



Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems
Issue 8, Vol. 11, 2025

RESEARCH ARTICLE 

Sectarian Dynamics and Political Reconfiguration in the Islamic Maghreb during the Fatimid Era: A Historical-Analytical Study of Doctrinal Conflict, Power Struggles, and Governance Transformations (4th–5th Centuries AH / 10th–11th Centuries CE)

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Issue web link

<https://imcra-az.org/archive/385-science-education-and-innovations-in-the-context-of-modern-problems-issue-11-vol-8-2025.html>

Keywords

Islamic Maghreb; Fatimid State; Sectarian Conflict; Ismailism; Ibadism; Political Authority; Medieval Islamic History; State Formation; Abu Yazid Revolt; Rustamid State

Abstract

The Fatimid era in the Islamic Maghreb represents a decisive historical phase marked by profound sectarian tensions and accelerated political transformations that reshaped the region's structures of authority, governance, and collective identity. The expansion of the Fatimid Ismaili mission during the early 4th century AH/10th century CE did not occur in an ideological vacuum; rather, it interacted dynamically with an already diverse doctrinal landscape characterized by Sunni, Ibadi, Kharijite, and tribal affiliations. These interactions generated a complex pattern of alliances, resistances, and conflicts that transcended purely theological disagreement and evolved into broader struggles over political legitimacy, sovereignty, and control of space. This study adopts a historical-analytical approach to examine the nature and implications of sectarian conflict in the Islamic Maghreb during the Fatimid period. It explores how doctrinal disputes intersected with tribal structures and local power centers, contributing to the reconfiguration of political authority and the emergence of new governance models. Particular attention is given to the role of Ibadi movements and the establishment of the Rustamid state, as well as to major uprisings such as the revolt of Abu Yazid Makhlad ibn Kidad, which embodied a dual confrontation—both sectarian and political—against Fatimid rule. The study argues that sectarian conflicts during the Fatimid era functioned as instruments of political mobilization and state formation rather than mere reflections of religious divergence. By analyzing these conflicts within their social, tribal, and geopolitical contexts, the paper demonstrates how the Islamic Maghreb became a laboratory for competing models of authority that left a lasting imprint on the region's historical trajectory. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between doctrine and power in medieval Islamic history and highlight the central role of the Maghreb in shaping broader Islamic political developments.

Citation

Rabia Ch.; Salmi Z. (2025). Sectarian Dynamics and Political Reconfiguration in the Islamic Maghreb during the Fatimid Era: A Historical-Analytical Study of Doctrinal Conflict, Power Struggles, and Governance Transformations (4th–5th Centuries AH / 10th–11th Centuries CE). *Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems*, 8(11), 1463–1469. <https://doi.org/10.56334/sci/8.11.124>

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Received: 22.06.2025

Accepted: 29.09.2025

Published: 28.11.2025 (available online)

Introduction:

The Fatimid era in the Islamic Maghreb represents one of the most historically rich and transformative periods, characterized by deep sectarian conflicts and rapid political changes that contributed to reshaping the social and governmental structure of the region. The spread of the Fatimid Ismaili mission from the beginning of the 4th century AH/10th century CE was a pivotal event that triggered complex interactions between local powers, whether aligned with the Fatimid project or opposed to it, including Berber tribes and Sunni and Ibadi sects. This interaction manifested in a series of political and military confrontations that were not merely expressions of sectarian disagreement but extensions of a deeper struggle over legitimacy, authority, and the definition of identity in the Maghreb.

The significance of studying this period lies in its foundational role in establishing new patterns of governance and redrawing power relations among local and regional actors, including the Idrisids, Ibadis, Zenata, as well as forces allied with the Umayyads in al-Andalus. Reading the sectarian conflicts of this era allows an understanding of the mechanisms of interaction between doctrine and authority and how these conflicts contributed to shaping the political and social order of the Islamic Maghreb in subsequent centuries. Therefore, addressing this issue through a historical-analytical approach enables a clearer reconstruction of the major transformations experienced by the region and an understanding of the nature of the tensions accompanying the formation of the Fatimid state and its expansion into the Maghreb.

