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## THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT IN THE PERIOD IN WHICH SHIHAB AL-DIN AL-SUHRAWARDI LIVED

**Abstract.** *This article examines the socio-political environment of the Muslim East during the lifetime of Shihab al-Din Abu Hafs Umar al-Suhrawardi (1145–1234), the eponymous founder of the Suhrawardiyya Sufi order. It situates his career within the protracted decline of the Abbasid Caliphate, the political fragmentation that accompanied Buwayhid and Seljuk dominance, and the partial restoration of caliphal authority under al-Nasir li-Din Allah (r. 1180–1225). Particular attention is given to al-Nasir’s use of the futuwwa and of Sufi networks as instruments of political integration, and to al-Suhrawardi’s role as “Shaykh al-Shuykh” and as the caliph’s diplomatic envoy to the Ayyubids, the Khwarazmshah, and the Seljuks of Anatolia. The study argues that al-Suhrawardi’s religious and political activity can be properly understood only against the background of the socio-economic crises and the search for social stabilization that characterized the late Abbasid period.*

**Keywords:** *Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, Suhrawardiyya, Abbasid Caliphate, al-Nasir li-Din Allah, futuwwa, Sufism, Baghdad, socio-political history.*

### INTRODUCTION

The period in which Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi lived was characterized by complex socio-political processes in the history of the Muslim East. During this period, political instability, struggles among various dynasties, and changes in religious and spiritual life exerted a significant influence on the development of society.

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that, by examining the socio-political environment of the period in which Shihab al-Din Abu Hafs Umar al-Suhrawardi (1145–1234) – one of the major representatives of the Sufi tradition, who lived in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – carried out his activity, it becomes possible to understand more

deeply the essence of the historical processes of the age and to evaluate correctly the environment in which the scholar lived and worked (Ohlander, 2008).

### MAIN PART

The years of al-Suhrawardi's life coincided with the period of decline of the Abbasid dynasty, which ruled the vast Arab-Muslim state for nearly five hundred years, from 750 to 1258; deriving its name from that of its capital, this state was also known as the "Baghdad Caliphate" (Bosworth, 1996). From the very beginning of its existence, the Abbasid state was not a single, fully sovereign polity, and already in its first decades it became clearly visible that the peak of the political power of the Arabs and their state lay behind them (Kennedy, 2004).

When the Abbasids came to power, Iraq lay in post-war devastation. Irrigation systems had declined, many dams on the Tigris and the Euphrates had been destroyed, and attempts to restore them were only partly successful. The new caliphs devoted greater attention to the construction of the new capital, Baghdad, where a mobilized labour force of peasants built magnificent palaces and mosques, and the economic situation was generally favourable (Kennedy, 2004).

At the end of the ninth century, the political disintegration of the caliphate was further aggravated by the uprisings of the Zanj and the Qarmatians. The Zanj rose in revolt in 869 and held the province of Basra under their control for fourteen years, and a group of Shi'i origin known as the Qarmatians, drawn from the Ismaili movement, joined their uprising (Kennedy, 2004).

During the Seljuk period, the Abbasids retained a certain importance as a banner in the struggle against the Fatimids. Under the energetic caliph al-Nasir li-Din Allah (r. 1180–1225), they succeeded in restoring secular authority in Baghdad and its surrounding territories, although this restoration did not last long; even when the caliph's practical functions were limited, he continued to be regarded as the supreme ruler of all believers (Hartmann, 1975).

The rule of the Buwayhids is characterized as a period of wars and unrest that brought disorder and devastation and hindered population growth – a transitional period that, in this case, extended over more than a hundred years. In the social sphere, the content

of the period is defined by a process of social stabilization, and the socio-economic development of Iraq during the Seljuk period may be understood as an interaction between demographic processes and processes of social stabilization (Kennedy, 2004).

These socio-historical processes led to the decline of the large landownership that had formed in the previous period and to a restructuring of the entire social system. The years 1060–1090 constituted a period of recovery, marked by the construction or restoration of recently destroyed settlements. The process of social synthesis, however, ended unsuccessfully and gave way to a nationalist reaction, which led to the restoration of feudal relations and to a sharp deterioration in the condition of the peasants. This reaction provoked internecine wars and developed into an ecological-social crisis whose characteristic features were demographic catastrophes, famine, epidemics, uprisings and civil wars, external wars, and the death of a large part of the population (Kennedy, 2004).

Once the authority of the caliphs over Iraq had been re-established, the wars finally ceased. The caliph's social policy was distinguished by an aspiration to preserve justice: he took care of the poor, shelters were built in all the neighbourhoods, and lists were compiled among the population for the distribution of allowances. Friendly relations were established with the Ismailis, and the caliph sought to help bring an end to the internecine wars of the Muslim world (Hartmann, 1975).

The establishment of friendly relations with the Ismailis in 1211–1212 was an important success of al-Nasir's foreign policy. His relations with the Khwarazmshahs, by contrast, developed in a more troubled manner and affected the fate of the entire Muslim world. Al-Nasir carefully observed the actions of the Khwarazmshahs, their aggressive expansionist policy, and their claims to the title of sultan. While war was being waged between them and the last Seljuk, Tughril III (r. 1176–1194), the caliph assisted the Khwarazmshah in the hope of dividing the lands of Western Iran with him; the Khwarazmshah, however, was unwilling to surrender even a fraction of the conquered territory. Recognizing that the Khwarazmshahs posed no less a danger to the dynasty than the Seljuks had, the caliph severed all relations with them (Hartmann, 1975).

