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**Centralized Authority and Military
Autonomy in the Early Islamic
Conquests***

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(Chicago)

I Introduction: Some Thoughts on Centralization

THE HISTORICAL works of the Islamic tradition portray the early Islamic conquests as the self-conscious and centrally managed expansion of a new state in the name of the new faith of Islam. According to this view, commitment to Islam provided the motive force underlying the conquests, and the leadership of the early Islamic community, headed by the Caliphs in Medina, coordinated virtually all aspects of the expansion, from the initial recruitment of troops to the placement of garrisons of Muslims following the successful conquest of a province.

This vision of the Islamic conquests embraces what we shall call, in more general terms, the "centralization thesis." The main components of this

* I am indebted to the participants in the third Late Antiquity and Early Islam workshop, whose fertile suggestions strengthened this paper immensely, and whose criticisms of an earlier version spurred me to address some of its main weaknesses. Unfortunately, they are too numerous for me to single out for individual mention here. I am also grateful to Paul M. Cobb and Walter E. Kaegi for taking the time to read earlier drafts and for many helpful suggestions. This paper was first written in 1992, then revised in early 1993 and, slightly, in early 1994. In making revisions, however, I have not included literature appearing since 1992, with the sole exception of references to the revised edition of Albrecht Noth's *Quellenkritische Studien*, cited here as "Noth-Conrad" (see n. 22, below).

thesis can be identified as (1) the existence of some central concepts or mission motivating the conquerors; (2) the existence of a ruling élite dedicated to the principles of these central concepts; and (3) the existence of some plan of expansion in the name of the central concepts; and (4) the capacity of the ruling élite to realize the plan of expansion through direct and indirect commands.

The centralization thesis has been accepted in the main by many modern scholars, but it has also been challenged, sometimes fundamentally, by a variety of revisionist interpretations put forth over the past century or so. The objective of this essay is to consider the cogency of the various interpretations of the conquests that have been advanced by modern scholars, with particular reference to whether the conquests are viewed as “centralized” or “decentralized.” Before doing so, however, it will be useful to make some general observations about the notion of “centralization” that must be kept in mind when attempting to interpret the evidence for the early Islamic conquests.

Centralization means control of some process from “the centre” – in the traditional view of the Islamic conquests, control of the conquest movement by the Caliphs in Medina. In dealing with historically complex phenomena such as the Islamic conquest, however, the notion of centralization cannot be envisioned as half of a simple binary polarity, with complete “decentralization” as its opposite pole. Rather, it must be seen as a continuum. That is, we may be able to envision the Islamic conquests as falling in general somewhere along a broad spectrum of degrees of centralization. Indeed, we will probably need to draw a complex judgment on the issue of centralization, and to speak of certain aspects of the conquests as being relatively centralized, while other aspects are quite decentralized.

Moreover, we must recognize the existence of a hierarchy of levels or aspects of centralization – what, for simplicity, I shall term the *conceptual*, the *strategic*, and the *tactical* aspects. These can perhaps best be described by formulating them as questions: (1) Were the conquests the product of some centralized or unitary impulse or ideology? Did they have some central source of authority and some broad, overarching goal to which its participants felt themselves bound, even if the latter was perhaps vague or elastic?¹ If so,

¹ Meaning, here, by “broad”, that it transcended the narrow interests of particular individuals.

we can speak of the conquests as having displayed *conceptual centralization*. If, on the other hand, the various events usually included under the rubric of the Islamic conquest were in fact motivated by different and unrelated causes and were not part of some larger conception, then we can consider the conquests to have been conceptually decentralized. (2) Did there exist some general military objectives and some general strategy for attaining these military objectives? Or (to put it another way), did the central authorities coordinate in some measure the activities of different war parties on various fronts? If so, we can speak of the conquests as having displayed strategic (or operational) centralization (we shall use either “strategic” or “operational” depending on whether the particular context of which we are speaking focuses primarily on planning or on implementation). If, on the other hand, the events of the Islamic conquest represent primarily the fruits of the individual initiative of various war-leaders who acted on their own authority without any direction from the “centre”, then we must speak of the conquests as having been strategically decentralized. (3) Did there exist a close centralized control or implementation of tactics and logistics (of supply, communications, etc.) on various fronts or in specific encounters with the enemy? If so, we can speak of the conquests as having displayed tactical centralization.

Certain implications follow *a priori* from these logical distinctions among different degrees or aspects of centralization. One is that absence of centralization on one level does not necessarily imply an absence of centralization on the levels above it; rather, each level must be examined in its own right. In particular, we must avoid the pitfall of drawing conclusions about strategic or conceptual centralization on the basis of evidence that pertains to tactical matters. It is, for example, all too easy to ridicule the idea that the Caliphs in Medina could have controlled every detail of the conquests unfolding in distant provinces; but lack of Caliphal oversight over details of tactical disposition does not necessarily mean that the Caliphs had no strategic or operational oversight. Nor can it be used as evidence to conclude that the conquests lacked any unifying conceptual base, that they were not a “movement,” but were merely a collection of unrelated incidents that were only retrospectively conceived of as parts of a larger whole.

Conversely – but, perhaps, somewhat less obviously – we can propose that any firm evidence for the existence of a given level of centralized control inescapably implies the existence of centralized control on all higher levels as

well. Coordination by a centralized authority of the activities of separate commanders (operational centralization in realizing a strategic plan), for example, requires that the central authority be motivated by some guiding concepts; for it is self-evident that there can be no coordination of activities without a purpose or goal in the pursuit of which things are to be coordinated.

From these considerations it becomes clear that there are only four logically valid types of interpretation for any conquest movement. In order of increasing degrees of centralization, they are:

I. No centralization is found on the conceptual, strategic, or tactical levels. That is, the character of the conquest as a coordinated movement is denied.

II. Conceptual centralization is present, but neither strategic or tactical centralization is found. In other words, there is a general commitment to some common idea or doctrine, but there is either no unified leadership to implement it, or no effective mechanisms of implementation available to the leadership. Implementation is, in other words, totally haphazard, and under the free control of independent local commanders acting in the name of a set of common concepts, but without any coordination among them and as each interpreted the dictates of those concepts on his own.

III. Conceptual centralization and strategic centralization are present, but not tactical centralization. According to this scheme, the leadership of the movement is able to mobilize subordinate forces and shape general strategic policy in the name of the unifying concepts.

IV. Centralization is found on all levels – conceptual, strategic, and tactical. Virtually every aspect of the conquest is controlled and managed from the centre by the ruling élite.

