The Fatimids and the Red Sea (969-1171)

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"The sea of al-Qulzūm [i. e. the Red Sea] stands within the territory of Egypt. It has [the Red Sea] this territory on its West, its East and on its North" [1].

While this statement made in the 1030's by al-Quḍāʿī, a Fatimid administrator, clearly described the Red Sea an internal sea penetrating between territories under Fatimid hands, the policy and the actions of the Ismaili masters of Egypt in this area remains poorly known.

In an former but precursor article, Bernard Lewis wrote that upon their arrival in Egypt in 969 The Fatimids deliberately tried to divert the continental trade routes between Asia and the Mediterranean through the Red Sea and Aden in particular. Lewis assumed that the Ismaili predication, the *da'wa*, was orientated toward that goal in order to weaken the Abbasids[2]. In his *"India Book"* recently edited by Professor Morderchai A. Friedman, Professor Shelomo Dov Goitein developed another theory. He explained that the north Africa economic expansion during Fatimid times (909-969) created the condition for the Jewish traders particularly active in the Red Sea to search for new outlets for the Maghrebi products[3]. The Ismaili propagandists would then have benefited from this economic boom to develop the Fatimid *da'wa* in these same areas. Both theories, as attractive as they might look, cannot really be confirmed or overturned. It seems obvious anyway that the Fatimid conquest of Egypt was an opportunity for them to take control of the red Sea shores and to create direct links with this new maritime space. It has also allowed them to consolidate the long time relationship they had established with the territories along this sea, from the remote and mountainous Yemen to the holly Hedjaz.

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[1] Al-Quḍāʿī quoted by al-Maqrīzī 2002-2004, 1 : 40.
[2] Lewis 1948-1949: 50-54. Lewis 1972: 287-295.
[3] Goitein & Friedman 2007: 22.

The sources, from the Arabic chronicles to the Geniza letters passing by the the Fatimid official correspondence with the Sulayḥids sultans in Yemen, show what could be seen as a reinforcement of the Fatimid relations with the red Sea areas. Therefore, the texts report the strengthening of the relations between the two areas while the dynasty, after having experienced a period of great power, was increasingly challenged until his disappearance in 1171. During the two centuries of Fatimid power in Egypt, the Mediterranean context totally changed. The Egyptian civil war in the years 1060's, the advance of the Seljuk Turks into Syria and, finally, the Crusades changed considerably the first objective of this Ismaili dynasty. The *'Bagdad dream'* and the subjugation of the Abbasid Iraq which was the Fatimid major political goal since 909 vanished and the Cairo masters had to adopt a *realpolitik* dictated by a survival instinct.

The texts invite us to wonder about the underlying logics which steered these closer relations and to try to determine if the Fatimid really had a policy toward the Red Sea or if they just let the *invisible hand of the market* ruled for them.

From 969 to 1073, the red Sea does nor seem very interesting for the Fatimids. During this period, the Fatimid imams are engaged in the ideological struggle with the Abbasids and the main ground for this battle is the Hedjaz and its holly Muslim cities. After 1073, and especially during the 12th century, could be considered as the time of pragmatism. The ideology which seemed to have dictated Fatimid actions since the very beginning of this dynasty disappeared under Badr al-Jamālī powerful reforms. Keeping the red Sea open for trade appeared as the new goal of the Fatimid interventions in the area

1. The Fatimid and the Red Sea : the time of ideology (969-1073)
1.1 *The propagation of the da'wa.*

After 969, the territories bordering the Red Sea, especially the Hedjaz, which mobilized Fatimid attentions more than the control of the maritime space. The Fatimids ardently wanted to increase their ideological influence in the Muslim world rather than their power over a new maritime space.

Since the creation of the Fatimid caliphate, the Ismaili Imams wished to expand their influence to symbolic places of the Muslim world. Taking control, even theoretically, over Mecca and Medina, the two upmost holly cities of the Islamic world appeared as a key issue for this dynasty, representing a minority in the Sunni world. Entering into Egypt, al-Mu'izz (953-975) and his successor wanted to keep alive the traditional adage saying that the "Hedjaz has always been under the control of Egypt because of it is the source of its supply"[4]. Therefore, the Fatimids never ceased to try that the Friday payer in the holly cities was called in their names, even though they had to use the armed force like in 990[5]. As al-Quḍā'ī quoted it, they reached their goal and in the 1030's, almost all the territories bordering the red Sea were in Fatimid hands[6].

The Fatimid eyes also turned towards Yemen where the *da'wa* was formerly established[7]. In a remote area of the Yemen, during the 1040's, 'Alī al-Sulayḥī (d. 1067) officially called the prayer for the Fatimid caliph. Slowly he took over the major cities of the area. In 1061, Zabīd felt into his hands and two years later, Aden followed. From this moment until the Fatimids collapsed, there were pro-Fatimids emirates in Yemen. The development of the *da'wa* and the control over new territories are the two main aspects of the letters exchanged between the caliph al-Mustanṣir (1036-1094) and the Sulayḥids. Troubles were occurring between two clans fighting for the control of Mecca and Medina. The pilgrimage has to be stop for several years. 'Alī al-Sulayḥī was sent to Mecca in order to act in the name of the Fatimid caliph. He gave advice to the caliph on the local personalities to support[8]. He even had to used his troop in march 1063 and in 1064 because the disorder was to critical[9]. Al-Mustanṣir wished to have peace in the Hedjaz area for the pilgrims feel secure to come[10]. After several years of interruption due to the dangers, the resumption of the yearly pilgrimage

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[4] Al-Muqaddasī: 105.
[5] Al-Maqrīzī 2002-2004, 2: 16. Surūr 1957: 14.
[6] Al-Muqaddasī: 105.
[7] The Palestinian geographer al-Muqaddasī wrote that during the years 980-990, Ismaili propaganda was very active in the Sind area, around the city of Multan, and the Friday sermon, the *khutba* was pronounced in the name of the Fatimid caliphs of Cairo. It lasted till 1010. Al-Muqaddasī : 485. Idrīs 'Imad al-Dīn, *'Uyūn al-Aḫbār* 1984, 6 : 222. Halm 1996: 286-288.
[8] *Sijillāt*, n° 4: 38.
[9] *Sijillāt*, n° 7 : 47. Ibn al-Aṯīr 1979, 10 : 19. Wiet 1937 : 243
[10] Concerning the interruption of the pilgrimage see : *Sijillāt*, n° 3: 34.

