Al-Maʾmūn, the Inquisition, and the Quest for Caliphal Authority

By John Abdallah Nawas

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series editors

Joseph E. Lowry
Devin J. Stewart
Shawkat M. Toorawa

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For Monique

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

The "inquisition" (Ar. *miḥna*) unleashed by the seventh Abbasid caliph, ʿAbdallāh al-Maʾmūn (r. 813–833), has long attracted the attention of modern scholars of the intellectual, political, and religious history of the early Abbasid era. Because this event—which began in 833 and stretched through the reigns of two of al-Maʾmūn's successors—appears at a convergence of prominent currents in systematic theology, rationalist thought, theocratic politics, and nascent trends in Shiism and Sunnism, historians have seen it as the key to a wide array of puzzles and problems in early Islamic history. In this incisive study, Professor John Nawas of the University of Leuven (KU Leuven), Belgium, subjects the various proposed explanations of these events to a sober and searching analysis and, in the process, presents a new interpretation of al-Maʾmūn's political and religious policies, contextualized against the background of early Abbasid intellectual and social history.

One of the very first analyses of the politico-religious policies of al-Maʾmūn was undertaken by W.M. Patton, in his 1897 study *Aḥmed ibn Ḥanbal and the Miḥna*, which focused especially on the hero of proto-Sunni resistance to al-Maʾmūn's policies, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855). Patton's work still has much that is useful for moderns scholarship, but it has one additional, enormous benefit for those who work on this material—it contains most of the relevant passages from the relevant Arabic primary sources in Arabic. Included here at the end of the volume, it is once again being made available to modern researchers as a companion to Professor Nawas's study.

Although *Al-Maʾmūn, the Inquisition, and the Quest for Caliphal Authority* deals with subject matter that has traditionally been the preserve of specialists working with medieval Arabic sources, this volume aims, for the first time, to make the problematics of these events and materials available to a wider readership. We are thus very pleased indeed to be able to publish this volume as part of our series, Resources in Arabic and Islamic Studies. We are also extremely gratified that the eminent historian Michael Cook, Class of 1943 Professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, has provided a Foreword to this important work.

Joseph E. Lowry
Devin J. Stewart
Shawkat M. Toorawa

FOREWORD

Michael A. Cook

No caliph between the accession of Abū Bakr and the Mongol destruction of Baghdad did as many surprising things as al-Maʾmūn. They range from the unique to the downright odd. He was the only caliph ever to rule from Khurāsān and the only one to visit Egypt. No other ʿAbbāsid (let alone Umayyad) caliph appointed an ʿAlid as his heir—and stranger still, an ʿAlid who must have been two decades his senior. No other caliph adopted the doctrine of the created Qurʾan, or any other theological doctrine, as a litmus test of orthodoxy to be imposed by institutionalized persecution; his immediate successors merely continued what he had begun. By any standards al-Maʾmūn was an idiosyncratic caliph, and sometimes a bizarre one.

This does not mean that the unusual things he did were a kind of behavioural gibberish. They were not the ravings of a lunatic who had slipped his cultural moorings. Attempting to rule the caliphate from a center as eccentric as Khurāsān may not have been a particularly good idea; but Khurāsān was undoubtedly a province that mattered, for reasons at once historical, economic, political, and military, and it was the region with which al-Maʾmūn was best connected. His visit to Egypt goes against the grain of Near Eastern geopolitics in the early centuries of Islam, in which the country was relegated to a somewhat marginal role; but Egypt mattered economically, it boasted interesting sites for a caliphal tourist, and it was in the throes of an obstinate rebellion. Appointing an ʿAlid heir who was unlikely to outlive him looks like a very bad idea, and probably was—it could be relied on to alienate a lot of people who mattered without securing a viable alternative basis for the power of the caliphate. But it went well with al-Maʾmūn's consistent partiality for ʿAlī and his descendants, a partiality that has always been widely shared in Islam, and it may also have made some sense in terms of eschatological beliefs that were current at the time. Adopting as official dogma an unpopular elite doctrine may not have been politic, but the created Qurʾan was no brainchild of al-Maʾmūn's: it was one of the few issues on which the dialectical theologians of the day—the *ahl al-kalām*—were in agreement. Imposing this doctrine by heavy-handed state action, to the point that it was rumored that it would be taught to children in primary schools, made