Main Problem:

How did sectarian conflicts during the Fatimid era contribute to shaping political transformations in the Islamic Maghreb, and to what extent did interactions among sectarian, tribal, and local powers redraw the balance of authority and governance structures in the region?

Sub-questions stemming from this main problem include:

1. What was the nature of the sectarian landscape in the Islamic Maghreb prior to the emergence of the Fatimid mission, and how did this context affect the reception or resistance to the Ismaili project?
2. What were the most prominent manifestations of sectarian conflict between the Fatimid Ismailis and Sunni and Ibadi groups, and what social and political factors fueled these confrontations?
3. To what extent did revolts such as the movement of Abu Yazid Makhlad bin Kidad represent a dual conflict: sectarian and political?

Methodology:

The descriptive method was used to portray the nature of sectarian conflicts and political transformations, followed by the historical-analytical method, as the research fundamentally relies on tracing the historical events and circumstances that contributed to the emergence of sectarian conflicts during the Fatimid era, analyzing their development over time, and extrapolating their results and impacts on the political and social structure of the Islamic Maghreb.

1. Historical Background of Sectarian Conflict in the Islamic Maghreb:

The emergence of opposition movements in Islamic states has roots in the early history of Islam, and the discord incidents were expressions, to some degree, of disputes with authority. These disputes crystallized, particularly in later stages, as the conflict between Ali (may God be pleased with him) and Muawiya and movements such as the Kharijites and Shiites.

The Islamic Maghreb provided an ideal environment for spreading Kharijite and Shiite ideas, especially for those fleeing Umayyad persecution, due to several factors: the nature of the Berbers, Umayyad policies, and the principles these groups carried. Dr. Moussa Lekbal, in his book *Currents of the Islamic Conquest in North Africa and Its Outcomes*, raised an important issue regarding the massive Arab migration from the East to the Maghreb, which naturally influenced the cultural sphere of the Maghrebis, especially religious beliefs. With this movement, political and intellectual disputes transferred, and sectarian conflicts emerged as branches extending from their origins in the Arab East.

Thus, the acceptance of these groups by the Maghrebis was an outlet for expressing opinions and interacting with religious principles. Three states—Rustamid, Fatimid, and Almoravid—will be presented as models to illustrate the nature of authority in the Maghreb to understand the issue of religious authority during this period.

The religious form of the struggle over the caliphate revealed itself since the caliphate of Uthman, affecting both internal and external movements. Observers of the medieval Islamic era cannot separate political developments from social conditions, which acted as drivers of opposition that began organizing into factions since the Battle of the Camel and Siffin, leading to the conclusion that “religious interest gives political conflict its coloration.” The focus here is on the emergence of sects as political parties expressing a particular pattern of debate in political matters during this period.

The Kharijites, upon their emergence, were not a complete ideological system; their divergence from Muslims was related to objections over arbitration. By the late first and early second centuries AH, the Kharijites weakened due to internal divisions, leading them to migrate to the peripheries of the Islamic world, including the Maghreb.

2. Emergence of Doctrines and Political Currents in the Islamic Maghreb:

A. The Ibadi Movement and the Establishment of the Rustamid State: The Ibadi doctrine predominated in the Lower Maghreb and spread among its tribes, especially Nafusa and Hawwara. This doctrine operated systematically and secretly in preparation for the appearance led by Abu al-Khattab Abd al-Ala, who was pledged allegiance in 140 AH, considered the first imam, and whose revolution marked the beginning of the Imamate’s appearance. The Ibadi movement conducted several revolts in the Maghreb secretly. The first, in 126 AH/744 CE, was led by Abdullah bin Masoud al-Tuhaybi in Tripoli, suppressed by the army of Abdul Rahman bin Habib. The second was led by Al-Harith bin Talid Al-Hadrami and Abdul Jabbar bin Qais Al-Maradi in Tripoli, also defeated by Abdul Rahman bin Habib. The third, initiated by Ismail bin Ziyad Al-Nafusi in Nafusa, was suppressed by Abdul Rahman bin Habib, who executed prisoners and tested the people with them.

