Chapter 5

The ‘Abbāsī Reactions

1 Al-Manṣūr’s First Response

The news about the outbreak of the revolt reached al-Manṣūr while he was in the area where he planned to build Baghdad. He left the site immediately and hurried to al-Kūfa.1 (Most probably to al-Hāshimiyya in al-Kūfa’s immediate surroundings). The tradition attributes to him the following saying: “I, Abū Ja’far, drew the fox out of his hole.”2 He ordered a tight curfew on al-Kūfa and surrounded it with armed posts. This was done following his uncle ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Ali’s advice (who was at that time under house arrest).3

While still in Baghdad, he had a letter sent to Egypt, in which he ordered that the supply of food and grains (الماء والبرة) to Mecca and Medina be cut off.4 He also ordered that the transfer of grain which passed through Wādī l-Qurā en route from Syria to Medina be blocked. According to al-Ṭabarī, this was done according to the advice of Ja’far b. Ḥanẓala al-Bahrānī, who was “the most knowledgeable among men in the (art) of war, and fought with Marwān [b. Muhammad, the last Umayyad caliph] in his wars.”5

Other letters were sent to his brother al-ʿAbbās, who was the governor of al-Jazīra, and to the governors (umarā’)6 of Syria (al-Shām), ordering them to send soldiers to him.7

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1. Al-Ṭabarī, 3:206, 319; al-Balādhurī, Ansāb (ed. Madelung), 2:509, 521–522; al-Masʿūdī, Tanbīh, 360: al-Kūfa. However, cf. Agapius, Taʾrīkh, 126: al-Manṣūr leaves for al-ʿĀqūl. Al-ʿĀqūl is not mentioned by the Muslim geographers. An ‘Āqūl near al-Kūfa is mentioned by al-Kalāʾi, al-Iktifāʾ, 4:278; a Dayr al-ʿĀqūl, located south of Baghdad, between al-Madāʾin and al-Nuʿmāniyya, on the east bank of the Tigris is a well-known place; see Le Strange, Eastern Caliphate, 35–36; map 11 facing 25, but this is far from al-Kūfa.

2. Al-Ṭabarī, 3:206 (ll. 4–6).

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 3:280; al-Balādhurī, Ansāb (ed. al-Dūrī), 3:268: a similar tradition with some important changes; the word al-mādda is missing.

5. Al-Ṭabarī, 3:223–224 (l. 21 to l. 5).

6. Ibid., 3:280; McAuliffe, ‘Abbāsid Authority, 250, has commanders.

7. Al-Ṭabarī, 3:280–281 (al-Jazīra and Syria); al-Balādhurī, Ansāb (ed. al-Dūrī), 3:268 (Syria). In spite of the similarity between these two sources, there are some major differences between them: according to al-Ṭabarī, ibid., al-Manṣūr says (regarding recruiting soldiers from Syria: “It would be good if even one soldier reaches me every day, with them I’ll increase the ahl
Upon other advice from his uncle, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alī, al-Manṣūr summoned to al-‘Irāq Salm b. Qutayba b. Muslim, the son of the well-known Umawī warrior and governor, who was in al-Rayy with al-Manṣūr’s son, Muḥammad al-Mahdī. Upon his arrival, he was put at the head of some of the best contingents of ahl al-Shām.\(^8\)

It is highly probable that al-Manṣūr did not need this specific advice, or the other advice supposedly given to him by various advisers. Although we have here a stereotypical literary narrative, built according to “the question and the answer motif,” the advice of both ʿAbdallāh b. ‘Alī and of Jaʿfar b. Ḥanẓala was logical from a strategic point of view.

Most of the advice given was equally practical and it is certain that the caliph could have come up with it himself, such as the above-mentioned idea of blocking the transfer of grain from Syria to Medina. We have already seen that al-Manṣūr did not need anyone’s advice in order to write to his governors in al-Jazīra and Syria and order them to send him troops.

Still, these traditions undoubtedly reflect the real situation on the eve of the outbreak of the revolt. They mirror real worry and anxiety on the caliph’s part. They were put into circulation after the rebellion was crushed, together with others that, in retrospect, described the rebellion as if it had had no chance of succeeding at all and was doomed to failure.\(^9\) In one such tradition the last Umawī caliph, Marwān b. Muḥammad, foretells that the rebellion will fail, as did all the other ‘Alīd rebellions in the past.\(^10\) This esoteric knowledge, which the ‘Abbāsīs gain from Marwān, was also known to al-Manṣūr’s astrologer, Khurāsān units that are with me”:\(^8\)

while al-Balādhurī’s text (regarding recruitment from al-Jazīra) runs as follows: “even if he sent one man per day to him in order to break the ahl Khurāsān units with them, since their bad and corrupt behavior is not to be trusted, this in addition to their boldness (towards the caliph)”: \(^8\)

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 3:204: . . . ‘Abdallāh b. al-Rabī’ b. ‘Ubaydallāh b. ‘Abdallāh b. Abd al-Madān < Saʿīd b. ‘Amr b. Jaʿda al-Makhzūmī, records a conversation between him and Marwān b. Muḥammad; ‘Abdallāh b. al-Rabī’ b. ‘Ubaydallāh b. ‘Abd al-Madān, al-Manṣūr’s relative (from the female side: the mother of Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Saffāḥ, al-Manṣūr’s brother, was from their family; on him and his family, see Crone, Slaves, 149), relates his answer to al-Manṣūr, who confidentially disclosed to him the news of the revolt’s outbreak.

\(^{8}\) Al-Ṭabarī, 3:206–207.

\(^{9}\) E.g., ibid., 3:206.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 3:206–207.

. . . ‘Abdallāh b. al-Rabī’ b. ‘Ubaydallāh b. ‘Abdallāh b. Abd al-Madān < Saʿīd b. ‘Amr b. Jaʿda al-Makhzūmī, records a conversation between him and Marwān b. Muḥammad; ‘Abdallāh b. al-Rabī’ b. ‘Ubaydallāh b. ‘Abd al-Madān, al-Manṣūr’s relative (from the female side: the mother of Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Saffāḥ, al-Manṣūr’s brother, was from their family; on him and his family, see Crone, Slaves, 149), relates his answer to al-Manṣūr, who confidentially disclosed to him the news of the revolt’s outbreak.