

# Dynamics of Absence

## Twelver Shi'ism during the Minor Occultation\*

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the religious and sociopolitical ferment that shaped Twelver Shi'ism during the Minor Occultation. At the core of the controversy is the question of *sifāra* and the status of the Safīrs. The paper argues that the main points of Twelver dogma regarding the Imamate and the twelfth Imam are the product of a delicate balance between contending views of Twelver sub-groups of the time. Some of these groups were pushed outside the fold of Twelver Shi'ism while others incorporated *mutatis mutandis*. The second and third Safīrs contributed most to this process on three levels: communicating with the Twelver masses, establishing an understanding with the 'ulamā', and neutralizing Abbasid authority. Despite the relatively modest religious rank of the Safīrs they were able to use their acumen not only to preserve the nascent community, but also to shape its views by relying on the 'ulamā'. They devised a dynamic by which they could put the crisis to rest without menacing the leadership of the 'ulamā', although they eventually managed to promulgate a version of Shi'ism that was not fully accepted by any particular Twelver group.

The period from 260/874 to 329/941, known as the 'Minor Occultation', was one of the most critical periods for Twelver Shi'ism. Those seven decades witnessed disagreements among Twelvers on the identity of the Imam following the death of the eleventh Imam Ḥasan al-'Askarī in 260/874. In addition, there were fierce struggles in the community over theological and sociopolitical questions. Over the course of the Minor Occultation, most of these conflicts were resolved, but only after having left a permanent mark on Twelver Shi'ism.

This article presents an understanding of that period as viewed by the contemporary Twelver Shi'i elite. There have been several studies on the Minor Occultation; however, these studies do not fully incorporate both theological and sociopolitical perspectives in order to produce an approximation of Twelver ethos at the time.<sup>1</sup> The current piece will thus rely on

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their findings, whether in agreement or disagreement with them, and will incorporate other data to provide for a more comprehensive analysis. It also proposes an answer to the question as to how Twelver Shi'ism, despite its attacks on *ghuluww* and *ghulāt*, came to be influenced by their doctrines.<sup>2</sup> The common position in Western scholarship that Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī died childless will not be addressed. This is so not only because of the largely speculative nature of the question, but also because the concern here is with the Twelver community's reception of the authority that claimed to be operating on the Imam's behalf, regardless of the truth of this claim. While the Imamate of the eighth Imam ʿAli al-Riḍā (d. 203/818), for example, was constructed in a complex development starting in his lifetime, it may be said that the twelfth Imam's Imamate was constructed independently of his existence.<sup>3</sup>

The careers of the so-called four deputies (*sufarāʿ*, sing. *safīr*), though problematic, appear to be the most convenient basis for a historical presentation; such an approach allows for a more continuous and solid tracing of the incipient Twelver community amidst feuding Imāmī sub-sects.<sup>4</sup> The main objection that could be raised against this option is the "anachronistic"<sup>5</sup> use of the concept of *Safīr* to refer to the first two *Safīrs*. Nonetheless, there is some evidence in early sources, even from the time of the second *Safīr*, to counter this

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<sup>1</sup> Although employing an approach similar to the one described above, ARJOMAND 1996a, *passim*, is more concerned with the period following the commencement of the Complete Occultation. Moreover, Arjomand's work is mainly directed at the theoretical aspect inasmuch as the leading Shi'i doctors of theology and jurisprudence developed a unified position vis-à-vis the Imam's occultation.

<sup>2</sup> BAYHOM-DAUO 2003-2004, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Apparently, Watt is one of the very few Western scholars inclined to accept the existence of a surviving son to al-ʿAskarī; WATT 1983, p. 27. On the construction of al-Riḍā's Imamate see COOPERSON 2000, pp. 76-84.

<sup>4</sup> Henceforth, the term Imāmī (and its other forms) is used to refer to the community that adhered to the Imamate of Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī while alive. The term Twelver (and its other forms) denotes the group that accepted the Imamate of the latter's hidden son, regardless of the schisms within this last group. Nonetheless, it was not before ca. 390/1000 that the term 'Twelvers' (*Ithnā ʿAshariyya*) gained circulation; KOHLBERG 1976, p. 521n2. This need not be seen as causing inconsistencies as "the transition from Imāmiyya to Ithnā ʿ[*A*]shariyya proved a relatively smooth and natural process", *ibid.*, 534; *idem* 1988, p. 40. The terms *al-mahdī* and *al-qā'im* in reference to the hidden Imam will be avoided here as they seem to have been conflated during the period in question while having had distinct denotations before; SACHEDINA 1981, p. 59; HUSSAIN 1982, pp. 12-19; MODARRESSI 1993, p. 89n194.

<sup>5</sup> ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 508.

objection.<sup>6</sup> The same applies to the argument that such a presentation assumes that the office of *Sifāra* included defined tasks and a measure of continuity,<sup>7</sup> as the term 'Safīr' is employed here in a minimal sense only, i.e. to denote the main figure believed to have been in contact with the hidden Imam by the group that upheld his existence. It is thus to the period marked by the first Safīr's career that we now turn.

### The career of 'Uthmān al-'Amrī

The death of Ḥasan al-'Askarī led to serious problems and caused many schisms among Imāmīs. The number of new subjects reportedly resulting from this turmoil amounted to no less than fourteen, all holding diverse views on the new Imamate.<sup>8</sup> Albeit grave, this was simply one more problem to be added to the others the community faced. In addition to the Imāmīs' perpetual conflict with the Abbasid authority and the Sunni majority, in the previous decades they had come under Ismā'īlī threat. The Imāmīs, many of whom were discontented with the Imams' political quietism, were tempted by this revolutionary movement. The Ismā'īlī missionaries in southern Iraq must have found in the Imāmī community an ideal audience to target after the death of al-'Askarī; hence the reports about some prominent Imāmīs converting to Ismā'īlism.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the very concept of the Mahdī was modified by Ismā'īlīs and presented in a more realistic light, thereby making it

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<sup>6</sup> This is Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī's (d. 310/923) *K. al-Tanbīh*, the last parts of which are preserved in AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, pp. 88-96. The book is believed to have been written either around 290/902-903 (ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 505) or 285/898; MODARRESSI 1993, p. 133. Arjomand does use the terms "chief agent" (ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 502) and "intermediaries" (idem 1997, p. 8) to describe the first two *sufarā'* while reserving the title *safīr* as such for the third occupant of that position. His distinction between the *safīr* and chief agent appears to be based on that the "*safīr* (intermediary), seems to have been put in circulation [...] in order to upgrade the office of the chief representative as the *sole official intermediary* [italics added] between the [I]mam and the [Shi'is]"; idem 1996b, p. 506. However, Abū Sahl asserts twice (ABŪ SAHL AL-NAWBAKHTĪ 1991, pp. 90, 93) that the hidden Imam had only one representative at the time, if as a *de facto* matter. 'ALI 2005, p. 98 pointed out the terminological confusion in the sources, conceptualizing a hierarchy headed by one senior *wakīl* = *safīr*, then a number of *nā'ibs* or *bābs* then junior *wakīls*. As the whole question boils down to that of mere terminology, the usage of *Safīr* is more appropriate since it is in line with the more common Twelver jargon.

<sup>7</sup> SACHEDINA 1981, p. 97 states that "nowhere does al-Ṭūsī ... mention the four, whom later sources designate as al-nuwaw[ā]b al-arba' [sic.]. Nonetheless, the chapter on the praiseworthy *Safīrs* (*sufarā'*) in AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 353-397 names only those four as *sufarā'* while presenting their careers sequentially. Earlier, AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, pp. 432-433 had recorded a tradition presenting the four *Safīrs* as the successive representatives of the Imam.

<sup>8</sup> AL-NAWBAKHTĪ 1984, pp. 128-142. Other later accounts enumerated as many as twenty subjects; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 57. Hussain nonetheless groups these sects into five main categories based on the identity of the Imam in which they believed; *ibid.*, 56-66.

<sup>9</sup> On the missionary activity then in Iraq and among Imāmīs see DAFTARY 1990, pp. 117-118.

more accessible to the public.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the imminent Ismā'īlī threat to the state must have made the Abbasid program of incessant persecution of the now seemingly Imamless Imāmīs a less urgent endeavor. To be sure, the latter did not see an ally in the former, but their dedication to combating Ismā'īlīsm made them relent somewhat toward the Imāmīs.

The office of the late Imam and al-'Askarī's father, 'Ali al-Hādī (d. 254/868), had long been administered by 'Uthmān b. Sa'īd al-'Amrī of the Banū Asad.<sup>11</sup> He had started his career as a servant of the tenth Imam at a very young age,<sup>12</sup> and then moved to higher echelons within the Imam's administration until he became the chief financial manager of the alms-collecting network extending all across the Islamic world.<sup>13</sup> In the very few accounts about his life and character, he is stereotyped as an extremely devout and obedient follower of the Imams.<sup>14</sup> Following the death of the tenth Imam, it was only natural that he kept his office,<sup>15</sup> probably with increasing influence due to the new Imam's precarious position. Al-'Askarī had not been the most likely successor to his father, but rather his elder brother Muhammad.<sup>16</sup> However, the latter predeceased his father, which resulted in the Imamate passing to Ḥasan to the surprise, even discomfiture, of some notable Twelvers.<sup>17</sup> The new Imam was first met by the challenge of his younger brother Ja'far. Ja'far had already clashed with his father,<sup>18</sup> but

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<sup>10</sup> On the new definition of al-Mahdī's role, later canonized by the Ismā'īlī scholar al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān (d. 363/974) see *ibid.*, 128.

<sup>11</sup> AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 353; there appears to have been some confusion about his name in sources. See for a succinct treatment of the question, AL-KHŪ'Ī 1990, pp. 7:154-156; ARJOMAND 1997, p. 2n6. As noted elsewhere, we owe most of the information at our disposal regarding the *sufarā'*, especially the first two, to al-ṬŪSĪ's *al-Ghayba*; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 85; KLEMM 2003, p. 139.

<sup>12</sup> 'ALI 2005, p. 99; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 85; MODARRESSI 1993, p. 17n86.

<sup>13</sup> A brief study of this network is in HUSSAIN 1982, pp. 45-49, 79-83. Sources ascribe to al-'Amrī the titles *al-sammān* (the butter dealer) and *al-zayyāt* (the oil dealer), ostensibly on account of his smuggling alms money in butter vessels as part of his clandestine activities; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 354.

