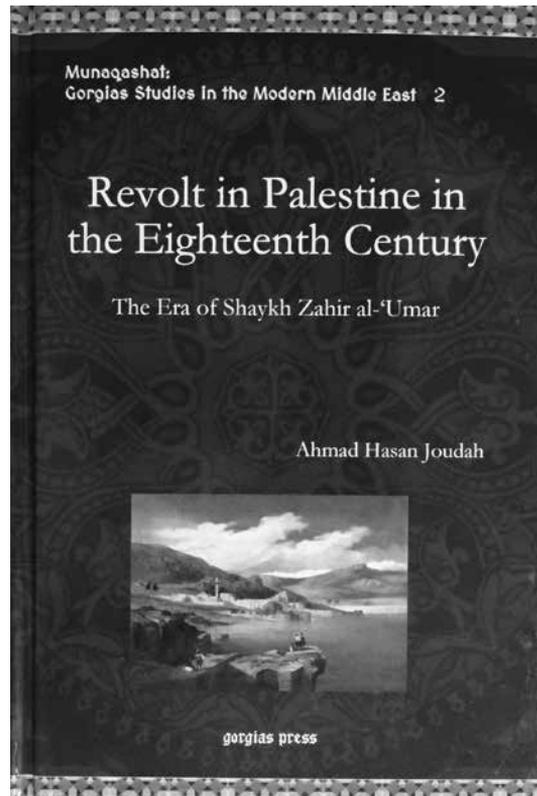


Zahir al-'Umar and the First Autonomous Regime in Ottoman Palestine (1744-1775)

Ahmad Joudah



[These excerpts from Ahmad Joudah's historical study of Zahir al-'Umar, are taken from the second edition of his book *Revolt in Palestine in the Eighteenth Century: The Era of Shaykh Zahir al-'Umar* (Gorgias Press 2014), and reprinted here by permission. The first (1987) edition was the first comprehensive history of this figure to be published. In a recent critical review of the new edition Dana Sajdi remarks "Joudah and the [German historian] Philipp mention the appropriation of al Umar as a Palesitnian nationalist hero.* Their claim notwithstanding, al Umar's life and times have figured neither in the Palestinian collective memory nor in school curricula. That might change very soon. [I]n the Arab world, and

* Thomas Philipp, *Acre: The Rise and Fall of a Palestinian City, 1730-1831*. (New York: CUP, 2002).

especially among Palestinians, al Umar is making not what we, professional historians of Bilad al-Sham, see as a comeback. Rather this is a debut, a very first appearance of al Umar not as a local strongman and petty tax farmer, but a heroic political figure.” (*Journal of Palestine Studies* 175, Spring 2015)].

Zahir al-‘Umar al-Zaydani (1690-1775) was arguably the best-known provincial leader in the Syrian provinces of the Ottoman Sultanate to establish an autonomous regime in northern Palestine. He came from a family of local potentates and *multazims* (tax farmers), patronized by the Shihabi Emirs of Mount Lebanon. His father, ‘Umar al-Zaydani, was the *multazim* of the regions of Tiberias and Safad in the early 18th century. After his father’s death in 1706, Zahir assumed the *iltizam* but eventually broke away from his family’s old practice of tax-farming for the Shihabis. This brought him face to face with central Ottoman authorities in both Damascus and Sayda. He began to ask for *iltizam* of new regions directly from the wali of Sayda and gradually extended his domain.

In general Zahir’s tolerant and inclusive policy toward religious minorities gained him the support of the Matwalis inhabitants of Jabal ‘Amil (southern Lebanon). Security, order and justice, which prevailed throughout his territories, were essential to the prosperity of his domain and the expansion and survival of his regime. These favorable economic, social and administrative conditions attracted a great influx of diverse immigrants from several provinces and countries (i.e., Cyprus and Greece). Newcomers rushed to Zahir’s territories, particularly to Akka, his seat of rule, which became a major port in the Levant after he had annexed the city in 1744.

By 1750 Shaykh Zahir dominated the entire Galilee, Marj ibn ‘Amir and the coastal area which reached approximately ten miles south of Haifa. Economic prosperity contributed immensely to Zahir’s rising political power. He became a major player in the politics of the Damascus and Sayda provinces, especially those parts in Palestine and southern Lebanon, until 1775. His father was the *multazim* in the Tiberias region, and following him, Zahir al-‘Umar was appointed as the *multazim* of the Safad region in the early 18th century.

Between 1762 and 1767, Zahir, was engaged in an intrafamily struggle. However, others outside the family, particularly the Matwalis and the Druzes, were involved as well. By the end of 1767, Zahir had reconciled his differences with his sons and their allies. Furthermore, he concluded an alliance with Nasif al-Nassar, the strong shaykh of the Matwalis, and cultivated amicable relations with Amir Mansur of the Druzes. However, ‘Uthman Pasha of Damascus remained opposed to him, and by 1768 he politically and militarily prepared for an assault against Zahir. ‘Uthman Pasha required the sultan’s endorsement to attack Zahir; his request was denied because the Porte did not wish to antagonize Zahir, particularly on the eve of the Russo-Turkish war of 1768–1774. It was in the Porte’s interest to avoid further disturbances in the Arab provinces. Furthermore, Zahir’s agents in Istanbul played a significant role in supporting his case against that of ‘Uthman Pasha.¹

After his appointment to Damascus, the pasha attempted to have each of his sons appointed as governors of Tripoli and Sayda. While he succeeded in appointing his son Muhammad Pasha as governor of Tripoli in 1761, Sayda was not given to his other son, Darwish Pasha, until September 1770.² Furthermore, due to his heavy-handed policy

in the rural areas, a series of uprisings broke out in Yaffa, Ramlah, and Gaza between 1766 and 1767. ‘Uthman Pasha’s injustices, heavy taxes, and several exactions by his representatives were the primary cause of these revolts. It is worth noting that Shaykh Zahir played a significant role in these revolts as well by dispatching a considerable amount of gunpowder to the insurrectionists of Ramlah. As a result, the leaders of the uprising in Ramlah – the mufti, the qadi, and others—sought asylum in Zahir’s capital.³ The revolts, which ‘Uthman Pasha successfully suppressed, had grave consequences during his struggles with Shaykh Zahir and his ally ‘Ali Bey of Egypt in 1770–71.

