
The eighth ‘Abbāsid Caliph, al-Mu‘taşim Bi-Allah 2 (d. 227/842) stands out quite conspicuously in Islamic history being the last ‘Abbāsid Caliph who exercised absolute power. The post-Mu‘taşim period witnessed a shift in civil-military relations as a result of the ascendancy of the military. The succeeding Caliphs were overshadowed by the military commanders who concentrated enormous powers in their hands. The institution of *Amīr al-Umara‘* (the title of the commander-in-chief of the army) symbolized this shift, as the military commanders became the *de facto* rulers, with the reigning Caliphs as mere puppets in their hands. This historical legacy of military hegemony continues in some parts of the Muslim world to this day, and governs the state-society dialects in many Muslim polities.

This is one of the central themes, which is the focus of the book under review. It is, in fact, a collection of five articles dealing with various aspects of the reign of Caliph Mu‘taşim. The author, ‘Osmān Sayyid Ahmad İsmā‘il Al-Bili, is primarily an academic, but in addition to holding academic posts, he has served at various administrative positions as well. Currently, he is Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic History in the University of Qatar, Doha.

The first chapter titled “The Legacy of al-Ma‘mūn’s Reign”, which has set the context for ensuing articles, sheds light on the crisis which set in the ‘Abbāsid Empire under Ma‘mūn (d. 218/833). In fact, the signs of degeneration of the ‘Abbāsid Caliphate start becoming obvious in his reign.

Al-Bili suggests that the decline of the Caliphate needs to be sought in the decay of its political and administrative institutions. Haunted by the legacies of bloody civil wars over the question of succession, Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 193/809) divided his Empire amongst his three sons, Amin (d. 198/813), Ma‘mūn and Qāsim. After Rashīd’s death in 193/809, this arrangement gave way to regionalism, and consequently, led to disintegration of the caliphate in the wake of the emergence of semi-autonomous regional kingdoms in the long run. Simultaneously, these regional courts gave considerable impetus to the flourishing of local cultures and commerce. Nevertheless, this politico-

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1 It is a mistake originally present in the title of the book. It should be 218–227 AH.
2 Henceforth referred to as Mu‘taşim.
administrative arrangement could not last for long, as civil war broke out between Amin and Ma’mūn, which lasted for three years (195–8/811–13). During the civil war, the civil-military relations underwent a significant shift. Since it exposed the dependence of the rulers on the military, it facilitated the establishment of military hegemony over the former. In addition to this situational factor, other factors too contributed to this shift, which tilted the balance heavily in favour of the military.

An important development that took place in Ma’mūn’s reign was the initiation of the practice of having recruits for the army from Eastern provinces of the Empire. This development is generally attributed to Mu’tašım, but al-Bili argues that it was initiated by Ma’mūn, and Mu’tašım merely followed his predecessor’s policy (pp. 11-12). These fresh recruits later came to be known as Turks. Hailing from nomadic backgrounds, they were known for their military prowess, hardihood, valour, rowdiness and loyalty. They served three important purposes of the regime: First, with the expansion of the territorial boundaries of the Empire, prosperity and affluence crept in among the Arabs, who cultivated luxurious and comfortable lifestyles. Increasing urbanization, which encouraged trade and commerce, and flourishing of crafts and commercial activities, further gave way to dwindling human resource for the civil bureaucracy and army, as less people were now inclined to join state services. This vacuum created in administrative circles of the Empire was adequately filled by these Turkish recruits. Thus, al-Bili offers a sociological interpretation for the dwindling human resource in the ‘Abbāsids Empire owing to rapid urbanization, and the consequent sedentary life of Arabs. Secondly, the stability and security of Ma’mūn’s regime was also threatened by internal uprisings and external threats, most notably from Byzantium. The practice of having new recruits instilled a fresh blood in the military, which considerably strengthened the institution. Lastly, another pragmatic consideration before Ma’mūn was the elimination of old commanders, and their replacement by loyal generals in whom he could put trust. The set of these factors necessitated the introduction of new elements in army and administration. Nonetheless, this development led to the ushering of the ‘age of the generals’ in the Muslim world beginning with the reign of Ma’mūn.