<sup>14</sup> AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, p. 485; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 354-355.

<sup>15</sup> MODARRESSI 1993, pp. 17-18.

<sup>16</sup> Later Twelver literature tried to resolve this question by either denying that 'Ali al-Hādī had designated him as successor, or relating accounts to the effect that his brother Ḥasan al-'Askarī had been designated as such in Muhammad's life time, or by resorting to the concept of *badā'* to justify the apparent change in the identity of the next Imam. An exhaustive, though apologetic, survey of these positions is in AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 198-203; see also the brief discussion in MODARRESSI 1993, pp. 65-66.

<sup>17</sup> Ḥasan al-'Askarī was known for practices foreign to his forefathers'; *ibid.*, pp. 68-70.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

he was now claiming to be entitled to the Imamate while apparently enjoying the support of members of his father's inner circle.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the efforts of Ḥasan's aides, coordinated by al-'Amrī, proved effective in keeping most of the privileges and legitimacy in his hands. But this success was to be short-lived. Ḥasan's Imamate was truncated by his premature death at the age of twenty nine,<sup>20</sup> presumably childless. Thus began the crisis and commenced the Minor Occultation.

Some of Ḥasan's close associates, headed by al-'Amrī, claimed that he had a son in hiding.<sup>21</sup> Ja'far, on the other hand, fiercely denied it and filed a lawsuit against them demanding his share of the inheritance.<sup>22</sup> It is true that he eventually managed to win the court ruling after seven bitter years of trials, but he began to fall out of favor with the Imāmī community for accepting the judgments of illegitimate governors.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, the network of the deceased Imam had been working actively to promote its claim of a hidden successor. Primarily, al-'Amrī had to win to his side the local financial agents of different districts. In his incessant efforts to establish himself, allegedly on behalf of the hidden Imam, al-'Amrī was able to gain the support of the Shi'i nobility and learned elite.<sup>24</sup> This was entirely due to his attested intimacy with the two late Imams, a connection that certainly made him known to Shi'is who used to pay their alms and frequent the Imam's residence. Another factor that consolidated his position was the support of the eleventh Imam's mother Ḥudayth, among other women of the family, for the claim of the existence of a hidden son.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, al-'Amrī's position was greatly strengthened by Ja'far's behavior. In addition to the aforementioned question of his resorting to illegitimate judiciary, Ja'far had a reputation for behavior considered illicit by Imāmīs.<sup>26</sup> Although he continued to enjoy the support of a

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> HUSSAIN 1982, p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> MODARRESSI 1993, p. 77.

<sup>22</sup> HUSSAIN 1982, pp. 77-78; MODARRESSI 1993, p. 78.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 78-79.

<sup>24</sup> AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 356; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 86; MODARRESSI 1993, pp. 70-80.

<sup>25</sup> This support must have been crucial to counter claims to the contrary for which Ja'far had gained support from his sister; AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, pp. 424-430; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 77; MODARRESSI 1993, p. 78.

<sup>26</sup> This involved wine drinking, even publicly, and listening to slave-girl singers. Exaggerated as they may be, these stories seem to have seeds of truth in them; *ibid.*, p. 74n108-75.

group of followers, and even passed his Imamate to his son Muhammad upon his death in 282/895-896, his influence faded away rapidly to the point where he did not pose a real threat to al-'Amrī's heirs.<sup>27</sup>

Al-'Amrī had died long before Ja'far, seemingly shortly after the death of Ḥasan al-'Askarī.<sup>28</sup> Despite his relatively short career after the death of the eleventh Imam, his success in promoting the bold claim regarding the existence of a hidden son is definitely his major achievement. That a substantial group of Twelvers were willing to accept his narrative, its scarce evidence notwithstanding, is indicative of the extent of his authority and his firm grip of the affairs of the now void seat. Al-'Amrī's successor was none other than his son Muhammad, believed to have been appointed by the hidden Imam himself.<sup>29</sup>

#### The career of Muhammad b. 'Uthmān al-'Amrī

The career of Muhammad b. 'Uthmān al-'Amrī, henceforth referred to as Abū Ja'far, was the longest of the four Safīrs'. Given the turbulence surrounding the nascent belief in a hidden Imam, his career was markedly that of fully legitimizing the group's belief by appealing to the more general public in order to complete what his father had nearly achieved with the Twelver elite. Together with his father, Abū Ja'far had long been a servant of the Imam.<sup>30</sup> Sources even allude to him as being the scribe responsible for letters issued by the Imam's office during al-'Askarī's lifetime.<sup>31</sup> Although there had been some opposition to his Sifāra, he eventually succeeded in overcoming these obstacles and maintaining his status

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 83n161. Al-Ash'arī (d. 324/936), writing after 290/903 (AL-ASH'ARĪ 1980, p. yṯ), stated that the vast majority of Shi'is accepted Muhammad b. Ḥasan al-'Askarī as the twelfth Imam in Occultation; *ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> Sources do not provide enough data to infer his death date. 'ALI 2005, p. 107 takes it to be around 280/893-894. HUSSAIN 1982, p. 97 asserts it was 267/880-881 based on an alleged correspondence between the second Safīr and a Twelver dissident. However, Hussain is confusing two different persons. MODARRESSI 1993, p. 67n63 pointed out this confusion in some other works dealing with a different question. The assumption that his death was probably not long after Ḥasan al-'Askarī is based on his son's lengthy career; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 366.

<sup>29</sup> AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, p. 510; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 361.

<sup>30</sup> 'ALI 2005, p. 107; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 99; MODARRESSI 1993, p. 92.

<sup>31</sup> The statements in Twelver sources that letters written in the same handwriting were issued during the life of the first two Safīrs, but not later, can only signify that they took it to be Abū Ja'far's; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 356-363. As some traditions mention rescripts written in the handwriting of the Imam himself, Arjomand's assertion is only partially true; ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 502; *idem* 1997, 2.

as the chief representative of the hidden Imam in the eyes of Twelvers.<sup>32</sup> The descriptions of his activities in early sources are quite revealing. It is clearly the collection of alms monies, habitually in secrecy and extreme caution, that constituted the bulk of those tasks.<sup>33</sup> In addition to its evident financial significance, his intricate management of alms monies is quite indicative of his success in widening the scope of his followers and diffusing his networks of agents.<sup>34</sup> Bearing in mind the relentless struggle between Imāmī subsects, his financial control was both a sign of power and an indispensable tool for triumphing over his adversaries.

The source material on Abū Ja'far frequently stresses that he had seen the hidden Imam and reported it to Twelvers. In many of these reports, Abū Ja'far implied that the Imam had become an adult.<sup>35</sup> Whenever asked about the Imam's name, Abū Ja'far would castigate the questioner and even threaten to excommunicate him.<sup>36</sup> Such an unusually harsh reaction was justified as being out of fear for the Imam's life; absolute silence on this matter was necessary lest the sovereign, who did not even know of the Imam's existence, learn of him and track him down.<sup>37</sup> In some other traditions, he is said to have seen the Imam during pilgrimage, a claim which, when combined with some other parallel traditions, bespeaks a likely Twelver acceptance of the Imam as dwelling in the Ḥijāz.<sup>38</sup> These reports, besides

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<sup>32</sup> Idem 1996b, 502.

<sup>33</sup> HUSSAIN 1982, pp. 105-106.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 106-110; 'ALI 2005, p. 124-128.

<sup>35</sup> AL-KULAYNĪ 1969, p. 1:331; AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, p. 435; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 360-361.

<sup>36</sup> AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, p. 483; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 364. This is also seen in that Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī (*K. al-Tanbīh* see footnote 68) and Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī (d. between 300-310/912-922), probably both writing under Abū Ja'far, avoided mentioning the hidden Imam's name. Interestingly, Ḥasan b. Mūsā, when enumerating the fourteen Imāmī sects formed after al-'Askarī's death, speaks of the sixth sect whose only difference with 'Imāmīs' (i.e. Twelvers) is its disclosure of his name. That this was sufficient reason for Ḥasan b. Mūsā not to count them among Twelvers is a clear indication of the strength of anathema attached to this act.

<sup>37</sup> AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, pp. 441-442; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 360-1, 361. A similar tradition replacing Abū Ja'far with al-'Amrī is in AL-KULAYNĪ 1969, p. 1:329-330. It should be noted that although Zaydīs were the most politically active Shi'īs, such a state does not necessarily spare Imāmī Imams the authorities' hostility, as suggested elsewhere; ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 499. Rather, it still makes sense to assume that at the time of the eleventh Imam "the Abbasid persecutions had become intolerable;" KOHLBERG 1976, p. 533.

<sup>38</sup> AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, p. 440; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 232, 253-267, 268, 274-280, 364. HUSSAIN 1982, pp. 70, 75-76 relies on these accounts to propose that the twelfth Imam lived in Medina as a kid, part of his father's plan to hide him from the Abbasids.

-serving the obvious purpose of proving the existence of the Imam, show that Twelvers did believe in a certain frequency of communication between the two. Moreover, the context betrays the Twelver ethos of that time as being extremely political, awaiting an imminent return of the Imam. The extreme prudence and caution with which Abū Ja'far managed the affairs of the Sifāra are indicative of his contribution to that ethos, as seen in the strict ordinance to abstain from naming the Imam.

It is during Abū Ja'far's career that Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī<sup>39</sup> authored *K. al-Tanbīh*; only partially extant, it is one of the earliest Twelver works on the question of the Occultation.<sup>40</sup> Writing thirty years into Abū Ja'far's career, Abū Sahl sheds some light on the air of hostility and fear that dominated Twelvers' attitude toward the government. He portrays Abū Ja'far, though without naming him, as living in concealment and secrecy.<sup>41</sup> Abū Sahl distinguishes the Twelver belief in Occultation from that of the Wāqifiyya on account of Mūsā al-Kāẓim's (d. 183/799) then implausible lifespan, whereas the life of the twelfth Imam is still within reasonable limits.<sup>42</sup> This portrayal serves to make Abū Ja'far the living proof for the Imam's existence. Moreover, it also shows the very political role of the Safīr as understood by Twelvers and displayed by the Safīr himself. It is also a clear indication of the Twelver political expectations regarding the Imam's role. So prevalent was this ethos that even a leading figure like Abū Sahl, who enjoyed both social and religious prominence, seems to have harbored such aspirations. Whether the caliph actually was averse to the Twelvers or simply considered them a benign Shi'i sect, and whether Abū Ja'far was acting out of real fear and true caution or simply reifying his group's illusions, it is still attested by the sources that the Twelver attitude under Abū Ja'far was extremely political, and probably chiliastic.

