

Warfare and History

THE ARMIES OF THE CALIPHS



Military and Society in the Early Islamic State

Hugh Kennedy

The Armies of the Caliphs

‘... this is an extraordinarily rich and original book. It forces a reassessment of the early Islamic conquests from standpoints that have hitherto been totally ignored or undervalued.’

Professor Carole Hillenbrand, University of Edinburgh

During the mediaeval period, the Middle East was a battleground in which the Umayyad and the ‘Abbasid Caliphs fought for dominance of an empire that stretched from Spain to the borders of India. *The Armies of the Caliphs* is the first major study of the relationship between army and society in the early Islamic period, and reveals the pivotal role of the military in politics.

Over the key period of 600–945, the Muslims developed a salaried, semi-professional army, dependent on the state for its livelihood. In this extraordinary survey, Kennedy shows how the army began to influence and eventually dominate the political system, and reflects on how the involvement of the military in Middle-Eastern politics today has its origins in this period.

Through an examination of recruitment, payment, weaponry and fortifications in the armies, *The Armies of the Caliphs* offers the most comprehensive view to date of how the early Muslim Empire grew to control so many people. Using Arabic chronicles, surviving documents, and archaeological evidence, this book analyses the military and the face of battle, and offers a timely reassessment of the early Islamic State.

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The Armies of the Caliphs

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Hugh Kennedy



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This book is dedicated to my son James, who is always
interested in soldiers and battles

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Hugh Kennedy
St Andrews, 2001

List of abbreviations

- BSOAS* *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
EI2 *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (New edition, Leiden, 1960)
IJMES *International Journal of Middle East Studies*
JAOS *Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JESHO *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*
JNES *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JRAS *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*
JSAI *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*
JSS *Journal of Semitic Studies*
LAEI *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, The Byzantine and Islamic Near East: i, Problems in the Literary Source Material*, eds A. Cameron and L. I. Conrad (Princeton, 1992); ii, *Land Use and Settlement Patterns*, eds G. R. D. King and A. Cameron (Princeton, 1994); iii, *States, Resources and Armies*, ed. A. Cameron (Princeton, 1995).

For abbreviations of primary sources used in the notes, see the Bibliography of Primary Sources on pages 211–13.

A note on the use of Arabic sources

This study of the military in the early Islamic world is based on the great narrative sources compiled by authors of the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, like al-Balādhurī and, above all, al-Ṭabarī.¹ It was they who edited and republished earlier collections of narratives and transmitted the texts in the form in which they have come down to us. This is not the place to review once again the arguments surrounding the veracity and usefulness of these collections but it is necessary to make some comments on the way I have approached and used this material. There can be no doubt that this historical writing, in all its richness and variety, forms one of the great monuments of world historiography. It does, however, have its distinct characteristics and these must inevitably influence the approach and conclusions of the modern scholar.

The early Islamic historians are more interested in individuals and groups of individuals rather than institutions. They do not discuss the army as a corporate body but rather how different people performed when fighting with or against each other. Nor do they systematically discuss institutions like the *dīwān* or methods of payment.² Rather we are given anecdotes about individual disputes about payments, or how much a certain person or group received on a certain occasion. This in turn makes the writing of the history heavily prosopographical. Some readers of this book will no doubt share some of E. M. Forster's anguish when reading the translation of the Baburnama: 'Those awful Oriental names! They welter from start to finish. Sometimes twenty new ones occur on a page and never recur.'³ Yet these names are essential for understanding the development of the military. Take the institution of the *shurṭa* (military police), for example. The existence of this body is attested from early Umayyad times but in no place are we told of its functions or composition. In order to understand what this group did, we have to collect examples of the *shurṭa* in action and the names of its commanders at different times.⁴ In this way we can establish, or at least suggest, that the *shurṭa* of the Umayyad Caliphs was indeed a body whose membership was fairly continuous from one Caliph to the next, rather than simply the chosen bodyguard of the individual ruler. The continuity of the names of the commanders points to the continuity of the institution. We can also show that the commanders of the *shurṭa* in important cities like Basra, Kūfa and Fustāṭ (old Cairo) were chosen by

the Umayyad governors from the local élites, so demonstrating their role as mediators between these élites and the authority of the Caliph and his representative. But no source says this explicitly, only the prosopography reveals it. Or, again, we find constant references to the *quwwād* (military commanders) in the early 'Abbasid period, but no source discusses and explains the recruitment and duties of a *qā'id*: we can investigate this only by taking the biographies of individual *quwwād* and trying to extrapolate from them what the nature and functions of the office were.

