

Foundations of an Islamic Art of Warfare: *Mukhtaṣar fī Siyāsat al-Ḥurūb* and the Making of the Abbāsīd Military Doctrine

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Abstract

Objectives: This article examines the ninth-century treatise *Mukhtaṣar fī Siyāsat al-Ḥurūb* (*A Compendium on the Management of Warfare*), attributed to Abū Saʿīd al-Ḥarṭhamī al-Shaʿrānī (3rd century AH/9th century CE), as one of the earliest Muslim manuals of governance and warfare. It situates the text within the vibrant era of the early ʿAbbāsīd rule and demonstrates how creed, law, and politics intersect in the articulation of military doctrine.

Methodology: The study employs a multidisciplinary approach, combining philological analysis of the *Mukhtaṣar* with historical contextualisation. Doctrinal comparison with Abū Ḥanīfah’s *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar* identifies shared principles of agency. A comparative framework situates the treatise within the “Mirror for Princes” tradition, contrasting it with al-Māwardī’s *Al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah* and Niẓām al-Mulk’s *Siyar al-Mulūk*. Finally, secondary scholarship establishes its unique contribution to Muslim military thought.

Findings: The *Mukhtaṣar* frames warfare not merely as a technical enterprise but as both a strategic discipline and a creedal duty. It grounds military command in *taqwā* (God-conscious piety), justice, and discipline; rejects excess, vengeance, and plunder; and attributes victory to *qadar* (divine decree) while affirming human accountability through *kasab* (human acquisition of divinely created acts).

Originality: The study positions the *Mukhtaṣar* as a distinctively Sunnī articulation of military thought and a doctrinal turning point in Islamic intellectual and military history, challenging the marginalisation of Islamic military writings as derivative and highlighting their contribution to the broader tradition of theology-based political and strategic thought.

Keywords: ʿAbbāsīd Statecraft; Divine Decree (*Qadar*); Ethics of Leadership; Islamic Military Tradition; Moral Accountability in Warfare

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أسس فن الحرب في الإسلام: رسالة «مختصر في سياسة الحروب» وتشكل العقيدة العسكرية في العصر العباسي

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ملخص البحث

أهداف البحث: يتناول هذا البحث كتاب مختصر في سياسة الحروب، المنسوب إلى أبي سعيد الحرثمي الشعрани (القرن الثالث الهجري/ التاسع الميلادي)، بوصفه من أوائل المؤلفات الإسلامية في فنون الحكم وتدير الحرب. ويهدف إلى وضع النص في سياق ترسيخ العقيدة السنية في العصر العباسي المبكر، وبيان كيفية تداخل العقيدة والشريعة والسياسة في صياغة النظرية العسكرية. منهج البحث: يعتمد البحث منهجاً متعدد التخصصات يجمع بين التحليل الفيلولوجي لـ«المختصر» والسياق التاريخي. ويحدد مبادئ الفعل والمسؤولية المشتركة في مقارنة عقديّة مع «الفقه الأكبر» لأبي حنيفة. ويضع إطاراً تحليلياً مقارناً للرسالة ضمن تقليد «مرايا الملوك»، موازناً إياها مع «الأحكام السلطانية» للهاوردي و«سير الملوك» لنظام الملك. وأخيراً، يبرز استعراض الدراسات الثانوية مدى إسهام العمل الفريد في الفكر العسكري الإسلامي. النتائج: يصوّر المختصر الحرب ليس بوصفها فناً تقنياً فحسب، بل كعلم استراتيجي وواجب عقدي في آن واحد. فهو يربط القيادة العسكرية بالتقوى والعدل والانضباط، ويرفض الإفراط والانتقام والنهب، وينسب النصر إلى القدر الإلهي، مع تأكيد المسؤولية الإنسانية من خلال مفهوم الكسب. أصالة البحث: يبرز البحث المختصر باعتباره صياغة سنية متميزة للفكر العسكري ونقطة تحول عقديّة في التاريخ الفكري والعسكري الإسلامي. ومن خلال إظهار التلاقي بين العقيدة والأخلاق وعلم الحرب في هذا النص المبكر، يؤكد البحث إسهام المؤلفات العسكرية الإسلامية في ترسيخ تقاليد الفكر السياسي والاستراتيجي القائم على العقيدة. الكلمات المفتاحية: السياسة العباسية، القدر، أخلاقيات القيادة، التراث العسكري الإسلامي، المسؤولية الأخلاقية في الحرب

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1. Introduction

Mukhtaṣar fī Siyāsat al-Ḥurūb (*A Compendium on the Management of Warfare*),¹ attributed to Abū Saʿīd al-Ḥarthamī al-Shaʿrānī (fl. early third century AH/ninth century CE), is a concise manual on the conduct and administration of war. Its existence is attested in Ibn al-Nadīm's (d. 990 CE) *Kitāb al-Fihrist* (*Book of Catalogue*), which also records another work by al-Ḥarthamī, *Kitāb al-Ḥiyāl fī al-Ḥurūb* (*The Book of Stratagems in War*), reportedly composed for Caliph Abū al-ʿAbbās ʿAbd-Allāh al-Māmūn (r. 813–833).² Ibn al-Nadīm praises its organisation and precision, describing its structure as detailed.³ The *Mukhtaṣar* remains one of the few extant treatises to present a systematic account of the ethics, logistics, and responsibilities of leadership in warfare within an Islamic framework. Concise yet carefully structured, it articulates a doctrine of war shaped by the outlook of a practitioner embedded in the institutions and political culture of the early ʿAbbāsid caliphate. Despite its significance, the *Mukhtaṣar* has received little sustained scholarly attention. Histories of military thought continue to privilege Graeco-Roman, Chinese, and later European traditions, often relegating Islamic contributions to the margins or treating them as derivative. When Islamic texts are considered, they are frequently read as pragmatic manuals rather than as works rooted in a distinctive intellectual and theological tradition.

The present study addresses the scholarly marginalisation of early Islamic military literature, which is frequently dismissed as either derivative of non-Muslim traditions or purely pragmatic in nature, lacking deeper theological foundations. By examining the *Mukhtaṣar*, the research investigates how creed, law, and politics intersect to form a cohesive Sunnī military doctrine. The significance of this work lies in its rehabilitation of the military manual as a sophisticated form of political theology, positioning the text as a critical doctrinal bridge between early ethical-tactical traditions and later institutionalised ʿAbbāsid statecraft. Ultimately, the study challenges Eurocentric strategic narratives by demonstrating that warfare in Islam was a rationalised, theology-based discipline anchored in *taqwā* (God-consciousness) and moral accountability centuries before the formalisation of Western “Just War” theories.

