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BYZANTIUM AND EGYPT DURING THE FIRST ARAB CIVIL WAR

SHAUN O’SULLIVAN

The standard account of the first Arab civil war and its inherent weaknesses

Internal troubles afflicted the Islamic State for the first time in the late 650s and early 660s. Known in Islamic tradition as the first fitnah, the troubles were described by early Western historians of Islam as what may be termed the ‘standard account’ of the first Arab civil war. Their account is founded upon the Islamic historical-biographical written tradition, whose corpus of records on the first fitnah is preserved in the early comprehensive collections of al-Tabarī (d.923) and al-Mas‘ūdī (d.956). But these writers depended on earlier written compilations of oral accounts of the civil war (akhbār), whose authors are listed in al-Nādirī’s Fihrist, compiled about 987. They include Abū Mikhnaf (d.774), Sayf ibn ‘Umar (d.796), ibn al-Muthannā (d.823-6), al-Wāqīdī (d. 823), al-Mīnqārī (d.827), al-Madā‘īnī (d.839), ibn Abī Shayba (d.849), and ibn Shabba (d.877). The compilations of all these authors were grouped around the selected themes of ‘Uthmān’s murder, the battle of the Camel, and the battle of Siffin with the subsequent arbitration process. Four of the compilations survive.

The Islamic tradition on the first fitnah was therefore recorded in writing by compilers who lived in the third, fourth, and fifth generations (100-150 years) after the events. As with the record of the early Islamic conquests (fiṭrūḥ), the long time-gap

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1 University College Cork, Ireland.
2 In Wellhausen 1899, Caetani 1905-26; more recent accounts are found in Shaban 1971, Kennedy 1986 and Hawting 1986.
3 Noth and Conrad 1994: 35. See also Duri 1983.
5 Ibid. 34-5: one on ‘Uthmān’s murder, one on the battle of the Camel, and two on Siffin. Noth/Conrad also refer to collections on ‘All’s victory over the Kharijites at the battle of Nahrawān.
would explain why the compilers did not produce coherent narrative accounts of the civil war. Instead, according to Noth/Conrad, the nature of the available traditions obliged them to group their compilations around the three themes mentioned above, together with the separate theme of 'Ali’s conflict with the Kharijites and his eventual assassination. Such disparate material furnished the main source of the civil war for Western historians, who assembled the material chronologically to form the narrative ‘standard account’. This may now be resumed as follows: During AH34/July 654-July 655, Arab settlers in Egypt and Iraq met to discuss the question of joint opposition to 'Uthmān. In mid-35/early 656, the protesters arrived in Medina to present their grievances to the caliph. They complained of 'Uthmān’s nepotism, his standardized recension of the Qur’an, and his maltreatment of Arab settlers in the provinces: they demanded control over provincial finances and the right to choose their own governor. 'Uthmān acceded to these demands and the protesters departed for their provinces; learning soon afterwards, however, that he had ordered their deaths, they returned, besieged the caliph in his house and murdered him. ‘Uthmān’s Umayyad supporters hurriedly left Medina, and 'Ali, present in the city but not directly involved in the murder, was appointed caliph on 18 Dhū l-Hijjah 35/17th June 656.

'Ali soon returned to his base in Iraq, faced with the task of imposing his authority upon a disintegrating Islamic State. He first defeated and killed his former Meccan allies, Talhah and Zubayr, at the battle of the Camel near Basra in Jumādā II/December 656. Next, 'Ali advanced against Mu‘āwiya, the Umayyad governor of Syria, who had refused to recognize his elevation to the caliphate. A bloody yet inconclusive battle was fought between the two armies at Siffin on the Euphrates in Safar 37/July 657. It ended with an agreement to arbitrate the justification for ‘Uthmān’s murder and the legitimacy of ‘Ali’s succession. Fighting ceased, arbiters were appointed by each side, and a future meeting agreed. This conference, held at Dūmat al-Jandal in Ramadan 37/February 658, concluded that ‘Uthmān’s murder had not been justified. To ‘Ali, implicated in the murder, this decision was a setback; moreover, in protest against the very concept of arbitration, many of ‘Ali’s Iraqi followers had withdrawn their support after Siffin.

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6 Ibid. 35. Noth/Conrad’s work remains central to the well-known question of the Islamic tradition’s reliability. It takes a moderate position on this question, but a more radical argument is made by Wansbrough 1978, Crone and Cook 1977. See also Robinson 2000.
7 Hinds 1972.
8 Ibid. 457-8. ‘Uthmān’s murder probably occurred in Dhū ‘l-Qa‘dah 35/May 656: see Agapius 1912.
and his persecution of these dissidents, Kharijites as they were known, turned them into bitter domestic opponents. ‘Ali’s position weakened further when Mu‘awiyah was elected caliph by his Syrian supporters in Dhū l-Qa‘dah 37/April 658. Only a few months later, in Safar 38/July 658, Mu‘awiyah swiftly took control of Egypt, whose Arab settlers had previously recognized ‘Ali as caliph. A second arbitration conference, held at Adhruh in Sha‘bān 38/January 659, confirmed the decision made at Dūmat al-Jandal and may even have pronounced in favour of Mu‘awiyah’s claim to the caliphate. Over the next two years, ‘Ali remained passively entrenched in Kūfa. Although retaining control of Iraq and Fars, he held no authority farther east. During this period, small expeditions sent by Mu‘awiyah occupied most of Arabia but failed to advance into Iraq. Finally, ‘Ali was assassinated by a Kharijite in Ramadan 40/January 661; his son and successor Hasan soon surrendered to Mu‘awiyah, whose entry into Kūfa, probably in Rabī‘ I 41/July 661, marked the reunification of the Islamic State.

The standard account is focused on three themes (‘Uthman’s death, the battle of the Camel, and the battle of Siffin with the subsequent arbitration conferences), which all occurred within the two-and-a-half year period June 656 to January 659. In contrast, the second half of the civil war, from January 659 to July 661, is largely ignored: ‘Ali’s death and Hasan’s surrender a few months later are the only significant events reported during this period. This imbalance of coverage, together with the long period before the first written compilations of the first fitnah, raises the theoretical possibility that other important events took place during the civil war, particularly during its second half, but were not passed down within the Islamic tradition.

The possibility of important omissions increases when we consider that the standard account seems to lack internal consistency. During the two years from the conference at Adhruh in January 659 to ‘Ali’s assassination in January 661, the account does not record any decisive steps in the struggle between ‘Ali and Mu‘awiyah. ‘Ali did not invade Syria again to redress his indecisive Siffin campaign of 657: nor did Mu‘awiyah attack ‘Ali in force, though he had already been proclaimed as rival caliph in Syria. The tradition merely records that Mu‘awiyah sent small expeditions against Iraq and Arabia in 659-60: the one against Iraq failed, but the other expedition gained control of most of Arabia, including the Hijaz. The struggle for power was finally ended by ‘Ali’s

9 The date is given by al-Tabari, Ta‘rikh al-rusul wa-l-muluk, II.4; Elias of Nisibis, Chronicle, ed. E.W. Brooks and J.-B. Chabot, CSCO 62-3 (Paris, 1909-10), 141.
assassination at the hands of a Kharijite third party. Certainly, a long period of indecisive stalemate between the two rivals is conceivable. However, it seems unlikely that the stronger of the two would not have made a determined bid for victory during the two years 659-60 that followed the end of arbitration. The Islamic tradition implies that defections to the Kharijites and the loss of Egypt had so weakened ‘Ali by mid-658 that he was unable to launch a new campaign against Mu‘awiya. But then, if ‘Ali were really in such a weak position, why did Mu‘awiya not attack him more vigorously in 659 or 660?