There is marked contrast in this respect with the sources available to John Haldon when writing the volume on the Byzantine army which is the counterpart of this book.⁵ He had at his disposal works like the *De Administrando Imperii* of the Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus which, as its name implies, discusses institutions of administration and occasionally mentions individuals who played an important role. By contrast, it is the prosopography which drives this account of early Muslim military practice and it is examples, rather than explanation or prescription, which form the raw materials of the research. Nor can I emulate Rhoads Murphey, in his volume on Ottoman warfare in this series,⁶ in discussing the commissariat, the calorific value of the diets of soldiers and all the other details of operations and movements which the Ottoman documentation reveals. This is not because I feel they are unimportant, simply that the nature of the sources means that the information is entirely lacking.

Another feature of the Arabic sources is the strength of the narrative material. We have full, sometimes vivid, exciting and moving accounts of military operations and battles. I have tried in this work to do some justice to this material, either in summary or direct quotation. At certain points, I have decided to concentrate on key encounters which are well reported in the texts and to use them as illustrations of what John Keegan refers to as the 'face of battle' at various periods. I make no apology for this, though it runs against the grain of much sober and scientific historiography of recent years. If we are to investigate the military and society, we have to try to understand what went on in battles and how they were remembered and recorded.

A particular problem attaches to the numbers of soldiers in armies mentioned in the chronicles. Some critics may feel that all numbers mentioned in early mediaeval sources are likely to be wildly exaggerated, or at least formulaic and unreliable.⁷ They may be surprised that I have taken these as a basis for discussion on numerous occasions. I believe, however, that there are good reasons for doing so. The first test is that in many cases the numbers presented are plausible in the context of the historical record: vastly exaggerated numbers of the sort sometimes encountered in, say, Western accounts of the Crusades, are rare. Clearly this is not by itself a very convincing reason for trusting them, but it at least means that in many cases they are not unreasonably large or small.

A more compelling justification for accepting some numbers as a general guide given is that troops were counted and their numbers recorded at the time. Certainly from the reign of 'Abd al-Malik onwards, soldiers had their names

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recorded in the *dīwān* and payments were made to them. For example, when Abū Muslim heard that a group of soldiers under Muḥriz b. Ibrāhīm had assembled to support him, he ordered a clerk (*kātib*) to be sent to count them and enter their names in a book; he found that there were exactly 804.⁸ The method of payment must have meant that soldiers were regularly counted. The numbers must have been known, therefore, to the clerks who recorded the names and made the payments, to the commanders who led them and presumably, by extension, to many of the soldiers themselves. It would not be surprising if such well-known information found its way into the historical record along with other details of the military expeditions.

Some contemporaries were very skilled in estimating numbers as suggested by the following anecdote: the time is shortly after the defeat of the Umayyad Caliph Marwān II by the 'Abbasid 'Abd Allāh b. 'Alī in 132/750 at the battle of Tell Kushāf, which meant the end of Umayyad power. The speaker is Abū Mūsā b. Muṣ'ab of Mosul, who had been one of Marwān's secretaries.

When Marwān was defeated and 'Abd Allāh b. 'Alī triumphed over the people of Syria, I asked for an amnesty and he gave it to me. One day I was sitting with him and he was reclining when the conversation turned to Marwān and his defeat. He ['Abd Allāh] said to me, 'Were you present at the battle?' and I answered, 'Yes, may God glorify the Amir.' So he went on, 'Tell me about it' and I replied, 'On the day, he [Marwān] asked me to guess the number of the enemy.' I replied, 'I am secretary, not a military man.' He then looked to left and right and said to me, 'They are 12,000 strong.' 'Abd Allāh sat bolt upright and said, 'God damn him! There were 12,000 men in the *dīwān* that day!'⁹

This is not to say that all numbers should be trusted implicitly. Sometimes contradictory numbers are recorded. There seems to be a suspiciously high incidence of armies of 4000 in the Umayyad period, perhaps the number here represents a formula for a small to medium-sized force. Furthermore, it would be unwise to put much reliance on estimates of the numbers in armies before the establishment of the *dīwān*. This is particularly true of the numbers quoted for the armies of the Islamic conquests which must have been no more than estimates. Estimates of non-Muslim armies, notably the Byzantines and Sasanians, or of volunteers or rebels whose names were not recorded in a *dīwān* must be treated with scepticism. It is also important to be cautious in cases where there is an obvious reason to exaggerate for propaganda reasons, as when a small army of Muslims defeats a much larger number of Byzantines, or a smaller army of 'Abbasid troops fights a much larger number of Umayyad supporters, but such contrasts are unusual in the sources.