little political sense: it meant picking a fight with a part of the population that was otherwise not particularly likely to rebel, and at a time when rebellions were epidemic in the caliphate. But the idea of "examining" people to verify that they were believers is grounded in the Qurʾan: "O believers, when believing women come to you as emigrants, test them.... Then, if you know them to be believers, return them not to the unbelievers" (Q 60:10). The verb here translated as "test" (*imtaḥana*) was likewise used by al-Maʾmūn, and derives from the same root that gives us the standard term for his "inquisition" (*miḥna*).

However, showing that all of al-Maʾmūn's unusual actions must have made some kind of sense to contemporaries, and indeed to posterity, does not add up to explaining why he chose to behave in those particular ways. The world of the possible contains innumerable things that humans could intelligibly do, many things that at some level they would like to do, and far fewer that they actually do. In the case of al-Maʾmūn it is hard not to come away with the sense that a particular personality was in play. Here was someone intelligent, educated, imaginative, and creative; someone who had a way of coming up with bright but bad ideas, getting hooked on them, and persisting with them till disaster or death forced a change of course. (Indeed al-Maʾmūn's relatively early death looms large in all this: he never had the opportunity to grow old and wise.) And of course we know nothing about the intimate processes whereby he came up with his ideas and got hooked on them. The implication of this line of thought, were we to pursue it further, would be that while we can say some worthwhile things by way of setting out necessary conditions for al-Maʾmūn's more unusual actions, identifying sufficient conditions is beyond our reach and likely to remain so. This, of course, would be a rather defeatist conclusion. The fact is that al-Maʾmūn is a puzzle, and confronted with an interesting and historically significant puzzle it seems a pity to give up on it.

At the time when John Nawas sent me a copy of his dissertation, Ibn Ḥanbal was an everpresent figure in my daily life. I was engaged in writing a study of "commanding right and forbidding wrong" in which he stood at the center of a key chapter. This meant that I was at least tangentially interested in the inquisitorial procedure initiated by al-Maʾmūn, since one of its most celebrated victims was to be Ibn Ḥanbal. It was in this context two things immediately caught my eye about the dissertation.

The first was that Nawas did not simply push a line of his own while ignoring or dismissing other views. Instead he set up a systematic taxonomy of the rather chaotic landscape of the secondary scholarship, identifying a limited number of hypotheses in terms of which the various trends in the field could be reduced to order. He then took the reader through these hypotheses one by one, even-handedly showing what evidence supported them and what evidence counted against them, and judging them accordingly on the basis of the full range of primary sources. It was hard not to agree with his rejection of the Muʿtazilite hypothesis, the idea that al-Maʾmūn's links to the Muʿtazilites—and more broadly the *ahl al-kalām*—could explain his decision to impose the doctrine of the created Qurʾan. These links were clearly a necessary condition for the decision, and

as such an indispensable part of any explanation, but they were far from being sufficient. The same was true of the related but distinct Shīʿite and ʿAlid hypotheses; they did not identify even a necessary condition, except to the extent that we may see al-Maʾmūn's Shīʿite or ʿAlid sympathies as linked to his strong conception of caliphal authority—and as Nawas points out, his thinking on this issue does not seem to have been very different from that of his predecessors.

The second thing that caught my eye was that the view favored by Nawas—namely the caliphal authority hypothesis—was more comprehensive and held more water than its rivals. This view presents al-Maʾmūn's inquisition as a quintessential example of authority dramatization. It is indeed eminently plausible that a ruler with his strong sense of occupying a God-given office would have felt intensely frustrated and grossly disrespected by the level of disarray that prevailed in his domains, and would accordingly feel a strong urge to dramatize his authority. Of course as Nawas points out, this hypothesis still leaves several questions unanswered, for example the timing of the inquisition—why did al-Maʾmūn put up with the cacophony of the traditionists and their associates for two decades, only to launch his campaign against them near the end of his reign? But if the puzzle can be solved at all, Nawas has made a major contribution to its solution.