All the more so since, as early as July 658, Mu‘awiya had reportedly been in control of Egypt, whose wealth was believed to be a key factor in the civil war: according to al-Tabarî, for example, Mu‘awiya ‘hoped that if he won control over Egypt, he would also be victorious in the war against ‘Ali on account of the huge sum that was raised from its kharāj.’ Yet the Islamic tradition records that in spite of his key victory in Egypt and his own elevation to the caliphate, Mu‘awiya refrained from attacking ‘Ali in force during the second half of the civil war. This seems questionable.

Source-evidence contradicting the standard account

In fact, the report on Mu‘awiya’s takeover of Egypt is not only suspicious on internal grounds but is also implicitly contradicted by several sources. Once more, the Islamic tradition records that ‘Amr ibn al-‘Ās, Mu‘awiya’s ally, invaded Egypt with a small army in Safar 38/July 658 and rapidly overcame feeble resistance by the anti-Umayyad faction in the country. Remarkably, though, al-Tabarî comments at one point on the strength of the anti-Umayyad faction in Egypt, which seems to cast doubt on the report he makes elsewhere that the Umayyads conquered the country easily:

Mu‘awiya’s only concern was Egypt, fearing its fighting men because of their proximity to him, and the strength of their enmity to anyone who was of the opinion of ‘Uthmān. Nevertheless, Mu‘awiya knew that a group there had found the killing of ‘Uthmān reprehensible and opposed ‘Ali.

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12 Ibid.
13 L.3396.
14 EI, ‘Mu‘awiya ler’ VII.267; al-Tabarî L.3400, 3404, names Muhammad ibn Abī Bakr as the last anti-Umayyad governor of Egypt.
This notice indicates that only a minority of Arabs in Egypt (‘a group’) favoured Mu‘awiya and his deputy ‘Amr ibn al-‘As, who had been the first Arab governor of Egypt from 641 to 644. The majority sympathized with ‘Uthmān’s murderers, Egyptian Arabs who, in effect, had represented them in laying their grievances before ‘Uthmān. And they naturally supported ‘Alī against ‘Uthmān’s kinsman and avenger Mu‘awiya. Equally, Qays ibn Sa‘d, governor of Egypt at ‘Uthmān’s death and indeed the murdered caliph’s protégé and foster-brother, opposed the restoration of his predecessor ‘Amr ibn al-‘As. Therefore, al-Tabari’s report that most of the Egyptian Arabs were determinedly opposed to Mu‘awiya and ‘Amr sounds highly plausible.

But to go further, the standard account of the civil war should be compared with reports from the Christian historical tradition. Differences are sometimes plainly attributable to error on the part of the Christian sources, but this is not always the case. In fact, three Christian sources reliably contradict the Islamic tradition’s report that Egypt fell quickly under Mu‘awiya’s control in July 658.

The first source is the Maronite Chronicle, a document preserved in a single Syriac manuscript thought to be of eighth- or ninth-century date. The manuscript has two sections, of which the second covers the years 657-664. Despite a folio-length lacuna and a textual discrepancy over the years AG972 and AG973, this second section of the chronicle has a narrative, anecdotal style with an unusual degree of detail and accurate dating, as, for example, in the notice: ‘there was frost in the early morning of Wednesday, 13 April, and the white grapevines were withered by it’ (the day and date coincided in 662). The editors of the Maronite

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17 For example, the Syriac historical tradition, depending here upon the non-extant chronicle of patriarch Dionysus of Tell Mahre (d.845), includes the battle of Kerbala and the subsequent death of ‘Ali’s son al-Husayn as events of the first civil war, although they certainly occurred during the second civil war in 680: Chronicle 1234, 280.
Chronicle believe that it was compiled by a contemporary of the events described, although it may have been incorporated into a later history.\(^{18}\)

The second section of the chronicle begins with the following notice:

‘Alī, too, threatened to go up once again against Mu’āwiya, but they struck him while he was at prayer in al-Hīra and killed him. Mu’āwiya went down to al- Hīra, where all the Arab forces there gave their right hand to him in allegiance, whereupon he returned to Damascus.

In AG 970 (September 658-September 659), the 17th year of Constans, on a Friday in June [7th June, 659], at the second hour, there was a violent earthquake in Palestine, and many places there collapsed.

The earthquake report suggests that ‘Ali’s death occurred about two years earlier than the date of Ramadan 40/January 661 given in the Islamic tradition. However, allowing the possibility that entries have been transposed, let us ignore the dating of this notice and concentrate on its content. The phrase ‘once again’ surely refers to ‘Ali’s first attack on Mu’āwiya, which ended in the bloody but inconclusive battle of Sīfīn in July 657. The chronicle thus indicates that ‘Alī was in a position to attack Mu’āwiya a second time shortly before his death. Yet ‘Ali had been faced with opposition in Iraq and Iran since early 658: he could hardly have mounted a second major attack against Syria if, in addition, Egypt had fallen under Mu’āwiya’s control in July 658. If ‘Alī had been preparing such an attack shortly before his death, it seems reasonable to assume that he still had the support of Egypt.

The Islamic tradition’s report on Egypt during the civil war is further called into question by generally accepted evidence from the Chronographia of Theophanes (d.813) that Mu’āwiya made a humiliating truce with the Empire, probably in 659. According to the Chronographia:

In this year [AM6150 = AG969/September 657-September 658], peace was concluded between Romans and Arabs after Mauias had sent an embassy, because of the rebellion, offering that the Arabs should pay the Romans a daily tribute of 1,000 solidi, one horse, and one slave. In the same year, there was a violent earthquake and buildings collapsed in Syria and Palestine in the month of Daisios, indication 2.\(^{19}\)

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\(^{18}\) Theodor Nöldeke, François Nau, E.W. Brooks, Andrew Palmer. Lammens suggested that the Maronite Chronicle formed part of the world history written in the tenth century by Qays al-Marūnī, a writer only known to us from the report of al-Mas‘ūdi: Hoyland 1997: 135-8. This is possible; in any case, however, the extant second section described above seems contemporary.
Theophanes thus states that the truce was made in the year AG969/September 657 September 658. However, this date may be one year early because he goes on to specify that the truce occurred ‘in the same year’ as the violent earthquake of Daisios (May/June) in Syria and Palestine.20 The notice of the Maronite Chronicle, quoted above, also records a violent earthquake in Palestine, dated precisely to Friday, 7th June, 659, which must surely be the same earthquake.21 Hence, it may be better to date the truce to the following year AG970/September 658-September 659. The alteration should be acceptable since the Chronographia frequently reports seventh-century events as occurring one year earlier than do most other sources.