The *Mukhtaṣar* also challenges the reductionist perception of early Islamic military writings as derivative or purely pragmatic by positioning warfare within a comprehensive framework of Sunnī theology and statecraft. The fundamental elements of the Sunnī worldview provide the ethical and strategic foundation of leadership, ensuring that strategy remains anchored in creed and moral order.⁽⁴⁾ This consolidation of Sunnism was intrinsically tied to political and military strategies of liberation that integrated creed with statecraft—a process reflected in the *Mukhtaṣar*'s insistence that military command is a moral trust and a

1 See: Abū Saʿīd al-Shaʿrānī al-Ḥarthamī, *Mukhtaṣar fī Siyāsat al-Ḥurūb*, hereinafter cited as *Mukhtaṣar*, ed. ʿĀrif Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Ghanī, 1st ed. (Damascus: Dār Kanān, 1995).

2 Abū al-Faraj Muḥammad ibn Ishāq al-Nadīm, *Al-Fihrist*, ed. Ibrāhīm Ramaḍān (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifah, 1978), 437.

3 Ibid., 437.

4 Muhammad Husni Mohd Amin, “Worldview, Strategy, and Strategic Principles in Three Muslim Military Treatises,” hereinafter cited as “Worldview,” *TAFHIM: IKIM Journal of Islam and the Contemporary World* 16, no. 2 (2023): 33–60.

religious responsibility.¹ Comparative studies further highlight how questions of legitimacy and authority differentiated Sunnī and Shī‘ī traditions,² making it essential to situate the treatise firmly within Sunnī orthodoxy. The contrast between Islamic and Christian strategic thought is sharpened by the divergent moral economies of war revealed in eleventh-century accounts of Crusader violence.³ While the Crusader approach—influenced by the Graeco-Roman concept of *pólemos* (war) as a tool for state expansion—frequently manifested as unjust wars characterised by excesses, the *Mukhtaṣar* proves that Islamic restraint was doctrinally codified.

In stark contrast, Islamic expansion was conceptually framed as *fath*, or liberation, bound by strict ethical codes. This tradition of accountability, established during the first Muslim liberation of Jerusalem under Caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, was revived by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, who treated prisoners with clemency and viewed war as a limited engagement governed by accountability to God. Unlike technocratic Western manuals, the *Mukhtaṣar* opens by asserting that the order of affairs in warfare is *taqwā* (God-conscious piety), establishing the maxim that abstaining from bloodshed is the true victory and commanding leaders to prohibit vengeance even upon defeated foes. Islamic contributions to strategy thus extend well beyond the battlefield combat associated with *jihād*, encompassing enlightened principles of peace, diplomacy, and governance. Works as the *Mukhtaṣar* serve as comprehensive guides on statecraft that integrate war into a broader administrative and planning framework of *siyāsah* and *tadbīr*.

The Islamic contribution to strategy includes sophisticated principles of diplomacy and soft power.⁴ The *Mukhtaṣar* encourages a highly restrained and ethically governed undertone by advising rulers to outwit enemies through stratagems and diplomatic intelligence rather than immediate force. It emphasises *shūrā*, or consultation,⁵ and treating subordinates with dignity to ensure loyalty through the unification of hearts.⁶ The treatise details a highly sophisticated organisation, including the *khamīs* five-part formation and specialised units for reconnaissance and support, proving that Islamic military science was technically and institutionally mature.⁷ These insights underscore the need to reposition works like the *Mukhtaṣar* within the wider canon of strategic thought, challenging Eurocentric narratives that marginalise Islamic contributions or view them as mere derivatives of Greek thought. While Western “Just War” theory was not fully formulated

1 Muhammad Husni Mohd Amin, “Solidification of Worldview, Liberation Strategy and Revival of Sunnism Leading to the 12th Century A.D. / 6th Century A.H. Muslim Liberation of Jerusalem,” hereinafter cited as “Solidification,” *AFKAR: Journal of ‘Aqidah & Islamic Thought* 26, no. 1 (2024): 121–166.

2 Khalif Muammar and Rizky Febrian, “Post-Ghazali Islamic Philosophy in the Sunni and Shi‘ite Traditions,” *Afkar: Journal of ‘Aqidah & Islamic Thought* 25, no. 2 (2023): 459–498.

3 Ayşe Çekiç, “Manifesting the Crusaders’ Instinct for Violence in the Context of the Capture of Antioch,” *Journal of Al-Tamad-dun* 19, no. 2 (2024): 267–276.

4 Felix Idongesit Oyosoro, “Beyond Jihad: The Islamic Contributions to the Field of Strategic Studies,” *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 24 (2023): 44–52.

5 Al-Harthamī, *Mukhtaṣar*, 21 and 36–37.

6 Ibid., 15–17.

7 Ibid., 23–38 and 40–52.

until the seventeenth century, Islamic civilisation had codified the legitimacy and morality of fighting centuries earlier. By comparing the *Mukhtaṣar* to Byzantine manuals like Maurice's *Strategikon*, the distinctiveness of the Islamic tradition becomes clear. Where the *Strategikon* is technocratic and secular, the *Mukhtaṣar* synthesises scholastic heritage, spiritual metaphysics, and experiential battlefield realities into a unique military canon. This tradition affirms that the battlefield is governed by the same moral and legal order as the mosque or marketplace, situating the treatise in its proper theological and strategic context.

The early ninth century coincided with the consolidation of Sunnī orthodoxy, expressed in creeds such as *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*¹ (*Major Understanding [of Religion]*) of Imām Abū Ḥanīfah (699–767) and later codified by the Ash'arī and Māturīdī schools of theology. It is within this context that the *Mukhtaṣar* must be understood. The treatise's emphasis on *tawḥīd* (unity of God) as the foundation of order, *qadar* (destiny) as the framework for victory and loss, *'adl* (justice) as the principle of leadership, and obedience to legitimate authority all reflect a distinctly Sunnī worldview. Situating the work within Sunnī creed—particularly that of Abū Ḥanīfah, whose *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar* most closely represents the mainstream theology of the period before al-Māmūn adopted Mu'tazilī doctrines—avoids anachronistic readings shaped by Mu'tazilī rationalism, which privileged abstract reason over revelation, or Shī'ī imamology, which anchored authority in the infallible *Imām* rather than in entrusted leadership. This positioning allows the *Mukhtaṣar* to be understood not as sectarian or marginal, but as a consciously Sunnī articulation of the military art, embedding creed within strategy.

The *Mukhtaṣar* also distances itself from other sects. Against the Mu'tazilah and Qadariyyah, which overemphasised human autonomy and denied the scope of divine decree,² it insists that victory in war cannot be secured by strategy, numbers, or planning alone but rests ultimately on God's Will.³ At the same time, it avoids the fatalism of the Jabbariyyah, who denied meaningful human agency, by requiring commanders to act with vigilance, discipline, consultation, and foresight.⁴ In this balance, the *Mukhtaṣar* reflects the Sunnī doctrine of *kasab*: all human acts are created by God, yet human beings “acquire” them through their intentions and choices and are therefore accountable, even though the outcome of events rests entirely with His Will.⁵ The text likewise diverges from Shī'ī tenets of the ninth century. Whereas Shī'ism located legitimacy in a divinely appointed, infallible Imām endowed with esoteric knowledge and ultimate authority,⁶ the *Mukhtaṣar* presents military command as a trust borne by fallible leaders accountable before God. Knowledge is practical and consultative, grounded in experience rather than esoteric revelation,

1 See Abū al-Munṭahā al-Maghniṣāwī, “Kitāb Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar,” hereinafter cited as “Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar,” in *Al-Rasā'il al-Sab'ah fī al-'Aqā'id*, 1st ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Baṣā'ir, 2009).