Author's Preface

In 1993, during a typically august and traditional European ceremony, I publicly defended a dissertation entitled "Al-Maʾmūn: Miḥna and Caliphate," which I had written at the Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen (later renamed Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen) in the Netherlands. Perhaps the grandiosity of this very formal, old-fashioned and somewhat outmoded ceremony instilled in me the diffidence that dissuaded me from publishing the dissertation immediately, though it was always in the back of my mind. I did soon after notice that it was being regularly used and cited, but, convinced though I was that I had to find time to sit down and do the necessary work to get the manuscript into book form, the years rolled by. Two decades on, I was unexpectedly invited to have it included in the series Resources in Arabic and Islamic Studies (RAIS). I considered this honor an exceptional opportunity to finalize the manuscript in the manner I had always envisioned, then as now, namely to address it not only to Arabists and Islamicists but also to a broader readership. I have accordingly revised the text and changed the chapter structure. I have also updated the notes by including secondary literature that has appeared since 1993 in cases where the new material makes a direct contribution to the topic: these are indicated by an asterisk (*) in both the notes and the Bibliography. For a comprehensive annotated listing of the existing literature, see my historiographical essay on the *miḥna* published in Oxford Bibliographies Online (Nawas 2014), which is regularly updated.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the editors of this series, Joseph E. Lowry, Devin J. Stewart, and Shawkat M. Toorawa, for inviting me to publish in Resources in Arabic and Islamic Studies (RAIS) and for their editorial guidance. I especially want to thank the gifted copyeditor they engaged. Michael Cook did me the honor of writing the foreword; it is not only his help to others but also his dedication to Islamic Studies that inspires us all.

I was fortunate to have had the benefit of receiving help when I was writing the dissertation. The people to whom I owe thanks are many. I would like explicitly to acknowledge my debt to several scholars on whose time and expertise I had no claim whatsoever but who, nonetheless, graciously responded to my queries in ways that no novice has a right to expect: Edmund Bosworth, Mayke de Jong, Carol Hillenbrand, Etan Kohlberg, Wilferd Madelung, Harald Motzki, Jan Peters, Peter Rietbergen, Dominique Sourdel, Arjo Vanderjagt, Geert-Jan van Gelder and W.M. Watt. I am also most grateful to Gual Juynboll, whose extended discussions with me taught me much and which I still cherish deeply. His passing is a loss I feel every day. Kees Versteegh helped me wade through a number of thorny Arabic grammatical constructions, which he thought funny as they were the very examples "his" grammarians would use to explain the Arabic language. Needless to say, any shortcomings are mine alone.

A special word of thanks goes to Jerry Atlas and Debby Tanzer for a friendship that has spanned decades: *al-ṣadīq ʿind al-ḍīq* (a friend in need is a friend indeed), as the Arabic proverb goes; and, as the Yiddish proverb goes, what soap is to the body, laughter is to the soul. I thank both your souls for giving Monique and me so much moral support and for making us laugh so much together.

I am blessed again to be able to thank my parents, who are approaching 90 but whose persevering and tenacious spirits are stronger than ever. My mother-in-law Diny Bernards-Hendriks leads us in longevity and wisdom, acquired as she raised and fed five children almost on her own; her oldest, my much lamented brother-in-law, Frans Bernards, passed away in 2009 and is missed for his unconventional intellectual curiosity, which only made us more curious than we already were. My sister Carmen and my brother Mike, together with their spouses, Paulus and Anne (and my nieces and nephews, Sander, Lisa, Tom, Max, and Lydia) deserve separate mention here for their support.

I am happy to be able to thank my own PhD students for the intellectual journeys that they shared and continue to share with me: Stijn Aerts, Ahmed Azzouz, Thijs Delva, Talat Shinnawe, and Jessika Soors. I also thank them for our research group "History of the Fundamentals of Islam" at the KU Leuven and the Institute for Advanced Arabic and Islamic Studies, Antwerp, Belgium, which provides an extremely stimulating intellectual climate.

Finally, I thank Cambridge University Press for permission to use material drawn from my "A Reexamination of Three Current Explanations for al Maʾmun's Introduction of the Mihna," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26 (1994): 615–29.

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