In general, then, and I believe with due caution, the numbers quoted in the texts for regular soldiers, that is to say soldiers whose names were recorded in a *dīwān*, will be accepted as an approximate indication of the actual numbers.¹⁰

Another methodological problem is provided by the patchiness of the sources. Some conflicts are covered in great detail, others apparently just as important, get

only a cursory mention. Are the military campaigns on which we are best informed typical or exceptional? We can only try to extrapolate intelligently from the examples we have.

The accounts preserved in the works of such scholars as al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī are very varied in quality. Many of them take the form of narratives which purport to be (and in many cases probably are) first-hand accounts. While these are likely to be partial and are always partisan, they contain much incidental information about tactics and equipment which is likely to be fairly reliable. For the purposes of this study, the important aspect is not so much that they reflect exactly what happened in one particular incident or conflict, but rather that they show what happened in warfare at that time and how such warfare was perceived by the participants.

The richness of the narrative accounts does not always reflect the wider importance of the conflicts, since it is based more on the survival of material than on conscious editorial decision. Thus we know very little about the course of some battles which radically affected the history of the Islamic world, the battle of Marj Rāhiṭ in 65/684 which led to the accession of the Marwanid branch of the Umayyad family, for example, or the battle of Rayy in 195/811 which led to al-Ma'mūn's victory over his brother al-Amīn. We know the names of the main participants and the final outcome, but not what happened in the turmoil and why one side won and another lost.

Surprisingly we have very little detailed information on the campaigns of the Muslims against the Byzantines. It might be thought that these campaigns, which were the focus of the military activities of Umayyad and 'Abbasid Caliphs and which occurred comparatively close to the seats of power, would have given rise to an extensive historiography in praise of rulers and the Muslim armies. In fact, we have little more than notes of raids and their outcomes.

In contrast to these bald narratives, we have much richer accounts of other conflicts. This is principally owing to the efforts of two early compilers whose work al-Ṭabarī was able to call and incorporate, Abū Mikhnaf and al-Madā'inī. Abū Mikhnaf Lūṭ b. Yahyā al-Azdī (d. 157/774) was descended from a companion of 'Alī's and was based in Iraq.¹¹ He is recorded as having written a large number of books and pamphlets at least some of which were used by al-Ṭabarī. From the point of view of military history, the most important of these are probably the works entitled 'Sulaymān b. Ṣurad and 'Ayn al-Warda' and 'Shabīb al-Ḥarūrī and Ṣāliḥ b. Musarraḥ'. The first of these is the account of the attempt of an army of pious Kufans to avenge the murder of al-Husayn by marching on Syria in 65/684 while the second describes the daring exploits of two Khārijī leaders and the attempts of the governor al-Ḥajjāj to defeat them. Other works preserve the details of civil wars among the Iraqis and struggles with other Khārijīs. In many cases, the compiler would have been in a position to speak with eye-witnesses or participants. Abū Mikhnaf's purpose was largely commemorative rather than military, but the writing is often clear and vivid with a fine eye for the detail of military encounters.

‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Madā’inī (d. c. 235/850) wrote extensively, among other subjects, on the history of Khurāsān, especially of the long conflicts between the invading Muslims and the Turks and Soghdians of Transoxania. Perhaps because he was further than Abū Mikhnaf in both time and distance from the scenes he describes, his accounts of battles are more impressionistic but he has preserved much interesting material, with the result that we know vastly more about the warfare in Central Asia than we do of the warfare against the Byzantines.

