



Power, Justice and Degeneration: A Hierarchical Network of Corruption and its Actors in 13th-Century Damascus

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Abstract: This article examines a systematic case of corruption in Damascus during the 13th century, a period characterized by the weakening of the Ayyubid State and intense internal dynastic power struggles. The study analyzes the hierarchical corruption network that permeated the highest levels of government and took shape under the shadow of a political legitimacy crisis during the second rule of 'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl in Damascus (637-643/1240-1245). The main aim of the research is to examine the formation, operation, and collapse of this corruption network, which brought together political authority ('Imād al-Dīn), bureaucratic power (Vizier al-Sāmīrī), and judicial authority (Qādī al-Jīlī), within the context of the actors' biographies. The research method is based on a comparative analysis of primary sources of the period. A multidimensional reading of the events has been conducted by synthesizing the accounts of historians such as Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Wāṣil, who exhibited a critical and moral stance, with the testimony of the physician-historian Ibn Abi Uṣaybī'a, who highlighted the scholarly profile of the perpetrators. The findings suggest that the institutionalized use of false witnesses lay at the center of the corruption. Through false testimonies organized by Qādī al-Jīlī, the properties of pre-determined wealthy individuals were confiscated, and the obtained revenues were shared through a hierarchical chain. The article further reveals that this network collapsed not because of external intervention, but as a result of internal conflicts of interest. Qādī al-Jīlī's attempt to expose the irregularities in treasury revenues and the vizier's involvement in this affair resulted in his own execution through the vizier's machinations; this process ultimately brought about the demise of the corruption system itself. This analysis of the corruption network and its actors that emerged in Ayyūbid Damascus, demonstrates that the instrumentalization of the judiciary for political and material interests inevitably produces corruption.

Key Words: Islamic History, 13th-Century, Damascus, Vizier al-Sāmīrī, Qādī al-Jīlī, Corruption.



İktidar, Yargı ve Yozlaşma: 13. Yüzyıl Dımaşk'ında Hiyerarşik Bir Yolsuzluk Ağı ve Aktörleri

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Öz: Bu makale, Eyyübî Devleti'nin zayıfladığı ve hanedan içi iktidar mücadelelerinin yoğun olarak yaşandığı 13. yüzyılda, Dımaşk'ta yaşanan sistematik bir yolsuzluk vakasını ele almaktadır. Çalışma, İmâdüddîn İsmâîl'in ikinci Dımaşk hâkimiyeti döneminde (637-643/1240-1245), siyasi meşruiyet krizinin gölgesinde şekillenen ve devletin en üst kademelerine sirayet eden hiyerarşik bir yolsuzluk ağını ve aktörlerini incelemektedir. Araştırmanın temel amacı; siyasi otorite (İmâdüddîn), bürokratik güç (Vezir es-Sâmirî) ve yargı erkini (Kadı el-Cîlî) birleştiren bu yolsuzluk ağının kuruluş, işleyiş ve çöküş dinamiklerini mezkûr aktörlerin biyografileri bağlamında irdelemektir. Araştırmanın yöntemi, dönemin birincil kaynaklarının karşılaştırmalı analizine dayanmaktadır. Özellikle İbnü'l-Cevzî ve İbn Vâsıl gibi eleştirel ve ahlaki duruş sergileyen tarihçilerin kayıtları ile faillerin entelektüel yönünü öne çıkaran tabip tarihçi İbn Ebî Usaybia'nın verileri sentezlenerek, olayların çok boyutlu bir okuması yapılmıştır. Bulgular, yolsuzluğun merkezinde "yalancı şahitlik" kurumunun sistematik hale getirilmesinin yattığını göstermektedir. Kadı el-Cîlî tarafından organize edilen sahte şahitlikler aracılığıyla önceden belirlenmiş zenginlerin malları müsadere edilmiş, elde edilen rant hiyerarşik bir silsile ile paylaşılmıştır. Makale, bu ağın hâricî bir müdahaleyle değil, dâhilî çıkar çatışmaları neticesinde çöktüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Kadı el-Cîlî'nin hazine gelirlerindeki usulsüzlüğü ve vezirin bu işteki payını ortaya çıkarma çabası, vezirin entrikalarıyla kadının öldürülmesine mal olmuş; bu süreç nihayetinde yolsuzluk sisteminin de kendi sonunu getirmiştir. Bu vaka analizi; Eyyübî Dımaşk'ında teşekkül eden hiyerarşik bir yolsuzluk ağını ve aktörlerini merkeze alarak, yargı erkini siyasi ve maddi çıkarlar uğruna araçsallaştırılmasının kaçınılmaz bir yozlaşmaya yol açtığını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslam Tarihi, 13. Yüzyıl, Dımaşk, Vezir es-Sâmirî, Kadı el-Cîlî, Yolsuzluk.