brought to Fatimid credit was obviously a victory over the Abbasids. To thank 'Alī al-Ṣulayḥī, al-Mustanṣir gave him the honorific title of *"Support of the Caliphate"* (*'umdat al-Ḥilafa*), one of the greatest honorific title of the time. When 'Alī died, his son, al-Mukarram followed the path of his father in the Hedjaz. Nonetheless, the situation was about to change. As soon as 1069, the prayer was no more called for the Fatimids in Mecca and Medina but for the Abbasids. The Iraqi caliphs took advantage of the critical situation of the Fatimids in Egypt where a civil war was undermining the Caliph authority since 1065. The Abbasids also benefited the expansion of the Seljuk Turks[11]. In spite of all, the Ṣulayḥids remained the Fatimid armed force in Yemen. Moreover, after 1067, they also became in charge of the Ismaili mission in 'Oman and India[12]. Nevertheless, in Egypt the civil war was shattering the dream of the dynasty. Al-Mustanṣir had no more influence over his army and in 1069, when the opportunity occurred to established a Ismaili enclave in India, the Caliph did not encourage his local propagandist to make the last step[13]. Then to avoid that 'Alī al-Ṣulayḥī figures out the state of the dereliction of the caliphate, the Caliph systematically refused 'Alī to come and meet him in Cairo[14]. The Caliph arguments were that 'Alī's trip to Egypt would give an occasion to his enemies to take back the power in Mecca and in Yemen where some of his allies were experiencing troubles[15]. Of course, al-Mustanṣir explain that it was of the highest interest for the dynasty to put out these sparks of rebellion[16]. We find no word in this correspondence about the tragic situation in Egypt.

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[11] Al-Maqrīzī 1971, 2: 303.

[12] He has first sent his religious judge (*qāḍī*) in 1061, Lamak b. Mālik al-Ḥammādī, whom stayed five years in Cairo where he learned from the chief propagandist (*dāʿī al-duʿāt*) of the dynasty; al-Muʾayyad fi-l-dīn al-Shīrāzī. Cf. Al-Muʾayyad 1949: 102-103. Daftary 1990: 209-210.

[13] *Sijillāt,* n° 60: 196 . Hamdānī 1955: 226, 318. Al-Maqrīzī 1971, 2: 303. Halm 1996: 385-392.

[14] Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn, *'Uyūn al-Aḫbār,* VII, p. 108-109.

[15] *Sijillāt*, n° 3 p. 34, n° 4 p. 38, n° 7 p. 47, n° 60 p. 196 Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn, *op.cit.,* p. 102-110.

[16] *Sijillāt*, n° 41 p. 140, n° 60 p. 196.

1.2 The trade development: an alibi?

During this first period, historical sources contain some references about gifts sent to Cairo or about the products of the *Ḥums* (or *fifth*), a specific Ismaili tax, collected by every propagandist outside of Egypt[17]. No text allow us to talk about trade development between Yemen and Egypt at that moment. Altough It doesn't mean that there was no trade at all. Before 969, the famous geographer Ibn Ḥawqal pointed out the presence in Suwākin of traders from Persia and a group of merchants from the Rabīʿa tribe calling the prier in the name of the Fatimids, still in Maghreb at that time[18]. The author does not use the word propagandist (*dāʿī*, pl: *duʿāt*), but the verb he used (*yudʿā*) has the same root. It make think that these men were Fatimid missionaries acting under the cover of the commercial activity[19]. Trade was often used by a lot of Ismaili propagandists as a mise-en-scene to hide their official mission.

Anyway, at that moment, the major port in the red Sea was al-Qulzum (modern Suez)[20]. It was used as an exportation port for the barley sent to the holly cities and as the port o f embarkation for the pilgrims. Naṣīr-ī Khusraw, the Persian traveler undertook twice the pilgrimage through al-Qulzum during the 1050s and on his second trip back he was even accompanied by the Emir of Mecca[21]. During the 10th and the first half of the 11th century, the relation between Egypt and the Hejaz through al-Qulzum was the most common one. We might say the most official also. The sea trip to al-Jār or Jidda, about fifteen days, was very dangerous because of its treacherous winds and reefs[22]. The control that the Fatimids were able to established in the high Said between 969 and 1050 associated with the dangerousness of the trip between al-Qulzum and the Arabian ports contribute to weaken the port which gave his name to the red Sea usually called the Sea of al-Qulzum (*baḥr Qulzum*). Even though Naṣīr-ī Khusraw went to the Arabian peninsula through this port (Figure 1), its decline has

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[17] Idris ʿImad al-Dīn 2002, 7: 84. Al-Maqrīzī 1971, 2 : 222.
[18] « *yudʿā fīhā li-ṣāḥib al-maghrib* » Ibn Ḥawqal 1938-1939: 48.
[19] The Ismaili missionaries often took the appearance of traders in order to travel without calling too much attention from the Abbasid police. Cf. Stern 1949: 298-307.
[20] Ibn Ḥawqal 1938-1939: 53. Al-Muqaddasī 1967: 97, 196. On the word *furḍa* : Dozy 1991, 2: 254-255.
[21] Naṣīr-ī Khusraw 2001: text 76, 78, 79-80, tr. : 76, 78-80.
[22] Concerning these kinds of difficulties, especially around the straits see: Al-Muqaddasī 1967: 11-12.