The sources for the history of warfare in the early ‘Abbasid period are, curiously, less revealing than those of the Umayyad period. In general, the sources used by al-Ṭabarī are much more fragmented, lacking the sustained narratives of the earlier period. There is certainly nothing to compare with Abū Mikhnaf’s descriptions of battles in Iraq or even al-Madā’inī’s narratives of the conquests in Transoxania. The extended narratives we do have, notably ‘Umar b. Shabba’s account of the rebellion of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zākiyya and his brother Ibrāhīm in Madīna and Basra in 145/762–3,¹² are more concerned with the religious and political discourse than with details of the military encounters. It is only in the accounts of the campaigns of Khāzim b. Khuzayma, the most successful of the early ‘Abbasid generals, against the Khārijītes and Ustādhsīs, that we get a real feel for battle.¹³ In the Umayyad period, we know little about the life of the court but a good deal about military activities. In the early ‘Abbasid period, the position is reversed, the court becomes the focus of interest and campaigns, even major campaigns involving the Caliph himself, like Hārūn’s raids on the Byzantine Empire, are treated in such a cursory fashion that we cannot form any real impression of the warfare involved.

The accounts of the civil war which followed the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd in 193/809 provide more details of military activity though, as already mentioned, the crucial battle outside Rayy in 195/811 is reported in such vague and abbreviated terms that it is impossible to understand the course of the conflict. By contrast, the blockade of Baghdad which followed produced some of the most vivid narratives of siege warfare and hand-to-hand fighting encountered anywhere in early Arabic literature.

In the third/ninth century, a new genre of narrative appears. In contrast to early Islamic accounts with their use of multiple, parallel and sometimes contradictory *akhbār* (short stories), these are essentially linear narratives, carefully detailing the course of military campaigns. These narratives also provide detailed descriptions of organisation and equipment. Such narratives appear in the accounts of al-Mu‘taṣim’s campaign against Amorion in 233/838 and in the more extended narratives of the campaigns against Bābak in Azerbaijan (219–22/834–7). Even more striking is the long and meticulous account of the campaigns of al-Muwaffaq and al-Mu‘taḍid against the Zanj rebels in southern Iraq (266–70/879–83) ascribed to Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Sahl, known as Shaylama. Whether the much more developed military organisation described in these accounts represents a real change in the nature of early Islamic armies, or simply a changing style of reporting, or both, remains problematic.

USE OF ARABIC SOURCES

The early Islamic historical sources both inform and tantalise us. Their priorities are not our priorities, at least as concerns this study. We often have to tease nuggets of information from incidental detail and there are many questions we cannot hope to answer. The shape of this book is necessarily restricted by the nature of the sources on which it depends.

