‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mūsawī, known as al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, was born in Rajab 355/June-July 966 to a prominent Alid family. Through his father, Abū Aḥmad al-Ḥusayn b. Mūsā, he was a descendant of the seventh Imam of the Twelvers, Mūsā al-Kāẓim (d. 183/799), whose tomb was a prominent landmark and site of religious devotion in Karkh, the large Shīʿī quarter in Baghdad. Through his mother, Fāṭimah (d. 385/995), he was a descendant of the fourth Imam ‘Alī Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn (d. 95/712); she was the granddaughter of the Zaydī Imam al-Nāṣir li'l-Ḥaqq Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Uṭrūsh b. ‘Alī (r. 300–4/913–17), who had succeeded in re-establishing the Zaydī state of Tabaristan that had been founded by al-Ḥasan b. Zayd (r. 250–70/864–84) in the mid-ninth century. Al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022) is reported to have written his work on the legal obligations regarding women, Aḥkām al-nisāʾ, at the request of al-Murtaḍā’s mother. Al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā wrote a commentary, titled al-Nāṣirīyāt, on the legal work of his great-great-grandfather on his mother’s side, al-Nāṣir the Elder, Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī. Al-Murtaḍā reports that he knew his grandfather, al-Nāṣir the Younger, and had frequent contact with him before he died in Baghdad in 368/978–79. Al-Murtaḍā’s younger brother, al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, was born in 360/970. The two studied in their youth under the tutelage of al-Shaykh al-Mufid, then the leading Shīʿī scholar in Baghdad. Both would become prominent scholars, and both were accomplished in religious and literary fields: al-Raḍī was widely recognized for his literary skills and famed as one of the greatest poets of the age and as the compiler of Nahj al-balāghah, an anthology of sermons, speeches, and aphorisms attributed to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib; al-Murtaḍā was better known for his accomplishments as a jurist and theologian, though he was also a skilled poet, literary critic, and commentator on the Qurʾān.

Al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā’s family dominated the position of Alid naqīb, “syndic” or “marshal of the nobility” in the Buyid period. His father,
al-Sharīf Abū Aḥmad al-Ḥusayn b. Mūsā, held the office of naqīb from 355/965 intermittently for about forty years, until he died in 400/1010. Al-Murtaḍā’s maternal grandfather was also appointed naqīb of the Alid sayyids in 362/972, during one of the periods when his father had been dismissed. His brother al-Raḍī held the office until he died in 406/1015. On 16 Muḥarram 403/7 August 1012, al-Raḍī was declared naqīb of the Ṭālibids—descendants of ‘Alī’s father, Abū Ṭālib—throughout the territories under Abbasid sovereignty. He was the first Alid naqīb to receive an honorary robe in black, the color of the Abbasid dynasty.¹ Al-Murtaḍā assumed the office of naqīb upon his brother’s death and held it for thirty years, until his own death in 436/1044. His nephew ‘Adnān b. ‘Alī held the office of naqīb from 436/1044 until 450/1058.²

Members of the family held positions besides that of naqīb as well. In 366/976–77, al-Sharīf Abū Aḥmad led an embassy from ʿizz al-Dawlah (r. 356–67/967–78) to ʿaḍud al-Dawlah (r. 338–72/949–83).³ In 380/990–91, he was appointed leader of the pilgrimage caravan to Mecca (amīr al-ḥājj) and supervisor of the grievance council (nāẓir al-maẓālim), in addition to his duties as Alid naqīb; al-Murtaḍā and al-Raḍī were appointed as deputies to their father.⁴ They were removed from these offices in Dhū al-Qaʿdah 384/December 994-January 995,⁵ but regained them in 394/1003–4.⁶ In Rabīʿ II 402/November 1011, when the Caliph al-Qādir had a document drawn up denouncing the Fatimids as illegitimate claimants to the caliphate who had falsified their genealogy, both al-Raḍī and al-Murtaḍā, along with a number of other scholars, were among the signatory witnesses.⁷

On 3 Ṣafar 406/23 July 1015, following the death of his brother, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā was appointed naqīb, amīr al-ḥājj, and supervisor of the grievance council. An official ceremony, attended by the leading judges and jurists, was held at Dār al-Mulk, the Buyid prince’s palace, and an official letter of appointment was issued by al-Qādir.⁸

Upon the death of al-Shaykh al-Mufīd in 413/1022, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā became the leading Shi‘ī jurist in Baghdad as well as an important notable

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¹ Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Muntaẓam, 15:89.
² On the office of naqīb during this period, see Busse, Chalif und Grosskönig, 280–97; Louis Massignon, “Cadis et naqībs Baghdadiens,” 263–64.
⁴ Ibid., 14:344.
⁵ Ibid., 14:369.
⁶ Ibid., 15:43.
⁷ Ibid., 15:82–3.
⁸ Ibid., 15:111–12.