But whether the truce was concluded in 658 or 659, the fact that it was made at all makes it questionable that Mu‘awiya took control of Egypt in July 658, which would have greatly added to his resources and strength. For the truce, the first sought by the Islamic State from its enemy, was a humiliating admission of weakness. It stipulated that Mu‘awiya pay the Empire 1000 solidi daily, an amount equal to that which the Empire itself had reportedly paid during the previous truce of 651-3. At the rate of 72 solidi per pound, the resulting sum of 365,000 solidi per year amounted to over 5000 pounds of gold—much more than the 3000 per year that Mu‘awiya agreed to pay the Empire in 678, after the failure of the second assault on Constantinople and the outbreak of the Mardaite revolt in Syria.22 Mu‘awiya had not been prepared to pay

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19 Chronographia 347. The earthquake notice belongs to a dozen or so unique or near-unique notices in the Chronographia that seem, because of their unusual local detail, to be fragments of a non-extant Christian chronicle tradition, possibly related to the Maronite Chronicle, which originated in northern Syria shortly after the Islamic Conquest. The notices include: death of the hostage Gregory, Heraclius’ nephew, at Heliopolis (651-2); settlement of Sicilian captives in Damascus (662-3); settlement of 5000 Slav deserters near Apamea (663-4); death of Thomarichos, bishop of Apamea (664-5); burning of the bishop of Emesa (664-5); famine in Syria and mass emigration to the Empire (686-7); deportation of the bishop of Apamea to Martyropolis (711-12), in Chronographia 345, 348, 353-4, 355, 382. The subject is thoroughly discussed and later notices are listed in Conrad, L., ‘The conquest of Arwād: a source-critical study in the historiography of the early medieval Near East’, Cameron and King 1992, I: 326, 331-8, 346, 348. On the tradition of the Muslim conquest of Arwād, for example, Conrad states (346): ‘In northern Syria under the early Umayyads there were probably many, including church functionaries, who were well informed about what had happened at Arwād. From this base of potential informants an account of the island’s fall was either transmitted to or composed by Theophilus [of Edessa, d. 785] in later Umayyad times.’ Theophilus of Edessa is plausibly identified by Conrad as the main source of Eastern events for Theophanes, the Syriac chroniclers, and Agapius (see also Hoyland 1997: 400-08).

20 Brooks 394; Stratos, A., Byzantium in the Seventh Century (Amsterdam, 1968-80), III.189.

21 This earthquake is also recorded by Elie of Nisibis 68, for AH39/659-60.

22 Brooks 1913: 397; Bréhier and Aigrain 1947: 183; Haldon 1990: 64. Stratos 1968-80, III: 187-8, questions why Mu‘awiya waited so long after the start of the civil war to seek a peace treaty; without referring to Sebeos’ account, he suggests that Mu‘awiya underestimated both Byzantine strength and ‘Ali’s recovery in the years after Siffin.
this heavy price before the Siffin campaign in spring-summer 657, when he certainly controlled only Syria and was directly threatened by ‘Alī; would he have done so then in 658 or 659, soon after his reported takeover of Egypt? It seems most unlikely.

The third Christian source is Agapius (Mahbūb), an otherwise unknown Melkite bishop of Manbij who wrote a world history from Creation to his own time in the 940s.\textsuperscript{23} Comparison with Theophanes and the Syriac chroniclers shows that, from the Muslim conquest to the 750s, Agapius relies largely on a common source, which is shown to be Theophilus of Edessa (d.785).\textsuperscript{24} However, he probably also relied on a Muslim source for the history of early Islam up to and including the first civil war, for which he gives a folio-length account. On the role of Egypt in the civil war, Agapius emphasizes its importance and gives a description of events that is substantially different from the standard account’s:

‘Alī conferred the administration of Egypt upon Qays ibn Sa‘īd [Ibn Sa‘d] who stayed there and governed it; but Mu‘āwiya intrigued against him and had him deposed. Then Mu‘āwiya and ‘Amr ibn al-Ās went to Muhammad ibn Hazifah (Hudhayfah), who was in Egypt and whom ‘Alī had made governor of it. They deceived him and made him depart for al-‘Arīsh. Then ‘Alī nominated Hakam ibn al-Salt to Egypt. Mu‘āwiya and ‘Amr advanced towards him and set up siege engines against him; then he went out against them with thirty of his companions, and they killed him. After that, ‘Alī sent Qays ibn Sa‘īd against Egypt. Allegiance was sworn to Hasan ibn ‘Alī in the year 41 (May 661-April 662) of the Arabs. Then Mu‘āwiya went to Iraq, and Hasan ibn ‘Alī [went] to him. They met at Meskene in the Sawād, the province [of Kufa], and they made peace in writing on certain conditions and before eyewitnesses.\textsuperscript{25}

From this account, it seems that Mu‘āwiya and ‘Amr invaded Egypt at least twice yet were unable on each occasion to take control of the country. Qays ibn Sa‘d, who had governed Egypt for twelve years by the time of ‘Uthmān’s death, clearly opposed the Umayyads and supported ‘Alī throughout the civil war. Mu‘āwiya managed to secure his deposition but only to see him replaced by two further nominees of ‘Alī. The second was killed in battle by Mu‘āwiya and ‘Amr, but it does not follow that Egypt fell into their hands, for ‘Alī then dispatched Qays ibn Sa‘d to Egypt again, with unstated results.

\textsuperscript{23} Hoyland 1997: 441-2. The work was praised by al Mas‘ūdī (d.956).
\textsuperscript{24} See n.19 above.
\textsuperscript{25} Agapius 1912: 225-6.
Agapius’ account clearly contradicts the standard account’s report of a rapid take-over of Egypt in July 658. Rather, it indicates a long and complex struggle for control of the country, and the list of ‘Ali’s nominees, particularly the name of Qays ibn Sa’d at beginning and end, implies that the anti-Umayyad party had the upper hand.

Sebeos’ variant account of the civil war and corroboration in Chronicle 1234

Evidence from the four sources quoted — al-Tabari, the Maronite Chronicle, Theophanes, and Agapius — together cast doubt on the Islamic tradition’s report that Mu‘awiyah conquered Egypt with ease in mid-658, although they do not offer an alternative explanation. For a variant account of Egypt’s role in the civil war, we must now turn to another Christian source whose remarkable description of the civil war seriously challenges the validity of the standard account. This is the History of the Armenian writer Sebeos, whose equally remarkable account of a disastrous Arab attack on Constantinople in 654 has been considered in a previous article.26

There is some historiographical controversy over Sebeos’ History, mainly because it cannot be attributed with certainty to the bishop Sebeos whose name is included in several medieval lists of Armenian historians as the author of a ‘history of Heraclius’.27 Nevertheless, the attribution of the work to this bishop Sebeos, made by the discoverer of the manuscripts in the 1830s and by the original editor in 1851, remains a more plausible choice than any other. The History is informed by a single purpose: from the particular standpoint of the writer’s native Armenia, to interpret the upheavals of the seventh century as fulfilling Daniel’s prophecies and ushering in the penultimate age of the world. The writer appears throughout as a competent and reliable historian. He uses original documents extensively and places them coherently within a chronological framework. Where his material is closely paralleled by other sources, a comparison shows him to be equal or superior in chronological accuracy, extent of information, and personal objectivity.28