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<sup>39</sup> On him, see AL-NAJĀSHĪ 1996, p. 30-31; KLEMM 2003, p. 149; ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 503-506.

<sup>40</sup> It is probably due to this that he is described as the chief figure in the intellectual formulation of Imāmī theory; WATT 1983, p. 27. But there appears to be some exaggeration in this as we now know of other theologians at work then. For example, extant are three treatises on the question by Abū Ja'far Ibn Qiba al-Rāzī (d. before 319/931), a contemporary of Abū Sahl. The edited texts with English translation are in MODARRESSI 1993, pp. 107-244.

<sup>41</sup> Abū Sahl Al-Nawbakhtī, *K. al-Tanbīh*, partly preserved in AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, pp. 92-93.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.



Abū Ja'far had to face other claimants to the Sifāra. After al-Sharīfī, about whom there is a dearth of information except that he was one of the *ghulāt*,<sup>43</sup> Muhammad b. Nuṣayr (d. 270/883-884) was seemingly the first claimant to challenge Abū Ja'far's authority.<sup>44</sup> Both Twelver and Sunni sources describe his teachings as being extremely vile and heterodox, both on the level of theology and practice. His patron was a member of the Banū I-Furāt, an influential Shi'i family, and one of his contending successors was his patron's son.<sup>45</sup> As with al-Sharīfī, Muhammad b. Nuṣayr was excommunicated in a rescript supposedly issued by the hidden Imam.<sup>46</sup> For the current study, the most interesting aspects of Muhammad b. Nuṣayr's endeavor are the nature of his teachings and the identity of his presumed patron.

The tension in the Imāmī community between, to use the polemical terms, shortcomers (*muqaṣṣira*) and various extremist trends (*ghulāt*, *mufawwiḍa*) was always present, and had even erupted long before the Occultation. The *ghulāt* were the most extremist of all, usually arriving at the deification of the Imams and abrogating the *sharī'a*. The *mufawwiḍa* mostly attributed supernatural qualities to the Imams but did not go as far as declaring them deities, and they still adhered to the *sharī'a*.<sup>47</sup> As elaborately presented elsewhere, the position of the Imams had usually been disapproving of the extremists.<sup>48</sup> But

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<sup>43</sup> He appears to have been of the *mukhammisa ghulāt* believing in the divinity of Muhammad, 'Ali, Fatima, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn; reportedly, he claimed divinity for himself; AL-ĀSH'ARĪ 1980, p. 14-15. AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 397-398 says that he was a companion of the tenth and eleventh Imams without clearly presenting his doctrine, although he hints that he ended up claiming divinity for himself.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 398-399.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 399. On the Banū I-Furāt see SOURDEL 1979. Muhammad b. Nuṣayr reportedly recanted his teachings and attempted to reconcile with Abū Ja'far, who however did not receive him; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 399. This alleged recantation is only recorded in Twelver sources, while later historical developments testify to the contrary as known from the continuing existence of the Nuṣayriyya sect; 'ALI 2005, p. 109-113; HUSSAIN 1982, pp. 103-104; MODARRESSI 1993, pp. 28-29. The same Twelver sources relate the story of his appointment of a successor, which also shows his adherence to his earlier positions.

<sup>46</sup> AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 398; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 104.

<sup>47</sup> MODARRESSI 1993, pp. 21-28.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 19-51. Kohlberg appears to adopt a different position whereby he sees "the official line" or "the official Imāmī doctrine" as disapproving of rational thinking and more inclined to the belief in the supernatural qualities of the Imam; KOHLBERG 1988, p. 35-36. Nonetheless, this use of the term 'official' is problematic. It assumes that there existed a religious institution occupied with promulgating a dogma, which is not the case as clearly shown by Modarressi in his presentation of various trends incorporated within Imāmī community (see footnote 47). Statements of the Imams on which Kohlberg relies to infer such an 'official line' are mostly dubious and more reflecting of the struggle between contending Imāmī groups. It also assumes an unchanging position of the community throughout the pre-*ghayba* period, which neglects certain historical facts.

in the mid-third/ninth century, the office of Imamate began to adopt a more practical position in a bid to satisfy the entire community.<sup>49</sup> The rank and file Imāmīs seem to have taken a third way falling somewhere between the two.<sup>50</sup> Evidently, Muhammad b. Nuṣayr was an extremist of the *ghulāt*.<sup>51</sup> His feud with Abū Jaʿfar was reputedly the first between the *ghulāt* and what was evolving as the Twelver community. The Banū I-Furāt appear to have had *ghulāt* inclinations in general. They were close associates of the vizier Ismāʿīl b. Bulbul, who himself belonged to the *ghulāt* and made sure to surround himself with his co-religionists.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, Abū Jaʿfar enjoyed very cordial relations with the Banū Nawbakht; he even married his daughter off to one of them.<sup>53</sup> The Banū Nawbakht and the Banū I-Furāt were among the most influential of the Shiʿi gentry in Baghdad.<sup>54</sup>

Despite Abū Jaʿfar's success in overcoming this challenge, the confrontation between the *ghulāt* and the office of Sifāra was yet to continue. In another rescript, the views of the Khaṭṭābiyya *ghulāt* extremists were severely anathematized and the group excommunicated.<sup>55</sup> Abū Jaʿfar also had to deal with a few other problems, usually pertaining to the question of his legitimacy as the Safīr, financial issues, or both.<sup>56</sup> He nonetheless

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<sup>49</sup> MODARRESSI 1993, p. 38.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>51</sup> He appears to have been originally affiliated with the *mufawwiḍa* before adjusting his views to the more extremist *ghulāt* position; *ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>52</sup> NEWMAN 2000, p. 16. Given their non-*ghulāt* Twelver doctrine, the Banū Nawbakht appear to have been an exception to this rule.

<sup>53</sup> ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 503.

<sup>54</sup> For a succinct survey of the Shiʿi prominent families and their respective relations see NEWMAN 2000, pp. 19-26.

<sup>55</sup> ARJOMAND 1997, p. 6 reads the rescript to be discouraging of the *mufawwiḍa*. Nonetheless, those in question are clearly *ghulāt* since they are followers of Abū al-Khaṭṭāb, founder of the Khaṭṭābiyya *ghulāt* sect; MODARRESSI 1993, p. 26. Moreover, their condemned beliefs included the denial of the third Imam Ḥusayn's death, which is characteristic of the *ghulāt*, particularly the Nuṣayriyya; ʿALI 2005, p. 110. This distinction would prove itself crucial in the course of later developments.

<sup>56</sup> AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 399-401; HUSSAIN 1982, pp. 99-103.

managed to resolve these problems and further establish his status. When he died in 304/917, his authority was almost uncontested among Twelvers.<sup>57</sup>

A curious incident took place towards the end of his career when a certain Ibn al-Ḍubaʿī claimed to be the twelfth Imam, but the claim was easily refuted as he was known to some craftsmen. Twelver sources do not appear to have taken interest in the matter, and the fragility of the pretender's position must have made the whole episode irrelevant.<sup>58</sup>

### The career of Ḥusayn b. Rūḥ al-Nawbakhtī

Abū I-Qāsim Ḥusayn b. Rūḥ al-Nawbakhtī,<sup>59</sup> a Qummī,<sup>60</sup> was appointed the third Saḥīr by Abū Jaʿfar on his death-bed, allegedly upon the orders of the hidden Imam.<sup>61</sup> It has been widely accepted in modern scholarship that Abū I-Qāsim had been a junior aide of Abū Jaʿfar's, and therefore his appointment came as a surprise for the community.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless,

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<sup>57</sup> SACHEDINA 1981, p. 91. A tradition telling of Abū Jaʿfar's authority is preserved in AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 367-8. Abū Jaʿfar orders a pious Twelver to pay his alms money to Abū I-Qāsim, later to become the third Saḥīr. Not certain whether that order is the Imam's, the man double-checks with Abū Jaʿfar by asking him explicitly about it. The latter does not answer the question but merely reiterates his order; as if to say that his words and the Imam's are one. The tradition may be taken as authentic; it would have been better for everyone to invoke the twelfth Imam, but he is still absent from the tradition.

<sup>58</sup> AL-QURṬUBĪ 1897, p. 49-50. ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 506 is of the opinion that this incident might have been why Abū Sahl later proposed that the hidden Imam had died (see below). KLEMM 2003, p. 151 on whom Arjomand relied for the account of this incident, quotes the claimant saying that he returned from Occultation, whereas al-Qurṭubī's text speaks of him as returning from the desert/wilderness (*bādiya*); AL-QURṬUBĪ 1897, p. 50.

<sup>59</sup> He was probably connected to the Banū Nawbakht from his mother's side; IQBĀL 2004, pp. 248-250. KLEMM 2003, p. 142 reports that he might have been Abū Sahl's nephew. His father's name has two possible vocalizations, Rawḥ (KOHLBERG 1995 and HALM 2004, p. 35) and Rūḥ; I use the latter here following HUSSAIN 1982, p. 119; MODARRESSI 1993, p. 93.

<sup>60</sup> HUSSAIN 1982, p. 119; KLEMM 2003, p. 142. ʿALI 2005, p. 132 seems more inclined to consider him an Ahwāzī, but there is little evidence to support this assumption.

<sup>61</sup> AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, p. 503; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 369, 370-372. Other traditions suggest that he had been carrying out Abū Jaʿfar's work for sometime; AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, pp. 501-502; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 367-368. Although there is hardly any evidence that Abū Jaʿfar was influenced by Abū Sahl in appointing Abū I-Qāsim as suggested elsewhere (SACHEDINA 1981, p. 93), Hussain is clearly rejecting it out of dogmatic reservations; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 121.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120; KLEMM 2003, p. 148; MODARRESSI 1993, pp. 92-93.

there is good evidence to discredit this assumption.<sup>63</sup> Certain sources provide material describing the close friendship between Abū Jaʿfar and Abū I-Qāsim.<sup>64</sup> When combined with the fact that the latter was a member of a prestigious family, educated and extremely politically engaged,<sup>65</sup> it becomes more plausible that he held a high rank in the hierarchy.<sup>66</sup>

Under Abū I-Qāsim the communication with the Imam was resumed after having been halted for a long time.<sup>67</sup> One would expect that Abū Jaʿfar, in his efforts to keep Twelver loyalty to him as the representative of the hidden Imam, had more interest in nurturing an impression of a more frequent communication with him. That things went in the other direction indicates a different state of affairs. Twelvers appear to have accepted Abū Jaʿfar's authority chiefly because he had seen the Imam, and credited his claim to such an extent that he did not feel the urge to affirm it repeatedly towards the end of his career.

