



AMĪR

AMĪR, “commander, governor, prince” in Arabic. Etymologically, the Arabic root *amara* “to command” corresponds to the common Hebrew root *āmār* “to say;” the amir, as well as being the person entitled to give orders and command, thus might also be considered as the spokesman and orator of his group, with a semantic parallelism to the term *zaʿīm*, used in modern Arabic to denote the leader of, e.g., a political party. The term amir seems to be basically Islamic; although it does not occur in the Qurʾān, we do find there the related concept of the *ūluʾl-amr* “holders of authority” (4:59, 83); and the actual term amir occurs frequently in the early Hadith literature. It also occurs in the phrase *amīr-al-moʾmenīn* (“commander of the believers”), which seems to have been used, during the Prophet’s lifetime and just afterwards, to denote the leaders of military expeditions sent to outlying parts of the Arabian peninsula and to the Syrian and Iraqi frontiers. It was then adopted by ʿOmar b. al-Kaṭṭāb on his succession to the caliphate in 13/634 as a title with a more specifically religious content than the purely secular, and more cumbersome, title *kalīfa kalīfa rasūl Allāh* (“successor of the successor of the Messenger of God”). Recently, M. A. Shaban has underlined the significance of the further meaning given in the classical Arabic lexica of “adviser, counselor, one whose advice is sought” (cf. *Tāǧ al-ārūs*¹ III, p. 18: *amīr* = *moʾāmer*, *mošāwer*) as a meaning which could well have been in ʿOmar’s mind, and has noted that the 9th-century Byzantine historian Theophanes renders *amīr-al-moʾmenīn* into Greek as *protosymboulos* (“first counselor,” “first among the *symbouloi*, counselors”). The early Muslims, following the egalitarian traditions of the desert in which the tribal chief was more a first among equals than a despot, would therefore



have regarded the *amīr-al-mo'menīn* as “counselor of the believers” rather than as their military leader (*Islamic History A.D. 600-750 (A.H. 132), a New Interpretation*, Cambridge, 1971, pp. 56-57).

As the early Islamic state and society developed during the Omayyad and early 'Abbasid periods, the title of amir was given both to members of the ruling family and to other notables of the Arabs who were entrusted with high official posts, such as provincial governorships or the leadership of Muslim armies against the infidels of the Dār al-Ḥarb in such regions as the Byzantine frontiers in Anatolia, the Caucasus, Transoxania, or Afghanistan. After the early 'Abbasid period, Arabized Persians and (from the time of Ma'mūn onwards) Turks began to fill such posts and to qualify for the title of amir. Thus in the Iranian world we find such lines of provincial governors as the Tahirids (Arabized Persians) designated as amirs in Khorasan (e.g., on their coins; see B. Spuler, *Iran*, p. 359; see also Barthold, *Turkestan*³, p. 209, where, in a quotation from Gardīzī, 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāher is addressed by his secretary as “O Amir!”). The Tahirids may be described as “officially-appointed amirs,” deriving their authority directly from an act of caliphal delegation; but the title of amir was equally adopted by the early Saffarids in Sīstān, even though, constitutionally, they were usually in rebellion against the 'Abbasids. The early Saffarid amirate really comes under the heading of *emārat al-estīlā* (“amirate by seizure,” “amirate established by force majeure”), to which the legal scholar Māwardī devotes a section in his treatise on the constitutional aspects of the caliphate, *al-Aḥkām al-solṭānīya*: The amir imposes his power by his own force of arms and does not derive his authority from an act of delegation (*tafwīẓ*) from the caliph, which would include a specific document of appointment (*ahd*, *manšūr*) and such appurtenances of governorship as a standard (*lewā*), a robe of honor (*keḷ'a*), and a grant of honorific titles (*alqāb*; see H. A. R. Gibb, “Al-Māwardī's Theory of the Caliphate,” *IC* 11, 1937, pp. 301-02; repr. in *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, Boston, 1962, pp. 162-64).