Let us now review some salient interpretations of the early Islamic conquests to see where they stand in relation to this logical typology.

II. Divergent Interpretations: a Typology

A significant number of modern interpreters of the early Islamic conquests have accepted the main outlines of the traditional Islamic “centralizing thesis,” holding to the general notion of a set of central motivating concepts and a

centralized execution directed, loosely at least, from the centre in Medina.² These interpretations correspond to type III in the typology sketched above.

Modern versions of the centralizing thesis, when compared to their analog in the traditional Islamic sources, can usually be seen to involve adjustments or shifts of emphasis that modify it in ways that are minor, from the point of view of our analysis, however revolutionary they may be in other respects. For example, the notion that the movement was sparked by some motivating concept or mission may be adopted, but in some cases the nature (but not the existence) of that mission is called into question: where the Islamic tradition sees the motivating factor as the pure early Islam, others may adduce political or other motivations instead.³ These interpretations, then, emphasize the importance of conceptual centralization, and usually follow the Islamic sources also in seeing a large measure of strategic (operational) centralization. The issue of tactical centralization is usually not raised explicitly, or is not dealt with in depth, and as far as I know no modern interpretation has proposed that the Islamic conquests displayed complete Caliphal control on both the strategic and tactical levels (type IV), although the Islamic tradition itself routinely suggests this.⁴

Already in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, however, some western authors were raising objections to certain aspects of the centralizing thesis of the type III variety. Building on the work of Hugo Winkler, for example, Leone Caetani advanced the view that the expansion of Arab rule was largely the result of ecological factors – particularly climatic

² See, for example, Carl Brockelmann, *History of the Islamic Peoples* (New York, 1960), 49-62 [German original 1939]; Laura Veccia-Vaglieri, “The Patriarchal and Umayyad Caliphates,” in *The Cambridge History of Islam I* (Cambridge, 1970), 58-60; Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago, 1974), I, 200-211; Fred M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981); Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London, 1986), 59; John Walter Jandora, *The March from Medina: a Revisionist Study of the Arab Conquests* (Clifton, N.J., 1990).

³ Among the most striking cases of this is Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism* (Cambridge, 1977). Radical as the religious implications of the book are, however, it nonetheless sees the conquests as the result of implementing a central mission.

⁴ Jandora, *The March from Medina*, pays more attention than most works to matters of military tactics and organization. A few general comments are offered by Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Abū Ghazzāla, *Al-Intiṣārāt al-‘arabīya al-‘uḏmā fī ṣadr al-islām: dirāsā ‘an fann al-ḥarb al-‘arabī* (Cairo, 1403/1983), 33-47 (on weaponry) and 48-52 (on military organization), but despite its subtitle this work offers virtually no analysis of military organization or its development.

change and population increase – which resulted in economic distress and consequent emigration.⁵ This “ecological thesis”, as we may term it, proved very popular, and was embraced by many later writers. A typical expression of it is the following passage by a leading scholar from a book intended for a general audience: “Initially the great conquests were an expansion not of Islam but of the Arab nation, driven by the pressure of overpopulation in its native peninsula to seek an outlet in the neighboring countries. It is one of the series of migrations which carried the Semites time and again into the Fertile Crescent and beyond.”⁶ According to the ecological thesis, the early Caliphs were merely riding the tiger of the expansion of the Arab peoples, over which they had little real control, at least at the outset. It is for this reason that proponents of the ecological thesis often prefer to speak of the “Arab conquests”, rather than the “Islamic conquests.” The view that the conquests were essentially more “Arab” than “Islamic” was partly rooted in the observation of an undeniable fact, that the conquests were not carried out primarily to secure the religious conversion to Islam of the conquered populations, at least beyond the Arabian peninsula. For, as is well known, the conquerors were content to collect tribute from non-Muslim religious communities outside Arabia that tendered their submission, and to leave them free to continue in their former faiths.

Many – indeed, almost all – of the scholars who adopted the ecological thesis to explain the Islamic conquests continued to adhere to aspects of the centralization thesis; for example, they often continued to describe how the Caliphs dispatched forces, coordinated strategy, and mobilized resources for the conquests, while positing ecological factors as the underlying cause of the conquests. That is, they seem to have introduced the ecological thesis as a kind of modification of the centralization thesis, rather than as a total repudiation of it, perhaps feeling that it provided a way to explain the origins of the

⁵ Leone Caetani, *Studi di Storia Orientale* I (Milan, 1911), 133-38, 369-71; restated with, if anything, greater force by Henri Lammens, *Le berceau de l'Islam* (Rome, 1914), 117-21 and 174-77. A variant of the ecological thesis is developed in M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History A.D. 600-750 (A.H. 132): a New Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1971). He argues that Muḥammad's activities created an economic recession that forced the Arabs to raid neighbouring territories, resulting in their “unintentionally acquiring an empire” (p. 14). For further discussion of these theories, see Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 3-7.

⁶ Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (rev. ed., New York, 1960), 55-56.

conquest movement that was, in their view, more “scientific.”⁷ On the other hand, seeing the conquests primarily as an Arab conquest neatly glosses over the fact that the conquests began with the forcible subjugation of many Arabian tribes by the Medinese leadership.

There is also a deeper problem inherent in such “hybrid” interpretations. Stripped to its essentials, the ecological thesis is nothing less than the denial that a mission or central set of concepts played any causative rôle in the Islamic conquests – it asserts, after all, that the conquests were “really” generated by population pressure and other historical and economic forces rather than by conceptual factors. That is, the ecological thesis belongs to type I in our typology of interpretations. The coordination of strategy, dispatch of commanders, and other operational features, on the other hand, belong to what we have termed strategic centralization, which is found only in interpretations of type III or IV. Yet, we have shown in the preceding section that the existence of strategic and operational centralization logically requires the existence of conceptual centralization. Hybrid interpretations that combine an ecological thesis with some elements of the centralization thesis seem to me, in other words, to embrace a fatal contradiction, for the two theses are logically incompatible. The hybrid “ecological-centralizing” interpretation, in short, does not conform to any of the four logically valid typological variants, and must be rejected. This does not mean that ecological factors played no part in the events of the conquest era, but in dealing with them we must either embrace the ecological thesis whole-heartedly and dispense entirely with any talk of centralized control by the Caliphs over what is usually called the Arab or Islamic conquests, or reduce ecological factors to the role of supporting elements abetting the process of Arab migrations once the conquests had already begun.⁸

⁷ For example, Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (8th ed., London, 1964), or Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, 55, who speaks of the conquest both as a migration of the Arab nation and as something in which the Arab leadership employed conscious strategy and provided reinforcements and supplies for their troops. See also Francesco Gabrieli, *Muhammad and the Conquests of Islam* (New York, 1968); Shaban, *Islamic History*; Edmond Rabbath, *La conquête arabe sous les quatre premiers califes (11/632-40/661)* (Beirut, 1985), I, 13-26, who sees ecological factors in combination with the new faith of Islam as decisive.