started few years before. During his reign, al-Ḥākim (996-1021) freed al-Qulzum inhabitants to pay the custom taxes on the boats (*mukūs al-marākib*)[23]. This decision could be seen as a privilege, but it could also have meant that at that time the sums levied on boats in the port were so small that the Treasury had no real needs for that money while the local population was starting to grow poorer. The new Egyptian port on the rise was the southern port of Aydhāb. Closer, by sea, from its Arabian counterparts, Aydhāb began its rise at the beginning of the 11th century. In the 10th century, it was already known as a modest commercial port, but it was a transfer place for North African pilgrims to Jeddah[24]. In August 1050, Naṣīr-ī Khusraw had to stay in the dry small town, waiting for wind in order to sail to Jeddah. He wrote about the custom rights the Fatimid were levying on merchandises coming from Abyssinia , Zanzibar and Yemen[25]. Once the Sulayḥids took over Yemen, they regularly send gifts and money to their overlord in Cairo. In 1062, gold, silver, slaves, weapons, amber, musk and handcrafts reached Aswan via Aydhāb[26]. All these elements clearly prove that economic relations did exist before the great trade development in the 12th century, but the historical sources give us the impression that the red Sea trade was not the main interest for the Fatimids. It was the direct control or influence over territories bordering the red Sea, especially the Hijaz, which drawn all the attention of the Egyptian caliphate during this first period. That Fatimids levied custom taxes in al-Qulzum and Aydhāb is not under discussion here. Nothing permits to say that at that moment, the Fatimids tried to have any kind of influence over trade in the red Sea as Lewis wrote[27].

The documentation, somewhat scanty, let the impression that between 969 and 1073, ideology and religious prevailed over any kind of other considerations. During these years, Fatimid policy in the Red Sea was somehow very indirect. It consisted essentially in trying to improve their ideological influence over the Eastern territories bordering the sea, but the sea in itself didn't seem to be of major interest for the dynasty. Between the failing of the attempt

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[23] Al-Maqrīzī 1971, 2:15.
[24] Al-Yaʿqūbī 1892 : 335. Al-Istakhrī 1967: 29, 35, 54. Al-Masʿūdī 1861-1877 : 1: 238; 3: III: 32.
[25] Naṣīr-ī Khusraw 2001: text 85, tr.: 85-86.
[26] Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn 2002, 7: 84.
[27] Lewis 1972: 287-295.

of taking Bagdad by the general al-Basāsīrī in 1058-1059, acting in the name of the Fatimid caliph, and the Crusade in 1098, the Fatimids underwent a series of change which forced them to reconsider their links with the Red Sea on a totally different basis.

2. The Red Sea : a new major stake for the Fatimid policy (1073-1171).
2.1 *A redirected da'wa and a more active diplomacy*.

The second phase of the relationship between Fatimid and Red Sea began with the arrival in Egypt of Badr al-Jamālī. During this period, the means of the Fatimid policy is to respond to new objectives.

The change of policy was not immediate. In a first time the Hijaz stayed very attractive for Fatimids. Al-Mustanṣir was maybe the last Fatimid inspired by the original Ismaili theories[28]. Ruling over Mecca was the last dream for this dynasty who could no longer claim for universal power as it did at its beginning. Badr re-established the prayer in the name of the Ismaili Imam. The caliph asked al-Mukarram to control the Sharif of Mecca whom played on Fatimid and Abbasid sides in order to maintain himself in power in the holly city[29]. Thus, during the 1070s and the 1080, the prayer was alternatively pronounced in the name of the Fatimids or the Abbasids, following the context more and more unfavourable to the Egyptians[30].This caliphate will corresponded anyway to Badr new strategy. He didn't want to pursue the movement of expansion toward the East or the north of Syria since the Seljuks had taken up in Syria.

Perhaps more interesting than the relations with Mecca for judging the new attitude of the Fatimids toward the territories bordering the Red Sea is the reorientation of the *da'wa* toward Bahrayn, Oman and India. In 1076, al-Mustanṣir suggested to al-Mukarram to try to tale advantage of the troubles in Bahrayn to send there missionaries whom helped the Sulayḥid to take the whole area under his influence[31]. This Fatimid renewal of interest for

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[28] Al-Mustanṣir considered this failure as the sign that he should better give up with this dream. Cf Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002, 7: 74.
[29] Sijillāt, n° 54: 176; n° 63: 203.
[30] Al-Maqrīzī 1971, 2 : 303, 320-322.
[31] Sijillāt, n° 54: 176.

territories such India, where the Ismaili message has already been dispatched long before the 1070s, could find a explanation into the new pacified situation in Egypt. The caliph has now al his mind to try to extend the da'wa and to catch up on the time lost during the civil war. Nevertheless, if the Fatimid imam and the great dā'ī in Cairo were officially in charge of the *da'wa* in Egypt and its propagation all over the Muslim World, Badr al-Jamālī arrival seemed to have had an effect on the mission. In fact, the *da'wa* and all its organisation felt into Badr hands. Has became the one whom fixed the orientation, the choices to make and not the caliph anymore. Al-Mustanṣir indicated for example to al-Mukarram that the nomination decrees for the new missionaries in India and Oman were on their way, but they were issued through Badr's council (*majliss*). In the Sulayḥids eyes, the Fatimid caliph was still the vivid incarnation of the hidden imam. He represented the only source of spiritual and political authority. He was the main interlocutor. In the Egyptian reality, unknown by the missionaries and the Sulayḥids, al-Mustanṣir was only a puppet into Badr hands. It seemed than after 1078, once the situation was settled in Egypt, Badr understood what he could do with the *da'wa*'s organisation outside of Egypt. In 1078, the Caliph asked al-Mukarram to follow Badr orders and advices. Then, after 1086, al-Mustanṣir also asked the Sulayḥids to add to his own name Badr's name and al-Afḍal's name, Badr's son, in the call for the prayer[32]. These changes show that Badr used the *da'wa* as a tool in order that it can be used to respond goals he had determine. The Caliph urged the Sulayḥid queen, al-Ḥurra to have a better control over the missionary in Oman because he has gave up his mission for the trade activity. This was another sign proving that the *da'wa* and the trade were still closely related. The Caliph ask the queen to carry on her efforts in India and he showed great interest in the situation in Yemen where the tribal chiefs were trying to destabilized Sulayḥid power. The caliph even wrote to them in order to persuade them to stay faithful to al-Ḥurra[33]. When Badr al-Jamālī and al-Mustanṣir died in 1094, the Sulayḥid followed the official *da'wa* as al-Afḍal, the new Fatimid vizier, and the queen al-Ḥurra wished. The breaking-off between the two dynasties occurred at al-Āmir death in 1130 when al-Afḍal choose not to let the official heir to the throne, al-

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[32] Sijillāt, n° 51: 169; n° 20: 76; n° 14: 58; n° 15: 63.
[33] Sijillāt, n° 14: 58; n° 26: 90; n° 48: 161; n° 52: 171; n° 63: 203.

