



## YA'QUB B. LAYṬ B. MO'ADDAL

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**YA'QUB b. LAYṬ b. MO'ADDAL** (r. 247-65/861-79), founder of what may be distinguished as the Laythids, or the “first line” within the [Saffarid dynasty](#), who built up a powerful military empire in the eastern regions of the Islamic world centered on Sistān, The rise to power of Ya'qub and his brother [Amr](#) effected a substantial breach in the fabric of the 'Abbasid caliphate, aggravating a process which began with the autonomous stances of the caliphs' governors in Khorasan, the Tahirids and the Samanids, who were local potentates in the upper Oxus region and Transoxiana.

Ya'qub's home province of Sistān had an enduring heritage of sectarian opposition to the caliphs, and Kharijite activity there provoked an orthodox Sunni counter-movement, including in the capital Zarang, in which the ['ayyārs](#), or *motatawwe'a* (volunteer fighters) were prominent. Such bands of men soon came to represent the personal interests of local warlords, utilizing local feeling against continued caliphal control and financial exploitation of the province, and it was within one of them, that of the *'ayyār* leader in Bost, Ṣāleḥ b. Naṣr (or Naṣr), that Ya'qub first rose to prominence. In the internecine fighting of rival commanders, another *'ayyār* leader emerged in Sistan, Derham b. Nazr (or Naṣr), under whom Ya'qub then took service. However, he soon built up his own following, set Derham aside and, on 25 Moḥarram 247/10 April 861, he was hailed as Amir in Sistān. Later eulogists of the Saffarids fabricated a glorious descent for Ya'qub and his family, back through the Sasanid emperors to the legendary Iranian kings, but Ya'qub's origins were in reality firmly plebeian; from his birthplace, the village of Qarnin, he came



to Zarang as a coppersmith (*ṣaffār*, *ruygār*), while his brother 'Amr was a mule-hirer (Gardizi, p. 138; *Tāriq-e Sistān*, pp. 199-202; tr. pp. 158-60; Juzjāni, I, pp. 197-98).

In 249-50/864, two years after his elevation to power, Ya'qub led an expedition to Bost against his former master Šāleḥ, and then into Rokkaj and Zamindāvar against the local ruler there, the Zunbil, killing him and securing an immense booty. Ya'qub's 'ayyār origins implied a hostility to the local Kharijites, who were particularly strong around Joveyn and Uq in northern Sistān. Ya'qub now moved against them, securing a decisive victory and killing their leader 'Ammār b. Yāser in 251/865 (*Tāriq-e Sistān*, p. 211; tr. pp. 164-5). There were further operations against the Kharijites of the *Bādḡis* and *Garčestān* regions, in which Ya'qub employed a mixture of repression and conciliation; he incorporated many former Kharijites into his own army, in which they now formed a distinct unit, the so-called *jayš al-šorāt* (Bosworth, 1968, pp. 543-44). It was policies like this, and a growing anti-'Abbasid attitude on Ya'qub's part, that led some hostile sources to stigmatize him as a Kharijite sympathizer himself. Ya'qub's actions in fact mark the decline of militant Kharijism in the East, where it henceforth subsisted as the creed of quietist, peaceable communities.

Another early concern for Ya'qub was to extend his authority northwards to Herat and to the rich province of Khorasan, which was then under the governorship of the Tahirid family. Moḥammad b. Ṭāher b. 'Abd-Allāh had been appointed as governor in 248/862 when a serious anti-caliphal, Shi'ite revolt broke out in the Caspian lowlands under the Hasanid 'Ali b. Zayd, called *al-Dā'i ilā'l-Ḥaqq*, which Moḥammad – and, as it subsequently proved, Ya'qub himself – was unable to quell. We have two source traditions on the events leading to the deposition of Moḥammad b. Ṭāher in Nišāpur: an “eastern” one (e.g. Gardizi, p. 1402) which places Ya'qub's attack on Pušang and Herat in 257/871 as part of his campaign against the Kharijites of northern Afghanistan and after his campaigns in the eastern and northern regions against the Zunbils and Abu Dawudids (see below); and a “western” one (e.g. Ebn [Abi] Azhar in Ebn Kallekān, VI, pp. 404-05; tr. de Slane, IV, pp. 302-04) favored by Barthold, which places the Khorasan campaign at the earlier date of 253/867. This earlier date is now confirmed by the local history, the *Tāriq-e Sistān* (pp. 208-09, 213; tr. Ḥabibi, pp. 165-66, 169), which describes how Ya'qub captured Herat from its Tahirid governor and defeated a Tahirid army, compelling Moḥammad to grant Ya'qub, as his vassal governor, Sistān, Kabul, Kermān and



Fārs, together with the appropriate official insignia; this was the first official recognition of Saffarid authority outside his home province.

