

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Bibliography](#)

THE OCCULTATION OF THE TWELFTH IMAM

A Historical Background

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[Introduction](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Introduction](#)[Chapter I](#)[Chapter II](#)[Chapter III](#)[Chapter IV](#)[Chapter V](#)[Chapter VI](#)[Chapter VII](#)[Conclusion](#)[Bibliography](#)

INTRODUCTION

Introduction and survey of the sources

1. Introduction

Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-'Askari is the twelfth Imam of the "Imamates" or "Twelve-Imam Shi'ites", al-Ithna Ashariyya, who form the second largest denomination in Islam after the Sunnis. He appears to have been born in 256 A.H./869 A.D. Four years later, after the death of his father al-'Askari, the eleventh Imam, he was hidden from the authorities of the 'Abbasid caliphs as a precaution. His whereabouts were disclosed only to a very few of his followers. Four of his father's close associates became successive mediators between the Imam and his followers until the year 329/941. This period has been considered by the Imamites as the first or the short occultation (al-Ghayba) of the twelfth Imam. During it the four safirs directly supervised the underground religious and political activities of the Imamites.

The last safir announced on his death-bed in 329/941 that the twelfth Imam had decided not to appoint another safir and had entered into total occultation. The Imamites considered this declaration the beginning of the twelfth Imam's second occultation, which has continued until the present time.

Because of the second occultation the series of Imam stopped at the number twelve. Accordingly the Imamites believe that the twelfth Imam is al-Qaim ("he who will rise"), whose rising was promised by the Prophet. For the Prophet is said to have predicted that a descendant of his daughter Fatima would rise with the sword and fill

the world with justice and equity. For this reason the Imamites believe that he is still alive, but in a state of occultation until the moment of his rising at an unspecified time in the future.

Since the first half of the fourth/tenth century many scholars have examined the occultation of the twelfth Imam purely from the theological point of view, even though this event appears to have been historical. However, because of the close connection between the occultation and the Imamate (al-Imama) or the religious and political leadership, it became involved with Shi'ite theological discussions and gradually its historical aspects came to be ignored. Thus modern scholars like Ignaz Goldziher, Margoliouth, Snouck Hurgronje and Darmesteter were inclined to study the occultation of the twelfth Imam as a theological phenomenon and tried to trace its pre-Islamic origins. The present inquiry is an attempt to study the historical background and circumstances of the occultation of the twelfth Imam. The Imamites had political ambitions to obtain political power under the leadership of an Imam called al-Qaim bi-l-sayf (the one who will rise with the sword). This study tries to examine the role of these ambitions in his occultation and to trace as well the evolution of the underground Imamite organization (al-Wikala) and its role during the time of the twelfth Imam's short occultation. It is essential to make a survey of the main sources of this study so that the viewpoint of each of them can be understood and the information they contain evaluated accordingly.

2. Survey of the sources

2.1. Books on the question of Ghayba It is indeed an old idea in Imamite history that one Imam from the progeny of the Prophet would go into hiding to prepare for the day when he would rise again under the title al-Qa'im al-Mahdi and fill the world with justice. The concealment (al-Ghayba) was considered a sign of the true al-Qa'im al-Mahdi, and both before and after the occultation of the twelfth Imam in 260/874> Many Shi'ite writers collected traditions attributed to the Prophet and the Imams concerning this issue. These traditions were used by many Shi'ite groups to back up the claims of their leaders who aspired to power by adopting the title of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. Before 260/874 they were used even by some Imamites themselves as evidence that one or another of their deceased Imams was in fact al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. Finally the same traditions have been used by the Imamites to support their claims that the twelfth Imam was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi himself. These works on the subject of the Ghayba can be divided into three groups based on the dates of their authorship.

2.1.1. Books on the question of the occultation written before 260/874

The Imamite scholars wrote about four hundred books (al-Usul al-Arba'mi'a) during the lifetimes of the first eleven Imams. Some of these dealt with the subject of the Imam's concealment, recording traditions on the authority of the Prophet and the Imams predicting that an Imam would go into occultation. These traditions, however, neither named the Imam nor fixed the time at which his occultation would begin. The ambiguity of these traditions encouraged many Shi'ites to apply them to different Imams. Hence the Waqifa sect held that Musa al-Kazim, the seventh Imam, was the hidden Imam whereas al-Imamiyya al-Qat'iyya and al-Zaydiyya al-Jarudiyya¹ held that the hidden Imam would be the twelfth, but they did not identify him by name. Despite the fact that a great majority of these early works are not extant, it appears that during the fourth and fifth centuries the Imamite authors based their works concerning al-Ghayba on these early writings. The following works are examples of the Waqifite, Zaydite and Imamite views on this matter. i)

The Waqifa

1. Al-Anmati Ibrahim b. Salih al-Kufi, was companion of the fifth Imam, al-Baqir (d. 114/732). He wrote a book entitled al-Ghayba which represents the Waqifite point of view, although the information he gave was used by such later scholars as Ahmad b. 'Ali b. Nuh (d. before 423/1031) and al-Tusi to support the Imamite view. [2](#)

2. Al-Ta'i al-Tatari, 'Ali b. al-Hasan, was a companion of the seventh Imam, al-Kazim (d. 183/799), whom he named as the hidden Imam. In defence of his view he wrote Kitab al-Ghayba, which became the framework for the works of later Waqifite authors like Ibn Suma'a (d. 263/877) on this issue. [3](#)

3. Al-Hasan b. Muhammad b. Suma'a, composed a book on al-Ghayba, following the footsteps of his Waqifite teacher al-Ta'i al-Tatari.⁴ However, those Imamites who lived during the period from 260/329 / 874-940-1, like al-Hasan al-Saffar (d. 292/904) and al-Kulayni (d. 329/940), used his information to support their claim that the hidden Imam was not the seventh Imam but the twelfth Imam.⁵

ii) The Zaydites

Abu Sa'id 'Abbad b. Ya'qub al-Rawajini al-'Asfari (d. 250/864) was one of the leading scholars of the Shi'ite sect al-Zaydiyya al-Jarudiyya. He compiled a book of traditions entitled Kitab Abu Sa'id al-'Asfari. The importance of this work is that its author cites a tradition referring to the occultation at least ten years before its occurrence. He also

mentions other traditions which point to the fact that the number of the Imam's would end with the twelfth Imam and that he would be al-Qa'im. However in contrast to the Imamites he does not mention the names of the twelve Imams. Al-'Asfari's work along with the works of Sulaym b. Qays (d. 80-90/699-707) and al-Hasan b. Mahbub al-Sarrad (d. 244/838) were used extensively by such Imamites as al-Kulayni (d. 329/941), al-Nu'mani (d. 360/970) and al-Saduq (d. 380/991) to prove the existence of the twelfth Imam and his subsequent occultation.

iii) The Imamites

1. 'Ali b. Mahzayar al-Ahwazi was a close associate of the ninth Imam, al-Jawad. He was appointed by the latter as his representative in al-Ahwaz and continued to remain in office throughout the reign of the tenth Imam, al-Hadi. He wrote two books, called Kitab al-Malahim and Kitab al-Qa'im, both dealing with the occultation of the Imam and his subsequent rising with the sword.⁶ Then between the years 260/874 and 329/940 his two sons Ibrahim and Muhammad became the authorised representatives of the twelfth Imam in al-Ahwaz. It is on their authority that al-Kulayni and al-Saduq give important information concerning the communication methods employed in the underground activities of the Imamites.

2. In his work on the subject of al-Ghayba called al-Mashyakha, al-Hasan b. Mahbub al-Sarrad (d. 224/838) records several anecdotes which are often attributed to the Imams. This work has been lost but several quotations from it are included in the available Imamite sources.

3. Al-Fadl b. Shadhan al-Nisaburi (d. 260/873) was a well-known Imamite scholar and secured the trust and the praise of the eleventh Imam. He also compiled a book called al-Ghayba, ⁷ but most of its material seems to have been quoted from the work of al-Hasan b. Mahbub.⁸ Since al-Fadl died two months before the death of the eleventh Imam in 260/874, the importance of his work lies in the traditions he recorded indicating that the twelfth Imam would be al-Qa'im. Many later writers like al-Tusi in his own work entitled al-Ghayba, relied on al-Fad's work. Baha' al-Din al-Nili (d. 790/1388) also compiled a work entitled al-Ghayba by summarizing al-Fadl's work.⁹ Despite the fact that the actual work of al-Fadl is lost, the works Kifayat al-Muhtadi fi Ma'rifat al-Mahdi by Mirlawhi (d. 12th/18th century) and Kashf al-Astar by Mirza Husayn al-Nuri (d. 1320/1902) seems to be copies of his work. ¹⁰ Therefore it is not unreasonable to make use of these later sources for our present purposes.

2.1.2. Books on the Question of the Ghayba written between the years 260/329/874-941

During the years of the short occultation (260-329-874-941) many books reflecting different views were composed on the question of al-Ghayba. These were mainly collections of anecdotes based on works written before 260/874. Their authors were either jurists or propagandists and they participated in the activities of the underground organization of the Imamites led by the twelfth Imam himself. Thus they recorded important information, which cannot be found in books on history compiled during the same period.

In 2162/876, Ibrahim b. Ishaq al-Nahawandi (d. 286/899) claimed to be the representative of the twelfth Imam in Baghdad. [11](#) He composed a book about the Ghayba reflecting thieves of the extremists (al-Ghulat). Later al-Nu'mani (d. 360/970) used al-Nahawandi's information extensively in composing his well-known book al-Ghayba. [12](#)

'Abd Allah b. Ja'far al-Himyari (d. after 293/905) wrote a book entitled al-Ghyba wa-l-Hayra. The importance of his work lies in the fact that he was one of the close associates of the tenth and the eleventh Imams and later became the agent of the first two deputies (safirs) of the twelfth Imam. Unfortunately this work and the work called al-Imama wa-l-Tabsira min al-Hayra by Ibn Babawayh (d. 329/940) are not extant. However, the latter's son, al-Saduq (d. 382/991) and al-Tusi (d. 460/1067) made thorough use of these works. Al-Kulayni (d. 329/940) devoted much space in the section entitled al-Hujja of his book al-Kafi to the question of the occultation. He backs up this study with important information on the general situation of the Imamites between the years 260-329/874-940 with special emphasis on the role of the safirs of the Imam in this period. He recorded many traditions attributed to the Imams concerning the concealment of the twelfth Imam. He quoted this information from the earlier Waqifite and Imamite authors like al-Hasan b. Mahbub (d. 224/838), 'Abbad b. Ya'qub al-'Asfari (d. 250/864) and al-Hasan b. Suma'a (d. 263/877). Moreover the agents of the twelfth Imam were the main source of his information on the underground activities of the Imamites.

2.1.3. Books on the question of the Ghayba written after 329/941.

The occurrence of the second occultation in 329-941 led to a state of confusion among the Imamites. Hence several works were composed to justify the twelfth Imam's occultation and to explain the reasons for its prolongation. Five works of this period can be considered the basis for all later Imamite opinions concerning the occultation. Since these primary sources have been widely used in this book, it is worth evaluating the information they contain in some detail.

1. Al-Nu'mani, Muhammad b. Ibrahim b. Jafar, known as Ibn Abi Zaynab, was a native of the town of Nu'maniyya, one of the districts of Wasit. He moved to Baghdad where he was educated in Hadith transmission under the supervision of al-Kulayni (d. 329/940) and Ibn 'Uqda (d. 333/944). He then went to Syria where he died around the year 360/970. Because of the confusion which had spread amongst the Shi'ites after the death of the eleventh Imam, al-'Askari, in the year 260/874, al-Nu'mani wrote a book entitled al-Ghayba. He tried to prove the necessity of the twelfth Imam's occultation by relating traditions on the authority of the Prophet and the Imams predicting its occurrence. He acquired most of his information from early authors who wrote on this subject, irrespective of their doctrinal views. Among such early authors are al-Hasan b. Mahbub, an Imamite (d. 224/838), al-Fadl b. Shadhan, an Imamite (d. 260/873), al-Hasan b. Suma'a, a Waqifite (d. 263/877), Ibrahim b. Ishaq al-Nahawandi, an extremist (d. 286/899), al-Kulayni, an Imamite (d. 329/940), the well-known Zaydite jurist Ibn 'Uqda (d. 333/944), and al-Mas'udi (d. 345/956). **13** Al-Nu'mani's outstanding contribution was that he was the first compiler after al-Mas'udi (d. 345/956) to give an interpretation of those traditions attributed to the Imams by al-Kulayni, which indicated that al-Qa'im would have two occultations, the first short and the second long. Al-Nu'mani stated that the first occultation was the period of the four representatives of the twelfth Imam, lasting from the year 260/874 until the year 329/940-1, and that the second began after the death of the fourth safir in 329/941. **14** Some of his remarks reflect how the complete occultation of the twelfth Imam threw the Imamites into confusion and caused a massive decrease in their numbers. His interpretation became the basis for all later Imamite works on this subject.

2. Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Babawayh, who is better known as al-Saduq (d. 381/991), wrote a book on the question of the Ghayba entitled Kamal al-Din was Tamam al-Ni'ma. The information contained in this work is valuable because al-Saduq relied on the Shi'ite primary sources (al-Usul) which had been compiled before 260/874. **15** Thus we find that he often refers to the authors al-Hasan b. Mahbub, al-Fadl b. Shadhan, al-Hasan b. Suma'a, al-Saffar, al-Himyari and his own father, Ibn Babawayh, **16** who had close ties with the third and fourth safirs of the twelfth Imam. Because his father was an eminent jurist and the Imam's agent in Qumm, al-Saduq was able to give reliable information regarding the underground communications between the agents in Qumm; al-Saduq was able to give reliable information regarding the underground communications between the agents and the Imam via his four safirs. However, a study of the chain of transmitters (isnad) of some of his reports concerning the birth of the twelfth Imam indicates that al-Saduq obtained his information from

extremists such as Muhammad b. Bahr. Consequently, one must be careful in using these reports.

3. Muhammad b. Muhammad b. al-Numan, who is known as al-Mufid (d. 413/1022), was at one time the leader of the Imamites. During this time the question of the occultation began to penetrate theological discussions. Hence he wrote five articles in defence of the occultation of the twelfth Imam and also compiled an independent work entitled *al-Fusul al-'Ashara fi al-Ghayba*. Despite the dogmatic approach of this work, it records valuable information concerning the historical circumstances surrounding the disappearance of the twelfth Imam before 260/874. Al-Mufid also presents an exposition similar to that of al-Nawbakhti and Sa'd al-Qummi putting forward the fifteen different views held by the Imamites after 260/874. Al-Mufid bore witness of the disappearance of all fifteen groups by 373/983, except the Twelvers who believed that their leader was the twelfth Imam and that he was in concealment. In his book *al-Irshad*, al-Mufid follows the method employed by al-Kulayni and al-Nu'mani in the narration of Hadith, first of all by proving the existence of the twelfth Imam and then by vindicating the prolongation of his age beyond the life-span of an ordinary person.

4. After al-Mufid his two eminent pupils 'Ali b. al-Husayn, better known as al-Murtada (d. 436/1044), and Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Karajaki (d. 449/1057), followed his rational approach in their treatises on the prolongation of the twelfth Imam's concealment. This approach is clear in the extant article of al-Murtada which was published in Baghdad in 1955 under the title *Masa'la wajiza fi al-Ghayba* and translated into English by Sachedina.¹⁷ In 427/1035 al-Karajaki compiled a work entitled *al-Burhan 'ala Sihhat Tul 'Urm al-Imam Sahib al-Zaman*, in which he mentions many people whose ages had been prolonged beyond the life-span of an ordinary person. His aim in this was to prove, like al-Saduq and al-Mufid before him, that the prolongation of the twelfth Imam's life during his occultation was not an extraordinary phenomenon. On account of the dogmatic approach of these two works they are devoid of any historical information concerning the actual career of the twelfth Imam between the years 260-329/874-941.

5. The well-known Imamite scholar Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Tusi (d. 460/1067) deals with the question of the Ghayba of the twelfth Imam in most of his dogmatic works. But the most important of these is *Kitab al-Ghayba*, in which he makes use of both tradition and reason to prove that the twelfth Imam was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi, and that he must be in a state of occultation. Through his refutation of the other Shi'ite claims, which held that 'Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 41/661), Ibn al-

Hanafiyya (d. 84/703), al-Sadiq (d. 148/765), Muhammad b. Isma'il, and al-Kazim (d. 183/799) were al-Qaim and that they were in hiding, he suggests that the traditions concerning the occultation go back to the time of 'Ali. Al-Tusi also provides reliable historical information on the underground activities of the four representatives of the twelfth Imam, quoting from a missing book entitled *Ahab al-Wukala al-Arba'a* by Ahmad b. Nuh al-Basir. Al-Tusi's work became the main source for all the later Imamite writers regarding the concealment of the twelfth Imam, particularly al-Majlisi (d. 1111/1699) in his work *Bihar al-Anwar*. A contemporary of al-Kulayni was Abu al-Qasim al-Balkhi, a Mu'tazilite, who died around the year 301-913. He held that the eleventh Imam had died and heirless and gave expression to these opinions in his work *al-Mustarshid*, which is a refutation of Ibn Qubba's book, *al-Insaf*. Unfortunately his work has been lost. However judging by the quotations recorded in the book *al-Mughni* by al-Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar (d. 415/1024), it appears that al-Balkhi relied on al-Hasan al-Nawbakhti (d. ca. 310/922) for information concerning the divisions among the Imamites after the year 260/874. [18](#)

As for al-Ash'ari (d. 324/935), he depended on al-Balkhi for his information about the Imamites. In fact after al-Ash'ari's conversion to the group of Ahl al-Hadith, later to be the Sunnites, his books became the main source for the later Sunnite writers, such as al-Baghdadi (d. 429/1037) in his work *al-Farq bayn al-Firaq*, [19](#) the writer Ibn Hazm (d. 453/1063) in his work *al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa-l-Ahwa wa-l-Nihal* and later al-Shahristani (d. 548/1153) in his work *al-Milal wa-l-Nihal*. [20](#) However the information contained in the later works concerning the Imamite schisms after the death of al-'Askari is so far removed from the original exposition of al-Balkhi and al-Nawbakhti that one has to be careful about relying upon it.

2.2 The Biographical Works

Among the primary sources of this study are the books of al-Rijal, which deal with the scientific biographies of the narrators and compilers of traditions by estimating the degree of their authority and deducing their reliability from their dogmatic and political inclinations. The Imamites compiled four main biographical works concerned with the domain of the present study in the 4th-5th/10th-11th centuries.

1. The first is *Ma'rifat al-Naqilin 'an al-A'imma al-Sadiqin*, compiled by Muhammad b. 'Umar al-Kashshi. He was a native of the town of Kashsh near Samarqand, where he was brought up under the auspices of the Imamite scholar Muhammad b. Mas'ud al-Samarqandi and where he spent the whole of his life. According to al-Tusi he died in 368/978. [21](#) Al-Kashshi quoted his information from fifty-three narrators but his main source was 'Ali b. Muhammad b. Qutayba of

Nishapur, [22](#) who was contemporary with the short occultation and had close ties with the agents of the twelfth Imam in Khurasan. Ibn Qutayba provides important information concerning the evolution of the underground organization of the Imamites (al-Wikala) after al-Sadiq (d. 148/765) and the reason behind the rise of the Waqifite groups after the death of the seventh Imam in 183/799. Al-Kashshi's work became an important source for later Imamite scholars like al-Tusi (d. 460/1067), who summarised it and gave it the title *Ikhtiyar Ma'rifat al-Rijal*.

2,3. Al-Tusi's works, *al-Fihrist* and *al-Rijal*, are two of the four main Imamite books of *al-Rijal*. He cites different chains of transmitters (isnad) regarded as authentic and enables us to discover the links between the Imamite scholars and the agents during the short occultation.

4. The fourth Imamite work on *al-Rijal* is *Fihrist Asma' Musannifi al-Shia'*, which was written by Ahmad b. 'Ali al-Najashi (d. 450/1058), a native of Kufa. He received his Shi'ite education there and then moved to Baghdad, where he was one of the leading Imamite scholars along with al-Murtada (d. 436/1044). His residing in these two cities enabled him to establish close contact with forty-five Imamite scholars who had in their possession documents related to the period of the short occultation. These documents cast light on the different ranks within the Imamite organization and provide useful information on works on the Ghayba compiled before and after 260/874. Al-Barqi (d. 278/891), in his work on *al-Rijal*, provides valuable reports concerning the relationship between the Imams and their followers in particular the tenth and eleventh Imams, since he was their contemporary.

Despite the fact that the work of al-Dhahabi (d. 748/1347) entitled *Mizan al-I'tidal* is a later source, it contains some reports which elucidate the background of the Ghayba and its connection with the rise of al-Qa'im.

2.3 The books of general history

Al-Tabari (d. 310/922) lived during the period of the short occultation. His work *Tarikh al-Rusul wa-l-Muluk* is devoid of any information on the activities of the representatives of the twelfth Imam, which points to the fact that their activities were underground. However he does follow the militant activities of the other Shi'ite groups like the Qaramita and the Isma'ilis until the establishment of their state in 296/908. He also traces the use of the prophetic traditions regarding al-Qa'im al-Mahdi by these groups in their struggle for power during the time of the short occultation. Al-Mas'udi (d. 346/957) lived during the period of the second occultation and provides important information regarding the harsh treatment of the Imams and their

followers by the 'Abbasids and the effect of this policy on the occurrence of the Ghayba. This can be found in his works, *Muruj al-Dhahab*, *al-Tanbih wa-l-Ishraf* and *Ithbat al-Wasiyya* (attributed to him). In his work *al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh*, Ibn al-Athir (d. 630/1232) provides a useful report concerning the schisms among the agents of the twelfth Imam and the role of the extremists in these schisms, especially al-Shalmaghani. It is possible that Ibn al-Athir quotes this information from an Imamite work entitled *Tarikh al-Imamiyya* by Yahya b. Abi Tay (d. 630/1232). Unfortunately, however, this work is not extant. Many other historical and geographical works and books of traditions have also been used in the present study. Before they have been employed, they have been considered with the same critical method as that used above.

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Introduction](#)[Chapter I](#)[Chapter II](#)[Chapter III](#)[Chapter IV](#)[Chapter V](#)[Chapter VI](#)[Chapter VII](#)[Conclusion](#)[Bibliography](#)

CHAPTER I

The role of traditions in the occultation of the twelfth Imam

After the martyrdom of al-Husayn, the Imamite Imams from 'Ali b. al-Husayn to al-Hasan al-'Askari followed a quiescent policy towards the Umayyads and the 'Abbasids. But they expected that all their suffering would be terminated by al-Qa'im, whose rising in arms they were awaiting. The Imamites based their expectation on their interpretation of certain Qur'anic verses and on numbers of traditions attributed to the Prophet concerning the political and religious role of al-Qa'im. So it is essential to discuss some of these Qur'anic verses and traditions in order to see their effect upon the attitude of the 'Abbasids towards the Imamites, and consequently their reactions to the question of the occultation (al-Ghayba) of the twelfth Imam.

1. The early usage of the term al-Mahdi

The term al-Mahdi, which means "the one who is guided by Allah", is the passive participle of the stem hada, "to guide". A term that occurs twice in the Qur'an is the active participle of the same stem, al-Hadi, the Guide. The first verse states, "Allah is surely the Guide of those who believe" (XXII, 53), while the second states, "But the Lord is a sufficient Guide and Helper" (XXV, 33). In the usage of the Qur'an the eighth form of the same stem, ihtada, "he accepted the guidance for himself", is used strictly as a reflexive passive, whose participle is Muhtadi. So Man, who is guided by Allah, is not simply guided, but reacts himself to the divine guidance (hidaya)¹, either by instinct or intellect. Through these two means he can acquire knowledge of Allah, which leads him to worship Him by following His laws on earth.

However, Allah's laws cannot be discovered through these two sources of knowledge, so throughout the course of history Allah has revealed His knowledge and laws to a group of people who have been divinely guided to lead mankind towards His straight path. These people are called "Prophets" and possessed charismatic qualities which enabled them to implement the commands of Allah and to lead the people without error. Hence they are called in the Qur'an al-Hudat (sing. Al-hadi), because they were already rightly guided (muhtaduan) by Allah.[2](#)

The term al-Mahdi (the guided one) has the same meaning as al-Muhtadi. However, it has been applied to certain individuals in the early Islamic period as an honorific title, while also being applied to al-Qa'im. Many examples can be cited showing that the term al-Mahdi was used in these two senses. For example the poet Hassan b. Thabit (d. 54/673) applied the term al-Mahdi to the Prophet in a qasida when he says:[3](#)

جَزَاءً عَلَى الْمَهْدِيِّ أَصْبَحَ تَأْوِيًّا
يَا خَيْرَ مَنْ وَطَأَ الْحَصَا لَا تَبْعِدِي

*Sorrow for the Mahdi who is buried!
O best of those who walked on Earth, be not far!*

The poet Jarir applies this term to Ibrahim, the prophet.[4](#) The Sunnites often applied it to the four caliphs after the Prophet, who were called al-Khulafa' al-Rashidun al-Mahdiyyun the divinely guided caliphs.[5](#) Sulayman b. Surd called al-Husayn, after his martyrdom, Mahdi b. al-Mahdi.[6](#)

As for the theological usage of this term, according to Rajkowshi, Abu Ishaq Ka'b b. Mati' b. Haysu al-Himyari (d. 34/654) was the first individual to speak of al-Mahdi as the Saviour.[7](#) But it is worth mentioning that the second caliph, 'Umar b. al-Khattab, had spoken of occultation before Ka'b. When the Prophet died in 11/632, 'Umar contended that Muhammad had not died but had concealed himself as Moses did and would return from his occultation. 'Umar's claim, however, was refuted by Abu Bakr, who reminded him of the Qur'anic verse revealing the death of the Prophet [8](#) which states : "Surely you shall die and they (too) shall surely die. Then surely on the Day of resurrection you will contend with one another before your Lord" (al-

Zumar, XXXIX, 30-1).

The follower of Ibn al-Hanafiyya (d. 81-4/700-3), [9](#) al-Mukhtar, who was in revolt in Kufa in 66/685, named him as claimant to the Imamate and called him al-Mahdi in the messianic context. [10](#) Later the name of Ibn al-Hanafiyya became associated with the Kaysaniyya sect, which denied his death and held that he was the promised Mahdi, who had concealed himself in Mound Radwa, and who would rise in arms to eliminate injustice. [11](#) The Kaysaniyya dogma played an important role in Islamic political history during the Umayyad period, since the 'Abbasid propaganda, which brought about the collapse of the Umayyads, was in fact derived from this sect. [12](#) The dogma of al-Kaysaniyya can be seen in the poetry of Kuthayyir (d. 105/723) and al-Sayyid al-Himyari (d. 173/789). The latter had followed this sect, but it is said that he became an Imamite after a discussion with al-Sadiq, who clarified for him that the concealed Imam mentioned by the Prophet was not Ibn al-Hanafiyya but the twelfth Imam from the progeny of al-Husayn. [13](#)

The Zaydites also applied the term al-Mahdi in its eschatological sense to their leaders who rose in arms against the 'Abbasids, such as Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya (d. 145/762), Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 203/818), and Muhammad b. al-Qasim al-Talqan, who disappeared in the year 219/834. [14](#) An example of the Zaydite usage of this term is recorded by Ibn Tawus, [15](#) who states on the authority of Ibrahim b. 'Abd Allah b. al-Hasan, the brother of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya, that the latter had rebelled hoping that Allah might make him the Mahdi promised by the Prophet:

As for the Imamites, a considerable body among them applied the title of al-Mahdi in its messianic sense to each Imam after his death. This can be seen in the claim of al-Nawusiyya al-Waqifa and the followers of al-'Askari, the eleventh Imam. After the death of al-Sadiq in the year 148/765 the Nawusiyya group held that he was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi and that he did not die but went into occultation. [16](#) The Waqifa group applied this title to the seventh Imam Musa al-Kazim (d. 183/799) and denied his death, contending that he was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi and that he would rise to fill the earth with justice after it had been filled with tyranny. [17](#) Other Imamites held that the eleventh Imam al-'Askari was ***al-Qa'im al-Mahdi***, [18](#) whereas the last important usage of this term was given to the twelfth Imam, who became the magnate of the Imamites' hope in their struggle for justice and equity. It is worth mentioning that all these claims relating to the eschatological usage of the term 'al-Mahdi' were based mainly on Prophetic traditions concerning a future restorer of Islam. Hence it is essential to discuss

the traditions of the Prophet and the Imams, especially these traditions which concern the twelfth Imam, so as to see their role in the question of his occultation.

2. The Occultation of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi in the Qur'an

In Shi'ite exegesis many Qur'anic verses are regarded as references to the role of al-Qa'im and his occultation. The most important is the following verse: O, but I call to witness the planets, the stars which rise and set (al-Takweer, LXXXI, 15-6). According to Imam al-Baqir, this verse means that an Imam would go into occultation in the year 260/847; then he would reappear suddenly like a bright shooting star in the dark night. [19](#)

Ibn al-Furat, al-Kafi and al-Saduq interpret the following Qur'anic verse: "Say: Have you thought: If (all) your water were to disappear into the earth, who then could bring you gushing water" (al-Mulk LXVII, 30). They maintain that this verse is a metaphor for the concealment of the Imam, whose presence among people is like the water they need to drink. [20](#)

The Isma'ili writer Mansur al-Yaman (ca. 4th century A.H.) agrees with al-Kulayni that some Qur'anic verses which apparently deal with the Day of Judgement actually concern the appearance of al-Qa'im after his occultation. According to al-Kulayni the verse "And those who sincerely believe in the day of Judgement" (al-Ma'raj, LXX, 26) refers to those who believe in the reappearance of al-Qa'im. [21](#) Mansur al-Yaman gives similar esoteric interpretation of another verse:

And of mankind are some who say, we believe in Allah and the Last Day, wen they believe not. They think to beguile Allah and those who believe, but they beguile none save themselves; but they perceive not. (al-Baqara, II, 8-9).