Ṭayyīb, take the caliphate. Al-Ḥurra decided to encourage the creation of a new Ismaili mission and didn't recognise the new caliph al-Ḥāfiẓ, as the imam[34]. At that moment, links between Egypt and Yemen were about to over-stretch while the Fatimids were facing great difficulties in the Mediterranean because of the Crusaders. In face of this defection, the Fatimids had to quickly find new allies in Yemen.

The honorific title of *dāʿī* was given to the Zurayʿids dynasty which were ruling Aden in the name of al-Mukarram and al-Ḥurra since the 1060s[35]. The Zurayʿids always had a troublemaking attitude toward the Sulayḥid power even though they never officially ceased their relation with them nor with the Fatimids. The Cairo masters were too happy, even when their relations with the Sulayḥids was still peaceful, to see a counter-power to the Sulayḥids emerging in the key city of Yemen. We know that al-Mustanṣir was in close relation with the Sulayḥids but he also wrote to several others local chiefs Yemen. No letter of these correspondence have survived but it would be very surprising if none of them had been send to the ruler of the main city of the area[36]. Al-Ḥāfiẓ officially gave the title of *dāʿī* to ʿAlī b. Saba' who died before the caliph messenger arrived with the decree[37]. Muḥammad, Alī's brother, received the title. He benefited the help of Bilāl b. Jarīr, the vizier of Aden et the most powerful man in town[38]. From 1138 till the end of the Zurayʿids, the *dāʿī* title remained in Zurayʿids hands. During all these years ʿUmāra al-Ḥakāmī shows how the spirituality of the *daʿwa* vanished in the Fatimid caliphate itself. The men in power during most of the 12th century has no interest in maintaining the original purity or orthodoxy of the Ismaili's cause[39]. They were ready to make important concessions such as granting in a hereditary manner the

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[34] He was accused of being an impostor because he was not designated as the official heir by al-Āmir who had named his son, al-Ṭayyīb. Al-Ṭayyīb was already an adult and the vizier wanted a young boy, easier to control. Cf. Daftary 1991: 256-257.

[35] Cleverly, al-Mukarram had named two brothers at the head of Aden and the surrounding areas. One was in charge of the port and the coast while the other was ruling the hinterland .

[36] Sijillāt, n° 38: 128; n° 22: 79.

[37] The caliph waited for the end of the civil war (1136-1138) between the two branches of the ruling family in Aden. Daftary 2001: 276-278.

[38] ʿUmāra 1892: 50, 55. Bā Maḥrama 1950, 2 : 32, 216.

[39] This phenomenon was clearly felt as soon as the 11th century by the future great *dāʿī al-Muʾayyad f-l-Dīn al-Šīrāzī* . When he arrived in Egypt he understood that the *daʿwa* was no more into the hands of people really concerned by the purety of the Ismaili ideology. Al-Muʾayyad 1949: 80-83.

honorific title of *dā'ī* to the Adenese rulers[40]. The da'wa clearly became an instrument, a kind of a tool used to keep Aden, the lock of the Red Sea trade, under Fatimid influence.

This used of the *da'wa* was not the only way for the Fatimids to act in the Red Sea. During the 12th century, sources allowed us to talk about a diplomatic offensive between the Fatimid and the rulers of the southern area of the Red Sea. The qādī al-Rašīd and 'Umāra, close friend with several Yemeni potentates, made several trips between Egypt and Yemen during the 1140s, 1150s and 1160s[41]. The Fatimids were not mistaking, the real Adenese master was Bilāl b. Jarīr (d. 1151). He received numerous sumptuous gifts and the title of "Fortunate Shaykh, Respectable and Just" (*shayḫ al-Sa'īd al-Muwaffaq al-Sadīd*)[42].

2.2 Closer relations with the trader communities?

The sources don't certify the presence of Fatimid merchantmen in the Red Sea[43]. But the Fatimid could try to have an influence over one of the major actors in the Red Sea trade: the jewish traders. A way to play such a role was to intervene in the religious affairs of the Jewish community. This kind of intervention had already been done with the Coptic Church, when Badr al-Jamālī forced the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria to come and live in Fustat, and the vizier ask the Patriarch to send a new representative in Nubia and Abyssinia, a man that had promised that he would guarantee regular commercial relations with Egypt[44].

As soon as the 1030s, the Fatimids maintained relatively close relations with the Jews from Egypt[45]. Thus, as Marc Cohen has explained, after 1073, the Fatimids may have taken advantage of the Palestinian context to encourage the birth of the title of the *Nagīd* (chief)

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[40] This title was supposed to stay valid only during the time life of the beneficiary. Officially, it couldn't be gave in an hereditary manner.

[41] On al-Rašīd see 'Umāra al-Ḥakamī 1892: 78. Abū Šāma 1956, 1: 147-148. Ibn Ḫallikān 1970, 1: 143-146 ; 2: 343. Al-Suyūtī 1967, 1: 311. Derenbourg 1893: 18, 207, 289, 419, 532.

[42] 'Umāra 1897: 26-27.

[43] But it was the case in the Mediterranean. Cf. Ibn Muyassar 1981: 135. Canard 1954 : 125-146.

[44] Ibn al-Muqaffa' 1949, II/3: 329-330, 347-351. Beshir 1975: 15-24.

[45] Thus, The Tustari brothers were al-Ẓāhir (1021-1036) and al-Mustanṣir bankers. They had key positions in the Fatimid administration. Ibrāhīm has sold to al-Ẓāhir the woman black slave whom gave birth to al-Mustanṣir. During al-Mustanṣir's youth, his mother had great influence on his son and the administration in general. She made her former master her *wāsiṭa*, a kind of personnal vizier while Faḍl, the other brother was name Secretary (*Kātib*) of the Fatimid army in Syria. Gil 1981: 37-43. Bareket 2004 : 192-193.

among the Jews of Egypt and to attract to Fustât in 1127, the installation of Palestinian Gaonate. This was one of the main authority which had appointed heads of local Jewish communities in Egypt and, for example, in Yemen or in India[46].