Introduction

The death of the Ayyubid sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil in 635/1238 triggered internal upheaval within the Ayyubid state, as competition among dynasty members intensified dramatically. The struggles among dynasty members who resorted to internal and external alliances to gain superiority over one another gradually weakened the state's power, particularly in the Bilād al-Shām and al-Jazīra regions. Al-Malik al-ʿĀdil Sayf al-Dīn II, who ascended to the throne after al-Malik al-Kāmil's death, could not achieve political unity, alienated the high-ranking emirs valued by his father, and neglected the people.^[1] Al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb, who was in al-Jazīra at the time of al-Malik al-Kāmil's death, came to Cairo in 1240 with the help of the Khwārazmians and Mamluk emirs in Egypt who were dissatisfied with the policies of al-ʿĀdil II, and declared his sultanate.^[2] Meanwhile, ʿImād al-Dīn Ismāʿīl, who controlled Damascus, mounted an exhausting opposition against his nephew al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ's sultanate, constituting a serious obstacle to al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ becoming the great sultan of the Ayyubid state.

Previously, ʿImād al-Dīn had governed Damascus in his own name for approximately four months as deputy of his brother al-Malik al-Ashraf Mūsā, from his death until al-Kāmil besieged and conquered Damascus.^[3] During this period, he had earned a good place in memory with his governance style that was accepted by the people of Damascus. His adherence to the traditional Sunni line followed by the Ayyubid dynasty during this first period also elevated him to the position of a respected administrator in the eyes of both Damascus's notables and the people. Probably for this reason, when he occupied Damascus in 637/1239, the Damascenes who knew his past positive image and governance style welcomed his assumption of administration positively.^[4] However, influenced by the exhausting power struggle with his nephew al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ, ʿImād al-Dīn Ismāʿīl formed alliances during his second Damascus rule that strained the moral values on which Ayyubid state tradition was based, driven by his desire to preserve his power. This intense struggle for survival created a severe "legitimacy crisis" for ʿImād al-Dīn. As defined in political theory, such crises occur when the normative basis of a ruler's authority is eroded, often pushing the political authority to prioritize regime security over established legal and moral norms.^[5]

Ibn Wāṣil directly links ʿImād al-Dīn Ismāʿīl's legitimacy crisis and his necessity for this corruption network to the sharp political competition of the period. While the historian notes that the ruler of Damascus was under great military and political pressure from the Ayyubid Sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn, he describes this situation as the ruler's 'strangulation' (dāqa kh-ināquhu). According to Ibn Wāṣil, this political impasse, caused by Sultan Najm al-Dīn's intention

[1] Abū ʿAbdallāh Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb fī akhbār Banī Ayyūb*, Ed. Ḥasanayn Muḥammad Rabīʿ (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathāʾiq al-Qawmiyya, 1972-1977), 5/174-175; Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Maqrīzī, *al-Sulūk li-maʾrifat duwal al-mulūk*, Ed. M. ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1997), 1/383.

[2] Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 5/266-267; al-Maqrīzī, *al-Sulūk*, 1/403; Suhayl Takkūsh, *Tārīkh al-Ayyūbiyyīn fī Miṣr wa-Bilād al-Shām wa-iqlīm al-Jazīra* (Beirut: Dār al-Nafāʾis, 1999), 353.

[3] ʿImād al-Dīn Ismāʿīl had undertaken the administration of Sawād and Buṣrā during the reigns of his father al-Malik al-ʿĀdil and his brother al-Malik al-Muʿazzam ʿĪsā. Following al-Malik al-Ashraf's death in Damascus on 4 Muḥarram 635 (27 August 1237), the administration of Damascus was given to ʿImād al-Dīn Ismāʿīl in accordance with his testament. However, al-Malik al-Kāmil, who considered ʿImād al-Dīn to be an ambitious person, did not find it appropriate to leave Damascus to him. Al-Kāmil, who besieged Damascus four months later, was able to take Damascus by leaving him Baalbek and Biqāʿ alongside Sawād and Buṣrā (9 Jumādā al-Awwal 635 / 28 December 1237). Abū al-Muzaffar Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mirʾāt al-zamān fī tawārīkh al-aʿyān*, Ed. Ibrāhīm al-Zaybek (Damascus: Dār al-Risāla al-ʿĀlamiyya, 2013), 22/388; Kamāl al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿAdīm, *Bughyat al-ṭalab fī tārīkh Ḥalab*, Ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 5/1808-1809; Abū al-ʿAbbās Shams al-Dīn Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-aʿyān wa-anbāʾ abnāʾ al-zamān*, Ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), 5/82; Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 5/147-153; Abū al-Faḍl Khatībī, "al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: TDV Publications, 2004), 29/80.

[4] Ibn al-ʿAdīm, *Bughyat al-ṭalab*, 5/1811.