2 'Abd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah*, ed. 'Abd al-Karīm 'Uthmān (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 1965), 302.

3 Al-Harthamī, *Mukhtaṣar*, 68–70.

4 Ibid., 15–17, 25–33, 39–47, 55, and 64–66.

5 Al-Maghniṣāwī, “Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar,” 58–60.

6 Ahmad Kazemi Moussavi, *Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam: From the Office of Mufti to the Institution of Marja'* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1996), 178–179.

and authority is exercised within the limits of justice, mercy, and discipline. Its paradigm of warfare is not redemptive martyrdom but the pursuit of order, obedience, and divine trust. In all these respects, the *Mukhtaṣar* reflects the Sunnī consolidation of its time. Given its timeframe, ca. 200–220 AH/ 816–835 CE, in the aftermath of Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809) and during Caliph al-Māmūn’s reforms, it is best interpreted within this milieu, which highlights the organic relationship between creed, law, and military science in Sunnī intellectual history.

The present study employs a multidisciplinary methodology that combines philological, historical, doctrinal, and comparative approaches to situate the *Mukhtaṣar* within the evolution of Islamic strategic thought. At the textual level, the treatise is analysed through its internal features—title, chapter organisation, and terminology—to establish its character as a foundational abridgment within the broader corpus of Islamic military literature. Key concepts such as *siyāsah* (management) and *tadbīr* (governance) are examined through the definitions of classical lexicographers and theorists, including Ibn Manẓūr (1233–1312), Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Tahānawī (d. 1745), and ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (1339–1414), to clarify the intellectual framework governing the text. Historical contextualisation anchors the treatise within the political milieu of the early ‘Abbāsīd caliphate, specifically the reigns of Hārūn al-Rashīd and al-Māmūn, whose military reforms and internal civil conflicts shaped the environment in which the text was produced. Doctrinally, the work is interpreted through the lens of Sunnī theology, mapping creedal categories—such as *tawḥīd* (divine unity), *qadar* (destiny), *kasab* (acquisition), and *mas’ūliyyah* (accountability)—onto its content. This doctrinal mapping is further refined through a specific comparison with the tenets of *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*, demonstrating how warfare is framed as a moral and creedal discipline.

A critical component of this methodology is a comparative analytical framework that situates the *Mukhtaṣar* as a doctrinal turning point within the “Mirror for Princes” genre. The rationale for this comparison lies in the thematic and theological continuity between these works, despite their varying political environments. By contrasting the *Mukhtaṣar* with the later jurisprudential ordinances of Imām al-Māwardī’s (975–1058) *Al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah*—composed during the Buyid occupation to reassert caliphal legal authority—the study highlights the shift from practitioner-oriented ethics to institutionalised legality. Furthermore, the inclusion of Nizām al-Mulk’s (1018–1092) *Siyar al-Mulūk* provides a comparison with a figure of profound administrative and military stature. By virtue of his long service as vizier to the Saljūq sultans Alp-Arslān (r. 1063–1072) and Malik-Shāh (r. 1072–1092), Nizām al-Mulk was a veteran of numerous military campaigns and functioned as a commander of their armies. This comparative approach allows the study to identify the specific tactical-ethical synthesis that distinguishes early ‘Abbāsīd military thought from later bureaucratic statecraft. Finally, a structural-thematic reading of the forty chapters provides a systematic analysis of the content, from the spiritual foundations of command to tactical formations and administrative duties. Each theme is treated not merely as a practical guideline but as an expression of the

Sunnī worldview, underscoring the treatise’s contribution to the strategic rationalisation of Muslim military thought.

2. Title, Author, and Authorship of *Mukhtaṣar*

The original title, *Mukhtaṣar fī Siyāsat al-Ḥurūb*, reflects its function as a concise yet practical guide to the procedures of managing warfare, systematically arranged and grounded in ethical awareness. Although information about the author is extremely limited, al-Ḥarthamī’s role should not be overlooked within the tradition of Islamic military writing. The *nisbah* (ascriptive designation) “al-Ḥarthamī” has led to the assumption that he may have had a blood connection or *walā’*—that is, a bond between master and client—with Harthamah ibn A‘yan (d. 816), a prominent commander and distinguished statesman during the reign of the ‘Abbāsids. Harthamah had served under Caliph Abū Muḥammad Mūsā al-Hādī (r. 785–786) and later held several important positions under Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd and Caliph al-Māmūn,¹ including as governor of frontier regions with Byzantium, governor of Khurāsān, and head of the caliphal guard. Known for his loyalty to the state, moderation in leadership, and wisdom in judging people and managing conflict, he remained a trusted figure consulted by caliphs in important matters even after leaving formal office.

Harthamah’s legacy endured as that of a commander and administrator who balanced firmness with prudence, laying a foundation for the stability of Islām’s frontier territories during the heyday of ‘Abbāsid rule—a setting that likely shaped the outlook and writings of al-Ḥarthamī. The title *siyāsat al-ḥurūb* itself reflects a deep understanding of the term *siyāsah* in ‘Abbāsid discourse, which did not merely mean “politics” or “policy” in the modern sense but also encompassed governance, administration, management, discipline, and military command. Such an understanding may have been acquired by al-Ḥarthamī through direct involvement in bureaucracy or field structures under figures such as Harthamah, who once played an important role in restoring fiscal stability in Palestine while serving in al-Shām ca. 795–796.² At that time, abuses in tax collection due to mismanagement and corruption had led to widespread oppression. Harthamah was sent by Hārūn al-Rashīd to revive the depopulated area. By reducing taxes and treating farmers justly, he successfully persuaded them to return to their lands, thereby demonstrating both administrative competence and compassion in leadership.

2.1 Defining *Siyāsah* and *Tadbīr*

Regarding governance oriented towards purpose, Muslim scholars have articulated the concept

1 Abū al-‘Abbās ibn Jābir al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-Buldān*, ed. Muḥammad Munīb Maḥyū (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Ma‘ārif, 1987), 196, 232, and 327.

2 Ibid., 196.

as *al-siyāsah wa al-tadbīr*.¹ While the root of *siyāsah* (*sāsa*) literally pertains to the management and herding of livestock, this imagery evolved in Islamic thought into a metaphor for the comprehensive endeavour to reform the community based on divine guidance. For the classical lexicographers, *siyāsah* was intrinsically teleological. Ibn Manẓūr defines it as supervising a matter specifically to bring about its benefit (*iṣlāḥ*),² while al-Tahānawī elevates this to a metaphysical level, describing it as guiding mankind toward salvation in both this world and the hereafter.³ This dual focus reflects the “Mirror for Princes” tradition, where the ruler’s efficacy is measured by his ability to maintain moral order.