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<sup>63</sup> There are four reports to the effect that one Jaʿfar b. Aḥmad was expected to be the next Saḥīr as he was Abū Jaʿfar's confidant. The first (AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 368) is narrated on the authority of Jaʿfar b. Aḥmad himself. The second is a general report describing the close personal and familial connection between the two (*ibid.*, 368-9). Although his name does not appear in the *isnād*, it seems that he is the source of this report as it relies on the same informant like the previous one. The third (AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, p. 501; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 370) is also on Jaʿfar's authority, this time via his nephew ʿAlī b. Muhammad. The fourth is an affirmation by two men who claimed to have witnessed the incident reported in the third account.

<sup>64</sup> AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 372.

<sup>65</sup> AL-DHAHABĪ 1987, p. 24:191; ʿALĪ 2005, p. 134; HUSSAIN 1982, pp. 119-120.

<sup>66</sup> Despite the likely family prejudice in these accounts that testify to his higher status, they still offer a more reasonable explanation of his ascension to office than those justifying the other hypothesis. Of the five traditions supporting this position, two have the Nawbakht family connection; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 371-2. The other three, one of which already discussed (see footnote 57), do not betray such a connection; *ibid.*, pp. 368, 371. This connection indicates that Abū I-Qāsim's position was weaker than his predecessor's and needed support. It does not provide enough evidence from which to infer that the Sifāra was an invention of the Banū Nawbakht and their circles; cf. KLEMM 2003, p. 142; KOHLBERG 1995. In fact, the Banū Nawbakht did not believe that the Saḥīr is able to perform miracles, a position in disagreement with the majority of Twelvers and at the same time runs against their interest in strengthening the office of Sifāra; AL-MUFĪD 1993a, p. 69. A survey of miracles attributed to Saḥīrs is in MOEZZI 1992, pp. 272-277.

<sup>67</sup> It is difficult to determine the exact duration of this interruption. ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 507 states that it lasted a quarter-century. In this he is taking the rescript in AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, pp. 483-485 as the last issued before the interruption of communication; ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 502. But this is an *argumentum ex silentio*. He also reads the text in AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 372-373 as a rescript signaling the resumption of communication with the hidden Imam (ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 507); he then proceeds to note that "[t]he subject of the decree, it is interesting to note, was the confirmation of [Abū I-Qāsim], the new head of the hierarchy." The ambiguity of the rescript notwithstanding, it should be noted that such a practice was quite natural. Abū I-Qāsim's predecessor had received a much firmer assertion of his designation from the Imam; AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, p. 510; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 361.

Abū I-Qāsim faced many challenges regarding his Sifāra; his usual reaction was to excommunicate dissidents, allegedly on behalf of the Imam. It appears from sources that Abū I-Qāsim had resorted to this severe measure more often than not.<sup>68</sup> Naturally, this indicates the gravity and multitude of the challenges he had to live up to. Nonetheless, the two most important challenges were those posed by Abū Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj, and far more menacing, by al-Shalmaghānī. However, al-Ḥallāj's activity was not confined to the Twelver community,<sup>69</sup> and it had been ongoing before the death of Abū Sahl, the head of both the Banū Nawbakht and Twelvers in Baghdad. Therefore, the involvement of al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), who was executed only five years into Abū I-Qāsim's troubled career, had been mostly with Abū Sahl.<sup>70</sup> Except for cursing him in a rescript ascribed to the Imam,<sup>71</sup> there is scant evidence to infer that al-Ḥallāj's movement had caused a serious schism in the Twelver community. Rather, it appears that his drifting away from narrower Twelver doctrines and appeal to other sectarian groups had undermined his credibility in the eyes of Twelvers, a community that was still isolationist to a large extent.<sup>72</sup> Abū Sahl was instrumental in bringing al-Ḥallāj to court and in his execution;<sup>73</sup> given the relative insignificance of his challenge, however, there must have been other reasons for such severe reaction on the part of Abū Sahl. It might have been that al-Ḥallāj declared the death of the twelfth Imam in Occultation,<sup>74</sup> a statement that

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<sup>68</sup> AL-ṬŪSĪ's wording indicates the multitude of people whom Abū I-Qāsim excommunicated; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 399. Also, the fact that he had to reiterate the excommunication of a certain Aḥmad b. Hilāl al-Karkhī, a foe of Abu Ja'far's whom the latter had already excommunicated, shows that some splinter groups were not ephemeral; *ibid.*, p. 399; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 101.

<sup>69</sup> AL-TANŪKHĪ 1971-1973, p. 1:161. He himself stressed his Sunni convictions; MASSIGNON 1979.

<sup>70</sup> 'ALI 2005, p. 138. Different accounts of Abū Sahl's intercourse with al-Ḥallāj appear in various sources, Twelver and non-Twelver alike; see AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 401; AL-TANŪKHĪ 1971-1973, p. 1:161.

<sup>71</sup> AL-ṬABRISĪ mentions his name prior to the rescript although the rescript itself does not contain it; AL-ṬABRISĪ 1981, p. 290. AL-ṬŪSĪ does not comment but rather keeps the rescript text, so al-Ḥallāj's name is not found there; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 410-411. Nonetheless, Abū I-Qāsim is quoted cursing al-Ḥallāj in a conversation; *ibid.*, p. 405.

<sup>72</sup> NEWMAN 2000, p. 60.

<sup>73</sup> IQBĀL 2004, pp. 140-144.

<sup>74</sup> MASSIGNON 1922, pp. 151-152.

must have alarmed Abū Sahl due to his own personal views on the question which appear to have been moot.<sup>75</sup> Al-Shalmaghānī, on the other hand, posed a much more serious challenge.

Abū Ja'far Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Shalmaghānī was a prominent Twelver jurist who had been a close associate of Abū I-Qāsim before he broke away from him,<sup>76</sup> seemingly during the latter's incarceration for five years ending in 317/929.<sup>77</sup> Al-Shalmaghānī had authored books almost fully sanctioned by the learned Qummī elite.<sup>78</sup> These books remained ubiquitous in the scholarly Twelver community even after his excommunication.<sup>79</sup> Apparently due to both his strong ties with Abū I-Qāsim and his personal erudition, his network included the most prominent Twelver households in Mesopotamia like the Banū Bisṭām<sup>80</sup> and the Banū I-Furāt. Al-Shalmaghānī then began to endorse views held by the *ghulāt* extremists, while ostensibly maintaining his status as a senior aide of Abū I-Qāsim.<sup>81</sup> His claims did not at first entail any challenge to Abū I-Qāsim's authority but rather upheld extremist views on the prophet's family and the transmigration of souls.<sup>82</sup> Seemingly after Abū I-Qāsim had discovered and denounced these views, al-Shalmaghānī presented himself as the Safīr of the hidden Imam.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> See below. The analysis in *ibid.*, pp. 153-159 is too inclined in favor of al-Ḥallāj, both in terms of assessing his motives and significance.

<sup>76</sup> AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 403; HUSSAIN 1982, pp. 126-127; NEWMAN 2000, p. 24. There have been some attempts in Twelver sources to deny his close association with Abū I-Qāsim, but the majority of sources attests to the contrary; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 381. Al-Dhahabī's account should be treated with caution because of the ceremonial atmosphere it describes; AL-DHAHABĪ 1987, p. 24:191.

<sup>77</sup> HUSSAIN 1982, pp. 126; KLEMM 2003, p. 143; ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 508.

<sup>78</sup> AL-ṬŪSĪ 1997, p. 224. The depth of his involvement in the Safīr office is best exemplified by an account that took place after his dissidence. Hearing that al-Shalmaghānī claimed responsibility for many answers to questions addressed to the Imam's office, certain Qummīs wrote a letter to Abū I-Qāsim asking whether those answers were al-Shalmaghānī's or the Imam's. Naturally, the reply, composed in first person, asserted the Imam's authorship of these answers; *idem* 1991, p. 373.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 389-390. Al-ṬŪSĪ himself, writing in 447/1055-1056 (*ibid.*, 112), narrates a tradition on al-Shalmaghānī's authority on the birth of the twelfth Imam; *ibid.*, 245. Later Twelvers tried to mitigate his influence by claiming that Abū I-Qāsim had corrected a certain book (*K. al-Taklīf*) of his before having been put in circulation; *ibid.*, 389. But another tradition indicates that the book was compiled after the fall out of al-Shalmaghānī with Abū I-Qāsim and that the latter read the book like any other reader; *ibid.*, pp. 408-409. Even in this account following their feud, Abū I-Qāsim authenticated the whole book save for two or three traditions.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 403-405.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 403-404;

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 403; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 128. AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 391 preserved two paragraphs written by al-Shalmaghānī regarding his dispute with Abū I-Qāsim. Their extremely reconciliatory tone in recognition of Abū I-Qāsim as

The shrewd Abū I-Qāsim retaliated from his prison by excommunicating him in 312/925.<sup>84</sup> Some of al-Shalmaghānī's followers, including individuals of the Banū I-Furāt, refused to dissociate themselves from him.<sup>85</sup> Before that, the final crisis of the Banū I-Furāt earlier that year<sup>86</sup> had made al-Shalmaghānī flee to Mosul.<sup>87</sup> He then developed his discourse to a point of claiming divinity for himself.<sup>88</sup> Later, he returned to Baghdad where he was executed in 323/934.<sup>89</sup> Abū I-Qāsim had been released from prison five years earlier, and there is little reason to doubt his active participation in his foe's tragic end.<sup>90</sup>

Al-Shalmaghānī's reliance on the support of a notable from the Banū I-Furāt can hardly be seen as a mere coincidence. As noted above, the main *ghulāt* challenge to Abū Ja'far had been backed by a member of the Banū I-Furāt, while Abū Ja'far had kept excellent relations with the Banū Nawbakht. The next major *ghulāt* challenge, i.e. al-Shalmaghānī, was also supported by a Furātī, now against a Nawbakhtī.<sup>91</sup> But the sources speak of a cordial relationship between the two families, and this is attested to by senior positions occupied by

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the only Safīr indicates that they belong to a period when the disagreement was mostly about al-Shalmaghānī's views without touching on the Safīr's authority.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 405, 408-410; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 128. Al-Shalmaghānī even called Abū I-Qāsim for the traditional practice of mutual cursing (*mubāhala*), intended to bring down God's wrath upon whomever is the imposter. Clearly, the latter eschewed this challenge; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 307.