[5] Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy", *The American Political Science Review* 53/1 (Mart 1959), 86-87.

to capture Damascus, pushed ‘Imād al-Dīn into an urgent search for irregular financing.^[6] At this point, ‘Imād al-Dīn’s role goes far beyond mere administrative neglect, as he became the primary driving force of the hierarchy. Indeed, due to this political impasse, the ruler exerted immense pressure on Vizier Amīn al-Dawla, who in turn personally demanded that Qādī Rafī‘ al-Dīn ‘procure funds’ (taḥṣīl al-amvāl) by any means necessary.^[7]

When his compromising alliance with the Franks against al-Malik al-Şāliḥ abroad combined with his illegitimate alliances with bureaucrats who violated people’s rights at home, he faced criticism from the society in which he lived and from Muslim historians who recorded this society’s reactions.^[8] In the sources, ‘Imād al-Dīn’s rule with despotism and oppression during his second Damascus sovereignty (637-643/1240-1245) is attributed to his falling under the influence of his famous vizier Amīn al-Dawla al-Sāmīrī.^[9] In this context, the administration evolved into a structure of “systematic corruption,” characterized by the abuse of public power for private gain through a hierarchical network.^[10] Furthermore, to sustain this network, the legal system was subjected to “judicial instrumentalization,” where the judiciary functioned not as a check on power but as a weapon for political and financial liquidation.^[11]

This study fills an important gap in the literature regarding micro-analysis of systematic corruption cases in medieval Islamic history. ‘Imād al-Dīn Ismā‘īl’s transition from successful governance in his first period to systematic corruption in his second period demonstrates how power lust can distance a ruler from legitimacy. This study aims to illuminate a corruption case from the final period of the Ayyubid state by examining in detail the basic actors, operational mechanisms, and effects of this corruption network.

1. From Book Collector to Tyrannical Vizier: A Portrait of Amīn al-Dawla al-Sāmīrī

Amīn al-Dawla Abū al-Ḥasan b. Ghazzāl b. Abī Sa‘īd al-Sāmīrī converted to Islam while he was a Samaritan and took the epithet Kamāl al-Dīn.^[12] Amīn al-Dawla studied medicine under his uncle Muḥadhdhab al-Dīn Yūsuf al-Sāmīrī, who was the vizier and physician of the ruler of Baalbek, al-Malik al-Amjad Bahrāmshāh (d. 627/1230). When his uncle died in 624/1226, he succeeded him. When the rule of Baalbek passed to ‘Imād al-Dīn Ismā‘īl in 635/1238, he entered his service. When ‘Imād al-Dīn conquered Damascus in 637/1239, he brought Amīn al-Dawla with him and appointed him as his vizier. Trusting Amīn al-Dawla’s knowledge and experience, ‘Imād al-Dīn assigned him responsibility for state affairs, including the appointment of Qādīs.^[13] While ‘Imād

[6] Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 6/165.

[7] Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 6/165.

[8] Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 5/301-302; al-Makīn Jirjis Ibn al-‘Amīd, *Akhbār al-Ayyūbiyyīn* (Port Said: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, n.d.), 31; al-Maqrīzī, *al-Sulūk*, 1/407; W. B. Stevenson, *The Crusaders in the East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), 318; Corliss K. Slack, *Historical Dictionary of the Crusades* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2003), 39; R. Stephen Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols: The Ayyubids of Damascus, 1193-1260* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 266.

[9] Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 5/236-237; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir‘āt al-zamān*, 22/419; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, Ed. B. ‘Awwād Ma‘rūf – M. Hilāl al-Sarḥān (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risāla, 1985), 23/110; Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad Ibn Duqmāq, *Nuzhat al-anām fī tārikh al-Islām*, Ed. Samīr Ṭabbāra (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Aşriyya, 1999), 201.

[10] Joseph S. Nye, “Corruption and Political Development: A Cost-Benefit Analysis”, *The American Political Science Review* 61/2 (Haziran 1967), 419.

[11] Tamir Moustafa, “Law and Courts in Authoritarian Regimes”, *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 10 (2014), 282-283.

[12] Aḥmad b. al-Qāsim Ibn Abi Uşaybi‘a, *Uyūn al-anbā’ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā’*, Ed. Nizār Riḍā (Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, n.d.), 723; Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umari, *Masālik al-abşār fī mamālik al-amşār*, Ed. Kāmil Salmān al-Jubūrī (Lebanon: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2010), 9/291.

[13] Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 5/236-237; Ibn Abi Uşaybi‘a, *Uyūn al-anbā’*, 723.

al-Dīn focused on the difficult problem of preserving his power in Damascus against his rival al-Malik al-Şāliḥ, Amīn al-Dawla gradually strengthened his authority.

Amīn al-Dawla, through the intelligence network he established and the wealth he collected from Damascus's rich, accumulated great wealth on one hand while constructing an authoritarian regime in the name of 'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl on the other. He carried out intelligence gathering and wealth acquisition through officials he directly appointed or helped appoint. When he exiled the famous preacher and historian Ibn al-Jawzī from Damascus, he relied on intelligence information he received from Yūsuf b. Ya'qūb, one of the instructors and informants of the Shibliyya madrasa.^[14] To secure the financial resources he needed, he utilized the authority of Rafī' al-Dīn 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Jilī, whose appointment as chief Qādī of Damascus he had facilitated. The system that Amīn al-Dawla established with Rafī' al-Dīn al-Jilī was based on arbitrary practices that disregarded law. According to this system, al-Jilī resorted to the testimony of false witnesses he had arranged beforehand to seize the property of wealthy people he targeted. After giving part of the money he took from the wealthy to the false witnesses, he sent the remainder to Amīn al-Dawla.^[15]