27 Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999: xxxii, xxxvi-xxxviii. Neither of the two manuscripts, dating 1568 and 1672, which were used for the original 1851 edition, bore a title or author for the text of this history. Sebeos’ History appeared early in Western languages: Hübschmann1875, a partial translation; Macler 1904.
28 Ibid. lxxiv-lxxvi. In his introduction, Howard-Johnston compares Sebeos and other sources (Theophylact Simocatta, Chronicon Paschale, George of Pisidia, Chronicle 724, and Theophanes) on nine episodes of the last Roman-Persian war and the Arab invasion of Palestine.
The extent of biblical references and the interest shown in theological controversy indicate that the writer was an Armenian Monophysite churchman. His reference to eyewitnesses and his close knowledge of the Sasanian Empire indicate that he lived during the period he covered, being born around 600 and writing most of the History around the middle of the century. Finally, the History is demonstrably a unified work: though it frequently changes topics and digresses from the chronological thread of the narrative, there is no sign of interpolation. In short, the writer known as Sebeos is a reliable source by all standard measures; therefore, his reports on the events of his time must be treated with respect. Sebeos’ account of the civil war comes at the very end of his History and may be a postscript written in the early 660s, several years after the main body of the text. The account has been thoroughly commented by James Howard-Johnston. It can be divided into two parts, the first of which follows:

Now God sent a disturbance among the armies of the sons of Ismael, and their unity was split. They fell into mutual conflict and divided into four sections. One part [was composed of] those in the direction of India; one part, those who occupied Asorestan [Syria] and the north; one part, those in Egypt and in the regions of the T’etalk‘; one part in the territory of the Arabs and the place called Askarawn. They began to fight with each other and to kill each other with enormous slaughter. The [army] in Egypt and that in the area of the Arabs united; they killed their king, plundered the multitude of treasures, and installed another king. Then they went to their respective areas.

That prince who was in the region of Asorestan, their prince called Mu‘awiya, was the second after their king. When he saw what had occurred, he brought together his troops, went into the desert, slew that other king whom they had installed, waged war with the army in the region of the Arabs, and inflicted great slaughter on them. He returned very victoriously to Asorestan.

Dates are absent, and no protagonists are named except Mu‘awiya. Nevertheless, this first part of Sebeos’ account refers clearly enough to ‘Uthmān’s murder by Egyptian Arabs, ‘Ali’s elevation to the caliphate, the civil war between

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29 Ibid. xxxix, lxi. See also Hoyland 1997: 124-31.
31 Ibid. 151, n.923.
32 Ibid. 149, n.911: the T’etalk‘ normally means the Kushans of Sijistan and Khurasan. Sebeos is referring to an alliance between Arab forces in Egypt and in Khurasan.
33 Ibid. 285: ‘askarawn‘ is likely connected with Arabic ‘askar, referring to the great camp-cities of Basra and Kufa, otherwise unmentioned in Sebeos’ list.
Mu‘āwiya and ‘Alī, and ‘Alī’s death. At the end, it reports that Mu‘āwiya killed ‘Alī (‘that other king whom they had installed’). This statement does not square with the Islamic tradition’s record that ‘Alī was assassinated by the Kharijite Ibn Muljam in the mosque at Kūfa, but the discrepancy does not affect the sequence of events.35

However, this first part of Sebeos’ account does make clear that the civil war was not simply a two-sided conflict between ‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya. Rather, the Islamic State, described as ‘the armies of the sons of Ismael’, was divided after ‘Uthmān’s death into four parts. The exact definition of these divisions is problematic, but the general interpretation is straightforward and compelling. ‘Uthmān’s murder unleashed a complex struggle involving peripheral Arab forces in Egypt and Iran besides those in the central regions of Syria and Iraq. ‘Alī’s death and Mu‘āwiya’s take-over of Iraq and Arabia merely ended one dimension of the civil war, according to Sebeos. He goes on to describe the rest of the conflict in the last paragraph of his History. It is this second part that diverges radically from the standard account’s version:

He [Mu‘āwiya] returned very victoriously to Asorestan [after ‘Alī’s death and the takeover of Iraq]. But the army that was in Egypt united with the king of the Greeks, made a treaty, and joined him. The host of troops, numbering about 15,000, believed in Christ and was baptized. The blood of the slaughter of immense multitudes flowed thickly among the armies of Ismael. Warfare afflicted them as they engaged in mutual carnage. They were unable to refrain for the least moment from the sword and captivity and fierce battles by sea and by land, until Mu‘āwiya prevailed and conquered. Having brought them into submission to himself, he rules over the possessions of the sons of Ismael and makes peace with all.36

Thus, according to the Armenian historian, soon after ‘Alī’s death and Mu‘āwiya’s takeover of Iraq – that is, in mid- to late-661 – the Arab army in Egypt formed an alliance with the Empire, sealing it by renouncing Islam and adopting Christianity. Fighting on land and sea continued for some time; the eventual result was Mu‘āwiya’s complete victory over all his opponents and re-establishment of the Islamic State. With the single exception of James Howard-Johnston’s 1999 commentary, this account has been practically ignored by modern scholarship. Even if considered, however, it would be unlikely to gain widespread acceptance because

35 al-Tabarī 1.3460.
36 Sebeos 176; Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999: 284-7. Thomson points out that the last sentence is in the present tense, suggesting that this section was written shortly after the end of the conflict (154, n.944).
corroborating evidence is insufficient. It is weaker even than the corroboration for Sebeos’ account of the Arab attack on Constantinople in 654.\(^{37}\) In that case, the paucity of direct corroboration may be explained by the combination of two factors: the decision to vilify the memory of Constans II after the condemnation of Monotheletism; and the assimilation of the event in popular memory with the Arabs’ later failed assault on Constantinople in 674-8. But neither of these factors is available in the present argument. Nor is the undeniable scarcity of extant evidence for this period a wholly satisfactory explanation. Nevertheless, we shall argue for the plausibility of Sebeos’ account with the aim at least of casting doubt on the standard account of the civil war based on the Islamic tradition. Corroborating evidence (such as it is) will be presented, arguments in favour fielded, and the course of the civil war reconstructed and fitted into the context of events during the early 660s.

The corroborating evidence comes from the Syrian Monophysite Chronicle 1234. For the seventh century, this anonymous Edessene work preserves much of the nonextant chronicle of Dionysius of Tell Mahre, Jacobite patriarch of Antioch 818-45, which in turn depended heavily on the history of Theophilus of Edessa (d.785), composed about 750.\(^{38}\) Chronicle 1234 states:

AG976, year 23 of Constans, 44H (corresponding to the period September 664-March 665): There was confusion as to the date of the Feast of the Resurrection [......] In this year there was an eclipse of the sun and the stars came out. In this year both Lord John the patriarch and Lord Simeon the metropolitan of Edessa died within the space of a month [......]. And Mu‘āwiya invaded Egypt and destroyed all the Romans there, more than five thousand of them – year five of Mu‘āwiya.\(^{39}\)

The last sentence of this precisely dated notice gives an intriguing piece of information that seems never to have attracted the attention of commentators. It states unequivocally that a Byzantine force was present in Egypt in 664-5. Now, it is possible that the entry refers merely to a Byzantine naval raid on the Egyptian coast that was repulsed by the Arabs with heavy loss. In 673, for example, such a raid occurred in order to disrupt the gathering Arab naval offensive against Constantinople,
and several others are recorded against Egypt, Barqa, and the Syrian coast during the later seventh and eighth centuries. Nevertheless, the wording of this notice allows for an alternative and perhaps more fitting interpretation. First, five thousand seems a rather large number for a raiding force. And secondly, the report states that Mu'āwiya ‘invaded’ Egypt in order to attack the Byzantines. Perhaps Mu'āwiya simply led an army into Egypt to help his governor ‘Amr ibn al-‘Ās against Byzantine raiders. But the use of the word ‘invaded’ is remarkable, suggesting that the Byzantines were present in Egypt in a more permanent way and in greater force, and that, to destroy them, Mu'āwiya had to invade the country in late 664 or early 665.

