Abu Ja’far al-Mansur Was The Greatest Politician of The Abbasids

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Abstract: During the reign of Abu Ja’far al-Mansur, the second Abbasid caliph, several revolts broke out undermining the newly established caliphate. The revolts were launched by the two brothers of the Hasanid Alids: Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya and Ibrahim b. Abdullah. Another revolt came from al-Mansur’s uncle, Abdullah b. Ali who claimed the right of succession to the caliphate. With his cunning and slyness al-Mansur was able to crush these uprisings. He also succeeded in eliminating his great rival, Abu Muslim who had rendered a great service to the Abbasids. Due to an intense enmity between al-Mansur and Abu Muslim and the latter’s rebellion, the caliph murdered him ruthlessly.

Keywords: The Abbasids and The Umayyad

ABU Ja’far al-Mansur was the successor of the first Abbasid caliph Abu al-Abbas Abdullah who was destined to rule only a short time (750-754). The latter called himself al-Saffah (the Blood Pourer) in his speech of acceptance in the mosque of al-Kulah. In accordance with his nickname, he was famous for his brutality. He exterminated most of the Umayyads except those who were able to flee to Andalusia where later on founded the Umayyad dynasty. Even

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though the main enemy, the Umayyads had been annihilated, the Abbasids still had some enemies, in particular, the Alids and other family of Bani Abbas. The Alids did not reconcile at once to the rise of their cousins. They claimed that they were entitled to the caliphate and accused the Abbasids as usurpers of their right. Therefore they tried every effort to overthrow the Abbasid caliphate. While the challenge of the Abbasid family came from Abdullah b. Ali who claimed his right for the succession to the caliphate. When Abu Jafar al-Mansur succeeded his brother in June 754, he had to deal with these challenges which threatened the newly established dynasty. Al-Mansur first had to crush the revolt of his uncle, Abdullah b. Ali. The next threat which was no less dangerous than the first came from the man who served much for the cause of the Abbasid empire, namely Abu Muslim. Finally, al-Mansur had to put down the revolts of the Alids represented by the Hasanids, one led by Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya at Madina and the other led by his brother, Ibrahim b. Abdullah al-Mahd. This paper will discuss these revolts beginning with the revolt of Abdullah b. Ali, the execution of Abu Muslim, the revolt of Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya and that of Ibrahim b. Abdullah and finally the discussion will be closed with conclusion.

The revolt of Abdullah b. Ali

The caliph al-Mansur following his proclamation as caliph had to face a number of economic and political problems. But the most important and immediate step which confronted him was to crush both his great enemies: his uncle, Abdullah b. Ali and Abu Muslim. The former claimed himself successor to the caliphate and rebell ed against him, and the latter, due to his increasing power threatened the dynasty.

Abdullah b. Ali is said to have visited Abu al-Abbas at Anbar in 136/753 and was instructed to lead the campaign against the Byzantines with the army from Syria and Khurasan. He was at the place
called Duluk and getting ready to move against Byzantines when he received the news of the Caliph’s death and the oath of allegiance of Abu Ja’far. Abdullah summoned people to pray in congregation, he then announced the death of al-Saffah. He informed the people that al-Saffah had promised him the succession when the latter sent him to march against Marwan II. Some of Abdullah’s officers such as Abu Ghanim, Khaftar al-Marwizi, Abu al-Asbah and all of officers of the men of Khurasan attested his claim. They took the oath of allegiance to him so did the majority of people of Syria and Jazira. Abdullah then set out for Harran and captured it from al-Mansur’s deputy after the siege for forty days. The allegation that the siege lasted for forty days is debatable because al-Mansur as will be seen later, sent Abu Muslim to fight Abdullah b. Ali as soon as he heard of Abdullah’s rebellion. Regarding Abdullah’s claim, Omar argues that it is difficult to ascertain the validity of Abdullah’s claim. The fact is that the Abbasids feared his ambition as it was indicated clearly from Abu Ja’far’s expression and anticipation. According to Baladhuri’s allegation quoted by Omar that al-Saffah seems to have promised Abdullah b. Ali the succession. But one of the caliph’s friends Sa’ad b. Umar al-Makhzumi advised him not to transfer the caliphate from Abu Muhammad b. Ali to their uncles. The caliph, therefore changed his mind and appointed his brother Abu Ja’far as his immediate successor and Isa b. Musa second in line. The promise of al-Saffah to render the caliphate to his uncle, if it was true, it may have been given privately and had been known only by a few people of the Abbasids. Unlike Omar, Shalabi is pretty sure that Abdullah’s claim is true based on the confirmation of those who testified him and their continued struggle on his side for a long time without any sign of their decline in spirit or their withdrawal from the claim. In addition, evidence can also be found in al-Mansur’s fear of the revolt of Abdullah. However, this promise was not af-
firmed with a written document.\footnote{1}