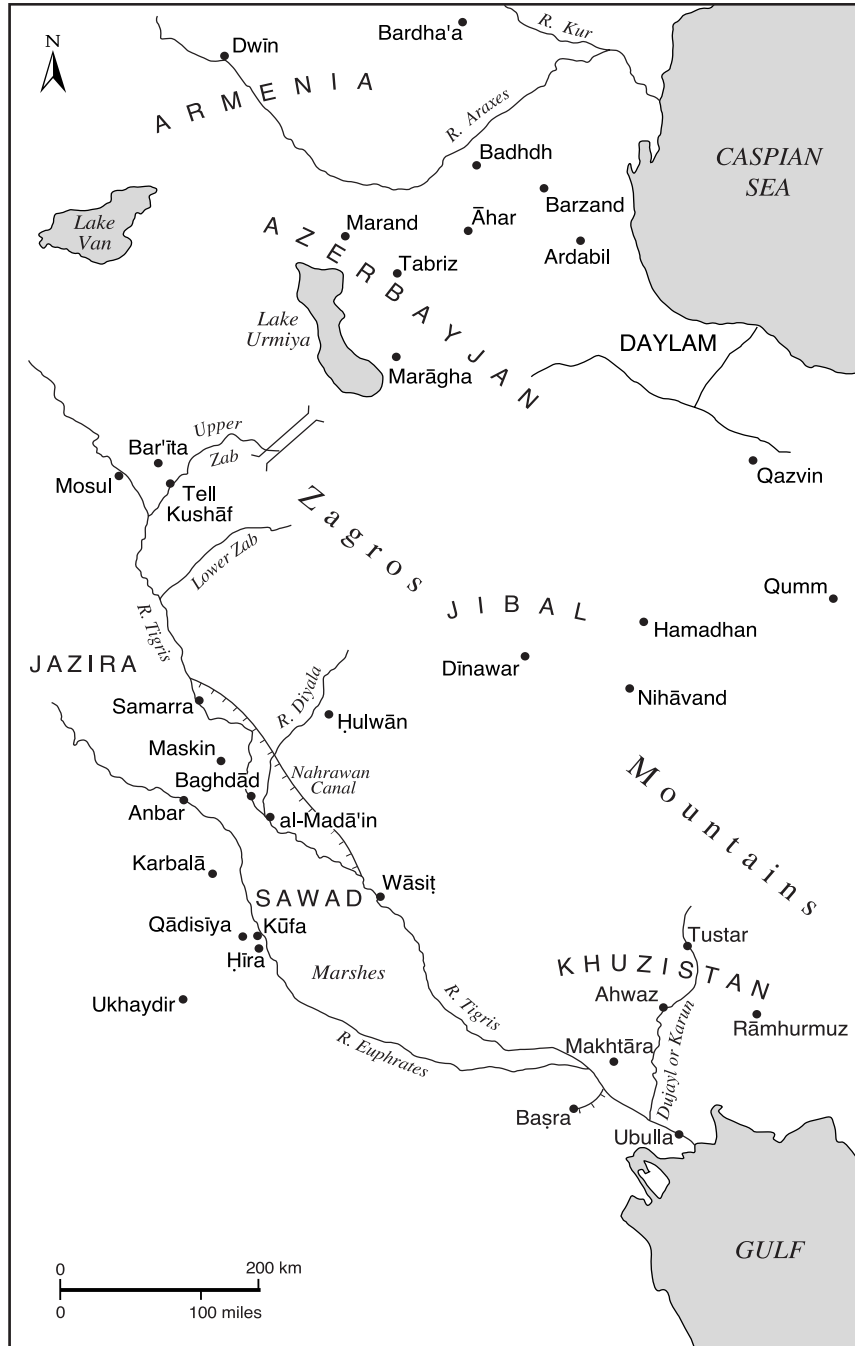
Notes

- 1 For overviews of the early Islamic historiographical tradition, see A. A. Durī, *The Rise of Historical Writing Among The Arabs*, trans. L. I. Conrad (Princeton, 1983) and T. Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge, 1994). The reliability of the early Muslim tradition has been vigorously challenged, notably in P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977) and P. Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, 1987). A more nuanced critique, stressing the formulaic elements in many of the accounts of the Muslim conquests can be found in A. Noth and L. I. Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source Critical Study*, trans. M. Bohles (Princeton, 1994). For the current state of the debate, and a more positive view of the early tradition, see F. M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, 1998).
- 2 The *Kitāb al-Kharāj* of Qudāma b. Ja'far (d. c. 320/932), written right at the end of the period, is an exception and survives only in part and tells us little about the structure of the army.
- 3 E. M. Forster, 'The Emperor Babur', in *Abinger Harvest*, quoted in W. H. Thackston (trans.), *The Baburnama* (Oxford, 1996), 17.
- 4 See pp. 13–14.
- 5 J. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565–1204* (London, 1999).
- 6 R. Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700* (London, 1999).
- 7 For this point of view, see L. I. Conrad, 'Seven and the *tasbī'*: On the Implications of Numerical Symbolism for the Study of Medieval Islamic History', *JESHO*, 31 (1988), 42–73. Conrad's arguments are not, I believe, incompatible with my position.
- 8 Ṭa., ii, 1957.
- 9 al-Azdī, 126–7.
- 10 For further discussion, see pp. 19–21.
- 11 On his sources and work, see U. Sezgin, *Abū Mihnaf. . . Ein betrag zu Historiographie der umayyadischen Zeit* (Leiden, 1971). Despite the full and scholarly treatment, Sezgin almost ignores Abū Mihnaf's family connections and his position among the *ashrāf* of Kūfa.
- 12 Extensive extracts from this account can be found in Ṭa., iii, 143–318 and al-Iṣfahānī, Abū'l-Faraj, *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyīn*, ed. A. Saqr (Cairo, 1949), 232–99, 315–86.
- 13 See pp. 100–03.