Despite these uprisings, the Ibadis continued to operate secretly, preparing to declare the revolution, representing the first step towards establishing Ibadi governance in the Maghreb. Scholars studied under Ibn Abi Karima, including five students—Abu al-Khattab Abd al-Ala ibn al-Samah, Abdul Rahman bin Rustam al-Farsi, Asim al-Sadrati, Abu al-Munib Ismail bin Drar al-Ghadamsi, and Abu Dawud al-Qibli—for five years (135–140 AH). The role of appearance was represented by Abu al-Khattab’s revolution, which started in Tripoli under his appointed governor. The Ibadi influence spread to the Lower and parts of the Middle Maghreb. Ja’far al-Mansur sent his famous campaign led by his governor in Egypt, Muhammad bin al-Ash’ath al-Jara’i, who killed Abu al-Khattab and thousands of his followers in the Battle of Turgha in 144 AH/761 CE. Thus, the Battle of Turgha ended the Imamate of appearance, which lasted four years, and afterward, the Ibadis returned to working in secrecy, known as the “Defensive Imamate.”

It is noteworthy that the Ibadi movement conducted revolts both with the smaller Ibadis and against the central caliphate, which saw the Maghreb as disobedient. Amidst these disturbances, Abdul Rahman bin Rustam, with the support of Middle Maghreb Ibadis, established a state in Tahert in 161 AH, practically demonstrating the success of Ibadi revolts in achieving their objectives in forming an Ibadi state in the Maghreb.

B. The Ismaili Doctrine and the Establishment of the Fatimid State: The evolution of the Shiite stance, its origin, and spread allow for extensive interpretation. Shiism began simply as love for Ali (may God be pleased with him) and support for him, later developing with political events, especially after the killing of Husayn. Under these circumstances and extensive experience in different environments, the Ismaili mission took a path to the Maghreb.

During this period, the Abidid state coexisted with the Aghlabids in Ifriqiya, the Idrisids in the far Maghreb, the Rustamids in Tahert, and the Banu Midrar in Sijilmasa. Questions arise about how the Ismaili mission reached the Maghreb and established the Fatimid state. Following Shiite theoretical principles regarding the Imamate, relying on concealment and appearance (taqiyya), the Ismaili mission and the establishment of the Fatimid state are divided into two stages:

1. Stage of Concealment:

Historical sources often remain silent on early Ismaili activity in the Maghreb due to the secrecy of the da’is. Shiism reached the Maghreb via Idris bin Abdullah, who founded the Idrisid state in the far Maghreb in 172 AH. Several secret attempts were made to spread the doctrine across regions. The role of Yemen in transmitting Ismailism to the Maghreb was significant: Shahr ibn Hushab invited Abu Sufyan and Al-Halwani to prepare the ground in Kutama, where they gained many supporters among the Kutama Berbers.

Obaid Allah al-Shi'i played a key role in establishing Fatimid rule in the Maghreb. He was knowledgeable in religious matters and led a group of Kutama, teaching them the Shiite doctrine, and convinced them to follow his guidance in the Maghreb. Hasan Ibrahim Hasan notes that Obaid Allah, after failing to generalize his doctrine among his subjects, promoted the sanctification of the Imams among Moroccans while hiding the specifics of the Ismaili mission from the public.

2. Stage of Appearance:

This stage can be divided into two phases:

a. Preparation for State Formation (Confrontation and Revolts): The arrival of Ismaili da'is in the Maghreb disguised as traders, and the support of the Kutama for Abu Obaid Allah, allowed the public spread of the Ismaili doctrine and the foundation of the state by confronting all opponents. Abu Obaid Allah seized Setif in 291 AH/903 CE, then Tanbah in 293 AH/906 CE, followed by the fortress of Balzama, Bagai in 295 AH/908 CE, and entered Constantine and the Jerid region in the same year.