At this time there had been a power struggle among the Mamluks in Egypt, a struggle in which ‘Ali Bey al-Kabir emerged on top.⁴ During the return of the pilgrimage caravan from the Hijaz in August 1760, ‘Ali Bey launched his coup d’etat and assumed the position of Shaykh al-Balad (governor of Cairo or premier bey). He soon obtained the recognition of the Ottoman Pasha, thus assuming the supreme position among his fellows, the Mamluks. The Ottoman Pasha of Egypt ratified the office. To augment his power, ‘Ali Bey raised one of his followers, Isma‘il, to the rank of bey and married him to the daughter of his master, Ibrahim Kakhya. He also raised his treasurer, Muhammad (Abu al-Dhahab), to the rank of bey. In 1764, ‘Ali Bey led the Egyptian pilgrimage caravan (al-Rakb al-Misri) to Mecca as Amir al-Hajj (commander of the pilgrimage), during which he was embroiled in a dispute with ‘Uthman Pasha al-Kurji, the governor of Damascus and the commander of the Syrian pilgrimage caravan (al-Rakb al-Shami). The inter-Mamluk power struggle continued and ‘Ali Bey became involved in eliminating his rivals either by assassination or exile. But in 1766 he was overpowered and sent into exile to Gaza. A year later, he managed to return to Upper Egypt and conclude an alliance with the Hawwarah, the most influential tribe in that area, as well as other exiled Mamluk comrades. He eventually defeated his rivals and entered Cairo in October 1767 to assume the position of Shaykh al-Balad and obtain the recognition of the Ottoman Pasha.

‘Ali Bey spent the remainder of 1767 and the first half of 1768 subduing the rest of his adversaries among the Mamluks and the Arab tribes in the Delta and Upper Egypt. Consequently, he received a *firman*, a sword, and a robe of honor from Istanbul. This gesture from the Porte forced the pasha in Cairo to visit ‘Ali Bey. However, in November 1768 the pasha tried to incite an uprising in Cairo against ‘Ali Bey, who reacted swiftly and deposed the pasha. Subsequently, ‘Ali Bey assumed the position of the Ottoman Viceroy in Egypt (*qa'im-maqam*) while retaining the position of Shaykh al-Balad. ‘Ali Bey, nevertheless, endeavored to retain the sultan’s support. He dispatched one of his Mamluks to Istanbul with gifts for the sultan and other high officials. He also complained to the Porte that ‘Uthman Pasha of Damascus granted asylum and assistance to Egyptian refugees opposed to him. Accordingly, ‘Ali Bey requested the removal of the pasha of Damascus, but was refused.

By the end of 1769, ‘Ali Bey struck coinage in his name, but he retained the sultan’s name on the other side of the coin. Then in December 1769, the Imam (leader of prayer) mentioned in the *khutbah* (the sermon of Friday congregational prayer) the name of ‘Ali Bey after that of the sultan. ‘Ali Bey rebuked the Imam and ordered that he be beaten,

but the next day he sent him gifts of money and clothes and asked for his pardon. These actions indicate the ambiguous attitude of ‘Ali Bey towards the sultan. He claimed two traditional prerogatives of a Muslim sovereign, *khutbah* and *sikka* (coinage in his name), yet he did not wish to dissociate himself completely from the sultan. He also did not hesitate to dispatch a considerable force in November 1768, after the sultan requested that ‘Ali Bey participate in his military operations.⁵

Later, ‘Ali Bey seized the opportunity to enhance his ambitions when the sultan asked for his help. The situation was as follows: In the early 1770s, two Hashimites had been contending for the position of *sharif* of Mecca. One, named Sharif ‘Abd Allah, lost and left for Istanbul to appeal to the sultan for support. The sultan sent him to Egypt with a request that ‘Ali Bey dispatch an expedition to the Hijaz to enforce the installation of ‘Abd Allah as the *sharif* of Mecca. Undoubtedly, ‘Ali Bey happily welcomed the invitation, especially since he had subdued all his opponents in Egypt. He accordingly recruited soldiers from several parts of the Islamic world: Turks, Maghrebis, Syrians, Druzes, Matwalis, Yemenis, Hadramis, Sudanese, and Abyssinians. In June 1770 (Safar, a.h. 1184), the expedition departed to the Hijaz by the Red Sea under the command of Muhammad Bey Abu al-Dhahab. After winning some minor battles, Abu al-Dhahab marched on to Mecca, defeated its ruler (the *sharif*), and installed the sultan’s new choice, ‘Abd Allah, as *sharif* of Mecca. He also deposed the pasha of Jiddah and appointed Hasan Bey al-Jiddawi in his place.

At this time, developments threatening Zahir took place in the Syrian provinces. ‘Uthman Pasha of Damascus at last had his son Darwish appointed as the pasha of Sayda in September 1770, a step which enhanced ‘Uthman’s plans to destroy Shaykh Zahir. Prior to this appointment, Zahir exploited the enmity between Muhammad Pasha al-‘Azam of Sayda and ‘Uthman Pasha of Damascus. Now, ‘Uthman Pasha not only would protect his son’s interests, but they would join arms together against Zahir.⁶ In October 1770, ‘Uthman Pasha went on the *dawrah* (annual tour to collect taxes) and took advantage of the occasion to subdue a shaykh in the region of Nablus. Meanwhile, he sent a letter to Zahir in which he informed him of Darwish’s appointment to Sayda and his intention to pass by ‘Akka and encamp at Tell al-Fakhkhar (“Hill of Pottery”) at the gate of ‘Akka. Certainly it was a threatening letter. The pasha implied that he intended to conquer ‘Akka and destroy Zahir, as A. Sabbagh has written.⁷ Aware of the grave situation, Zahir immediately started his military preparations against ‘Uthman Pasha. He also started reinforcing the defense of ‘Akka and mobilizing its inhabitants, ordering every person, except the French community, to be armed with two pistols, a gun, and a saber.⁸

‘Uthman’s campaign against Nablus failed, and he returned to Damascus without even confronting Zahir. However, Zahir continued to raise more troops and reinforce his fortifications. Furthermore, in order to strengthen his front he reconciled himself with his sons, whose support he needed, and informed his allies among the Matwalis of the pending threat.⁹