Amīn al-Dawla also played an important role in the course of the competition between his master 'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl and al-Malik al-Şāliḥ. Ibn al-Jawzī holds Amīn al-Dawla responsible as the person who broke the extensive agreement reached between al-Malik al-Şāliḥ and 'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl in 641/1243. According to him, al-Sāmīrī thwarted the agreement by dissuading 'Imād al-Dīn, who was about to release al-Malik al-Şāliḥ's son al-Malik al-Mughīth 'Umar from prison and send him to Egypt, from his decision.^[16] Ibn al-Jawzī mentions that al-Sāmīrī manipulated 'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl by saying "al-Malik al-Mughīth 'Umar is Solomon's seal. Do not let him go. Otherwise, you will lose your realm," thus breaking the peace agreement. Similarly, Ibn al-Jawzī attributes the reason for al-Mughīth's death in prison in 642/1244 to the pressure and mistreatment al-Sāmīrī subjected him to.^[17] On the other hand, when the intensity of al-Şāliḥ's great siege of Damascus in 643/1245 increased, 'Imād al-Dīn hastily sent Amīn al-Dawla to the Abbasid Caliph, but could not obtain the aid he desired.^[18] It was also Amīn al-Dawla who finalized the decision to surrender Damascus to al-Şāliḥ with amnesty, together with al-Şāliḥ's vizier Mu'īn al-Dīn b. Shaykh al-Shuyūkh.^[19]

After al-Malik al-Şāliḥ conquered Damascus, Amīn al-Dawla was captured and sent to Cairo. Ibn Abī Uşaybi'a states that al-Şāliḥ's deputy in Damascus, Mu'īn al-Dīn b. Shaykh al-Shuyūkh, and other notables made a plan to capture him along with his wealth after becoming aware of the wealth Amīn al-Dawla had collected. According to this account, they invited Amīn al-Dawla to their council and received him respectfully. They told him that he could either stay in Damascus or go to Baalbek to join his master 'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl if he wished. Unaware of the trap set for him, Amīn al-Dawla said he preferred to go to his master. After leaving the council, he began preparations to return to Baalbek. He loaded all his possessions, including furniture and carpets,

[14] Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-zamān*, 22/371-372.

[15] Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 6/164-165; Muḥammad b. Shākir al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-wafayāt wa-l-dhayl 'alayhā*, Ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās (Beirut: Dār Şādir, 1974), 2/352-353.

[16] Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-zamān*, 22/378; Ibn Aybak al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-durar wa-jāmi' al-ghurar*, Ed. Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāḥ 'Ashūr (Cairo: Markaz Wudūd li-l-Makhtūṭāt, 1972), 7/352.

[17] Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-zamān*, 22/387; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, Ed. 'Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1998), 47/5; Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, Ed. N. Muştafa Fawwāz – Ḥikmat Fawwāz (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2004), 29/196; Muḥammad 'Alī Mulavī, "Amīn al-Dawla-i Sāmīrī", *Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif-i Buzurg-i Islāmī* (Tehran: Markaz-i Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif-i Buzurg-i Islāmī, 1380), 10/291-292.

[18] Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 5/341; 'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl Abū al-Fidā', *al-Mukhtaşar fī akhbār al-bashar*, Ed. Muḥammad Z. 'Azab (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1119), 3/211; al-Maqrīzī, *al-Sulūk*, 1/421; Fatma Zebar al-Ḥamdānī, *al-Malik al-Şāliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb wa-injāzātuh al-siyāsiyya wa-l-'askariyya* (Jordan: Dār al-Diyā', 2007), 118.

[19] Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-zamān*, 22/388.

onto mules and set out. On Friday, 2 Rajab 643, as soon as he left Damascus, he was captured by Mu'ın al-Dīn's men and his property was confiscated.^[20]

Amīn al-Dawla was arrested by al-Şāliḥ's deputy Ḥusām al-Dīn al-Hazbānī who came to Damascus in 644/1246, sent to Cairo, and imprisoned in Qal'at al-Jabal.^[21] After remaining in prison for a long time, he was executed by al-Malik al-Mu'izz 'Izz al-Dīn Aybak on 24 Dhū al-Qa'da 648.^[22]

One of Amīn al-Dawla's important characteristics was his passion for collecting books.^[23] He purchased numerous valuable books in various sciences. He claimed to have more than 20,000 books in his library.^[24] He employed many copyists to produce better copies of books he admired. Once, he wanted to produce a better copy of Ibn 'Asākir's Tārīkh Dimashq, written in a difficult script, and add it to his library. Since it would take too long for one copyist to copy this 80-volume work alone, he divided the task equally among 10 copyists. The copyists were able to complete the 80 volumes after working for approximately two years.^[25]