Al-Bili brings to the forefront other critical issues pertaining to the institution of wizarat (prime ministership) and the question of succession. Almost all the wazirs of the ‘Abbāsids, who were invariably competent and seasoned, had a tragic fate as their careers ended in disgrace and/or death, or both. Numerous stories of the rise and fall of notable personages and families such as Ya’qūb ibn Dāwūd under Hādi, Barmecides under Rashīd and Faḍl bin
Sahl under Ma’mūn can be cited as instances in point. Similarly, Ma’mūn’s unsuccessful policy of succession too backfired. Owing to his pro-ʿAlid sentiments, Ma’mūn had nominated ‘Alī ibn Mūsā al-Riḍā ‘from among the House of the Prophet’ as his successor, but it was resisted by the ‘Abbāsid and pro-ʿAbbāsid elements. Last but not least, Ma’mūn adopted Muʿtazilah doctrines, which were deemed heterodox by the ‘ulamā’. In 833 CE, he initiated a policy of mihmāb (inquisition) based on the desire for doctrinal unity (even if one enforced from above), and persecuted renowned ‘ulamā’ including Imām ʿAḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (the founder of Ḥanbalite school of Sunnī jurisprudence), which consequently alienated the contemporary ‘ulamā’ from the Caliph. Al-Bīlī contends that Ma’mūn had tried to seek the solution of the political problems in religion but failed to do so (p. 21). For this reason, probably Ma’mūn had also simultaneously initiated the policy of waging jiḥād against Byzantium. Against this backdrop, Muʿtaṣīm ascended the throne in 833 CE after the death of Ma’mūn.

The second chapter deals with the early life and accession of Muʿtaṣīm Bi-Allah. It informs that he was almost illiterate, since being the son of a slave girl of Rashīd, he remained deprived of getting proper education like his brothers. Nonetheless, he not only became Caliph, but all the rest of the ‘Abbāsid Caliphs descended from him. Though he maintained an apolitical stance during the civil war between Amin and Ma’mūn, Muʿtaṣīm made himself conspicuous during the latter’s reign as a military commander. It is pertinent to mention here that Muʿtaṣīm commanded the support and personal loyalty of a group of Turkish military recruits. Ma’mūn and Muʿtaṣīm developed a relationship of mutual trust, and for this reason, Muʿtaṣīm was appointed as the Governor of Syria and Egypt. It was on a military campaign against Byzantium when Ma’mūn fell ill, and seeing no chances of recovery, nominated Muʿtaṣīm as his successor before his death. Some military commanders resented it, as they were threatened by the ascendancy of Muʿtaṣīm and his Turkish troops. Nevertheless, the resistance remained confined to the military.

Al-Bīlī points out a critical development that took place in that time. It was the discontinuity of the practice of seeking the consent of the masses, albeit as a formality, in preceding reigns. The decision of Muʿtaṣīm’s accession taken by Ma’mūn in consultation with his military commanders is a turning-point in Islamic history (p. 39). This disregard of the consent of the community was equally matched by the political apathy and declining interest of the masses in issues of succession. It, in turn, further widened the yawning gulf between the rulers and the ruled.
The third chapter about Mu’taṣīm and the Turks delineates the character and role of the new Turkish troops recruited by Mu’taṣīm under Ma’mūn. Al-Bili points out that all of them were not ethnically Turks, but being predominantly Turks, they came to be referred to as such. The word Turk was generally used more in political and/or linguistic sense than in an ethnic meaning. Huge in numbers, these troops hailed from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and were non-Arabic speaking. Mu’taṣīm commanded their loyalty, as a majority of them were his slaves as well. Since in those days the veteran soldiers and the ‘Irāqīs in general were mistrusted by the ruling Caliphs, these troops filled the vacuum. Soon they rose to positions of power and influence during Mu’taṣīm’s reign and after. Mu’taṣīm after assuming the Caliphate expanded this ‘Caliphal Corps’. Their numerical strength and power in state administration, both civil and military, was substantially enhanced. The favourite commanders of the Caliph received governorships and other administrative responsibilities.