Mansur al-Yaman states that the Last Day (al-Yawm al-Akhir) in this verse is the "Commander of the Age" (Sahib al-Zaman), that is al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. [22](#) Al-Kulayni interprets many Qur'anic verses with the same kind of approach and links them to the future role of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. In his view, when al-Qa'im reappears he will establish the political state of the "People of the House" (Ahl al-Bayt) that is, the Imams, upon the ruins of the state of inequity. This is al-Kulayni's esoteric commentary on the verse: "And say: The truth has come and falsehood has vanished. Surely falsehood is a vanishing thing." (Banu Isra'il, XVII, 81). [23](#)

Al-Tusi follows in al-Kulayni's footsteps in commenting on certain

Qur'anic verses. Take, for example, this passage:

And We desired to bestow a favor upon those who were deemed weak in the land, and to make them the Imams, and to make them the heirs. And to grant them power in the land, and to make Firon and Haman and their hosts see from them what they feared. (al-Qasas XXVIII, 5-6)

Al-Tusi holds that the above verses predict the establishment of the state of Justice by al-Qa'im al-Mahdi, who would inherit what had been in the possession of the wrong-doers.²⁴ Other Imamite scholars maintain that the fifth Imam, al-Baqir, said that Allah's promise of victory to an Imam from the People of the House is mentioned explicitly in the following verse:

And certainly We wrote in the Book after the reminder that (as for) the land, My righteous servants shall inherit it. (al-Anbiya', XXI, 105)²⁵

Other verses have also been interpreted by the Imamites to be connected with the role of al-Qa'im, after his rising from occultation, such as the verse:

Allah has promised to those of you who believe and do good that He will most certainly make them rulers in the earth as He made rulers those before them, and that He will most certainly establish for them their religion which He has chosen for them, and that He will most certainly, after their fear, give them security in exchange; they shall serve Me, not associating aught with Me; and whoever is ungrateful after this, these it is who are the Transgressors. (al-Nur, XXIV, 55)

Al-Qummi and al-Tusi report that the People of the House mentioned that this verse concerns the Mahdi because he would live during his concealment in a state of fear, would appear after the removal of fear, and would certainly become victorious.²⁶

3. The traditions concerning the twelfth Imam and his occultation

3.1 The traditions concerning al-Qa'im al-Mahdi

There are many traditions attributed to the Prophet in the books of tradition concerning the identity of al-Mahdi, his family, his epithet (Kunya) and his character. The conclusion of these numerous

traditions is that al-Mahdi is a descendant of the sons of Fatima, [27](#) the daughter of the Prophet; and more particularly, that he is of the progeny of her son al-Husayn. His colour is similar to that of the Arab, and his body is like the Israelite, and his name and Kunya are similar to the name and Kunya of the Prophet. [28](#) Moreover some traditions claim that the Prophet said that al-Mahdi's father's name is like the name of the Prophet's grandson, al-Hasan. Below are a number of these traditions.

i) We, the family of 'Abd al-Muttalib, are the Masters of the inhabitants of Paradise: I, Hamza, Ja'far, 'Ali, al-Hasan, al-Husayn and al-Mahdi. [29](#)

ii) Al-Mahdi is from my progeny. His name is similar to mine and his epithet is similar to mine. In his physique and character he looks exactly like me. He will be in a state of occultation and there will be confusion (Hayra) in which people will wander about. Then he will come forth like a sharp, shooting star to fill the earth with justice and equity as it was filled before with injustice and inequity. [30](#)

iii) Al-Mahdi is from my Family ('itra) from the sons of Fatima. It is worth mentioning that this tradition was reported on the authority of Umm Salama by 'Ali b. Nufayl, who died in 125/742. [31](#)

iv) On the authority of Ibn 'Abbas, the Prophet is reported to have said, "How shall Allah destroy a nation whose beginning is myself, whose end is Jesus and whose very centre is al-Mahdi, who will be from my family? [32](#)

v) The name of al-Mahdi's father is similar to the name of my son al-Hasan. [33](#)

The conclusion of Osman concerning these traditions seems to be rather forced. "All these hadiths are weak and contradictory (mutadarib), therefore their attribution to the Prophet Muhammad is to be very much doubted." [34](#) For the use of the epithet al-Mahdi by numerous Islamic groups, particularly the Zaydites, in their struggle for power during the Umayyad period shows that these traditions were well-known among the Muslims of that period. Moreover, many traditionists from different Islamic sects transmitted these traditions before the downfall of the Umayyads in 132/749, and later they were collected in the books of tradition (hadith). The earliest of these books was Kitab Sulaym b. Qays, attributed to Sulaym b. Qays al-Hilali, who died between the years 80-90/699-708. He reports many Prophetic

traditions concerning al-Mahdi, his occultation and his reappearance. [35](#) It appears from these two points that osman's judgement is somewhat hasty, particularly if one takes into account the fact that Prophetic traditions regarding al-Mahdi were narrated by twenty-six companions of the Prophet. On their authority thirty-eight traditionists recorded these traditions in their collections of hadith. [36](#)

The evidence suggests that from the earliest times in Islam there was a belief that the Prophet had given his followers a promise about a man from the progeny of al-Husayn, who would rise in arms in the future to purify Islam from innovation. But political rivalry amongst the Muslims encouraged some people to exploit this hope and to distort these Prophetic traditions in order to use them in their struggle for power. [37](#)

These traditions only mention that al-Qa'im al-Mahdi will be from the progeny of the Prophet. But there are also other traditions attributed to the Prophet which state that al-Mahdi will, in fact, be the twelfth Imam.

It is true Montgomery Watt objects that, Until al-'Askari died on 1st Jan. 874, there was nothing to make people expect that the number of the Imams would be limited to twelve or that the twelfth would go into occultation. It follows the theory of the twelve Imams was worked out after 874. [38](#)

Nevertheless, there is ample proof that traditions claiming al-Qa'im would be the twelfth descendant of the Prophet were in circulation before 874. It is thus necessary to throw light upon these traditions, which were transmitted by Sunnites and Zaydites as well as Imamites, so that one can see to what extent these traditions were used by the Imamite scholars to support the belief that the twelfth Imam had not died but was in a state of occultation.

3.2. The traditions of the Sunnites (Ahl al-Hadith)

The Sunnite books of tradition report three Prophetic traditions pertaining to the twelve Imam who would be the successors of the Prophet. These were narrated on the authority of seven companions of the Prophet, namely Jabir b. Samura, 'Abd Allah b. Mas'ud, Anas b. Malik, 'Umar b. al-Khattab, Wa'ila b. Asqa', 'Abd Allah b. 'Umar and Abu Hurayra.

i) Jabir b. Samura narrates that he heard the Prophet say, "There will be after me twelve Amirs." Then he mentioned something which I did not hear, so I asked my father, who was sitting beside me, who said,

"All of whom will be from Quraysh."[39](#)

ii) 'Umar b. al-Khattab reports that he heard the Prophet say, "The Imams (al-A'imma) after me will be twelve, all of whom will be from Quraysh."[40](#)

iii) 'Abd Allah b. Mas'ud was once reciting the Qur'an in the mosque in Iraq, when a young man came and asked him if the Prophet had informed them about the number of his successors. Ibn Mas'ud replied, "The Prophet informed us that his successors will be twelve caliphs, whose number is similar to the number of the leaders (al-nuqaba') of Banu Isra'il."[41](#)

These traditions have been related by the traditionists and considered authentic. Ibn Hanbal narrates the first with thirty-four chains of transmitters (sanad), all of which are on the authority of Jabir b. Samura,[42](#) although there are slight differences in the versions. Some of the narrators used the words Amir and Khalifa instead of Imam. But these traditions, as reported by the Sunnites, indicate only that the Prophet would be succeeded by twelve successors; none reveals that the twelfth would go into occultation, nor that he would be al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. But the Zaydite and the Imamite narrators relate the same traditions with phrases which indicate that the twelfth Imam would be al-Qa'im al-Mahdi.[43](#)

3.3 The twelfth Imam in the Zaydite traditions

The Zaydite sect, the Jarudiyya, narrate many traditions attributed to the Prophet and al-Baqir concerning the political role of the twelfth Imam. One of their distinguished scholars in Kufa was Abu Sa'id 'Abbad b. Ya'qub al-Rawajini al-'Asfari (d. 250/864).[44](#) He wrote a book entitled Kitab Akhbar al-Mahdi.[45](#) Al-Dhahabi reports that 'Abbad was a Rafidite propagandist, and was awaiting the rise of al-Mahdi in the near future. He used to carry a sword, and once said that he kept his sword ready in order to fight for al-Mahdi.[46](#) It is worth mentioning that 'Abbad held this view before the occultation of the twelfth Imam in 260/874, since he died in 250/864. [47](#) He reports three Prophetic traditions concerning the twelfth Imam. Below are two of them:

i) The Prophet is believed to have said, *"From my descendants there will be eleven leaders (who will be) noble, receivers of tradition (and) possessed of knowledge, the last of whom will be 'al-Qa'im bi-l-Haqq' who will fill it (i.e. the world) with justice, just as it was filled with tyranny."*[48](#)

ii) The Prophet is reported to have said: *"I and eleven of my descendants and you, O 'Ali, are the axis of the earth, that is, its tent pegs and its mountains. By us Allah has secured the world so that it will not sink with its people. For when the eleventh of my descendants has died the world shall sink with its people without warning."*[49](#)

These traditions along with other sayings predicting the historical circumstances and the signs which would precede the rise of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi were used by the Shi'a in their struggle for power. This can be seen in the events of the general 'Alid uprising which occurred in 250-1/864-5, when many Shi'ites applied the Prophetic traditions concerning the signs of the rise of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi to the historical circumstances surrounding this revolt. Ibn 'Uqda (d. 333/944) reports that al-Sadiq said:

A man from the People of the House of the Prophet will rise in arms in Mecca holding a white standard in his hand: the Euphrates will become dry, and, at the same time, a group of people, whose eyes are small, will advance towards you from the East and will force you to leave your houses. Moreover, the graves of your dead will be opened and predatory animals will attack your houses. Afterwards a fair-complexioned man will install a chair in Mecca calling people to curse 'Ali b. Abi Talib, and killing many people, but he will be killed on the same day.[50](#)

According to 'Ali b. Al-Husayn b. Al-Qasim al-Kharraz (d. ca. 250/864) all these signs occurred during the revolt of Yahya b. 'Umar in 250/864. As a result, some Shi'ites, particularly the Jarudiyya, believed that the leader of this revolt, Yahya b. 'Umar, was himself al-Qa'im al-Mahdi.[51](#)

3.4 The twelfth Imam in the Imamite traditions

The Imamite traditionists are distinguished from the Sunnites and the Zaydites by their claim that the twelfth Imam mentioned in the Sunnite and the Zaydite traditions is in fact Muhammad the son of the eleventh Imam al-'Askari, and that he is al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. Moreover they have written in more detail about his occultation, and his political role, the signs which would precede his reappearance and the social and political conditions which might pave the way for it.

3.4.1. The traditions concerning the twelfth Imam

The Prophetic traditions concerning the twelve Imams related by the Sunnite and the Zaydite traditionists were also narrated by the Imamites.[52](#) They applied these traditions to their twelve Imams and added traditions of the Imams themselves which indicate explicitly

that the successor of the eleventh Imam was al-Qa'im. The traditions attributed to the Prophet do not indicate explicitly that al-Qa'im would be the successor of al-'Askari, the eleventh Imam, whereas the sayings of the Imams do.

The earliest reference to a Prophetic tradition concerning the twelfth Imam is recorded by the Imamite traditionists on the authority of Sulaym b. Qays al-Hilali. He was a companion of five Imams, 'Ali, al-Hasan, al-Husayn, 'Ali b. al-Husayn and al-Baqir, and died in 90/701.⁵³ The Imamites regard his work as the first Shi'ite collection of Hadith.⁵⁴ He reports numerous narrations concerning the twelve Imams and the political role of the last Imam. The first of these narrations is attributed to a Christian monk who met 'Ali after his return from the battle of Siffin. He informed him that he had found in the Gospels that the successors of the Prophet Muhammad would be twelve; the last of them would fill the world with justice, and Jesus would perform the prayer behind him.⁵⁵

All the other narrations in Sulaym's work are attributed to the Prophet. The most important of these is quoted on the authority of the companions 'Ali, Abd Allah b. Ja'far al-Tayyar, Salman al-Farisi, Abu al-Haytham b. al-Tayhan, Khuzayma b. Thabit, 'Ammar b. Yasir, Abu Dharr, al-Miqdad and Abu Ayyub. They narrated that the Prophet gathered his companions together at Ghadir Khumm and said to them:

O people, the legal power (al-wilaya) is granted only to 'Ali b. Abi Talib and the trustees from my progeny, the descendants of my brother 'Ali. He will be the first, and his two sons, al-Hasan and al-Husayn, will succeed him consecutively. They will not separate themselves from the Qur'an until they return to Allah.⁵⁶

Sulaym adds that the Commander of the Faithful, 'Ali, told him, "O brother, son of Hilal, the Mahdi of my nation is Muhammad, who shall fill the earth with justice and equity as it was filled with tyranny and injustice. I know who will pay the oath of allegiance to him."⁵⁷

Sulaym states that he met al-Hasan and al-Husayn in Medina after the assassination of their father, 'Ali, and related to them this tradition on 'Ali's authority. They confirmed that they had also heard it from the Prophet. Sulaym adds that he informed 'Ali b. al-Husayn, the fourth Imam, in the presence of his son al-Baqir about this tradition, and they also confirmed its authenticity. Moreover Abban b. Abi 'Ayyash reports that he met al-Baqir during the rite of pilgrimage and mentioned Sulaym's tradition to him, and that he confirmed its

authenticity.[58](#)

But al-Mas'udi doubts the authenticity of this tradition claiming that this tradition was transmitted only through Sulaym.[59](#) Despite the fact that this tradition is related on the authority of Sulaym b. Qays by many Imamite scholars, such as al-Kulayni, al-Nu'mani, and al-Tusi,[60](#) it was related and confirmed by others as well.[61](#) In addition al-Saduq relates the above tradition on the authority of 'Ali,[62](#) and he narrates another prophetic tradition on the authority of 'Abd Allah b. 'Abbas:

I am the master of the Prophets and 'Ali the master of my trustees, of whom there will be twelve; the first one is 'Ali, and the last is al-Qa'im.[63](#)

Moreover the Imamite scholars relate numerous traditions attributed to their Imams, which confirm that the twelfth Imam will be al-Qa'im al-Mahdi.[64](#) It is worth noting that al-Hadrami (fl. 3rd/9th century) reports a tradition which gives the Imam who will rise in arms the epithet al-Qa'im.[65](#) At the same time other narrations employ the epithet al-Mahdi, particularly in the works of al-Saffar (d. 290/902).[66](#)

The use of these two terms caused such confusion amongst the followers of al-Jawad that some were not sure whether al-Qa'im and al-Mahdi were the same individual or not. Therefore, according to al-Saduq, al-Jawad was reported as having said that al-Qa'im is from "us" and that he would be al-Mahdi; he must be awaited by his followers during his occultation and obeyed at his rising and that he would be his descendant in the third generation.[67](#) The Imamites of the fourth/ninth century called the twelfth Imam al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. Al-Mufid states that he was called al-Mahdi because he would guide people to a forgotten dogma and law.[68](#)

3.4.2. The political role of al-Qa'im

It has already been pointed out that the Imams from 'Ali b. al-Husayn onwards adopted publicly a quiescent policy towards the Umayyads and the 'Abbasids. Accordingly, they stressed the propagation of their teachings, which they expected, would result in religious and political awareness among the people and would prepare the ground for the task of al-Qa'im. Al-Nu'mani reports that al-Baqir advised his partisan Abu al-Jarud to keep quiet at home, and not to implicate himself in the militant activities of some 'Alids against the Umayyads, since the Umayyad state had a natural lifespan and the moment of its downfall had not yet come.[69](#) He added that any 'Alid who rebelled

against tyranny before the rise of al-Qa'im would inevitably fail.[70](#) Al-Sadiq and the later imams followed the same policy. They ordered their followers not to allow despair to find a place in their hearts and to wait for the rise of al-Qa'im in the near future.[71](#) This policy enabled the Imamites to spread their doctrine and at the same time to organize themselves - during the period between 132-260/749-874 - into a well-established political and financial organization (al-Wikala). It seems probable that this underground organization was preparing for the rise of al-Qa'im. For they expected his rising[72](#) and placed important political and religious duties upon his shoulders.

Several narrations suggest that the quiescent policy of the Imams was established after their followers caused two abortive rebellions. According to al-Kulayni, al-Sadiq once said: This matter (al-Amr), that is, the endeavour to reach power, was hidden until it reached the hands of the Kaysaniyya. They revealed it on the roads and circulated it among the villagers of al-Sawad.[73](#)

According to al-Nu'mani the Imamites endeavoured to rise in arms twice, first in the year 70/689 and second in the year 140/758, but their followers spoiled their plans by revealing the name of their leader to their foes,[74](#) an act which resulted in the arrest or the assassination of the Imams. In this connection a conversation between al-Baqir and his partisan 'Abd Allah by 'Ata al-Wasiti is revealing. Al-Wasiti said to the Imam:

You have many followers in Iraq and there is no one among your family who has the merit for leadership but you. So why do you not rise in arms? Al-Baqir replied: O 'Abd Allah, do not listen to the masses, because none of us has his name mentioned by the people nor a hand pointing at him as the Imam, without soon facing inevitable death. So search for him whose birth is concealed from the people, because he will be the one who will manage such an affair.[75](#)

Moreover al-Sadiq was reported to have said:

This matter (the rising in arms) was vested in me, but Allah delayed it; He shall do with my progeny whatever He wants.[76](#)

These sayings indicate that the Imams had suffered the consequences of revealing the fixed dates of their militant endeavours to reach power. Hence the later Imams did not reveal explicitly to their followers which Imam would be al-Qa'im with the sword. At the same time they encouraged their followers to follow their instructions,[77](#) for this

would pave the way for one of the Imams to reach power under the title of al-Qa'im.

Several traditions reveal that the establishment of al-Qa'im's political state will occur through the "natural" course of events. A Prophetic tradition states that a group of people from the east will start underground activities and pave the way for the installation of al-Mahdi by military means.⁷⁸ The latter will struggle for power without any miraculous aid and will face difficulties and opposition against the propagation of his teachings, similar to the opposition which the Prophet faced with Quraysh.⁷⁹ Furthermore he will not take any militant action unless he has at least 10,000 partisans.⁸⁰

According to al-Baqir the main goal of al-Qa'im will be to establish an Islamic state and to apply Islamic law as it was revealed to the Prophet. Al-Sadiq asserts that he will follow the Prophet's policy by elimination and demolishing all the innovations which derive from a situation of ignorance (al-Jahiliyya) and apply Islam in a new form.⁸¹ Other narrations indicate that he will apply the law of David and Solomon along with the Islamic law⁸² and apply the rules of Torah to the Jews and the rules of the Gospel to the Christians. According to al-Nu'mani, his state will include, in addition to the Islamic lands, the territories of Rum, Sind, India and China.⁸³

Some functions attributed to al-Qa'im indicate the unrest and disappointment felt by the Imamites in the face of the political and economic situation of the time, Al-Fadl b. Shadhan (d. 260/873) and al-Kulayni report that al-Qa'im will rise with the sword as God's avenger against those who caused troubles to 'Ali and his wife Fatima. He would also take vengeance against those who were responsible for the suffering of the Imams and their followers,⁸⁴ particularly against those who assassinated al-Husayn. Al-Sadiq considered al-Husayn's assassination the main reason for the rise of al-Qa'im as an avenger.⁸⁵ Other functions of al-Qa'im depict the political annoyance of the Imams towards the allegiance of the Arabs, and especially towards the clan of Quraysh who had monopolized political authority since the death of the Prophet. Al-Nu'mani mentions a tradition attributed to Imam al-Sadiq: "When al-Qa'im rises he will deal with the Arabs and Quraysh only by the sword."⁸⁶

The Imamites also vested al-Qa'im with another task which reveals their dissatisfaction with the economic system of the 'Abbasid state. According to al-Himyari, al-Baqir stated that when al-Qa'im rose all the feudal systems would be abolished.⁸⁷ Al-Kulayni agrees with al-Himyari and adds that al-Qa'im, after carrying out this operation, may

allow his partisans to administer and cultivate the lands with the condition that they pay the legal land-tax.⁸⁸ In the light of these hopes and the repeated failure of the Zaydite uprisings, as had been expected by the Imams, the Imamites concentrated all their hopes on the uprising of al-Qa'im, whose state had been awaited since the time of al-Baqir.⁸⁹ Al-Nu'mani reports that when the 'Abbasid revolution broke out in Khurasan and black banners were raised, Abu Bakr al-Hadrami and Abban went to the Imam al-Sadiq, and asked his opinion about participation in the revolution. He warned them against it saying: "When you see us follow a man, then you must join us with weapons."⁹⁰ Although the Imam did not reveal the identity of the man to be followed, he confirmed that he would struggle for power by militant means and eliminate the rule of his opponents.⁹¹ It appears that because of the militant role of al-Qa'im the Imams refrained from giving any explicit statement of his identity. However, they did indicate that since the rulers, first the Umayyads and then the 'Abbasids, had reached power by "natural" means, their fall would also occur by "natural" means.

There is a good deal of evidence to indicate that some of the Imams would have taken militant action if they had had strong and faithful partisans. But they delayed this task indefinitely until the intellectual activities of their followers could bear fruit and be converted into a political awareness which might enable one of the Imams to gain power by militant means. The Imams also wanted their partisans to be more optimistic in gaining immediate success, and not to leave the task of propagation of their teachings to al-Qa'im, whose military uprising relied on the outcome of the activities of the Imamites themselves. Finally, it seems most likely that the uprising of the Imam who would be al-Qa'im, was later attributed to the twelfth Imam, because the Imamite propaganda reached a developed, political stage during the life-time of the tenth and the eleventh Imams, and this might have enabled the twelfth Imam to reach power.

3.4.3 the signs of the rise of al-Qa'im

The early Imamite traditionists delineated five signs which would precede the rise of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi: first, the rise of al-Yamani, then the rise of al-sufyani, thirdly the assassination of the Pure Soul (al-Nafs al-Zakiyya) in Mecca only fifteen days before the rise of al-Qa'im, fourthly an outcry in the morning from the sky in the name of al-Qa'im, and finally the sinking of an army into the earth (al-Bayda') during its march on Mecca.⁹² Despite the fact that al-Nu'mani, al-Saduq and al-Tusi differ as to the chronological occurrence of these signs, they all agree that they will occur in the same year.⁹³

It seems that the delineation of these signs along with the expectations of the Imamites and al-Jarudiyya that al-Qa'im al-Mahdi would rise in the near future⁹⁴ caused the 'Abbasid authorities to be suspicious, since some of these signs were connected with their regime and indicated that al-Qa'im's uprising was directed mainly against them. The fact that the Imams had the 'Abbasids in mind can be seen in the discussion between al-Rida, the eighth Imam, and his adherent al-Hasan b. al-Jahm,⁹⁵ who said to him:

"May Allah make you prosper! The people are saying that al-Sufyani will rise after the fall of the 'Abbasids." Al-Rida said: "They lie. He will rise while they are still in power."⁹⁶

This statement has been confirmed in other traditions attributed to al-Sadiq. For example his companion Ya'qub b. al-Sarraj asked him:

"When will your Shi'a gain their release from suffering?" he replied, "When conflict occurs amongst the 'Abbasids, and their power begins to decline. Then their partisans and their subjects will be encouraged to threaten the authorities. Thereafter al-Sufyani will rise from the West, while the Yamani will advance from the East, until they both reach Kufa, where they will destroy the 'Abbasids. At the same time the Hasani will start his rebellion. Then the Master of this matter, al-Qa'im, shall advance from Medina towards Mecca to rebel."⁹⁷

According to al-Nu'mani, al-Sadiq added that because of these events, the fall of the 'Abbasid regime was inevitable. Its fall would be similar to a piece of crockery dropped from the hand of its possessor, which then splits into pieces.⁹⁸

In the light of these statements attributed to the Imams it is clear that from the time of al-Sadiq onwards, the Imamites awaited the political uprising of one of their Imams, called al-Qa'im while the 'Abbasids were still in power.⁹⁹ Indeed the spread of these traditions caused the 'Abbasids to fear the Imams, who might have been behind some 'Alid revolts. Perhaps this is why the 'Abbasid caliphs became suspicious of the Imams. Even the caliph al-Mansur himself related a tradition on the authority of al-Baqir stating that al-Qa'im would be from the progeny of 'Ali.¹⁰⁰ He restricted the movements of al-Sadiq and his followers and made it a policy to discriminate against them. Moreover he invested his successor Muhammad with the epithet "al-Mahdi" (158-169/775-785) in order to turn the attention of his subjects from the 'Alid family toward the family of 'Abbas.¹⁰¹

Despite the fact that the movements of the seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim, were also restricted by the authorities, so that he died in prison, [102](#) the Shi'ite propaganda from the rise of an Imam in the name of al-Qa'im and al-Mahdi spread on a wide scale, particularly after the rebellion of Ibn Tabataba in 199/814. Probably because of this situation the caliph al-Ma'mun devised a new policy towards the eighth Imam al-Rida. He made overtures to him asking him to be his heir apparent. By this means he hoped to split the 'Alids some of whom were in rebellion and to keep al-Rida within the 'Abbasid palace under close watch. [103](#) Al-Ma'mun followed this same policy with the ninth Imam, al-Jawad, marrying him to his daughter Umm al-Fadl, and keeping him under house-arrest. [104](#) Thereafter house-arrest became the cornerstone of the policy of the caliphs towards the Imams. It obliged the Imams to stress the idea of the occultation as the means the Imam would employ to avoid the 'Abbasid restriction, which increased from the time of al-Mutawakkil onwards.

Because his agents discovered connections between the underground activities of the Imamite agents in Baghdad, Mada'in and Kufa and the Imam al-Mutawakkil followed the policy of al-Ma'mun. He wrote to al-Hadi a letter full of kindness and courtesy asking him to come to Samarra where they could meet. Afterwards al-Hadi was summoned to the capital in 233/848, [105](#) where he spent the rest of his life under surveillance. As a result he was prevented from meeting most of his adherents. He was only able to meet a few of his associate agents (wukala) in secret. [106](#) In fact al-Mutawakkil's policy managed to prevent the 'Alids from rising in arms against his regime. However it failed to destroy the system of the wukala or to end the underground activities of the Zaydites and the Imamites. These spread throughout the empire to the extent that they were capital of causing a revolt.

Between the years 245-260/859-874 the Imamite and Zaydite traditionists were relating traditions stating that al-Qa'im would be the twelfth Imam and urging people to join his side when he rose. The Zaydite al-Asfari (d. 250/864) [107](#) and the Imamite Ahmed b. Khalid al-Barqi (d. 274-80/887-93) both related such traditions. For example, in 250/864 al-Barqi passed on a narration attributed to Ali b. Abi Talib and the Prophet al-Khidr, which states explicitly that al-Qa'im al-Mahdi would be the twelfth Imam. [108](#) The spread of such narrations encouraged the Imamites to expect the rise of al-Qa'im in the near future and to link his rising with Abbasid rule. Some of them applied these traditions along with others concerning the signs of the rise of al-Qa'im to the circumstances surrounding the Alid revolt which broke out in 250/864. Ibn Uqda relates that the leader of the rebellion, Yahya b. Umar, was expected to be al-Qa'im al-Mahdi, since all the

signs concerning the rise of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi related by al-Sadiq occurred during the revolt. [109](#)

Although Yahya b. Umar died in 250/864, the Abbasids' fear increased because of the continuation of this revolt and al-Hasan b. Zayd's (250-270/864-884) success in establishing a Shi'ite state in Tabaristan. This fear is not surprising if one bears in mind the fact that there was a well-known Prophetic tradition which stated, "A people will appear in the East who will pave the way for the Mahdi's rise to power." [110](#) This tradition, at that time, might seem to refer to the establishment of the Alid state in Tabaristan, which would prepare the way for the rise of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi's. Other factors supported the Abbasid fear. According to al-Tabari, Abbasid spies discovered secret correspondence between the founder of the Alid state in Tabaristan, al-Hasan b Zayd and the nephew of Muhammad b. Ali b. Khalaf al-Attar, [111](#) a follower of the tenth Imam al-Hadi. Moreover many pure Imamites took part in the Alid revolt of 250/864, such as Muhammad b. Ma'ruf, who held the banner of the rebels in Mecca. [112](#) and Ali b. Musa b. Ismail b. Musa al-Kazim, who joined the rebels in al-Rayy and was arrested by the caliph al-Mu'tazz. [113](#) It seems that the Abbasid authorities linked these factors with the activities of al-Hadi. Therefore they imposed tight restrictions upon al-Hadi and his followers, and arrested prominent figures in Baghdad, such as Abu Hashim al-Ja'fari, and Muhammad b. Ali al-Attar, and sent them to Samarra. [114](#) This campaign of arrest also included al-Askari and Ja'far, al-Hadi's two sons. [115](#)

Another reason the Abbasids feared the position of al-Hadi and his successor, al-Askari, is the traditions of both the Prophet and the Imams concerning the series of the twelve Imams, the last of whom would be al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. This series could only be interpreted as applying to the Imamites' tenth Imam, al-Hadi, and his successor al-Askari. So it was plausible that the successor of the latter would be the twelfth Imam, about whom so many traditions were being related. Moreover further traditions, attributed to al-Hadi, and al-Askari, themselves appeared around this period emphasizing the important political and religious role of al-Askari's son [116](#) For example, Abu Hashim al-Ja'fari (d. 261/875), the associate and follower of al-Hadi, reports the letter as having said,

"The successor after me is my son al-Hasan but what will you do with the successor of my successor?" Al-Ja'fari said, "May Allah make me your sacrifice! Why?" The Imam said, "Because you will not see his physical body and it is not permissible for you to reveal his name," Al-Ja'fari said, "How shall we mention him?" Al-Hadi said, "Say 'The proof

(al-Hujja) is from the family of Muhammad." [117](#)

It seems from al-Kulayni's report that the Imamites considered al-Hadi's statement as applying to al-Qa'im. Moreover, they felt it explained a statement by the eighth Imam, al-Rida, who had said that the body of al-Qa'im would not be seen and his name would not be revealed. [118](#) Perhaps al-Baqir and al-Jawad's interpretation of a Qur'anic verse, referred to on page 15, may be linked with the above two statements. For as we have seen, he stated that an Imam would go into concealment in 260/874, and would later rise like a bright, shooting star in the dark night. [119](#)

On account of the spread of these Imamite traditions and the Alid underground activities, the eleventh Imam, al-Hasan al-Askari, was forced to stay in the capital under house arrest and had to report to the Abbasid court twice a week. [120](#) The authorities hoped that through these measures they would be able to prevent the appearance of any danger from the twelfth Imam.

