CHAPTER FIVE

THE MILITARY

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The political history of the reign of al-Muqtadir was dominated by the affairs of the military, and above all by the need to pay the soldiers on a regular basis. Although many sources for this period, as has been described in the previous two chapters, put great emphasis on the influence and activities of civil administrators, it is clear that the military increasingly controlled the political life of the caliphate. By the end of the reign, different elements of the military had come to dominate the politics of Baghdad, presaging the rise of the amīr al-ʿumarāʾ in the year’s following al-Muqtadir’s death.

The Abbasid army during the reign of al-Muqtadir can be divided into two distinct groups. The first was the regular military based in Baghdad, paid by the dīwān al-jaysh (bureau of the army) and commanded by men appointed by the caliph or his vizier. The second group were soldiers raised by military contractors and paid by them, often with monies taken from provinces over which they had been granted the rights to collect taxation and other government revenues. The allegiance of such groups to the Abbasids was variable; rebels could join the Abbasid cause and then, if things did not work out, could abandon the armies of the caliphs and return home. The most important of these contractors were the Ḥamdānids, whose forces at this stage seem to have been largely Arabs recruited in the Jazīra, and the Sājids, followers of Yūsuf b. Abī l-Sāj, mostly recruited among the inhabitants of the mountain regions of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

This chapter is largely concerned with the regular Abbasid army. It begins with a general description of the forces available and of the role of *ghilman* and the ‘regiments’ of the Ḥujarīs and Maṣāffīs. It then discusses the careers of individual commanders, Muʿnis al-Muẓaffar, Naṣr al-Qushūrī, the long-serving ḥājib (chamberlain), and successive *aṣḥāb al-shurṭa* (chiefs of police) and uses their biographies as a way of illustrating the use and limitations of military power.

The caliph al-Muqtadir inherited a large, expensive and potentially effective military organization which had been built up by his predecessors. The army developed from the forces which had emerged at the end of the period of anarchy in Samarra in 256/870. The creation of this army was largely the work of al-Muwaffaq, never caliph himself but effectively both regent and military commander for his brother al-Muʿtamid (r. 256–79/870–92). Al-Muwaffaq’s great achievement was to re-establish a personal bond between the Abbasid family and the military which had fallen into abeyance after the death of the warrior caliph al-Muʿtaṣim (218/833). The close relations were strengthened during the long and hard campaigns which al-Muwaffaq led against the Zanj rebels in southern Iraq. He led the army in person and was tirelessly in the field. During the latter part of these campaigns, he was assisted by his son, later the caliph al-Muʿtaḍid, who, like his father, was an active military leader. Both al-Muwaffaq and his son built up their own corps of *ghilmān* whose loyalties lay with their masters. At the end of al-Muwaffaq’s life (279/892) there is evidence of some tension between him and his son, and of rivalry between the two groups of *ghilmān*, which ended in al-Muʿtaḍid’s arrest and his liberation by his own supporters. The *ghilmān* of al-Muʿtaḍid formed the backbone of al-Muqtadir’s army and they developed a strong group loyalty to each other and to maintaining their interests and privileged position against any individuals or groups who set out to challenge them. Almost all the important military leaders of the reign, such as Muʿnis al-Muẓaffar, Naṣr al-Qushūrī and Yāqūt, had begun their careers in al-Muʿtaḍid’s military following.

The policy of direct Abbasid military leadership continued during the short reign of his son al-Muktafī (r. 289–95/902–8), who had been entrusted with military command by his father during his lifetime and who continued to lead the troops in person when he was caliph.

These soldiers are usually described as *ghilman* (sing. *ghulam*). The word means simply ‘boys’ but at this time it is used in the Arabic sources to mean soldiers, often of slave origin, who had been purchased or recruited