At this time, Darwish Pasha remained in Damascus with his father. He finally assumed his office in Sayda in January 1771 after hearing rumors that Egyptian troops were advancing towards Gaza. Actually, as early as November 1770, ‘Ali Bey sent two

expeditions to Palestine to pave the way for a major campaign (April 1771) under the command of his able leader Muhammad Abu al-Dhahab. On 4 November 1770, he dispatched a force under the command of a Mamluk named ‘Abd al-Rahman towards Gaza to eliminate Shaykh Salit, head of al-Wuhaydat tribe, and the chief shaykh of the Bedouins in the *sanjaq* of Gaza. Salit posed a serious threat to the Mamluk forces marching toward Damascus. The expedition was successful: Salit, his brothers, and sons were killed. Thus, the campaign achieved an essential prerequisite for the success of the next ones: By exterminating Salit, it provided indispensable security to the lines of communication between Egypt and Syria. In the same month, ‘Ali Bey ordered the second preliminary expedition commanded by Isma‘il Bey to support Shaykh Zahir in his struggle against ‘Uthman Pasha of Damascus.

Zahir al-Umar at his Zenith

Following the attack on the pilgrimage in 1757, ‘Abd Allah Pasha al-Shataji was appointed governor of Damascus in early January 1758.¹⁰ He faced two major problems: one was to restore order, particularly in Damascus following demonstrations due to the poor economic conditions, and the other, to ensure the safe conduct of the pilgrimage caravan from Damascus to Mecca and back. The pasha restored order in Damascus by having the Yerliyyah subdued, and he ensured the safety of the pilgrimage by suppressing the strongest two tribes on the Pilgrimage route: the Banu Sakhr in the north, and the Banu Harb in the Hijaz. He then repaired the pilgrimage route and constructed several fortresses in which he placed permanent garrisons.¹¹ But the defeat of the tribes was not won without a heavy price paid by the Damascenes and the pasha himself. This also was due, in part, to the fact that ‘Abd Allah Pasha had been required to depose the *sharif* of Mecca, Musa‘id ibn Sa‘id, and to replace him with his brother Ja‘far. *Sharif* Musa‘id appealed to Istanbul and was reinstated, while ‘Abd Allah Pasha was deposed in early 1760 and appointed as governor of Diyar Bakr, where he remained until his death in late 1760.¹²

The new governor of Damascus, Muhammad Pasha al-Shalik (al-Jaliq), assumed his position under unfavorable circumstances. All of Greater Syria was rocked by severe earthquakes, followed by a fearful plague that spread from Antioch to Gaza for six months. On top of all these miseries, food was scarce and expensive, largely due to a severe frost which destroyed the crops. Al-Shalik could not solve these problems, and was deposed.

After such a turbulent period in Damascus, a strong governor was desperately needed. ‘Uthman Pasha al-Kurji (1760–1771) was appointed in that capacity. He was of Georgian origin and a *mamluk* (slave) of As‘ad Pasha al-‘Azm, who had governed the province of Damascus for about fourteen years.¹³ Due to his relationship with As‘ad Pasha, he was erroneously referred to as ‘Uthman ibn al-‘Azm. ‘Uthman Pasha assumed the governorship of Damascus at a critical time. The natural disasters, earthquakes, and the plague had disrupted much of the country’s economic life. His primary concern was similar to that of his predecessors – to establish order within the province of Damascus and to secure the safety of the pilgrimage. He was more successful in realizing the second goal than

the first. He was a heavy-handed governor and managed to have both Sayda and Tripoli governed by his sons, yet he failed to subdue his principal antagonist, Shaykh Zahir al-'Umar. The length of his tenure in Damascus (1760–1771) ranks second only to that of As'ad Pasha al-'Azm (1743–1757) in the history of Ottoman Syria, indicating that he had established stability. During the same period, Aleppo, for example, had ten governors.¹⁴

The appointment of 'Uthman Pasha al-Kurji as the wali of Damascus in 1760 ended a long period of peace which existed between the pashas of Damascus and Sayda on one side and Shaykh Zahir al-'Umar on the other. Since Sulayman Pasha al-'Azm's death in 1743 during a campaign against Tiberias, the stronghold of Zahir, not a single governor had made a genuine effort to subdue Zahir. As'ad Pasha al-'Azm maintained an expedient policy of peaceful relations with Shaykh Zahir. This policy was about to be changed by the new wali of Damascus, Husayn Pasha ibn Makki, who in 1757 threatened to kill Zahir if he did not abandon the areas which constituted part of the province of Damascus. Fortunately for Zahir, the pilgrimage caravan commanded by Husayn Pasha was attacked, and he never returned to Damascus.

Husayn Pasha was succeeded by 'Abd Allah Pasha al-Shataji (1758–1760), who concentrated on the old problems of restoring order in Damascus and along the pilgrimage route between Damascus and the Hijaz. 'Uthman Pasha of Damascus and Sa'd al-Din Pasha al-'Azm of Sayda unsuccessfully planned to attack Shaykh Zahir in 'Akka. This influenced 'Abd Allah Pasha to try to befriend Zahir, according to al-Sabbagh. The next governor, Muhammad Pasha al-Shalik (1760), ruled for about nine months, but did not have much of an opportunity to form a definite policy. He was preoccupied with internal matters and the safety of the pilgrimage as his predecessors had been. On the whole, his relations with Shaykh Zahir were friendly.¹⁵

The appointment of 'Uthman Pasha al-Kurji (also known as al-Sadiq) as the wali of al-Sham changed the political alignment of Syria. 'Uthman Pasha challenged Shaykh Zahir's authority and sought to destroy him, but he failed to do so. However, 'Uthman Pasha's attempt helped to involve not only other powers of the region but also some European states. An alliance was concluded between 'Ali Bey of Egypt and Shaykh Zahir. They secured military support from the Russian fleet in the Mediterranean Sea, an event which in itself had great significance: it marked the first European intervention in the Arab East in modern times.

Zahir's career during the 1760s can be divided into three stages. First, in 1761–62, Zahir assumed a defensive strategy, protecting his domain against possible attacks from 'Uthman Pasha al-Kurji. Second, he had to deal with several uprisings between 1763 and 1767 led by some of his sons and supported by outside adversaries of their father. Third, after these problems were resolved, he allied himself (1768–71) with 'Ali Bey of Egypt, occupied Damascus, and eventually brought an end to 'Uthman Pasha's lengthy governorship in Syria.