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Introduction](#)[Chapter I](#)[Chapter II](#)[Chapter III](#)[Chapter IV](#)[Chapter V](#)[Chapter VI](#)[Chapter VII](#)[Conclusion](#)[Bibliography](#)

CHAPTER II

The role of the Imams in the shi'ite underground activities and their influence upon the evolution of the Ghayba

1. Al-Sadiq's Attitude towards the new Regime

It appears that the members of the 'Abbasid family who became part of the revolutionary movement against the Umayyads adhered to the belief, in common with the various groups of the Shi'a, that the first lawful caliph after the Prophet was 'Ali,¹ and that the caliphate must belong to the People of the House (Ahl al-Bayt). The 'Abbasids preached against the Umayyads by calling for reform and justice. They invited the people to rally around the most suitable person from the progeny of Muhammad (al-Da'wa li-I-Rida min al Muhammad). Many Shi'ite thought that this slogan referred only to the descendants of Imam 'Ali. Thus they joined the 'Abbasid movement.² Some of the Shi'a, such as Abu Salama al-Khallal, reached high rank in the 'Abbasid movement without cognizing the fact that the 'Abbasids were the founders of the movement, and they aimed to monopolize the caliphate for them selves. When the propagandists overthrew the Umayyads in 132/749, Abu Salama al-Khallal, having discovered the reality of the 'Abbasid's goal, endeavoured to transfer the caliphate to the 'Alids by corresponding with Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, 'Umar al-Ashraf and 'Abd Allah al-Mahdi, offering it to each of them, Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq rejected the offer bluntly by burning Abu Salama's letter, and he warned 'Umar al-Ashraf and 'Abd Allah al-Mahdi against accepting it.³ Al-Sadiq had already held a secret meeting with the leading personalities of the 'Abbasid family, such as al-Saffah and al-Mansurat

al-Abwa', near Medina, around the year 120/737, to discuss the situation of the people of the house (Ahl al-Bayt). At this meeting the attendants wanted to form an underground collusion to bring about the downfall of the Umayyads. A proposal also was made to support the Hasanid claims put forward by 'Abd Allah al-Mahdi on behalf of his son Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya,⁴ but al-Sadiq refused to have anything to do with it. Although the 'Abbasids present at this meeting made a nominal pledge to Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya, al-Sadiq seems to have been aware of the possibilities that their involvement with the revolutionaries, particularly the Kaysaniyya or its Hashimiyya branch, would be successful and that they would replace the Umayyads. Also al-Sadiq knew he was the true divinely appointed Imam al-Baqir. Thus people should rally around him to recover his right in the Caliphate. Al-Sadiq's view did not please the 'Abbasids, so, they carried out their underground activities against the Umayyads without his participation.

When the 'Abbasids succeeded in seizing the reins of power in 132/749 they were naturally aware of the danger from their kinsmen, the 'Alids, whose claim to succession would be greater than their own if 'Ali's right to the caliphate were to be accepted by the general populace. As a result the 'Alids now faced 'Abbasid oppression more severe than that of the Umayyads.⁵ The motives for this oppression seem to have been first of doctrinal. The early members of the Abbasid family, such as Abd Allah b. Abbas,⁶ had conformed, 'Ali's right to the Imamate (the political and religious authority) by relating many traditions attributed to the prophet supporting it. They had also supported 'Ali against the first three Caliphs and participated in the Caliphate of 'Ali, and they gave some support to his son al-Hassan.⁷ In the eyes of the 'Alids by taking over the caliphate the Abbasids became usurpers of the political authority of the Imamate. Hence the Abbasids became suspicious of the 'Alid attitude toward their authority. Secondly their were economic motives for the Abbasid oppression since Imam al-Sadiq continued to collect the khums secretly from his followers,⁸ an act which the Abbasids considered as a preparatory step towards some conspiracy to overthrow them. These two factors obliged them, especially in Iraq and later in Egypt, under close scrutiny measures to ensure the security of the state.

Thus al-Sadiq maintained an externally quiescent policy towards the Abbasids. Yet at the same time he spread traditions amongst the Shi'ite narrators of tradition stating that the Imamate was a prerogative bestowed by God upon one of the Descendants of al-Husayn, who, before his death and at the prophet's order, had transferred it to his successor by a clear stipulation (al-Nass al-Jali).⁹ Al-Sadiq held that it was not necessary for the divinely appointed Imam to rise in revolt

immediately in order to recover his rights to political authority. he should be satisfied with the spiritual leadership and perform its duties until the time when the community is sufficiently aware of his right to political power. Then god will assist him in his quest.[10](#) In accordance with his quiescent policy al-Sadiq announced openly that al- Qa'im al-Mahdi and not himself would achieve political power.[11](#)

Al-Sadiq's quiescent policy did not satisfy a considerable body of his adherents. Their political ambitions caused schism amongst the imamites. The instigator of this political moment was called Abu al-Khattab. At first he was trusted by al- Sadiq and nominated as agent (wakil) of the Shi'ite group in kufa. But al- Sadiq then repudiated and denounced him because of his extremist theological view,[12](#) which he had endeavoured to enforce by militant means. It seems likely that Abu al-Khattab wanted to circumvent the influence and the interference of al-Sadiq by propounding his political and revolutionary ideas to al-Sadiq's son Isma'il, who was more inclined to such thoughts than his younger brother Musa. Thus Abu al-Khattab hoped to give his revolutionary ideas religious legitimacy under Isma'il's name.

Although the rebellion of Abu al-Khattab was easily subdued at Kufa, his failure and al-Sadiq's continued insistence on a quiescent policy forced Abu al-Khattab's followers to resort to underground activities under the leadership of Muhammad b. Isma'il. This event led the adherents of al-Sadiq to split into the Isma'ilis and the Musawiyya. After his death, they split into Musawiyya, who held the Imamate of Musa al-Kazim, al-Fathiyya, who held the Imamate of the eldest son of al-Sadiq, Abd Allah al-Aftah; al-Muhammadiyya, who held the Imamate of Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Sadiq, the Waqifa, who thought that al-Sadiq had not died but was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi; and the two Isma'ili sects who held the Imamate of Isma'il and his son Muhammad respectively.[13](#)

2. The Imamate activities during the period of al-Kazim (148-183/765-799)

As a consequence of al-Sadiq's death the Imamites became so weak that even if military rebellion might have been possible during his lifetime, there was little chance of it now. The rise of the Isma'ilis during al-Sadiq's lifetime, followed by the rise of the Fathiyya sect, which included most of the Imamite fuqaha',[14](#) made the position al-Sadiq's successor, Musa al-Kazim, very weak, and obliged him to follow the quiescent policy of his father. For this reason al-Mansur (d.158/774) did not take any action against him or his followers during his lifetime. However he continued his pursuit of the representatives of the

revolutionary branch of the Hasanids.[15](#)

The regime of al-Mahdi, who was installed in the Caliphate after the death of his father al-Mansur in 158/774,[16](#) was distinguished by his "orthodox" policy. He encouraged the traditional muhaddithun, pursued the zindiqs, and oppressed the People of the Book.[17](#) However, "this policy could be described as less religious policy than a political weapon. The promotion of the Sunna by the Abbasids was, in fact, a means in the struggle against the religion-political enemies or opposition movement."[18](#)

This statement is illustrated by al-Mahdi's attitude towards the Imamites. When he came to power in 158/774, the followers of al-Kazim became active and more powerful than the Fathiyya and the Isma'ilis.[19](#) Al-Mahdi thought that the religious and intellectual activities of al-Kazim's partisans might endanger his regime, especially as there was a report indicating "that an important body of opinion had been turning towards the Alids and away from the Abbasids or rather, spread through all the clan, but was peculiarly present in the Alids alone."[20](#) Perhaps for this reason, al-Mahdi summoned al-Kazim from Media and imprisoned him in Baghdad. But in so doing he neither reinforced the legitimacy of his rule nor changed public opinion towards the charismatic character of al-Kazim.[21](#) Therefore, he decided to follow a policy which depended on bribery and the intimidation of the Shi'a. Al-Kazim was released in 159/775, after he had sworn that he would not rise in arms against al-Mahdi or his successors.[22](#) According to al-Tabari, al-Mahdi simultaneously approached the Zaydites in order to the Alids and their followers.

For example, he made overtures to Ya'qub b. Dawud, who belonged to a family which had worked in the secretarial affairs of Khurasan during the Umayyad period,[23](#) and made him his "brother in God". Then, in 163/799, al-Mahdi made him his vizier and vested him with full powers to handle all the affairs of the Caliphate, whereupon Ya'qub gathered together the Zaydites and appointed them to the high offices of the state.[24](#) Al-Mahdi may have been motivated by the fact that the non-revolutionary Zaydites (al-Jaririyya) believed in the Imamate of the Inferior (al-Mafdul) as long as the Superior (al-Afdal), was present and such dogma might give a legitimate foundation to his Caliphate which could be used against the Alids.

During al-Madhi's regime the was put forward that the lawful Imam after the Prophet was not Ali but al-Abbas, and that therefore the Imamate belonged to his family.[25](#) In fact Ya'qub b. Dawud brought

many jurists together from Basra, Kufa and al-Sham and organised them [26](#) so as to further this claim. Al-Kashshi reports two transmissions to support this. He says that the Zaydite Hisham b. Ibrahim wrote many Zaydite works, one of them entitled "The Confirmation of the Imamate of al-Abbas", and he adds that another Zaydite, called Ibn al-Muq'ad, wrote a heresiographical work illustrating the dogmas, places and activities of the pro-Imamites, such as al-Ya'furiyya, al-Zurariyya, al-Ammariyya, and al-Jawaliqiyya, and submitted his work to al-Mahdi. This work was then recited together with a warning by the Caliph at the gates of Baghdad, Medina and other cities.[27](#) The recitation of this work was the first step to al-Mahdi's pursuit of the other factions of the pro-'Alids. Some of these pro-Alid were obliged to flee from Kufa to remote provinces, like Yemen,[28](#) while al-Kazim spread instructions amongst his adherents for them to follow his quiescent policy carefully. Al-Kashshi's report seems to follow his quiescent policy carefully. Al-Kashshi's report seems to indicate that the tense relationship between the Abbasids and the pro-Alids continued until the death of al-Mahdi in 169/785. [29](#)

Although some of this tension seems to have been alleviated with the accession of al-Hadi, the Hasanids were closely watched and their salaries cut. They began to increase their provinces in a new Zaydit form, and they contacted the leading personalities of the Hasanids in Medina, encouraging them to revolt.[30](#) As a part of al-Hadi's precautionary policy the Hasanids of Medina were forced to come to the office of the governor every evening. They exploited a gathering of their followers from numerous provinces during the Pilgrimage and made their ill treatment by the governor an excuse to rebel in 169/785. But their uprising was easily defeated and resulted in their being massacred in the battle of Fakhkh.[31](#) However the Caliph accused al-Kazim of provoking the rebels and decided to kill him, but died in 170/786 before he could put his decision into practice.[32](#)

The battle of Fakhkh and the commitment of al-Hadi's successor, al-Rashid, to the anti-Alid policy of his predecessors only served to entrench the political strategy of the three Alid parties, the revolutionary Hasanids, the Isma'ilis and the Imamites.

The Imamite group under Imam Musa al-Kazim became stronger and more organised, and insisted on a gradual movement towards their political goal, but Imam rejected any bid to rise any arms because he considered this the task of al-Qa'im.[33](#) His adherents, most of whom were originally from Kufa, were scattered throughout the Islamic state and used the rite of Pilgrimage to communicate with each other. They succeeded in maintaining an important body of followers in Akhmim in

Egypt, which became a center of communication between the Shi'a in Kufa and those in Egypt.[34](#) They had other followers in al-Maghrib.[35](#) Al-Kazim permitted a few of his adherents to work in the 'Abbasid administration, especially in the offices of al-wizara and al-barid (governmental mail), so that they could help to save their fellows in times of danger. Hence several Imamite families held office, such as that of 'Ali b. Yaqtin[36](#) and that of al-Ash'ath, including Ja'far b. Muhammad al-Ash'ath and his son al-'Abbas, who became the governor of Khurasan, and Waddah (or Wahid), who worked in the barid of Egypt.[37](#)

The enlargement of al-Kazim's party increased his wealth, for there is much evidence to indicate that he collected secretly from his adherents [38](#) the Khums, the Zakat, gifts and other taxes enjoined in the Shari'a as part of what was due to his Imamate.

The second Shi'ite party was the Isma'ilis, who had already disassociated themselves from the quiescent policy of al-Sadiq and his son al-Kazim by adopting the Imamate of Isma'il first and then of his son Muhammad, both of whom were more inclined towards more actively revolutionary underground political activities. They learnt from the repeated failure of the Hasanid uprisings, which were initiated without political preparation, and they decided to struggle for power through a gradual political process. This decision encouraged them to adopt ideas from beyond the circle of Islam, and their adoption of these ideas may have "liberated" their minds from the limits of Shari'a. They put forward new interpretations of the Islamic texts, according to which each passage had an esoteric and an exoteric meaning.[39](#) For example, a tradition attributed to the Prophet says that the Mahdi will appear when the sun rises from the places of sitting. According to them, this meant not the rising of the real sun, but that of al-Mahdi, who would appear in al-Maghrib. Therefore, they became more interested in preaching their doctrine in al-Maghrib and encouraged their followers in the east to migrate there.[40](#)

Nawbakhti's report suggests that the relationship between the Isma'ilis and al-Kazim's followers was tense, since the Isma'ili leaders allowed their followers to assassinate the Imamites who supported al-Kazim.[41](#) Moreover, the Imamites accused the Isma'ilis of being implicated in the arrest of al-Kazim.[42](#)

In the Hijaz the situation of the third Shi'ite group, the Hasanids, was very difficult following the total defeat of their second revolt in Fakhkh in 169/785. The 'Abbasids discovered that the notion of al-Mahdi had been in circulation amongst the Hasanids and that they believed that he might rise in Mecca. It was such a notion that encouraged two

Hasanid leaders to rise in arms, first al-Nafs al-Zakiyya in 145/762 and then al-Husayn b. 'Ali in 169/785, each of them hoped that he might be the promised Mahdi.[43](#) Thus the 'Abbasids continued to restrict the movements of the Hasanids and force them to present themselves to the governor (al-Wali) every evening.[44](#) This critical situation made it impossible for the Hasanids to take any militant action in the Hijaz, so two of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya's brothers left Medina after the battle of Fakhkh to promote their claims elsewhere. The first of these was Yahya al-Mahdi, who went to the province of Daylam and preached his ideas there winning considerable support from the native princes and the people of Daylam, whom he provoked to rebellion against the caliph al-Rashid in 175/791.[45](#) The second brother, Idris, fled to Egypt, where he already had a large body of partisans, and, with assistance of a certain Wadih, a Shi'ite working in the barid, managed to escape from there to al-Maghrib. It seems most likely that his partisans in al-Maghrib had already spread much propaganda against the 'Abbasids, because within three years Idrisid state, in 172/788.[46](#)

The numerous shi'ite activities mentioned above seem to have been the causes of al-Rashid's anti-'Alid policy, which converted most of his Caliphate. In 171/787 he became suspicious of the loyalty of the 'Alids in Baghdad, and decided to gather all of them together and exile them to Medina.[47](#) He followed this step with the appointment of Bakkar al-Zubari, a descendant of 'Abd Allah b. al-Zubayr, as governor of Medina and he ordered him to put the 'Alids under close watch and to restrict their movements.[48](#) As for the rebellion of Yahya al-Mahdi in Daylam, al-Rashid sent an army against him (fifty thousand according to al-Tabari) under the leadership of al-Fadl b. Yahya al-Barmaki. Through diplomacy and promises of amnesty he managed to persuade Yahya al-Mahdi to end his uprising and to surrender, after giving him a guarantee of security from al-Rashid. But the Caliph was not satisfied, so he had al-Mahdi arrested in Baghdad and killed.[49](#)

As for the revolt of Idris al-Mahdi, al-Rashid followed the policy of his father al-Mahdi by using the Zaydites against the other 'Alids. He sent a Zaydite scholar called Sulayman who pretended to be a Shi'ite partisan who had escaped from the 'Abbasids' oppression. He became one of the counsellors of Idris and managed to poison him in 177/793.[50](#) However the assassination of Idris did not bring about the disintegration of his state, as the Berber tribes installed his child, Idris II, after his death. For this reason al-Rashid vested Ibrahim b. al-Aghlab with the government of Ifriqiyya and, four years later, encouraged him to establish the Aghlabid state, possible to counteract the danger posed by the Idrisids.[51](#)

In the meantime the Imamite scholars were active in the intellectual field in Egypt, Yemen, Iraq and Khurasan.[52](#) Hisaman b. al-Hakam, for example, attempted to prove the legitimacy of the Imamate of al-Kazim, which meant that he considered the 'Abbasids as usurpers of al-Kazim's rights.[53](#)

The Hasanid uprisings in Daylam and al-Maghrib and the underground activities of the Imamites and the Isma'ilis worried al-Rashid and made him think that al-Kazim, whom he already knew to be receiving the khums, the Kharaj and gifts from his followers, was behind all these activities and had prepared a conspiracy to overthrow him. Therefore he initiated a campaign of arresting the Imamites.[54](#) He started by arresting al-Kazim in Medina in 179/795, and sent him to prison in Basra and Baghdad.[55](#) Furthermore, Ibn al-mu'tazz reports that al-Rashid ordered the Zaydite Abu 'Isma to kill the Imamite poet Mansur al-Nammari.[56](#) It was the campaign of persecution that forced the Imamite missionary Hisham b. al-Hakam to hide in Mada'in, from whence he escaped to Kufa, where he died two months later. [57](#) However al-Rashid's arrest did not deter the Imamite underground activities, especially in Basra. Therefore, according to the Imamite narration, al-Kazim was poisoned for al-Rashid in 183/799 at the instigation of Yahya al-Barmaki.[58](#) Al-Rashid also put to death sixty 'Alids who were prisoners.[59](#)

The death of al-Kazim led to another schism amongst the Imamites. The first group, which represented quite a large body, was called the Waqifa. They held that he was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi, but they differed amongst themselves concerning this death and split into four sub-groups, three of whom maintained that he had died while the fourth denied it.[60](#) A few anecdotes mentioned by the Ithna' Ashariyya suggest that the cause of the denial of al-Kazim's death was that some of his agents, like 'Uthman b. 'Isa al-Rawasi in Egypt, and Ziyad, al-Qindi, 'Ali b. Abi Hamza, Hayyan and al-Sarraj in Kufa possessed a large amount of money (more than a hundred thousand dinars) which belonged to al-Kazim. Since they had used this money for their own benefits, they denied his death and rejected the Imamate of al-Rida in order that they would have an excuse for not returning the money.[61](#) However, it is hard to agree with al-Kashshi's views concerning the reason behind the emergence of the Waqifa sect. Most of the traditions concerning the occultation and the rise of al-Qa'im are attributed to al-Sadiq, who did not designate explicitly which of his descendants would be al-Qa'im.[62](#) Therefore it is very likely that a considerable number of the muhaddithun thought that the Imam had indicated his son Musa and hence stopped at him, contending that he

was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi and was in a state of occultation.

The second group resulting from the schism after al-Kazim's death held that he had passed away and the Imam was his son 'Ali al-Rida, who, according to al-Kulayni, assumed the Imamate by the designation of his father.⁶³ Al-Rida faced many difficulties in proving his right to the Imamate, not only to his father's prominent followers, but also to his brother Ahmad.⁶⁴ However, between the years 183-199/799-814, he managed to maintain a considerable number of followers, and administer an underground system of communication to carry on the religious functions of his Imamate.⁶⁵ Moreover his preference for the religious dimensions of Islam, rather than its political dimensions, made him a magnet for many individuals, preference for the religious dimensions of Islam, rather than its political dimension, made him a magnet for many individuals, including the precursors of the sufi movements, especially in Khurasan.⁶⁶ But many Imamites who had accepted his Imamate were not satisfied with his quietist attitude and involved themselves in the underground activities of the revolutionary Zaydites, probably without his permission.⁶⁷

3. The Attitude of al-Rida towards the 'Alid Revolt against al-Ma'mun

When al-Amin became caliph, Iraq was the centre of his power. It was here that he maintained the support of the Arabs, and especially that of the Murji'ite scholars (al-Amma, later called the Sunnites), while his brother al-Ma'mun was governor of Khurasan and gained the support of its military leaders and senior administrators, especially the Persian vizier al-Fadl b. Sahl and his partisans, who eventually helped him to overthrow al-Amin.⁶⁸ Al-Ma'mun's success in gaining the caliphate was contrary to the political and economic interest of al-Amin's supporters. Therefore many regional revolts took place in Syria, al-Jazira, Yemen and Iraq, headed by the local 'Abbasid governor.⁶⁹ At the same time the 'Alids used their underground propaganda which was influential in the Yemen, Hijaz and Iraq, to exploit al-Ma'mun's difficulties in Iraq and to cause a revolt in Kufa in 199/815. Thus these regions fell out of al-Ma'mun's control.

Although reports about the ideological identity of the 'Alid uprising and the events surrounding it are confused, apparently it was a Zaydite revolt⁷⁰ maintained with the support of some Imamite sects. These included the followers of Ahmad b. Musa al-Kazim and the Sabtiyya, the followers of Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Sadiq,⁷¹ along with some of the Imamites, but without the direct order of the eighth Imam, al-

Rida ⁷²

The spiritual leader of this revolt was Muhammad b. Ibrahim b. Tabataba, while its military leader was Abu al-Saraya. It broke out under the slogan "We invite people to rally around the most suitable leader from the progeny of Muhammad and to practice the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunna"[73](#) in Kufa on the 10th Jumada 199/26th January 815, where the rebels had the support of the people of the environs of Kufa and of the Bedouins. Abu al-Saraya minted coins in his own name in Kufa, managed to defeat three 'Abbasid armies and occupied Mada'in.[74](#) Moreover he dispatched many successful campaigns under the leadership of al-Rida's brothers and relatives to extend his authority in Iraq, al-Ahwaz, Fars, the Hijaz, and Yemen. They fulfilled their tasks and became the governor of al-Ahwaz and Basra, Fars came under the control of Isma'il b. Musa al-Kazim, and Yemen came under the control of his brother Ibrahim, Wasit was ruled by Husayn b. Ibrahim b. al-Hasan b 'Ali. Abu al-Saraya appointed Sulayman b. Dawud in Medina, and nominated al-Husayn al-Aftis as governor in Mecca, authorising him to be the leader of the pilgrims and to provide the Ka'ba with a white Kiswa.[75](#) The authority of Abu al-Saraya increased after the mysterious death of the spiritual leader of the revolt, Ibn Tabataba on the 1st Rajab 199/15th February 815, and the refusal of the eminent 'alid, 'Ali b. 'Ubayd Allah, to accept the position of Ibn Tabataba. Abu al-Saraya, in order to evade the interference of any strong spiritual leader, nominated for this post a young 'Alid called Muhammad b. Muhammad b. Zayd b. 'Ali,[76](#) and monopolised all affairs of the leadership of the revolt.

Abu al-Saraya's full control in Iraq did not continue, because the 'Abbasid army defeated him at Qasr b. Hubayra near Kufa and forced him to withdraw towards Basra along with 800 horsemen. But news came to him that his governor in Basra, Zayd b. Musa al-Kazim, had also been defeated after hard combat and had been captured by the 'Abbasid troops. Thus he went towards al-Ahwaz, but was defeated by the 'Abbasid troops. Thus he went towards al-Ahwaz, but was defeated by the 'Abbasid governor of that city and his followers dispersed. A few months later the troops of al-Hasan b. Sahl captured him at Jalawla and on 10th Rabi' I 200/18th October 815 they beheaded him, after which his body was impaled in Baghdad.[77](#)

It is worth mentioning that the failure of this revolt caused come Imamites to hold that Musa al-Kazim, the seventh Imam, was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. They had considered his son Ahmad as the lawful successor of his father. But since he had participated with Abu al-Saraya, they rejected his Imamate and denied the death of al-Kazim.[78](#) This fact reveals the general attitude of the Imamites

towards any militant action and indicates that they had Hadiths concerning the rise of an Imam with the sword, whose uprising would never be defeated, for he could not die without establishing the government of the People of the House.⁷⁹ This may be the reason behind the quiescent attitude of those followers of al-Rida who did not take any open or active part in the revolt of Abu al-Saraya.

On hearing of the military defeat of their comrades on the Iraqi front after the death of Abu al-Saraya, the rebels in Mecca, who had full control of the Hijaz and the Yemen, made overtures to Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Sadiq, asking him to be their leader and finally persuading him to accept their offer. They swore the oath of allegiance to him as their caliph and called him Amir al-Mu'minin on 6th Rabi II 200/13th November 815.⁸⁰ He himself claimed that he was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi, and based his claim on prophetic traditions.⁸¹ But the eighth Imam al-Rida denied his claim, although he endeavoured to save him from a military defeat by advising him to postpone his revolt against the 'Abbasids.⁸²

The installation by the rebels of an 'Alid caliph in Mecca with the epithet al-Mahdi threatened the authority of al-Ma'mun. Having failed to subdue the revolt by force, al-Ma'mun decided to resort to political methods, by conciliating the eighth Imam al-Rida. He dispatched an army under the leadership of 'Isa b. al-Juludi to Medina for his purpose.⁸³ But this army was badly defeated at the hands of Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Sadiq. Therefore al-Juludi asked al-Rida to contact Muhammad and ask him to end his resistance, but he rejected al-Rida's mediation and insisted on continuing his rebellion. This led to skirmishes between the 'Abbasid troops and the rebels until the end of the year 200/815, when the 'Abbasid army captured Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Sadiq and forced him to renounce his claim publicly.⁸⁴ Because his arrest did not return the areas of revolt into the hands of the authorities, al-Juludi returned with him and al-Rida to Merv. According to al-Kulayni, al-Ma'mun welcomed al-Rida and offered him the caliphate, but he refused. However, after a few months of negotiation with al-Ma'mun, al-Rida agreed to be his successor.⁸⁵ The caliph announced his acceptance on 5th Ramadan 201/28th March 817 and called him " al-Rida min Al Muhammad". At the same time he ordered his soldiers to wear green clothes instead of the black which was the emblem of the 'Abbasids. Then he strengthened his relations with al-Rida by marrying his sister Umm Habiba to al-Rida.⁸⁶

The installation of al-Rida was in reality a political step arranged by the Persian vizier al-Fadl b. Sahl and associated with other policies aimed at consolidating his Persian support and harming the interests

of his Arab opposition in Baghdad. This can be concluded from the points mentioned below:

Firstly, the fact that al-Ma'mun continued to reside in Merv caused complaints amongst the military and administrative groups in Iraq, who had been the courtiers of Al-Amin (193-198/808-814) and who then had to struggle for their economic and regional interests against the Persian vizier of al-Ma'mun, al-Fadl b. Sahl, and his brother al-Hasan b. Sahl.[87](#) Because he was busy with this conflict, al-Ma'mun failed to subdue completely the 'Alid rebellion in the Hijaz and Yemen. Therefore, with the encouragement of his vizier, al-Ma'mun installed al-Rida as his successor to the caliphate in order to divide the rebels by gaining the support of al-Rida's adherents and those who were hoping for the appearance of an inspired 'Alid leader.[88](#)

Secondly, al-Ma'mun changed the colour of the 'Abbasid emblem from black to green. The latter colour was associated with the Sasanids, whereas the 'Alid emblem was white.[89](#) Such a step suggests the influence of the Persian vizier al-Fadl b. Sahl.