In the first half of the 4th/10th century, a development of the title amir, *amīr-al-omarā*’ (“supreme commander of the caliphal forces”), comes into prominence. It seems that it was first held by Moqtader's maternal uncle Hārūn b. Ġarīb in 316/928 (Ebn al-Aṭīr [repr.], VIII, p. 188). In 329/940-41 we find the title amir on coins issued by the *amīr-al-omarā*’ Bečkem. It was then used by the Daylamī Buyids, who in 334/945 entered Baghdad and imposed their tutelage on the enfeebled 'Abbasid caliphs. The three brothers who founded the Buyid dynasty, Aḥmad b. Būya (the later Mo'ezz-al-dawla), 'Alī



(the later ‘Emād-al-dawla), and Ḥasan (the later Rokn-al-dawla) all called themselves simply amir; but the latter’s son ‘Azod-al-dawla (338-72/949-83) endeavored to raise himself above the other members of his family by assuming the loftier titles of *malek* (“monarch”) and, in Persian, *šāhanšāh* (“emperor”). The latter title had already been used by his father on a coin of 351/962 (on Buyid titlature, see H. Busse, *Chalif und Grosskönig. Die Buyiden im Iraq (945-1055)*, Beirut and Wiesbaden, 1969, pp. 174f.).

The title of amir was especially favored by the Samanids of Transoxania and Khorasan, who were, as Sunnite potentates, always careful to proclaim their allegiance to the ‘Abbasids. The title was doubtless used as the common form of address to the Samanids, as is seen in poetic eulogies; but there also seems to have been a more formal usage of the title, accompanied by a descriptive epithet, applied to them in the literary sources (and probably also in spoken usage) after their deaths. These formulae are detailed, for instance, in the sections of Naršaḳī’s *Tārīḳ-e Bokārā* devoted to the successive Samanid rulers. Thus Esmā’īl b. Aḥmad (279-95/892-907) was referred to as Amir-e Māzī (“the late amir”); Aḥmad b. Esmā’īl (295-301/907-14) as Amīr-e Šahīd (“the martyred amir”); Naṣr b. Aḥmad (301-31/914-43) as Amīr-e Sa’īd (“the fortunate amir”); Nūḥ b. Naṣr (331-43/943-54) as Amīr-e Ḥamīd (“the laudable amir”); ‘Abd-al-Malek b. Nūḥ (343-50/954-61) as Amīr-e Rašīd (“the rightly-guided amir”) or Amīr-e Mo’ayyad (“the divinely strengthened amir”); Maṣṣūr b. Nūḥ (350-65/961-76) as Amīr-e Sadīd (“the righteous Amīr”); and Nūḥ b. Maṣṣūr (365-87/976-97) as Amīr-e Rašīd or Amīr-e Raḳī (“the well-pleased amir”). (See *Tārīḳ-e Bokārā*, ed. Modarres Raḳawī, Tehran, 1319 Š./1940, pp. 91, 110-11, 113, 115, 117; tr. R. N. Frye, *The History of Bokhara*, Cambridge, Mass., 1954, pp. 77, 94-95, 97-99. Frye curiously misinterprets several of these epithets as personal names [“Sa’īd,” “Ḥamīd,” etc.], as pointed out by Arberry in *BSOAS* 17, 1955, p. 605. Cf. further, Spuler, *Iran*, p. 359; and C. E. Bosworth, “The Titlature of the Early Ghaznavids,” *Oriens* 15, 1962, p. 214, repr. in *The Medieval History of Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia*, London, 1977.)

In the period of Samanid decline during the second half of the 4th/10th century, the title of amir was also used by the local Iranian and Turkish slave generals of the Samanids, such as the Čāḡānī family, the Sīmḡūrīs, Fā’eq Kāṣṣa, Taš, Begtuzun, etc. ‘Otbī and Gardīzī record that in 381/991 Abū ‘Alī Sīmḡūrī assumed on his own initiative the grandiose designation of *amīr-al-omarā’*, *al-mo’ayyad men al-samā’* (“supreme commander, the heavenly-strengthened one;” Bosworth, “Titlature,” p. 215). Already on coins issued by him in



377/987-88 we find the legend *al-amīr al-ǧalīl al-moẓaffar* (M. Mitchiner, *The Multiple Dirhems of Medieval Afghanistan*, London, 1973, no. 1930).