According to Omar, Abdullah’s revolt had some motives. Importantly, it indicated the revolt of Syrian people who exploited Abdullah’s grievances. It was Syrian revolt, not only from the point of view of its geographical position and of the extent of its loyalty, but also of its elements formed the movement. Balkhuri asserts that most of the leaders and distinguished personalities who joined Abdullah’s revolt were Syrians who had served Marwan II. They rose in revolt against the Abbasids in the beginning of their rule, then they were protected. Among those leaders were Bakkar b. Muslim and Uthman b. Suragah al-Azdi.

There was apparent interest shared by Abdullah and the Syrians, each tried to take advantage of the other to achieve its goal. Abdullah’s aim was the succession, while the Syrians’ intention was to take the revenge from the people of Khurasan and regain their lost privilege and the position of Syria which was replaced by Iraq. Abdullah’s record was full of endeavors for the consolidation of the new regime. He led the Khurasani army in the battle of the Zab and pursued Marwan II who fled to Syria and then Egypt. Furthermore, he took control over Syria during the early years of the Abbasid rule. Arguably, it was natural for Abdullah to have the ambition for the succession because he realized himself as being the most able man of the house of Abbas.\footnote{2} Abu Ja’far sent Abu Muslim to fight Abdullah b. Ali although he both suspected and hated him. This was because he feared that Abu Muslim would lead an uprising in Khurasan, while the Abbasid army were fighting in Syria. At the same time, the caliph expected to get rid of the two (Abdullah and Abu Muslim) as his vizier, Abu Ayyub al Muryani said. We suspect Abu Muslim much more than Abdullah. Yet, we expect one of them to be killed. Abu Muslim himself did not want to fight Abdullah. Al-Ya’qubi alleges that Abu Muslim wanted to go to Khurasan and tried to get rid of Abu Ja’far and Abdullah. However, his secre-
Izl.1y assured him with the opposite opinion and expected to add to Abu Muslim’s victory by defeating Abdullah. Abu Muslim’s acceptance to go ahead with a fight was an excellent plan with which Abu Ja’far was able to destroy his enemies. Whatever the result was, it meant his victory over one of them. The caliph, realizing that this was a good chance to eliminate one of his enemies, tried with every effort to persuade Abu Muslim to obey his order. When the latter showed his hesitation to march against Abdullah, the caliph sent a group of his assistants to Abu Muslim without his knowledge in the attempt to assure him. Abu Muslim finally responded to their suggestion. Hearing Abu Muslim’s readiness to fight Abdullah, Abu Ja’far was pleased and provided him with the armies from various regions so as to build a big force equipped with adequate weapons and supported by Arab officers like Hazm b. Khuzaima, Jumhur b. Marrar. The caliph also asked Hasan b. Qahtaba, who was the governor of Armenia to bring his army to join Abu Muslim at Mosul. Abdullah was surprised by the arrival of Abu Muslim to challenge him, whereas he expected the opposite, because he knew the deep hatred between Abu Muslim and Abu Ja’far in the past. He became more doubtful when he saw the huge force of the Khurasani army of Abu Muslim, who were loyal to him. Fearing the disloyalty of the Khurasani army within his force, Abdullah killed seventeen thousand of them. The number of the Khurasani army who were killed by Abdullah was confirmed by some historians, but it seems to be exaggerated. The difficulty also lies in that we are not told of the number of Abdullah’s army when he was sent to march against the Byzantines. It is mentioned that his Army comprised of the Syrians and the Khurasanis.