It was clear that 'Uthman Pasha had the support of the Porte to subdue Shaykh Zahir. The customs houses of 'Akka and Haifa had been under the dominion of the pashas of Sayda and Damascus respectively. About 1720, at the request of 'Uthman Pasha Abu Tawq of Sayda, the Porte ordered both customs houses united under one administration

in 'Akka. This arrangement prevailed after Zahir occupied 'Akka and Haifa. However, within a few months of his appointment to the governorship of Damascus, 'Uthman Pasha al-Kurji obtained a *firman* from the Porte to separate the two customs houses and establish his own customs official at Haifa. The French merchants in both 'Akka and Sayda did not welcome the pasha's move. Needless to say, Zahir also received the news unfavorably. This *firman* alerted Shaykh Zahir to the serious threat he had to face from 'Uthman Pasha of Damascus.¹⁶

Zahir decided to attack the pasha, hoping probably to dissuade him from a war against all of his territories. Zahir sent his sons to raid several villages in Damascus province, and in response 'Uthman Pasha seized the fortress of Tanturah on the coast from Shaykh Zahir.¹⁷ This was a futile effort on the pasha's part, for it was extremely difficult for him to maintain control over Tanturah. Soon after the pasha returned to Damascus on his way to lead the pilgrimage to Mecca, Zahir recaptured Tanturah.¹⁸

The second target of 'Uthman Pasha was Haifa. He obtained the *firman* accordingly to separate it from 'Akka. On May 20, 1761, a small force of Maghrebis (North Africans) was dispatched from Beirut to capture Haifa on a French boat en route to Yaffa. Zahir was aware of this move because the pasha of Sayda sent a copy of the *firman* concerning Haifa to Shaykh Zahir. Therefore, it was not surprising that the pasha's force dispatched from Beirut was defeated. Five soldiers were killed as soon as they landed in Haifa, and Zahir imprisoned the three French sailors of the boat carrying the attacking force.¹⁹

The French sought the help of Yusuf Qassis, Zahir's Greek Catholic advisor, to secure the release of the sailors. Aware of how much the French needed him, Zahir decided to exploit the situation to his benefit. He responded by writing to the French consul in Sayda asking him to request his ambassador in Istanbul to use his influence at the Porte in favor of Zahir. The English vice-consul at 'Akka had already written to his consul in Aleppo and to the British ambassador in Istanbul to that effect. Of course, Zahir wanted to secure the abrogation of the *firman*, which authorized the separation of Haifa from 'Akka after the cities had been unified for about 40 years.²⁰

After 'Uthman Pasha returned from Mecca in August 1761, he continued to assemble provisions and arms to attack Zahir. Also, the pasha tried to incite Zahir's sons to rise up against their father. This was not difficult since the sons had shown their interest and personal ambitions in seizing more power from their father. Two of Zahir's sons, 'Ali and Sa'id, tried to force their father to abdicate in March 1762. 'Uthman Pasha of Damascus countenanced the revolt and encouraged Shaykh Nasif of the Matwalis to support 'Ali. This prompted Shaykh Qublan, Nasif's rival, to support Zahir. Eventually, Zahir made some concessions to his sons and a peaceful agreement was concluded.²¹

Negotiations began between 'Uthman Pasha and Shaykh Zahir in order to reconcile their differences. Meanwhile, 'Uthman Pasha continued his attempts to exploit the dispute between Zahir and his sons. He ordered his forces to march against Zahir's territories; they then occupied Haifa and placed it under control of Zahir's enemy, the shaykh of Nablus. Failing to recapture Haifa, Zahir resorted to a war of attrition. He laid siege to the city, and the besieged garrison subsequently surrendered. Zahir thus reestablished his authority over Haifa and secured his seat of power, 'Akka.

Shaykh Zahir foiled several attempts by ‘Uthman Pasha of Damascus to seize some strategic and vital posts on the Mediterranean. The field of battle was always far from the pasha’s center of power in Damascus and closer to Zahir’s. Marching from Damascus to the coast, the pasha’s forces had to pass through either the shaykh’s domain or his allies’ territories. The pasha was prevented from sending a strong force by sea. He would have had to use French ships, but trade was largely transacted with Zahir and accordingly they were supportive of him rather than the pasha of Sayda. Nu‘man Pasha of Sayda also was unwilling to alienate Zahir, for he was the principal source of the *miri* paid to him. Besides, Nu‘man Pasha had his own grievances with the pasha of Damascus, who was urging the Porte to appoint his son Darwish Pasha as governor of Sayda. This apprehension and disharmony made cooperation between the two pashas impossible.²²

The Intra-Family Struggle

The second task that Shaykh Zahir had to deal with was to overcome local adversaries, whether they were members of his family or tribes settled within his domain. The Saqr tribe, which helped Zahir establish authority in his early days, became a principal source of disturbances since the early 1730s. They had sided with Sulayman Pasha al-‘Azm, governor of Damascus, in his campaigns against Zahir in 1730, 1737, and 1742–1743. Furthermore, they did not lose any opportunity to incite and support Zahir’s sons or his brother Sa‘d in their power struggle. The Saqr’s primary objective was to destroy Zahir’s power in order to regain a free hand in northern Palestine, because the law and order which Zahir successfully established in these areas deprived them of their ability to inflict aggression on the inhabitants.

The death of Sulayman Pasha al-‘Azm, as already noted, gave Zahir a respite that lasted until the appointment of ‘Uthman Pasha al-Kurji in 1760. For nearly two decades, Zahir was more or less secure from any outside aggression, a situation which allowed him to give more attention to his internal problems. For example, his cousin, Muhammad al-‘Ali, posed a threat to his power, so he eliminated him.²³

Muhammad al-‘Ali succeeded his father, Zahir’s uncle, in his *iltizam* at al-Damoun southeast of ‘Akka, close to the sea coast. A few years later, he annexed Shafa ‘Amr and made it his seat of government. Being Zahir’s cousin and brother-in-law, he never hesitated to support him during his strife to expand his territories. After Zahir had successfully secured his northern, southern, and eastern borders, he aspired to have an outlet on the Mediterranean – namely ‘Akka. The strategic location of Muhammad al-‘Ali’s territory and his personal ambitions stood as an obstacle in the face of Zahir’s aspiration. In addition, Zahir sensed some sign of rapprochement between his cousin and the provincial Ottoman authorities. Thus, he saw his cousin as an imminent threat to his vital plans. All these factors prompted Zahir to completely eliminate his cousin and brother-in-law in 1743, paving the way to annex ‘Akka.