Thirdly, by installing al-Rida as his successor, al-Ma'mun succeeded in splitting the rebels by gaining the support of al-Rida's brothers, who accepted the conciliation of al-Rida's brothers, who accepted the conciliation of al-Ma'mun and mentioned his name in the Khutba along with the name of al-Rida. According to al-Tabari, al-'Abbas b. Musa al-Kazim accepted the governorship of Kufa on behalf of al-Ma'mun, a fact which encouraged some of the rebels to mention the names of al-Ma'mun and al-Rida in the Khutba. But the majority of the Kufans insisted on mentioning only al-Rida's name or that of any prominent person from the descendants of 'Ali.[90](#) such attitudes indicate the Zaydite inclination of the Kufans. However, the leader of the rebels in Mecca, Ibrahim b. Musa al-Kazim agreed to mention both his brother al-Rida and al-Ma'mun in the Khutba. For this reason, al-Ma'mun confirmed his office and authorized him to lead the pilgrimage in Mecca.[91](#) But a year later, in 202/817, the caliph gave the governorship of Mecca to an 'Abbasid leader, 'Isa al-Juludi, and dispatched Ibrahim to Yemen to subdue the rebellion there. He also granted him Yemen's governorship. After he had fulfilled this task, Ibrahim set out for Mecca, but during his return he was arrested, as was his brother Zayd, and sent to al-Ma'mun.[92](#) Moreover, al-Nawbakhti mentions that a considerable body of the muhaddithun and Zaydites (the non-revolutionary branch) became Imamites after the installation of al-Rida. But the accounts of al-Kashshi and al-Saduq suggest that these same people, for example Hisham b. Ibrahim al-Rashidi, had been used by al-Ma'mun to watch the partisans of al-

Rida, and this might explain why they returned to their previous faith directly after the death of al-Rida in 203/817. [93](#)

Fourthly, after he had quashed the 'Alid rebellion, al-Ma'mun decided to go to Baghdad, taking with him al-Rida and Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Sadiq. During his advance, his vizier al-Fadl b. Sahl was assassinate, then al-Rida died in Tus, probably of poison, [94](#) and Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Sadiq passed away and was buried in Jurjan. [95](#) Their mysterious deaths seem to indicate that al-Ma'mun, having used them to fragment the 'Alid opposition, was now moving on to a more rigorous anti-'Alid programme. Fifthly, the numerous measures initiated by al-Ma'mun after his arrival at Baghdad on Rabi I 204/819 revealed the political aim of his previous policy. He cast aside the green banner and ordered his subjects to wear the black colour of the 'Abbasids. [96](#) He granted al-Rida's successor, al-Jawad, tow million dirhams, [97](#) and gave back the district of Fadak to prominent 'Alids, Muhammad b. Yahya b. al-Husayn and Muhammad b. 'Ubayd Allah b. al-Hasan. [98](#) Furthermore, the land-tax (al-Kharaj) of the sawad was adjusted in favour of the tax-payer. The share of the treasury was to be two-fifths instead of half of the produce. [99](#) Through these actions, al-Ma'mun wanted to cut the support given by the prominent 'Alids and the peasants of the sawad to the revolutionary 'Alid activities, which, according to Abu al-Fida, he had brought to an end. He was also endeavouring to work against his Arab opposition in Baghdad. When he entered the city everything there returned to normal as if the uprising had never occurred. [100](#) Finally, in 205/820 al-Mamun started to hold symposiums between the Imamites and the Zaydites, and encouraged them to discuss the question of the Imam in his presence. It is worth mentioning that the non-revolutionary Zaydites believed in the Imamate of the inferior (al-Mafdul) in spite of the presence of the superior (al-Afdal). This view was based on the belief that even though 'Ali b. Abi Talib was the most excellent of the community after the Prophet, he fully recognized the caliphate of Abu Bakr and 'Umar. Because of this belief of the Zaydites, in the discussions with the Imamites, al-Ma'mun after agreed with the viewpoints of Zaydite scholars such as 'Ali b. al-Him, as regards the Imamate. [101](#) Then al-Ma'mun managed to capture the 'Alid rebel 'Abd al-Rahman b. Ahmad b. 'Abd Allah b. Muhammad b. 'Umar b. 'Ali b. Abi Tabib, who rose in arms in Yemen. By subduing this rebellion, al-Ma'mun ended the last military opposition of the 'Alids during his rule.

Finally, in 206/821 his real attitude towards the 'Alids was revealed when he ordered them to wear black, and announced that all the descendants of Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib and their close kindred (al-Talibiyun) should be prevented from entering his palace. [102](#)

4. The development of the Imamite organization (al-Wikala) during the time of al-Jawad

Despite the well-developed status of the Imamite organization during the last period of al-Rida's Imamate, he died, leaving a successor only seven years old, thus causing further splits amongst his followers. Al-Mas'udi mentions that because of the age of Muhammad al-Jawad, the ninth Imam, al-Rida's followers were confused as to whether or not he possessed the requisite qualifications for the Imamate. Therefore eighty leading personalities from various provinces, among them al-Rayyan b. al-Salt, Safwan b. Yahya, Yunis b. 'Abd al-Rahman, Muhammad b. Hakim, 'Ali b. al-Husain al-Wasiti, and Ishaq b. Isma'il b. Nawbakht, gathered together at the house of 'Abd al-Rahman b. al-Hajjaj in Baghdad to discuss the validity of al-Jawad's Imamate. They decided to test his knowledge during the pilgrimage. Two groups concluded that al-Jawad's age precluded his being qualified for the Imamate; the first group supported the Imamate of his uncle, Ahmad b. Musa al-Kazim, whereas the second group, including Ibrahim b. Salih al-Anmati, joined the Waqifa and held that the seventh Imam was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. [103](#) But the rest were satisfied that al-Jawad's knowledge was exceptional and held that he was well qualified in spite of his age. [104](#) Hence they continued with the affairs of the organization, and sent propagandists from Kufa and Median to various provinces. According to al-Najashi, many Kufan muhaddithun, such as Muhammad b. Muhammad b. al-Ash'ath, Ahmad b. Sahl, al-Husayn b. 'Ali al-Misri, and Isma'il b. Musa al-Kazim, moved to Egypt and carried on their activities there. One of these activities was to circulate the traditions of the Prophet concerning al-Qa'im al-Mahdi and the fact that he would be from the progeny of al-Husayn. [105](#) A narration mentioned by al-Kulayni suggests that they gained considerable adherents there, namely, that 'Ali b. Asbat al-Kufi came from Egypt to Medina to see al-Jawad so as to describe him to the Imamites in Egypt. [106](#) Throughout the land of the caliphate the Imamite system of sending out agents (wukala') became more developed and managed to save their organization from certain disintegration. The Imam's agents spread in many provinces, like al-Ahwaz [107](#), Hamadan [108](#), Sistan, Bist [109](#), Rayy [110](#), Basra [111](#), Wasit, Baghdad [112](#), and the traditional centres of the Imamites, Kufa and Qumm. [113](#) They allowed their partisans to work in the 'Abbasid administration. Thus Muhammad b. Isma'il b. Bazi and Ahmad b. Hamza al-Qummi occupied high ranks in the vizierate, [114](#) and Nuh b. Darraj was the qadi of Baghdad and then of Kufa. Because his relatives were the agents of al-Jawad, he hid his faith during his occupation of this post. [115](#) Other Imamites became governors of some 'Abbasid provinces, such as al-Husayn b. 'Abd Allah al-Nisaburi,

the governor of Bist and Sistan, and al-Hakam b. 'Alya al-Asadi, the governor of Bahrain. Both of these men paid the Khums to al-Jawad while hiding their allegiance to him. [116](#)

At this stage the underground activities of the agents only aimed at the controlling and carrying on the religious and financial affairs of the Imamites, not at endangering al-Ma'mun's rule. However in the year 210/825 the people of Qumm, most of whom were Imamites, appealed to the caliph to reduce their land-tax (al-kharaj), just as he had reduced the kharaj of the inhabitants of Rayy, but he ignored their appeal. Therefore they refused to pay the kharaj and took control of the affairs of Qumm. [117](#) As a result al-Ma'mun dispatched three regiments of his army from Baghdad and Khurasan to quash their revolt. The leader of the Abbasid army, 'Ali b. Hisham accomplished his task. He demolished the wall of Qumm and killed many people, amongst them Yahyab. 'Umran, who, according to Ibn Shahr Ashub, was the agent of al-Jawad. [118](#) Moreover al-Ma'mun collected seven million dirhams from Qumm's inhabitants as a kharaj instead of the normal amount, which had been two million dirhams before the uprising. The reports of al-Tabari and Ibn al-Athir indicate that some of the leaders of this revolt were exiled to Egypt, among them Ja'far b. Dawud al-Qummi. [119](#) But these measures did not end the military activities in Qumm. According to al-Tabari, Ja'far b. Dawud escaped from Egypt and rebelled in Qumm in 214/829, but his revolt was subdued and he was arrested and banished again to Egypt. [120](#) Unfortunately the Imamite sources are silent about these military actions in Qumm and their relationship with the Imamites' organization. But al-Ma'mun linked these activities with al-Jawad. Thus he endeavoured to end them through the Imam. According to al-Azdi and al-Tabari, during his march to invade al-Rum, al-Mam'un summoned al-Jawad and welcomed him in Tikrit in Safar 215/830, where he married his daughter Umm al-Fadl to him. He asked him to celebrate his marriage in Baghdad, then to go back with his wife to Median. [121](#) But this marriage neither gave al-Ma'mun the support of the Imamites nor stopped the revolts in Qumm. Ja'far b. Dawud managed to escape again from Egypt and rebelled in Qumm in 216/831, where he defeated the army sent by al-Ma'mun and killed its leader 'Ali b. 'Isa. He continued his resistance until the end of the year 217/832, when the 'Abbasid troops ended his uprising and executed him. [122](#) But afterwards the underground activities of the 'Alids increased on a wide scale. Therefore al-Mu'tasim, who succeeded al-Ma'mun to the caliphate in 218/833, was obliged to summon al-Jawad and Muhammad b. al-Qasim al-Talqan, so as to investigate their role in the underground activities. The latter, on hearing of al-Mu'tasim's decision, escaped from Kufa to Khurasan, [123](#) whereas al-Jawad was

arrested in Median and taken along with his wife, Umm al-Fadl, to the caliph in Baghdad, where he was put under house-arrest. He died a few months later in Dhu al-Hijja 220/835. Some Imamite writes claim that his wife Umm al-Fadl poisoned him at the instigation of al-Mu'tasim, but al-Mufid thinks that he died naturally. [124](#)

In the last few years of al-Jawad's Imamate the system and the tactics of the Imamite agents were highly developed. The Imam's followers in Khurasan allowed themselves to be recruited into the 'Abbasid army and participated in subduing the rebellion of Khurramiyya. According to al-Tusi, in 220/834 they seized large amount of booty from the rebels, so al-Jawad ordered them to pay the khums either to him directly or to his agent. [125](#) Al-Jawad himself, on hearing of al-Mu'tasim's command to present himself in Baghdad, asked his representative Muhammad b. Al-Faraj to hand the khums to his son 'Ali al-Hadi as a sign that he was to be his successor. [126](#)

5. The 'Abbasids' Attitude toward the activities of al-Hadi

According to the Imamite sources, the bulk of the followers of al-Jawad accepted the Imamate of his successor 'Ali al-Hadi, who was then seven years old. His age presented no obstacle to their accepting his Imamate, since they had faced the same problem with his father, who had also been seven years old when he took over the office. A few of al-Jawad's followers, however, supported the Imamate of his son Musa, but after a short time they rejoined the rest of the Imamites, accepting the Imamate of 'Ali al-Hadi. [127](#)

At this stage the Imamites concentrated their efforts in reorganising the activities of their followers. This was especially necessary considering the fact that the flourishing state of the 'Abbasid economy had decreased the 'Alids' opportunities to obtain supporters for further military action. [128](#) Perhaps for this reason the caliph, al-Mu'tasim and his successor al-Wathiq (227-232/841-846), were more tolerant towards the 'Alids than al-Ma'mun before them or al-Mutawakkil after them. According to Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, the descendants of 'Ali b. Abi Talib and their close kindred (al-Talibiyun) assembled in Samarra where they were paid salaries by the caliph al-Wathiq. [129](#) The latter also distributed a large amount of money among the Alids in the Hijaz and other provinces. [130](#)

After the death of al-Wathiq certain events had serious consequences for the Abbasid attitude towards the activities of the adherents of the tenth Imam, al-Hadi. Al-Mutawakkil was chosen to the caliphate in 232/837, [131](#) and his installation was seen by the narrators (al-Muhaddithun al-Amma) as a major setback for those who favoured the

Alids. The majority of the latter were from the ranks of the Mu'tazila and the Shi'ites, who formed the progressive and indeed radical element in society. Recognising this, al-Mutawakkil carried out certain measures with the aim of destroying the economic and political foundations of both the Mu'tazila and the Shi'ites.

Firstly he abandoned the "inquisition" (al-Mihna) against the narrators of the Amma, which had been implemented by al-Ma'mun with the support of the Mu'tazilites, and he encouraged these narrators and their adherents to openly adopt anti-Shi'ite slogans. [132](#)

Secondly, al-Mutawakkil discharged the vizier, al-Zayyat, and his staff from their offices and appointed instead al-Jarjara'i and Ibn Khaqan, who were more inclined to go along to with his anti-Shi'ite policy. [133](#)

Thirdly, he decided to rebuild the whole structure of the army in two stages. First he began to gradually weaken the power of the Tahirids, who were in charge of ruling Khurasan and of policing Baghdad and the Sawad. He did this by nominating his three sons, al-Mantasir, al-Mu'tazz and al-Mu'ayyad, as his successive heirs apparent, and then appointing al-Mantasir as governor in Ifriqiyya and al-Maghrib, al-Mu'ayyad as governor in Syria, and al-Mu'tazz as ruler of the eastern provinces, in particular Khurasan. Simultaneously the caliph divided the army in the capital among his sons and sent them to the provinces to which he had appointed them, so as to prevent any direct conspiracy on the part of the leaders of the army. His second move was to begin to build a new army called al-Shakiriyya, recruiting people from areas which were well-known for their anti-Alid attitudes, particularly from Syria, al-Jazira, al-Jabal, Hijaz, and even from the 'Abna, who had rebelled against the "inquisition". [134](#)

While carrying out these measures, al-Mutawakkil turned towards the opposition to deal with the organised underground activities of the Alids in general and the Imamites in particular. The intellectual activities of the Imamites in Egypt, which had been encouraged by Isma'il b. Musa al-Kazim, had borne fruit and expanded into the sphere of underground political activities, even penetrating into remote parts of North Africa. [135](#) The system of communication of their organization (al-Wikala) was highly developed, particularly in the capital Samarra, Baghdad, Mada'in and the districts of the Sawad. [136](#) Furthermore al-Ya'qubi's report seems to indicate that the Imamites had hidden the name of their Imam to the extent that the caliph was not sure exactly who he was [137](#) or if he had direct links with Shi'ite underground activities.

Al-Mutawakkil instigated a campaign of arrests against the Imamites in 232/846, accompanied by such harsh treatment that some of the agents of the Imam in Baghdad, Mada'in, Kufa and the Sawad died under torture, while others were thrown into jail. [138](#) By these measures the caliph caused serious damage to the communication network within the Wikala. In order to fill the vacuum left by the arrested agents, the Imam had to appoint new agents instead, such as Abu 'Ali b. Rashid, who was nominated to lead the activities of the Imamites in Baghdad, Mada'in and the Sawada, and Ayyub b. Nuh, who was appointed as the agent of Kufa. Al-Hadi also provided them with new instructions concerning their duties during this critical situation. [139](#)

Despite all the Imamite efforts to save their organisation, the investigation of the governor of Medina, Abd Allah b. Muhammad, led to the discovery that al-Hadi was in fact behind these activities. He informed al-Mutawakkil, warning him of the danger of al-Hadi's presence in Medina. So the caliph summoned al-Hadi to Samarra in 233/848, where he kept him under house-arrest. [140](#) Two years later the caliph discovered that Egypt and the areas near the tomb of al-Husayn in the Sawad were the strongest centres of the underground communications of the Alids. Therefore he ordered that the tomb of al-Husayn and the houses nearby be leveled to the ground. Then he ordered that the ground of the tomb be ploughed and cultivated, so that any trace of the tomb would be forgotten. Furthermore he issued an order prohibiting people from visiting the tombs of any of the Imams and warning them that anyone found in their vicinity would be arrested. [141](#)

Al-Mutawakkil also waged another campaign of arrests. Among those taken prisoner was Yahya b. Umar al-Alawi, who was accused of conspiracy and held in the jail of al-Mutbaq in Baghdad. [142](#) At the same time al-Mutawakkil ordered the governor of Egypt to deport the Talibiyyin to Iraq, and he did so. Afterwards in 236/850, [143](#) al-Mutawakkil banished them to Medina which had been used as a place of exile for the Alids.

Several remarks suggest that al-Mutawakkil went even further in his policy, aiming in the long term to destroy the economic and social status of the Alids, and issued many orders so as to achieve this end. He confiscated the properties of the Husaynids, that is the estate of Fadak, whose revenue at that time, according to Ibn Tawus, was 24000 dinars, and granted it to his partisan Abd Allah b. Umar al-Bazyar. [144](#) He also warned the inhabitants of the Hijaz not to have any communication with the Alids or to support them financially. Many

people were severely punished because they did so. According to al-Isfahani, as a result of al-Mutawakkil's measures the Alids faced harsh treatment in Medina, where they were totally isolated from other people and deprived of their necessary livelihood. [145](#)

The caliph also wanted to remove the Shi'ites from the Abbasid administration and to destroy their good standing in public opinion. Al-Mas'udi gives an example of this policy: he mentions that Ishaq b. Ibrahim, the governor of Sirawan in the province of al-Jabal, was discharged from his office because of his Imamite allegiance, and that other people lost their positions for the same reason. [146](#)

According to al-Kindi, al-Mutawakkil ordered his governor in Egypt to deal with the 'Alids according to the following rules:

- 1) No Alids could be given an estate or be allowed to ride a horse or to move from al-Fustat to the other towns of the province.
- 2) No Alid was permitted to possess more than one slave.
- 3) If there was any conflict between an Alid and a non-Alid, the judge must first hear the claim of the non-Alid, and then accept it without negotiation with the Alid. [147](#)

By these measures, al-Mutawakkil managed to prevent the Shi'ites from plotting against his regime, but he failed to end their underground activities. Reports indicate that al-Hadi continued his communications with his adherents secretly, receiving the khums and other taxes from his agents in Qumm and its districts. [148](#) According to al-Mas'udi, al-Mutawakkil was informed about this, and he also heard that in al-Hadi's house there were arms and letters from his supporters indicating a conspiracy against him. Therefore the house was searched by the caliph's soldiers, but they did not find any proof, and so al-Hadi was set free. [149](#)

The suppression of the Imamites decreased after the assassination of al-Mutawakkil, who was succeeded by his son al-Muntasir in 247/861. He was more tolerant toward them than his father. He issued an order to stop the campaign of arrests and the oppression of the Alids and their adherents, and permitted them to visit the tombs of al-Husayn and the other Imams. He also gave the properties of Fadak back to them. [150](#) But this new attitude on the part of the caliph ceased with the succession of al-Musta'in in 248/862. According to al-Kindi, the Imamites in Egypt were persecuted by its governor, Yazid b. Abu Allah al-Turki, who arrested an Alid leader called Ibn Abi Hudra along with his followers. They were accused of carrying out underground activities and deported to Iraq in 248/862. [151](#) Al-Kulayni also states

that the campaign of arrests and pursuits affected the followers of al-Hadi in Egypt. For example, Muhammad b. Hajar was slain and the estate of Sayf b. al-Layth was seized by the ruler. [152](#)

Meanwhile in Iraq some of the followers of al-Hadi in Samarra were arrested, [153](#) and his main agent in Kufa, Ayyub b. Nuh, was pursued by the qadi of the city. [154](#)

It appears, however, that the Abbasid oppression did not deter the Shi'ite ambition to reach power. Many historians like al-Isfahani report that Alid revolts broke out in 250-1/864-5 in the areas of Kufa, Tabaristan, Rayy, Qazwin, Egypt and Hijaz. These might have been directed by one group, or to be more accurate, by one leader. It is beyond the scope of this worth mentioning that the rebels employed the Prophetic traditions concerning al-Qa'im al-Mahdi and the signs of his rising to achieve immediate political success. According to Ibn Uqda, the leader of this uprising, Yahya b. Umar al-Qa'im al-Mahdi, because all the signs and events predicted by the sixth Imam, al-Sadiq, regarding the rise of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi occurred during the course of that revolution: [155](#)

قال ابو عبد الله كابدان يخرج رجل من آل محمد
 ولا بد ان يمسك الزاوية البيضاء . قال علي بن
 الحسن : فاجتمع اهل بي رواس ، وكانوا
 قد عقدوا عمامة بيضاء على فناة فامسكها
 محمد بن معروف وقت خروج يحيى بن عمر
 وقال ابو عبد الله في هذا الخبر : يحف فرانكم
 فجف الفرات . وقال ايضا : تكونكم قوم
 صغار لا عين فيخرجونكم من دوركم . وقال
 علي بن الحسن : فجاءنا كنجر والانراك فاخرجوا
 الناس من دورهم . وقال ابو عبد الله ايضا :
 ويحيى السباع الى دوركم .

قال علي : فجاءت السباع الى دورنا . وقال
 ابو عبد الله : وكأني بجنائركم تحفر قال
 علي بن الحسن : فرأينا ذلك كله . وقال

ابو عبد الله : يخرج رجل اشقر اوسيان ينكس
 له كرسي علي باب دار عمرو بن حُرَيْث ،
 يدعو الناس الى البراءة من علي بن ابي طالب
 عليه السلام ويقتل خلقا من الخلق ويقتل
 في يومه فرأينا ذلك كله .

This document indicates that the Imamites were expecting the establishment of their state by al-Qa'im al-Mahdi in the near future. Despite the uprising's Zaydite façade, many pure Imamites participated. According to Ibn Uqda, the holder of the rebel standard in Mecca was Muhammad b. Ma'ruf al-Hilali (d.250/864), who was among the eminent Imamites of the Hijaz. [156](#) Furthermore, the leader of the rebels in Kufa, Yahya b. 'Umar, who was assassinated in 250/864, attracted the sympathy and praise of al-Hadi's agent, Abu Hashim al-Ja'fari. [157](#)

In addition al-Mas'udi reports that a certain 'Ali b. Musa b. Isma'il b. Musa al-Kazim took part in the revolt in Rayy and was arrested by the caliph al-Mu'tazz. Since this man was the grandson of the Isma'il b. Musa al-Kazim who had preached the Imamite doctrine in Egypt, it seems extremely probable that the revolt was essentially Imamite. [158](#) Moreover, al-Tabari gives information concerning the underground activities of the Imamites and their role in this rebellion, which the authorities considered purely Zaydite rather than Imamite. He also reports that the 'Abbasid spies discovered correspondence between the leader of the rebels in Tabaristan, al-Hasan b. Zayd, and

the nephew of Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Khalf al-'Attar. Both of these men were adherents of the tenth Imam, al-Hadi. [159](#) This led the authorities to the conclusion that the Imamites had direct links with the rebels. So they arrested the leading Imamite personalities in Baghdad and deported them to Samarra. Among them were Muhammad b. 'Ali al-'Attar, Abu Hashim al-Ja'fari, [160](#) and the two sons of al-Hadi, Ja'far and al-Hasan al-'Askari, later to be the eleventh Imam. [161](#) One can link these 'Abbasid precautions to the sudden death of al-Hadi in Samarra in 254/868, because the authorities believed him to be behind all these disturbances, and felt that his death would bring them to an end. [162](#)

The cautious attitude of the authorities towards the Imamites continued during the short Imamate of the eleventh Imam, al-Hasan al-'Askari (254-60/868-74). He was put under house arrest and his movements were restricted, since he was obliged to present himself at the palace of the caliph in Samarra every Monday and Thursday. [163](#) Despite these restrictions, al-'Askari managed to communicate with his agents by secret means. [164](#) It appears that the continuation of the rebellion of the 'Alids, who extended their penetration into new areas, was behind the restriction of the Imam's movements. According to al-Tusi, the caliph al-Muhtadi arrested some Imamites in 255/869, accusing them of the assassination of 'Abd Allah b. Muhammad al-'Abbasi, who had been murdered by the rebels in Kufa. Al-'Askari was also arrested, but was set free soon after the death of the caliph, al-Muhtadi. [165](#) Despite the fact that the eleventh Imam managed to carry out his activities without the knowledge of the authorities until his death in 260/874, [166](#) the policy of house arrest, which had been imposed upon the Imams by the caliph al-Ma'mun and had been continued until the time of al-'Askari, seems to have led him to search for a method by which he could prevent 'Abbasid surveillance being imposed on his son, the twelfth Imam, so that he could disguise his identity and carry on his activities in secret. [167](#) .

Conclusion

From the death of al-Husayn onward, the Imams of the Shi'a followed a more or less passive policy towards the ruling caliphs, but this did not indicate their acceptance of the rights of the Umayyads and then the 'Abbasids to the caliphate. Rather they believed that, since these families had come to power through natural means, their downfall would also be according to the will of Allah, that He would indicate their imminent downfall to them and assist them in carrying out His will when the appropriate time had arrived. Towards this end they were always prepared to rise and take their rightful position, because any Imam could be ordained by Allah as al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. This can

be noted in the statement of Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib.

والمهدي يجعل الله من يشاء منا أهل البيت

"Allah will chose the Mahdi, who He wants, from among us, the People of the House." [168](#)

Thus al-Sadiq, who was strong and capable of leading an uprising might have risen against the caliph if his followers had adhered to his instructions, but schisms appeared amongst their ranks and the Imam's aspiration came to naught. A considerable body among al-Sadiq's followers were not satisfied with his political methods, and cut themselves off from him in order to struggle for power without his interference. This was manifested in the emergence of the Zaydites and the Isma'ilis, who put forward a new interpretation of the traditions (Ahadith) concerning al-Qa'im al-Mahdi and his rising and used it in their struggle for power. This can be seen in the Zaydite and Isma'ili revolts between the years 145-296/762-908, which ended with the establishment of an Isma'ili state and the installation of an Imam with the title al-Mahdi.

The Imams, however, denied the claim of any 'Alid who claimed that he was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi promised by the Prophet, but they sympathised with some 'Alid rebels who were loyal to them. This might encourage us to assume that the Imams had tow methods designed to help them reach power. The first was the scholarly, cultural and religious activities which they fostered amongst the people without openly involving themselves in any political activities. Secondly, they secretly supported some Shi'ite rebels who were loyal to them, hoping that they would hand the power over to them after their success.

The military activities of the various Shi'ite groups confused the 'Abbasids and led them to believe that the Imamite Imams were behind them or at least that the result of their intellectual activities would be militant action. Therefore the 'Abbasid authorities forced the Imams to reside in the capital from the year 202/817 under house arrest. This policy was imposed upon the Imams al-Rida, al-Jawad, al-Hadi, and al-'Askari, and led them to develop the underground system of their organisation (al-Wikala) so that it could function under these difficult conditions. At the same time this critical situation forced the eleventh Imam, al-'Askari, to search for a method by which he could prevent 'Abbasid surveillance being imposed upon his son, later to be the twelfth Imam, so as to enable him to disguise his identity and carry on his activities beyond the careful watch of the authorities.

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Introduction](#)[Chapter I](#)[Chapter II](#)[Chapter III](#)[Chapter IV](#)[Chapter V](#)[Chapter VI](#)[Chapter VII](#)[Conclusion](#)[Bibliography](#)

CHAPTER III

The Imamites' views concerning the concealed Imam and his birth

1. The Schisms Amongst the Adherents of al-Hasan al-'Askari After His Death.

1.1 Introduction.

The Imamate during the life of the last six Imams of the Twelve Imamites (al-Imamiyya al-Ithna ashariyya) was distinguished by the many splits which occurred after the death of each Imam, who was considered by the Imamites as one of the twelve Imams, over the recognition of his successor. In spite of these repeated schism, after a hard struggle each Imam was able to maintain the obedience of the majority of the followers of the previous Imam. [1](#)

Al-Hasan b. 'Ali al-'Askari was born in 232/845 and died in 260/874. According to some later Shi'ite sources, he was poisoned through the instigation of the 'Abbasid caliph, al-Mu'tamid. [2](#) During the six years of his Imamate, al-'Askari lived in hiding and prudent fear because of the restrictions imposed upon him by his being surrounded by the spies of al-Mu'tamid. This was the reason for his lack of open contact with the mass of his followers. Only the elite of his adherents were able to communicate with him personally. [3](#)

The same sources report that in the year 260/874 the eleventh Imam became ill. Bassoon as new of his sickness reached al-Mu'tamid, he dispatched five of his special servants to al-'Askari's house, ordering them to keep close watch on him. Thereafter the caliph sent

physicians and the Qadi al-Qudat in the company of ten men whom he considered trustworthy, to al-'Askari's house to remain with him and observe his condition and the situation within his home at all times. Al-'Askari's malady became worse and he passed away on 8th Rabi' I 260/1st January 874.

Al-Mu'tamid dispatched Abu 'Isa b. al-Mutawakkil to say the prayer for the dead over the body of al-'Askari. After this rite was completed al-'Askari was buried within the confines of his house in SIRR Man Ra'a (Samarra), next to his father.⁴

According to the early Imamite sources al-'Askari did not leave a publicly acknowledged son, nor did he determine upon or install his successor openly.⁵ As al-Mufid says, the Imamites were suffering oppression at the hand of the 'Abbasids, while the caliph, al-Mu'tamid, was searching for al-'Askari's son and trying to arrest him by any means possible. Moreover, the views of the Imamite Shi'a about him were being circulated, and it was becoming known that they were waiting for him to rise. For this reason al-'Askari had not revealed his son during his lifetime, not even to the greater portion of his own adherents.⁶

Because the Imamites were distinguished from other Islamic denominations by the principle of the designation of the Imam by his predecessor they seem to have found themselves in a critical situation after their Imam's death, since he had not designated his successor openly. Therefore the Imamite jurists had recourse to the traditions of the Prophet and his progeny to determine who was to be the twelfth Imam. They found many traditions to support their various claims. Amongst them were transmission which stated that an Imam could not die without seeing his offspring who would succeed him; that the world cannot be without a Proof;⁷ that the Imamate cannot pass to two brothers after al-Hasan and al-Husayn, and that it will be occupied by one of the progeny of 'Ali b. al-Husayn;⁸ that the Imam knows who will succeed him and does not die until he gives his testament to his successor;⁹ and that the Imamate should belong to the eldest son of the preceding Imam.¹⁰ These traditions seem to have been adopted by the greater portion of the Imamites, and their interpretation of these traditions led to various viewpoints, which in turn led to new divisions amongst the Imamites.