<sup>85</sup> NEWMAN 2000, p. 24.

<sup>86</sup> KLEMM 2003, p. 143; NEWMAN 2000, p. 25.

<sup>87</sup> 'ALI 2005, p. 152; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 130-131; ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 507; NEWMAN 2000, p. 24.

<sup>88</sup> The development of al-Shalmaghānī's claims is plainly described in Twelver sources without taking account of their locus; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 403-412. The gradual escalation in his claims has been noted elsewhere, but without connecting them to the Banū I-Furāt's crisis; HUSSAIN 1982, pp. 128-129; NEWMAN 2000, p. 24. This datum about his escalating claims in relation to his stay in Mosul is recorded in IBN AL-ATHĪR 1965-1967, p. 8:290. 'ALI 2005, p. 154 considers the incident of *mubāhala* (see footnote 84) to have taken place after the Mosul period. But the logic of events suggests that it dates back to a time when al-Shalmaghānī's claims were still centered on the Sifāra.

<sup>89</sup> AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 412; 'ALI 2005, p. 153; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 131; ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 508.

<sup>90</sup> There are reports to the effect that Abū I-Qāsim, while in prison, had warned the vizier against al-Shalmaghānī's activity; IBN AL-ATHĪR 1965-1967, p. 8:290; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 130.

<sup>91</sup> 'ALI 2005, pp. 119-120 considers that the Banū I-Furāt were supportive of all Shi'is regardless of their differences. Nonetheless, he does not seem to consider their relation with Abū Ja'far in the same light but rather as that of rivalry; *ibid.*, p. 124.

Nawbakhtīs under the viziers of the Banū I-Furāt.<sup>92</sup> This ostensible conflict in reports can be avoided by abandoning the conception of the Twelver community as a monolithic entity and seeing it rather as containing various trends. Clearly, the Banū Nawbakht were more educated and inclined to engage in intellectual life, mostly endorsing a rational approach to religion.<sup>93</sup> Despite their divergent proclivities, both families identified themselves as Shi'īs and realized the importance of solidarity in a society whose majority adhered to other creeds. This might have been why Abū I-Qāsim's hardship coincided with that of the Banū I-Furāt,<sup>94</sup> an unmistakable sign of the interrelated destinies of the two Shi'i clans. But the final demise of the Banū I-Furāt might have left the Banū Nawbakht as the unrivaled patron of the mainstream Twelver community. It is thus that al-Shalmaghānī's execution took place without much protest.

The source material pertaining to the presumed connection between the Imam and Abū I-Qāsim presents the reader with an intriguing conundrum. Most of these traditions describe the miracles attributed to Abū I-Qāsim, understood to be due to the Imam's blessings.<sup>95</sup> But there are very few, if any, accounts where the former is said to have seen the latter. This stands in sharp contrast with parallel accounts from the first two Safīrs, especially Abū Ja'far. Strikingly, the Twelver community seems not to have placed great emphasis on the issue at the time. This discrepancy may well be taken to mean that the claims to seeing the Imam had been only a vehicle to prove his mere existence; to reiterate them was now redundant as they had been firmly established by Abū Ja'far. Rather, it had become more convenient to stress miraculous reports whose significance as confirming Abū I-Qāsim's legitimacy cannot be mistaken. The central question had thus shifted from the existence of the Imam to the credibility of the Sifāra. But clearly Twelvers still maintained that the Sifāra kept contact with the Imam under all circumstances.<sup>96</sup> The best

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<sup>92</sup> AL-TANŪKHĪ 1971-1973, p. 91. Newman considers the Banū Nawbakht to have been 'conspicuous allies' of the Banū I-Furāt; NEWMAN 2000, p. 19.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-26.

<sup>94</sup> He was imprisoned shortly after the fall of the vizier Ibn al-Furāt and before his execution; *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>95</sup> See for example AL-ŞADŪQ 1991, pp. 486-522; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 304-327.

<sup>96</sup> This can also be seen from sources' negligence to mention anything about the handwriting in which rescripts under Abū I-Qāsim were written, clearly disavowing the view, though universally held, that it was the Imam's; *ibid.*, pp. 373-383. Also, there are no accounts of people asking Abū I-Qāsim whether he ever saw the Imam, which testifies to the fact that Abū Ja'far had alleviated the community from this concern. Of similar



demonstration of this was when Abū I-Qāsim excommunicated al-Shalmaghānī. Such a powerful statement, a prerogative of the Imam, gained acceptance among Twelvers as emanating from him without questioning Abū I-Qāsim's means to acquire the Imam's approval while incarcerated.<sup>97</sup> Al-Shalmaghānī's later description of himself and Abū I-Qāsim as "wrangling over this matter like dogs over a corpse" clearly indicates that he had never contacted the alleged hidden Imam and believed this to be the case with Abū I-Qāsim.<sup>98</sup> However, it further suggests that unlike Abū Ja'far, Abū I-Qāsim was not believed to have frequent communication with the Imam even by some of his closest associates, to say the least.<sup>99</sup>

Despite the demonizing portrayals of him in Twelver sources, a claim like al-Shalmaghānī's was not uncommon in the Twelver community.<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, his case is laden with connotations particularly due to both historical and theological contexts and thus merits a closer analysis. Of all Imāmī communities, Qummīs were known for their staunch hostility to extremists.<sup>101</sup> The fact that Abū I-Qāsim had Qummī scholars ratify a dubious

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significance is the letter sent by al-Ṣadūq's father the famous Qummī traditionist 'Alī Ibn Bābawayh (d. 329/941), asking Abū I-Qāsim to intercede for him with the Imam so that the latter can pray to God for Ibn Bābawayh to have children; AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, pp. 502-503; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 320-321. Arjomand is mistaken in understanding the story to mean that the Imam was congratulating Ibn Bābawayh for his new born; ARJOMAND 1996b, 507.

<sup>97</sup> Obviously, imprisonment does not necessitate absolute interruption of communication, but it nonetheless makes it very difficult, especially for managing a network like Abū I-Qāsim's. AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 410 relates an account whereby Abū I-Qāsim is hesitant to publicize (*izhār*) the rescript because of his imprisonment, but he is ordered (*umira*) to do so. Clearly, the only party who could order the Safīr is the Imam himself.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 392; ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 507. Usually understood to be what al-Shalmaghānī divulged to one of his confidants, this statement is probably best understood if placed in the context following his arrest where he had to repudiate his claims, so its later dismissal by the community is only natural; ARJOMAND 1984, 43.

<sup>99</sup> Indeed, the wording of al-Shalmaghānī's statement betrays an initial disbelief in the existence of the hidden Imam. He is clearly stating that he joined Abū I-Qāsim upon his ascension to office "knowing what the whole thing is about"; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 391-392. ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 507 states that "[a]s an insider of the secretariat of the absent Imam, al-Shalmaghānī knew, as did [Abū I-Qāsim], that everything was up for grabs", indicating that al-Shalmaghānī's position was a result of his close association with Abū I-Qāsim. Nonetheless, the above quoted statement of al-Shalmaghānī suggests the reverse order.

<sup>100</sup> Many of his claims regarding the transmigration of souls and libertinism are also ascribed to Muhammad b. Nuṣayr, to mention but one example; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 398-399. Earlier, the *ghulāt* were infamous for abrogating the *sharī'a*; MODARRESSI 1993, p. 35n101.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-37; NEWMAN 2000, p. 42; KOHLBERG 1988, p. 39.

work is remarkable.<sup>102</sup> Although not totally unprecedented,<sup>103</sup> this move betrays Abū I-Qāsim's willingness to identify more with the Qummī attitude with respect to certain extremists and at the same time to consolidate their authority as a learned Twelver elite commanding the Imam's respect. This was not innocent of political expediency. Most troublesome movements, chiliastic and rebellious, were spearheaded by the *ghulāt* extremists;<sup>104</sup> marginalizing them, or even better repudiating them, would spare the community much trouble. On the other hand, Qummīs were not fully aware of the differences among extremists,<sup>105</sup> and non-*ghulāt* extremists would often escape their scrutiny. Thus Abū I-Qāsim, himself a Qummī, found his best ally in the Qummī community in his quest to counter the *ghulāt*, if for other than theological reasons. But this should not be taken to mean that he adopted what has been elsewhere termed 'the Baghdadī rationalist discourse',<sup>106</sup> since it can be inferred that he harbored some extremist views himself.<sup>107</sup> This way, Abū I-Qāsim can be seen to have supplied corroboration for a third way that contented Qummīs, lay Twelvers and non-*ghulāt* extremists, this to the detriment of the *ghulāt*. Paradoxically, al-Shalmaghānī's extremist views provided Abū I-Qāsim with allies whose central cause was to combat extremism, and at the same time allowed some non-*ghulāt* extremist views to creep more easily into the mainstream Twelver community.

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<sup>102</sup> AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 390; MODARRESSI 1993, p. 42n128.

<sup>103</sup> The eleventh Imam had recommended a book by one Ibn Khānabih for his followers. Nonetheless, since this took place at a time when the Imam was present in the community, it was taken as an approval of the book in question, thus bestowing great honor on the author; *ibid.*, p. 70. Clearly, in such instance, the authority still belonged to the Imam who did not ask anyone to ratify the book. However, in Abū I-Qāsim's case discussed above, Qummīs were presented with the book and their approval solicited. The flow of religious authority has been reversed.

<sup>104</sup> For the influence of the chiliastic movements on Imāmī Shi'ism see ARJOMAND 1996b, *passim*. On the earlier movements and the close affinity between extreme beliefs and millenarianism see TUCKER 2008, pp. 9-109.

<sup>105</sup> They seem to have taken their yardstick for extremism the abrogation of ritual obligations; MODARRESSI 1993, p. 35.

<sup>106</sup> NEWMAN 2000, p. 148. Probably a more accurate designation of their discourse is 'philosophy-minded' (MODARRESSI 1993, p. 116) since it is less in tension with traditionist theology than with traditionist literalism (see footnote 108).