The Islamic ethical administration is operationalised through *tadbīr*—the art of farsighted management. Rooted in the word *dubur* (outcome),⁴ *tadbīr* requires a leader to look beyond immediate actions to their final consequences. Al-Jurjānī specifically links this to the “knowledge of what is best,”⁵ suggesting that strategy is a virtue of the intellect rather than just a physical skill. Thus, *tadbīr* in Islamic tradition conveys the ability to think ahead and act with due consideration of consequences. These definitions affirm that *siyāsah* and *tadbīr* within the Islamic framework do not merely denote authority, technical administration, or governance, but encompass a comprehensive effort to reform the community based on divine guidance, collective welfare, and ultimate accountability in the Hereafter. The combination of the two concepts indicates that governance and administration in the worldview of Islām require both orderly execution and farsightedness, considering long-term effects and outcomes. Together, *siyāsah* and *tadbīr* constitute the art of ruling and managing life in accordance with the wisdom enjoined by God, integrating worldly considerations with otherworldly guidance as the foundation of true well-being. In this regard, the Holy Qur’ān also affirms that all human planning, including in administration and warfare, remains subject to God’s decree and wisdom. Among its verses are: “And to God belongs the outcome of all matters (*wa-li Allāh ‘āqibat al-umūr*),” (*al-Ḥajj*, 22:41) and “And to God will be the end of all matters

1 Al-Fārābī (d. 950), in *Kitāb al-Siyāsah al-Madaniyyah*, describes *tadbīr al-madīnah* (management of the city) as the science of directing human society toward its ultimate purpose; al-Māwardī (d. 1058), in *Al-Aḥkām al-Sultāniyyah*, treats *siyāsah* as administering subjects justly and *tadbīr* as the management of affairs for the benefit of religion and worldly order; and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), in *Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk*, employs expressions such as *tadbīr al-mulūk* and *siyāsah al-ra‘iyyah* to frame governance as the ethical management of political and social order. Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), in his *Muqaddimah*, explicitly links *siyāsah* and *tadbīr* to the preservation of *‘umrān* (civilisation) and the securing of communal benefit. See the following works: Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Al-Fārābī’s The Political Regime* (al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya, also known as the *Treatise on the Principles of Beings*), ed. Fauzi M. Najjar (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1964); Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Mawardī, *Al-Aḥkām al-sultāniyyah wa al-wilāyāt al-dīniyyah*, hereinafter cited as *Al-Aḥkām*, ed. Aḥmad Jād (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2006); Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Tibṛ al-Masbūk fī Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk*, ed. Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1988); and Abū Zayd ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, ed. ‘Abd-Allāh Muḥammad Darwīsh, 2 vols. (Damascus: Dār Ya‘rib, 2004).

2 Muḥammad ibn Mukarram ibn ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 9 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2003), 4: 747.

3 Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Tahānawī, *Mawsū‘ah Kashshāf Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Funūn wa al-‘Ulūm*, hereinafter cited as *Kashshāf Iṣṭilāḥāt*, ed. ‘Alī Dahrūj, 2 vols. (Beirut: Maktabah Lubnān Nāshirūn, 1996), 1: 993.

4 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 3:289.

5 Al-Tahānawī, *Kashshāf Iṣṭilāḥāt*, 1:402.

(*wa-ilā Allāh ‘āqibat al-umūr*)” (*Luqmān*, 31:22). Governance and administration in Islām are therefore incomplete without awareness of divinely sanctioned direction and readiness to entrust all decisions to God. Consequently, translating the *Mukhtaṣar*’s title as *A Compendium on the Management of Warfare* avoids the narrow modern connotations of ‘politics’ and instead captures the emphasis on *siyāsah* as a disciplined, ethical administration of force aimed at achieving beneficial outcomes under divine decree.

3- The Origins of Military Strategy in Islām

The emergence of the *Mukhtaṣar* must be understood within the framework of the early formation of Islamic military and political history, beginning with the liberation of territories under the leadership of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ (c. 570–632) and continued by the Rightly Guided Caliphs, before undergoing a process of institutionalisation of military knowledge under the ‘Abbāsids. The treatise appeared during a transitional phase between the spontaneous and adaptive mobile strategies of the Rāshidūn and Umayyads, and the more formalised, systematic, and ethically rationalised military governance that developed under the ‘Abbāsids. It condenses the accumulated experiences of warfare, siege, and state-building into a concise yet substantive doctrine of military leadership, founded upon spiritual considerations alongside careful strategic calculation. The origins of military strategy in Islām cannot be understood apart from the long history of martial practice in Arabia and the wider Mediterranean world. Before the advent of Islām, the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula already possessed their own forms of military doctrine,¹ shaped by tribal society and the localised nature of warfare. Yet the Arabian martial culture was not isolated. For centuries, the tribes of Arabia had lived in contact with the great powers of late antiquity²—Romans, Byzantines, and Sassanian Persians—absorbing elements of their military and political practice, which later became a latent advantage when they emerged as a world power following the rise of Islām in the seventh century.³ This wider setting had already established the intellectual vocabulary of strategy.

Even before his mission, the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ had some exposure to weapons training and tribal warfare.⁴ Ibn Hishām (d. 833) records his youthful skill in archery, while reports suggest he may have been present at the Sacrilegious Wars (*Ḥarb al-Fijār*), tribal conflicts fought during the sacred months. Such experience, limited though it was, became perfected through divine revelation and guidance. The

1 Charles Oman, *A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages, Vol. I: A.D. 328–1278* (first published Oxford: Blackwells, 1885; this ed. London: Greenhill Books, 1991), 209.

2 Irfan Shahīd, *Rome and the Arabs* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984), 10 and 43–48.

3 That is, respectively the years 290 and 549. See Irfan Shahīd, *Rome and the Arabs*, 23, 25–30, and 51–63. For an exposition on the involvement of Arabs in Roman-Persian war during that time, see Irfan Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century: Volume I Part I* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995), 12–28 and 62–143; Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity: AD 395–600* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 112.

4 Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah*, hereinafter cited as *Sīrah*, ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmurī, 3rd ed., 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1990), 1:210–211; Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, hereinafter cited as *Muhammad* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2006, [first published UK: George Allen & Unwin, 1983]), 31.