In 1752–53, Zahir’s son ‘Uthman attacked him, but was quickly suppressed. The most serious threats came in the 1760s and 1770s,²⁴ when his sons began to demand more

authority. As Shaykh Zahir became older (he was then in his seventies), the different contenders were more encouraged to strike. They, of course, received support from ‘Uthman Pasha of Damascus, the principal antagonist of Zahir, and from a faction of the Matwalis, Zahir’s major ally.

Although ‘Uthman ibn Zahir was neither the eldest nor the most competent of Shaykh Zahir’s sons, he was the most troublesome. He challenged his father’s authority from 1752–53 until Shaykh Zahir died. In the early 1760s during the course of hostilities between ‘Uthman Pasha of Damascus and Zahir, ‘Uthman had asked his uncle, Shaykh Sa‘d, to help him against Zahir.²⁵

A strong and ambitious person, Shaykh Sa‘d was not only the older brother of Zahir but had also served as his principal counselor since the beginning of his political life, and was largely responsible for most of Zahir’s successes. It was reported that Sa‘d envied Zahir; therefore, he welcomed ‘Uthman Pasha’s support. Furthermore, being aware of the Saqr tribe’s hostile attitude toward Zahir, and the ambitions of his nephew ‘Uthman, Sa‘d won them over to his side. They planned to kill Shaykh Zahir and replace him with Sa‘d. Zahir discovered the plot and had his son ‘Uthman assassinate his uncle Sa‘d in return for the region of Shafa ‘Amr. Thus, by 1762, Zahir had done away with the most dangerous adversaries within his family: his cousin Muhammad al-’Ali in 1743 and his brother Sa‘d in 1761.²⁶

Zahir, however, failed to honor his promise to his son ‘Uthman when the people of Shafa ‘Amr appealed to Zahir not to appoint ‘Uthman as governor of their town. Because Zahir was sympathetic to their welfare, he heeded their request and bought off ‘Uthman. Zahir then turned to settling his old accounts with the Saqr tribe, which had agreed to help Sa‘d in his bid for power. Zahir assembled his forces and marched against the Saqr, defeating them on the plain of Marj ibn ‘Amir.

In 1765, ‘Uthman demanded Shafa ‘Amr, which Zahir denied him a few years earlier as a reward for his role in eliminating his uncle Sa‘d. But again, Zahir rejected ‘Uthman’s request. Additionally, ‘Uthman was jealous of his half-brother ‘Ali, who had received more favorable treatment in 1762. ‘Uthman then incited his brothers Ahmad and Sa‘d al-Din to request more territories from their father. When Zahir rejected their request, they joined arms with ‘Uthman and laid seige to Shafa ‘Amr. Zahir ordered the inhabitants of that area to expel his sons, which they did. The three brothers then left for Tiberias, where their eldest brother Salibi – the most loyal of Zahir’s sons – ruled. They pleaded with him to intercede with their father to grant their requests, but to no avail. Zahir’s refusal prompted Salibi to back ‘Uthman and his brothers. They approached the Saqr tribe, which was anxious for revenge against Zahir but not strong enough to retaliate. When Zahir became aware of the potential alliance between his sons and the Saqr, he decided to buy off the Saqr, offering to exempt them of the *miri* for that year in return for withholding their support from his sons. They agreed to his offer. By so doing, Zahir neutralized ‘Uthman and his brothers. Later, when ‘Uthman least expected any hostile action from his father, Zahir arrested him and imprisoned him in the fortress of Haifa for more than six months. When assured of ‘Uthman’s complete submission, Zahir released him. However, he deprived him of all means of causing disturbances by leaving him

neither arms, nor goods, nor horses, nor any of his men. Finally, he exiled him to a village near Safad with a modest pension for his subsistence.²⁷

In May 1766, 'Uthman resumed hostilities against his father, but this time with the backing of the Druzes of the Galilee and their co-religionists of Lebanon who were very anxious to see Zahir's power destroyed. There was also a strong anti-Zahir faction among the Matwalis, led by Shaykh Nasif, that started a full-scale war against Zahir.²⁸

Zahir succeeded in winning to his side his most competent son, 'Ali, and another son, Ahmad. Along with the assembly of a major striking force, he marched against his son 'Uthman and his allies. Both armies met in the upper Galilee. 'Uthman had already occupied a few villages in the region of Safad whose people declared themselves on his side. But Zahir's force was formidable, and he defeated them. The Matwalis were forced to negotiate peace, while 'Uthman fled and took refuge at the court of Amir Mansur of Mount Lebanon.²⁹

The intricacy of the power struggle that developed in the Syrian provinces created a favorable situation for Zahir. Muhammad Pasha al-'Azm of Sayda aspired to the governorship of Damascus, which was in the hands of 'Uthman Pasha al-Kurji and who, in turn, strove to have his son Darwish appointed as pasha of Sayda. Meanwhile, a struggle ensued between Yusuf and Mansur al-Shihabi over the emirate of the Druzes. The former was supported by the pasha of Damascus, while the latter was backed by the pasha of Sayda. Furthermore, the Matwalis were split into two factions, one led by Nasif and the other by Qublan, each of whom aspired to become the chief shaykh of their people.