⁸ I have offered more detailed objections to some of the specific assumptions of the ecological thesis in *The Early Islamic Conquests*, 3-8.

Very few scholars have chosen the first option and attempted to discard the centralization thesis in all its aspects; as we have seen, many attempted to reconcile aspects of the centralizing view with the ecological thesis. Recently, however, there has appeared a radically revisionist view of the Islamic conquests that we can call the *accidental* thesis. It clearly belongs among type I interpretations. Its proponents not only deny that the events of the conquest (as related in the traditional sources) were coordinated by the Caliphs as part of a coherent movement; they also deny the existence of any centralizing concepts or mission and doubt that many of the major events of the conquest, as related in the traditional sources, took place at all. This position is clearly staked out in a recent article, whose authors, on the basis of seventh-century Syriac, Greek, and Armenian sources, "conclude that the local sources written before the early eighth century provide no evidence for a *planned invasion* of Arabs from the Peninsula, nor for great battles which crushed the Byzantine army; nor do they mention any Caliph before Mu'āwiyah....The picture the contemporary literary sources provide is rather of raids of the familiar type; the raiders stayed because they found no military opposition....[W]hat took place was a series of raids and minor engagements, which gave rise to stories among the Arab newcomers of How We Beat the Romans; these were later selected and embellished in late Umayyad and early 'Abbāsīd times to form an Official History of the Conquest."⁹ According to this more radically revisionist view, the very notion of a conquest movement is an

⁹ J. Koren and Y. Nevo, "Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies," *Der Islam* 68 (1991), 87-101, at 100. See also Moshe Sharon, "The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land," in Sharon (ed.), *Pillars of Smoke and Fire: the Holy Land in History and Thought* (Johannesburg, 1986), 225-35, esp. 226-27, who argues that "Islam" had no unified beginning, and may have had several prophets, and suggests that local communities of *mu'minūn* (believers) simply seized power when the Byzantine and Sasanian empires collapsed. Even in some of the older literature, however, we find suggestions that the first steps in the conquest may have been, essentially, accidental; Carl Heinrich Becker's magisterial essay "Die Ausbreitung der Araber," in his *Islamstudien*, I (Leipzig, 1924), 70, expresses this idea, as does Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 8th ed., 144-45, although Hitti introduces Islam as a conceptual factor, contending that it forced Arab tribes to stop raiding one another, and so helped redirect their raids outward. Walter E. Kaegi, Jr. has pointed out to me that – *pace* Koren and Nevo – some "local" sources written, at the latest, at the very beginning of the eighth century C.E. (end first century A.H.) do make reference to major battles of the conquest era, notably Anastasius the Sinaite, *Sermo adversus Monotheletas* (ed. Karl-Heinz Uthemann, Turnhout, 1985), 60 (paras. 3.1.86-88); on the date of this work, see John Haldon, "The Works of Anastasius of Sinai," in Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad, eds., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East I: Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), 107-47, at 113 (personal communication, Walter E. Kaegi, Jr.).

historiographical myth, created during the first few Islamic centuries, that was projected back onto a set of historical events that were much more haphazard, unplanned, and accidental than the conquest traditions would have us believe.¹⁰ One is reminded here of the recent revisionist interpretation of the Dorian invasions in Greece that views them not as the immigration and conquest by a new group, but as a retrospective historiographical myth created to explain the emergence to prominence in various parts of Greece of once-lowly peoples.¹¹

The question of what mission or concepts, if any, mobilized the conquests is a vitally important one, but is properly beyond the scope of this volume, which focuses on the problem of states and their material infrastructure in the transition from late antiquity to early Islam. Tactical centralization, on the other hand, given the prevailing conditions of the conquest era, is neither expected nor likely to have characterized the conquests. This only leaves the question of strategic and operational centralization, which is central to the present volume's focus, so we shall restrict our remaining comments to the problem of strategic centralization in the early Islamic conquests, taking it for granted for the moment that there was some kind of conceptual basis underlying the conquest movement, even if we are not yet sure exactly how we wish to characterize it. Our focus here on strategic centralization is justified, moreover, because most of the interpreters of the conquests to date have assumed the existence of motivating concepts, but disagreed sharply on the degree of strategic and operational centralization. Just how much operational control did the Caliphs have over the events of the conquests unfolding throughout the Near East? In what measure were the

¹⁰ The most detailed analysis of the historiographical problems of the conquest literature are the works of Albrecht Noth cited in n. 22, below. Noth is not as skeptical about the basic events of the conquest as, say, Koren and Nevo are; but Noth has made the clearest statement of the salvation-historical character of the conquest tradition. It may be, however, that Koren and Nevo pursue some implications of Noth's ideas, even beyond the point intended by Noth: Noth's general reconstruction of the *events* (as opposed to the historiography) of early Islamic history can be found in his chapter "Früher Islam," in Ulrich Haarmann, ed., *Geschichte der arabischen Welt* (München: C. H. Beck, 1987), 11-100. On the other hand, even a scholar as generally traditional in his orientation as Hitti (*History of the Arabs*, 145) pointed out parallels between the conquest accounts and Biblical "salvation history."

¹¹ A convenient summary of the various interpretations in this debate, with recent bibliography, is provided in Jean-Nicolas Corvisier, *Aux origines du miracle grec. Peuplement et population en Grèce du Nord* (Paris, 1991), 7-16. The closest parallel is perhaps the interpretation advanced by Sharon, "The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land."

conquests of various provinces the result of conscious strategic policies implemented by the ruling elite, and in what measure were they the serendipitous consequences of uncontrolled tribal raiding parties or the action of forces controlled by essentially autonomous war leaders, acting on their own initiative and for their own purposes, and not for those of the Caliphs and the nascent Islamic state? It is to a consideration of these issues that we must now turn.

III. Problems of Strategic and Organizational Centralization

The notion that the conquests displayed a significant measure of strategic and operational centralization is, as we have seen, crucial to the traditional interpretations of the conquests. Three different objections have been raised to this notion. They are the difficulty of communications, the case of 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ and his role in the conquest of Egypt, and – by far the most complex – a general historiographical critique of the conquest narratives. Let us look at each in turn.