When Amīn al-Dawla heard of the existence of a valuable book not in his library, he would definitely obtain it. When he learned of Ibn Abī Uşaybi'a's famous work 'Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā' about famous physicians, he requested a copy of the book from him through his father. Ibn Abī Uşaybi'a, who was then working in the service of 'Izz al-Dīn Aybak al-Mu'aẓẓamī in Sarhad, came to Damascus upon his father's notification and delivered a copy transcribed by one of Damascus's famous copyists, Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī, to Amīn al-Dawla through Damascus Qādī Rafī' al-Dīn al-Jilī. Greatly appreciating the book, Amīn al-Dawla sent Ibn Abī Uşaybi'a a significant amount of money and valuable clothing in return for this book.^[26]

Amīn al-Dawla's most important work is his compendium on medicine titled al-Nahj al-wāḍiḥ fī al-ṭibb. This work, which addresses the universal and particular laws of medical science, consists of five books. The first book deals with natural matters, the three states of the body, types of diseases, pulse, urine, and depression. The second book is about simple medicines and their effects. The third book deals with compound medicines and their benefits. The fourth book concerns external diseases and their treatment, precautions to be taken in hot and dry weather, and clothing selection. The fifth book deals with internal diseases, their causes, symptoms, treatment methods, and matters needed in surgical interventions for these diseases.^[27]

The actions and governance style of Amīn al-Dawla, an expert in theoretical and practical medicine, during his vizierate faced serious criticism. The harshest criticism came from Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, whom he had sent into exile. Ibn al-Jawzī states that he could neither remain Muslim nor stay Samaritan, that he used Islam as a mask, and that he tried with all his effort to destroy the Sharī'a of Muşṭafā. He also mentions that Shaykh Ismā'īl al-Jurānī, who visited Amīn al-Dawla, alluded to the signs of hypocrisy in him by saying, "If only you had remained in your religion. This would have been better for you. Thus, you would have remained somewhat faithful to your religion. But now you are floundering in between. You are neither with them nor with these."^[28] Our other contemporary author, Ibn Wāşil, states that he became Muslim in his youth but does not neglect

[20] Ibn Abī Uşaybi'a, 'Uyūn al-anbā', 723-724; Konrad Hirschler, *Medieval Damascus: Plurality and Diversity in an Arabic Library* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 347.

[21] Ibn Wāşil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 5/361-362, 6/163.

[22] Ibn Wāşil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 6/164.

[23] Ibn Wāşil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 6/164; Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Razzāq Kurd 'Alī, *Khiṭaṭ al-Shām* (Damascus: Maktabat al-Nūrī, 1403/1983), 6/188.

[24] Sibṭ mentions that his library contained 10,000 volumes. See: Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-zamān*, 22/419.

[25] Ibn Abī Uşaybi'a, 'Uyūn al-anbā', 725.

[26] Ibn Abī Uşaybi'a, 'Uyūn al-anbā', 725.

[27] Ibn Abī Uşaybi'a, 'Uyūn al-anbā', 725; George Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science* (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1931), 1098.

[28] Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-zamān*, 22/419.

to relate an account that would raise doubts about his sincerity. According to this account, when Amīn al-Dawla converted to Islam, his uncle, who was the vizier of al-Malik al-Amjad, said to his nephew Amīn al-Dawla: “My child, if you regret becoming Muslim, I will send you to a Frankish country. You can live there and return to your religion.” In response, Amīn al-Dawla answered, “No, I became Muslim with sincere intention and believed in Islam.” Upon this answer, his uncle turned to him and advised, “If things are as you say, then be a good Muslim.”^[29] Ibn Wāṣil states that after expressing that Amīn al-Dawla possessed leadership, intelligence, and ability, due to the path he and his friend Rafīʿ al-Dīn al-Jīlī had taken astray, they could not benefit from these blessings, that they oppressed the people and usurped people’s property through oppression.^[30]

The most positive critiques of Amīn al-Dawla belong to his colleague Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, who wrote his biography in detail. Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa describes him with epithets such as perfect leader, the best of viziers, master of physicians, and imam of scholars. Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa says that Amīn al-Dawla loved acquiring wealth and collected large sums of money from the people of Damascus through Damascus chief Qādī al-Jīlī and his deputies for his master ʿImād al-Dīn, but does not provide information about the methods by which this money was collected.^[31]

Amīn al-Dawla’s case is particularly noteworthy in revealing how, in legitimacy-deficient political environments, intellectual prestige can serve not simply as personal achievement but as a strategic tool of camouflage. The hierarchical corruption network established by Amīn al-Dawla not only financed his political survival but also appears to have provided the means for his boundless intellectual and aesthetic ambitions. Indeed, his passion for accumulating over 20,000 volumes of books in his library and employing ten copyists for two years to reproduce a monumental work like *Tārīkh Dimashq* could likely only be sustained through the massive financial capital acquired by exploiting public power. This obsession with books and luxury items seems to have transcended mere curiosity, potentially becoming a fundamental factor that pushed him toward corruption and normalized a disregard for legal norms. His effort to transport all his furniture and carpets on mules while leaving the city underscores the significant value of his material accumulation and confirms his profound attachment to them. Consequently, it can be said that in the case of Amīn al-Dawla, intellectual prestige functioned less as a personal achievement and more as a strategic tool of camouflage to legitimate and obscure this immense wealth.