Sa'd al-Qummi counted fifteen schisms, whereas al-Nawbakhti and al-Mufid enumerated them as fourteen. Al-Mas'udi thinks that there were twenty sects, while al-Shahrastani counts only eleven.¹¹ Nevertheless a study of the claims of these factions reveals that there were

apparently only five major schisms. However, each of these became further split over the theological and traditional arguments employed to support their claims. At any rate it seems important to set down the major claims of these schisms in order to achieve a clear conception of the Imamites at that time.

1.2 schism I: the Waqifa at al-'Askari

What brought the people of this faction together was their claim that the eleventh Imam, al-'Askari, was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi although they differed as to how he became al-Qa'im.

i) The first faction of this schism deemed that al-'Askari had not died, but had gone into occultation.¹² They based their assumption on the traditions reported from the previous Imams, which said that an Imam could not die without having a publicly acknowledged son to succeed him, because the world cannot be without a Proof.¹³ While the people were not obliged to accept the Imamate of those who were now laying claim to it, they should acknowledge the Imamate of al-'Askari whose Imamate had been confirmed by the testament of the former Imam. They also maintained that they had a tradition, which said that al-Qa'im had two occultations. Therefore, since al-'Askari had not left a publicly acknowledged son and since the earth cannot remain for an hour without a Proof, it was right to claim that he had not died but was hidden, and that he was truly a-Qa'im. This was his first occultation, after which he would rise again. Then, when his rising became known, he would conceal himself once more in his second occultation.¹⁴

In their discussions with their opponents, they tried to distinguish themselves from the Imamites who had stopped at the seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim (183/799), claiming he was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi, by faulting them for stopping at al-Kazim. They pointed out that he had died and left his successor, 'Ali al-Rida (202/817) as well as other sons, while al-'Askari had obviously passed away and left no heir.¹⁵

ii) The Second faction of the Waqifa at al-'Askari believed that he had died, but was then raised to life, and was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. Basically, the members of this faction established their doctrine on a transmission from Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, who said that al-Qa'im was called al-Qa'im because he would "rise" again after his death. They stated that it was certain that al-'Askari had died without leaving a successor and without designation anyone as his legatee. Thus there was no doubt about his being al-Qa'im, nor about his being alive after death, although he concealed himself for fear of his foes. They supported their theories with a saying of Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib,

contained in his advice to his follower Kumayl b. Ziyad, "O Allah, indeed You do not leave the earth without a Qa'im with proof from You, whether manifest or hidden, for then Your proofs and Your signs would be invalidated."16 On the basis of 'Ali's words they concluded that al-'Askari was absent and hidden, but that he would rise to fill the earth with peace and justice after it had been filled with tyranny.17

iii) Al-Waqifa al-la Adriyya also stopped at al-'Askari. They deemed that he had died and had been the Imam. Although the earth could not be without a Proof from Allah, they were not sure who had succeeded al-'Askari, his son or his brother . therefore they stopped at the Imamate of al-'Askari, and decided to make no decision until the matter became clear to them.18

Unfortunately, the contemporary sources do not mention anyone as representing the three factions of al-Waqifa at al-'Askari. However, from the doctrine of the first faction of the Waqifa, it seems that its partisans lived in places, which were far from Samarra, the city of the Imam. Since they were not present at the moment of his death, they tended to believe that he had not in fact died, but was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi.

1.3 Schism II: The Ja'farites

The representatives of this schism claimed that the Imam after al-'Askari was his youngest brother, Ja'far, but they differed as to how the Imamate had passed on a to him, and therefore split into four factions.

i) The first faction believed that al-'Askari had died and that he had held the Imamate by the testament of his father. Since the Imamate can only pass to the eldest living son of the former Imam, the Imamate passed from 'Ali al-Hadi not to his eldest son Muhammad, who had died before him, but to al-'Askari, who was the elder of the two sons who had outlived their father.19

This faction believed that al-'Askari had not left a publicly acknowledged son to take over the Imamate and, therefore, his sole remaining brother, Ja'far, was the Imam. In order to support their dogma they were obliged to repeat the Fathiyya's 20 arguments about the Imamate. The latter claimed that Musa al-Kazim received the Imamate, not from his father Ja'far al-Sadiq, but from his eldest brother 'Abd Allah, according to the tradition which says that the Imamate passes on to the eldest son of the Imam when he dies. Like the Fathiyya, this faction of the Ja'farites accepted the authenticity of the tradition, which says that the Imamate passes on to the eldest son

of the Imam when he dies. Like the Fathiyya, this faction of the Ja'farites accepted the authenticity of the tradition, which says that the Imamate will not fall to two brothers after al-Hasan and al-Husayn. But they maintained that this could only be applied if al-'Askari had left a son. Since al-'Askari had passed away without leaving a publicly acknowledged successor, his brother Ja'far was the designated Imam [21](#) and the Imamate would pass on in his offspring. They also recognised 'Abd Allah b. Ja'far al-Sadiq as the seventh Imam. Consequently Ja'far was thirteenth in the chain of Imams.

ii) The second faction of the Ja'farities contended that the eleventh Imam had himself designated Ja'far as his successor according to the principle of al-Bada'. [22](#) The same thing had happened in the case of Isma'il, the eldest son the Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq. God had clarified His ultimate decision concerning him by taking away his soul and placing his brothers 'Abd Allah and Musa consecutively in the Imamate instead. Similarly, in the case of Ja'far b. 'Ali, God had entrusted al-'Askari with the Imamate, but thereafter He had made it clear that the Imamate should not pass on in the progeny of al-'Askari. Therefore He transferred it to his brother Ja'far, who was the Imam after al-'Askari's death. Like the previous factions, this faction used the argument and dogma of the Fathiyya to support their viewpoint.

This sect was probably more popular than the first among the theologians, especially in Kufa. Its leader was a Kufi theologian called 'Ali b. Tahi or al-Talhi al-Khazzaz, who had been famous amongst the surviving members of the Fathiyya for his skill in theological discussions. He upheld Ja'far's Imamate and encouraged people to take his side. He was supported in his propaganda by the sister of Faris b. Hatim b. Mahawiyya al-Qazwini, although she rejected the Imamate of al-'Askari and claimed that the Imamate had been transferred to Ja'far from his father, 'Ali al-Hadi. [23](#) She may have had this claim because her brother, Faris b. Hatim, was killed on the order of al-'Askari. [24](#) It is also possible that the Kufan scholastic family Banu Faddal, who were active supporters of the Fathiyya, adopted the doctrine of this faction, especially Ahmad b. al-Hasan b. 'Ali b. Muhammad b. Faddal, who died in 260/874, and his brother 'Ali.

iii) The members of this faction claimed that the Imamate had passed on to Ja'far through the designation of his father. They based their doctrine on a tradition attributed to Ja'far al-Sadiq, which states that the Imamate cannot be held by two brothers after al-Hasan and al-Husayn. [25](#) Since Muhammad, the eldest son of 'Ali al-Hadi, died during the lifetime of his father, and since the Imamate should belong to those who survive the death of their father, it had not been

transferred to Muhammad. They may have accepted the Imamate of al-'Askari because he was the eldest son after the death of their father, it had not been transferred to Muhammad. They may have accepted the Imamate of al-Askari because he was the eldest son after the death of his father, but they rejected his Imamate after his death, because he had passed away without leaving a publicly acknowledged son as his successor. It was a matter of course to them, they said, that the Imam could not die without leaving a publicly acknowledged and well-known successor, designated by him and entrusted with the Imamate. Therefore the claim of al-Askari to the Imamate must be invalid. So it was inevitable that the Imam was Ja'far by the designation of his father. [26](#)

It is worth mentioning that this faction existed within the lifetime of al-Askari. When the tenth Imam died in 254/868 the majority of his followers accepted the Imamate of his eldest surviving son, al-Askari, as confirmed by the testament of his father, but a minority took Ja'far's side. [27](#) He became more powerful after al-Askari's death, since some of al-Askari's adherents abandoned his Imamate and accepted that of Ja'far. A leading scholar of this function was Ali b. Ahmad b. Bashshar, who wrote a book on the Ghayba and disputed fiercely with his opponents. [28](#) There is some evidence that this faction achieved a certain degree of success by persuading a few of the people who had accepted al-Askari's Imamate to join their side. Al-Saduq and al-Majlisi report a letter attributed to the twelfth Imam, and sent to his agent, Uthman b. Sa'id al-Umari. This letter reveals that an adherent of this faction argued with a Twelver called al-Mukhtar, and succeeded in making him accept the Imamate of Ja'far. [29](#) The sister of Faris b. Hatim, who was mentioned above, was one of the partisans of this group.

iv) The followers of this faction were called al-Nafisiyya. They believed the tenth Imam had designated his eldest son Muhammad as his legate. Then, according to the principle of Bada', Allah took away his life while his father was still alive. But when Muhammad b. Ali passed away, by the order of his father, he designated his brother Ja'far as his successor. He entrusted his testament, the secret knowledge and the weapons needed by the community to trustworthy young slave called Nafis. And he ordered him to hand them over to his brother Ja'far when his father died. However, when Muhammad died, the adherents of al-Askari discovered the secret arrangement and the role of Nafis. Since Nafis was afraid of them and handed over the trust of Muhammad b. Ali al-Hadi. Ja'far himself claimed that the Imamate had been passed to him from his brother, Muhammad. [30](#) The members of this faction denied the testament of al-Hasan al-Askari, because his father, they claimed, had neither designated him nor changed his

testament from Muhammad. Nafis was killed by being drowned in a well.[31](#)

1.4 Schism III: The Muhammadiyya

This sect denied the Imamate of Ja'far and al-Askari and considered Muhammad, who had died in the lifetime of his father, as their Imam. They argued that Ali al-Hadi, the tenth Imam, had neither designated nor indicated either al-Askari or Ja'far as his legate. Therefore neither of them had any right to make claims upon the Imamate. Since the Imam could not die without leaving a successor, and since al-Askari had passed away and not left a publicly acknowledged or well-known son, his Imamate was invalidated. Ja'far, they added, was not worthy of putting forward a claim because his immorality and sinfulness were infamous. His wicked character could not be prudent fear (Taqiyya) in the face of his enemies, for Taqiyya cannot be practiced by committing sins.

They concluded that since it was forbidden for the Imamate to be nullified, they were obliged to return to the Imamate of Muhammad b. Ali, since he left offspring and his act were distinguished by probity and virtue.[32](#) Others of them even considered him as al-Qa'im al-Mahdi[33](#) and some of them went as to deny his death.[34](#)

1.5 Schism IV: The Qat'iyya

This faction constituted the greater portion of the Imamites. They believed that al-Askari had died and left a son to succeed him, but they differed about the day of his birth, his name, and whether or not he was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. For this reason they split into six groups:

i) The first group maintained that al-Askari had died and left a son called Muhammad. According to Sa'd al-Qummi, they held that his son had come of age, while, according to al-Nawbakhit and al-Shahristani, they believed that he had been born two years before his father's death. He was the Imam because his father had designated him so, and because it was well known that al-Askari had left no other son. So inevitably he was the Imam and al-Qa'im. But due to fear of his uncle, Ja'far, he went into concealment and this became one of his occultations. This group built their doctrine on a tradition attributed to Ja'far al-Sadiq, which says that al-Qa'im's date of birth is hidden from the people, information concerning him is obscure, and the people cannot know him.[35](#) Unfortunately little is known about this faction, but al-Saduq, while trying to prove the birth of the twelfth Imam, mentions traditions, which are presumably attributed to this faction's adherents. One of these was called Ya'qub b. Manfush, who claimed that he had visited al-Askari and asked him about his successor. Al-

Askari showed him his son, who was between eight and ten years old, indicating that his son would succeed him. Another was called Daw' b. Ali al-Ijli, who maintained that he had met al-Askari in his house where he saw his son, who was then two years old.[36](#)

ii) The members of this group held the same dogma as the previous faction. They agreed with them on the death of al-Askari, but they thought that he had left a successor whose name was not Muhammad but Ali. They said that al-Askari had no son except Ali, who had been seen by his father's trustworthy followers. According to Sa'd al-Qummi this sect had few adherents and they were concentrated within the suburbs of the Sawad of Kufa.[37](#)

iii) This sect held that the Imam after al-Askari was his son, who had been born eight months after his father's death and had then gone into concealment. They argued that those who claimed that a son was born to him during his lifetime were making false statements, because al-Askari had died without leaving a publicly acknowledged son. But the pregnancy had been known to the caliph as well as other people, and for this reason the caliph delayed dividing his share in the estate until the pregnancy was proved invalid. In fact, they said, the son was born eight months after the death of his father and was hidden, and his father had ordered that he be called Muhammad. They based their doctrine on a tradition attributed to the eighth Imam, Ali b. Musa al-Rida, which says, "You would test the foetus which is within the womb of his mother, and the suckling child."[38](#)

iv) The partisans of this faction held that al-'Askari had no sons at all. The arguments about a hidden son, who was born during the lifetime of al-'Askari, were rejected by them, because they had searched for him during the life of the eleventh Imam using various means, but failed to find him. But since the Imam cannot die without leaving an heir, they claimed that a slave girl had conceived a child belonging to al-Askari, and that when she gave birth to him he would be the Imam, even if, as they are reported to have said by al-Mufid, the pregnancy should last a hundred years. They established their doctrine on a tradition of al-Sadiq, which states that al-Qa'im, is he whose conception and date of birth are hidden from the people.[39](#)

v) This faction held that the Imam after al-Askari was his son Muhammad, who was the Awaited One (al-Muntazar). They claimed that he had died but would rise to life with the sword to fill the earth with peace and justice after it had been filled with tyranny and injustice.[40](#)

This group is mentioned neither by Sa'd al-Qummi nor by al-Nawbakhti. Presumably the latter dealt with it but this discussion was later dropped from his work, since al-Mufid who based his information on al-Nawbakhti's work, mentions this group in al-Uyun wa-I-Mahasin.[41](#)

vi) This group, entitled the Imamiyya by Sa,d al-Qummi and al-Nawbakhti, held that al-Askari had died and that inevitably Allah's Hujja on earth was his son. He was his sole successor and legatee, charged with the affairs of the Imamate after him in accordance with the method laid down by previous tradition. Thus the Imamate should pass on to his offspring until the Day of Resurrection, but he was absent and hidden by an order. It was prohibited to seek him out before he chose to manifest himself, because his adherents would endanger his life and their own if they looked for him. In spite of his occultation a few reliable followers could contact him [42](#) He was born on 15th Sha'ban 256/29th July 868.[43](#)

Basically this group directed their arguments against those factions, which supported the Imamate of Muhammad and Ja'far. With the partisans of Muhammad they argued that the Imamate could be held neither by the descendants of Muhammad, who had died during his father's lifetime, nor by his legatee, such as his brother or someone else, because there was no evidence or proof for accepting the Imamate of a son who had died before his father. Perhaps this argument was also directed against the Nafisiyya.

Presumably with the Ja'farites they argued that the Imamate could not pass from brother to brother after al-Hasan and al-Husayn, and that the Imamate should fall to the eldest son of the preceding imam. The eleventh Imam al-Askari, was designated by the testament of his father, so the Imamate had to pass to his offspring.[44](#) They also said that it was improper for the faithful to select an Imam for themselves. Allah had to choose him and to manifest him at the proper time.[45](#)

This faction constituted the majority of the Imamites who had accepted the Imamate of al-Askari, such as Abu Sahl Isma'il b. Ali al-Nawbakhti, al-Hasan b. Musa al-Nawbakhti, Sa'd b. Abd Allah al-Ash'air al-Qummi (the author of Kitab al-Maqalat wa-I-Firaq), Uthman b. Sa'id al-Umari and his son Muhammad.[46](#)

1.6 Schism V: The Cessation of the Imamate

This group held that from the moment al-'Askari died there was no longer an Imam. Al-Nawbakhti, al-Mufid and al-Shahristani considered this group as one faction, whereas Sa'd al-Qummi was presumably more accurate when he divided it into two,[47](#) since the partisans of

this schism agreed on the death of al-'Askari and the cessation of the Imamate, while they differed on the dogma of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi as follows:

i) The first group deemed that it had been confirmed by successive transmission that al-'Askari would die without leaving a successor. For this reason there was no Imam after al-'Askari and the Imamate ceased. This, they contained, was reasonable and permitted. Since the cessation of the prophecy after Muhammad was possible, the cessation of the Imamate was also possible. They established their doctrine on a transmission attributed to the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, which states that the earth cannot be without a Proof unless Allah becomes angry at the sins of His creatures and retains him from them for as long He wills. This group did not believe in the rising of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. [48](#)

ii) The people of the second group held the same doctrine as the previous faction, but they separated from them over the dogma of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi. They said that since al-Askari had passed away without leaving a successor, the Imamate had ceased until Allah raised the Qa'im from among the Imams who had died, such as al-Hasan al-Askari, or from among any of his descendants. Furthermore the rising of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi was inevitable because this was confirmed by successive tradition. They considered the period after the death of al-'Askari and the rise of al-Qa'im as an interval of time devoid of prophecy and Imamate, like the period between Jesus and Muhammad. [49](#) There is some evidence that many people from various countries doubted the existence of the twelfth Imam, such as Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Mahzayar al-Ahwazi from al-Ahwaz, [50](#) and many of the persons from Banu Talib in Medina who had been agents of the eleventh Imam. [51](#)

1.7 Conclusion

This historical and theological survey suggests that on the death of al-'Askari, the Imamites fell into problems similar to those which had beset them after the death of the seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim. They split into al-Waqifa, Muhammadiyya, Ja'fariyya and Qat'iyya. Possibly the causes of this split were as follows:

i) Although the bulk of the Imamites accepted the Imamate of al-'Askari, they retained their cultural and sectarian backgrounds. For example, al-'Askari himself had allowed his adherents to accept the traditions related by the Banu Faddal, who belong to the Waqifa Musa al-Kazim, but had urged them to reject their doctrine. The influence exerted by these cultural ties can be noted in the traditional

arguments held by the Imamites after the death of al-'Askari, arguments which led to the rise of the Waqifa at al-'Askari and the encouragement of the Ja'farites.

ii) Despite its developed system the Imamite organization (al-Wikala) did not widely disseminate the testament of Imam al-'Askari concerning his successor amongst the populace and the lower missionaries. The organization may have acted in this way because of the tense political situation. Thus no successor was openly indicated by al-'Askari, nor was any well known to the general mass of the Imamates. For this reason the Imamates who knew nothing about al-'Askari's testament had recourse to the traditions adopted by the majority of the Imamates to determine who was to be the twelfth Imam. The interpretation of these traditions led to various different points of view, which, in turn, led to new sub-divisions amongst the Qat'iyya and the Muhammadiyya.

iii) The third cause contributing to these divisions was the personal ambition of al-'Askari's brother, Ja'far, who claimed the Imamate during the lifetime of al-'Askari. Ja'far became more powerful after the death of his brother, because he was encouraged by the Fathiyya, in order to vindicate their doctrine, and especially by Banu Faddal in Kufa. However Ja'far's success did not continue, because his followers differed as to how he gained the Imamate, and because their arguments in the field of traditions were weaker than those of the Qat'iyya.

Thus, as al-Mufid and al-Tusi state, all these divisions and splits gradually vanished, except for the Qat'iyya, who became the Twelvers in the fourth/tenth century.⁵²

2. The question of the birth of the twelfth Imam The possibility that the twelfth Imam was born and his birth was kept hidden is supported by a number of narrations. The fact that there were already narrations about the twelfth Imam as al-Qa'im al-Mahdi gave rise to other narrations which can only be described as hagiographical. But from the time of al-Saduq onwards, even these were accepted by the Imamites as historical facts. Nevertheless, other early narrations present his birth as a purely historical fact without the embellishment of miraculous reports.

2.1 The Origin of the Mother of the twelfth Imam

The earliest Imamite scholar to give an account of the twelfth Imam's mother is al-Mas'udi. He reports that she was a slave-girl called Narjis.⁵³ Al-Shahid (d. 786/1384) states that her name was Maryam

b. Zayd al-'Alawiyya, [54](#) and other reports give her name as Rayhana, Saqil and Sawsan. [55](#) It is possible that her name was in fact Narjis and the other names, except Saqil, were given to her by her owner Hakima bint Muhammad al-Jawad. People at that time used to call their slave-girls by different names as a form of flattery, and Narjis, Rayhana and Sawsan are all names of flowers.

The earliest report concerning the nationality of the twelfth Imam's mother goes back to the year 286/899. This was written down for the first time by al-Saduq, on the authority of Muhammad b. Bahr al-Shaybani, who attributed his narration to Bishr b. Sulayman al-Nakhkhas. According to this report she was a Christian from Byzantium who had been captured by Islamic troops. She was sold as a slave and bought by al-Nakhkhas in the slave-market in Baghdad. Al-Nakhkhas sent her to the tenth Imam, 'Ali al-Hadi, in Samarra. After this, however, the narration begins to lose much of its credibility and become hagiographical. It is related that she was Malika b. Yashshu', the granddaughter of the Emperor of Byzantium, whose mother was a descendant of Simon (Sham'un) the disciple of Jesus. When Malika was in her grandfather's palace, she dreamt that she saw Jesus's mother, Mary, and Muhammad's daughter, Fatima. In this dream Fatima converts her to Islam and persuades her to allow herself to be captured by Islamic troops. [56](#)

The authenticity of this narration is questionable in many aspects, the most doubtful points being found in the last part. Firstly there was no major battle between the 'Abbasids and the Byzantines after 242/856. [57](#) and there is no indication in the sources that the Emperor of Byzantium appealed to the 'Abbasids to liberate his granddaughter.

Secondly, the early Imamite authors, particularly al-Qummi, al-Nawbakhti, al-Kulayni and al-Mas'udi, who were contemporaries of al-Shaybani, the narrator of this report, do not refer to it in their works. In addition, al-Kashshi, who was a companion of al-Shaybani, and the later scholars al-Najashi and Ibn Dawud claim that he was an extremist. [58](#)

Thirdly, al-Kulayni states that al-Qa'im's mother was a slave-girl from al-Naqba, the northern province of Sudan. [59](#) Moreover al-Nu'mani and al-Saduq related other narrations, which indicate that al-Qa'im's mother was to be a black slave-girl. [60](#) It may be that the later Imamites ignored these transmissions and considered the narration of al-Shaybani as authentic because the latter makes al-Qa'im's mother of noble ancestry and high social status. They would have been particularly attracted by the connection the report establishes between

the twelfth Imam, al-Qa'im, and Jesus, since prophetic traditions state that the two of them will rise together to rid the world of tyranny.[61](#)

In the light of these three points the narration of Muhammad b. Bahr al-Shaybani can be rejected despite the fact that al-Tusi and Ibn Rustam al-Tabari consider it reliable.[62](#) Possibly the correct account of the origin of al-Qa'im's mother is given by al-Mufid, who states that she was a slave-girl brought up in the house of Hakima, the sister of the tenth Imam. According to his report the Imam saw her one day and predicted that she would give birth to someone with special Divine blessing.[63](#) According to al-Saduq she died before the death of her husband, al-Hasan al-'Askari, in 260/874.[64](#) But al-Najashir's report indicates that she was alive after this year hiding at the house of Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Hamza, one of the close associates of her husband al-'Askari.[65](#)

2.2 The birth of the Twelfth Imam

Since the eleventh Imam died without leaving an obvious son, most of his followers, who held that he had in fact left a successor, based their belief on traditions attributed to the preceding Imams concerning al-Qa'im al-Mahdi and his occultation.[66](#) The following statements, some of which we have already had occasion to relate, are examples of these traditions: The world cannot be void of a Proof, either manifest and well known, or hidden because of fear.[67](#) The Imamate cannot be vested to two brothers after al-Hasan and al-Husayn.[68](#) According to al-Sadiq, the "Master of the Command" (Sahib al-Amr) will have two occultations. One of them will be so prolonged that some will say that he has died and others will say that he has been killed, and finally only a few of his followers will remain faithful to his Imamate. No one will become cognizant of his whereabouts and his affairs except his intimate partisans, who will look after his affairs.[69](#) It is worth mentioning that this last tradition had also been recorded before the death of al-'Askari in 260/874 by the Sevener Imamites, the Waqifa who had applied these traditions to the seventh Imam Musa al-Kazim.[70](#)

Abu Sahl al-Nawbakhti reports that al-'Askari had intimate partisans who used to narrate traditions concerning Islamic law on his authority and were his deputies. When al-'Askari died in 260/874 all of them agreed that he had left a son who was the Imam. Al-Nawbakhti adds that they forbade their adherents to ask about his name or to reveal his existence to his foes, who were at that time trying to arrest him.[71](#) The 'Abbasids' political pressure, which forced al-'Askari to hide the birth of his son from the ordinary Imamites, may also have led the twelfth Imam to transmit different reports concerning the date

of his birth, some of which took on a hagiographical form.

Most of the Imamite sources agree that al-'Askari's son was born on Friday, the 15th of Sha'ban, [72](#) but they differ about the year of his birth. Al-Qummi gives an account of a group of Imamites who held that al-'Askari had died and left a son called Muhammad, who had already come of age when his father died. [73](#) But they did not fix the year of his birth. Perhaps this group based their belief in the existence of al-'Askari's son mainly upon the tradition which says that the earth cannot be void of a Proof. Unfortunately al-Qummi does not report any witnesses to the birth of the Imam from this group to support their opinion.

Al-Kulayni, al-Mufid and al-Tusi mention four different viewpoints concerning the date of the twelfth Imam's birth. The first was related by 'Allan al-Razi and al-Kulayni on the authority of 'Ali b. Muhammad, who states that the twelfth Imam was born in 255/868. [74](#). Al-Tusi reports two narrations attributed to Hakima bint al-Jawad which support this date. [75](#)

The second report states that he was born in 258/871. This report is attributed by Daw' b. 'Ali al-'Ijli to an anonymous Persian who related that in the year 260/873 he had come to Samarra from Persia to serve in the house of al-'Askari. According to the Persian one of al-'Askari's slave-girls had given birth and he was the child in the arms of another slave-girl. He estimated his age at about two years. [76](#) Another transmission, on the authority of Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Bilal, relates that al-'Askari informed him twice about his successor: once in 258/871, then three days before his death in 260/874. [77](#) The narration attributed to Daw' does not mention explicitly the date of the Imam's birth nor the time when the narrator gave his estimation, whether it was before or after the death of al-'Askari. Regarding the narration of Ibn Bilal, although al-'Askari informed him about the existence of his successor in 258/871, this does not indicate or reveal that the birth of his son occurred in that year. In fact it leads us to think that the birth occurred before 258/871.

The third viewpoint was that of a group of Imamites who thought that al-'Askari's son had been born after his father's death in 261/874. They claimed that a slave-girl had conceived a child belonging to al-'Askari, and that her pregnancy had been known to the caliph as well as to other people. Thus the authorities delayed the division of his share of the estate until the pregnancy was proved invalid to the caliph. They contended that the Imam was born eight months after his father's death, and was then hidden. Al-'Askari had commanded that

he be named Muhammad.^{[78](#)} From the historical viewpoint, the account given by this group is completely unconvincing and in itself does not encourage one to believe that al-'Askari had left a successor. Firstly, al-'Askari's slave-girl, Saqil, who had claimed that she was pregnant by her master, was detained by the 'Abbasid authorities for two years until the pregnancy was proved invalid.^{[79](#)} Secondly, al-Kulayni reports that Abu Hashim al-Ja'fari ^{[80](#)} once asked the eleventh Imam,

"O master, do you have a son?" He replied, "Yes." Abu Hashim said, "If something should happen to you, where should I ask for him?" The Imam said, "In Medina."^{[81](#)}

It is well known that al-'Askari died in 260/874 and that Abu Hashim died the following year. Therefore this narration would suggest that the birth occurred before 260/874. Thirdly, al-Mas'udi reports that the twelfth Imam was born two years after the death of his grandfather, al-Hadi.^{[82](#)} As the latter died in 254/869,^{[83](#)} the birth would have occurred in 256/870.

Al-Mas'udi's narration adds weight to the fourth viewpoint, which places the birth of the twelfth Imam in 256/870. The Imamite sources record many narrations in favour of this date.^{[84](#)} The most important one, however, is mentioned on the authority of Mu'alla b. Muhammad and Ahmad b. Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah, who related that al-'Askari issued a letter to his reliable followers after the assassination of al-Muhtadi, the caliph, saying,

"This is the punishment of him who has sinned against Allah, the Exalted, in regard to his legatees. He thought that he would kill me without offspring. Now he has seen the omnipotence of Allah, the Exalted."

The narration continues to report that in fact the Imam had a son called Muhammad, who was born in 256/870.^{[85](#)}

Al-Muhtadi was dethroned and died in Rajab 256/871.^{[86](#)} Moreover all the Imamite narrators agree that the birth of the twelfth Imam occurred on the 15th of Sha'ban. So if one links the death of al-Muhtadi in the month of Rajab with the letter of al-'Askari which was issued in the next month, Sha'ban, it would seem plausible that the Imam's birth occurred on the 15th of Sha'ban in 256/870. Furthermore al-Mas'uid reports an anecdote to Khadija bint Muhammad al-Jawad to support such a hypothesis. In 262/875 a

certain man called Ahmad b. Ibrahim asked her about al-Askari's successor, and she confirmed his existence, adding that he had taken over the Imamate on 11th Rabi' I 260/874 at the age of four years and seven months, **87** which means that he was born on 15th Sab'ban 256/18th July 870.