Therefore, we should consider the possibility of a connection between this notice in Chronicle 1234 and Sebeos’ account of Egyptian events during the civil war. For the parallel elements are clear: both refer to conflict in Egypt that involved the Byzantines in some manner and at roughly the same time (in Chronicle 1234’s report, September 664–March 665: in Sebeos’ History, the period beginning with Mu'āwiya’s takeover of Iraq in mid-661 and ending with his complete victory at an unspecified later date, but probably by 665, when the Muslims reportedly invaded North Africa).

Reconstruction of the civil war during the early 660s and arguments in favour

The standard account’s report that Egypt fell easily to Mu'āwiya in mid-658 has been variously called into question by the circumstantial evidence of al-Tabari, the Maronite Chronicle, Theophanes, and Agapius. If Mu'āwiya failed to take Egypt then or afterwards, it becomes understandable why he concluded the truce with Byzantium in 659, why he did not attack ‘Alī vigorously, and why ‘Alī, for his part, was reportedly preparing to attack Mu'āwiya again shortly before his death.

We may now place this circumstantial evidence besides the direct evidence of Sebeos and Chronicle 1234 in order to reconstruct the second half of the civil war, and especially the role of Egypt.

The stalemate prevailed between Mu'āwiya and ‘Alī throughout 659 and 660, as the Islamic tradition records, but with the important difference that Egypt remained independent of and hostile to Mu'āwiya. In fact, Egypt remained as it had been since

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41 Not reading Syriac, I rely here on the accuracy of Andrew Palmer’s translation of Chronicle 1234 in West-Syrian Chronicles, 85f. On other occasions where Palmer uses the word ‘invade’, ‘invaded’, ‘invasion’, or ‘invader’, the meaning is plainly accurate: as, for example, in describing the Arab invasions of Africa in 647 and Cyprus in 649 (ibid. 167, 174, 176).
42 See n.69 below.
‘Uthmān’s death, under the control of its Arab military settlers, but aligned with ‘Alī in his conflict with Mu‘āwiya. During these years of prevailing truce between Mu‘āwiya and Byzantium, as we shall see below, the emperor Constans took the opportunity to regain the Empire’s control over Armenia and extend its assistance to regions of Transcaucasia and northwestern Iran that had successfully broken away from the Islamic State.43 Mu‘āwiya also took advantage of the truce to concentrate against his enemies in the civil war. His attempt – more likely, his attempts – against Egypt had failed; however, during the years 659 and 660, he dispatched expeditions that gained control over most of Arabia including the Hijaz, thereby dividing ‘Alī from his allies in Egypt. On the other hand, as the Maronite Chronicle records, ‘Alī prepared to counter-attack with a second invasion of Syria, and these preparations were almost complete when ‘Alī was assassinated in Kufa in January, 661.

Mu‘āwiya lost no time in exploiting this windfall. He advanced rapidly in person, intimidating ‘Alī’s son Hasan into surrender and recognition of his, Mu‘āwiya’s, sole title to the caliphate, and so gaining the allegiance of most Iraqi Arabs by the middle of 661. His position greatly strengthened, he naturally prepared to renew the attack on Egypt and could reasonably have expected rapid success this time, all other things being equal. The Egyptian Arab army was concentrated at the new capital of al-Fustāt with a detachment at Alexandria; according to Sebeos, it numbered about 15,000 soldiers at this time.44 We cannot know whether its commander, the governor of Egypt, was still Qays ibn Sa‘d or a successor; in any case, the great majority of the army was loyal to the Egyptian Arab conspirators who had murdered ‘Uthmān. After ‘Alī’s death in January 661, these soldiers and their commander had transferred allegiance to his son Hasan. However, when Hasan surrendered to Mu‘āwiya in mid-661 with guarantees of security, they did not do

\[\text{Note, by comparison, that a subsequent Arab-Byzantine truce was made in 678 for thirty years. It seems to have lasted until 692 as regards the main theatre of fighting in Asia Minor. No Arab invasions into Asia Minor are recorded throughout this long period. But the truce did not prevent Byzantine support for the Mardâite rebellion in Western Syria, which began not long before the truce was made. The sources describe the Byzantines as sending forces by land and sea to participate in this uprising (Stratos 1968-80, IV: 51, V: 19-35).}\]

\[\text{44 The original Arab army of conquest that settled at Fustāt reportedly numbered 12,000 (Duri 1983: 61). The Arab army gathered to repel the Byzantine invasion of Egypt in 646 numbered 15,000 (Stratos 1968-80, III: 36-7), and it is recorded that a force of 20,000 invaded North Africa from Egypt in 647 (Duri ibid.). Ibn Abd al-Hakam estimates 40,000 soldiers registered in the Egyptian diwān at the start of Mu‘āwiya’s caliphate in the early 660s (Kennedy 2001: 72). Sebeos’ figure of 15,000 soldiers for the total size of the Egyptian Arab army in 661 is not implausible: it seems somewhat low, but this could be explained by heavy losses suffered in the disastrous naval expedition of 654 and the costly victory at Phoenix in 655, in both of which Egyptian Arab forces must have played a heavy part, and of course in the fighting of the civil war.}\]
likewise. Deeply implicated in the murder of Mu‘awiya’s kinsman, they feared the consequences of doing so; equally, surrender to Mu‘awiya would have terminated the practical independence they had enjoyed since 656.

Hence the Egyptian Arabs took the bold step that Sebeos took care to record, probably because it was so striking to a contemporary— that is, they defected altogether from the Islamic State and allied with the Empire. Furthermore, in order to establish their good faith and guarantee unstinting assistance, the Egyptian Arabs abandoned Islam and accepted baptism en masse into the Byzantine or Melkite Catholic Church. Consequently, they received assistance that enabled them to defend Egypt against Mu‘awiya. This assistance included the dispatch of a Byzantine army to Egypt, not a raiding force but a permanent reinforcement. The expeditionary force is recorded by Chronicle 1234 as having numbered 5000 at the time of its eventual destruction by Mu‘awiya in 664-5, but it may have been larger initially.45