Maps



Map 1 Syria, Palestine and the Western Jazīra



Map 2 Iraq and Western Iran



Map 3 Iran and Central Asia

CHAPTER ONE

The conquests and after: Muslim armies, 11–64/632–83

Before the conquests

The armies of the first Caliphs were formed in the Prophet's lifetime and during the spectacular conquests which followed his death in 11/632. Most of the men who joined the armies of the conquests were of bedouin origin.¹ Raiding and fighting, as well as defending themselves against the raids of others, were an integral part of their lives, as both the poems and narratives of the *Jāhiliya* and information about modern bedouin societies makes clear.² This meant that most adult males had experience of military activity and some practice and even skill in riding, using spears and swords and archery. Hunting, too, provided training in such skills. Compared with the farmers and citizens of the settled areas of the Near East, they were a military population.

They did not, however, form armies. An army, as an identifiable unit in society, can exist only if there are sections of society which are in effect non-military or civilian. In the bedouin tribe, this was not the case: with few marginal exceptions, all adult males were fighters and all females and children the families and dependants of fighters. Only after the conquests and settlements did there develop the social specialisation which meant that the army formed a discrete group.

The military forces lacked any system of remuneration, fighting as they did for booty, honour or self-defence. Nor did they have any structure of command with coercive powers. There were certainly tribal nobles, the *ashrāf* (sing., *sharīf*), who owed their status to descent and their own abilities, but they were obeyed only voluntarily. The individual bedouin tent preserved its own autonomy, just as it provided its own subsistence and the warrior his own weapons. Social identity, formal training, provided equipment and payment, all characteristics of a true army, were foreign to this society.

How far this changed in the first years of Islam, the lifetime of the Prophet, is very difficult to tell.³ The latest authority on the subject⁴ stresses the extent to which our sources on the practice of the Prophet in military affairs, as elsewhere, have been shaped by later legal discussion. We can probably assume that Muḥammad's own unique position meant that his orders were accepted more readily than those of other contemporaries. There is some evidence that the

nascent Muslim community did, on occasion, supply weapons and food to allow its more indigent members to join in campaigns.⁵ There is no sign, however, of a structure of command, of military units other than the tribe, or of regular payment. We should be very wary of burdening this fluid and expanding community with a developed military system on the basis of later evidence of doubtful historicity.

The armies of the conquests

The great Muslim conquests in the decade which followed the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in 11/632 were among the most dramatic and far-reaching in history. By 20/641, all the lands of the Fertile Crescent, Iraq, Syria and Palestine and Egypt had been conquered. By 30/650 much of Iran had been subdued as well. The lands which were taken in these swift campaigns were to remain under Muslim rule, with only limited exceptions, right down to the present day.

This massive change has not given rise to the wealth of speculation and argument which can be found, for example, in the historiography of the fall of the Roman Empire in the West.⁶ There is no doubt that there were important long-term factors, such as the effects of plague and military exhaustion and political instability in the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires, but the immediate cause for the Muslim conquests was the military victories of Muslim armies over their rivals, most famously the Battles of Yarmūk in Syria and al-Qādisiyya in Iraq, both probably in 15/636, when the military power of the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires was shattered. The indications, such as they are, suggest that the Muslim armies were less numerous and probably less well equipped than their opponents. If the battles of Yarmūk and al-Qādisiyya had been decisive victories for the Byzantines and Sasanians, and the Muslim armies had been slaughtered and scattered, it is unlikely that the Islamic conquests would ever have occurred.

To understand the conquests, it is important to keep the military history centre stage. However, this is less easy than might be supposed and the amount of scholarly discussion devoted to the military reasons for the triumph of Islam is very small. This is not because there are no sources; indeed almost the opposite is true.⁷ While Byzantine and Persian writers have little enough to say on the subject,⁸ the Arabic texts purporting to describe the events run to thousands of pages, packed with names and apparently eye-witness accounts. These accounts present almost insuperable problems to the military historian. For them, victory was the result of God's will, the valour of individuals and groups and the cowardice, pride or foolishness of their enemies. As explanations for the great events of the seventh century these are at best partial. This is not to say that the Muslims were not brave and that the conviction that they were doing Allah's will was not significant: it clearly was. But their opponents also had firm ideological commitments and there is no reason to assume that individuals were likely to be any less brave. Despite the great mass of words, the full explanation for Muslim victory still eludes us.