Zahir received the support of Shaykh Qublan of the Matwalis and Muhammad Pasha al-'Azm, governor of Sayda, in his struggle against both 'Uthman Pasha of Damascus and his rebellious sons. He also received moral support from Amir Mansur, the prince of the Druzes, who, in concerted effort with Amir Isma'il of Hasbaya, mediated to reconcile the differences between Shaykh Zahir, his son 'Uthman, and his ally Shaykh Nasif. It was not in the Druzes' interest, however, to see the Matwalis defeat Shaykh Zahir, who was the strongest challenger against the pasha of Damascus. One reason is that the Druzes might have seen in Zahir an essential ally in assuring stability in the regions bordering their territories, particularly in regard to those of the Matwalis. By the end of 1767, Zahir concluded a treaty of alliance with the Matwalis, and thus succeeded in incorporating the territory of Jabal 'Amil within his sphere of influence.³⁰

In September 1767, a peace conference was held at Ras al-'Ayn near Sur (Tyre). It was attended by Shaykh Zahir, Shaykh Nasif, and the delegation of Amir Mansur headed by 'Ali Junblat. Zahir was successful, and peace was concluded between him and his son, 'Uthman. He returned with his father to 'Akka and from there proceeded to Nazareth, which Zahir had granted him according to the agreement. But it should be noted here that this agreement was not accepted by Shaykh Nasif al-Nassar, who continued to pit Zahir's sons against their father. His differences with Zahir were finally reconciled in December 1767.³¹

As soon as Zahir reconciled with his son 'Uthman, he had to face a new revolt led by his sons 'Ali and Sa'id. 'Ali al-Zahir, who ruled Safad, had been the most dependable son in Zahir's struggle to quell internal disturbances and repel external attacks. This

important role encouraged ‘Ali to aspire to expand his control over a larger region. In September 1767, he requested his father to grant him Dayr Hanna, which had been held by his late uncle Sa‘d. Zahir turned down ‘Ali’s request because Dayr Hanna was so strategic that the shaykh was determined to keep it under his own control. ‘Ali then asked for Dayr al-Qasi, also to no avail. Frustrated, he decided to take both places by force. Once the news reached Zahir, he prepared an expedition composed of Maghrebis, a faction of the Matwalis, and some of his own people and marched towards Safad. Aware of his weakness vis-à-vis his father’s forces, ‘Ali decided to come to terms with him. As a result, Zahir pardoned ‘Ali and granted him Dayr al-Qasi, besides confirming him in his position at Safad.³²

Sa‘id, a full brother of ‘Ali, was encouraged by the latter’s success and appealed to his father to extend his control over Hittin and Tar‘an, two small villages between Nazareth and Tiberias. He claimed that his possessions were not adequate to meet his needs. Zahir rejected his request. Then, Sa‘id pleaded with his older brother ‘Ali, who was highly respected by his father, to intercede on his behalf. Zahir declined ‘Ali’s mediation on the basis that, since most of the country was divided among his sons, there was very little left under his direct control. Furthermore, Zahir suggested to ‘Ali that he could give Sa‘id some parts of his region if he was indeed sympathetic toward his brother. ‘Ali, irritated by his father’s answer, promptly took up arms against him.³³

This time, the power struggle was not confined to Zahir’s family; it involved outside elements as well. ‘Uthman Pasha, Shaykh Nasif al-Nassar, and Amir Yusuf all supported ‘Ali and his brother Sa‘id. Shaykh Zahir received the backing of his son ‘Uthman, Shaykh Qublan of the Matwalis, and Muhammad Pasha al-‘Azm of Sayda. Believing that the balance of power was not in his favor, Zahir asked the governor of Sayda for support against his rebellious sons and the Matwalis. The pasha desired to join the struggle against the Matwalis, who were within his province, but there was no real possibility he could do so as he had few troops. However, he dispatched some soldiers to fight on Zahir’s side. Zahir himself probably did not anticipate considerable material support from the pasha of Sayda. His request was motivated mostly by political ends, for he gave the impression that he was the legitimate ruler in his country. Meanwhile, Zahir aimed at exploiting the existing animosity between his principal antagonist ‘Uthman Pasha of Damascus and Muhammad Pasha al-‘Azm of Sayda. The latter considered the governorship of Damascus almost as a family prerogative and disliked ‘Uthman Pasha.³⁴

Ibrahim al-Sabbagh, Zahir’s counselor, made an effort to settle the dispute through negotiations. He persuaded Shaykh Zahir to pardon his sons and grant Sa‘id both Hittin and Tar‘an. But it was not a durable arrangement; ‘Ali was discontented because he was not granted Dayr Hanna. Accordingly, he continued to prepare for a military expedition, and succeeded in winning his brother Salibi of Tiberias to his side. Then, ‘Ali resolved to use force, particularly as the balance of power seemed to be in his favor. Meanwhile, Zahir demobilized his forces and depended mainly upon the people of ‘Akka, who were mostly Christian merchants and poor fighters. ‘Ali won the battle, and Zahir retired to ‘Akka to prepare a new expedition capable of defeating ‘Ali’s forces. Zahir’s new troops

consisted of the main body of the Maghrebis, his trained cavalry, and some artillery.³⁵

During the second battle, which began October 1767, Shaykh Zahir laid siege to 'Ali's castle, whereupon the son surrendered. He fled from Dayr Hanna, leaving behind his children and household, in the hopes that they would draw Zahir's sympathy. Zahir pardoned 'Ali but made him buy back his castle for twenty-five purses (12,500 piasters) and twenty-five of his best mares.

We should consider the factors underlying the revolts of Zahir's sons. Zahir's move for power appeared to have been based upon the Zaydanis's strength which also was based on familial ties rather than on religious connections, as was the case with the Matwalis and the Druzes. Zahir appointed different members of the family, including his sons, as his subordinates over different regions of the territories under his control.³⁶ Gradually, as we have seen, he eliminated those in whom he saw a serious menace to his authority, such as his cousin Muhammad al-'Ali in 1743 and his older brother Sa'd in 1761. This cruel measure, not uncommon at that time, probably served as a warning to his sons of their own fates. But why did they wait until the 1760s to revolt? There were primarily two reasons: first, while they were young their father was also young and strong; second, they were busy helping Zahir consolidate his power and repel outside dangers. Once Zahir's sons grew older, their aspirations and ambitions grew with them, and each sought to expand his holdings. The situation was aggravated because the sons were supported by their respective mothers' tribes. Each of the senior sons, 'Uthman, 'Ali, and Salibi, hoped to succeed Zahir as the shaykh of 'Akka and the Galilee. This rivalry prompted them to strengthen their positions in their bid for power. In addition, Zahir preferred one over the other according to the Roman doctrine *divide et impera*, hoping probably to have better control. Conversely, this accentuated the rivalry both among the brothers and against their father. Meanwhile, Zahir lived longer than they expected without abdicating in favor of any of them. In the 1760s and again in the 1770s, they received encouragement if not incitement from outside powers such as 'Uthman Pasha al-Kurji, the Matwalis, the Druzes, and Muhammad Abu al-Dhahab. Zahir's sons finally decided to force their father to surrender his authority. Although none of these revolts bore fruit, they undoubtedly weakened Zahir and eventually contributed to the conclusion of his reign.