A. *Communications during the Conquests.*

The difficulty (real or assumed) of communications in the early medieval period is sometimes taken as a reason why the conquests could not have been, in operational terms, a centralized movement, since strategic and operational centralization would require the Caliphs to be able to communicate with their commanders with some efficiency. Noth, for example, has argued that the early Muslims lacked this capacity, stating that it would take 20 days for messengers to cover the 1000 km separating Medina from the fronts in Syria and Iraq, so that a single exchange of letters would require forty days' time and a complex negotiation many months.¹²

It is, however, hardly unreasonable to assume that a fast messenger could cover the distance of 1000 km in less than twenty days. Musil relates instances in which riders were able to cover 300 km in roughly sixteen hours, and even more rapid communications can be imagined if we assume that the early Muslims maintained a few courier posts, with fresh riders and fresh, fast

mounts, between Medina and the armies in Iraq or Syria.¹³ Such rates would make it possible for couriers from Syria to reach Medina and bring a reply in a week or even less, certainly quickly enough to take care of general operational coordination. Obviously, tight Caliphal control of all details on all fronts would be out of the question, but broader strategic planning and operational oversight is not thereby ruled out.

In any case, the communications time-lag faced by the early Islamic state certainly compares favorably with later colonial ventures such as the Portuguese or British expansions in the Indian Ocean. Both were carried out by forces operating on the basis of general orders in an environment where communications and news required months to reach home base in Europe, but there can be no doubt that the Portuguese colonies in Asia and the British occupation of India were, in at least strategic terms, sanctioned and in some measure coordinated from Lisbon and London; they were not, at any rate, "accidental" occupations undertaken by free-wheeling commanders completely unbeknownst to higher authorities in Europe, however loose the latter's day-to-day knowledge of and control over operations must have been. Communications limitations demanded that Muslim commanders in the field handle many situations that arose as they saw fit, and we may, with Noth, wish to take a sceptical view of reports of lengthy negotiations between commanders in the field and Caliphs in Medina arising out of specific local situations during the conquest. But operational coordination of a broadly conceived strategy for the Islamic conquests by the Caliphs in Medina certainly seems to have been feasible given the prevailing communications of the day.

B. *'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ and the Conquest of Egypt.*

A few of the accounts about the invasion of Egypt by 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ describe him as having acted entirely on his own authority, and some scholars have taken these accounts to be vestiges of an archaic layer of tradition reflecting

¹² Noth, *Quellenkritische Studien*, 72-80, esp. 72-73; Noth-Conrad, 78-80.

¹³ Alois Musil, *Northern Negd* (New York 1928), 145. William Lancaster of the British Institute at Amman recounted reports, dating from the beginning of the twentieth century, of a fast camel travelling from Damascus to al-Jawf in 24 hours – a distance of 600 km. (comment during Workshop discussions.)

lack of centralized Caliphal coordination of the conquests.¹⁴ This interpretation rests on the observation that later Islamic tradition had a tendency to exaggerate the degree of centralized control enjoyed by the Caliphs – what we can call the “centralizing bias.”¹⁵ Given the existence of this centralizing bias, it is argued, any surviving accounts that show a commander – in this case, ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ – acting independently must be older than the appearance of this centralizing bias, and hence must reflect more closely the original conditions prevailing in the conquest era.

A closer look at these accounts suggests, however, that they provide only dubious or ambiguous evidence for a lack of strategic centralization. The assumption that accounts relating ‘Amr’s independence of action antedate the centralizing bias ignores the fact that there were some historiographical circles in late Umayyad times that were glad to paint ‘Amr as a villain,¹⁶ and once the centralizing bias was current, accounts portraying ‘Amr as acting on his own and in defiance of Caliphal authority would be just right for such vilification. For this reason, the “centralized” versions of the invasion of Egypt – in which ‘Amr invades on ‘Umar’s orders, rather than on his own authority – may well be just as old as, or even older than, the accounts in which he invades Egypt on his own.¹⁷ It is therefore very risky to claim that these accounts about ‘Amr’s independence reflect an old tradition based on an historical reality of decentralization.

In any case, even if ‘Amr did invade Egypt on his own, we must still ask whether ‘Amr’s presumed independence of action can be taken to reflect a general lack of strategic or operational centralization. Might it not have been a particular case of disobedience, and if so, is it reasonable to take it as characteristic of the whole conquest movement? Is it not misleading to generalize from this one example of military autonomy – assuming that it is an example? For, we find reports of such independence or defiance of Caliphal authority for no other commander of the early conquest period on any other front – and there were many of them. The only apparent parallel we might

¹⁴ The most detailed analysis is again found in Noth, *Quellenkritische Studien*, 162-64; Noth-Conrad, 182-84.

¹⁵ See below.

¹⁶ Erling Ladewig Petersen, *‘Alī and Mu‘āwiyā in Early Arabic Tradition* (Odense, 1974 [orig. 1964]), especially 33-34, 45, 48-49, 53-54.

¹⁷ I plan to provide a more detailed analysis of the ‘Amr traditions in a separate study.

point to, the independent raiding of the Iraqi countryside by al-Muthannā ibn Hāritha and tribesmen of Shaybān, is really quite different from the case of ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ. For one thing, it is not clear that al-Muthannā, when he embarked on his raiding, had any formal relationship with the Islamic state; he appears in many accounts merely to be a local tribal chieftain who was raiding an area adjacent to his traditional tribal territory.¹⁸ In this he stands in marked contrast to ‘Amr, who according to every account had been appointed by the Caliph to lead an army composed of men drawn from many tribes into territories far from their own homelands (and certainly distant from ‘Amr’s native town, Mecca). Whereas ‘Amr may have been an insubordinate agent of the state, in other words, al-Muthannā was an outsider – albeit one whose raiding activity, in close proximity to the campaigns of Khālīd ibn al-Walīd into Iraq, was soon co-opted by the Islamic state.¹⁹

An episode from ‘Amr’s later history in Egypt also raises doubts about the cogency of the argument that his invasion of the country reflects his unbridled autonomy as a military commander. Had ‘Amr in fact acted entirely on his own, with no Caliphal approval or control, one might expect that it would be impossible to dislodge him thereafter from the province that was, after all, in some sense his private conquest. ‘Amr’s dominant rôle in ruling Egypt after its conquest is well-known, of course; yet the Caliph ‘Uthmān did relieve him of his post as governor of Egypt (replacing him with his own foster-brother, ‘Abdallāh ibn Sa’d ibn Abī Sarh). Moreover, ‘Uthmān was apparently able to do so without undue difficulty – certainly no military force was needed to make ‘Amr relinquish his position. The fact that ‘Amr obviously resented the measure, and complained openly about it, makes all the more significant the fact that the Caliph could replace him as viceroy over Egypt.²⁰ Indeed, if we wish to find an example of an individual and his descendants thoroughly entrenched in a province during and immediately

¹⁸ On al-Muthannā and his raiding see *EJ2*, s.v. “al-Muthannā b. Hāritha” (F. M. Donner); Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 181; *idem*, “The Bakr b. Wā’il Tribes and Politics in Northeastern Arabia on the Eve of Islam,” *Studia Islamica* 51 (1980), 30, 34-35.