Of course, this did not satisfy Ya'qub in the long run, but he turned his attention for now to embarking on a raid into Kermān and Fārs in order to exploit the rights granted to him by the Tahirids; Fārs, in particular, was famed for its high taxation yields, meaning that if Ya'qub were able to secure Fārs and its resources for himself, he could prepare for an attack on Ahvāz, which boasted rich, irrigated agricultural lands. The obstacle here, however, was the power of the 'Abbasid caliphate, especially after 256/870 when the new Caliph al-Mo'tamed's energetic and capable brother, al-Mowaffaq, secured an ascendancy in the state. Ya'qub's path to Fārs had already been blocked by the caliphal governor there, 'Ali b. Ḥosayn, whom Ya'qub had nevertheless defeated at Shiraz in 255/869, bringing back to Zarang rich spoils. Fārs meanwhile fell under the control of a local lord, Moḥammad b. Wāṣel, but Ya'qub reacted by leading a further raid into Kermān and Fārs in 257/970, and collected 30 million dirhams of land-tax from Fārs alone. Al-Mowaffaq now formally granted Ya'qub the governorship of Balkh, Toḡārestān, Sind and all the other eastern lands and their revenues, on the condition that he withdraw from Fārs, an obvious attempt to deflect Ya'qub's energies eastwards to the pagan borderlands of Afghanistan and northwestern India, from which the caliphs had no possibility of deriving revenue in any case (Ṭabari, III, pp. 1698-1706, 1839, 1841, 1858-59; *Tāriḳ-e Sistān*, pp. 216, 225-26; tr. pp. 171, 178-79).

Ya'qub had in fact already taken measures against the recrudescing power of the Zunbils and their allies, the Kābol-šāhs, and in 255/869 had marched into Zamindāvar, whilst the Zunbil retreated towards Kabul. He collected rich booty in the form of slave captives and treasures, which were probably from the despoiled shrine of the local god Zun; when presents of idols and other objects were forwarded by Ya'qub to the caliph, they caused a sensation in Sāmarrā'. Shortly afterwards, in either 256/870 (Gardizi, p. 139) or 258/972 (*Tāriḳ-e Sistān*, pp. 216-17; tr. p. 172), Ya'qub led a further expedition to the Kabul region, and then turned northwards to attack the Abu Dawudids, or Banijurids, in Balkh.

While the sources are frequently at variance over the exact chronology of the above events, they all agree that it was in the summer of 259/873 that Ya'qub captured Nišāpur and overthrew the Tahirids. Apparently taking advantage of disaffection within Moḥammad b. Ṭāher's entourage, amid accusations that



the latter had been neglecting the Zaydi Shi'ite threat from the Caspian region, Ya'qub entered the city without striking a blow, and deposed and imprisoned the Tahirid amir. He proceeded into Ṭabarestān, but failed to dislodge the 'Alid ruler Ḥasan b. Zayd, and, in any case, once he left westwards in pursuit of his primary goal to attack Iraq and the heartland of the caliphate, control of Khorasan reverted to various local warlords such as Aḥmad Kojestāni (Ṭabari, III, p. 1881; Gardizi, p. 130; *Tārik-e Sistān*, pp. 220-23; tr. pp 174-77).

A pretext for Ya'qub's second incursion into Fārs, in 261/875, was an appeal from Moḥammad b. Wāṣel's rivals for help against him. Moḥammad was defeated and fled, while Ya'qub again occupied Fārs and Ahvāz. What the caliph feared most now was an alliance between Ya'qub and the Zanj rebels, who were by now in control of much of Lower Iraq and southern Ahvāz, and while no formal, high-level alliance was made, contacts were undoubtedly established for local cooperation between the two anti-caliphal sides. The panic-stricken caliph granted Ya'qub an immense array of governorships, from Fārs and Ray eastwards, but Ya'qub rejected such overtures, marched into central Iraq and captured Wāsiṭ. A battle took place at Dayr al-Āqul, 50 miles south-east of Baghdad, in a terrain intersected by irrigation canals and unfamiliar to the Saffarid army, enabling al-Mowaffaq's troops to secure victory, and thus remove the threat to Baghdad (Ṭabari, III, pp. 1841, 1859, 1887-898; Mas'udi, *Moruj*, VIII, pp. 42-5; *Tārik-e Sistān*, pp. 225-32; tr. pp. 178-84; Ebn Kallekān, VI, pp. 412-19; tr. IV, pp. 312-19). For the remaining three years before his death from an internal illness at Jondišābur in Šawwāl 276/June 879, Ya'qub nevertheless retained control of Ahvāz, Fārs (which he recovered from his old enemy Moḥammad b. Wāṣel) and Kermān. Thus both southern and eastern Persia remained subtracted from caliphal control, a situation which was to continue under Ya'qub's successor 'Amr (*Tārik-e Sistān*, p. 233; tr. p. 184; Ebn Kallekān, VI, pp. 418, 420-21; tr. IV, pp. 315, 320-21).

Ya'qub, as a man of the people who gloried in his lowly origins and denounced the 'Abbasids as usurpers and exploiters, expressed local Sistāni discontent with outside masters, and for this reason may be regarded as a mouthpiece of local protest in Persia, though not as a proto-Persian nationalist. Nor can we assume that the scraps of New Persian poetry which his inevitable court eulogists addressed to him, and which are preserved in the sources, show Sistān as a focus of the New Persian literary revival. Frugal in his way of life, inured to hardship and a skilful military commander, Ya'qub may be regarded as an exponent of *Realpolitik* who had no time for the "caliphal fiction"



whereby all governors and holders of local power were to be regarded as enjoying their authority only as an act of caliphal delegation. His career accordingly marks an early stage in the disintegration of caliphal political unity in the Islamic world.

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