<sup>107</sup> Interestingly, the first account regarding the abovementioned al-Shalmaghānī's *K. al-Taklīf* (see footnote 81) states that some people regarded possessing the book as a sign of extremism. Whether the book was authored under the supervision of Abū I-Qāsim or during the feud, he eventually ratified its content. That the Banū Nawbakht in general shared some extremist views is discussed in *ibid.*, 44-45.

Moreover, the major Twelver compendium of traditions, al-Kulaynī's *al-Kāfī*, was compiled in Abū I-Qāsim's time.<sup>108</sup> The book faithfully reflects the above constructed attitude of Abū I-Qāsim, later to become typical of the Twelver proto-establishment. This massive collection of traditions contains sections more pertinent to the views of non-*ghulāt* extremists,<sup>109</sup> together with others that are conducive to the then classical Qummī anti-*ghulāt* position and favorable of the philosophy-minded Baghdadī discourse. Even in those traditions sharing some of the extremist views, al-Kulaynī (d. 329/941) de-emphasized certain qualities of the Imams, sometimes by way of systematic excision of heavily extremist themes,<sup>110</sup> which is clearly more in line with both philosophy-minded and anti-*ghulāt* discourse.<sup>111</sup> Nonetheless, much pro-*mufawwiḍa* content made its way into *al-Kāfī*.<sup>112</sup> It is true that some of its traditions might not have been in full accord with philosophy-minded theology, but to perceive it as a challenge to the 'rationalist' Baghdadī discourse is a precarious assumption.<sup>113</sup> The rationalism of that discourse is still nebulous, and judging it by Mu'tazilī standards can at best give us a rough approximation. It is thus not clear how troublesome such 'non-rationalist' traditions would have been for this discourse. Also, the threat of the *ghulāt*, with both its menacing communal consequences and ultra-heterodox theological propositions, must have been a sufficient cause for other Twelver strands to come to a *modus vivendi*.

Only the first two Safīrs are referred to in *al-Kāfī*, although the context has nothing to do with their status as Safīrs.<sup>114</sup> This has usually been taken as a sign of disarray in the community at the time.<sup>115</sup> Strikingly, no mention is made of Abū I-Qāsim. But the conciliatory

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<sup>108</sup> NEWMAN 2000, p. 95.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 121-126 presents an exhaustive comparative survey whereby the Imamology of *al-Kāfī* is shown to have retained the major views of earlier works believed by many Imāmīs to have been extremist.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 113-114.

<sup>112</sup> MODARRESSI 1993, p. 47.

<sup>113</sup> NEWMAN 2000, p. 148. Interestingly, some contemporary Twelver scholars consider al-Kulaynī more inclined towards the Mu'tazilīs due to his emphasis on 'aql in *al-Kāfī*; 'ABD AL-GHAFFĀR 1996, p. 423.

<sup>114</sup> AL-KULAYNĪ 1969, p. 1:329-330; KLEMM 2003, p. 146; NEWMAN 2000, p. 150-151.

<sup>115</sup> 'ALI 2005, p. 268 proposes that *al-Kāfī*'s silence on the rescripts might have been to al-Kulaynī's uncertainty about their authenticity. KLEMM 2003, p. 146 argues that the office of Safīr was not clearly defined.

tone of both al-Kulaynī's and Abū I-Qāsim's discourses could have hardly been a coincidence. It is therefore very unlikely that the absence of Abū I-Qāsim in *al-Kāfī* was due to theological considerations.<sup>116</sup> Rather, a more plausible explanation would either be that al-Kulaynī harbored suspicions about Abū I-Qāsim's claim; or that he avoided him simply to keep his work confined to undisputed points, which explains his narration of traditions on the first two Safīrs inasmuch as they were said to have been praised by Ḥasan al-'Askarī. Such an assumption is still in line with the hypothesis proposed earlier to the effect that Qummīs had already become more authoritative on non-communal religious matters than Abū I-Qāsim, who clearly did not mind this state of affairs.<sup>117</sup> The relevance and significance of *al-Kāfī* are better comprehended when taking account of both the Banū I-Furāt's particular *ghulāt* connection and the Banū Nawbakht's counter efforts.<sup>118</sup> Therefore, the solid bond between the Qummīs and the office of Sifāra that crystallized under Abū I-Qāsim was probably a product of concurrence over a number of theological, political and social points. Furthermore, the earlier invitation to Iraq of a senior Qummī scholar by Abū Ja'far can also be seen as a deliberate nurturing of a certain tendency on his part, and not merely "[t]o enhance the unity and authority of the [Imāmī] hierarchy".<sup>119</sup>

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Nonetheless, ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 503 alludes to some connection between the Banū Nawbakht administering the office of Imamate and al-Kulaynī moving from Rayy to Baghdad.

<sup>116</sup> Newman considers al-Kulaynī's silence, particularly on Abū I-Qāsim, to be suggesting either a rejection of the rationalists' projection of themselves as leaders (NEWMAN 2000, p. 152) or the Qummīs' uncertainties over the nature and length of occultation; idem 2003, p. 95. The fact that al-Kulaynī spent his last twenty years in Baghdad writing the book, as Newman has himself observed (ibid., p. 95), makes it unlikely that Abū I-Qāsim and al-Kulaynī were wholly unacquainted with each other. As there is no indication that their viewpoints were very divergent, let alone contradictory, al-Kulaynī's silence must have been due to 'practical' considerations.

<sup>117</sup> There remains a curious phenomenon in *al-Kāfī*. In the introduction, al-Kulaynī writes that he has compiled the book upon the request of an anonymous believer. Given the effort and time al-Kulaynī had spent writing it; such an anonymous solicitor could not have been of little standing. The book contents and date of compilation, both corresponding to Abū I-Qāsim's career, may also guide our research on the question. It should also be noted that some Twelver scholars upheld that *al-Kāfī* was personally sanctioned by the hidden Imam; 'ABD AL-GHAFFĀR 1996, pp. 395-397.

<sup>118</sup> NEWMAN 2000, p. 197 asserts that *al-Kāfī* represented some middle position between quasi-extreme traditionists and the 'rationalist' Baghdādī position. But the portrayal of al-Kulaynī as having produced his work almost singlehandedly and the feeble examination of intra-Twelver discrepancies leave the analysis wanting.

<sup>119</sup> While Arjomand is very attentive to the respective attitudes of diverse ethnic groups of the time, too much emphasis on them may well lead the research into the mistake of not taking the zeitgeist into account. For example, the incident where Abū I-Qāsim is reported to have spoken a Persian dialect with a Persian woman who did not know Arabic is interpreted as a proof that Abū I-Qāsim "ha[s] strengthened the holy seat's ties with its compatriots in Iran"; ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 507. It is agreed that Abū I-Qāsim did so, especially with Qummīs;

In his last three years, Abū I-Qāsim became a courtier of the Abbasid caliph.<sup>120</sup> Despite all reports in Twelver works praising his superb skill in maintaining secrecy and precautionary prudence (*taqiyya*),<sup>121</sup> it seems that his rank in the Twelver hierarchy was common knowledge in the court.<sup>122</sup> There is no compelling argument to assume that reports of Abū I-Qāsim's secrecy were fabricated. A possibly more valid explanation is that his activity was brought to the fore after al-Shalmaghānī's case. However, the caliph's nonchalant reaction<sup>123</sup> indicates that by then political authorities had become certain of the non-existence of an heir to al-'Askarī and thus dismissed the possibility of Twelvers constituting a political threat. In this sense also, Abū I-Qāsim's career proved to have infused a more theological coloring into Twelver Shi'ism and relieved it from the burden of unnecessary political risk-taking. However, this all could have been generated by convenient political circumstances and internal power dynamics rather than being a deliberate project executed by the Safīr.

The anathema against the declaration of the hidden Imam's name seems to have been lifted at some point toward the beginning of Abū I-Qāsim's career. The sources contain reports of Twelvers believing in *Muhammad b. Ḥasan al-'Askarī* as the twelfth Imam.<sup>124</sup> Since

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but having a Persian speaking his mother tongue in a multilingual society like Baghdad of the time was certainly nothing out of the ordinary.

<sup>120</sup> AL-ŞŪLĪ 1983, p. 104. Abū I-Qāsim is referred to as Ḥasan in both the text and index, probably a copyist's mistake.

<sup>121</sup> AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 384-388, 391; HUSSAIN 1982, pp. 120-121.

<sup>122</sup> AL-ŞŪLĪ 1983, p. 104.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. He would justify his nonchalant reaction by stating that Abū I-Qāsim was collecting money for none other than himself. Also, 'ALĪ 2005, p. 145 noted that this reaction is telling of the caliph's weakness.

<sup>124</sup> Al-Ash'arī names the twelfth Imam Muhammad as *al-mahdī* in which the majority of Shi'is believe; AL-ASH'ARĪ 1980, p. 18. It is very unlikely that al-Ash'arī was mixing two sects (see footnote 36) since the strength of anathema on naming the Imam appears to have been unmistakable. He also mentions Muhammad b. Ḥasan [al-'Askarī] as the twelfth incarnation of God for a certain *ghulāt* sect, which clearly points in the same direction; *ibid.*, 14. Writing around 285/898, Ibn Qiba still avoids naming the hidden Imam. The only instance where the name appears (MODARRESSI 1993, p. 136) is in quoting the Mu'tazilī argument in order to refute it; otherwise he refers to him as the son (*walad, ibn*) of al-'Askarī. 'Ali Ibn Bābawayh, writing after 290/902-903 ('ALĪ IBN BĀBWAYH 1983, pp. 14-15), still refrained from naming the Imam; *ibid.*, pp. 117-119. Al-Kulaynī, on the other hand, does mention the name. That it is written in disjointed letters (*m-h-m-d*) may indicate that the anathema had not lost its effect fully by then; AL-KULAYNĪ 1969, pp. 1:329, 514. A few interpretations of this unconventional phenomenon have been suggested (MOEZZI 1992, pp. 254-264), but they fail to provide enough justification, for there is no connection between the disjointed appearance of the letters and whether the name is pronounced loudly or kept in the more constricted circle of believers. Also, the use of the name in numerological arithmetic to produce the number 12 does not necessitate that it be written disjointedly. In fact,

it was Abū Ja'far who had reinforced this anathema, it is likely that it was lifted after his death. Given the context of Abū Ja'far's advocacy of the anathema, its desuetude might have been in the new context of the declining political activism under Abū I-Qāsim when Twelvers gained much power and influence.

