blood cannot go unavenged — the whole world is not sufficient compensation for the death of the smallest one among them.

You must be made to drink from the same cup you made them drink from — by the hands of its slashers and destroyers.

Lo! Give up those borrowed items [the caliphate]! They belong — Despite your intense dislike — to their lenders!

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v. 18

If you say you have killed the Umayyads by removing their errant seducer and nullifying their disbeliever.

v. 19

We have found you to walk after them in worse paths and walks than theirs.

v. 20

You have spilt the very blood that you sought vengeance for — Can the palm of the perpetrator grasp retribution?

v. 21

Blood of noble ones, whose blood cannot go unavenged — the whole world is not sufficient compensation for the death of the smallest one among them.

v. 22

You must be made to drink from the same cup you made them drink from — by the hands of its slashers and destroyers.

v. 23

Lo! Give up those borrowed items [the caliphate]! They belong — Despite your intense dislike — to their lenders!
to his edition of Tamīm’s Dīwān (1971: 13) asserts that Muʿizz was careful not to give Tamīm any post or specific function in the state.

67 Tamīm, Dīwān 328-334.
68 Ibid., 449-451.
69 Q 6:115. See photograph and discussion of Ḥākim’s coin inscription in Merchant (2008: 114).
70 Q 28:5. From personal observation in 2009.
72 Muʿayyad, Majālis III, 436, majlis #298.
73 While campaigning in Syria to unite its refractory princes under the Fatimid banner, Muʿayyad (Dīwān 268) composed a poem of fakhr challenging Fatimid officials unfriendly to himself, in which he declared that Baghdad’s eye had never had to contend with dust such as the dust his feet had stirred up (v. 8). Text, trans. and contextualization in Qutbuddin (2005: 73-74).
76 Muʿayyad, Sīra 183-184. Earlier, Nuʿmān (Sharḥ al-akhbār III, 393) had quoted a prophecy by ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib that there would be two messiahs: al-Mahdī bi-l-lāh, who would appear first (and who, according to Nuʿmān, had indeed emerged in the person of the first Fatimid caliph-imam), and al-Marḍī bi-l-lāh, who would be from his progeny, and who would come at the end of time.
77 References of verses cited in this section have been provided where first cited; to facilitate cross referencing, verse numbers where known, and the rhyme letter of the poem, are provided here.
78 Ibn Hāniʾ also expressed aspirations for the conquest of Baghdad in the lines “Your cavalry will water in … al-Karkh [Baghdadian suburb]” (v. 53); “Baghdad wishes it were Cairo” (v. 72); and “The earth of the two Iraqs felt such fear the ‘Abode of Peace’ (Baghdad) almost shook with it” (v. 68).
79 Ibn Hāniʾ, Dīwān 75. Yaʿlāwī tentatively dates this poem’s composition in 350/961, ibid. 72, n.* (sic). Ibn Hāniʾ also mentioned the Spanish Umayyads in seven other poems: ibid., 75, 196, 200, 262, 355, 403.
80 Stetkevych (2002: 90, vv. 18-19).
81 Q 8:17.
83 Ibid., 188, 189, vv. 4, 14.
84 Ibid., 274, v. 5.
85 Ibn Hāniʾ, Dīwān 355.
86 Ibid.
87 In a revenge line he followed his naming of the Abbasids as targets with the phrase “… and the time has drawn near (qad danā l-ajal)” (v. 55.).
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