Immediately after putting down his son's revolts, Zahir directed his attention towards Tanturah. This particular locale was so important and strategic that it remained a point of contention between 'Uthman Pasha of Damascus and Zahir in the early 1760s. Ultimately, Zahir prevailed. It seems that during the years of Zahir's struggle against his sons, Zahir's appointed shaykh of Tanturah became quite independent. Zahir could not tolerate this, particularly at a time when the troops of 'Uthman Pasha of Damascus were attacking al-Ramlah. The campaign against Tanturah was undertaken to secure the town before the pasha of Damascus could resume his attacks.

Thus, by the end of 1767, Zahir had settled his disputes with his sons and regained full control over his domain. He also concluded an agreement of friendship with Shaykh Nasif al-Nassar of the Matwalis, which eventually developed into a strong alliance thanks to the mediation of Zahir's son 'Uthman.³⁷ Furthermore, 'Uthman al-Zahir played a

significant role along with Nasif in reconciling the differences between Amir Mansur and Yusuf, on the one hand, and between Yusuf and Haydar, governor of Ba‘labak, on the other. ‘Uthman also enjoyed high respect and a close friendship with the French in Sayda and ‘Akka, who called upon him several times to intercede with his father.³⁸ Thus, the tense relations that had existed among the different power groups, primarily within the province of Sayda since the early 1760s, were relaxed by December 1767.

Although Shaykh Zahir had resolved his intra-family power struggle and cultivated amicable relations with his neighbors, he was faced with a more serious threat posed by his staunch enemy ‘Uthman Pasha of Damascus. The next round of hostilities between Zahir and ‘Uthman Pasha al-Kurji, which started in 1768, escalated in 1770 and reached their climax in June 1771 when Zahir’s forces and Egyptian troops conquered Damascus.

Conclusion

The death of Zahir al-‘Umar on August 22, 1775, brought an end to the autonomous state of the Zayadinah and their supremacy over almost all of Palestine and southern Lebanon up to Sayda.

All the same, his family has continued to live in northern Palestine to the present day, under the name of al-Zawahir. Many prominent people in Syria and Palestine take pride in being descendents of Zahir al-Umar.

Numerous contemporary travelers and chroniclers lamented and deplored the tragic end of Zahir as a dignified man in many respects, worthy of a better life. They discuss in great detail his skill in military affairs, courage, forthrightness and foresight. Volney, for one, considered his death a great loss for Syria which had seldom seen leaders of such great character.³⁹

All of Zahir’s adversaries aside, he successfully achieved a significant feat in governance. In doing so, he surpassed his contemporaries, predecessors and successors in southern Ottoman Syria. Shaykh Zahir owed his accomplishments to sound economic and administrative policies that provided him with the necessary foundation to realize his aims. The prevailing economic conditions during Zahir’s time helped to create a core of local bourgeoisie headed by the Sabbagh family. This rising class forged an alliance with the ruling elite and substantiated an important marker of a modern state. But Zahir’s tragic end did not afford him the opportunity to develop these institutions further.

One might point out that this economic system mirrored the mercantile structure prevalent in Europe prior to the industrial revolution. One might also speculate that this system of semi-monopoly during Zahir’s era gave rise to the state economy that was later adopted more elaborately by Muhammad Ali in Egypt in the early nineteenth century.

However historians may look at Shaykh Zahir al-‘Umar and his movement, he is highly respected by the Arabs of the East. In particular the Palestinians consider him a national hero who struggled against Ottoman authority for the welfare of his people. This praise is reflected in the recent academic, cultural and literary renaissance within Palestinian society that has elevated Zahir and his legacy to near-iconic status. These re-readings

are not always bound to historical objectivity but are largely inspired by the ongoing consequences of the *Nakba*. Still it is precise to say that Shaykh Zahir had successfully established an autonomous state, or a “little Kingdom,” as Albert Hourani called it, in most of Palestine for over a quarter of a century.⁴⁰