¹⁹ There do exist accounts in which al-Muthannā is said to have come to Medina before engaging in any raiding in order to seek the caliph’s permission to do so. In this case, however, I suspect that such accounts may be later creations reflecting the *topos* of centralization.

²⁰ A convenient overview of the events is provided in *EJ2*, s.v. “‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ” (A. J. Wensinck).

following the Islamic conquests, the best example is probably that of Syria – conquered, according to traditional sources, by several armies, one of which was led by the Umayyad Yazīd ibn Abī Sufyān, who became its first governor, and governed, after Yazīd's death, by his younger brother Mu'āwiyā. However, the implications of the Umayyads' long tenure of this governorship for the question of central authority and local autonomy are clouded by the fact that the Caliph 'Uthmān (r. 644-56 C.E.) was also an Umayyad, and hence not inclined to challenge Mu'āwiyā's grip on Syria as he had challenged 'Amr's control of Egypt, since he relied so heavily on his kinsman's support.

C. *The General Historiographical Critique.*

Another challenge to the centralization thesis rests predominantly on historiographical arguments and analysis. It has long been argued that the traditional Islamic sources present a vision of early Islamic history, including the early conquests, that is idealized and shaped to fit later dogmatic needs.²¹ The conquest narratives in particular have been made the subject of detailed analysis by Albrecht Noth.²² Noth has demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that many narrative sources for early Islamic history are imbued with a marked tendency to present events – especially the events of the conquest – as centrally planned and regulated.²³ Even a cursory review of the traditional accounts about the Islamic conquests provides one with examples that confirm

the existence of this centralizing bias. Let us select one example at random by way of illustration – a relatively lengthy account coming via Ibn Ishāq (d. 151 A.H.), allegedly on the ultimate authority of an eyewitness to the early Islamic campaigns in Egypt under the command of 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ.²⁴ This account relates how 'Amr's forces conquered villages surrounding Alexandria and describes 'Amr's negotiations with the "master" of Alexandria²⁵ to establish the terms according to which the city was brought under Muslim rule. It contains, however, many hints that it is a composition of relatively late date and of Egyptian origin. For example, the "master" of Alexandria addresses the Muslims using terms that reflect a sharp conceptual opposition between Muslims and Christians, and between Arabs on the one hand and Byzantines and Persians on the other: "I used to pay the *jizya* to parties who were more odious to me than you are, oh company of Arabs – to Persia and Byzantium." Such sharp distinctions along these lines seem more likely to hail from the context of second-century A.H. Islamic juristic usage, however, rather than from the mouth of a non-Muslim figure of the early seventh century. The same can be said of the account's systematic understanding of *jizya* to mean a head tax, which accords with later juristic usage but not with what documentary sources reveal about the first Islamic century.²⁶ This is reinforced by the account's depiction of Egyptian captives being given their free choice to embrace Islam or to remain Christian and pay *jizya* – thus justifying collection of *jizya* by the state not on grounds of mere conquest, but on grounds of the personal choice of those subjected to the tax. Likewise, the account's pronounced emphasis on establishing the tax status of the conquered districts via what has come to be known as "sūli-'anwā'" traditions is certainly

²¹ This view goes at least as far back as Ignaz Goldziher; see his *Muhammedanische Studien* 2 (Halle, 1890), 5 [= *Muslim Studies*, 2 (transl. by S. M. Stern, London, 1971), 19].

²² Especially his monograph *Quellenkritische Studien zu Themen, Formen, und Tendenzen frühislamischen Geschichtsbücherei*. Teil I: *Themen und Formen*. (Bonn, 1973) (= *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: a Source-Critical Study*, Second edition in collaboration with Lawrence I. Conrad. Translated by Michael Bonner, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 2, Princeton, 1994) (cited as "Noth-Conrad"). See also Noth's articles "Der Charakter der ersten großen Sammlungen von Nachrichten," *Der Islam* 47 (1971), 168-199; "Iṣfahān-Nihāwand. Eine quellenkritische Studie zur frühislamischen Historiographie," *ZDMG* 118 (1968), 274-96; "Zum Verhältnis von Kalifaler Zentralgewalt und Provinzen in Umayyadischer Zeit. Die "Sūli"-... "Anwā"-Traditionen für Ägypten und den Iraq," *Die Welt des Islams* 14 (1973), 150-62; "Die hierarchisch überlieferten Verträge der Eroberungszeit als historische Quellen für die Behandlung der unterworfenen Nicht-Muslims durch ihre neuen muslimischen Oberherrn," in Tilman Nagel et al., *Studien zum Minderheitenproblem im Islam* I (Bonn, 1973), 282-314.

²³ The most explicit formulation is in Noth, "Der Charakter der ersten großen Sammlungen von Nachrichten." His *Quellenkritische Studien* is based on the assumption that the traditional sources exaggerate the degree of centralization. Cf. Noth, *Quellenkritische Studien*, 53-54, 57, 75-76, 174-181; Noth-Conrad 56-57, 61, 81-82, 196-204.

²⁴ The account is in al-Tabarī, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al. (Leiden, 1879-1901) I, 2581-84 (isrā'īḍ. Ibn Humayd – Salama – Ibn Ishāq – al-Qāsim ibn Quzmān, a man of Egypt – Ziyād ibn Jar' al-Zubaydī).

²⁵ *Shihb al-Iṣkanadārīya*. It is not clear who this "master" was; perhaps the Coptic bishop of Alexandria, or the Byzantine official known as the *praefectus augustalis*, the effective civil ruler of Byzantine Egypt?