This revolution in affairs must have taken place in the second half of 661. Not surprisingly, then, we learn from the Maronite Chronicle that Mu‘awiya terminated the truce with the Empire the following spring.46 For the years 662, 663, and 664, we only have record of Mu‘awiya’s offensives into Asia Minor; however, if our reconstruction of events is valid, it was his strategic priority to conquer Egypt. Similarly, however, it must also have been Byzantium’s strategic priority during these years to keep Egypt out of Mu‘awiya’s hands. Consequently, Egypt was the central theatre of conflict for three years until the period September 664-March 665, when it fell to an invasion led by Mu‘awiya in person. Of this last stage of the Arab civil war, Sebeos gives us the impression, in Howard-Johnston’s words, that ‘all the armies which he enumerated were involved, that the fighting was widespread and the casualties heavy.’47 Also, a vague but suggestive allusion comes in the History of the Patriarchs, a tenth-century compilation of earlier Lives of the Coptic patriarchs of Alexandria. Of special interest are the Lives of patriarchs Benjamin (641-61) and Agathon (661-77), written by the archdeacon George shortly before 720.48 Following the Muslim conquest of Egypt, this author only once mentions the Arab-Byzantine war that continued with little interruption up to his own time. Interestingly, the statement comes immediately after the enthronement of Agathon is recorded for 661:

\[\text{45} \text{ A precedent exists in the large Byzantine expedition sent to re-take Egypt in summer 646. The expedition took Alexandria and marched inland but was soon defeated by the Arabs (Stratos 1968-80, III: 36-7). Byzantines and Arabs were aware of Egypt's strategic importance. According to al-Tabari (1.3409), Ali told the Kufans: 'Servants of God, Egypt is greater than Syria, more productive, and with better people.'} \]

\[\text{46} \text{ See quote below at n.71.} \]

\[\text{47} \text{ Sebeos 287.} \]

\[\text{48} \text{ Hoyland 1997: 446-7.} \]

\[\text{49} \text{ Severus ibn al-Muqaffa' 1947: 258. See n.78 for the rest of the notice.} \]
'Now the Muslims were fighting against the Romans furiously'.

This conjectural account offers one explanation of the reports in Sebeos and Chronicle 1234. Another explanation, not necessarily more reasonable but likely more acceptable in the present climate of opinion, would assert that the reports are unconnected: Chronicle 1234's report refers to a short and disastrous Byzantine naval raid against Egypt, while Sebeos' report on the mass conversion of the Egyptian Arabs is fancy or, at best, a large exaggeration – stemming perhaps from established reports that Christian Arab allies of the Empire who had made nominal conversions to Islam during the Islamic conquest of Syria later reverted to their old allegiance and settled in Asia Minor. The principal example here is the case of Jabala ibn al-Ayham, the last Ghassanid ruler, who reportedly renounced Islam and fled to the Empire with 30,000 of his followers in 640 or 641. As it stands, then, Sebeos' report of the Egyptian Arab army's mass conversion would be viewed sceptically by most modern historians. Nevertheless, with a single exception, his History seems consistently reliable elsewhere: in particular, even his description of the 654 attack on Constantinople and its astonishing debacle can be substantiated. It is also worth stressing that James Howard Johnston, the only historian who has given Sebeos' report on the mass conversion any consideration, is by no means sceptical. Indeed, he points out, somewhat sardonically, that 'a stray reference in early Islamic tradition to Muslims converting to Christianity [...] at this time because of the deadly strife within the congregation of Muhammad (in Bahrain) may ease some of the incredulity which Sebeos' statement is likely to arouse in Islamicists.'

Howard-Johnston's comment should give pause for reflection on the fact that our perspective of the seventh century is clouded by hindsight. Men living in the 650s could not possibly have held in their minds the concept indelibly fixed in our own – of Islam as a historical movement spread though a great expanse of space and time. It follows, then, that under circumstances of military defeat and political disintegration, they could very well have regarded Islam as a momentary phenomenon destined to vanish as rapidly as it had arisen twenty years previously. Keeping fully in mind this psychological element, let us now recall the probability that the Arabs had...
launched a vast naval attack on Constantinople in 654, in which their fleet had been suddenly and completely destroyed by a storm within sight of the city. Let us also recall that the Islamic State broke into several pieces only two years afterwards, the armies of conquest now turning upon one another in violent combat. Under these circumstances, it would not be surprising if the confidence of the Muslims in their own destiny was deeply shaken during the later 650s – notwithstanding their timely naval victory at Phoenix in 655, which had done no more than halt the Byzantine counter-attack.

Two secondary points should also be noted. First, the Arab army in Egypt included large groups of Syrians from the Judhām and Qudā‘a (Kalb) tribal confederacies, both of which had previously been allies of Byzantium and, at least in the case of the Qudā‘a, mainly Christian. These tribesmen settled in al-Fustat immediately after its establishment and drew military stipends. Only twenty years after the conquest, therefore, a Christian background influence from formerly Christian soldiers and sometimes still-Christian family members would have been apparent within the Egyptian Arab army. Secondly, if the Egyptian Arab soldiers had converted en masse, they would naturally have joined the Chalcedonian Melkite Church, thereby confirming their dominion over the Monophysite native Egyptians (rather as Germanic tribal units of the Roman army favoured Arianism as a badge of privilege over their Catholic subject populations).

The context of events and the strategy of Constans II

Sebeos reports that the Egyptian Arabs broke with the Islamic State, converted to Christianity, and came under the Empire’s protection for more than three years (late 661- early 665). With the indirect corroboration of Chronicle 1234, and with awareness of the failed Arab attack on Constantinople in 654, we can reconstruct the second half of the civil war, especially its Egyptian theatre, in a manner that plausibly incorporates Sebeos’ account. In contrast, the standard account of the civil war based on Islamic sources reports that Mu‘āwiya took over Egypt easily in mid-658. But this report seems to be internally inconsistent and is indirectly contradicted by notices in four sources. The standard account’s silence on the Egyptian events reported by Sebeos should cause no surprise: such events would probably never have entered the Islamic tradition, still less have been included in the written compilations made 100-

54 Athamina 1986: 201; Lammens 1907: 155.
55 Ibid. 157-8. Lammens stresses the political and perfunctory nature of conversion to Islam by the Syrian Arabs, commenting, ‘À cette époque l’exercice de l’islam se réduisait presque à rien, même pour les hommes.’
150 years later. Finally, after the evidence and argument presented, it becomes easier to appeal to the scarcity of extant material for this period as explanation for the lack of direct corroboration for Sebeos in Christian sources.

The case has been presented, but it remains to be fittingly framed within the context of surrounding events during the period 661-5. This is the period after ‘Ali’s death – the second half of the Arab civil war, which finds no place in the standard account but is recorded in the last paragraph of Sebeos’ History.

First, Mu’āwiya was of course greatly strengthened by the reunification of the Islamic State’s central territories of Syria, Arabia, and Iraq. However, he was unable to end the civil war rapidly, not only because of Byzantine assistance to Egypt, but also because of the need to complete operations in the East. Sebeos’ account records that independent Arab forces arose in the East after ‘Uthmān’s death, one ‘towards India’ and the other in Khurasan (‘the region of the T’etalk’). The Islamic tradition tends to confirm this, recording that soon after ‘Uthmān’s death, the governors he had appointed for Khurasan and Sijistan withdrew to Mu’āwiya in Syria. Nor does it appear that ‘Ali’ ever established his authority in these regions. As soon as Mu’āwiya took control of Iraq, the Islamic tradition continues, he dispatched his lieutenants to retake Khurasan and Sijistan. It is likely that these generals were confronted by anti-Umayyad Arab forces in the East and certain that they spent years campaigning against native Iranian and Ephthalite rebels, whose stronghold of Kabul probably did not fall until 665. In connection here is the valuable record from non-Islamic sources that Peroz, son of the last Sasanian king, invaded Sijistan from India during the Arab civil war but was killed before reaching Khurasan.