The Zurayʿid vizier, Bilāl b. Jarīr, was in close relation with a man called Maḍmūn b. Ḥasan b. Bundār[47]. Between 1130 and 1150 Maḍmūn was at the same time a great trader, the representative of the merchants (*wakīl al-tujjār*), a shipowner, and the supervisor (*nāẓir*) of the port of Aden, named at this place by Bilāl[48]. Maḍmūn has a strong influence over all the commercial activities in the city. He also was the local leader (*nāgīd*) of the Jewish communities in Yemen and even in India. He had been named *nāgīd* in 1140 by the Palestinian Gaon, in Egypt at that time[49]. In addition to his allegiance to the Palestinian Academy, Maḍmūn was also the local representative for the Babylonian Academy. He should also remain faithful to those whose gave him the chance to become the superintendant of the port of Aden. Maḍmūn and Bilāl had business in common. Maḍmūn provided with his own vessels Bilāl's naval expedition against a man from Zabīd whom didn't pay the taxes[50]. The number of boats equipped as man-of-war for this single expedition let us think that the real goal of this naval attack was not only to take back money from a tax evader trader but to raid Zabīd's area like it has already been done in 1143[51]. Maḍmūn also wove matrimonial alliance with Abū Zikrī Kohen Judah b. Joseph, a great representative of the traders in Fustât, the main commercial town in Egypt[52].

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[46] The Palestinian Gaonate first flew from Jerusalem because of the Seljuks. The Palestinian Gaon took refuge in Tyre then in Damas before coming in Egypt in the 1120s. Marc Cohen think that the Fatimids did not appreciate the fact that the Gaon stayed in Tyre while the city was rebelling against the Fatimid authority. This attitude would have encouraged Badr al-Jamālī to support the emancipation of the Egyptian Jewish community. Cohen 1980: 84-85, 231-232. Gil 1992: 774-776.

[47] Goitein & Friedman 2007: 14.

[48] S. D. Goitein, M. A. Friedman 2007: 37-47, 283-400. Goitein 1967, 1: 186-192. Margariti 2002: 285-289.

[49] The other Talmudic Academy was the one of Babel in Iraq. Maḍmun also received honorific titles from the Head of this Academy. Thus, Maḍmun was under jurisdiction of the two main Jewish Academies. So he was able to judge all the problems that could occurred between his coreligionists, whatever the Talmudic yeshiva they were obeying to. Goitein & Friedman 2007: 38.

[50] ULC Or 1080 J 171. Tr. R. E. Margariti 2002 : 268.

[51] Bodl. Ms. Heb. D. 66 (Cat. 2878), fol. 61. Tr. Goitein & Friedman 2007: 704. ʿUmāra 1897: 26-27. We do know that in 1135, at the beginning of the navigation period, there was no boat in the port of Aden to defend the city against men-of-war sent by the King of Qish. Aden was saved only because two boats arrived from outside. Cf. Goitein 1954: 247-257. Ibn al-Muwājir 1936, 1: 43-45. On the type of boats sent by Maḍmūn and Bilāl, the so-called *jāšujiyyāt* see. Agius 2008: 342-343.

[52] Goitein & Friedman 2007: 40.

It seems that Maḍmūn enjoyed the confidence from the various local chiefs whom controlled the maritime and terrestrial routes. This can be interpreted as proof that he had agreements with emirs or pirates located on these roads between India and Egypt in order that the latter do not prevent his vessels, not to say all vessels passing through Aden, to sail freely in the Red Sea[53]. If the Geniza letters contain no reference to any kind of recognition or submission of Maḍmūn in regards of the Fatimids, it is yet very interesting that the rapprochement between rabbinical authorities and the Fatimids is almost concomitant with the rise of Maḍmūn in Aden, with his nomination as the *nāgīd* for the Palestinian yeshiva of the Jewish communities in Yemen and India, and of course with the strong political rapprochement between the Fatimids and the Zuray'ids at at time when the Fatimids needs to firmly established their influence in this area[54]. Without texts is of course very difficult to affirm that all that was wrote down but let's say simply that the beam of interests among all actors appears particularly expanded.

2.3 Direct military interventions.

Thanks to their fleet, the Fatimids could ensure the security of maritime trade routes. Nonetheless, they didn't intervene directly in the Red Sea before 1118[55]. The boats at anchor in 'Aydhāb were looted by pirates send by Qāsim b. Abī Hāshim, the *amīr* of Mecca,. The Egyptian vizier al-Afḍal sent five fire-launcher vessels (*ḥarrāriq*) to 'Aydhāb[56]. The establishment of this first Fatimid flotilla in the Red Sea gave the starting signal to a series a direct Fatimid military interventions in the Red Sea and more specifically in Yemen (figure 1)[57]. In 1119, about 20 cavaliers under Ibn Najīb al-Dawla orders were sent to Yemen[58]. Officially, their mission was to help queen al-Ḥurra to take back the city of Zabīd whose

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[53] Goitein & Friedman 2007: 396-397.

[54] I shall thank Professor Mordechai A. Friedman from Tel-Aviv University to have confirmed to me that there was actually no Geniza letters which refers to direct Fatimid influence over Maḍmūn.

[55] We put aside one or two direct land interventions in Hejaz in 990 and another one during the 11th century.

[56] Al-Maqrīzī 1973, 3: 57-58.

[57] Al-Qalqašandī 1987, 3: 597.

