THE BLACK BANNERS AND THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FLAGS AND SLOGANS IN MEDIEVAL ISLAM

BY

KHALIL ʿATHAMINA

When the ʿAbbasids chose black banners and black costumes as the official symbol of their regime, a battleground was created which had not existed previously in the relationships between the groups competing for power in the Islamic arena. This not only led the opposing camps to adopt banners and symbols in various colors, but also engendered a new kind of propaganda war aimed at supporting the political efforts of the respective sides, presenting them as if they were based on Islamic religious foundations, for the sake of legitimacy.

In this article I shall try to shed light on this phenomenon from a number of viewpoints, including its beginnings and the degree to which it is linked to Arab-Islamic tradition. I shall also attempt to illuminate the political background and traditional conceptions in whose shadow this phenomenon grew and prospered.

The issue of black banners was connected to the dissemination of prophetic traditions of a messianic nature, according to which the Prophet Muhammad foresaw the suffering that would be the lot of his family after his death, and informed them that salvation would come from the East when the local people would arise and bear the black flags that would lead them to a final victory against the rule of tyranny and restore justice⁴. ʿAbbasid propaganda also contributed to the significant dissemination of the black-banner tradition, since the latter was included in the spurious will delivered by

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Abū-Hāšim, the son of Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya to Muḥammad b. ‘Ali b. ʿAbdallāh b. al-Ḥabbās, and which became known by the name of al-saḥīfa al-saḥra’—"the yellow scroll". In any case, because of the nature of Islamic historiography in general and of the nature of the writing of ḥadīth literature in particular, it is difficult to point with certainty to a precise date at which this type of tradition appeared on the Islamic scene. But it may be stated with certainty that the messianic-mystic traditions are a complete and utter sham. There is practically no controversy on this point—neither amongst contemporary researchers nor amongst medieval Muslim critics of ḥadīth literature. This fact did not influence the strong effect these traditions had on the public, who showed great interest in them. The masses saw in these prophecies a divine predestination whose eventual materialization was inevitable. This attitude was reflected in their behavior, evidencing itself even in the course of their daily lives.

2 Abhār al-ʿAbbās, p. 185; Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd, Šarḥ nahḥ al-balāqa. ed. Abū al-Fadl Ibrāḥīm, Cairo, 1959, vol. 7, pp. 149-150. It is worth mentioning that the will issue was the basic point within the Abbasid propaganda in its primary stage. M. Sharon, Black Banners From the East, Jerusalem, 1983, p. 139.

3 In this context one should advise the comprehensive study concerning the writing down of the ḥadīth literature. Ignaz Goldziher, Muslim Studies, ed. S. M. Stern (Translated from the German by C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern), London, 1971, vol. 2, pp. 181-188.


5 al-Ḥindī, Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir, Taḏkirat al-mawdūdī-aṭī, Damascus, 1342 h., pp. 221-223; al-Fiṣān wa l-ṭalāḥīm, vol. 1, pp. 9-10. This fact was also known to Muslim scholars from the ninth and the tenth century, they had clearly stated that this kind of ḥadīth is an absolute forgery. Ibn al-ʿImrānī, Muḥammad b. ʿAlī, al-Inbāʾī ṭarīḥ al-ḥulafā’, ed. Q. al-Samarāʾī, Leiden, 1973, p. 119. It is clear that the main sources responsible for the currency of these ḥadīth are always converted Christians or Jews. See for example: al-Mubarrad, Muḥammad b. Yazīd, al-Kāmil, ed. Abu al-Fadl, Cairo (n.d.), vol. 3, p. 235; al-Suyūṭī, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, Tāriḥ al-ḥulafā’, ed. by Muḥammad M. ʿAbdul-Ḥamīd, Cairo, 1964, p. 216.