Holy Qur'ān and the Prophet Muḥammad's ﷺ own battlefield conduct provided enduring principles: that *jihād* must never be accompanied by injustice, treachery, or cruelty (*al-Baqarah*, 2:190)¹ and that armed struggle was always bound by religious law and morality. As leader of the city-state of Madīnah, the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ not only governed but also planned campaigns, organised armies, and responded strategically to threats from Quraysh,² hostile tribes, and external powers. Between 624 and 630, key campaigns—including Badr, Uhūd, Khandaq, and the Liberation of Makkah³—demonstrated how Qur'anic injunctions on *jihād* were applied in practice, combining courage with restraint, calculation with reliance upon God (*al-Nisā'*, 4:95; *al-Mā'idah*, 5:35; *al-Tawbah*, 9:20; *al-'Ankabut*, 29:69; *Muḥammad*, 47:31; and *al-Ṣaff*, 61:11).⁴ The first clash with Byzantium at Mu'tah in September 629 further extended this doctrine: despite being outnumbered, Muslim forces under Khālīd ibn al-Walīd displayed discipline and tactical innovation that preserved their strength. This strategic ethos expanded under the Rightly Guided Caliphs. Abū Bakr secured Arabia through the Apostasy Wars (*Ḥurūb al-Riddah*, 632–633)⁵ and initiated expeditions into Iraq and Syria. Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb transformed these into organised campaigns, culminating in the decisive victory at Yarmūk in August 636, which ended Byzantine dominance in Syria, and in the conquest of Egypt under 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ (639–641).

Under the Umayyads, the institutionalisation of military administration through the *dīwān al-jund* (army registry) professionalised the forces and enabled extensive campaigns across North Africa and Spain. Although no systematic manuals survive from this era, strategic knowledge was preserved through oral transmission, heroic poetry, and fortified *ribāt* structures. Following the Umayyad collapse in 750, the 'Abbāsids built upon this foundation to confront internal revolts and external threats, such as the 755 Khurāsān revolt and the 762 Madīnah uprising led by Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah. While al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah's *Kitāb al-Siyar* advocated for noble military ethics—including shielding civilians and refusing ambushes—his eventual defeat suggested that principles alone were insufficient for victory, prompting Caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754–775) to further stabilise the state. This era of transition eventually led to the systematic codification of military law by Ḥanafī jurists, most notably Imām Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī (d. 805), whose works *Al-Siyar al-Kabīr* (*The Major Conduct*) and *Al-Siyar al-Ṣaghīr* (*The Minor Conduct*) integrated prophetic precedent, juridical reasoning, and practical necessity into the first organised

1 See also Mālik ibn Anas, *Al-Muwatta'*, ed. Muḥammad Fu'ad 'Abd al-Bāqī (Beirut: Dār al-Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1985), 447.

2 Zakaria Bashier, *War and Peace in the Life of the Prophet Muḥammad*, hereinafter cited as *War and Peace* (Markfield: The Islamic Foundation, 2007), 5.

3 For a wide-ranging and in-depth scholarly discussion of the military campaigns in the history of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, see the following works: Muḥammad Ḥamīdullāh, *The Battlefields of the Prophet Muḥammad* ﷺ (1st ed., New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1992; 6th ed., 2017); Lings, *Muhammad*; and Bashier, *War and Peace*.

4 See also Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 2:239–240; Ahmed Mohsen Al-Dawoody, *The Islamic Law of War: Justifications and Regulations* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 62–66.

5 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī, *Tārīkh al-Khulafā'*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Minhāj, 2014), 157–161.

Islamic legal frameworks for warfare.¹

The progression toward an imperial peak continued through the reigns of al-Mahdī (r. 775–785) and al-Hādī, culminating under Hārūn al-Rashīd,² whose reign witnessed not only civilisational and cultural advancement but also a series of major military campaigns, particularly on the western frontiers against the Byzantine Empire. Under his rule, the empire reached its maximum territorial extent, stretching from the borders of Spain in the west to the Byzantine frontier in the northwest.³ A primary political objective for al-Rashīd was to assert the strength of the Caliphate through a combination of military pressure and diplomatic resolve. The campaigns against Byzantium, particularly in the early ninth century, demonstrated a methodical strategy involving deterrence, symbolic dominance, and the consolidation of imperial power. The immediate catalyst for large-scale military action was the decision by the Byzantine Emperor, Nicephorus I (r. 802–811), to revoke the tribute agreement established by his predecessor, Empress Irene (r. 797–802). In a threatening missive, Nicephorus demanded the return of previously paid tribute and asserted a status equal to that of the Caliph.⁴ Al-Rashīd responded by launching a series of systematically planned military campaigns to restore dominance and compel Byzantine compliance. These operations commenced with the rapid mobilisation of forces and a stern communication from the Caliph. In 806, al-Rashīd besieged the city of Heraclea; upon its fall, the city was razed, its inhabitants enslaved, and its structures levelled—a clear signal of retribution and an overt display of power. Consequently, Nicephorus was forced to accept a humiliating settlement, which included a personal tribute of 50,000 dinars for himself, his heirs, and his court officials.⁵

Al-Rashīd's military operations were characterised by their massive scale and efficient coordination. He mobilised 135,000 professional, salaried soldiers (*murtaziqūn*),⁶ supplemented by volunteer and auxiliary forces.⁷ Command responsibilities were delegated to senior generals, such as Dāwūd ibn 'Īsā, who led 70,000 troops into Byzantine territory. Simultaneously, Ḥumayd ibn Ma'yūf spearheaded a major naval assault on Cyprus, resulting in the capture of 16,000 inhabitants and the acquisition of significant spoils and captives. These actions not only weakened the Byzantine periphery but also offset the logistical costs

1 Muhammad Hamidullah, *The Muslim Conduct of State* (first ed. Hyderabad-Deccan: Islamic Culture, 1941–1942; 5th ed. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1973; this ed. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2012), 11.

2 Tayeb el-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 59–62. For a discussion of the 'Abbāsīds' reliance on foreign soldiers, Hugh Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs: Military and Society in the Early Islamic State* (London: Routledge, 2001), 148–152. See also Amira K. Bennison, *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the 'Abbasid Empire*, hereinafter cited as *Great Caliphs* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 32.

3 Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1954; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 2001), 158.

4 Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh al-Ṭabarī* or *Tā'rikh al-Umam wa al-Mulūk*, hereinafter cited as *Tā'rikh*, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2012), 4:668.

5 Ibid., 4:668–669.

6 Ibid., 4:677.

7 Ibid., 4:677.

of the war. Logistics and supply routes were overseen by Masrūr al-Khādim. Al-Rashīd himself established a command centre at Darb al-Ḥadath, a key frontier fortress, from which he coordinated a multi-pronged campaign.¹ His forces were stationed in Mar‘ash, Ṭarsūs, and other frontier towns, creating a buffer zone and bases for sustained pressure on the enemy. These campaigns followed a clear operational sequence: immediate punitive strikes, the siege and destruction of primary targets, simultaneous multi-directional attacks, naval operations, and finally, the enforcement of tribute. This integration of military might and economic pressure successfully forced a temporary Byzantine submission and solidified al-Rashīd’s reputation as a formidable and unshakeable ruler. Ultimately, al-Rashīd restored ‘Abbāsīd prestige through the calculated application of force, strategic coordination, and symbolic violence, thereby reinforcing the internal perception of the Caliph’s might and legitimacy.