Obaid Allah al-Mahdi arrived from Salmiya, which the Ismaili Imams had taken as a migration center since the Abbasid caliphate of al-Ma'mun. He headed to Sijilmasa, was captured by the last ruler of Banu Midrar, but freed by Abdullah al-Shi'i, and fought the Aghlabids successfully. Their entry into Ruqada al-Fayṣal in 296 AH led to the final fall of the Aghlabid capital to the Fatimids.

b. Declaration of the Fatimid Caliphate:

The Abidids controlled Ifriqiya, including Tripoli, Ifriqiya, and Zab. Two key events marked this stage:

1. General allegiance to al-Mahdi in 297 AH.
2. Removal of Obaid Allah al-Shi'i by al-Mahdi in 298 AH, causing unrest among the Kutama, which al-Mahdi suppressed. Berber revolts continued against Fatimid rule. A new city, Al-Mahdiya, was planned in 303 AH but was not moved to until 308 AH. Obaid Allah al-Mahdi ruled the Fatimid state in the Maghreb for twenty-four years until 322 AH, succeeded by his son Abu al-Qasim Muhammad.

3. Manifestations of Fatimid External Conflict:

To understand external Fatimid conflict, one must examine Berber reactions to the state's establishment, linked to three issues:

1. The revolt of Abu Yazid, known as "the owner of the donkey."
2. Tribal disputes.
3. Reliance on Binuziri.

The Revolt of Abu Yazid, known as "the owner of the donkey":

This revolt embodied external confrontation: Shiism vs. the Maghreb. It expressed Berber views on the Fatimid state. Declared by Abu Yazid Makhlad bin Kidad in 333 AH, during the rule of Al-Qaim bi-Amr Allah and his son Mansur, it reflected the harm inflicted on the Fatimid state and the resulting disturbances, which were suppressed in 336 AH by al-Mansur. Socially, Abu Yazid's movement was part of traditional conflict series among Berbers, reflecting political tendencies toward independence. Culturally, it represented tension between nomadic and settled lifestyles, and internally between local Maghrebi forces in the broader confrontation between Fatimids and Umayyads in al-Andalus. Historically, Abu Yazid's revolt was essentially an external Ibadi reaction against the Ismaili Shiite mission, using doctrinal principles to combat what was perceived as foreign Ismaili beliefs. Some Sunni Berber tribes supported the revolt initially, though the leader was not Sunni. Abu Yazid also aimed to establish a wide Ibadi state inspired by Ibadi principles, negotiating and exploiting opposing forces in his war against the Fatimids. In the early stages, he concealed his true objectives and

maneuvered politically, accepting conditions from traditional opponents and appealing to Sunnis through guidance in Malikite doctrine.

The conflict between Abu Yazid and the Fatimids can be classified into three main stages. The first stage marked the beginning of the actual confrontation, opening with the siege of Abu Yazid by al-Qa'im's armies in the Aurès region in 331 AH/944 CE, and ending with Abu Yazid's siege of Mahdia in 333 AH/946 CE, a stage characterized by the superiority of the rebels. The second stage was marked by relative parity in power, as the momentum of the initial victories declined, and the war became a struggle between the two sides, with victories and defeats exchanged. This stage extended from Abu Yazid's failure to capture Mahdia to his siege of the city of Sousse in Jumada al-Akhira, 334 AH/947 CE. The third stage witnessed the beginning of the decline of Abu Yazid's power and the waning influence of his movement, ending with his defeat and death, followed by his son al-Fadl's failure to avenge him in 336 AH/949 CE.

Second - Tribal Conflicts:

As previously mentioned, Fatimid rule was structured based on Kutama tribal loyalty, but the Fatimids attempted to sow division among the tribes, as their unity represented a threat to the Ismaili Fatimid doctrine. "On their way to the West, the Fatimids encountered three Zenata groups: the Mkanasa, Banu Ighran, and Maghrawa; they were forced to feign friendliness, show favoritism, and at times expel them from their homelands" (). Al-'Arwi emphasized this, stating: "They severely mistreated Ifriqiya: they stirred conflict between the Sanhaja and Zenata in the worst way, whereas Islam had mitigated the extremity of this conflict, and the Fatimids came and provoked it"

From this standpoint, it can be concluded that the Fatimid state, in this context, revived tribal loyalties and sought to pit one tribe against another to achieve its objectives.