A separate item gives further evidence of conditions in the East and of Byzantium’s deep involvement in the territories of the fragmented Islamic State during the civil war. The Armenian historian Movses Daskhurants’i, probably writing in the early eighth century, records in a postscript to his history that the emperor Constans personally led an expedition in the 19th year of his reign (659-60) through Armenia to the regions west and south-west of the Caspian Sea – Albania, Adharbayjan, and Media.

All these regions had formed part of the Islamic State, but their peoples had rebelled in 655 and destroyed an Arab army sent against them. Since then, they had

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57 Ibid.
maintained their independence and entered into alliance with the Empire, for Movses records that Juansher, prince of Media, had previously offered allegiance to Constans. Presumably, too, he had adopted Christianity: Media, previously part of the Sasanian Empire, had not been a Christian region, yet Movses records that Juansher was Christian when Constans gave him audience in 659-60, conferring on him the titles of ‘patrician and governor of the east’. This account is remarkable. First, by reporting the presence of the emperor in regions so far eastwards, it confirms that the Islamic State’s power no longer lay over much of the Iranian plateau at this time. Secondly, it offers a striking precedent and parallel to Sebeos’ report on the Egyptian Arabs in 661. In each case, internal opponents of the Islamic State offer alliance with Byzantium and profession of the Christian faith; their offer is accepted and their struggle for independence encouraged. The difference between the two cases is that one group of rebels belonged to the conquered native population, whereas the other was reportedly a dissident group among the Arab conquerors.

The emperor Constans returned from the East to Constantinople in 660, but he left the capital again for new operations, probably in the first half of 661. According to Latin sources, he advanced overland to Thessalonica and thence to Athens, where he resided until spring 663. These sources do not tell us why he spent so long in Athens, but Theophanes and Elie of Nisibis record that he had previously campaigned against Slav tribes, probably in Macedonia and Thrace. From this, it may be inferred that he spent 661 and 662 campaigning against other Slav tribes who had occupied much of southern Greece, especially the Peloponnese. Even so, we may doubt that Constans was solely or even mainly preoccupied with the Slavs in these crucial years when Mu‘awiya gained Iraq (July 661) and, ending the truce, resumed the war against the Empire (spring 662).

In fact, if the Egyptian Arabs had indeed defected from the Islamic State and allied with Byzantium in late 661, we may speculate that Constans’ residence in

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60 Sebeos 172-3; Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999: 280-1 and maps, 359f. Media was the region extending from Lake Urmia southeast as far as Hamadan.

61 Ibid. See also a report in the Syriac Life of Maximus, a Monothelete polemical document probably written in the 660s: ‘[Maximus] went down to Constantinople at the time when Mu‘awiya made peace with the emperor Constans, having started a war with Abū Turāb, the emir of Hīrta, at Sījjīn, and defeated him. The emperor Constans was in Adharbayjān (‘DRWYGN), and at that point Maximus entered Constantinople…’ (25), quoted in Brock 1984: 319.

62 Constans ordered the execution of his brother Theodosius, an act for which he was publicly reviled: Theophanes, AM6151 (658/9); Maronite Chronicle 71, and Elie of Nisibis 68, both date this event to 659: it probably occurred before his expedition to the Caucasus and north-western Iran.


64 Theophanes, AM6149 (656/7); Elie of Nisibis AH39 (659/60). Bréhier and Aigrain1947: 178-9.

65 Stratos 1968-80, III: 203f.
Athens mainly served the purpose of dispatching assistance to the Egyptian Arabs. The time he reportedly spent in Athens (late 661-spring 663) coincides with the period when a Byzantine expeditionary force would have been sent to Egypt. Athens in particular was well placed to communicate with Egypt via Barqa, a route that avoided Cyprus and the Syrian coast, both under Mu’awiya’s control. Coin evidence suggests that Athens at this time was a major military base in the region of southern Greece, the Aegean, and the southern coast of Asia Minor, which Constans himself had recently organized into the new naval theme of the Karabisians. Copper coin hoards of Heraclius, Constans II, Constantine IV, Philippicus, and Leo III have been excavated at Athens, and all are thought to reflect specific military mobilizations. By far the most numerous group, 817 coins, are of Constans II, which surely confirms the prolonged residence of the emperor, his administration, army, and fleet.

However, in spring or early summer of 663, Constans and his forces departed for Tarentum in southern Italy. After campaigning against the Lombards of the interior but failing to take their centre of Benevento, the emperor withdrew to Naples, visited Rome briefly in July 663, and then moved to Syracuse. There he remained until his murder in 668 at the age of 38.

Constans’ move to the West has aroused much comment. The most widely accepted explanation is that he planned first to restore the Byzantine position against the Lombards in southern Italy, as he had done against the Slavs in the Balkans, and next to strengthen North Africa against an anticipated Muslim attack, which indeed

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66 Hendy 1985: 652. The island of Samos was probably the headquarters of the new theme.
67 Ibid. 659-61. Coins of Heraclius, Constans II, and Constantine IV are also found at Corinth, but in much smaller number. Corinth became the administrative centre of the theme of Hellas, probably created in the 690s, but large numbers of coins do not appear there until the ninth century (ibid.).
68 The date is confirmed by the most recent study of Corsi 2001: 774; Brooks 1913: 394, dates the move to 662. Lewis 1951: 59, states that Constans transferred much of the fleet and 20,000 troops to the West.
69 Bréhier and Aigrain 1947: 179; Brooks, 1913: 394. Theophanes 347, states that Constans left the capital and arrived in Syracuse in 660-1. Liber Pontificalis I.343, and Paul the Deacon, History of the Lombards, V.11, more reliably record Constans’ arrival in Italy in spring 663.
70 Corsi (2001) focuses on Constans’ campaign against the Lombard duchy of Benevento. See also Brooks 1913: 395; Dennett 1948: 169; Haldon 1990: 59-60; Lewis 1951: 58-9; Stratos 1968-80, III: 201-2. Two other explanations for Constans’ move have been advanced. Following Theophanes, Chronographia, 348, and Chronicle 1234, 282, Haldon suggests that Constans intended a permanent transfer of the seat of government to the West because it was more secure against both the Muslims and domestic opposition; but Theophanes is very hostile to Constans, and such a transfer would have been tantamount to abandoning the Empire’s core territories in Asia Minor and Greece. Secondly, Lewis and Stratos both suggest that Constans intended to restore imperial control over North Africa, which was strongly opposed to the official Monothelete policy and, they believe, practically independent following the exarch Gregory’s rebellion in 646. But there is no evidence of North Africa’s political separation from the Empire after Gregory’s death in battle against the Muslims in 647; the province was certainly hostile to imperial religious policy, but that alone would hardly account for the emperor’s move to the West, let alone his prolonged residence there.
took place in 665 and again in 669.\textsuperscript{70}  

We should note, however, that Constans’ arrival in Italy came at least six months after Mu‘āwiya had broken the truce and renewed the Muslim offensive in Asia Minor. The ending of the truce is recorded by the Maronite Chronicle:

The following year there was frost in the early morning of Wednesday, 13 April, and the white grapevines were withered by it. When Mu‘āwiya had acquired the power that he had aimed at and was at rest from the wars of his people, he broke the peace settlement with the Romans and refused to accept peace from them any longer. Rather he said, ‘If the Romans want peace, let them surrender their weapons, and pay the tax.’\textsuperscript{71}