A very distinctive opinion attributed to Abū Sahl has been preserved in a later work. He is said to have declared his certitude of the death of al-'Askarī's son Muhammad, while maintaining that the latter had offspring in Occultation who will continue to assume the seat of Imamate.<sup>125</sup> If the report is to be taken as authentic,<sup>126</sup> then he must have developed this view after writing *K. al-Tanbīh*.<sup>127</sup> This would make his change of position fall sometime between 290/902 and 311/923. But such a change begs for an explanation. During that period, the age of the hidden Imam was still within a normal lifespan; the reason for such a change must therefore have been other than the lapse of time. Moreover, it took place at a time when the Safīr's authority was not subject to any real threat. Assuming that Abū Sahl was motivated by a desire to end all chiliastic claims to Sifāra does not provide an adequate explanation,<sup>128</sup> besides the fact that this alternative proposal does not really fit into this scheme as it leaves other Imams in hiding, a position equally prone to false claims. Moreover, such a position would inevitably bring Abū Sahl to a confrontation with his relative Abū I-Qāsim. However, they appear to have been on good terms with each other.<sup>129</sup> But the whole

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a more plausible explanation is that this betrays a compromise between strictly observing the previous prohibition and using the new permission to declare the name. Thus the account in AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 271-273 in which Abū Sahl does mention the Imam's name may be taken to indicate that he might have been a member of the sixth sect mentioned by al-Nawbakhtī (see footnote 37), but a better explanation is that he was talking after the death of Abū Ja'far. In any case, that sixth sect and the Imāmiyya appear to have been coalesced not long after al-'Askarī's death.

<sup>125</sup> IBN AL-NADĪM 1988, p. 225.

<sup>126</sup> While not offering any source criticism, ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 506 simply accepts it by stating that "there is no good reason to reject its authenticity". Modarressi's position seems to more skeptical; MODARRESSI 1993, p. 15n73.

<sup>127</sup> This is Arjomand's conclusion; ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 506. Modarressi seems more skeptical but shares this result were the paragraph to be considered authentic; MODARRESSI 1993, p. 95n223. Also very skeptical is IQBĀL 2004, pp. 139-140 who nonetheless has a different analysis whereby the paragraph is regarded to have been written before *K. al-Tanbīh*.

<sup>128</sup> ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 506. In his other study, Arjomand seems more inclined to justify Abū Sahl's position by a despair on his part "of elaborating rational arguments"; idem 1997, p. 10.

<sup>129</sup> AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 391; NEWMAN 2000, p. 23. It is worth noting that Abū Sahl is listed among those who witnessed Abū I-Qāsim promotion to office by Abū Ja'far; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 371. Ḥasan b. Mūsā, yet another

account is completely absent from all extant sources save one, with some inaccuracy in the biographical information on Abū Sahl.<sup>130</sup> Given this inaccuracy and the complete absence of historical data to support this account,<sup>131</sup> its authenticity appears extremely dubious. Nevertheless, it might also have been that Abū Sahl was proposing this hypothesis for the sake of argument, being a theologian well versed in disputation (*jadal*); such an explanation makes this position an efficient argument to be used against al-Ḥallāj who, in addition to declaring the death of the twelfth Imam, denied that he had offspring.<sup>132</sup>

Before his death in 326/938, Abū I-Qāsim had reportedly appointed ‘Ali b. Muhammad al-Sammarī<sup>133</sup> as his successor. At that time, Abū I-Qāsim’s authority had become undisputed to a point that al-Sammarī did not face any challenges in his short career.

The career of ‘Ali b. Muhammad al-Sammarī

Very little is known about al-Sammarī (d. 329/941) who assumed office after Abū I-Qāsim. He held it for only three years, at the end of which he reportedly declared the abolishment of Sifāra and thus abstained from naming a successor.<sup>134</sup> Though it is true that

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Nawbakhtī and their contemporary, is silent on the question. His conspicuous failure to record any view like the one attributed to Abū Sahl, let alone Abū Sahl’s failure to do so himself, may be understood if we take *Firaq al-shī’a* as having been written before 286/899 as suggested in MADELUNG 2003, p. 144. Otherwise, a possible explanation is to assume that Ḥasan b. Mūsā was reluctant to report this opinion lest his family’s reputation as upstanding Twelvers be affected. Although Sa’d b. ‘Abdullāh’s *K. al-Maqālāt wa-l-firaq* was written after al-Nawbakhtī’s *Firaq al-shī’a*, probably before 292/905 (ibid.), it is not of great help in this regard. Its silence is less indicative than al-Nawbakhtī’s as the author lacked his association with Abū Sahl and the date of its authorship is still too close to al-Nawbakhtī’s *Firaq al-shī’a*.

<sup>130</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm misidentifies al-Ḥallāj as al-Shalmaghānī in an alleged correspondence with Abū Sahl, although al-Shalmaghānī’s movement started after Abū Sahl’s death (see footnotes 69, 72); IBN AL-NADĪM 1988, p. 225.

<sup>131</sup> Interestingly, AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 228 transmitted a view which slightly resembles Abū Sahl’s, though without naming any of its adherents. This view upheld that there are in fact thirteen Imams, the thirteenth being the son of the twelfth Imam. But the names of the last two Imams are not mentioned therein, and that the twelfth Imam died is only inferred from their belief in thirteen Imams but not explicitly stated. Also, Abū Sahl’s purported view does not adhere to a fixed number of Imams. Thus this view transmitted by al-ṬŪSĪ can hardly be considered the same one Ibn al-Nadīm had ascribed earlier to Abū Sahl.

<sup>132</sup> The question of Abū Sahl disclosing the Imam’s name is indeed significant as noted elsewhere; ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 506. But as proposed above, the authenticity is quite dubious, in addition to the fact that Ibn al-Nadīm might not have quoted Abū Sahl verbatim. Still, other accounts (see footnote 122) do testify that Abū Sahl used to disclose the Imam’s name.

<sup>133</sup> His *nisba* is spelled in different ways: al-Sāmarrī (HALM 2004, p. 35) al-Simmarī (in KOHLBERG 1995 and HALM 2004, p. 35) and al-Sumarrī (MOEZZI 1992, p. 272); I use al-Sammarī here following HUSSAIN 1982, p. 133.

<sup>134</sup> AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, pp. 532-533; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 393-394, 395; HUSSAIN 1982, p. 134; KLEMM 2003, p. 145.

his main function in later perception appears to have been heralding the advent of the Complete Occultation<sup>135</sup> of the hidden Imam, it is still necessary to attempt an understanding of his appointment to that office since Abū I-Qāsim had rendered the office pivotal in the management of the affairs of the Twelver community. A very reasonable explanation of al-Sammarī's accession to office, despite his lacking a reputation of theological or political skill, could be his membership in a very rich and prestigious Imāmī family.<sup>136</sup> Such a family history, in addition to his association with the long serving Abū I-Qāsim, would enable him to command Twelvers' respect, thereby becoming the last accepted claimant to the Sifāra.<sup>137</sup> The same year of his death witnessed the demise of two towering Twelver traditionists, 'Alī Ibn Bābawayh and al-Kulaynī. This fact is worth examining in connection with the traditional view on the Minor Occultation's dates, since it signals that Twelver Shi'ism had completed a whole phase of development: the first uncontested comprehensive compendium of traditions had been compiled<sup>138</sup> and the Shi'is were no longer under the sway of Abbasid persecution.<sup>139</sup> In the absence of both political threats and political aspirations, the coherence and continuity of the Twelver community did not need to rely on any type of

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<sup>135</sup> The term 'Complete Occultation' (*al-ghayba al-tamma*) is favored over other variants ('Major Occultation' (*al-ghayba al-kubrā*), 'Longer Occultation' (*al-ghayba al-ṭūlā*)) because it is the term employed in traditions describing the death of al-Sammarī; AL-ṢADŪQ 1991, p. 533; AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, p. 394. This being the case, the former term is more pertinent to the perception of the narrators who were experiencing the conditions of Twelvers around the time of that event, be those traditions fabricated or authentic.

<sup>136</sup> HUSSAIN 1982, p. 133. SACHEDINA 1981, p. 96 appears to consider al-Sammarī an associate of al-'Askarī. In addition to the absence of any reference to support this assumption, this is unlikely given the latter's dates.

<sup>137</sup> AL-ṬŪSĪ 1991, pp. 412-415 mentions a certain Abū Bakr al-Baghdadī, Abū Ja'far's nephew, to have claimed the Sifāra. This account nonetheless stresses his affiliation with the *ghulāt*, so it was natural that his claim was rejected. 'ALI 2005, p. 260 mentions a certain Abū al-Faraj 'Alī b. Ḥusayn al-Ḥamdānī as a Safīr during the Complete Occultation who lived in the time of al-Mufīd, al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1045) and al-Ṭūsī. Nonetheless, the source text by Muntajab al-Dīn Ibn Bābawayh (d. 585/1189-1199) indicates that he lived *to* their time (*adraka*), clearly indicating his long life; MUNTAJAB AL-DĪN 1987-1988, p. 101. AL-KHŪ'Ī 1990, pp. 19: 198 simply dismisses Muntajab al-Dīn's account as a mistake.

<sup>138</sup> NEWMAN 2000, p. 54 considers al-Barqī's *al-Maḥāsīn* the first comprehensive compendium of Twelver traditions. Nonetheless, it was strictly Qummī in outlook and stirred much controversy. *Al-Kāfī*, on the other hand, had the distinction of being accepted by both Qummīs and Baghdadīs.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.



clandestine activity or central hierarchy.<sup>140</sup> There could hardly be a more apropos development to adopt as the end of such a critical period, at least in retrospect.

The idea that the hidden Imam had two Occultations was probably developed during the Minor Occultation. Nonetheless, the conception of these Occultations witnessed important changes. The earliest material on the question appears to have considered the interruption of communication with the Imam as heralding the advent of his second Occultation.<sup>141</sup> Nonetheless, later sources, still from the period of the Minor Occultation, mention that he will have two Occultations, though without defining either of these.<sup>142</sup> Clearly, the period in which this material was compiled was considered an Occultation, but it is difficult to tell whether it was viewed as the first or the second one. Whether this was an adaptation of the positions of the Neo-Wāqifiyya<sup>143</sup> or just making use of the same traditions then circulating in the Shi'i community, the notion of two Occultations of the hidden Imam quickly gained acceptance and became a central theme in works discussing the Occultation only a decade after the end of the Minor Occultation.<sup>144</sup> By then, the duration of each Occultation was probably defined as the community now saw the absence of the Imam and his representative.