²⁶ On the confused tax practices in early Islamic Egypt, see Daniel C. Dennett, Jr., *Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA, 1950), 65-115; Jørgen Bæk Simonsen, 1988), 79-131; Kosei Morimoto, *The Fiscal Administration of Egypt in the Early Islamic Period* (Kyoto, 1981).

the product of later juristic thought.²⁷ Finally, the account presents all decisions, even relatively minor ones, as having been referred back to the Caliph. As 'Amr is made to say when the "master" of Alexandria contacts him with an offer to pay *jizya* if 'Amr returns captives already taken from Alexandria's territory, "Behind me is a commander [*amīr*] without whose permission I cannot do anything." So the "master" of Alexandria and 'Amr agree to a cease-fire until a messenger can be sent to the Caliph and his response received. The Caliph's reply, when it comes, betrays too many later legal concerns of the kind mentioned above, and too much awareness of the later history of the Muslim community, to be plausible as an authentic document of the conquest period.

We would have to be credulous indeed to take at face value this account, which appears to be not, in fact, an eyewitness report dating from the conquest period but a working-through of later fiscal and religious concerns within the Islamic juristic tradition, fitted into the context of some very general understandings or commonly accepted notions of what had happened during the conquest period. In other words, some widely known fact, such as that 'Amr ibn al-'Ās had led the Muslim conquerors into Egypt, was utilized to provide a plausible framework on which to hang material that ground the late first and early second-century jurists' axes. Accounts of this kind, which abound in the narrative literature about the conquests, do seem to me to be best explained as products of later legal thought, and they fit very well into Noth's picture of the workings of an historiographical "*topos* of centralization."

While accepting the existence of a centralizing bias, however, we should not allow ourselves unwittingly to adopt an "all-or-nothing" attitude about centralization. That is, the existence of the later centralizing bias does not necessarily mean that the conquests themselves displayed no centralization; to argue thus is to fall into the trap of seeing centralization as a simple binary polarity. Rather, we should consider the possibility that what the centralizing bias does is to exaggerate the degree of centralization during the conquests, and to exaggerate it perhaps in specific arenas only and not in others. It seems

²⁷ On *sulh-'anwa* traditions, see Werner Schmucker, *Untersuchungen zu einigen wichtigen Bodenrechtlichen Konsequenzen der islamischen Eroberungsbewegung* (Bonn, 1972); Noth, *art. cit.*, n. 22.

clear, for example, that the centralizing bias is very prominent in the arena of tax arrangements, where, as we have seen from the example just given, the first Caliphs and their commanders are portrayed as imposing systematic taxation regimes on conquered areas in a way that is belied by surviving documentation. Whether the accounts about other aspects of the conquests are so thoroughly affected by the centralizing bias, however, remains to be considered. In the remainder of this section, therefore, we shall examine briefly a number of different kinds of accounts that, like accounts about taxation, have a bearing on the question of strategic centralization and the range of validity of this centralizing bias.

One obvious indicator of a measure of centralized operational control of the conquests is coordination by the Caliphs of activities on different fronts. The traditional sources provide us with many examples of such coordination: Khālid ibn al-Walīd's march from Iraq to Syria, the veterans of Yarmūk joining the Muslim forces at al-Qādisiyya in Iraq, the troops of southern Iraq marching north to join their fellows at al-Qādisiyya,²⁸ or the veterans of Syria being sent to northern Syria and the Jazīra.²⁹ Related to these are many accounts that portray the Caliphs sending reinforcements or supplies to various commanders or fronts. For example, some accounts say that the Caliph 'Umar reinforced 'Amr shortly after he entered Egypt by dispatching a supporting force under al-Zubayr ibn al-'Awwām.³⁰ Others describe the Caliph 'Uthmān arranging for reinforcements to go to Armenia from both Syria and Iraq in response to a request from the military commander in Armenia, Ḥabīb ibn Maslama al-Fihri.³¹ Similarly, the Caliph 'Umar is said to have sent sheep and camels from the Hijāz to provision the Muslims at al-

²⁸ On these, see respectively Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 119-27, 207 and nn. 193 and 194 to chapter 4 (with many references), and 339 and n. 195 to chapter 4.

²⁹ Recently noted in Walter E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge, 1992), 149, with references to the main sources.

³⁰ Al-'Tabarī, I, 2084 (*isnād*: Sayf – Abū 'Uthmān Yazīd ibn Asīd al-Ghassānī – Khālid ibn Ma'dān and 'Ubbāda ibn Nusayy); Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh madīnat Dimashq*, photographic reproduction of Zāhiriyya library manuscripts ('Amman, ca. 1988), XIII, 514, lines 9ff. (*isnād*: Khālifā – al-Walīd ibn Hishām al-'Ajranī – his father – his grandfather, and 'Abdallāh ibn al-Mughīra – his father and others).

³¹ On this episode see Najda Khammāsh, *Al-Shām fī sadr al-islām* (Damascus, 1987), 197-98.

Qādisiyya in Iraq.³² Careful study of these and many other similar traditions is needed to decide whether they represent a tendency to exaggerate the degree of coordination analogous to the centralizing bias, and intended precisely to convey the false impression that there was some coordination among different fronts, or whether they reflect, in some degree, the actual conditions of the conquest period.³³ If Caliphal coordination and reinforcement can be demonstrated, it would certainly support the notion of strategic and operational centralization of the conquests.

Another phenomenon bearing on the question of centralization is the degree to which the Caliphs were able to remove military commanders from their posts and to replace them with new candidates of their own choice. The traditional sources for the conquest period describe how the Caliphs changed commander or governor in a province with, sometimes, marked frequency. Related to this is the replacement of commanders lost in battle (as in the case of Abū 'Ubayd al-Thaqafī at the Battle of the Bridge in Iraq) or lost to disease (as in the case of the 'Amwās plague).³⁴ Frequent or regular dismissal of established commanders must be considered an indication of a significant measure of centralized administrative control; at any rate, it argues against commanders and governors being so entrenched that they could effectively resist dismissal. Moreover, we have no record of any governor or commander before the outbreak of the first civil war in 656 C.E. who resisted dismissal and rebelled against the Caliphs in Medina. There are accounts of Khālīd ibn al-Walīd grumbling about his dismissal by 'Umar, and similarly 'Amr ibn al-'Ās about his dismissal by 'Uthmān, but their opposition seems to have been verbal only.³⁵

Similarly, there exist accounts that describe the Caliphs exercising some measure of restraint on the ambitions of governors, commanders, and their troops. Mu 'āwīya, or example, as governor of Syria, petitioned 'Umar to let him make raids by sea, but the Caliph resisted this suggestion for some time and refused to permit naval raids against, among other targets, Cyprus.³⁶ 'Umar is said to have ordered Sa' d ibn Abī Waqqās move his camp back to a site west of the Euphrates, rather than where he had stationed himself near the old Sasanian capital of al-Madā'in in the Iraqi alluvium, which might have been a more natural administrative location.³⁷ Numerous accounts tell of the Caliphs instructing tribal groups moving to the front not to settle in one place but rather to head for another about which they were less enthusiastic.³⁸

Many accounts describe how the commanders of the early conquest armies forwarded a fifth of the booty to the Caliph in Medina, but these accounts may, in fact, belong to the complex of accounts relating to taxation growing out of the centralizing bias. However, only an extensive historiographical analysis of these numerous accounts can help us to understand their real date and provenance, and hence give us some idea of their reliability as evidence for the conquest period.³⁹

On the other hand, G.-R. Puin has examined accounts describing the creation by the Caliph 'Umar of various *diwān* or pay-register,⁴⁰ which distributed the booty among various categories of recipients, including especially the soldiers on active duty. The existence of this institution suggests some measure of administrative centralization and regulation closely tied to the military activities of the conquerors. It seems unreasonable to suppose that the same authorities who established a regular pay-system for troops in their armies would simultaneously be unconcerned with where those armies went or what they did in the field.