Although the Ghaznavids in effect seized power by force of arms in Ġazna and then Khorasan, they took care to seek legitimization subsequently and maintained a respectful attitude towards their Samanid suzerains until 389/999. Maḥmūd b. Sebūktigin then turned against the amir in Transoxania on the double pretext of avenging the deposed and blinded Amir Maṣṣūr b. Nūḥ and of getting the name of the ‘Abbasid caliph Qāder placed in the *koṭba* instead of that of the latter’s deposed predecessor, Ṭā’ē, whom the Samanids had continued to acknowledge. The normal, everyday title of the early Ghaznavid rulers was amir, as is clearly seen from the pages of Bayhaqī’s *Tārīk-e Mas’ūdī* and in the dedications of poems in the *dīvāns* of poets like Farroḳī and ‘Onṣorī. The founder of the dynasty, Sebūktigin (366-87/977-97) achieved after his death the popular designation of Amīr-e ‘Ādel (“the just amir”); this emerges from Bayhaqī and the anecdotal literature of authors like ‘Awfī (see Bosworth, “Titulature,” p. 216). It is not until the reigns of Farroḳzād b. Mas’ūd (443-51/1052-59) and his brother Ebrāhīm (451-92/1059-99) that we find the more elevated title of *al-solṭān al-mo’aẓẓam/al-a’ẓam* appearing on Ghaznavid coins, possibly influenced by Saljuq cultural trends and administrative practices (see Bosworth, *The Later Ghaznavids, Splendour and Decay. The Dynasty in Afghanistan and Northern India 1040-1186*, Edinburgh, 1977, pp. 47, 55-56).

The Saljuq rulers are generally, and correctly, regarded as the first major dynasty to adopt the titles of *solṭān*, *solṭān-e mo’aẓẓam*, etc. for formal usage in court protocol and on coins and inscriptions (see J. H. Kramers, “Sulṭān,” *EI*¹ IV, pp. 543-45). In the first stages of Ṭoġrel Beg’s rule in northern and eastern Iran, however, this title had not yet become the most generally used (even though Ṭoġrel had first assumed the title of *al-solṭān al-mo’aẓẓam* at Nīšāpūr on its occupation by the Turkmans in 429/1038; see Bosworth, *Ghaznavids*, p. 267). On coins issued by Ṭoġrel at Ray and Nīšāpūr up to 437/1045-46, his title appears as al-Amīr al-Sayyed or al-Amīr al-Aǧall; only from 438/1046-47 onwards does al-Solṭān al-Mo’aẓẓam become general on his coins (see G. C. Miles, *The Numismatic History of Rayy*, New York, 1938, pp. 196-97; and D. Sourdel, *Inventaire des monnaies musulmanes anciennes du Musée de Caboul*, Damascus, 1953, pp. 82f.). In subsequent general Saljuq usage, amir was employed as a designation for princes of the Saljuq royal house and also for the great commanders of state. Most of these last were Turkish military slaves



(*ġelmān*, *mamālīk*), and some of them held specific offices in the sultan's household, e.g., the *amīr-e jāndār* ("chief guard of the sultan"), the *amīr-e selāh* ("armor-bearer to the sultan"), and the *amīr-e āḳvor* ("master of the horse"); they held extensive *eqṭā's* (land grants); and in the course of the 6th/12th century, many of these commanders became atabegs in the provinces of the empire (see I. H. Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı devleti teşkilâtına medhal*, Istanbul, 1941, pp. 35f., and A. K. S. Lambton, in *Camb. Hist. Iran* V, pp. 224-25).

From the Saljuq period onwards, the title of amir tends to follow the way of all originally exalted titles (as pointed out by such authors as Helāl Şābe' and Bīrūnī; see Bosworth, "Titulature," pp. 213-14). It declines somewhat in the social scale, to become the title of petty chiefs and local dignitaries as well as of important territorial rulers. However, we still find in the 19th century that amir was the main designation of such powerful sovereigns as the Dorrānī amirs of Afghanistan and the Uzbek khans of the Central Asian states of Bukhara, Khiva and Kōqand, as well as of numerous Indo-Muslim rulers, e.g., the Mīr of Sind (cf. Yule-Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson, a Glossary of Anglo-Indian Colloquial Words and Phrases*, London, 1903, pp. 17-18, 637, s.vv. "Ameer" and "Omrah").

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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