2. A Qādī in the Hierarchical Corruption Network: Rafīʿ al-Dīn al-Jīlī

Abū Ḥāmid Rafīʿ al-Dīn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. ʿAbd al-Wāḥid b. Ismāʿīl was born in Jīlān (Gīlān), the mountainous region behind Ṭabaristān in northern Iran.^[32] After completing his education in Iran, Rafīʿ al-Dīn came to Syria and served as Qādī in Baalbek during the period of al-Malik al-Amjad. There he formed a friendship with Amīn al-Dawla al-Sāmīrī. After ʿImād al-Dīn Ismāʿīl conquered Damascus, he was appointed as chief Qādī to replace the deceased Damascus chief Qādī Shams al-Dīn al-Khūyī (d. 637/1240). Vizier Amīn al-Dawla, who introduced Rafīʿ al-Dīn to ʿImād al-Dīn and ensured his appointment as chief Qādī, did not stop there but also appointed him as instructor to the ʿĀdiliyya Shāmiyya, ʿAzrawiyya, and Amniyya madrasas.^[33] Rafīʿ al-Dīn also served as the first mudarris of the Amjadiyya Madrasa, which was built in Damascus by al-Malik al-Muẓaffar Nūr al-Dīn ʿUmar, son of al-Malik al-Amjad Bahramshāh.^[34]

[29] Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 5/236-237.

[30] Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 6/164.

[31] Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ*, 723.

[32] Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ*, 647.

[33] Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mirʾāt al-zamān*, 22/381; Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 5/237; Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ*, 647.

[34] Harun Yılmaz, *Zengî ve Eyyûbî Dimashk'ında Ulema ve Medrese* (Istanbul: Kalisk Yayınları, 2017), 86.

The evaluations of contemporary historians regarding Qādī Rafī' al-Dīn al-Jīlī exhibit significant variations based on the authors' intellectual identities and their personal relationships with the actors involved.

Ibn al-Jawzī, who criticized Rafī' al-Dīn for the illegal acts he committed together with Amīn al-Dawla during his Damascus chief Qādīship, leveled exceptionally heavy accusations against him. Relying on Damascus notables whose testimony he trusted, the historian provides a jarring depiction of the Qādī's personal life:

"A group of Damascus notables narrated: His belief was corrupt and he was a materialist; he made light of the matters of Sharia and used to go out to Friday prayers drunk. He would also sit in the court of judgment in this state. His house was like a tavern where women and men lived together. A group of reliable witnesses (*udūl*), from whose testimony there is no deviation, testified to me regarding all these matters."^[35]

When evaluating these extraordinary accusations by Ibn al-Jawzī, it is essential to consider the historian's personal relations with the political actors of the period. As noted previously, Ibn al-Jawzī was himself exiled from Damascus by Vizier Amīn al-Dawla. The unbreakable alliance between the Vizier and the Qādī, and the fact that Rafī' al-Dīn al-Jīlī managed the judicial arm of this oppressive regime, likely fueled the historian's resentment and laid the groundwork for these severe moral indictments. Consequently, Ibn al-Jawzī's account can be read not just as a record of corruption, but as an attempt by an intellectual victimized by the power elite to strip his opponents of their legitimacy by constructing them as moral and religious 'others.

Although Ibn Wāṣil follows a narrative similar to that of Ibn al-Jawzī in his criticisms of Rafī' al-Dīn al-Jīlī, the information he provides through direct witness is highly significant. He emphasizes that Jīlī systematically usurped the property of the people by exploiting his office as chief judge through the employment of 'false witnesses' (*shuhūd al-zūr*). Ibn Wāṣil presents the Qādī's tragic end as an inevitable manifestation of divine justice; he conveys with jarring detail how Jīlī was executed by being thrown off a cliff by a man named **Ibn Subh**, acting under the orders of Vizier Amīn al-Dawla. By recording dramatic details—such as the Qādī's request for permission to perform prayer upon realizing his impending death—directly from the executioner Ibn Subh, the historian views this execution as a direct retribution for the injustices committed. Indeed, he interpreted this exemplary demise through the Quranic verse, "And your Lord is not ever unjust to his servants"^[36]. Furthermore, Ibn Wāṣil states that in return for their oppression, God set Amīn al-Dawla against Rafī' al-Dīn and 'Izz al-Dīn Aybak against Amīn al-Dawla, thus destroying them both.^[37]

Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, who knew Rafī' al-Dīn al-Jīlī closely and read Ibn Sīnā's *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt* with him, refers more to his teacher's scholarly personality. He states that Rafī' al-Dīn was one of the distinguished scholars of his time in philosophical sciences, natural sciences, uṣūl al-dīn, fiqh, and medicine, and that many students engaged in medicine and various sciences were present in his council. He also describes him as a scholar with eloquent speech, sharp intelligence, and constantly engaged in learning.^[38] Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a mentions that people complained about his oppression and actions, and that he was captured and killed as a result of these complaints, but does not use expressions that would directly accuse him.^[39]

[35] Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-zamān*, 22/385; Ramazan Şeşen, *Salāhaddīn'den Baybars'a Eyyübîler-Memlûkler (1193-1260)* (Istanbul: İsar Yayınları, 2007), 386.