Muslim historians of the Umayyad and early 'Abbasid period would naturally

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tend to imagine the armies of the conquests in the context of armies of their own time, in the same way as Western mediaeval painters dressed figures from the classical past in the armour of their own period. They might well assume that the early Muslim troops were drawn up in lines of battle and that they were divided into units of ten, organised by *'arīfs*⁹ for some administrative purposes, as were soldiers in their own day. This unwitting anachronism could impose a false sense of organisation and method on military manoeuvres which were, in reality, much more chaotic.

Furthermore, the short stories (*akhbār*) which form the basis of the Arabic accounts are clearly not as reliable as they claim to be. Often there are totally contradictory accounts of the same event. Many of the details turn out to be *topoi*, formulaic accounts which can be transferred from one conquest to another. The tellers of these tales often had good reason to claim that certain individuals in certain tribes participated or were martyred in certain conflicts. It was not only a question of tribal or personal honour; it was a question of serious money. When the conquests were over, those who had participated in great battles like al-Qādisiyya in 636, which led to the conquest of Iraq, were entitled to much higher wages than those who had not. There was an immediate and compelling need to establish, truly or falsely, that named people fought in particular campaigns.

Other issues emerged to cloud the picture with later polemic. Robinson¹⁰ has shown how accounts of the conquest of Khuzistan were heavily influenced by later debates about the rights to the proceeds of the taxation (*fay*) of this rich area. If it had been conquered by the Basrans alone, then the revenues belonged to them but if Kufan forces had been involved, then the revenues should be divided. This meant that the issue was one of pressing concern as long as the concept of *fay* remained the basis for the distribution of revenues (probably until the late Umayyad period in this area), and it was precisely during this period that the traditions which have come down to us concerning this conquest were first elaborated and recorded.

This is not to say that the accounts were all fabrications. Obviously the Muslim conquests did occur and it is clear beyond reasonable doubt that the main battles happened where they did (though the exact chronology is much more problematic). We can assume, too, that some of the individuals and groups mentioned did in fact take part in the campaigns to which they are ascribed and that some of the incidents did actually occur. The trouble is that it is very difficult to tell which. This in turn means that it would be quite unsafe for the historian to search these accounts for examples of Muslim strategy, tactics, composition of armies or even of the weapons they carried. The account of the armies of the conquests can never be more than a suggestive prologue to the discussion of the armies of the Caliphs.

Despite the problems of the source material, Donner has proposed some tentative conclusions about the organisation and equipment of the Muslim armies at this time. The secret of Muslim success did not lie in overwhelming numerical superiority, though the very high numbers given for their Byzantine and Sasanian opponents should be treated with complete scepticism. Numbers for the Muslim

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army at the battle of Yarmūk in Syria range between 20 000 and 40 000, with most estimates tending towards the lower end.¹¹ The numbers given for their enemies range as high as a quarter of a million, figures which should not be taken literally, but which do suggest that they were at least as numerous as the Muslims.¹² For the Muslim army at al-Qādisiya in Iraq, Donner suggests a figure of 6000–12 000 or fewer.¹³ The army operating in southern Iraq in the first phase of the conquests, seems to have been no more than 2000–4000.¹⁴ Hinds suggests 2000–3000 in the earliest Arab expeditions to Fārs, a force that proved too small to penetrate much beyond the coastal plain.¹⁵ The forces with which ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ took Egypt are said to have numbered 15 500 at the most.¹⁶ These totals are approximate but not entirely unreasonable. Numbers soon increased and there can be no doubt that in the years immediately following these victories, the original Muslim armies were joined by large numbers of tribesmen from Arabia and the Fertile Crescent who wanted a share of the action.

The Muslim sources suggest that the Caliphs in Madīna exercised a considerable degree of control over the armies of the conquests.¹⁷ Communications between the capital and the front lines in Syria and Iraq may not have taken much more than a week each way and Donner concludes that ‘Operational co-ordination of a broadly conceived strategy for the Islamic conquests by the Caliphs in Madīna certainly seems to have been feasible given the prevailing communications of the day.’¹⁸ The sources give us examples of the despatch of armies from one front to another and, perhaps most convincingly, the removal of governors who had achieved the conquests and their replacement by the Caliph’s own men, as when ‘Uthmān dismissed the conqueror of Egypt, ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ, and replaced him by his own foster-brother. Nonetheless, the sources clearly have a tendency to explain events in terms of the Caliph’s will and decree and we should be wary of attributing too much weight to his word or letter.