It is significant to note that Iraq and Egypt were the two provinces of the Empire where the ‘Abbāsid rule depended on the power and strength of these foreign troops, which alienated the ruling elite from the natives of these provinces. The gulf between the ruling elite and the masses was further widened when Mu’taṣīm moved to his new capital Sāmarrā’ along with his troops. In fact, the new capital was founded in 835-6 CE to house the ever-increasing number of the Caliphal Corps.

The transfer of capital from Baghdad to Sāmarrā by Mu’taṣīm, and its repercussions for the ‘Abbāsid Caliphate forms the focus of the fourth article. In medieval times, Sāmarrā’ in north of Baghdad in Iraq was considered to be the last of the great cities founded in Islam. It became the seat of the government as well as a garrison centre. A host of factors contributed to the transfer of capital. The commercial and cultural life of Baghdad had overshadowed its political and administrative significance. Opposition of the Baghdadis to the troops, which even resulted in a violent clash, forced the Caliph to seek an alternative. Moreover, personally, Mu’taṣīm never liked Baghdad.

The new city was constructed cautiously, as its streets were wider and longer than those in Baghdad, and the obvious intent was to avoid the assaults on the troops by the opponents (p. 65). Mu’taṣīm also followed a policy of non-integration of his troops with the civilians by building separate settlements for them. Moreover, the soldiers of various ethnic origins were housed in separate quarters. Furthermore, Mu’taṣīm ensured through strict policies that these soldiers marry in their own ethnic communities. On the one hand, these measures undermined the sense of unity and esprit de corps
and led to mutual rivalry and hostility among various military groups. On the other hand, there began an ‘era of isolation’ in ‘Abbāsid Caliphate, which also explains the military character of the State. In the long run, it resulted in the weakening of the position of the Caliphs, as they were isolated from the subjects and in turn became more dependent on their troops. The perpetuation of the Caliphate, threatened by internal insurrections and external pressures, ultimately came to rest on the muscle of the state, symbolized by the military force. In addition, the secretarial class too came to occupy a predominant position in state affairs, particularly under the weak Caliphs.

Though Sāmarra’ flourished under Mu‘taṣim and his immediate successor Caliphs, it began declining under the reigns of the succeeding Caliphs. Meanwhile Baghdad, which had come under the control of the Ṭāhirids, retained its supremacy in cultural achievements and commercial enterprises even after the transfer of the machinery of the government to the new capital.

The last chapter covers the major events of the reign of Mu‘taṣim, particularly those having serious implications for the ‘Abbāsid Caliphate. Mu‘taṣim’s reign witnessed a number of revolts and uprisings as the 9th century was a period of deep crisis. In particular, the province of Iraq was a hotbed of rebellions, the most serious being that of Bābak the Khurramite, a political and military rebel as well as the leader of a heretical sect, the Khurramiyya. The causal explanations for the outbreak of the revolt can be sought in the peculiar social and economic conditions prevailing in the province. Behind it lay social and economic discontent, which can be better appreciated in the context of Persian feudalism. The promise of material well-being along with salvation in life hereafter fell to the willing ears of poverty-ridden peasantry. The economic disparities among the Iraqis also explain brigandage, which formed one of the principles of the Khurramiyya. Bābak’s doctrines envisaged communal ownership of property, and he stood for the break-up of large feudal estates. For these reasons, he was able to gather a large following among the peasantry, though the uprising cannot be reduced to a mere peasant revolt. It had broken out during Ma’mūn’s reign. A number of campaigns were sent against Bābak by Ma’mūn and Mu‘taṣim, but they remained unsuccessful owing to the mass support Bābak enjoyed. In addition, geographical and climatic factors too added to the difficulty of suppressing it. Finally, Mu‘taṣim’s seasoned military general Afshīn was able to curb it.

The prolonged revolt reflects the weakness of the state apparatus. Moreover, the vulnerable political and administrative control in the northern and eastern frontier provinces of the Empire was matched by the precarious hold of Islam as a religion in these regions. For these reasons, the political,
social and economic grievances among the subjects often manifested in rebellions and in some cases in the form of rejection of orthodoxy.