## Conclusion

The office of Sifāra helped the Twelver community survive an acute crisis. Clearly, the scope of its authority and the nature of its responsibilities were not fixed from the outset; even the mere recognition of the office as such was developed sometime after the death of the first Safīr. The main historical significance of al-'Amrī is thus in his staunch defense of the claim as to the existence of a hidden heir to the deceased Imam. Nevertheless,

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<sup>140</sup> 'ALI 2005, p. 261 takes the abolishment of the Sifāra as having been a result of some difficult external conditions. But the historical developments then were becoming more favorable for Twelvers, so it would make more sense that their prosperity enabled them to do away with the institution.

<sup>141</sup> This is clearly Abū Sahl's position as seen in *K. al-Tanbīh*; AL-ŞADŪQ 1991, p. 93.

<sup>142</sup> AL-KULAYNĪ 1969, pp. 339, 340.

<sup>143</sup> ARJOMAND 1996b, p. 505; idem. 1997, 1.

<sup>144</sup> AL-NU'MĀNĪ 1983, p. 175-181. The book was written no later than 342/953; MODARRESSI 1993, p. 97n234.

early on under Abū Jaʿfar Twelvers appear to have accepted him as the pivotal channel of communication with the Imam. They paid alms to his office while awaiting the Imam's imminent return. No great emphasis was placed on the Safīr's religious knowledge but rather on his trustworthiness.<sup>145</sup> This can be taken to represent the rudimentary concept of Sifāra for the Twelvers of the early Minor Occultation. Theological challenges deriving from the hiddenness of the Imam evolved throughout Abū Jaʿfar's career, and culminated under Abū I-Qāsim. With the latter, the office became more invested in providing solutions to legal matters, sometimes in consultation with Qummī jurists. On the other hand, Abū I-Qāsim had to combat *ghulāt* extremists who harbored chiliastic aspirations and challenged his authority. The office accordingly began to downplay the political aspect of the Imamate and bring other aspects to the fore. On the theological level, those convictions peculiar to the *ghulāt* were repudiated. The *ghulāt* extremists were finally excluded, the Qummī traditionists accepted as an unrivaled authority and non-*ghulāt* extremists appropriated *mutatis mutandis*. By the end of Abū I-Qāsim's career, the political nature of the Imamate had almost faded away, at least from the perspective of the caliphal government, and its religious aspect taken root. This consolidation of otherwise contending trends may be taken as having shaped the later Twelver understanding of the Sifāra as of religious, even theological, import, as in some recent discussions on the authority of the Safīrs.<sup>146</sup> Al-Sammarī's career was merely a short continuation of his predecessor's.

The advent in Baghdad of Shi'i Būyids in 334/945 must have encouraged the decision not to perpetuate the office of Safīr. On the one hand, this new dynasty allowed Twelvers to not only practice their rituals freely, but also to have the upper hand over Sunnis or at least enjoy an equal footing with them;<sup>147</sup> thus the organizational aspect of the office, inasmuch as it was necessary to lead the community under pressure from a religiously hostile political

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<sup>145</sup> It appears that 'trustworthiness' was a more a judgment of moral conduct than of scientific credentials; *ibid.*, p. 15n73.

<sup>146</sup> In a confessional book dedicated to the question of Occultation, the contemporary Twelver scholar Faḍīl al-Mālikī discusses 'the infallibility of the four deputies' (*iṣmat al-nuwwāb al-arba'a*). While not endorsing it, he nonetheless hints at the acceptance of their orders and reports on a level with the Imams' since their fidelity is unimpeachable; AL-MĀLIKĪ 2000, pp. 64-65.

<sup>147</sup> The particular Shi'i sect to which the Būyids belonged is still not fully determined. It may be said, however, that those in Baghdad showed stronger attachment to Twelver Shi'ism than did their relatives; on their religious identity see KRAEMER 1986, pp. 39-44. Recent studies tend to stress their Twelver affiliation more; MARCINKOWSKI 2001, pp. 201-202.

authority, became redundant. On the other hand, the Būyids of Baghdad appear to have endorsed what the Safīrs had been promulgating among Twelvers: they suppressed extremists and supported an apolitical belief in the Hidden Imam.<sup>148</sup> The resulting situation for Twelvers and Būyids was a win-win: the former may hold their views without posing any threat to the Būyid authority—in fact, to the contrary, providing it with a popular base to counter Sunni opposition; the latter would spare themselves the dangerous undertaking of unseating the Abbasid caliph, as the only legitimate claimant to the office was in Occultation. The religious aspect of the Sifārā, concerned with preserving the newly founded Twelver ‘orthodoxy’, was thus duly fulfilled.

The ostensible reason for the Imam’s occultation, i.e. the fear for his life, had now ceased to exist. His failure to emerge from Occultation might naturally be expected to have caused turmoil among Twelvers. But this was not the case. Probably due to the newly gained prominence and stability of the community and the now firmly established theology of Occultation, the question was relegated to the detached realm of theological speculation. The learned elite’s response to these favorable circumstances was to modify the theological argument such that the Imam’s life was claimed to be endangered by his followers’ ignorance as much as by his enemies’ hostility.<sup>149</sup>

In those decades, Twelvers certainly had the most severe crisis of their history, both in socio-political and religious terms. In fact, the Twelver sect as such could not have developed had it not been for al-‘Amrī’s bold claims. While much of what the four Safīrs did was not unprecedented, certain of their crucial initiatives were. It is thus that in the aftermath of al-Sammarī’s death there emerged a more coherent community with only the *ghulāt* extremists excluded. But the appropriation of certain *mufawwiḍa* views, particularly regarding the Imams’ nature, was necessary to transform the problematic issue of the Twelfth Imam from a historical topic to a theological one, thereby allowing a rationalization of Twelver Shi’ism into a system of hierarchal authority capable of addressing the concerns

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<sup>148</sup> KRAEMER 1986, p. 41.

<sup>149</sup> Thus al-Murtaḍā, writing in the early fifth/eleventh century and still under the Būyids, argues that the Imam’s followers may not be convinced of his real identity and take him for an imposter, and would therefore be liable to shed his blood—the implication being that his followers’ power is equally a threat to his life; al-MURTAḌĀ 1986, pp. 1:148-149.

of the community and its individual members.<sup>150</sup> The *muqāṣṣira*, however, also had to adjust since the coherence of the community required them to compromise many of their positions, to the point where they were no longer the main current in Qum, let alone elsewhere, by the end of the fourth/tenth century.<sup>151</sup> Responding to the earlier proposal of the Qummī al-Shaykh al-ṣadūq (d. 381/991) that whoever considers Qummī scholars to be *muqāṣṣira* is an extremist (*ghulāt, mufawwiḍa*),<sup>152</sup> the Baghdadī al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 412/1022) described many of them as *muqāṣṣira*.<sup>153</sup> Given his undisputed authority in the community, such a statement shows that the *mufawwiḍa*'s relentless efforts to dominate the Twelver community had not been all in vain. Paradoxically, the Imams had always been repudiating extremist positions without evident success as new *ghulāt* groups continued to emerge within the Imāmī community.<sup>154</sup> The Safīrs, by no means comparable to the Imams in the Twelver *weltanschauung*, achieved a major success in this respect, though partial and not without side-effects.<sup>155</sup> Regardless of their motives in so doing, the theological consequences

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<sup>150</sup> The process by which the Twelver thought developed a nomocratic theology of occultation is elaborately described in ARJOMAND 1996a, *passim*. Of particular relevance is his observation that the two concepts of the Imam's infallibility and occultation were used to neutralize one another (*ibid.*, p. 567); such a balance could have been effected only through the interplay between the more religiously oriented authority (i.e. the 'ulamā') and the more politically engaged one (i.e. the Safīr), whose apparent cooperation under Abū l-Qāsim may have led in this direction. Such an assumption does not necessarily contradict Arjomand's description which is primarily concerned with the theoretical manifestation of this development and addresses a later historical period.

<sup>151</sup> MODARRESSI 1993, p. 42.

<sup>152</sup> AL-ṢADŪQ 1993, p. 101.

<sup>153</sup> AL-MUFĪD 1993b, p. 135-137. Although al-Mufīd is still denouncing *mufawwiḍa* views here, his definition of *tafwīḍ* is presented in a fashion that allows many of their doctrines to bypass his negative judgment. In any case, it is mainly due to the efforts of both al-Mufīd and his disciple al-Murtaḍā that the traditionist school, of which al-ṣadūq was the main representative, was swept away by the beginning of the fifth/eleventh century; MODARRESSI 1984, p. 34-35.

<sup>154</sup> The earliest reliable record of such efforts is that of Ja'far al-ṣādiq. His attempt to repudiate the *ghulāt* and consolidate the position of the Imam among his followers, though apparently successful during his lifetime, proved ephemeral when it came to the *ghulāt*. New groups of *ghulāt* appeared among his 'rehabilitated' followers just after his death. It may be said that the same phenomenon emerged with most of his less charismatic successors who were less able to restrain the *ghulāt*. On his strategy in dealing with the *ghulāt* see HODGSON 1955, 4-9.

<sup>155</sup> WATT 1983, p.27 offers a very reasonable explanation when he ascribes the relative unity of the movement created during the Minor Occultation to the fact that the four Safīrs were "men with wide knowledge of affairs and considerable political skills" whereas the Imams were "politically incompetent."

of that process have been far-reaching. The consensus of Imāmīs has always been that the Imam is the leader of the community in both worldly and otherworldly affairs. This firm belief in charismatic leadership has more affinity with the Sunni position than with that the Muʿtazila.<sup>156</sup> Inasmuch as this is true for the period when the Imams were present, one is left to face the question of how the necessity of the existence of an absent Imam affected the Twelver understanding of both political and religious authority. Was the Imam's two-tiered charisma divided between the political and religious leaders of the community or, as seems more likely in retrospect, did it accrue in its entirety to the 'ulamā', who could then exploit its political component at will? The Safīrs, with their vague situation within the spectrum of religious and political power, may thus be seen as the first step in the process by which Twelvers developed their understanding of leadership in a different way than both Sunnis and Shi'i millenarians. Whether Twelver Shi'ism avoided revolutionary millenarianism "out of conviction or necessity,"<sup>157</sup> it is during the Minor Occultation that conviction in such a necessity must have developed.

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<sup>156</sup> SANDER 1994, pp. 186-187.

<sup>157</sup> TUCKER 2008, p. 139.

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