[36] Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 6/164-165.

[37] Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 6/165.

[38] Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Uyūn al-anbā'*, 647, 725.

[39] Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Uyūn al-anbā'*, 647.

Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a mentions three works by Rafī‘ al-Dīn: *Sharḥ al-ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*, which he wrote for Taqī al-Dīn ‘Umar, son of al-Malik al-Amjad Bahrāmshāh; *Mukhtaṣar al-kulliyāt*, which he wrote on the “*al-Kulliyāt*” book in Ibn Sīnā’s *al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb*; and a hadith collection.^[40]

In conclusion due to his close relationships with Rafī‘ al-Dīn al-Jīlī and Amīn al-Dawla, knowing them closely, personally witnessing their scholarly authority, being their colleague, and the method he followed in ‘Uyūn al-anbā’, Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a avoided an accusatory tone regarding both and mainly expressed their achievements in the scholarly field, especially medicine. Our other two contemporary authors, Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Wāṣil, made heavy criticisms. Even if it is thought that behind Ibn al-Jawzī’s criticisms lay personal enmity due to his exile, the same situation does not apply to Ibn Wāṣil. While not denying Jīlī’s intellectual depth, Ibn Wāṣil documented Jīlī’s unlawful actions with jarring details provided by direct witnesses such as the executioner Ibn Subh and interpreted this tragic end as a manifestation of divine justice through Quranic verses.

3. The False Witness System and Hierarchical Corruption: From Judicial Abuse to Reckoning

Rafī‘ al-Dīn, who gradually strengthened his position and influence with Amīn al-Dawla’s help, engaged in various illegal activities under his protection. He began oppressing the people of Damascus by abusing his Qādī position. As qāḍī al-quḍāt, knowing the city’s inhabitants well, Rafī‘ al-Dīn seized the property of wealthy people he targeted by attributing false accusations to them. He did this by resorting to the testimony of false witnesses he had arranged beforehand. After giving part of the money he took from the wealthy to the false witnesses, he transferred the remainder to the treasury through Amīn al-Dawla.^[41]

Ibn Wāṣil says that the relationship between Rafī‘ al-Dīn, who oppressed people and gave oppressive judgments to please ‘Imād al-Dīn Ismā‘īl and his vizier Amīn al-Dawla, and Amīn al-Dawla deteriorated in 641. According to Ibn Wāṣil, Rafī‘ al-Dīn prepared a report containing heavy accusations against Amīn al-Dawla and presented it to ‘Imād al-Dīn. When ‘Imād al-Dīn showed the report to Amīn al-Dawla, Amīn al-Dawla gave examples of the Qādī’s oppression of people and other faults, saying he should not trust him. Thereupon, ‘Imād al-Dīn dismissed him from the Damascus chief Qādīship.^[42] Ibn al-Jawzī, who at the time pointed to Amīn al-Dawla and Rafī‘ al-Dīn as the cause of all the evil done in Damascus, provides important information about the content of this report and the reason for the Qādī’s dismissal. According to this, Rafī‘ al-Dīn said in the report he sent to ‘Imād al-Dīn, “I carried 1,000,000 dinars from people’s property to your treasury,” to which ‘Imād al-Dīn replied, “No, you sent 1,000,000 dirhams.” When ‘Imād al-Dīn showed the report to Amīn al-Dawla, Amīn al-Dawla said, “This Rafī‘ has eaten countries and attributes his crimes to us. For people not to see you as responsible for these matters, it is beneficial to dismiss him.”^[43]

A record in al-Kutubī provides information explaining how this evil alliance broke down and the reason for the difference in amounts transferred to the treasury. According to this: “When complaints from people who suffered injustice increased, the vizier ordered an investigation into the amount of money carried to the treasury. However, the vizier was sending only a small part of the amount Rafī‘ al-Dīn sent him to the treasury and keeping the rest for himself. When

[40] Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a, ‘*Uyūn al-anbā*’, 648; Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, *al-A‘lām* (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm li-l-Malāyīn, 2002), 5/22.

[41] Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 6/165; al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-wafayāt*, 2/352-353; Şeşen, *Salāhaddīn’den Baybars’a Eyyübîler-Memlûkler*, 386.

[42] Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb*, 5/341-342.

[43] Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir’āt al-zamān*, 22/380-381.