It is worth quoting here a narration concerning the birth of the twelfth Imam which was viewed as authentic by the time of al-Mas'udi, who died in 345/956. Al-Saduq presented it as follows and attributed it to Hakima bint al-Jawad, who related,

"Abu Muhammad al-Hasan b. Ali, peace be upon both of them, called on me with the message, 'O aunt, break your fast at our house tonight, because it is the fifteenth of Sah'ban. Tonight Allah, the Exalted, will manifest the Hujja, His Proof on earth.' (When I went to the house), I asked him who the mother of the child was. He said, 'Narjis.' I said, 'May Allah make me your sacrifice! But there is no sign of pregnancy in her!' He said, 'What I am telling you is so.' Therefore I went in and greeted them. When I had taken my seat Narjis came forward to take off my shoes and said to me, 'My mistress and the lady of my family, how are you tonight?' I said to her, 'O my daughter, tonight Allah the Exalted will give you a son who shall be the Master in this world and in the hereafter' She became embarrassed and blushed.

"After I had finished my evening prayer I broke my fast and then went to sleep. At midnight I work for prayer. I performed my prayer while Narjis was sleeping, without any sign of childbirth. Then I sat down performing the supererogatory prayer. Thereafter I went to bed and got up again, but she was still sleeping. Then she got up, performed her supererogatory prayer and lay down again.

" Hakima continued," I went out to see the dawn and found that its first stage was about to appear. But she was still asleep. So I began to doubt al-Askari's expectation. Just then he called out from his place, 'Do not be in a hurry, O aunt, the matter is approaching.' I sat down and recited the Quranic sura's ha Mim al-Sajda (XL) and Yasin (XXXVI). At that moment she got up alarmed. I ran to her and said, 'The name of Allah be upon you, do you feel anything?' She replied, 'O aunt, yes.' Then I said to her 'Gather yourself and procure peace in your heart.' However at that moment we felt sleepy and drowsiness overcame us. after that I got up at the voice of my Master, and when I raised the covering from him I saw him, peace be upon him, prostrate on the ground. **88** I took him to my bosom and noticed that he was pure and clean.

Abu Muhammad called out to me and said, 'O aunt, bring my son to me,' and I did so... Afterwards al-'Askari put his tongue in his mouth and gently stroked his eyes, ears and joints with his hand. Then he said, 'O my son, speak.' The child replied, 'I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, He is unique and has no partner, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah.' Then he sent his greetings upon the commander of the faithful (Amir al-Mu'minin), and upon the Imams respectively until he stopped at the name of his father. Then he stopped speaking.

"Abu Muhammad said, 'O aunt, take him to his mother, so that he may greet her, and then bring him back to me.' I took him to her and when he had done so I brought him back and left him there. Al-Askari said to me, 'O aunt, come to visit us on the seventh day.' The next day I came to greet Abu Muhammad and raised the curtain to see my Master. But I did not see him. So I asked the Imam, 'May Allah make me your sacrifice! What has happened to my Master?' He replied, 'O aunt, we have entrusted him to the one to whom the mother of Moses entrusted her son.' Hakima said,

"On the seventh day I came and greeted him and took my seat. Abu Muhammad said, 'Bring my son to me.' I brought him wrapped in a piece of cloth, and the Imam repeated what he had done on the first day and the child said what he had said before. Then he recited the Qur'anic verse [89](#)

" And We desired to show favour unto those who were oppressed in the earth, and to make them Imams and to make them the inheritors. And to establish them in the earth, and to show Pharaoh and Haman and their hosts that which they feared from them. "90

The hagiographical nature of this account is obvious. However, certain of its elements suggest something about the nature of the birth. It seems that the pregnancy of Narjis was deliberately concealed, and a close relative was brought in to act as midwife only when the birth was due. If this was the case and a son was indeed born to al-'Askari - the likeliest date being 256/870 - then the reasons for the concealment of the pregnancy and the birth would be the same as the reasons for the Imam's occultation.

3. The Reasons for the First Occultation of the Twelfth Imam

The early Imamite works mention three reasons for the occultation of the twelfth Imam, reasons which mirror the new tactics of the Imams in their religious and political activities.

Al-Sadiq was reported to have said that al-Qa'im would go into

occultation before he rose again, because he would be afraid of being killed.⁹¹ A second reason is mentioned on the authority of the twelfth Imam, who was reported as having informed his partisan Ishaq b. Ya'qub that all his forefathers had paid the oath of obedience to oppressive rulers, but that he had hidden himself in order to rise in arms, and had made no oath of obedience to any oppressive ruler.⁹² This reason had already been mentioned by al-Hasan and al-Rida, who both said that al-Qa'im alone would not swear fealty to an oppressive ruler.⁹³ The third reason is mentioned by al-Kulayni, who states that the occultation was a test set by Allah for his creatures, so as to see who would remain steadfast in acknowledging the Imamate of the twelfth Imam.⁹⁴

These three reasons depict a new phase in the attitude of the Imamites toward their struggle for power. It appears that the quiescent policy of the Imams towards the 'Abbasid regime, along with their continued intellectual activities, had led the Imamite organization to a more politically developed situation. This fact encouraged the twelfth Imam to instigate underground political activities against the 'Abbasids. At the same time, he knew that certain followers of his forefathers had caused the failure of two bids for power in 70/689 and 140/757 by revealing the activities of the Imams to their enemies, which led to their arrest and the failure of their attempt.⁹⁵ Perhaps such incidents obliged the twelfth Imam to live in a state of concealment even from his own followers so as to practice his underground activities through the Imamite organization and to evade any 'Abbasid bid to arrest him. This is indicated by many traditions commanding the Imamites to keep the name of al-Qa'im a secret.⁹⁶ Al-Kulayni reports that, after the death of al-'Askari in 260/874, some people among his adherents asked the agent (wakil). Abu 'Abd Allah al-Salihi, to ask about the name and residence of the twelfth Imam for them. When he did so, the answer was,

"If you reveal the name to them, they will reveal it in public; and if they realize the place of his residence they will lead foes to it."⁹⁷

Al-Kulayni mentions another report, which asserts that the occultation of the twelfth Imam was a preparatory step for the overthrow of the state of injustice.⁹⁸ It is relevant to study the plan of al-'Askari to hide his son and the 'Abbasid attitude towards the Imamites after the death of al-'Askari so as to see why the latter felt it necessary to hide his son.

4. Al-Askari's Plan to Hide his Successor

The circumstance which accompanied the birth of al-'Askari's son

suggest that al-'Askari wanted to save his successor from the restrictive policy of the 'Abbasids, which had been established by al-Ma'mun. Hence he did not circulate in public the news concerning the birth of his son, but only disclosed it to a few reliable followers, such as Abu Hashim al-Ja'fari, Ahmad b. Ishaq, and Hakima and Khadija, the aunts of al-'Askari.⁹⁹ Moreover he decided to move his son to a place safer than Samarra so that he could carry on his religious and political activities through the Wikala without suffering the interference of the 'Abbasids.

Study of the hagiographical and historical anecdotes concerning the first occultation of the Imam and his reappearance reveals that al-'Askari hid his son first in Samarra and then in Medina, where he lived under the guardianship of his paternal grandmother. According to al-Saduq, al-'Askari sent his son to an unknown place forty days after his birth, and then his son was brought back to his mother.¹⁰⁰ According to al-Mas'udi, three years later, in the year 259/873, al-'Askari asked his own mother, Hadith to go on the pilgrimage. He explained his critical position to her, gave her full instructions, and sent his son with her. His son had already received from his father the signs of the Imamate, the most esteemed name of Allah, the inheritance and the weapon. Thereafter hadith and her grandson went to Mecca under the protection of a close friend called Ahmad b. Muhammad b. al-Muttahir.¹⁰¹ It appears that after they had performed the rite of pilgrimage they went to Medina, which was used as the place of concealment for the twelfth Imam.

Many reports incline one to accept the above description of the twelfth Imam's early life. As we have seen, Abu Hashim al-Ja'fari once asked al-'Askari where he should ask for his successor were he to die. Al-'Askari said, "In Medina." Another report states that the residence of al-Qa'im would be in Medina, surrounded by thirty intimate followers.¹⁰² All the traditions concerning the rise of al-Qa'im indicate that it will occur in Mecca.¹⁰³ The Imamite sources record that the twelfth Imam al-Qa'im went on the pilgrimage every year.¹⁰⁴ Such evidence indicates that the twelfth Imam was in an area not far from Mecca, perhaps Medina.

As part of al-'Askari's prudent fear, he made his manifest testament only to his mother, Hadith, and did not mention any successor openly to anyone else.¹⁰⁵ From all this it seems most probable that the twelfth Imam spent most of his early life in Medina, because al-'Askari recognised the danger which his son would face were he to remain in Iraq.

5. The Abbasid Attempt to Arrest al-'Askari's Son

The caliph al-Mu'tamid continued the 'Abbasid policy of putting the Imams under close watch and enforced it even more vigorously with the spread of the traditions concerning the role of the twelfth Imam. On hearing about the deterioration of al-'Askari's health, al-Mu'tamid sent five of his most trusted officers, amongst whom was his servant Nahrir, to the house of al-'Askari to watch over him. He also ordered the chief judge, al-Hasan be. Abi al-Shawarib [106](#), to send ten reliable people to participate in this task. When al-'Askari died on 8th Rabi' I 260/ 1st January 874, the caliph sent a contingent to search his house. They sealed off all his estate and then looked for his son to the extent that they even brought women to examine his slave girls in case any of them were pregnant. [107](#)

Despite the fact that the primary investigation proved to al-Mu'tamid that al-'Askari died without leaving a son, the vast majority of the Imamites held that he had in fact left one. [108](#) According to the Imamite works, Ja'far, the brother of al-'Askari, who had already claimed to be the Imam and tried to succeed his brother, revealed to the authorities the Imamites' belief in the existence of al-'Askari's successor. Al-Saduq reports that a band of people from Qumm, among whom was Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Himyari, arrived at Samarra in ignorance of the death of al-'Askari with letters of inquiry and legal taxes. There they learned about his death and were directed to Ja'far. They met him and wanted to indulge in the ceremonies, which they had practiced before on such occasions. They asked Ja'far to tell them about the amount of money they had brought and who had given it to them. Ja'far replied that he was no soothsayer and that the things the Imamites claimed about al-'Askari were mere lies, because Allah alone could know such things. He then told them to hand the money over to hi, but they refused to do so, and their quarrel became public. While they were arguing someone came, called them by name and led them to a house. there he showed them someone who was believed to be the agent of the twelfth Imam and who revealed to them how much money they had brought. Therefore they accepted the Imamate of the twelfth Imam. Having done so they were commanded that they should henceforth hand the money to a certain man in Baghdad. [109](#)

According to al-Saduq, Ja'far went straight to the caliph, al-Mu'tamid, and informed him that the Imamites still believed in the existence of a son of al-'Askari. Al-Mu'tamid immediately had this investigated by sending a band of soldiers with Ja'far to search the house of al-'Askari and the houses of the neighbours. [110](#) They arrested a slave-girl called Saqil and demanded that she show them the child, but she denied having given birth to a child. According to al-Saduq, in order to save the life of the twelfth Imam, Saqil claimed to be pregnant. [111](#) Thereupon al-Mu'tamid incarcerated her in his harem for observation.

Under the supervision of Nahrir, the caliph's wives and slave-girls and the wives of the chief judge, Ibn Abi al-Shawarib, observed Saqil for two years until they felt that further observation was no longer necessary. When disturbances occurred in various parts of the Empire and the vizier 'Ubayd Allah Ibn Khaqan suddenly died, they ignored her completely. [112](#)

Many reports indicate that while Saqil was imprisoned the 'Abbasids carried out a campaign of persecution against the Imamites and that Ja'far was behind it. In spite of the fact that the Imamites lost many people, all attempts on the part of the authorities to arrest the twelfth Imam proved fruitless.

According to al-Mufid, al-'Askari wanted to deny the 'Abbasids the opportunity to find any trace which might endanger the life of his successor. Hence he devised a plan whereby according to his public will he left his estate only to his mother, Hadith. [113](#) On hearing of the death of her son, she came from Median to Samarra to take over the estate, but found that it was under 'Abbasid control. Furthermore, Ja'far quarreled with her about his brother's inheritance, insisting on his right to the estate. He raised the case with the authorities, who were trying confirm that al-'Askari had no son by interfering in it. Hadith maintained that al-'Askari had made her his sole heiress, and that according to Imamite law Ja'far had no right to the estate of his brother. [114](#) This quarrel went on for two years until the pregnancy of Saqil proved false. Although the judge adjudicated in favour of Hadith, Ja'far's claim was not disputed because of his influential connections. In the end the estate was divided into two parts, in spite of Imamite law. [115](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Introduction](#)[Chapter I](#)[Chapter II](#)[Chapter III](#)[Chapter IV](#)[Chapter V](#)[Chapter VI](#)[Chapter VII](#)[Conclusion](#)[Bibliography](#)

CHAPTER IV

The underground activities of the twelfth Imam as seen in the actions of the Safirs

1. A Brief Study of the Wikala Before the Twelfth Imam

As mentioned in Chapter Two, a critical situation the Imams faced, brought about by the Abbasids, forced the Imams to search for a new means to communicate with the members of their congregation. The Imamite sources indicate that the sixth Imam al-Sadiq was the first Imam to employ an underground system of communication (al-Tanzim al-Sirri) among his community. [1](#)

The main purpose of the Wikala was to collect the khums, the zakat, and other kinds of alms for the Imam from his followers. Although the Wikala may have had other purposes at that time, the sources rarely record them. Al-Sadiq directed the activities of the organization with such care that the Abbasids were not aware of its existence. As part of his prudent fear (al-Taqiyya), he used to ask some of his followers to carry out certain tasks for the organization without informing them that they were in fact his agents. Al-Tusi reports that Nasr b. Qabus al-Lakhmi spent twenty years working as an agent (wakil) for al-Sadiq, without knowing that he had actually been appointed as one.

Al-Sadiq's most important agent in Iraq was Abd al-Rahman b al-Hajjaj, who continued in this office until his death, after the time of the eighth Imam al-Rida. [2](#) Mu'alla b. Khunays was al-Sadiq's agent in Media. In 133/750 he was arrested by the Abbasids and sentenced to death because he refused to reveal the name of the Imamite propagandists. [3](#)

Despite the difficulties which faced the Wikala in its early stages, the areas covered by the agents and their training were extended during the time of al-Kazim as activities were intensified. The rite of pilgrimage was used as a means to communicate with each other. Al-Kazim's agent in Egypt was Uthman b. Isa al-Rawwasi.⁴ He also had agents in numerous other places, such as Hayyan al-Sarraj in Kufa, Muhammad b. Abi Umayr in Baghdad, and Yunis b. Ya'qub Al-Bajli in Medina.⁵ Al-Mas'udi's report suggests that all the agents received their instructions from Abd al-Rahman b. al-Hajjaj, who was then resident in Baghdad.⁶

The agents faced another campaign of arrests in 179/795 instigated by the caliph al-Rashid. It caused the Imamite organization considerable damage. The agent in Baghdad, Muhammad b. Abi Umayr, was arrested and tortured in the unfulfilled hope that he would reveal the names and location of al-Kazim's followers, while his sister was put in jail for four years.⁷ Another agent, 'Ali b. Yaqtin, who used to send money and letters to the Imam through an individual called Isma'il b. Salam, was also arrested and spent the rest of his life in prison.⁸ According to the Imamite sources the campaign of arrests led to the arrest of al-Kazim himself and to his death in prison.⁹ sixty other 'Alids also died under torture in prison.¹⁰

After the death of al-Kazim the members of the Imamite organization found themselves faced with an internal theological and political question involving the doctrine of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi and his occultation. Al-Kazim's agents, such as al-Rawwasi in Egypt, Ziyad al-Qindi in Baghdad, 'Ali b. Abi Hamza and Hayyan al-Sarraj in Kufa, and al-Hasan b. Qayama in Wasit, had received many traditions attributed to al-Sadiq concerning al-Qa'im al-Mahdi and his occultation, but these traditions did not explicitly state his identity.¹¹ Perhaps for this reason, they applied these traditions to the seventh Imam al-Kazim by denying his death and contending that he was al-Qa'im al-Mahdi, but that he had gone into occultation.¹² Consequently, they rejected the Imamate of his son al-Rida and split into a new group called the Waqifa, using the money of the organization to their own ends. As a result al-Rida lost a considerable number of trained agents and over 100,000 dinars.¹³ Between the Years 183-202/799-817 al-Rida managed to solve this problem at least partially by clarifying to the members of the Waqifa the true nature of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi, as transmitted on the authority of the previous Imams. According to al-Kashashi, he seems to have been able to persuade some of the members of the Waqifa, like al-Rawwasi and his followers to recognize his Imamate.¹⁴

Meanwhile the role of the Wikala was expanded to embrace the new needs and tasks of the congregation. Al-Rida's agents were 'Abd al-'Aziz b. al-Muhtadi in Qumm, [15](#) Safwan b. Yahya in Kufa, [16](#) 'Abd Allah b. Jandab and 'Abd al-Rahman b. al-Hajjaj in Baghdad, [17](#) Along with another eighty agents 'Abd al-Rahman b. al-Hajjaj controlled the leadership of the organization through the time of the ninth Imam, al-Jawad, [18](#) who achieved considerable success in protecting the organization from new schisms. Moreover the tactics of his agents developed in new directions especially in widening the sphere of al-Taqiyya (prudent fear) by allowing some of his partisans to participate in the administration and the army of the 'abbasids. [19](#)

During the long Imamate of the tenth Imam, al-Hadi (220-254/835-868) new trends emerged amongst the Imamites due to historical circumstances, trends which were later to play a dangerous role during the time of the twelfth Imam.

As we pointed out above (Ch. II, pp 48-53), al-Mutawakkil practiced the policy of al-Ma'mun, who had made al-Rida and his son al-Jawad join his courtiers so that their links with their partisans could be restricted and closely watched. Al-Mutawakkil did the same with al-Hadi. In 233/874 he summoned him from Medina to Samarra, where he spent the rest of his life. [20](#) The absence of direct contact between the Imam and his followers led to an increase in the religious and political role of the Wikala, so that the agents of the Imam gained more authority in running its affairs. Gradually the leadership of the Wikala became the only authority which could determine and prove the legitimacy of the new Imam. For example the ninth Imam, al-Jawad, gave his testament concerning his successor to his chief agent Muhammad b. al-Faraj. He told him that in case he should die, he should take his orders from al-Hadi. [21](#) When al-Jawad died in 220/835 the prominent leaders of the organization held a secret meeting at the house of Muhammad b. al-Faraj to determine the next Imam, who was proved to be al-Hadi. [22](#)

The agents of the Imam gradually gained a great deal of experience in organizing their partisans into separate units. Several reports suggest that the agents divided their followers into four separate groups according to area. The first included Baghdad, Mada'in, Sawad and Kufa, the second Basra and al-Ahwaz, the third Qumm and Hamadan, and the fourth the Hijaz, Yemen and Egypt. Each area was entrusted to an independent agent, beneath whom many local agents were appointed. The workings of this system can be observed in letters of instruction attributed to al-Hadi concerning the organization's administration. It is reported that he sent a letter in 232/874 to his

local agent, 'Ali b. Bilal, saying:

"I have substituted Abu 'Ali b. Rashid for 'Ali b. al-Husayn b. 'Abd Rabba. I have entrusted him with this post since he is sufficiently qualified so that no one can take precedence over him. he has been informed that you are the chief (shaykh) of your own area, since I wished to invest you with that area. However, you have to follow him and hand all the revenues to collect over to him."

In a letter to his agents in Baghdad, Mada'in and Kufa, al-Hadi wrote,

"O Ayyub b. Nuh, I am commanding you to cut off relations between yourself and Abu 'Ali. Both of you should engage yourselves with what you have been entrusted and ordered to do in your areas. If you do so you should be able to manage your affairs without consulting me... O Ayyub, I am ordering you neither to receive anything from the people of Baghdad and Mada'in, nor to give anyone amongst them permission to contact me. If anyone brings you revenue from outside your area, order him to send it to the agent of his own area. O Abu 'Ali, I am ordering you to follow what I have ordered Ayyub."**23**

This system saved the organization from otherwise inevitable damage after the harsh attack of al-Mutawakkil upon its underground political cells in 235/850. In the same way it was save from the attack of al-Musta'in in 248/862.

It should be noted that during the time of the tenth and eleventh Imams, the leadership of the organization in the four areas, was monopolized by a few individuals. Their tasks later fell to their descendants and remained under their control during the shorter occultation of the twelfth Imam. For example, 'Ali b. Mazyar was the agent of al-Jawad and al-Hadi in al-Ahwaz **24**, while his son were the agent of the twelfth Imam in the same region.**25** Ibrahim b. Muhammad al-Hamadani was the agent of al-Hadi in Hamadan,**26** While his offspring inherited this post from father to son until the time of the twelfth Imam.**27** Another agent was Isma'il b. Ishaq b. Nawbakht,**28** Whose family later directed the members of the organization in Baghdad, While one of his relatives, al-Husayn b. Ruh, became the third safir or "representative" of the twelfth Imam.

Among the agents, the most important was 'Uthman b. Sa'id al-'Umari, who, as we shall see, was brought up under the auspices of the tenth Imam, al-Hadi. He made him first his own agent and agent of his son, Imam al- 'Askari. After the death of the later 'Uthman ~~presented by www.iraq.com~~ controlled the whole leadership of the organization as the first

representative of the twelfth Imam, and his son Muhammad later succeeded him to the post, as the second safir.

The fact that the Imam's activities were underground made it easy for certain people to claim falsely to be the representatives of al-Hadi and al-'Askari, and thus to collect money from the Imamites. It seems that the practice was carried out by the extremists (al-Ghulat) and increased throughout the time of the twelfth Imam at the expense of his rightful agnets.[29](#)

2. The Main functions of the wikala

For the Twelver Imamites the series of Imams ends with the twelfth Imam, who, from the death of his father in 260/874 up to the year 329-940-1, is believed to have lived in occultation. According to al-Nu'mani this period was called the "Short occultation," al-Ghayba al-Qasira,[30](#) and according to later scholars the minor occultation, al-Ghayba al-sughra.[31](#) It was of decisive importance for the organization and the internal evolution of the congregation. During it the twelfth Imam is considered to have pursued his activities from behind the scenes and to have led his followers by means of four specially chosen representatives. These were called sufara (sin. safir) or "ambassadors." The first was 'Uthman b. Sa'id al-'Umari, the second his son Muhammad, the third al-Husayn b. Ruh al-the second his son Muhammad, the third al-Husayn b. Ruh al-Nawbakhti and the fourth 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Summari.

A critical study of the history of this period (260-329/874-941) reveals that the main function of the safirs was to implement certain tasks previously undertaken by the Imams so as to save him from the political pressure of the 'Abbasids. His predecessors had suffered this pressure since the time of al-Ma'mun, especially since it was widely accepted among the Imamites of that period that the twelfth Imam would be al-Qa'im bi-l-Amr li-Izalat al-Duwal, that is, "he who is to be in charge of eliminating the governments (of the oppressors by militant means)."[32](#)

One of the ambassadors' tasks was to draw complete darkness over the name of the Imam and his whereabouts, not only as regards his foes, but even as regards his followers. Simultaneously the safir had to prove the existence of the Imam to his reliable adherents. This statement can be illustrated by a report of al-Kulayni. 'Abd Allah b. Ja'far al-Himyari once asked the first safir whether or not he had seen the successor of the eleventh Imam. Al'Umari, the safir, confirmed that he had seen him. but he added that people were forbidden to ask about his name, because if the government discovered his name they

would certainly try to arrest him.³³ In this way the first safir led the court of the caliph, al-Mu'tamid, to think that the eleventh Imam had died without a successor.³⁴ According to al-Kulayni's report, the conclusion reached by the 'Abbasids seems to have released the Imamites from the humiliation which they had suffered throughout the time of the previous Imams. The agents of the twelfth Imam began to carry out their activities without being afraid of the authorities, since they were sure of the non-existence of the twelfth Imam, and thus did not bother to investigate the Imamite's activities.³⁵

The activities of the safirs also aimed at protecting the congregation from any more schisms by proving the authenticity of the Imamate of al-'Askari's son. Towards this aim they employed those sayings of the Prophet and the Imams which indicate that the series of Imams will end with the twelfth, who would then go into occultation.³⁶ The four safirs carried out another task in the name of the Imam. They received and collected the taxes which the Imamites had previously paid to their Imams. According to the Imamite sources all the safirs performed miracles before receiving the money so that their adherents would believe in their legitimacy. According to the Imamite belief, whoever proclaimed himself a safir and did not work miracles had lied about the Imam and was driven out of the organization.³⁷

The Tawqi'at (written and signed answers or pronouncements) attributed to the twelfth Imam indicate that he neither gave any statement to elucidate his attitude towards the political and economic situation of his time, nor ordered his followers to implicate themselves in an open political struggle with their rivals, the 'Abbasids. In fact, it is reasonable to agree with Muhammad al-Sadr that by acting in this manner the Imam enabled his partisans to pursue their activities without attracting the attention of the 'Abbasids by statements criticizing their rule.³⁸ Moreover it seems most likely that in following this policy the Imam wanted his agents and propagandists to concentrate their efforts upon strengthening the size and quality of their party, until it developed its political means and ideology to a degree which might enable it to put its goal into action. but the involvement of the agents in an immediate political struggle would have taken place at the expense of an increase in the size and the development of the ideological and political basis of the organization.

3. The Early Career of Uthman b. Sa'id

Most of the Imamite information concerning the activities of the four safirs is attributed to al-Tusi in his work al-Ghayba. The latter depended mainly on two early missing works, that is, Kitab fi Akhbar Abi 'amr wa Abi Ja'far al-'Umariyyayn by Ibn Barina al-Katib, the son

of the granddaughter of the second safir, and Kitab Akhbar al-Wakila al-'Arba a by Ahmad b. Nuh,³⁹ Unfortunately, the work of al-Tusi and other works give very few details concerning the background to the career of the first safir. We know that the latter was Abu 'Amr 'Uthman b. Sa'id al-Umari from the tribe of Asad. Javad 'Ali, whose opinion was followed by Rajkowki, thought that the grandfather of 'Uthman was 'Amr b. Hurayth al-Sayrafi al-Kufi, a well-known Shi'ite from Kufa who belonged to Banu Asad. According to Javed 'Ali, since both belonged to the same tribe, both are known by the epithet al-asadi.⁴⁰ But this cannot be accepted because there is no explicit evidence leading one to link the lineage of the two individuals. Nothing is known about the safir nor of his position in the congregation. Moreover, the year of his birth and the details of his youth have not been handed down.

It is said that at the age of eleven 'Uthman b. Sa'id was contracted to become a servant in the house of the ninth Imam, al-Jawad, and that he never left his service. Later he became his gate-keeper and chamberlain. As the Imam's "right hand", he enjoyed his entire confidence and was entrusted with the execution of all his commissions.⁴¹ 'Uthman b. Sa'id occupied this same position of trust throughout the lifetime of al-Hadi, the tenth Imam⁴², who was watched carefully and suspiciously by the government of the day, so that he even avoided speaking with the individual members of the community. For this reason, al-Hadi presented 'Uthman to those who found it difficult to counter suit him directly. He told them that 'Uthman was his trusted associate and a man of honour, and that whatever he did was done in the Imam's name.⁴³ Furthermore, al-Kashshi's account indicates that during the last ten years of the time of al-Hadi, the leadership of the underground organization (al-Wikala) was in 'Uthman's hands. He organized its internal affairs and systematized the relations between the centre of the organization and its branches in the remote provinces. When the agent, 'Ali b. 'Amr, came to Samarra from Qazwin with money and contacted Faris b. Hatim, without knowing that the latter had been cursed by the Imam in 250/864, 'Uthman quietly moved his lieutenants to save the money and prevented 'Ali b. 'Amr from having contact with Faris b. Hatim.⁴⁴

'Uthman continued to hold this position of trust under the eleventh Imam al-Askari, who appointed him using the same words as had his father. It is reported that al-Askari, who appointed him using the same words as had his father. It is reported that al-'Askari had only informed a few of his followers that 'Uthman b. Sa'id was his agent. However, at one point a group of Yemenite Shiites brought money to al-'Askari, and he revealed to them that 'Uthman was his agent and that his son, Muhammad, would be the agent of the twelfth Imam, al-

Mahdi. [45](#) According to another narration al-'Askari presented his successor to forty reliable Shi'ites, such as al-Hasan b. Ayyub, 'Ali b. Bilal, Ahmad b. Hilal, and 'Uthman b. Sa'id. He informed them that they would not see him again and commanded them to obey 'Uthman during the concealment of the twelfth Imam, because he would be his representative. [46](#) Moreover, during the last illness of the eleventh Imam, 'Uthman looked after him and cared for him. According to al-Tusi, he performed the last rites for the dead man, washed the corpse, wrapped him in his shroud and buried him. For the Imamites these are the unmistakable signs that 'Uthman was the rightful representative safir of the hidden Imam. They contended that 'Uthman did all this on the orders of al-'Askari. [47](#)

4. The Career of the First Safir

The first safir managed to satisfy the prominent Imamites who were already members of the organization that the twelfth Imam was in a state of occultation and thus safe from his enemies, while also convincing them that he was the rightful representative of the Imam.