[58] More than, a general, Ibn Najīb was certainly a Fatimid missionary. He is discribed as a poor cavalier and he was in charge of the palace library before he went to Yemen. 'Umāra al-Ḥakamī. 1892: 42-44. Ibn Muyassar 1981: 93-95. Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002, 7: 233. Hamblin 1985: 135-136.

position was a threat to the navigation in the Red Sea if an hostile dynasty could secure its position there (figure 1). During that moment, the trade came to a standstill because of the animosity between al-Ḥurra and the new master of Zabīd. Ibn Najīb brought back the rebel city into the queen's realm and he also brought back the Yemen in a more peaceful situation. This action was clearly an help for the trade which re-start after that[59]. The new Fatimid vizier, al-Ma'mūn al-Batā'iḥī supported this first expeditionary force by sending 400 archers and 700 soldiers and by giving the full powers to Ibn Najīb on the populations of the centre of Yemen[60].

Such an important movement of troops is quite astonishing for the period. Shipping elite soldiers a far as Yemen while the Franks were threatening Egypt should be considered as a proof of Fatimid growing interest in Yemen and the Red Sea. Clearly, the Fatimids wanted to take control of the area in place of local emirs, even their allies. This Egyptian interventionism was poorly perceived by the Zuray'ids. Around 1125-1126, after a failure against Zabīd once again rebelled, Ibn Najīb tried to take control over Aden without success[61]. Al-Ma'mūn decided to send an emissary with military power over Yemen. This man, al- al-Kadhdhāb, was the head of the Cairo police. It was a key function in the capital city. The meeting between al-Kadhdhāb and Ibn Najīb went so badly that al-Kaḏḏāb decided to slander Ibn Najīb, alleging that Ibn Najīb was calling into question the Fatimid caliph legitimacy[62]. The Caliph al-Āmir decided to send another general, Ibn al-Khayyaṭ, to arrest Ibn Najīb and to take him back to Cairo. The general embarked with 100 cavaliers[63]. Ibn Najīb was arrested and putted into a boat in Aden. The vessel sailed toward Egypt but never reached its port of

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[59] Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002, 7: 233.
[60] 'Umāra al-Ḥakamī 1892: 43. Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002: 238. Bā Maḫrama 1956, 2 : 133.
[61] At that moment the Zuray'ids were not the Fatimid missionaries. Cf. Ibn al-Mujāwir 1936: 121-125. 'Umāra al-Ḥakamī 1892: 44.
[62] 'Umāra al-Ḥakamī 1892: 45-46. Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002, 7: 242.
[63] 'Umāra al-Ḥakamī 1892: 46. Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002, 7: 242-243.

call[64]. It is difficult to know precisely on the orders of which Ibn Najīb was drowned but it seemed that its presence now bothered. He has to be killed[65].

The reports of Ibn Najīb and Ibn al-Khayyat expeditions in Yemen showed that they both make a stop in Dahlak archipelago[66]. The islands appear regularly in the texts as a stopover between Egypt and Aden[67]. However, during these expedition, it was not merchantmen but men-of-war of a foreign power that stopped in Dahlak. It's quite difficult to consider these stops the mere fruit of maritime contingencies[68]. The archipelago was a pirate nest[69]. In the 1070s, the relations between the Fatimids and Dahlak sultan were quite good[70]. But during the 1080s, the islands were used as a refuge for the Najahid rulers of Zabīds whom fight against the Sulayḥids[71]. The tombstones found in the island attest that there was in the island a dynasty which might has been closed to the Seljuk Turks[72]. Dahlak sultans forced merchantmen to stop in Dahlak and to pay in order to pay taxes[73]. Such acts could disturb Cairo interests. Thus, the Caliph could have decided to put pressure on the Dahlak rulers. Ibn Najīb was perhaps mandated to negotiate with the sultan so that the latter does not disturb the commercial traffic between Egypt and Aden. Ibn al-Khayyat's stopover in Dahlak should be seen as a confirmation of the agreement between Ibn Najīb and the Dahlak's sultan. This different allusion bring us to talk about the traders of the Kārim

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[64] On the way to Aden, Ibn al-Khayyat and his men first humiliated Ibn Najīb. Then, after the embarkation, the prisoner, the gift to the Caliph sent by al-Ḥurra and the deputy of the queen were drawn into the sea. 'Umāra, *op. cit.*, éd. p. 47-48, tr. p. 63-64. Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn 2002, 7: 242-243. Bā Maḥrama 1956, 2: 71, 133, 202.

[65] Ibn Muyassar proposes an alternative version to Ibn Najīb's end. He would have been brought back to Egypt and crucified with the vizier al-Ma'mūn. The vizier was accused to be at the origin of the Nizarid propaganda that Ibn Najīb is supposed to have spread. Ibn Muyassar 1981: 104, 106. Al-Maqrīzī 1973, 3: 119, 122.

[66] This archipelago, nowadays Eritrean, is located northward Aden,. Its history is still quite unknown. The most complete works concerning these islands are : Basset 1893: 77-111. Wiet 1952: p. 90-95. Schneider 1983 : 24-42. Margariti, 2010.

[67] Goitein 1954: 181-197.

[68] Texts explain that Ibn Najīb stopped in Dahlak in order to meet al-Ḥurra's emissary that should instruct Ibn Najīb to the subtleties of the Sulayhid court. This explanation is not very satisfying.

[69] Goitein 1957: 458. Margariti 2008: 543-577.

[70] A fugitive was researched by the Egyptians authorities. He was arrested by the Dahlak master (*sāḥib Dahlak*) and transferred to the Fatimids. Ibn al-Muqaffa' 1949, II/3: text: 21; tr. : 329.

[71] Schneider 1983: p.30-31.

[72] Wiet 1952: 92. Schneider 1983: 36-37.

[73] Those who did not want to pay the taxes were pursued by Dahlak Sultan vessels. Cf. Margariti 2010 : 563-566.