We may also find some evidence for operational centralization in the way the military institutions of the first Muslims are said, by the traditional

³² E.g., al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ*, 152-53; Khammāsh, *Al-Shām*, 201-202.

³³ See several accounts in al-Ṭabarī, *Ta' rīkh*, I, 2482-85.

³⁴ E.g., *ibid.*, I, 2183 (Sayf) and 2185-87 (Sayf and al-Sha' bī), on Baḡlā being sent to Iraq rather than to Syria; 2187-88 (Sayf), similarly with Azd and Kināna.

³⁵ Such an analysis would be sufficient for a book and is far beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴⁰ Gerd-Rüdiger Puin, *Der Diwān von 'Umar ibn al-Hattāb. Ein Beitrag zur frühislamischen Verwaltungsgeschichte* (Diss. Bonn, 1970); see also Kennedy's paper in this volume.

³² Al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-buldān*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1866), 255 (*isrā'īl*: al-Wāqidi). Huge quantities of camel bones were discovered in archaeological strata datable to the conquest period at al-Rabadha in Saudi Arabia, presumably the result of large-scale slaughtering (Dr. Geoffrey King, personal communication). It is tempting to take this as evidence of a staging-point or supply-base for the early Islamic armies, but confirmation of this interpretation must await full publication of this material.

³³ Noth, *Quellenkritische Studien*, 114-15; Noth-Comrad 123-29, considers such accounts briefly, but is inconclusive regarding their significance.

³⁴ On Abū 'Ubayd and his successors, see Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 195-96 and 202. On the 'Amwās plague and the replacement of Yazīd ibn Abī Sufyān by his brother Mu 'āwīya, see al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ*, 139-41.

³⁵ On Khālīd, see al-Ṭabarī, *Ta' rīkh*, I, 2147-48 (Sayf); 2148-49 (Ibn Ishāq); 2149-50 (Ibn Ishāq). Like many of al-Ṭabarī's accounts about Khālīd, these have something of the character of moralizing tales. On 'Amr, see above, n. 20.

sources, to have evolved. Various organizational and technical features would suggest that the early conquest campaigns were, in fact, parts of a centrally coordinated conquest movement, rather than isolated raids carried out by unrelated parties. These include (1) evidence that the campaigns of conquest were much larger in scale and duration than usual tribal raiding; (2) evidence that, unlike tribal raids, the conquest campaigns were not limited to clearly defined military objectives, but rather had an open-ended quality; (3) evidence that the military techniques employed by the forces were more elaborate, or required a greater level of skill or training, than the usual tribal raiding displayed; and (4) evidence that the forces involved were not simply tribal war-parties led by a tribal chiefs, but were to some extent organized in ways that transcended tribal ties. The first two items are clearly depicted in the traditional sources and need not detain us further here; the third, on the other hand, while potentially important, is difficult to examine adequately because our evidence for military technology and field organization of the early Islamic armies is sparse and often quite problematic.⁴¹ This leaves for us to examine evidence for the organization of the early Muslim armies in ways that were independent of, or that transcended, tribal affiliation.

Many of the Prophet's military campaigns do not seem to have been organizationally more sophisticated than the small tribal raiding parties of pre-Islamic Arabia.⁴² By the time the Muslims embarked on the invasion of Syria and Iraq, on the other hand, we are – if we can believe the traditional narrative sources at all – no longer dealing with the usual tribal raids, but with much larger and more elaborate undertakings. It is, of course, possible to argue that these large armies⁴³ were simply agglomerations of large tribal

units led by their own tribal chiefs, who simply served under the overall command of the Muslim general staff; we read frequently, for example, of large groups from one particular tribe or other fighting in various battles, apparently as tribal contingents,⁴⁴ and the reports about the settlement of the garrison-town of al-Kūfa in Iraq tell of tribal groups being assigned particular quarters or streets, where they resided together.⁴⁵ But there is also some evidence of military arrangements that cut across tribal lines, or measures that harnessed the solidarity of tribal groups in ways that benefited the state. Some military arrangements that may have cut across tribal lines were the organization of troops into ranks (*ṣuṭūf*) by weaponry (archers, lancers, etc.) and references to (still obscure) organizational or tactical units such as the “tens” (*a‘shār*), *karādis*, *karā‘ib*, etc.⁴⁶ Moreover, the Islamic state seems to have turned to its own advantage the authority of tribal chiefs over their kinsmen by securing the loyalty of such chiefs through special payments, grants of lands, and the like.⁴⁷ The Caliphs could also channel various administrative arrangements through the tribes, such as relying on a figure known as the *‘arf* in each tribe to distribute payments (*‘atā*) to the soldiers belonging to that tribe.⁴⁸

As we saw at the beginning of this section, the centralizing tendency of the Islamic narrative sources is very palpable in many reports about tax arrangements supposedly made during the conquests. It is not nearly so clear, however, that in the many other arenas just surveyed the narrative material is exaggerated by, or even influenced by, the centralizing bias. Decisive definition of the exact range of applicability of the centralizing bias must await

⁴⁴ See the evidence for this compiled in Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 223, and Khammāsh, *Al-Shām*, 264-65, 356-57.

⁴⁵ Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 228-29 and 234-36. The basic references are al-Tabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, I, 2488-90 and 2495 (both related by Sayf ibn ‘Umar); on this slender base of evidence rest the various reconstructions of early al-Kūfa, including the book of Hichem Djait, *Al-Kūfa: naissance de la ville islamique* (Paris, 1986).

⁴⁶ On these arrangements and units see Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 223-26; Jandora, *March from Medina*, 113-16; Khammāsh, *Al-Shām*, 359-61.