The Muslim troops were definitely an army, not a tribal migration. They consisted overwhelmingly of adult males, without families or flocks and herds.¹⁹ Migration of tribes followed the conquests, after the military victories had been won. The weapons²⁰ they used were the sword and the spear. They had archers and some of them probably wore chain mail and iron helmets. They were both infantry and cavalry but the distinction was blurred: the cavalry often fought on foot while the infantry were transported to meet the enemy on horses and camels. Their mounts enabled them to travel more quickly to the scene of battle and conduct reconnaissance expeditions.²¹ Camels were used largely for transport. In short, they enjoyed no identifiable technological advantage over their enemies but may have been more mobile, especially in the semi-desert and pasture lands. This mobility allowed them to strike where they wished and to retreat to safety and regroup when necessary.

From an early stage in the conquests the Arabs were joined by groups of non-Arab troops. The most famous of these were several units of élite Sasanian troops who defected to the conquerors during the course of the conquests of Iraq.²² As early as the battle of al-Qādisiya, 4000 of the ‘Army of the king of kings’ (*jund*

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shāhānshāh) are said to have defected to the Muslims; in exchange they demanded to be allowed to settle where they liked, to become affiliated to an Arab group of their choice and be paid salaries.²³ There were 4000 foot soldiers from Daylam, in northern Iran, who joined the Muslims, converted to Islam and became allies of the Banū Tamīm. They, and other Persians who joined the Muslims at this early stage, were known as the *Ḥamrā'* (red people) and had their own mosque in Kūfa and are said²⁴ to have received the same pay (2000 *dirhams*) as those who had fought at al-Qādisiya. At the battle of Ṣiffīn, 'Ali's Kufan forces are said to have included some 8000 *mawālī* (clients) and slaves ('*abīd, mamālik*), all presumably non-Arabs, out of total force of some 70 000.²⁵

There were also the famous Asāwira,²⁶ Persian élite troops commanded by one of Yazdgar's senior commanders, known to the Arab sources as Siyāh al-Uswārī. They had joined the Muslims at the time of the conquests of southern Iraq and agreed to convert to Islam and fight alongside the Muslims against their fellow Iranians. In exchange, they were given the highest level of pay, a place to settle in Basra and a quasi-genealogical position as a sub-group the tribe of Tamīm, and were immediately despatched to help the Muslim armies in the siege of Tustar. In 64/683–4 they were engaged in the civil wars between the tribes in Basra: they were commanded by one Māh Afrīdhūn (an obviously Persian name) and spoke Persian. Their numbers are given as 400 or 500, but whether this was the total number or refers only to those under the command of Māh Afrīdhūn is not clear.²⁷ They distinguished themselves as archers who never wasted a shot.²⁸ Their example was followed by other groups of Sasanian soldiers originating from Sind, the Sayābija, Zuṭṭ and Indighār who joined the Muslims and were settled in Basra;²⁹ they continued to be an element in the Muslim army of Iraq until it was effectively demilitarised in the early second/eighth century.³⁰ Non-Arabs seem to have formed part of 'Amr b. al-Āṣ' army during the invasion of Egypt. The traditions are confused, but there seem to have been both Greeks and Persians involved and both groups were given areas to settle in the newly founded garrison city of Fustāṭ.³¹ Such groups of renegades may have been important in stiffening the Muslim armies and introducing new military techniques, and their role is likely to have been underplayed in the Arabic sources.

The Arabs seem to have fought in tribal units, each following its own banner (*liwā, rāya*). However, we are also told that they were drawn up in lines of battle (*ṣufūf*) with the classic formation of centre (*qalb* = heart), right wing (*maymana*) and left wing (*maysara*), implying some supra-tribal organisation, but this may be no more than a projection back of later practice. According to some accounts, Sa'd b. Abī Waqqāṣ, the Muslim commander at the battle of al-Qādisiya had some sort of command structure with the Amīr appointing leaders of various units and the division of soldiers into units of ten.³² Here again, however, this may be no more than a later rationalisation.

The most detailed reconstruction we have of one of the major battles of the conquests is Kaegi's account³³ of the Battle of the Yarmūk, which is itself based on Caetani's account. It benefits from the fact that the battlefield was visited both