2.4 The Fatimids and the beginnings of the Kārim trade.

The so-called merchants of the Kārim have often been associated with a period, the Mamluk Egypt, with a social category, the great traders, with at a religion, Islam and with a type of goods, spices and incense[74]. The Geniza documents and some Arabic sources indicate that the trade expansion in the Red Sea is concomitant with the Kārim traders appearance whose largest growth is nonetheless posterior to the Fatimid period. D. Goitein has highlighted that the first reference known to the Kārim is from 1134[75]. In the letters, some elements suggest that it was then a seasonal convoy[76]. In one of the letter from 1140, the author point out to his interlocutor focal point the arrival of the "Kārim the year" (*Kārim al-sana*) and in another document Joseph b. Abraham wish his mate a safe arrival in 'Aydhāb with "all the Kārim" (*jāmi' al-Kārim*)[77]. The recent research of Eric Vallet about Aden during the Rasulid sultanate have allowed to clarify what the Kārim was. He demonstrated that the words Kārim and Kārimī were not references to a category of individuals merchants, the great Red Sea merchants, as it was supposed[78]. In the same way, this is not by the specialization of these merchants in a few specific goods that we can define who were the Kārimīs. In all likelihood, it was primarily by the season, navigation season, from June to November, for what is called in the documents the Egyptian Kārim (*Kārim miṣrī*)[79]. The Kārimīs were the traders whom sail during this season, whatever their wealth. In addition, these traders were not sailing on the typical red sea vessel, the jalbas, vessel of a modest size rather specialized in coastal shipping and in the transversal navigation, which could approach the coasts without too much danger. It seems that these traders are often associated with the expression "large vessel" (*marākib al-kabīr*). These boats were thus of stronger tonnages than the dhows and because of their dimensions, they were able to transport more goods. They also used more direct route between Aden and Egypt. These vessels only stopped that in some points, primarily the

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[74] Labib 2003: 666. Labib 1965: 60-61. Fischel 1958: 164.
[75] Or. 5549, III, f. 5, b., l. 6, margin. TS NS J 23. TS Misc. 28, f. 33. Ed. Goitein 1958: 175-184.
[76] Goitein 1958 : 181.
[77] TS Misc. 28, f. 33. ENA NS 48, f. 4, b. l. 11-13. Tr. Goitein, 1968: 356-357.
[78] Vallet 2006 : 407-408
[79] Vallet 2006 : 409-410.

Dahlak archipelago and Suwākin (figure 1)[80]. it is quite difficult to know if such ships sailed in convoy as suggested Goitein but it must recalled that from a certain year, the vessels were protected by the Fatimid navy[81]. In the light of the low number of Fatimids vessels listed in the Red Sea, five then three, the protection could be effective only if the vessels to protect sailed in convoy. Even though it's difficult to affirm that as soon as 1137, the Fatimids protected these boats but it should be note that the Geniza letter corpus so far edited by Professor M. A. Friedman concerning the Red Sea trade show a clear domination of the period 1130-1160. About 60% of the letters are from that three decades[82]. One can imagine that the Fatimids protected the merchants with their vessels in the north of the Red Sea while the Dahlak sultans play the same role in the south. As surprising as it may look, this kind of agreement had already been sealed in the Mediterranean in the 11th century[83]. We should add to this that some Arabic letters found in Qasr Ibrim (south of Egypt) seem to show that another trade network, maybe more specifically handled by Muslims, was operating next to the Jewish network in the Red Sea. The few letters we know about, not yet published, are talking about Fatimid official, or at least personalities close to the Fatimid court, whom were shipowners in Aydhāb in the 12th century[84].

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[80] Vallet 2006 : 410.
[81] Al-Qalqašandī 1987, 3: 536, 598.
[82] This corpus is about 165 documents. The three decades cumulate respectively 50 letters for the 1130s, 21 letters 1140s and 29 documents for the 1150s. We find only 3 letters for the 1160s.
[83] In the 1040s, Jabbara, the ruler of Barqa in modern Libya was protecting merchantmen sailing between Tunisia or Sicilia and Egypt against the Christian ships. The Fatimids let Jabbara levied a tax, the ghifāra on the traders. TS 13 J 9, f.27, b. l. 6. TS 16.13, b, l. 22-24. Bodl. MS Heb. A3 Cat. 2873, f. 26, b. l. 28. Ed. M. Gil, 1997 IV, p. 167-173. Goitein 1967: 327-328.
[84] Plumley 1972 :101-106. these letters should be edited soon by Geoffrey Khan.

Le Caire
Al-Fustat
Al-Qulzum
Ayla/'Aqaba
Al-Tur
Qus
Qusayr
Medina
Assouan
Al-Jar
'Aydab
Jedda
Mecca
Sawakin
Halī
Dahlak
Sana'a'
Zabid
Ta'izz
Aden