It appears that his occupation of the leadership of the organization during the time of the tenth and the eleventh Imams encouraged the agents to accept his claim and follow his instructions, without asking him to show a miracle or proof. [48](#) However, the ordinary Imamites, who had nothing to do with the organization, were confused by the occultation of the Imam and, as has been noted, [49](#) held different views concerning the twelfth Imam's successor. Many Imamites refused to pay the khums to 'Uthman b. Sa'id unless he showed, by means of a miracle, that he had been rightfully appointed by the twelfth Imam. This is illustrated by a narrative of al-Kulayni attributed to Sa'd al-Ash'ari al-Qummi:

"Al-Hasan b. al-Nadr, Abu al-Saddam and a number of others spoke together after the death of Abu Muhammad (the eleventh Imam) about the agents and decided to search for the new Imam. Al-Hasan b. Nadr came to Abu al-Saddam and said to him, 'I desire to make the pilgrimage.' Abu al-Saddam said to him, 'Delay it this year.' Al-Hasan b. al-Nadr said to him, 'I am frightened by my dreams, so I must go.' He made Ahmad b. Ya'la b. Hammad his executor. The latter had devoted some money to the Imam, Hearing of al-Hasan's decision, he gave the money to al-Hasan and commanded him not to hand anything over without proof. "

Al-Hasan said, "When I arrived at Baghdad I rented a house. Thereafter an agent brought me clothes and money and entrusted them to me. I said to him, "What is this?" He said to me, "It is what

you see." Then another one brought similar goods, and a third one until they filled the house. Afterwards Ahmad b. Ishaq (the assistant of the safir) brought me all the goods he had. Thus I became confused. But later I received a message from al-Rajul (the Imam), peace be upon him, ordering me to take the goods to al-'Askar (Samarra)... When I arrived there I received a message ordering me to bring the goods (to him). So I loaded them in the baskets of the carriers. When I reached the corridor of his house, I found a black slave standing there. He asked me, "Are you al-Hasan b. al-Nadr?" I said, "Yeas." He replied, "Enter." So I entered the house, and then I entered an apartment, where I emptied the baskets of the carriers... There was a curtain leading to another apartment. Someone called me from behind it, "O al-Hasan b. al-Nadr, praise Allah for His grace is upon you, and do not doubt, for Satan would be pleased if you waver." Thereafter he sent out two garments for me and said, "Take them, because you will need them." So I took them and went out."

Sa'd al-Ash'ari reports that al-Hasan b. al-Nadr departed and died in the month of Ramadan, and the two garments were used as his shroud. [50](#)

This event was a clear proof to al-Hasan, because both his name and his doubts concerning the validity of the agents' activities had been revealed to him. Moreover, according to Sa'd al-Ash'ari, the two garments which al-Hasan had received were a prediction of his death, which occurred a month later. If one studies carefully the circumstances surrounding al-Hasan b. al-Nadr from the time of his decision to investigate the activities of the agents until his death, one can surmise that the agents arranged them so as to remove his doubts. They would have done so because al-Hasan b. al-Nadr was prominent amongst the Imamites of Qumm, [51](#) and his doubts might have affected the Imamites of his area. So perhaps the agents of Qumm informed the safir in Baghdad about his arrival there. This can be understood from the act of Ahmad b. Ishaq and the other agents who brought the clothes to al-Hasan's house and later sent him a letter ordering him to send the goods to Samarra. There, it is reported, he met the Imam, who confirmed for him the validity of the agent's activities. One can discover from this example and many others not quoted here [52](#) the means used by the safir to remove the doubts and confusion of the Imamites brought about by the concealment of their Imam, and to make them obey his instructions. As has already been indicated the safir forbade his partisans to ask about the name of the Imam. Perhaps, their silence along with al-'Askari's last will in which he bequeathed his endowments to his mother and placed her in charge of his affair without referring to his successor [53](#) encouraged the authorities to believe that the Imamites

no longer had an Imam and, therefore, that any Imamite activities were useless. In doing so the safir gained a certain freedom to have communication with the twelfth Imam and his followers. This is illustrated by a statement attributed to the safir:

"The caliph thinks that Abu Muhammad (al-'Askari), peace be upon him, died childless. Thus his estate was divided and given to someone, who had no right in the estate but he (the twelfth Imam) kept quiet. These are his agents carrying out their activities without being afraid that someone would stop them for investigation. If the (Imam's) name is identified, the (authorities) would start searching for (his whereabouts). So, by Allah, do not ask about his name."[54](#)

The belief that al-'Askari had no successor was circulated among some Sunni scholars, such as Abu al-Qasim al-Balkhi (died around 300/912). In his account of the Imamite doctrine, he states, "In our time al-Hasan b. 'Ali died and had no son. Therefore they (the Imamites) became confused."[55](#) Gradually this belief was so disseminated among the non-Imamite circles that leading Sunni scholars such as Ibn Hazm (d. 456/1063) and al-Shahristani (d. 548/1153) were encouraged to view it as a matter of fact.[56](#) Later al-Dhahabi believed that al-'Askari left a son but he disappeared when he was nine years old or less in 265/878, when he entered a cellar (sardab) in Samarra and was not seen again.[57](#) In other words the twelfth Imam died during the lifetime of the first safir. But al-Dhahabi is a later historian, since he died in 748/1347. Moreover he does not give the source of his narration, nor does he state explicitly how al-'Askari's son died even though he presents his information concerning the concealment of the twelfth Imam in the list of people who died in 265/878 to give the impression that he had passed a way in that year. The earliest report concerning the occultation of al-'Askari's son in the cellar is given by al-kanji, who died in 658/1260, but he also does not mention the source of his information.[58](#) It is therefore most likely that al-Dhahabi based his report upon a belief common among the Imamite masses, that the twelfth Imam had hidden himself in the cellar of his house. this belief spread after the fifth/eleventh century and later became popular among certain scholars, such as Ibn Khaldun.[59](#)

Moreover, several reports in the early Imamite sources refute al-Dhahabi's narration and prove that the twelfth Imam was alive after 265/878. Al-Tusi mentions that many of the Imamites received written answers to their letters from the Imam in the same hand-writing as in the letters they used to receive during the lifetime of the first safir,[60](#) and al-Saduq lists thirteen agents and forty-six ordinary Imamites

from numerous cities who claimed to have seen the twelfth Imam both during and after the time of the first safir.[61](#)

From this it is clear that al-Dhahabi's report is based on popular belief rather than upon sound historical facts. So it would be foolish to give credence to his claims concerning the death and occultation of the twelfth Imam.

5. The Opposition to the First Safir

As has been noted the occultation of the Imam resulted in the gradual expansion of the role of the safir. However it also made it easier for a pretender to the deputyship (al-sifara or al-niyaba) to practice his activities among the Imamites at the expense of the Imam's rightful representative. As we have seen this was practiced mainly throughout the period of the short occultation by the extremists (al-Ghulat). That they were extremists is indicated by a number of factors. Firstly, the claimant to the sifara believed in the incarnation of God (hulul),[62](#) Most of the claimants to the sifara from the time of al-Hasan al-Shari'i up until al-Shalmaghani claimed first that they were the agents of the Imam. Then when the Imam excommunicated them, they called people on their own account. Extremists had claimed to be the Imam's representative even before the occultation of the twelfth Imam, but with a slight difference. The claimant would first announce that he was the Gate (Bab) of the Imam, and then claim that he was a prophet. Al-Kashshi mentions many extremists who did so, such as Muhammad b. Furat, al-Qasim al-Yaqtini and 'Ali b. Haska.[63](#)

The third factor indicating that the claimants were extremist is that certain links existed between the extremists active during the time of the tenth and eleventh Imams and the claimants who lived during the time of the short occultation. According to al-Kashshi, 'Ali b. Haska was the teacher of Muhammad b. Musa al-Shari'i, al-Qasim al-Yaqtini and al-Hasan b. Muhammad b. Baba.[64](#) The last of these was a close follower of Muhammad b. Nusayr, who led the extremists' tread during the time of the eleventh Imam, and then claimed that he was the agent of the twelfth Imam.[65](#) Moreover, Ibn Nusayr was supported by some of Banu Furat, the descendants of the extremist Muhammad b. Furat.[66](#) According to al-Tusi, Abu Muhammad al-Hasan al-Shari'i [67](#) was the first to claim falsely to be the Imam's representative during the short occultation, but the Imamites cursed him and refused to accept him. Then the twelfth Imam issued a Tawqi', in which he excommunicated al-Shari'i and announced the falseness of his claim.[68](#) Although al-Shari'i did not achieve immediate success, his following grew in strength and eventually he formed a strong threat to the leadership of the second safir.

6. The Imam's Wikala During the Time of the First Safir

The main problem facing any historian dealing with the period of the short occultation is that most of the activities of the twelfth Imam and his representatives were carried out underground. Perhaps for this reason, the Imamite scholars such as al-Kulayni, 'Abd Allah b. Ja'far al-Himyari, Sa'd al-Ash'ari and al-Hasan b. Musa al-Nawbakhti rarely mention the names of the Imam's agents, or refer to their activities or links with each other: However, they do refer to those of their activities which did not attract the attention of the authorities. Therefore, the historical information concerning the underground activities of the agents is to be found scattered throughout the theological and heresiographical works much more than in the histories. Because of the nature of these works the historical information has taken on a heresiographical form. In addition, both questions asked by the Shi'ites and answers of the twelfth Imam and his safirs were collected during his time, but unfortunately, most of them have been lost. Only a few are extant, especially in works dealing with the concealment (Ghayba). For example the second safir Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. 'Uthman, collected the pronouncements of his father, but his collection is not extant. However, many anecdotes which assist us in discovering the links among the Imam's agents and the nature of their activities have been recorded.

6.1 Iraq: The Centre of the Wikala

After the death of the eleventh Imam, the first safir had not the slightest reason to remain in Samarra, which was then the capital and the headquarters of the troops of the 'Abbasid dynasty, which had opposed the Imams from the very beginning. Perhaps for this reason, 'Uthman b. Sa'id wanted to carry out the activities of the organization beyond the surveillance of the authorities in the capital. Therefore he moved to Baghdad, where he made the area of al-Karkh, which was inhabited by Shi'ites, the centre for the leadership of the organization.⁶⁹ A part of 'Uthman's prudent fear (al-Taqiyya) was to evade the investigation of the regime by not involving himself in any open political or religious arguments. He also disguised himself as a butter-seller (samman) and, used to bring money to the Imam in a butter-sack. Consequently he acquired the nickname al-Zayyar al-Samman.⁷⁰ Al-Kashshi reports that his name was Hafs b. 'Amr al-'Umari,⁷¹ which may have been a pseudonym he used when he held underground meetings with other agents.

It has been noted that the twelfth Imam was sent by his father to Medina in 259/873. However, the first safir made Baghdad the centre of the organization. He followed the traditional geographical divisions of the Islamic provinces in organizing the underground political units

(cells) of the organization. Nevertheless he took into consideration the size of each factional unit, the distance of each area from the capital, and its situation on the main roads.

According to al-Kashshi, 'Uthman b. Sa'id was the head of the Wikala from the time of the eleventh Imam, in the sense that all the revenue sent by the adherents to the Imam through his agents was given in the end of 'Uthman, who in turn handed it over to the Imam.⁷² Many agents were situated below the safir in the ranks of the organization in Baghdad and in the other cities of Iraq, such as Hajiz b. Yazid al-Washsha', Ahmad b. Ishaq al-Ash'ari and Muhammad b. Ahmad b. Ja'far al-Qattan, the last two of whom were the chief assistants of the first safir.

Ahmad b. Ishaq was at first al-'Askar's agent for his endowments (awqaf) in Qumm.⁷³ However, after the death of al-'Askari the sources begin to refer to his activities in Baghdad as assistant to 'Uthman b. Sa'id in the financial affairs of the organization. Al-Kulayni reports that in 260/874 some people from the east doubted the validity of the agents after al-'Askar's death and for this reason they came to Baghdad. Along with other agents Ahmad b. Ishaq managed to remove their doubts.⁷⁴ The first safir may have summoned him from Qumm because he needed his service in Iraq after al-'Askari's death. According to Ibn Rustam al-Tabari, Ahmad b. Ishaq continued his career in the organization in Iraq until his death during the time of the second safir.⁷⁵

Muhammad al-Qattan was the second agent of the safir in Baghdad. In order to hide his activities he disguised himself as a cotton dealer. The agents used to bring money and letters to him hidden in cotton which he then took to the safir.⁷⁶ Ibn Rustam reports that in 261-3/875-6 the people of Dinawar collected 16,000 dinars, which were entrusted to a certain Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Dinawari. At Qarmisin ⁷⁷ he collected 1,000 diners more and some garments. After an intensive search in Baghdad and Samarra, he received in Samarra a letter describing the money and other items and ordering him to take them to 'Uthman b. Sa'id and to follow his instructions. The latter ordered al-Dinawari to hand over the items to al-Qattan.⁷⁸ It is reported that al-Qattan had dealings with an agent in Tus called al-Hasan b. al-Fadl b. Zayd al-Yamani. According to al-Mufid, al-Yamani used to deal with al-Qattan as if he were the safir.⁷⁹ The third agent of the safir in Baghdad was Hajiz. His relations with a large number of agents indicate that he held a high position in the organization. He was perhaps the connecting link between the agents in the eastern provinces and the safir in Baghdad, especially since al-Saduq and al-

Kulayni mention certain persons from the cities of Balkh and Marv who contacted the Imam and his safir through Hajiz. [80](#)

While the first safir seems to have led the affairs of the organization in Baghdad with the help of his three assistants, he may also have directly supervised the activities of his agents in the other main cities, such as al-Mada'in, Kufa, Wasit, Basra and al-Ahwaz. In the last of these the leadership of the Wikala had been in the hands of Banu Mazyar or Mahzayar from the time of the ninth Imam. Al-Kashshi reports that the agent of the Imam in al-Ahwaz, Ibrahim b. Mazyar, had collected a large amount of money. On his deathbed he revealed to his son Muhammad a special secret code and ordered him to hand the money over to the person who would disclose to him his knowledge of this code. Al-Kashshi adds that when Muhammad arrived at Baghdad, al-'Umari the safir came to him and divulged to him the exact code, so he handed the money over to him. [81](#) It is clear from this report that the first safir had already agreed on the code with Ibrahim al-Mazyar so as to save the organization from infiltration and misuse by false agents. According to al-Kulayni and al-Mufid, a few days later Muhammad received a letter of promotion indicating that he was installed in the post of his father in al-Ahwaz. [82](#) This underground system of communication between the safir in Baghdad and the agent in al-Ahwaz was similar to other such systems which existed at this stage between the safir and his other agents in Iraq, such as Banu al-Rakuli in Kufa. [83](#)

6.2 The Second Area: Egypt, the Hijaz and Yemen

The main centre for the organization in this area seems to have been Medina. It is reported that al-'Askari had many agents there amongst the 'Alids (al-Talibiyyin). However, after al-'Askari's death, some of them denied the existence of his son, the twelfth Imam. According to al-Kulayni, those who held that al-'Askari had left a son received letters confirming them in their posts, whereas the deniers did not receive such letters which showed that they were dismissed from their posts in the Wikala. [84](#) Another report indicates that the principal agent in Median in 264/877-8 was Yahya b. Muhammad al-'Aridi. [85](#) Unfortunately, the sources neither explain how the safir in Baghdad used to contact his agents in Hijaz, nor do they referred to the connecting links among the agents of Egypt, Hijaz and Yemen, However, it is most likely that the agents used the occasion of the pilgrimage to communicate with each other. [86](#) But it seems that the safir did not keep in direct contact with his agent in Medina and preferred to employ slaves who were mostly ignorant and irreligious as the connecting link. He did this to keep the attention of the authorities away from such activities. The agents in Egypt followed the

instructions of the agents in Hijaz, especially as regards their contact with the centre in Iraq. Al-Kulayni reports a narration attributed to al-Hasan b. 'Isa al-'Aridi, who was probably the agent in Mecca.⁸⁷ He says that after the death of al-'Askari, an Egyptian came to Mecca with money for the Imam, but was confused because some people held that al-'Askari had died without a son and that the Imam was his brother Ja'far, whereas other people informed him that al-'Askari had, in fact, left a successor. Afterwards he sent a certain person called Abu Talib to Samarra with a letter, probably a recommendation from the agent in Mecca. In Samarra Abu Talib first contacted Ja'far, asking him for proof so that he could accept his Imamate, but Ja'far could not produce any. Therefore he went to the Gate (Bab, deputy), who gave him a strong proof that he was the rightful representative of the new Imam (the twelfth), by revealing to him that his master, the Egyptian, had entrusted him with money to deal with according to his wish. For this reason Abu Talib handed over the money to the Bab and received a letter in reply to his letter.⁸⁸ Perhaps the agent in Mecca had sent forward complete information concerning the case of his Egyptian colleague.

Yemen was a traditional region for Shi'ite tendencies. Al-Hadi had had agents there since 248/862,⁸⁹ and there were agents who had direct contact with 'Uthman b. Sa'id during the time of al-'Askari.⁹⁰

According to al-Kulayni, the chief agent in Yemen during the time of the twelfth Imam was Ja'far b. Ibrahim, who was related to a family working in the Imamite organization in Hamadan, Kufa and Yemen.⁹¹

A report mentioned by al-Najashi indicates that the connecting link between the agents in Yemen and the first safir was 'Alib. Al-Husayn al-Yamani.⁹²

6.3 The Third Area: Azerbaijan and Arran

The third area was Azerbaijan. According to Muhammad al-Safwani,⁹³ the agent there was al-Qasim b. al-'Ala, who had held the post from the time of al-Hadi and who continued his activities from the province of Arran ⁹⁴ during the time of the twelfth Imam. The twelfth Imam remained in touch with al-Qasim until the latter died during the time of the third safir, when his post was given to his son al-Hasan at the twelfth Imam's order. Al-Safwani does not mention the name of the connecting link between the agent of this area and the centre of the organization. However, he states explicitly that al-Qasim b. al-'Ala was in direct contact with the safir in Iraq through a messenger, who used to deal with him without revealing his name.⁹⁵

6.4 The Fourth Area: Qumm and Dinawar

It is well-known that Qumm was a traditional area for the Shi'ites, the

bulk of who were Arab,⁹⁶ and that there were many endowments (awaqaf) for the Imams in Qumm. Therefore, it probably received more attention from the first safir, who used to keep in direct contact not only with the agent of Qumm but also with the other agents in the province of Jabal. The prominent agent in Qumm was 'Abd Allah b. Ja'far al-Himyari,⁹⁷ who remained in this post during the time of the second safir.⁹⁸ Moreover, there were many subagents in numerous cities with a considerable Imamite population, such as Dinarwar, whose agent in 261-3/875-6 was Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Dinawri. The agent in Qurmisin was Ahmad al-Madra'i.⁹⁹

6.5 The Fifth Area: Rayy and Khurasan

Al-Kashshi's account of the situation of the organization during the time of the tenth and the eleventh Imams indicates that the latter had several agents in various cities in Khurasan and the eastern provinces, extending as far as the city of Kabul. Those agents, along with other sub-agents, used to carry out their missions according to the direct instruction of the Imam. For example, al-'Askari sent Ayyub b. al-Nab to Nisapur as his agent.¹⁰⁰ However, the penetration of the movement into remote regions of the east, the rise of the Zaydite state in Tabaristan from 250/864, and the continual military activities of the Khawarij in Sijistan, which caused a great deal of trouble for Imamites,¹⁰¹ all helped make it difficult for al-'Askari to supervise directly the activities in each area. Therefore al-'Askari issued a letter ordering the activities of the agents in Bayhaq and Nisapur to be linked with those of the agents in Rayy so that the two former cities could only receive his instructions from the agent in Rayy, who was to take his orders directly from 'Uthman b. Sa'id in Samarra. According to this letter al-'Askari appointed Ishaq b. Muhammad as his agent in Nisapur, commanding him to pay the dues to Ibrahim b. 'Abda, his agent in Bayhaq and its districts. The latter in turn was commanded to hand the dues to the agent of Rayy, Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Razi or to the person appointed by al-Razi. At the end of his letter the Imam pointed out that all the khums and other taxes which were sent by his followers should be given to 'Uthman b. Sa'id, who would then had them to him.¹⁰² Such a statement reveals that 'Uthman b. Sa'id was at the top of the organization before the death of al-'Askari in 260/874.

After the death of al-'Askari the first safir followed the system of communication which had been practiced before. Several anecdotes reveal that he directed the activities of this area through the agent in Rayy, al-Razi, who in turn directly supervised the activities of the agents in Bayhaq, Nisapur,¹⁰³ and perhaps Hamadan. There were many sub-agents of different ranks below the main agent in each city. Al-Najashi reports a narration which elucidates this system. He

mentions that al-Qasim b. Muhammad al-Hamadani, Bistam b. 'Ali and 'Aziz b. Zuhayr were sub-agents in one place in Hamadan and carried out their task under the instructions and commands of al-Hasan b. Harun b. 'Umran al-Hamadani. [104](#) Al-Najashi does not explain how the latter used to contact the safir. Al-Kulayni, however, reports that Muhammad b. Harun b. 'Umran al-Hamadani, the brother of the agent of Hamadan, made his shops an endowment (waqf) to the twelfth Imam and wanted to hand them over to his agent, whose identity was unknown to him. Thereafter Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Razi, the agent of Rayy, received an order to take these shops as waqf [105](#) in his capacity as wakil for the whole of Iran. This narration reveals that there was a strong link between the agent of Rayy and the agent of Hamadan and that the latter was below al-Razi in the ranks of the organization. [106](#) Since the agents in this area held different ranks within the organization, it is most likely that this system existed in the other areas of the organization as well.

7. The Death of the First Safir

Despite the important role of the first safir, 'Uthman b. Sa'id, no one gives the date of his death. Modern historians have tried to supply plausible dates. Hashim al-Hasani thinks that the deputyship (al-Sifara) of 'Uthman b. Sa'id continued until the year 265/879, [107](#) but he does not give any source for this information. In contrast Javad 'Ali states as follows:

"Twenty years after the withdrawal of the twelfth Imam, in the year 280/893, the first safir died, according to a tawqt', said to have been addressed by the hidden Imam to the son of the first safir and the Shi'ite congregation, in which after expressing sentiments of condolence on the death of such a pious man, the Imam appointed his son Abu Ja'far (Muhammad) as his successor." [108](#)

However, Javad 'Ali relied on al-Tusi, who only indicates that the narrator, Muhammad b. Humam, heard the narration from Muhammad al-Razi in 280/893; he does not cite any date for the death of the first safir. [109](#) Furthermore, it seems that the first safir did not remain in office for a long period, because al-Tusi reports that when Muhammad b. 'Uthman (Abu Ja'far) succeeded his father, a certain Ahmad b. Hilal al-Abarta'i, whose death occurred in 267/880-1, [110](#) denied that Abu Jafar was the safir of the twelfth Imam after his father. [111](#) Hence the death of the first safir must have occurred after 260/874, the date of the death of the eleventh Imam, and before 267/880.

According to Ibn Barina, 'Uthman b. Sa'id was buried on the western side of Baghdad in the Darb Mosque. This mosque takes its name from

its position at Darb Jibla, an avenue in the Maydan stree, [112](#) Al-Tusi confirms Ibn Barina's report when he states that he saw the grave in a place he used to visit every month between the years 404/1013 and 433/1040. [113](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Introduction](#)[Chapter I](#)[Chapter II](#)[Chapter III](#)[Chapter IV](#)[Chapter V](#)[Chapter VI](#)[Chapter VII](#)[Conclusion](#)[Bibliography](#)

CHAPTER V

The underground activities of the second safir of the twelfth Imam

1. The Designation of the Second Safir, abu Ja'far

The second safir was Muhammad. 'Uthman b. Sa'id al-'Umari. His kunya was Abu Ja'far. He carried out his activities first as the agent of the twelfth Imam and then as his safir for about fifty years, having been the principal assistant of his father, the first safir, from the time of the eleventh Imam, al-'Askari. According to al-Tusi, when the first safir died, Abu Ja'far carried out the last rites for the dead man, washed the corpse, clad him in his shroud and buried him. For the Imamites, these are the unmistakable signs that Abu Ja'far was acting as the representative and the safir of the hidden Imam. According to them he did all this at the order of the first safir. Moreover he was promoted to the office of the safira both by the designation of al-'Askari and of the first safir, 'Uthman b. Sa'id, according to the order of the twelfth Imam.[1](#)

After his father's death, Abu Ja'far received a letter of condolence attributed to the twelfth Imam, who offered his sympathy at his father's death and pointed out that he had been installed in his office.[2](#) However, some of the principal agents of the organization had serious reservations and doubts about his designation, as did Muhammad b. Nusayr, the leader of the extremist trend, the Ghulat. So Abu Ja'far did not succeed to his office without encountering certain difficulties.

1.1 Ibn Hilal

Ahmad b. Hilal al-'Abarta'i was one of those who denied the validity of Abu Ja'far's designation. He was born in the year 180/796 in 'Abarta', a village in the district of Askaf near Nahrawan, and died in the year 267/880. It is clear from the numerous references to his name in the chain of transmissions (isnad) of the Imamite narrations that he was a well-known theologian who had narrated most of Shi'ite books of traditions (usul). Beginning in 204/819 he had related several traditions indicating, that the twelfth Imam would be al-Qa'im having first gone into occultation.³ Al-Kashshi reports that he was a pious mystic and an eminent scholar, and some biographers respectfully mention the fact that he undertook fifty-four pilgrimages to Mecca, twenty of them on foot.⁴ According to a letter attributed to the twelfth Imam, Ibn Hilal was one of the most important scholars in Iraq during the time of the first safir and possessed an amount of money belonging to the Imam, which he refused to pay to the second safir.⁵ The Imamite report of his refusal to obey Abu Ja'far's instructions are confused and contradictory so it is rather difficult to discover the true state of affairs. According to al-Najashi Ibn Hilal had already been cursed by al-Askari, who had spoken against him on several occasions.⁶ Sa'd al-Qummi states that he abandoned Shi'ism and embraced the nasb doctrine,⁷ whereas al-Tusi accused him of holding an extremist doctrine (ghulw).⁸

It is clear that the different accusations made against him are attempts to define his beliefs rather than explanations of his dispute with the second safir. Al-Tusi mentions a report attributed to an agent called Muhammad b. Humam, which states that Ibn Hilal denied neither the existence of the twelfth Imam nor the validity of the office of the first safir. When Ibn Hilal was questioned about this by the Imamites, he replied that the Imam had personally installed the first safir, Uthman b. Sa'id, and made this known to all the faithful, but he had not done any such thing for Abu Ja'far.⁹ Because of Ibn Hilal's attitude towards the second safir he was expelled by the Imam in a letter distributed amongst the agents in Iraq which warned that the mystical practices of Ibn Hilal grew from hypocrisy and dissimulation.¹⁰

Despite the fact that the eminent agents of the organization already knew the cause of Ibn Hilal's excommunication, some of the Imamite narrators in Iraq who were not agents were astonished at the excommunication of such a pious mystic, and so they rejected the pronouncement. In fact the considerable support for Ibn Hilal may have been brought about by the Iraqi narrators who did not know about the dispute between Abu Ja'far and Ibn Hilal concerning the

sifara. They asked the agent al-Ala to inquire about the pronouncement against Ibn Hilal, and he put this question in writing to the Imam via the second safir. The Imam replied:

"Ibn Hilal was an incorrigible sinner and Allah will not forgive his sins. He behaved like a stubborn and arrogant person. Moreover, he has kept for himself money given for the Imam and refused to carry out our commands unless they suit his wishes. However we kept our composure until Allah fulfilled our prayer by taking away his soul. Concerning his case, we had informed a few of our close associates (mawali) during his time and ordered them to reveal it to the intimates among our adherents. . . There is no excuse for any of our followers to doubt the statements of our confidantes (thuqatuna), because we reveal these statements to them."**11**

This document shows clearly that Ibn Hilal had died, but that in spite of the Imam's strong criticism of him, the second safir could not completely eliminate the danger he had stirred up for his office. Al-Kashshi reports that a group of people remained firm in their loyalty towards Ibn Hilal and doubted the authenticity of the above pronouncement.**12** In fact the loyalty of this body to Ibn Hilal was mainly based not upon his inward spiritual faith, but upon his external and personal mystic acts. According to the Imamite doctrine, the worship of Allah is invalid without the recognition of and obedience to the Imams.**13** Hence the mystic acts of Ibn Hilal were invalid, because he refused to recognise the second safir, who had been installed by the Imam himself.

According to al-Tusi, the influence of Ibn Hilal continued until the time of the third safir, Ibn Ruh, who circulated another Tawqi on the authority of the Imam against Ibn Hilal:**14** "Although there are those among the Imamites who do not understand how such a great and pious man could have been excommunicated, what is piety if it please Allah to transform good deeds into sins? Al-Dihqan**15** was also a pious man in the service of the Imam, yet Allah eventually changed his faith into impiety because of his arrogance. This also happened to Ibn Hilal"**16**

In fact it is hard to attribute this Tawqi to the time of the third safir Ibn Ruh (305-326/917-937), because during that time there is no trace of the influence of Ibn Hilal's claim upon the Imamates. It is most likely that Ruh circulated this pronouncements against Ibn Hilal on the order of the second safir while he was still working as an agent beneath him especially if one bears in mind that Ibn Hilal died in 267/880 a long time before Ibn Ruh held thee sifara It would appear

that Ibn Hilal challenge had vanished before the death of second safir in 305/917.

1.2 al-Bilali

According to al-Tusi, a second opponent to Abu Ja'far's claim to the sifara was Abu Tahir Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Bilal, who was commonly called al-Bilali. [17](#) He was well known in Imamite circle as a narrator of traditions. [18](#) Furthermore he was amongst the principles agents in Bagdad and has close relations with both the tenth and the eleventh Imam. [19](#) The latter described al Bilali to Ishaq b. Ibrahim al Nisaburi with this phrase: "He is reliable, trustworthy and is acquainted with what he must do." [20](#) Moreover, according to al-Kulayni and al-Saduq, al-Askari twice revealed to al-Bilali the birth if his son, the twelfth Imam: firstly in 258/871 and then three days before his death. [21](#)

However, al-Bilali denied that Abu Ja'far was the safir and claimed that he himself was the agent if the Imam He kept the money of the Imam in his own hands and refused to relinquish it to Abu Ja'far Al-Bilali 's claim led to serious split amongst the Imamates, since a considerable body of Imamites accepted his claim and followed him, such as his brother Abu al-Tayyib and Ibn Hirz. [22](#) But al-Tusi neither fixes the date of this split nor the duration of al-Bilali's claims.