This era of external dominance and internal legitimacy was soon eclipsed by the fragmentation that followed al-Rashīd’s reign. The subsequent civil war between al-Amīn and al-Māmūn fractured the hard-won imperial order, evolving from a dynastic succession dispute into a systemic crisis of legitimacy and fiscal control.² Ultimately, al-Māmūn secured authority through the strategic brilliance of generals like Ṭāhir ibn al-Ḥusayn and the veteran Harthamah ibn A‘yan,³ providing the context for the *Mukhtaṣar*. Compiled by al-Ḥarthamī—whose name suggests a direct association with Harthamah,⁴ the treatise emerged as a critical effort to rebuild the caliphate’s military and administrative foundations by synthesising a century of accumulated experience into a comprehensive framework of law, ethics, and divine accountability.

4- The *Mukhtaṣar* in the Context of ‘Abbāsīd Strategic Transition

The *Mukhtaṣar* represents one of the earliest and most comprehensive works within this stream. At the beginning of the ninth century, the ‘Abbāsīd Empire was undergoing a marked strategic transition. In the aftermath of the civil war, vigorous efforts were undertaken to rebalance the structures of governance and to organise the military into a more integrated and formidable force. Al-Māmūn’s success stemmed from his ability to administer provinces and craft a political narrative that was both legally valid and morally authoritative, coupled with the strategic leadership of generals such as Ṭāhir and Harthamah. The empire’s geostrategic orientation also shifted—from mobile campaigns of conquest to fortified defence, systematic logistics, and the strengthening of frontier lines. In the final decade of his reign, al-Māmūn redirected strategic focus to the Byzantine frontier, not merely in retaliation for Byzantine massacres of Muslims at Ṭarsūs and Massīṣah, but also as part of a broader effort to reassert the caliphate’s stature as an ideologically united imperial power.

Al-Māmūn framed these campaigns as a moral duty: to defend Muslim lives, protect frontier territories,

1 Ibid., 5:3.

2 El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 59–62. For a discussion of the ‘Abbāsīds’ reliance on foreign soldiers, Hugh Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs*, 148–152.

3 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 5:68.

4 Editor’s introduction in al-Ḥarthamī, *Mukhtaṣar*, 8.

and uphold the dignity of Islām. In 831, he personally led a major expedition, affirming his role as warrior-caliph. His forces—composed of Khurāsānī veterans, loyal commanders, and recruits—captured more than thirty Byzantine fortresses, including Heracleia and Antigonos.¹ The construction of a permanent base at Ṭiyānā signalled the transition to a phase of occupation and long-term control. The success of these campaigns depended not only on numbers but also on prudent resource management, disciplined leadership, and the effective use of psychological strategy. Military operations were carefully structured: rapid conquests, expulsion of entrenched garrisons, destruction of key infrastructure, and consolidation of strategic zones. Al-Māmūn's exchanges with Emperor Theophilus (r. 829–842) further illustrated his skill in symbolic diplomacy that complemented armed action. It is within this historical framework that the *Mukhtaṣar* should be understood—as a response to the demands of the age, balancing force with *adab* (good conduct), and tactical discipline with *Sharī'ah* guidance. As frontier power fragmented and Khurāsānī and Turkish military elites grew in influence, the caliphate faced the urgent challenge of unifying its military doctrine and restructuring central authority. From this context emerged a genre of Islamic military writing dedicated to reorganising doctrine, strengthening command structures, and adapting to frontier realities.

5. The Mukhtaṣar as a Sunnī Doctrinal Turning Point in Military Thought

The *Mukhtaṣar* opens with the declaration that “the order of affairs in warfare is *taqwā* of God and obedience to Him” (*niẓām al-amr fī al-ḥarb taqwā Allāh wa al-‘amal bi-tā’atihi*),² establishing from the outset that war is not a sphere of unrestrained violence but a trust bound by accountability to God. Victory is ultimately His decree, even as strategy, discipline, and planning demand human effort. Within this framework, the treatise defines the qualities of an effective commander—justice, caution, magnanimity, and consultation—while warning against rashness and vindictiveness, which corrode morale and endanger campaigns. Secrecy (*ḥifẓ al-sirr*) is emphasised as a safeguard for unity and an essential tool of strategy, while stratagem, permitted by the Prophetic dictum that “warfare is deception,”³ is legitimised only when necessary and always within the limits of prudence and fairness. The *Mukhtaṣar* also displays an intimate grasp of battlefield realities: it discusses the deployment of cavalry, the arrangement of vanguard and flanks, the ethics of intelligence gathering, and the psychological and physical preparation of troops. Yet throughout, the discourse remains ethical in tone, insisting that caution is preferable to reckless speed and that commanders must attend not only to tactics but also to the morale of their soldiers and adversaries, recognising fear and endurance as decisive forces. In this vision, warfare is *siyāsah*: leadership rooted in justice, balancing the requirements of the *Sharī'ah* with pragmatic necessity. The commander emerges not merely as a strategist but as a trustee, obligated to avoid tyranny, restrain vengeance, and safeguard his men.

Situating the *Mukhtaṣar* within the broader landscape of Islamic political thought reveals it as a doctrinal

1 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 5:182.

2 Al-Harthamī, *Mukhtaṣar*, 14.

3 Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 10 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Tāṣīl, 2012), 4:169–170. *Ḥadīths* no. 3042 and no. 3043.

bridge between early ethical-tactical manuals and later institutionalised statecraft, a transition inextricably linked to the historical circumstances of its authors. While the *Mukhtaṣar* emerged during the ‘Abbāsid strategic transition under Caliphs Hārūn al-Rashīd and al-Māmūn, al-Māwardī composed his *Al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah* during the eleventh-century Buyid occupation to reassert the caliph’s legal authority. Nizām al-Mulk later wrote his *Siyar al-Mulūk* at the peak of Saljūq power, focusing on the bureaucratic machinery and majestic display of justice required for imperial stability. The *Mukhtaṣar* possesses a granular, practitioner-level tactical-ethical synthesis that both *Aḥkām* and *Siyar* lack; it provides intimate guidance on battlefield signals, night operations, and the individual troop psychology required to maintain order under pressure. Most distinctively, it establishes a metaphysical focus on the commander’s internal spiritual alignment, i.e., *taqwā*, as the primary prerequisite for victory. This detail is secondary in the aforementioned more technocratic or bureaucratic works.

Conversely, al-Māwardī’s *Aḥkām* provides rigorous legal jurisprudential ordinances, such as the precise status of non-combatants and the legal criteria for spoils and treaties,¹ which the *Mukhtaṣar* omits in favour of tactical application. Similarly, Nizām al-Mulk’s *Siyar* possesses an institutional and bureaucratic scope absent in the *Mukhtaṣar*, detailing the management of court officials, the vizierate, and a state-level intelligence system (*barīd*) used for political stability rather than just reconnaissance.² The theological foundation of these works rests upon the rejection of both fatalism and unrestrained human autonomy. The *Mukhtaṣar* leans heavily on the Sunnī doctrine of *kasab* (acquisition), where human planning—defined as *tadbīr* or farsightedness—is a religious duty even though outcomes remain with divine decree. While al-Māwardī treats agency as the legal execution of a communal obligation,³ Nizām al-Mulk operationalises it through bureaucratic oversight to ensure nothing remains hidden from the ruler.⁴ Despite these differing applications, a consistent Sunnī thread remains: a shared theological consensus that *ẓulm* (injustice) is a strategic liability.