● Ports
⬤ Fatimid navales bases
● Ports where punctual presence of the Fatimid navy is attested
– – Ibn Najib and Ibn al-Khayyat crossings to Yemen
– – Route of the Karim traders
– – Nasir-i Khusraw pilgrimage
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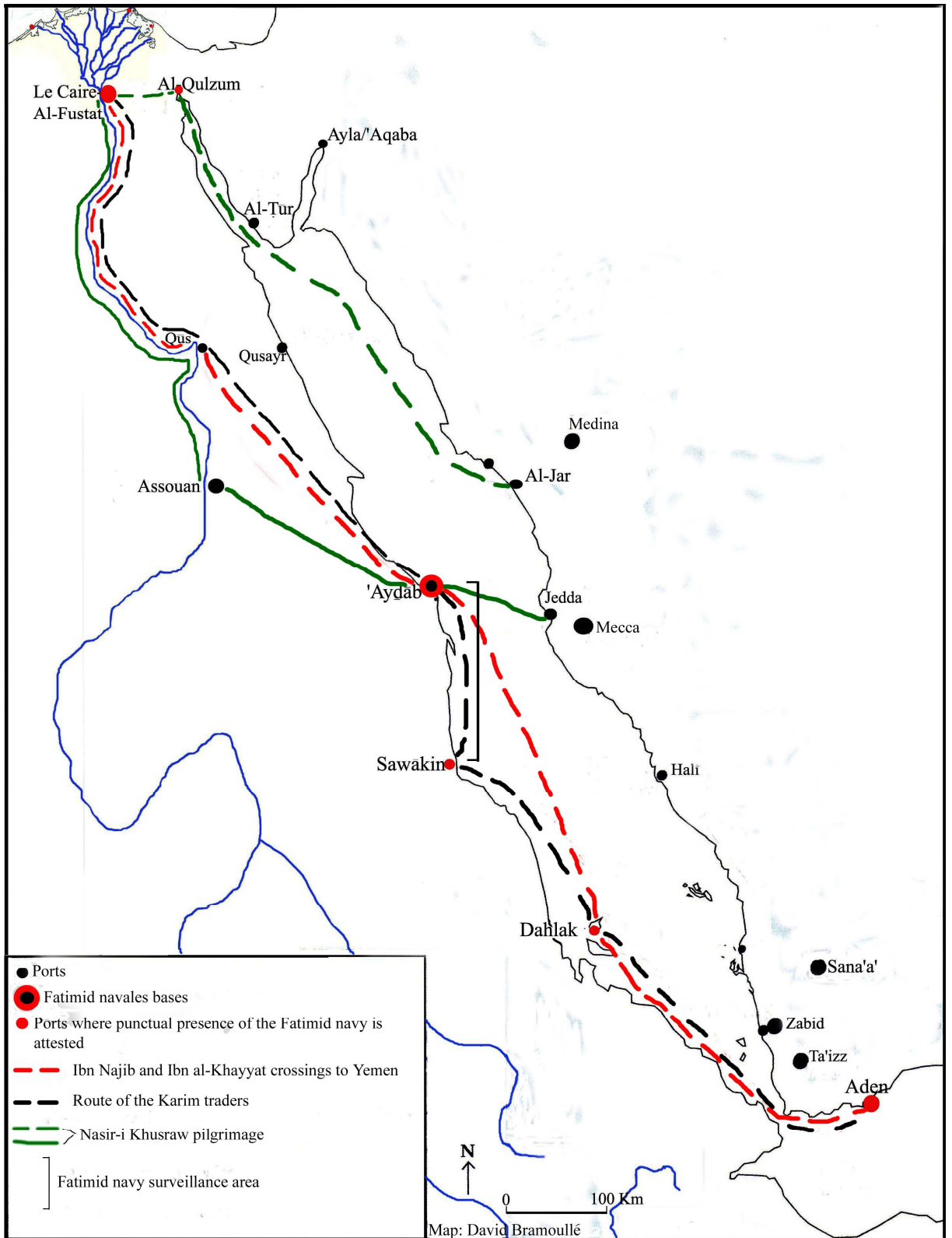
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Map: David Bramoullé

Figure 1: Fatimid actions in the Red Sea area

Conclusion.

The changing role granted to the Red Sea by the Fatimids is manifested through the strengthening and the diversification of the nature of Fatimids actions in this area. These transformations have several reasons. In a first period, the Fatimids aim to win the ideological battle against the Abbasids. They dream about to seize Baghdad, to convert the men to their creed and to gain leadership over the Muslim world. Their action against Mecca and the Hejaz could be explained by their ideology. During this first period, which extends up to 1073, the Fatimids are more politically and militarily interested on the Syro-Palestinian coast, in northern Syria that they are endeavouring to conquer and control by all means in order to move toward Iraq. The *da'wa* is then a whole ideological tool serving an ideological and political goal. Trade in Red Sea, does exist, appears to be a pretext, an alibi for *da'wa* expansion toward the south and east. This strategy almost succeeded in 1058-1059 when a Turk general took Bagdad in the name of the Fatimid.

After 1073, things changed. The imperialist dream of the dynasty was therefore abandoned by Badr al-Jamālī which was not a devotee of the Ismaili cause. The political and military context marked by the Seljuk's progression in Syria pushed Badr to change the orientation of the Fatimid policy and to define a new objective: to last in Egypt. During al-Afḍal vizierate, the Crusades allowed to believe that the Fatimids could have a deal with the Franks to repeal the Seljuk Turks, but the Fatimids understood that this was in fact a fight to death. Then the equation was quite simple. To withstand the Seljuk Turks and after them the Crusaders, the Fatimids need a lot of money not only to pay the soldiers but to buy materials for shipbuilding, because the fleet was the only efficient Fatimid weapon against the Franks. Trade, that the Fatimids had allowed the development as soon as the Ifrīqiya constituted the essential means to obtain the funds, *via* the customs taxes, but also the wood and the iron needed to build and maintain the fleets and therefore effectively protect Egypt.

The Fatimid tax system as described by al-Makhzūmī let understand the reason why the Red Sea became the major strategic space for the Egyptians. The Fatimids could not allow the Red Sea trade to be stopped and they should therefore ensure the opening of this sea by

whatever means necessary. The documents highlight that the Europeans, and among them the Italians perhaps more than others, were first arrived in Egypt to buy the Egyptian products, mostly flax. However, after the conquest of Sicily by the Normans during the 1060s, the high quality Sicilian flax became easily accessible to the Europeans. During the Crusade, the Palestinian flax production also felt in European hands. Thus, this were more and more the India trade products which attracted the Europeans traders in Egypt. The first reason for the of foreign merchants to come to Alexandria relied more and more in the opportunities they had to find the spices, the silk, incense that could be easily sold with great profits in Europe. According to the Egyptian tax system, European merchants who arrived in Egypt with strategic raw materials enjoyed certain tax exemptions on red Sea products. Against wood or iron, they could therefore export ou of Egypt at lower prices the products they resell with the big profits[85]. Of course it's easy to understand that if such products were about to disappear from the Egyptian markets and the Italians had no longer reasons to come to Egypt with their strategic goods and weapons that the ecclesiastic authority have forbid to sell in Muslim territories[86]. The men in charge of Egypt knew that if the red Sea trade stopped, Egypt could not resist to the Crusaders only with its own resources. So it was essential to keep alive the commercial maritime traffic in the Red Sea.

In this new context and with this new objective, the Fatimid strategy was totally overthrew. The *da'wa* thus became a tool in service of trade. Bernard Lewis assumption according to which the development of the *da'wa* toward India was intended to divert the traditional trade roads out of the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea in order to weaken the Abbasid is not unfounded but we think it is valid only until the 1070s. Thus, we are not far from thinking that in the 12th century the Red Sea became essential for the survival of the Fatimid dynasty.

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[85] Cahen 1964 : 217-314.
[86] Jacoby 2001 : 102-132. Jacoby 2000 : 76-89. Krueger 1933: 377-395. Krueger 1937: 57-71. Kedar 1983: 21-30.

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