The date Wednesday, 13\textsuperscript{th} April occurred only in 662 during that decade, and the ending of the truce is reported immediately afterwards. It seems reasonable then to suppose that the truce, having lasted between three and four years, ended between April and September 662 (the chronicle’s entries are recorded \textit{anno Graecorum}, from September to September). Indeed, there is evidence that the Arabs renewed their land offensive against Asia Minor in 662, and repeated their attacks every year thereafter for well over a decade, culminating in their second major assault against Constantinople from 674 to 677.\textsuperscript{72} Under such circumstances, it does not seem likely that the emperor intended to subjugate the Lombards of southern Italy. On the other hand, it was certainly necessary to strengthen Sicily and North Africa, rich but poorly defended provinces that the Arabs had already attacked during the late 640s and early 650s.\textsuperscript{73} Indeed, the vigorous renewal of the Muslim westward offensive offers ample explanation for Constans’ long stay at Syracuse: only after his death and the recall of his forces in 668 were the Muslims able to devastate Sicily and establish a permanent foothold in North Africa (669-670).

Yet, if we are to rely upon the combined accounts of Sebeos and Chronicle 1234, concern for North Africa could not have prompted Constans’ move to Italy in spring 663 and his settlement in Syracuse a few months later. For the Muslims could

\textsuperscript{70} 71-2 The next recorded event is the raid in Thrace, elsewhere attested for 663.

\textsuperscript{72} al-Tabarî II.16, reports a campaign in AH42 (Apr 662-Apr 663) that inflicted a ‘shocking defeat’ on the Byzantines. This was the first attack against the Empire recorded by the Islamic tradition since the battle of Phoenix in 655. Theophanes 348, also reports that the Arabs launched a major attack against the Empire in AM6154/Sep 661-Sep 662. However, most of his reports for this period seem to be one year behind, so perhaps this notice refers to the Muslim invasion of the following year, 663, which, according to the Maronite Chronicle, crossed into Thrace and threatened Constantinople. al-Tabarî corroborates the Maronite Chronicle here, stating that the attack of AH43 (Apr 663-Apr 664) reached Constantinople.

\textsuperscript{73} The Muslims reportedly attacked Sicily in 652: Eickhoff 1954: 16-17; Dennett 1948: 16.
not have threatened North Africa except from Egypt, but Egypt was still in the Byzantine camp in spring 663 since, according to our reading of Chronicle 1234's report, Muʿāwiya did not conquer the country until the period September 664-March 665. Again, nor could the Lombard question have prompted Constans' move to the West, given the danger to the Empire now posed by Muʿāwiya's ending of the truce. We are therefore driven to speculate that Constans' move to the West, like his move to Athens, was strategically connected to Egypt.

But Athens was much better placed than Syracuse in this regard: what explanation, then, can be offered for Constans' move from Greece to Sicily? In connection, let us note the possibility that, very soon after the submission of Iraq in July 661, Muʿāwiya rapidly built up Muslim naval power from the Syrian bases of Acre and Tyre. Such at least is implied by the following record in the Islamic tradition: A body of Persians was transplanted in the year 42 (662-3) by Muʿāwiya from Baʿlabakk, Hims, and Antioch to the seacoast of the Jordan, i.e. Tyre, Acre, and other places; and he transplanted in the same year, or one year before (661-2) or after, certain Asawira from al-Basra and al-Kufa and certain Persians from Baʿlabakk and Hims to Antioch.74

Perhaps Muʿāwiya was spurred to this effort by his failure to take control of Egypt and its important naval bases. The Egyptian fleet was probably under his own, not the Egyptian governor's, direct control before the civil war began;75 consequently, it may have remained loyal – Sebeos specifies only the Egyptian Arab army's involvement in the civil war and defection from the Islamic State. But the fleet could not have operated effectively without strong bases; therefore, Muʿāwiya may have built up the Syrian ports from 661 because he no longer controlled the vast Egyptian bases at Alexandria and al-Fustat. These had largely sustained his naval offensive against Byzantium from 649 to 654, so that the hostility of the Egyptian Arabs throughout the civil war may have initially crippled Muʿāwiya's naval capacity. Speculative this may be, but there is certainly no mention of Muslim naval activity in the Mediterranean for many years after the battle of Phoenix in 655, and Muʿāwiya's naval weakness probably influenced his conclusion of the humiliating truce with the Empire from 659-62. Finally, his rapid success in building up Syrian-based seapower from 661 is indicated by the report that a Muslim force nominally led by Muʿāwiya's son Yazīd crossed the Sea of Marmara into Europe in 663.76 This daring strike would hardly have been possible unless Constans had sailed to Italy with much of the imperial fleet shortly beforehand. More significantly, though, the report reveals Muʿāwiya's

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76 Maronite Chronicle, 72; al-Tabarī, II.27.
renewed naval strength in the eastern Mediterranean at this time. We may deduce in consequence that Egypt (always assuming that it was still in the Byzantine camp) was not only exposed to attack by land but also increasingly isolated from assistance by sea.

To conclude this line of speculation, Constans’ move to Athens and later to Syracuse may have been governed by the strategic priority of maintaining Egypt’s resistance against Mu‘awiya in the face of increasingly heavy odds. This priority overrode even the defence of Asia Minor since Constans, confident perhaps of the capital’s invincibility, took with him a large part of the Empire’s military force to Greece and Sicily. Once more, if we rely upon the sources referred to, then the Slavs, the Lombards, and North Africa could not have been the main strategic object of this force. Egypt was the strategic object, but since no other source informs us of Egyptian events in the early 660s, it is fruitless to speculate further on whether or how Constans may have deployed forces from Sicily towards Egypt. We are consequently brought to a halt, left with the certain knowledge that Constans’ far-flung strategy to contain Mu‘awiya eventually failed in both East and West and prepared the way for renewed Muslim advance.

The standard account of the civil war is based on oral traditions grouped around a handful of key events and compiled long afterwards. Quite conceivably, it did not record important events of the civil war. Sebeos, on the other hand, is a contemporary writer and demonstrably a trustworthy historian: his description of the 654 attack on Constantinople can be reasonably defended as the only surviving account of a historical event. Sebeos’ report that the Egyptian Arabs defected from the Islamic State during the civil war seems neither incredible in itself nor inconsistent with the surrounding political and military context. Faced with the alternatives of ignoring Sebeos’s account of Egypt in the Arab civil war or attempting to reconcile it with the standard account, one should choose the latter.

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77 Severus ibn al-Muqaffa’(1947) has already been quoted (n.48) as recording immediately after the enthronement of patriarch Agathon in 661: ‘Now the Muslims were fighting against the Romans furiously.’ He continues: ‘And the Romans had a prince whose name was Tiberius (Constans), whom they had made their ruler, and who possessed many islands. So the Muslims took the Romans captive, and carried them away from their own country to a strange land. Thus with regard to Sicily and all its provinces, they took possession of that island and ravaged it and brought the people captives to Egypt.’ This passage is the only reference in the work to the Arab-Byzantine war during the seventh century: it seems to record the Muslim attack on Sicily in 669.


79 Sebeos’ equally variant account of the origins of Islam has been given close attention in Crone and Cook 1977: 3-9; Hoyland 1995: 89-102.
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