The *Mukhtaṣar* organises the complexities of medieval warfare into a sophisticated, cohesive vision of leadership, grounded in two fundamental pillars: the meticulous management of followers and the rigorous execution of military strategy. At its heart, the treatise posits that victory is not merely a product of superior numbers but a divine gift granted to those who maintain spiritual alignment.⁵ As previously mentioned, this theological foundation is established in Chapter 1, where war is framed as a field of moral testing requiring *taqwā* and justice, and it is reaffirmed in the concluding Chapter 40, which humbles the commander by acknowledging that even the most perfect human plans remain subject to divine decree.⁶ Within this

1 See al-Mawardī, *Al-Aḥkām*, 79–93, and 200–211.

2 See Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥasan Nizām al-Mulk, *Siyar al-Mulūk*, hereinafter cited as *Siyar*, trans. Yūsuf Bakkār, 2nd ed. (Jordan: Wuzārah al-Thaqāfah, 2007), 72–73, 82, and 101–108.

3 See al-Mawardī, *Al-Aḥkām*, 15–19.

4 See Nizām al-Mulk, *Siyar*, 101–108 and 132.

5 Al-Harthamī, *Mukhtaṣar*, 14.

6 Ibid., 66–70.

ethical framework, the text treats leadership as a sacred trust rather than a platform for ego. According to Chapters 2 and 3, authority must be exercised through restraint, consultation, and the prudent management of one's own emotions. This human-centric approach extends to the granular administration of the ranks; in Chapters 31 to 33, the commander is urged to discern the unique temperaments of his soldiers to assign them appropriate roles, while maintaining a discipline that avoids humiliation.¹ By treating order as a moral necessity, the manual ensures that the army remains a unified, resilient body capable of withstanding the psychological pressures of the field.

The technical execution of warfare is equally methodical, beginning with the critical role of information and security. Chapters 9, 10, and 13 through 17 outline a strategy where every movement—whether marching or encamping—is governed by absolute secrecy and the constant deployment of scouts and spies (*jawāsīs*).² These 'silent arts' of reconnaissance, further detailed in Chapters 27 to 30, provide the intelligence necessary to shield vulnerabilities and facilitate the element of surprise.³ This logistical vigilance ensures that the transition from the road to the encampment is never compromised by the threat of a sudden, uncoordinated strike. When the army finally takes the field, it adopts a rigorous fivefold formation—comprising the centre, wings, vanguard, and rear-guard—that symbolises both tactical balance and ethical order. Chapters 11 to 22 describe how soldiers are positioned according to their strengths, ensuring the vulnerable are protected while the cavalry is handled as a precision instrument.⁴ Once the clash commences, as described in Chapters 23 through 25, the mechanics of manoeuvre, attack, and retreat are governed by a strict operational sequence.⁵ This includes the sophisticated use of ambushes (*kamīn*) and night operations (*bayāt*), where the calculated application of silence and sudden force serves to overwhelm the enemy's resolve. The final sections of the manual elevate these tactics into a broader philosophy of command. Chapters 34 and 35 address the unique rigours of siege warfare, where patience and propriety are deemed as essential as physical weaponry. As the work concludes in Chapters 37 through 39, it explores the inherent ambiguities of the 'fog of war,' noting that while reason must remain the commander's guide, the reality of battle often defies logic.⁶ By emphasising extreme caution and the avoidance of negligence even in the moment of victory, the *Mukhtaṣar* presents a model of a ruler who is both a brilliant strategist and a humble steward of his people's lives.

To further examine the *Mukhtaṣar* as a consciously Sunnī articulation of the military art—wherein strategy and leadership are framed within the theological and ethical parameters of creed—one may compare its themes to the tenets of contemporaneous Sunnī doctrine, most notably those expressed in *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*. The *Mukhtaṣar*'s opening declaration that the foundation of war is *taqwā* situates the

1 Ibid., 15–17.

2 Ibid., 23–24 and 28–33.

3 Ibid., 48–52.

4 Ibid., 25–38.

5 Ibid., 38–45.

6 Ibid., 53–63.

work firmly within the doctrine of *tawhīd* as articulated by Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, which understands God as the ultimate source of power, victory, and decree.¹ triumph does not arise from stratagems, numbers, or human strength, but is granted solely by His Will.² In this way, the conduct of war is anchored in *tawhīd*, preventing commanders from mistaking material causes for ultimate ones. The religion of Islām provides the ethical framework underpinning the commander's obligations, insisting on justice, restraint, and the avoidance of aggression. Creation itself is understood as a theatre of divine justice and trial, where even the victories of tyrants are subsumed under God's wisdom and decree. As Sunnī epistemology conceives knowledge as a pre-eternal attribute of God—granted to humans through Revelation, accessible by reason and natural predisposition (*fiṭrah*), and acquired through responsible action (*kasab*) under Divine Will³—the *Mukhtaṣar*'s emphasis on secrecy, intelligence gathering, and the use of spies in warfare⁴ is framed as practical knowledge that remains subordinate to God's all-encompassing omniscience. Human awareness and preparation are indispensable, yet their efficacy remains contingent upon God's all-encompassing knowledge. By asserting that God's predestination operates through worldly causes and human agency, al-Ḥarthamī directly counters the *Jabbariyyah* outlook, which denied the meaningful validity of human effort. He pointedly states: “Beware of negligence in affairs by relying [fatally] upon destiny, for every decree proceeds according to a cause; the cause of success is action, and the cause of failure is negligence.”⁵ This theological stance affirms that divine decree does not negate the necessity of human action; rather, it requires commanders to “acquire” responsibility for their intentions and choices through the Sunnī doctrine of *kasab*. Consequently, the *Mukhtaṣar* frames strategic discipline and *tadbīr* as religious duties that must be performed even though the outcome of any conflict remains subject to divine decree.