Al-Nasir's contemporaries regarded this as a failure of political foresight, for the enmity with the Khwarazmshah contributed to the weakening of the Muslim world, and some even directly accused the caliph of colluding with the Mongols. The caliph, for his

part, demanded that the Khwarazmshah place the territories of Western Iran under his authority, while the Khwarazmshah in turn demanded investiture with sultanic authority (Hartmann, 1975).

After the death of al-Nasir, the economic situation of the country began to deteriorate in 1225–1227, and the first major famine in half a century occurred; specialists note processes of the impoverishment of the peasantry and the enrichment of large landowners. Prices rose gradually while nominal wages remained unchanged, amounting to about 1.5 dinars per month, and real wages fell by more than half between the middle of the twelfth and the middle of the thirteenth century (Kennedy, 2004).

During the reign of Caliph al-Mustansir, the previously successful domestic policy of the Baghdad Caliphate weakened, and the alliance of Muslim states based on al-Nasir's *futuwwa* declined. His successor, the last Abbasid caliph al-Musta'sim (r. 1242–1258), was a weak ruler, remote from politics and given to entertainment, and during his reign the economy of the caliphate fell into complete decline; in addition, the storms and floods of 1244 caused a famine that lasted until 1249 (Bosworth, 1996).

It should be noted that during the Abbasid period the important office of vizier (prime minister) emerged – a figure who helped the ruler bear the burden of state power and who wielded very great authority. At times the caliphs, fearing the power of their viziers, dealt harshly with them, as in the case of the famous vizier dynasty of the Barmakids. Administrative governance and other aspects of state life were organized with reference to the experience of the Sasanian state of Iran, which was then regarded as exemplary, and in the works of the Arab historian and geographer al-Mas'udi (d. 956) the Sasanian kings and their customs are mentioned repeatedly (Kennedy, 2004).

It was under such conditions that the personality of the founder of the Suhrawardiyya order was formed, and the religious and Sufi worldview of Shihab al-Din Abu Hafs Umar al-Suhrawardi was, to a considerable extent, a product of the socio-political, cultural, and economic conditions in which he lived (Ohlander, 2008).

Al-Suhrawardi also pursued a political career, becoming the supreme Sufi of Baghdad: during the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Nasir (1180–1225) he served, as “Shaykh al-Shuyukh,” as an adviser to the caliph. On the caliph's behalf he carried out diplomatic missions in Anatolia, Syria, Egypt, and in the city of Aleppo, which after his visit became

a centre of Sufism and religious life (Ohlander, 2008). His contemporaries wrote the following about his activity in Aleppo:

Suhrawardi delivered a speech at the court of al-Malik al-Zahir. It was not only contemporary in terms of its rhetoric, but also so impressive that the hearts of the listeners became submissive and tears appeared in their eyes.

Caliph al-Nasir employed advisers such as al-Suhrawardi both to form alliances against his enemies and to persuade unaligned groups to support the caliph. Shaykh al-Suhrawardi was an important adviser for several reasons: he was one of the most respected scholars and a representative of the renowned Suhrawardi family, as well as a public figure whose opinion was valued by ordinary people; and he was a gifted orator of strong character who possessed the ability to captivate his listeners completely (Ohlander, 2008).

The caliph sent al-Suhrawardi to Tabriz, to the ruler Atabeg Uzbek ibn Muhammad (r. 1210–1225), and in 1207 al-Suhrawardi travelled to Egypt and Syria as a political envoy to meet the Ayyubid rulers. This mission pursued two aims, one political and one religious. There he met Khalil al-Hamawi, and, in order to help Caliph al-Nasir suppress rebellions and restore the devastated social order, he was warmly received and presented with many gifts, being honoured as the “prince of his time” (al-malik) (Ohlander, 2008).

In 1217–1218 al-Suhrawardi conducted diplomatic negotiations with the Khwarazmshah Muhammad, and a year later he undertook a diplomatic mission to Anatolia, to 'Ala al-Din Kayqubad I (d. 1237), the Seljuk ruler of Konya. On this mission Abu Hafs Umar al-Suhrawardi was received as a high-ranking statesman: ceremonial parades were organized in honour of the shaykh's arrival, and upon his return to Baghdad he was received by the caliph (Ohlander, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

Al-Suhrawardi's active participation in state affairs raises several questions concerning the development of the Sufi orders, and his political activity illuminates an important aspect of their consolidation and stabilization in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. For many years he served as a political adviser to the Abbasid caliph, who relied on his skill in forming alliances and on his readiness to show tolerance toward other Muslim administrations (Ohlander, 2008).

In sum, the life and work of Shihab al-Din Abu Hafs Umar al-Suhrawardi can be fully understood only against the background of the late Abbasid age – a period of political fragmentation, recurrent socio-economic crisis, and an attempt at religious and political integration under al-Nasir li-Din Allah – in which Sufism, embodied in figures such as al-Suhrawardi, came to occupy a central place in both the spiritual and the political life of the Muslim East.

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