⁴⁷ On the use of such blandishments by the Islamic state of the conquest era, see Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 255-63. Note also al-Tabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, I, 2187-88 (Sayf), in which the tribal leader of Azd has to persuade his tribesmen to go to Iraq, as the caliph requested, rather than to Syria, where they wished to go; clearly the tribal chiefs' stature among their followers was an important resource used by the caliphs to maintain control of the tribesmen.

⁴⁸ On the *‘arf* (office of the *‘arf*) and registration of troops by tribe see Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 237-39; Khammāsh, *Al-Shām*, 264-65, 356-58.

⁴¹ The valiant effort to refine our understanding of conquest-era military phenomena made by Jandora in *The March from Medina* is noteworthy, but it seems to me that at many turns his presentation relies more on extrapolation of what he feels “should” or “must” have been the case, based on later Arabian or other military parallels, than it does on deduction from solid historical evidence.

⁴² On this see Eila Landau-Tasseron, “Features of the Pre-Conquest Muslim Armies,” chapter 6 above.

⁴³ Large relative to what was familiar in the Arabian context, at least; as I have noted elsewhere, the armies were actually quite modest in size, the largest apparently being that at the Yarmūk in Syria (20,000-40,000 men); the army at al-Qādisiyya in Iraq probably numbered only between 6,000 and 12,000 men. See Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 133, 135, 140, 142 (different figures for the Yarmūk); 205-209 (Qādisiyya); 221. Cf. Jandora's estimates of 36,000 and 10,000 respectively, although he does not detail how he reaches these figures from the conflicting numbers given in the sources; Jandora, *March from Medina*, 68 and 62.

a much fuller historiographical analysis of the accounts in each of these arenas, a massive undertaking that is far beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, the various lines of evidence summarized above tentatively suggest that even allowing for some exaggeration due to centralizing bias, the strategic centralization of the early Islamic conquests is not merely an historiographical will-o'-the-wisp. It is true that reports of Caliphal control of all tactical details and accounts of systematic tax arrangements are exaggerated in the Islamic sources, but it nonetheless remains plausible to me to assume that the Caliphs enjoyed a good measure of influence and control over the conquests, both in setting general policy and in ensuring that it was implemented along lines agreeable to them.

There remains one final, general point about strategic and operational centralization to be made here. Strategic and operational centralization is essentially a question of relations between the central authorities and the first order of subordinates – generals in the field, in a military situation such as the conquests, or governors after the absorption of newly conquered territories into the state's domains. We can propose, as a general organizational principle, that the degree to which commanders in the field can be entrusted by the central authorities with implementing broad policy objectives is directly proportional to the degree to which the rulers and their subordinates constituted a coherent and homogeneous group. In thinking about the early Islamic conquests, it is important to remember that the élite of the new Islamic state was bound together by common values and expectations. According to the traditional Islamic sources, at least, the early Islamic ruling élite, whose members all hailed from the main towns of western Arabia – Mecca, Medina, and al-Tā'if – was a small group of men, almost all personally well-known to one another. All had embraced Islam and had shared certain formative experiences (notably, helping the prophet Muḥammad create the nascent Islamic state in Medina, and spreading its hegemony during the Prophet's last years and during the wars of the *riḍāʿ*). They were not all from the same tribe (though many were blood relatives or became linked by marriage), so we are not dealing mainly with a long-distance network of kinship ties; but all were, to a significant degree, shaped by their similar origins, common history, and common commitments. This is not to say that they all had exactly the same objectives as individuals, but at least the commanders in the field would have known what measures and behaviour would be acceptable to the Caliphs in

Medina. The implication of this is that the Caliphs might well have been able to content themselves with giving their commanders only general policy guidelines and objectives, secure in the knowledge that they would implement them on their respective fronts in a manner acceptable to the whole ruling group collectively. The existence of this kind of group cohesion and homogeneity both increased the reality of general strategic coordination, and reduced the need for close surveillance of subordinates by the Caliphs (and for the administrative instruments needed to carry out such surveillance).⁴⁹

IV. Conclusions

While we must acknowledge that the Islamic historiographical tradition has presented the conquest era in an overly centralized manner in some areas, such as taxation, I believe that the traditional view that the conquests displayed both conceptual and strategic-operational centralization or unity retains an explanatory power superior to revisionist alternatives – particularly what I have termed the accidental thesis. The accidental thesis – according to which the Arabs “found” themselves in possession of vast domains that, as an afterthought, they stitched together into an empire – leave too many important questions unanswered. How and why did they get there? Why was the military opposition of the established empires so ineffectual? How did the invaders manage to penetrate not only the Iraqi and Syrian fringes of the Arabian desert, but also deep into Iran, Egypt, and even across the sea? Why was the Hijāz, of all places, chosen as the ideological centre for these people who, according to the revisionists, had no particular conceptual focus and who, when they first emerge indisputably into the light of historical documentation, are ruling from Syria? Why, if the empire was later pieced together from smaller pieces originally conquered by different, unrelated groups, is there little or no record of the fighting among these different groups that must have attended the unification?⁵⁰ If we assume, with some proponents of the

⁴⁹ This point is made for the Roman republic by Arthur M. Eckstein, *Senate and General. Individual Decision Making and Roman Foreign Relations*, 264-194 B.C. (Berkeley, 1987), 322-324. The main thrust of Eckstein's book, however, is that the actions of Roman generals played a significant – but not unlimited – rôle in shaping Roman policy, tempering the theory advanced by others (esp. Mommsen) that during the Republic the Senate tightly controlled foreign policy.

⁵⁰ Consider by way of comparison, for example, the history of the same region under the successors of Alexander, who though bound to one another by the shared experience of long

accidental thesis, that the conquests were "really" at the outset a hodge-podge of local, uncoordinated raids by a variety of warlike "Arab tribesmen" with no connection to one another, how do we explain the fact that when the dust settles most governors, commanders, and rulers hailed from the Hijāzi towns of Mecca, Medina and al-Ṭā'if, which were not among the Arabian groups most renowned for their martial valour? These are the kinds of questions that the revisionist interpretations do not address, much less answer, but for which the traditional interpretation, even when subjected to much-needed modifications, offers perfectly plausible explanations.

campaigning, service with the conquering hero, and powerful cultural chauvinism, immediately began fighting one another upon Alexander's death and spent the next few centuries fighting each other. Yet the proponents of the accidental thesis ask us to believe that most of the Arab chieftains who had somehow established themselves in the Near East in the early seventh century quietly put aside their own ambitions and rallied round the Umayyads.