Rafîc al-Dîn said, 'I have records of the amount I sent,' the vizier, fearing the revelation of the truth, frightened the sultan with the consequences and destroyed Rafîc al-Dîn."^[44] These three complementary accounts clearly show that the established corruption network had three legs and that this was done on a hierarchical level. According to this, Damascus ruler 'Imâd al-Dîn, who had no concern other than filling the treasury, supported the corruption by turning a blind eye; the vizier, known for his worldly greed, was the person who received the largest share from the corruption; Qādî Rafîc al-Dîn, in the lowest tier of this network, paid the heaviest price for the crimes he committed by abusing his position. Amîn al-Dawla, who considered Rafîc al-Dîn's survival a threat to himself and his wealth, not only had him dismissed from all his positions but also killed him in 642/1244 by having him thrown from a high cliff through his men.^[45]

As seen in this case, systematic corruption networks tend to dissolve spontaneously due to internal power imbalances and conflicts of interest. The collapse of the tripartite structure established in Damascus reveals the paradoxical nature of hierarchical corruption systems: while the lower-level actor (Rafîc al-Dîn) who received the least share from corruption posed the greatest risk to the system's sustainability, the upper-level actor (Amîn al-Dawla) who benefited most had to eliminate this risk for his own security. The operation of the false witness system and the subsequent reckoning process demonstrate both the exploitability of judicial institutions in medieval Islamic societies and how such corruption purged itself under social pressure. This dynamic provides a concrete example of how the methods power elites resort to during legitimacy crises ultimately prepare their own end.

Conclusion

The systematic corruption case that emerged in 13th-century Damascus reveals the dissolution in the governance structure of the period with its political, social, economic, and legal dimensions. During a period when the Ayyubid state was weakening, this corruption network that emerged in 'Imâd al-Dîn Ismâ'îl's Damascus administration was organized within a hierarchical structure and operated through three basic actors: Political authority ('Imâd al-Dîn Ismâ'îl), bureaucratic authority (Vizier Amîn al-Dawla), and judicial authority (Qādî Rafîc al-Dîn). This tripartite structure created a mechanism that operated by usurping people's property, seizing wealthy people's property through false testimonies, and sharing the obtained revenues, forming a system that complemented and protected each other. Particularly noteworthy is that both bureaucrats (vizier and Qādî) were personalities known for their intellectual identities and distinguished by their scientific studies. This situation is important as it serves as a striking example of how elites who attain positions of power and authority can succumb to moral corruption. The contrast between the intellectual identities of Vizier Amîn al-Dawla and Qādî Rafîc al-Dîn al-Jilî and their patronage and orchestration of a systematic corruption network suggests that such complex schemes can only be orchestrated by educated and well-equipped elites who possess a command over the system's internal workings. This indicates that bureaucratic and academic elitism does not act as a deterrent to corruption but rather could provide the strategic capacity required to manipulate legal and administrative loopholes effectively.

One of the particularly striking elements in the system's operation is how the judicial system was abused. Qādî Rafîc al-Dîn's abuse of judicial authority to seize wealthy people's property and use false witnesses in this process reveals the weaknesses in the period's legal system. This

[44] al-Kutubî, *Fawât al-wafayât*, 2/353; Şalâh al-Dîn Khalîl b. Aybak al-Şafadî, *al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayât*, Ed. Aḥmad al-Arnâ'ût – Turkî Muştafâ (Beirut: Dâr İhyâ' al-Turâth al-'Arabî, 2000), 18/321.

[45] Sibṭ İbn al-Jawzî, *Mir'ât al-zamân*, 22/386; İbn Wâsil, *Mufarrij al-kurûb*, 6/165; al-Kutubî, *Fawât al-wafayât*, 2/353; al-Şafadî, *al-Wāfi*, 18/321

process demonstrates how judicial procedures were transformed into a strategic apparatus to provide a 'veneer of legality' for the illicit liquidation of private wealth. Such a systematic instrumentalization of the judiciary underscores how institutional trust can be weaponized to sustain a state-sponsored corruption network under the guise of formal law.

The system's collapse occurred with the breakdown of trust relationships among actors and the surfacing of conflicts of interest. In this process, particularly Qādī Rafī' al-Dīn's attempt to reveal the real amount of money transferred to the treasury exposed the cracks within the system.

This micro-analysis allows for broader structural inferences regarding Islamic political and legal history. First, this incident serves as a concrete and destructive example of the tension between politics and law often debated in the Islamic state tradition. The transformation of the judiciary into an "instrument of domination" by the political authority to overcome a legitimacy crisis and finance its power illustrates the fragility of the separation of powers in classical Islamic politics. The case of Ayyubid Damascus clearly demonstrates how the principle of judicial independence could be rendered dysfunctional in the face of a powerful vizier and an authoritarian sultan. Second, the institutionalization of the "false witness" mechanism proves how the institution of testimony, the primary means of proof in Islamic legal theory, can turn into a tool of oppression when stripped of its moral foundation. These practices, which appeared legally valid on the surface—based on a Qādī's ruling and witness statements—but were illegitimate in essence, serve as a historical reminder that legal security relies not merely on the existence of rules but on the moral integrity of their practitioners.

Ultimately, the Damascus corruption case demonstrates universal patterns in the breakdown of institutional integrity. The hierarchical nature of this network and its ultimate self-destruction through internal conflicts offer insights into how systematic corruption operates across different historical contexts, revealing the inherent instability of such systems regardless of time period.

The way period historians recorded this event is also a separate subject of analysis. While Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, one of the leading physicians of the period, used a softer tone toward colleagues also known for their medical studies, the more critical approaches of historians like Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Wāṣil, whose religious scholar identities predominated, show the presence of different perspectives in historical writing.

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