It is most likely that al-Bilali's claim lasted only for a few years after the death of first safir, by which time Abu Ja'far had proved himself to be the rightful safir of the Imam Al-Tusi report that Abu Jafar arranged a secret meeting between al-Bilali and the twelfth Imam to prove to him that he was acting on his behalf Abu Ja'far took him to one of his house where, it is said they met Imam who ordered al-Bilali to hand the money over to Abu Ja'far. [23](#) Al-Tusi report reveals that al-Bilali's importance in the organisation was such that Abu Ja'far had to arrange this secret meeting with the Imam in Baghdad to put an end to the doubts raised by al-Bilali, doubts which had led to a split among the agents. According to al-Tusi, shortly after this meeting Abu Ja'far went to al-Bilali's house, where his close supporters like Ibn Hirz and Abu al-Tayyib were assembled Abu Ja'far asked al-Bilali,

"O Abu Tahir (al-Bilali), I ask you by Allah, did the Sahib al-Zaman (the twelfth Imam), peace be upon him, not command you to hand the money (of the Imam) which you have over to me?" Al Bilali replied, "Yes." Then Abu Ja'far left the house [24](#)

It is clear from this report that by these two steps Abu Ja'far managed to refute I-Bilali's claim. Al-Tusi mentioned one person who abandoned his support of al-Bilali and took Abu Ja'far's side and perhaps other

supporters did likewise, because the existent sources do not refer to any trace of this split during the last years of the second safir time in office, a fact which probably indicates that it had ended.

1.3 Muhammad b. Nusayr

A third rival to Abu Ja'far for the office of the safira was Muhammad b. Nusayr who was not an ordinary Imamite, but belonged to the extremists, (al-Ghulat). It has been noted that some of the extremist, first during the time of ninth Imam (such as Ja'far b. Waqid Abu al-Ghamr and Hashim b. Abi Hashim), then during the time of the eleventh and the twelfth Imams (such as Ali b. Haska) al-yaqtini al-Hasan b. Muhammad b. Baba al Qummi and Muhammad b. al- Shariqi or al-Shari) had claimed that they were the Gates (Abwab) of the Imam and had collected money from the ordinary believers. They also preached extremist ideas aimed at abolishing the Islamic rites, that is, the prayer, fast, zaqat and pilgrimage.

According to al-Kashshi their roots lay in the extremist doctrines of Ibn Abi al-Khattab, [25](#) the contemporary of the sixth Imam al-Sadiq. However the presence of the Imams had limited activities of the extremists, since the Imams used to have direct contacts with their followers and circulated open letters of the excommunication against false agents. But the occultation of the twelfth Imam enabled the Gulat to extend their role as agents or Gates (Abwab) at the expense of the safir, since the safir could not refute their claim by declaring publicly that he was the true Imam's safir, a declaration which might put his life and the Imam's life in danger. For this reason, when al-'Askari died, Muhammad b. Musa al-Shari'i claimed - as has been noted - that he was the Gate (Bab) of the Imam. According to al-Tusi, after the death of al-Shari'i, Muhammad b. Nusayr al-Numayri aspired to the office of the safir. [26](#) This shows that both men may have been representatives of a single trend. According to al-Kashshi, Ibn Nusayr had already claimed that he was the Bab of the tenth Imam. [27](#) Al-Tusi's account suggests that he had abandoned this claim during the lifetime of the eleventh Imam, al-'Askari. It seems that only after the death of the first safir did he dispute the legality of Abu Jafar as the safir and claim that he was the Bab of the twelfth Imam. Therefore Abu Ja'far cursed and excommunicated him. Having been excommunicated, Ibn Nusayr tried to make Abu Ja'far change his mind, but he did not even receive him, so the Imamites excluded him from their community. [28](#)

Ibn Nusayr was encouraged in his claim by Muhammad b. Musa b. Furat, who belonged to the well-known family of Banu Furat. [29](#) He was a well-known muhaddith in Kufa and Baghdad and seems to have

been the first man from Banu Furat to hold an important administrative office in the 'Abbasid government.³⁰ With the support of Banu Furat, Ibn Nusayr was able to circulate his claim amongst the Imamites, and because of the participation of the two of them, their sect was known as "al-Numayriyya al-Furatiyya".³¹ The vast majority of their followers who came from Mada'in, and were called al-Ishaqiyya after one of their leaders, Ishaq b. Muhammad al-Ahmar.³²

It appears that Ibn Nusayr's claims neither weakened Abu Ja'far's position nor attracted any of his followers to Ibn Nusayr's side, so the latter's influence must have been limited mainly to the extremists. According to al-Nawbakhti a certain Ahmad was supposed to have been designated as the successor of Ibn Nusayr, but a Nusayri work refers to a certain Muhammad b. Jundab as Ibn Nusayr's successor in the view of the majority of the Nusayriyya. It is said that he was in turn followed by Muhammad al-Junbulani.³³ But this occurred at a later stage after the death of the second safir in 305/917, so it is beyond the topic of this section. However, it is worth mentioning that, from the time of second safir onwards, the followers of Ibn Nusayr separated themselves totally from the direct control of the second safir, Abu Ja'far, who in the Imamite view was the only representative of the hidden Imam. Moreover the Nusayriyya gave more importance to the role of the Bab than to the Imam himself, which was proof enough to place them outside the circle of the Twelver Imamites.

2. The Activities of Abu Ja'far, the Second Safir

2.1 The Career of Abu Ja'far

Despite the difficulties faced by Abu Ja'far because of the false agents Ibn Hilal, al-Bilali and Ibn Nusayr, he continued to direct the underground activities of the organization, extending its role amongst the Imamites. At the same time he followed in the first safir's footsteps by trying to prove the existence of the concealed Imam to the reliable Imamites. He wrought to circulate amongst them the idea that the Imam's occultation had taken place because of divine intervention, that it was a vindication of the traditions related by the previous Imams, and that he, Abu Ja'far, was the rightful safir of the hidden Imam. Furthermore, he sought to make it possible to continue his duties without being harassed by this encouraging the belief of the authorities, originally fostered by the first safir, that al-'Askari had died without leaving a successor.³⁴ He hoped that the government would therefore relax, content in the belief that an uprising was unlikely, because the Imamites no longer had an Imam to rally and lead them.

The dual plan of Abu Ja'far as regards the existence of the hidden Imam can be seen in several narrations. At one time, a certain Hamdan al-Qalansi asked Abu Ja'far about al-'Askari's successor. Abu Ja'far replied, "Al-'Askari has died, but he has left amongst you a successor whose neck is like this", [35](#) and he indicated the size of his neck as a sign that al-'Askari's son had attained maturity. According to al-Saduq, Abu Ja'far made the same statement to the well-known scholar 'Abd Allah b. Ja'far al-Himyari, when the latter asked him about al-'Askari's sons. [36](#) Furthermore on another occasion Abu Ja'far informed him as follows:

"The Sahib al-Amr (the Imam) attends the pilgrimage every year and sees the people and knows them, while they see him but do not recognise him." He added that he had seen the Imam at al-Ka'ba holding its drapes and praying, "O Allah, avenge me against my enemies." [37](#)

However, despite the fact that Abu Ja'far revealed the existence of the twelfth Imam to al-Himyari, he warned him against trying to discover his name. The authorities were content that al-'Askari had died without leaving a successor [38](#), but if they were to come to know the name of the Imam and his whereabouts, they would search for him and endanger both his life and the life of his agents. [39](#) Other reports indicate that the second safir instructed other agents similarly.

A careful study of the activities of the agents reveals that the second safir managed in fact to keep the existence of the hidden Imam secret from the 'Abbasids until the early years of the reign of al-Mu'tadid (278-89/891-901). Perhaps this was due to the wise instructions issued to his agents by Abu Ja'far who, as a part of his prudent fear (Taqiyya), carried out his activities unnoticed and in secret. Like his father before him he disguised himself as a butter-seller and acquired the nickname al-Samman. [40](#) He used pseudonyms in his underground meetings with some of his agents. According to al-Kashshi, Abu Ja'far's name was Muhammad b. Hafs al-'Umari [41](#) whereas his real name was Muhammad b. 'Uthman b. Sa'id, and it might be that the first name was a pseudonym. Furthermore a careful study of the chain of transmitters (asanid) of the Prophetic traditions and the sayings of the Imams shows that there is no reference to his name as a narrator, whereas most of the Taqqi'at (written and signed answers or pronouncements) attributed to the eleventh and twelfth Imams concerning legal matters came on the authority of Abu Ja'far [42](#). This fact reveals that he did not wish to implicate himself in any open discussions of religious matters, so that he could hide his real position amongst the Imamites from the government and convey

communications between the hidden Imam and his followers, free from the interference of the authorities.

2.2 The Agents of the Second Safir in Baghdad

It had been noted that the first safir had three agents in Baghdad, Ahmad b. Ishaq, Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Qattan, and Hajiz al-Washsha'. It appears that the responsibilities of the second safir, Abu Ja'far, were greater than that of the first, since according to al-Tusi he had ten people beneath him in Baghdad to run the affairs of the organization. Amongst them was al-Husayn b. ruh al-Nawbakhat, who later became the third safir.⁴³ Al-Tusi does not name the other agents, but it is most likely that the three agents of the first safir were amongst them, since these three served the organization in Baghdad during the time of the second safir, who had direct contact with them.⁴⁴

Al-Qattan was the most active amongst the agents in Baghdad. According to al-Saduq, he had seen the Imam⁴⁵. Al-Kashshi describes his reliability when he relates that, "After Abu Ja'far, there was no one on earth closer to the origin (the Imam) than he",⁴⁶ because he used to be the direct mediator between the Imam and the Imamites via the second safir, although the Imamites had no knowledge whatsoever of his relationship with Abu Ja'far. Perhaps for his reason a certain agent called al-Hasan b. al-Fadl, who used to deal with al-Qattan concerning legal affairs, thought that he was the safir.⁴⁷

The available sources make it rather difficult to detect the names of the rest of the agents in Baghdad, particularly if one bears in mind the fact that Abu Ja'far continued in his office for about fifty years. It is therefore probable that some of the agents, like Ahmad b. Ishaq. Al-Qattan and Hajiz, had died and been replaced by other agents. Ibn Rustam al-Tabari reports that Ahmad b. Ishaq died in Hilwan on his way to Qumm, but he does not fix the date of his death.⁴⁸ According to al-Saduq, when Hajiz died his office was filled by Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Asadi al-Razi.⁴⁹ Al-Qattan seems to have continued his activities after the years 279-282/891-894, when the government tried to arrest him after discovering the existence of the twelfth Imam.⁵⁰ He also carried out his activities during al-Mu'tadid's regime (279-289/891-901).⁵¹ but there is no reference to him after that period, which may indicate that he died around that date. Al-Tusi gives several accounts of the last will of the will of the second safir in 305/917 which includes the names of the eminent agents at that time. He reports:

"During Abu Ja'far's last illness, the heads of the Shi'a congregated

around him. Among them were Abu 'Ali b. Humam, Abu 'Abd Allah b. Muhammad al-Katib, Abu 'Abd Allah al-Baqtani, Abu Sahl Isma'il b. 'Ali al-Nawbakhti. Abu 'Abd Allah al-Wajna, and other leaders. They asked him, "If something happens to you, who will succeed you?" He said to them, "This is Abu al-Qasim al-Husayn b. Ruh b. Abi Bahr al-Nawbakhti. He will be in charge of my office and will be the safir between you and the Sahib al-Amr (the Imam), because he is his agent and is honest and trustworthy. So consult him in your matters, and depend on his in your needs, because I was ordered to announce this proclamation."[52](#)

According to another narration Ibn Ruh and Ahmad b. Ja'far b. Matil were amongst those who attended this meeting. The agents thought that, in the case of the death of the second safir, either Ja'far b. Ahmad b. Matil or his father would succeed him, because of their close relations with him.[53](#)

These two reports disclose the names of the chief agents of Baghdad around the year 304-5/916-7 and the fact that the agents Ahmad b. Ishaq, Hajiz and al-Qattan, who had been in office in Baghdad from the time of the first safir, had died, as has already been mentioned. Likewise they show that some of the other agents from the time of the first safir were still living and had been promoted to high ranks, like al-Baqtani and al-Wajna.[54](#)

2.3 The Relationship of the Second Safir to the Agents in the other Provinces

Apart from his agents in Baghdad, Abu Ja'far had other agents in various provinces, who were mediators between the provincial Imamites and the twelfth Imam in legal inquiries and the collecting of the khums.

He had three principal agents in Iraq. His agent in Kufa was Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Zajawzji, whose family had controlled this office since the time of the first safir and who was to hold this office during the time of the third safir.[55](#) According to al-Tusi and al-Najashi, the twelfth Imam also had contacts in Kufa with two people from the family of Zurara: Muhammad b. Sulayman (237-300/851-912),[56](#) and his uncle 'Ali b. Sulayman, who died around the year 313/925.[57](#) It seems that they were in fact cooperating with al-Zajawzji and were working under his instruction in their areas. The family of Zurara had been well-known for their allegiance to the Imams from the time of their great-Grandfather Zurara b. A'yun (d. 150/767), the companion of the Imams al-Baqir and al-Sadiq,[58](#) His grandson Sulayman had been the agent of the tenth Imam, al-Hadi, both in Kufa and Baghdad.

Furthermore, Ahmad, the son of Muhammad b. Sulayman, worked during the time of the third safir under Ahmad al-Zajawzji, [59](#) which indicates the close relationship between the latter and the family of Zurara.

In al-Ahwaz the deputyship of the Imam was still in the hands of Muhammad b. Ibrahim al-Mahzayar. It is said that he received an order from the Imam to follow the instructions of the second safir. [60](#) According to al-Saduq one member of this family, Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Mahzayar, doubted the existence of the twelfth Imam. His case was raised with the Imam, who issued a letter in which he confirmed that Allah would remove his doubt and lead him to recover his faith. [61](#) The second safir extended his activities to new areas. According to al-Saduq his main agents in Wasit were Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah al-Ha'iri and al-Hasan b. Muhammad b. Qatat al-Saydalani. The latter was the Imam's agent for endowments (wakil al-waqf) in Wasit, and was contacted by the safir through Ja'far b. Muhammad b. Matil. [62](#) Al-Mawsil was another areas in which the second safir gained partisans, and al-Tusi mentions a certain Muhammad b. al-Fadl al-Mawsili, who had accepted Abu Ja'far as the safir of the Imam. [63](#) Abu Ja'far himself succeeded in attracting some influential people to his side in that area. Al-Irbili reports that al-Husayn b. Hamdan (from the famous ruling family, the Hamdanids) became the governor of Qumm in 296/908. After he had been dismissed from his office, he contacted the second safir in Baghdad. He paid him the khums on all the money he had earned while in office as a sign of his obedience to the twelfth Imam. As a result of his belief, the rest of his family also converted to the Imamite doctrine. [64](#)

In Samarra the agent was Abu al-Qasim al-Hasan b. Ahmad. According to al-Saduq, he had direct contact with both the second safir and the Imam. [65](#) Meanwhile all the affairs of the Imamites' institutions in Iran were controlled by the agent of Rayy, Muhammad b. Ja'far b. Muhammad al-Asadi al-Razi. He had direct contact with the second safir and previously he had been answerable only to the first safir. The other agents of the Iranian provinces were instructed to pay the legal taxes to him. He continued in this office until his death in 312/924. [66](#) According to al-Tusi, at this time al-Qasim b. al-'Ala was the agent of the second safir in Azerbaijan. He continued in his office until the time of the third safir, Ibn Ruh. [67](#)

The second safir carried out extensive secret activities with his agents, whom he used to meet in various districts of Baghdad. During the period of the caliph al-Mu'tadid (279-289/892-901) the agents from the remote provinces like Qumm used to contact the second safir and

convey money and goods to him through traders who had no knowledge of the relationship between those who sent the goods and Abu Ja'far as the second safir. On the contrary they brought these goods from Qumm to Abu Ja'far thinking that he was involved with the traders only commercially.[68](#)

In his relationship with his agents Abu Ja'far was careful to leave no trace which the authorities could use against him and which would jeopardise both his own life and that of the Imam. Al-Saduq reports a secret meeting between Abu Ja'far and Ibn Matil, one of the ten agents in Baghdad. Abu Ja'far took Ibn Matil to a ruin al-Abbasiyya in Baghdad,[69](#) where read a letter written to him by the twelfth Imam and then tore it to pieces.[70](#) To evade any government spies Abu Ja'far also did not implicate himself in any direct contact with agents from remote provinces. He used to order any person who brought letters or money to put them in a certain place, and he would give him no receipt.[71](#)

Another narration indicates that the second safir had established a complicated system of communications between himself and the agents in the Imamite areas. There seems to have been a secret code reserved for the safir and his agents, while the messengers were sometimes ignorant of both the contents of their messages and the code. For example, Abu Ja'far once sent message to Samarra with one of his reliable partisans, but the messenger inserted a letter amongst the other messages without the safir's knowledge. In Samarra he received answers to all the letters except his own.[72](#)

The second safir sometime dealt directly with certain agents with whom he had previously communicated indirectly. The career of Muhammad b. Ali al-Aswad is a good example of such a case. According to al-Saduq, al-Aswad used to bring the legal taxes for the Imam to Abu Ja'far, who commanded him to hand them over to the well-known scholar al-Abbas b. Ma'ruf al-Qummi,[73](#) and did not offer him any receipt.[74](#) However, we latter find al-Aswad dealing directly with the second safir and the third safir, who both received in person the money which al-Aswad had collected from the Imamites.[75](#)

3. The Effect of the Shi'its Revolutionary Activities upon the 'Abbasids' Attitude towards the twelfth Imam

3.1 The events of the second safir's career suggest that he instructed his agents to avoid any act which might lead the government of the day to think that the Imamites still had political aspirations or that they had an Imam leading them secretly. Despite the fact that he

directed the Imamites to maintain this policy, the political activities of the other Shi'ite groups, particularly the Zaydites, the Qaramita and the Isma'ili, complicated the Imamites' relations with the Abbasids and made it difficult for them to keep the existence of the twelfth Imam totally concealed from their opponents. When the Zanj revolution (255-270/866-883) was taking place the situation of the Imamites was critical. The leader of that revolution, Ali b. Muhammad, traced his lineage to the brother of Imam al-Baqir, Zayd b. Ali. For this reason a considerable group of Alids joined his side and participated in his uprising from the year 257/871.⁷⁶ In spite of the fact that the eleventh Imam, al-Askari, had openly announced that the leader of the Zanj was not a member of the People of the House (Ahl al-Bayt),⁷⁷ the authorities considered this revolution to be linked with the Alids. According to al-Tabari, the collapse of the Zanj revolt in 270/883 was followed by governmental propaganda against the Alids in general. This attitude can be discerned in the poem of Yahya b. Muhammad al-Aslami, who praised the Abbasid leader al-Muwaffaq in 270/883 with this verse:

ويتلى كتاب الله في كل مسجد
ويلقى دعاء الطالبين خاسئاً

And the Book of Allah is recited in every mosque, and the Talibiyyin invite people to their cause in vain.⁷⁸

It is most likely that the Abbasid antagonism towards extreme Shi'ite groups extended also to the Imamites. According to al-Tusi, the Imamites were too frightened to express their doctrine openly between the years 270-273/883-887.⁷⁹

Another factor which strained relations between the Imamites and the Abbasids was the discovery of the underground activities of the two Isma'ili parties, the original Isma'ilis and the Qaramita.⁸⁰ Like the Imamites, the Isma'ilis had reported the Prophetic traditions stating that al-Qa'im al-Mahdi would go into occultation as a preparatory action for his rising.⁸¹ However, they interpreted some of these traditions in a manner, which would support their struggle to gain immediate success in North Africa (al-Maghrib). Thus they understood the tradition which states that al-Qa'im al-Mahdi will appear when the sun rises from the place of its setting to mean that the Qa'im would rise in the west (al-Maghrib).⁸² Furthermore they applied other traditions narrated by the Imamites about al-Qa'im al-Mahdi to their own concealed leader, who had organized his followers into a strong underground movement and had commanded them to extend their

activities into new areas by military means to prepare for his rising as al-Qa'im al-Mahdi.⁸³ According to Sa'd al-Ash'ari the number of the Qaramita increased in the villages around Kufa, and according to al-Nawbakhti, they gained about 100,000 partisans there.⁸⁴ Afterwards they expanded their propaganda on the western shores of the Gulf and Yemen, where a large number of Arabs accepted their cause, thus helping them to become powerful. As a result of all this they announced their rebellion,⁸⁵ which according to al-Tabari occurred in the suburbs of Kufa in 279/891.⁸⁶

In the occultation of the twelfth Imam the Isma'ilis seem to have found a good opportunity to use the Imamite masses in their political struggle. According to Ibn al-Athir, the Qaramita missionary Yahya b. al-Mahdi went to Bahrain, which had a large Shi'ite population. In 281/894 he contacted an eminent Shi'ite leader, Ali b. al-Mu'alla b. Hamdan, and informed him that he had been sent by al-Mahdi to inform his followers that his rising was at hand. Ali b. al-Mu'alla was satisfied with the message and revealed it to the Shi'ites in the town of Qatif and other villages of Bahrain. They in turn accepted it and promised that they too would support al-Mahdi if he rose. By such means the Qaramita succeeded in circulating their propaganda among the Arab tribe of Qays and began to collect the Khums.⁸⁷ By using the same methods, they expanded their activities among the tribes of Asad, Tayy and Tamim in the Sawad; while in the desert of the Samawa, the tribe of Banu al-Ulays, which used to protect the trade route between Kufa and Damascus, also joined their side.⁸⁸

It is worth mentioning that the Qaramita took into consideration the sectarian beliefs and economic situation of the people with whom they worked. Therefore we find that their propaganda spread mainly among the people who already had Shi'ite inclinations, such as the Qarmatiyyun, who had participated in the Zanj revolt,⁸⁹ and also among the people of the Sawad,⁹⁰ who wished to join the side of any rebel in order to improve their social and economic conditions.

There is evidence that the Qaramita permitted their followers to kill their opponents and confiscate their property.⁹¹ The Imamites seem to have been aware of the danger of such a principle, since the Abbasid government might accuse them of holding the same principle and it could be easy for it to attack them under this pretext. Since both the Qaramita and the Imamites were Shi'ites and lived in the same areas, practicing the same religious rites, expecting the rise of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi in the near future, it was difficult for the government to differentiate between them without extensive and careful investigation.

3.2 The twelfth Imam wanted to protect his followers from the influence of the Qaramita and make the government of the day differentiate between the Qaramita and his own adherents. Perhaps this is why he is said to have sent a letter to his second safir, in which he denounced and cursed Muhammad b. Ali Zaynab and his followers (the Qaramita). He declared that he had no relations with them and ordered his followers neither to have any discussion with them nor to attend their gatherings. The second safir circulated the pronouncement of the Imam among the Imamites via his agent Ishaq b. Ya'qub.⁹² It seems most likely that the Imamites obey the instructions in the pronouncement. According to Ibn al-Athir, a group of people from Kufa revealed to the Abbasid authorities the underground activities of the Qaramita in their area and informed them that they were inventing rules contrary to Islamic law, according to which it was permissible to murder any Muslim other than those who paid them an oath of allegiance.

Ibn al-Athir also reports that latter a group of Talibiyyun fought beside the government against the Qaramita in Kufa.⁹³ It is plausible that in both of these instances these groups were Imamites, and these steps were part of their plan to make the 'Abbasids realize in a practical way that they were not responsible for the Qaramita's activities.

However, there is evidence that the 'Abbasids paid no attention to the Imamite claims.⁹⁴ The period of al-Mu'tadid (279-289/892-901) was distinguished as one of oppression and pursuit for the Imamites. It is well known among the Sunni Scholars like al-Ash'ari that the Imamites had achieved a consensus in respect of the prohibition of any militant revolution unless the Imam himself appeared and ordered them to such action.⁹⁵ But the Propaganda of the Qaramita concerning the rise of al-Qa'im al-Mahdi seems to have encouraged the government to link their activities with the occultation of the twelfth Imam and to consider them as a preparation for his rising. They were certainly encouraged in this direction by the fact that the cousins of the twelfth Imam, Muhsin b. Ja'far b. 'Ali al-Hadi involved himself in the Qaramita's rebellion in Damascus.⁹⁶

This critical situation gave the opponents of the Imamites a vital weapon, which the viziers used not only against the Imamites but also against their own colleagues who were anti-Shi'ite.⁹⁷ In 278/891 the caliph, al-Mu'tamid, ordered the arrest of a member of the Imamite family Banu Furat who had held the office of Diwan al-Sawad. The family members hid themselves, but Abu Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Furat was still arrested.⁹⁸ In the same time al-Mu'tamid, appointed

'Ubayd Allah b. Sulayman, who was well-known for his anti-'Alid attitude,⁹⁹ to the office of the wizar. ¹⁰⁰ If one can link the uprising of the Qaramita in 278/891 with these two steps - taking into account the attitude of 'Ubayd Allah b. Sulayman - one can claim that 'Ubayd Allah's appointment was part of the precautions taken by the 'Abbasids against Shi'ite activities in general.

Afterward, al-Mu'tadid carried out a careful investigation of Shi'ite underground cells in general. In 282/895 he discovered that Muhammad b. Zayd, the head of the Zaydite state in Tabaristan, was sending 32,000 dinars every year to Muhammad b. Ward al-'Attar so that he could distribute the money among the 'Alids in Baghdad, Kufa, Mecca and Medina.¹⁰¹ The continual investigations of al-Mu'tadid caused the arrest and murder of many 'Alids; according to al-Isfahani they were not Qaramita, but were simply persecuted under that pretext.¹⁰²

As a result of these measures, the authorities realized that the Imamites had their own organization. According to al-Kulayni the spies of the vizier 'Ubayd Allah b. Sulayman discovered that the Imamites still had an Imam who guided their activities secretly. Al-Kulayni reports:

"Al-Husayn b. al-Hasan al-'Alawi said that two intimates of Badr Hasani (the servant of the caliph) were talking and one of them said, 'Why, he (the twelfth Imam) is collecting money and has agents, wukala.' Afterwards they named all the agents in all the districts. Then they reported this information to the vizier 'Ubayd Allah b. Sulayman, who endeavoured to arrest them. But the caliph (al-Mu'tadid) told him to search for the place of this man (the Imam), because this matter was important. 'Ubayd Allah b. Sulayman said, 'Let us arrest the agents.' But the caliph said, 'No, but infiltrate among them some spies who are unknown (in their service to the government), and ask them to give money to the agents. Then arrest anyone who accepts the money.'¹⁰³

Al-Kulayni does not mention the date of this incident, but we know that 'Ubayd Allah b. Sulayman continued in the service to the caliph al-Mutadid until the year 288/900, so this incident must have taken place between the years 282-288/895-900.

It is clear from this report that the 'Abbasid spies had reached the conclusion that the eleventh Imam al-'Askari had in fact left a successor, who directed the underground activities of his agents; but they were unsure of his place of residence. So they tried to arrest

some of his agents and partisans, hoping that by interrogating them they might also arrest the twelfth Imam. For this reason, the caliph ordered that spies be sent with money to infiltrate amongst the agents. However, it seems that the safir's network was so strong and worked so efficiently that his agents from near and far knew at once that the caliph and his vizier planned to act against them. Before the plan to arrest the agents of the Imam could be executed an order to stop the collection of taxes had gone out to almost every agent. When a spy infiltrated as far as the main agent in Baghdad, Muhammad al-Qattan, and informed him that he had money and wanted to send it to the Imam, al-Qattan pretended that he knew nothing about this matter. The other agents acted similarly. **104** It appears that the caliph failed to obtain any information from his spies. Therefore he decided to try to gather information by arresting the Imamites who came to visit the tomb of al-Hir, where al-Husayn was buried, and the tombs of Quraysh, where the seventh and the ninth Imams were buried. However, according to the Imamite sources, this plan was revealed to the Imamites, and an order was sent out to both the families of Banu Furat and al-Barsiyyin, warning them not to visit the tombs of Quraysh in Baghdad. **105**

According to al-Rawandi, a report came to the caliph revealing that the twelfth Imam was staying in the house of his father in Samarra. The caliph did not want knowledge of his information to reach the hands of the Imamites, so he himself dispatched three of his personal soldiers to Samarra. He described that house of al-'Askari to them and commanded them to enter it and kill whomever they found inside, but he did not reveal to them the name of the person whom they were going to murder. However, the twelfth Imam managed to evade the soldiers, and they returned to the capital. **106**

The hostile 'Abbasid attitude towards the agents of the second safir continued after 'Ubayd Allah b. Sulayman's death in 288/900. His office was given to his son al-Qasim. The latter was well-known in his hatred toward the Imamites and the Shi'ites in general. Throughout his service in followed the same policies of his father towards the Imamites and showed more malevolence. Al-Tusi gives report supporting this point: Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah of Qumm, who had seen the Imam and had obvious Imamite inclinations, attracted the attention of the vizier al-Qasim b. 'Ubayd Allah. On several occasions he tried to murder him, so he finally fled to Egypt. **107** According to Ibn al-Jawzi, al-Qasim arrested many innocent 'Alids on the pretext that they had Qarmatian inclinations, and they remained in jail until 291/903. **108**