The anthropology of the *Mukhtaṣar* aligns closely with the Sunnī position on human moral responsibility. Man is created capable of choice, accountable for his actions, and tested through obedience and disobedience.⁶ The psychology of the human soul is revealed on the battlefield, where patience, vigilance, justice, and mercy are cultivated, while rashness, injustice, and negligence invite ruin. This is reflected in al-Ḥarthamī's instructions to commanders: they are to rule with justice, cultivate love and discipline among their men, forgive rather than avenge, and avoid oppression.⁷ While Sunnī teaching holds that all things occur by God's Will and Decree,⁸ the *Mukhtaṣar*'s expression of *qadar* acknowledges that tyrants and unbelievers may at times prevail in battle. Such victories are interpreted not as divine approval but as tests for the faithful or *istidrāj* (gradual leading astray) for the oppressors. Al-Ḥarthamī states:

1 Al-Maghniṣāwī, “Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar,” 46–48.

2 Al-Ḥarthamī, *Mukhtaṣar*, 14.

3 Al-Maghniṣāwī, “Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar,” 58–60.

4 Al-Ḥarthamī, *Mukhtaṣar*, 22–23.

5 Ibid., 19.

6 Al-Maghniṣāwī, “Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar,” 60–63.

7 Al-Ḥarthamī, *Mukhtaṣar*, 15–16.

8 Al-Maghniṣāwī, “Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar,” 46–48.

One might now ask: “We indeed see oppressive rebels triumphing over the people of justice and equity, and we observe those who disbelieve in God granted victory over His friends (*awliyā`ihi*).” Let it be known that this proceeds from the decree (*taqdīr*) of the Almighty, the All-Wise, in His creation, according to what He knows best of His Unseen [secrets]. Moreover, this may be for the disbelieving oppressor a granting of respite (*imlā`*) and a ‘leading-on’ (*istidrāj*), while for the oppressed believer, it is a matter of divine regard and a trial (*ibtilā`*); for indeed, the ultimate end belongs to the righteous.¹

Human freedom is thus conceived through *kasab*: commanders act, acquire responsibility for their deeds, and face accountability, though outcomes remain God’s alone. The uncertainty of outcomes in war is thereby reconciled with the certainty of divine decree. The *Mukhtaṣar*’s call to restraint from vengeance, its insistence on justice, and its preference for obedience to God’s command over worldly gain² echo the Prophetic model of just conduct in warfare. In addressing sin and wrongdoing, the text reflects the Sunnī conviction that while sins are real and consequential, they do not expel a Muslim from faith unless deemed lawful.³ The *Mukhtaṣar* resonates this in its warning to commanders against oppression⁴ and devotes a chapter to crimes and punishable offences within the army.⁵ Sin is therefore presented as both a spiritual danger and a strategic liability, undermining divine support on the battlefield.

The unity of belief and practice also permeates the *Mukhtaṣar*. Sunnī theology defines *īmān* as belief in God, His Angels, Books, Messengers, the Last Day, and destiny, while *islām* refers to submission through acts of obedience. Together they constitute the totality of *dīn* (religion).⁶ The *Mukhtaṣar* assumes this integration by stressing that warfare must be pursued for God’s pleasure, with sincerity, justice, and patience.⁷ Religion, in this framework, is inseparable from strategy: the battlefield is governed by the same divine law as prayer or governance. The question of direction and counsel is also addressed. Guidance comes from God, but human beings must deliberate, consult, and act.⁸ The *Mukhtaṣar* echoes this by commanding rulers to consult their subordinates,⁹ rely on sincere advisers,¹⁰ and trust ultimately in God’s *tawfīq* (facilitation).¹¹ In its moral vision, values such as patience, secrecy, vigilance, consultation, and

1 Al-Harthamī, *Mukhtaṣar*, 14.

2 Ibid., 20.

3 Al-Maghniṣāwī, “Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar,” 70–73.

4 Al-Harthamī, *Mukhtaṣar*, 14.

5 Ibid., 55.

6 Al-Maghniṣāwī, “Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar,” 77–80. See also Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islām: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islām* (First published Kuala Lumpur: The International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995; This ed. Johor Bahru: Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Press, 2014), 112.

7 Al-Harthamī, *Mukhtaṣar*, 14 and 20.

8 Al-Maghniṣāwī, “Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar,” 87–88.

9 Al-Harthamī, *Mukhtaṣar*, 21.

10 Ibid., 22.

11 Ibid., 14.

forbearance are praised, while arrogance, negligence, and injustice are condemned as causes of failure. Happiness (*sa'adah*) is thereby defined not by spoils or conquest but by God's pleasure, where worldly benefit is joined with eternal reward.

6. Conclusion

The *Mukhtaṣar* thus frames warfare as a synthesis of strategic discipline and creedal duty, establishing that the battlefield—no less than the mosque or marketplace—is governed by the same truths of faith. In its historical and intellectual context, the treatise advances our understanding of Islamic political theory by serving as a doctrinal bridge between the ethical-tactical traditions of the early Caliphate and the later institutionalised statecraft of the eleventh century. By positioning warfare as an exercise in *siyāsah* and *tadbīr* rather than a purely technical enterprise, the work reveals how the early 'Abbāsid strategic transition under Hārūn al-Rashīd and al-Māmūn was underpinned by a consolidation of Sunnī orthodoxy. It suggests that military governance in this era was conceived as an extension of belief, where the order of the army was intended to reflect the moral order of the *Sharī'ah*.

Central to the treatise are the themes of God-consciousness, justice, and the intersection of human agency with divine decree. These themes align with the broader Sunnī political tradition shared with later works like al-Māwardī's *Ahkām* and Nizām al-Mulk's *Siyar*, which posits that injustice is a strategic liability that invites divine failure. However, the *Mukhtaṣar* diverges from these later, more technocratic or bureaucratic works through its granular, practitioner-oriented focus. While al-Māwardī prioritises jurisprudential ordinances and Nizām al-Mulk focuses on imperial administrative machinery, the *Mukhtaṣar* provides intimate guidance on battlefield signals, night operations, and the individual psychological endurance of troops, framing these tactical details as inseparable from the commander's spiritual alignment.

The present study makes a unique contribution to the scholarship on *Mukhtaṣar*-type treatises by mapping the work's instructions directly onto the tenets of Sunnī creed, such as those found in *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*. By identifying warfare as a theatre of divine justice and trial, the study demonstrates that secrecy, intelligence gathering, and reconnaissance are not merely pragmatism but are framed as practical knowledge subordinate to God's omniscience. This multidisciplinary reading rehabilitates the military manual as a sophisticated work of political theology, showing that the rationalisation of Muslim military thought was achieved by anchoring strategy in the metaphysical foundations of the faith.

Furthermore, the *Mukhtaṣar* engages with questions of authority and leadership by redefining the ruler as a trustee bound by accountability to God. Leadership is portrayed not as a contest for power but as a field of moral testing, where the commander is held responsible for the ethical and spiritual well-being of his army. This vision holds that internal refinement is the primary prerequisite for external victory—a conviction that resonated centuries later during the Crusader invasions. When the Muslim commanders of that era, 'Izz al-Dīn Abū al-'Asākir Sulṭān (d. 1154) and Usāmah ibn Munqidh (d. 1188), respectively declared that “war conducts itself” (*al-ḥarb tudabbiru nafṣahā*) and affirmed that triumph is a gift from God rather than

a product of numbers,⁽¹⁾ they were echoing the doctrinal turning point established by the *Mukhtaṣar*. The treatise thus completes a full circle: beginning with the requirement of *taqwā* and concluding with a state of submission to divine decree, it reconciles the uncertainty of human conflict with the certainty of the distinctly Sunnī worldview of Islām.

1 Usāmah ibn Munqidh, *Kitāb al-I'tibār*, ed. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Ashtar, 2nd ed. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 2003), 239.

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