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Endnotes

- 1 Al-Sabbagh, *al-Rawd al-Zahir*, ff. 11a-11b, 12a-14a.
- 2 al-Budayrī, *Hawādith Dimashq*, p. 232; A.E.B1, 1032, Sidon, 24, 25, 26 May 1761 and 6 June 1761; al-Bahri, *Tarikh Hayfa*, pp. 6-7.
- 3 A.E.B., 1033, Sidon, 6 June, 30 June, 26 October 1767; P. Masson, *Histoire du Commerce Francaise dans le Levant au XVIII Siecle* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1911) p. 290.
- 4 For further information on Ali Bey’s movement see M.R. Ramadan, “Ali Bey al Kabir and the Mamluk Resurgence in Ottoman Egypt, 1760-1772” (unpublished dissertation, Princeton University, 1968); al Jabari, *‘Aja’ib al Athar*, Vol. I, pp. 211-62, 307-87, 418-25.
- 5 Al-Jabarti, *‘Aja’ib al Athar*, Vol. I, p. 262, 308-311.
- 6 A.E.B., 1034 Sidon, 4 September, 15 November, 1770.
- 7 A. Al-Sabbagh, *al-Rawd al-Zahir*, f. 14b.; A.E. B., 1121, Tripoli, 29 October, 1770.
- 8 A. Al-Sabbagh, *al-Rawd al-Zahir*, f. 14b; A.E.B., 1034, Sidon, 4 September, 1770.
- 9 A. Al-Sabbagh, *al-Rawd al-Zahir*, f. 27a; A.E.B., 1034, Sidon, 15 November, 1770.
- 10 Two contemporary accounts were wholly devoted to commemorate ‘Abd Allah Pasha’s governorship: J. al-Barazanji, *al-Nafh al-Farajī fī al-Fath al-Jatahji* (Zahiriya Library); and U. al-Wakīl, *Tarwīh al-qalb al-shajī fī ma’āthir ‘Abd Allāh Pasha al-Jatahji*, (Vienna: Staatsbibliothek), Cod. Mist. 195. See also his biography in al-Murādī’s *Silk al-Durar fī A’yān al-Qarn al-Thānī ‘Ashr* (Cairo: Bulaq Press, 1883), Vol. III, p. 81–82.
- 11 al-Barazanji, *al-Nafh al-Farajī fī al-Fath al-Jatahji*, ff. 14a–15a, 21a–23a; al-Wakīl, *Tarwīh al-qalb*, ff. 43b–44a, 45b–49a.
- 12 al-Wakīl, *Tarwīh al-qalb*, f. 45a; M. al-Murādī, *Silk al-Durar*, Vol. III, p. 81; PRO, S.P. 97, 40, February 16, 1958; *ibid.*, 41, 17 January 1760.
- 13 al-Murādī, *Silk al-Durar*, Vol. III, p. 161; Kurd-‘Alī, *Khiṭaṭ al-Shām*, (al- Hadīthah Press, 1925–28), Vol. II, p. 299; A. al-Ṣabbāgh, *al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir fī tārikh Zāhir* (Paris), f. 106; M. Burayk, *Tārikh al-Shām 1720–1784*, ed. by al-Khūrī Quṣṭantīn Bāshā (Harīsā’: St. Paul Press, 1930), p. 71.
- 14 A.E.B1, 1032, Sidon, 22 December 1759; 27 March 1760; PRO S.P. 97, 41, 27 March 1760; G. Mariti, *Travels through Cyprus, Syria, and Palestine* (Dublin, 1791–92), Vol. II, p. 172.
- 15 A. al-Ṣabbāgh, *al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir*, ff. 10a–10b; A.E.B1, 1032, Sidon, 8 April 1758 and 30 May 1761.
- 16 A. al-Ṣabbāgh, *al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir*, ff. 10a–11a; Egmont, *Travels*, V. II, p. 4; Charles Roux, *Les Eschelles*, p. 6; A.E.B1, 1032, Sidon, 6 June 1761.
- 17 Cf. ‘Abdul-Karīm Rafeq, *The Province of Damascus*, p. 242. He erroneously called it Ṭarturah, probably, because he referred to al-Budayrī who also called it Ṭarturah. See al-Budayrī, *Hawādith Dimashq*, p. 232.
- 18 A.E.B1, 1032, Sidon, 6 June 1761; al-Budayrī, *Hawādith Dimashq*, p. 232.
- 19 al-Budayrī, *Hawādith Dimashq*, p. 232; A.E.B1, 1032, Sidon, 24, 25, 26 May 1761 and 6 June 1761; al-Bahri, *Tarikh Hayfa*, pp. 6-7.
- 20 A.E.B1, 1032, Sidon, 24, 25, 30 May 1761. M. al-Ṣabbāgh, *Tārikh Zāhir al-‘Umar*, ff. 22b–24b.
- 21 A.E.B1, 1032, Sidon, 22 September 1761, 25 March 1762; A. al-Ṣabbāgh, *al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir*, ff. 12b-14b.
- 22 A.E.B1, 1032, Sidon, 25 May 1762. For a detailed account of the arbitration between Shaykh Zahir and ‘Uthman Pasha under the auspices of the Sultan’s special emissary consult al-Ṣabbāgh, *al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir*, ff. 12b–14b.
- 23 A. al-Ṣabbāgh, *al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir*, (f. 8b); cf. Constantine Volney, *Voyage en Égypte*, Vol. I. p. 219, where he erroneously considered Muḥammad al-Alī as Zāhir’s uncle rather than his cousin;

- Mu'mmar, *Zahir al-'Umar*, pp. 56-57, 64, 69, 83.; A. al-Šabbāgh, *al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir*, f. 8b.
- 24 A. al-Budayrī, *Ḥawādith Dimashq*, p. 167; A.E.B1, 1029, Sidon, 2 March 1753; al-Munāyyir, "al-Durr al-Maršūf" in *al-Mashriq*, Vol. XLVIII (1954), pp. 680–81.
- 25 al-Šabbāgh, *al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir*, (f. 11a).
- 26 For further details see M. al-Šabbāgh, *Tārīkh Zāhir*, ff. 17a–18b, 20b–21b, who claimed that 'Uthman had strangled his uncle Sa'd while he was asleep. Meanwhile A. al-Šabbāgh maintained that Sa'd died of fear (f. 11a).
- 27 A.E.B1, 1033, Sidon, 10 May 1766 (Bulletin).
- 28 The Druzes were split into two factions, one led by Amīr Yūsūf in favor of 'Uthman Pasha of Damascus, while the other was headed by Amīr Mansūr supporting Shaykh Zāhir. There was a power struggle between Shaykh Nāṣif al-Naṣṣar and Shaykh Qublān over the leadership of the Matāwilah. The former was backed by 'Uthman: Pasha of Damascus while the latter received Zahir's support. For further details see M. J. Al Šafā, *Tārīkh Jabal 'Amil* (Beirut: 1963), pp. 117–20.
- 29 A.E.B1, 1033, Sidon, 10 May 1766 (Bulletin); M. al-Šabbāgh, *Tārīkh Zāhir*, ff. 22b–23a; H. al-Shihabī, *Lubnān* Vol, I, p. 68.
- 30 Ibid.; A.E.B1 1033, Sidon, 20 September 1767 (Bulletin).
- 31 A.E.B1, 1033, Sidon, 22 December 1767.
- 32 Ibid., 28 September 1767 (Bulletin); M. al-Šabbāgh, *Tārīkh Zāhir*, ff. 23a- 23b.
- 33 Ibid., f. 24a.
- 34 A.E.B1, 1033, Sidon, 28 September 1767 (Bulletin); 12 October 1767 and 28 September 1767 (Bulletin).
- 35 M. al-Šabbāgh, *Tārīkh Zāhir*, ff. 25a–25b.
- 36 al-Šabbāgh, *al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir*, f. 10a; M. al-Šabbāgh, *Tārīkh Zāhir*, ff. 7a, 7b, 8a, 11b; Qaṣatī, "Mulakhaṣ Tārīkh al-Zayādinah," *al-Jinān*, Vol. XXIV, p. 850–51; Volney, *Voyage*, II, pp. 226–27.
- 37 A.E.B1, 1033, Sidon, 22 December 1767.
- 38 Ibid., 27 October 1767.
- 39 Volney, *Voyage* II. p. 110-115, 256.
- 40 Albert Hourani, *A Vision of History* (Beirut 1961), p. 42.