The revolt of Zuṭṭ in Iraq can also be appreciated against a similar backdrop. Economic factors pushed them to robbery and waylaying, which culminated in defying the state. Zuṭṭ, who were of Indian origin, were also joined by discontented nomadic Arabs. This insurgency was curtailed by an accomplished military general ‘Ujaif during Mu’taṣim’s reign. Similarly, though the causes of the revolt of the provincial governor Māzyār in Ṭabristān region can be traced to his personal ambition, he too capitalized on the disgruntlement among the people over economic adversity, thereby enlisting the support of the poor, including the peasants. This revolt too was crushed ruthlessly. However, the death of Māzyār followed the trial and death of Afshīn, the military general who had defeated Bābak, being guilty of conspiracy. Afshīn’s fall synchronized with the rise of Ashīnās, another military commander who later wielded enormous power and influence in the Empire.

In addition, Mu’taṣim’s reign witnessed the revolt of Muḥammira in the Jibal and disturbances of the Kurds in the Mawšil region. One common factor in these revolts was that their supporters generally came from the poor and marginalized sections of the society. In these revolts, they found prospects of material gains. The rebel leaders were successful in mass mobilization of people in the name of equity and justice. The personal ambitions of rebel leaders, these revolts which offered tough resistance to the State, and Afshīn’s end, all indicate the weakness of the state control in the frontier regions as well as the fragile economic conditions of the ‘Abbāsid Empire.

Mu’taṣim is remembered in history as a warrior Caliph. His reign witnessed military conflict with the neighbouring Byzantine Empire. Despite attacks and counter-attacks from both sides, his military campaigns against Byzantine empire did not considerably contribute to conquest and territorial expansion. Nevertheless, they helped his favourite military commanders establish their supremacy in the longer run over civilian authorities. One such victory of Mu’taṣim over Byzantine was followed by unearthing an abortive conspiracy hatched by some experienced military commanders to kill Mu’taṣim and place his uncle named ‘Abbās on the throne.

These internal problems exposed the weakness and vulnerability of the Caliphate as well as the dwindling allegiance of the governors, commander and the general public to the Caliph. Against this backdrop, the need for the reassertion of the State’s power was felt, which was manifested in the state policies such as renewed vigour in waging jihād against Byzantium and the mihna. Later, Caliph Wāthiq officially abandoned Mu’tazilah doctrines, and
his successor Caliph Mutawakkil emerged as the champion of religious orthodoxy, which he officially restored.

During Mu'taṣīm’s reign, owing to his policies, the regional, ethnic and cultural exclusiveness and identities of various groups were encouraged, which resulted in slowing down the process of Arabization in the Empire. On the political plane, the power of regional dynasties in semi-autonomous kingdoms such as Tāhirids in Khurāsān and Aghlabids in North Africa was also consolidated as a result of his policies.

These five chapters are followed by a brief epilogue, which concludes the book. After ruling for more than eight years, Mu'taṣīm died in 842 CE, and was succeeded by his son Wāthic. The ascendancy of the military generals, which had begun under Ma’mūn and Mu’taṣīm, was confirmed under the succeeding Caliphs. Wāthic’s successor Mutawakkil was put on throne by the generals. Soon the Turkish generals started conspiring with the members of the ruling family in appointing and deposing Caliphs. They also started concentrating civil powers in their hands. Under Caliph Musta’in, a Turkish general became wazīr. The military hegemony eventually culminated in the creation of the designation of Amīr al-Umarā’ in 934 CE, who exercised all military and civil authority in the name of the Caliph. His name was inserted in the Friday sermons as well. Henceforth, the ‘Abbāsid caliphs became mere puppets in the hands of their generals-turned-wazīrs, who came to dominate the state affairs.

The epilogue is followed by a bibliography, and an index of names of persons and places, which enhances the usefulness of the book. The author has addressed a number of controversial issues and has given his own opinion in the light of evidences such as the ethnic origin of Mu’taṣīm’s mother, and ethnic composition of the Mu’taṣīm’s troops, etc. Citations from a host of primary as well as secondary sources speak volume of the thorough search painstakingly undertaken by the author for the study.

The book presents an historical analysis of the important political developments of Mu’taṣīm’s reign with a unique approach. In addition to the political factors, it takes into account the interplay of multiple personal, psychological, social, ethnic and economic factors for explaining and interpreting various developments that took place in ‘Abbāsid history. This multi-faceted approach of the author makes it quite a persuasive and interesting piece of work.

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