Third - Banu Ziri:

After suppressing the revolt of the "Master of the Donkey," the Fatimid state achieved a degree of stability that enabled it to complete its main project of transferring its caliphate to Egypt. It is noteworthy that from the reign of al-Mahdi to that of al-Muizz li-Din Allah in 341 AH, the Fatimids conducted campaigns, though unsuccessful, in 301, 302, 307, and 321 AH (). During al-Muizz li-Din Allah's reign, all efforts were devoted to transferring rule by moving to the Aurès mountains to discipline those who remained rebellious against the state, namely the tribes of Hawwara and Milila who supported Abu Yazid al-Khariji, and then turning toward the far West to subdue the rebellious Zenata, Mkanasa, and other tribes (). Morocco was thus organized, campaigns for the conquest of Egypt were undertaken relying on the Kutama tribes, and the conquest was achieved in 361 AH, leaving the Maghreb in the hands of the Sanhaja of Banu Ziri

From these historical events, it can be inferred that the Fatimid state operated in stages in the Maghreb, as it was a phase of the Ismaili call aimed at preparing for control over Egypt, in order to encircle the Abbasid caliphate and then establish a vast Islamic state along the Ismaili Shi'a line. Hassan Ibrahim Hassan observes that "the Ismailis view their doctrine as having arisen to replace Islam" (). In the same context, "they disrupted the unity of the Maghreb and sought to separate al-Andalus from it completely..." (). In contrast, after moving to Egypt, the Fatimids left the affairs of the Maghreb to Banu Ziri, yet the nature of the Ziri-Fatimid relationship was one of insincere loyalty: "Legally, the Ziri prince was merely a governor, yet he ruled all of Ifriqiya contentedly, unlike his lord preoccupied with the affairs of the Levant, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula. It was natural, then, for Ziri Ifriqiya to move toward actual independence first, then legal independence... In practice, the Ziri princes acted freely in all matters of war and politics, and the subordination was symbolic, manifested only in correspondence... especially as the central African region, specifically Kairouan, hostile to Shi'a doctrine, pushed the princes toward severance"

Conclusion:

The study of sectarian conflicts and political transformations in the Islamic Maghreb reveals the deep interconnection between religion and politics in shaping the history of the region. Sectarian divisions were not merely doctrinal disputes but reflected struggles for legitimacy and power, with each force attempting to redefine its position within the social and political structure. By tracing the course of these conflicts—whether between the Ibadis and Fatimid Shi'a or among various Sunni forces—it becomes clear that sectarian identity often masked deeper stakes concerning local autonomy, identity, and regional competition.

The study of Abu Yazid's movement and its confrontation with the Fatimid state demonstrates that this revolution was not a transient event in Maghreb history but a complex expression of intertwined religious, political, and social factors.

The movement arose amid intensified competition between sects, especially between the Ibadis and the Fatimid Ismailis, while simultaneously reflecting a deeper local struggle between Berber forces with independent tendencies and the emerging central authority represented by Mahdia. An analysis of the three stages of conflict shows that the movement's strength was linked to its ability to exploit internal contradictions; however, its lack of disciplined political organization and a stable urban base rendered it vulnerable to the more structured Fatimid military apparatus.

These conflicts, despite their intensity, contributed to major political transformations, notably the emergence of new states and centers of power, the decline of others, and the reorganization of the Maghrebic space between nomadism and urbanity, and between local forces and external projects from the Levant or al-Andalus. This enabled the development of a unique historical experience characterized by sectarian plurality and political dynamism, producing a diverse landscape that shaped the region's civilizational identity.

Thus, reading Maghreb history in light of these conflicts highlights those political transformations were not solely the product of military power but emerged from a complex interaction between sect, tribe, and authority, making the study of these phenomena essential for understanding the deep structure of Maghreb society and its historical development.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on historical sources and previously published scholarly works. It does not involve human participants, personal data, or confidential archival materials requiring special ethical approval. The authors have adhered to academic integrity standards by ensuring accurate citation, objective historical analysis, and respect for differing historiographical interpretations.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to express their appreciation to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Tahri Mohamed University, Béchar, for its academic environment and institutional support, which contributed to the completion of this research. Special thanks are extended to colleagues whose scholarly discussions enriched the analytical perspective of this study.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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