The war between Abu Muslim and Abdullah lasted for four months in which the former showed his skills in warfare. Abu Muslim deceived the Syrians within Abdullah’s army that he had no intention of fighting them and had only come to take up his appoint-
rain came], the house collapsed upon him, so he died at the age of 52.\textsuperscript{16} A different version of the story mentioned by al-Mas'udi that the caliph ordered al-Muhallab to have Abdullah strangled along with a concubine. Then the two bodies were placed in a position at embrace and the house was demolished upon them.\textsuperscript{17}

**The Execution of Abu Muslim**

On Abu Muslim's departure to fight Abdullah, Abu Ja'far was worried that both enemies would agree to make a plot to dismiss him because each of them had a large force of the Abbasid army. If this were to happen it would have been a great disaster. Accordingly, he utilized his cunning to thwart this scenario from actually happening. He spread his spies into Abu Muslim's army to watch and inform him of Abu Muslim's action every moment. Abdullah, however, was not a far-sighted man: he cast off every possibility to take an agreement with Abu Muslim by killing a large number of the Khurasani army in his camp. Abdullah's brutal action, of course, pleased the caliph and made him confident that war should break out between both sides. Abdullah had missed the opportunity for himself. If he were an experienced politician he might have been able to create an understanding with Abu Muslim, who went to the battle without having any confidence of what he did because of the enmity between himself and Abu Ja'far.\textsuperscript{18}

When Abdullah had been defeated the caliph sent Abu al-Khasib to Abu Muslim to count all the wealth that had been taken.\textsuperscript{19} Abu Muslim slandered Abu al-Khasib and was about to kill him unless someone reminded him not to do so. It is said that the caliph actually did not want to take the spoils; he only asked for the fifth to the treasure house.\textsuperscript{20} Al-Jumard asserts that Abu Muslim used to maintain the spoils and never sent the fifth of them to the treasure house except on rare occasion. For instance, he took the wealth which Abu Dawud had captured in the district of Kush and did not send anything to the caliph al-Saffah. But al-

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Muslim dispatched his closest friend, Abu Ishaq. But the latter was soon to be drawn into the plot. He was received by the house of Hashim with a good reception and al-Mansur offered him the government of Khurasan if he left Abu Muslim. Abu Ishaq came back to Abu Muslim and advised him to see al-Mansur and that the caliph would forgive him.  

Thus the trick worked with him and gave him no way than visiting the caliph. Abu Ja'far's treacherous tactics succeeded; Abu Muslim disobeyed the advice of one of his closest friends not to see al-Mansur, because the latter would slay him. It might be that Abu Muslim was confident of what the astrologer told him that he would not die except in the land of Rum.  

When Abu Muslim reached the caliph's camp, he was received with hospitality and for a time the honor shown to him was almost regal. At the first meeting with the caliph he was accepted with friendliness, but at the second occasion, the caliph raised a number of accusations against him. Most sources mention the list of the charges imposed upon Abu Muslim, some of which were insignificant in character, and only indicated individual interest of the caliph. But the most serious charge of all was that Abu Muslim had taken money and property from Abdullah b. Ali's camp and distributed part of it as ghanimah (spoils). 

Towards the end of the meeting, the caliph brought up two charges against Abu Muslim, namely, the assassination of Sulayman al-Khuzai, one of the Abbasid naqibs (agents, leaders) and his intention to go to Khurasan without the caliph's permission. Facing al-Mansur's accusation, Abu Muslim became apologetic. But al-Mansur was determined to kill him and ordered his men who hid behind the curtain and then slew him brutally.  

The murder of Abu Muslim was not merely because of the charges which were accused by the caliph, but it originated from the enmity and rivalry between both leaders, which went back to the time of the Abbasid revolutionary movement. Abu Ja'far wasn't in agreement with his brother, Ibrahim on the young man,
overpower him which he thought very dangerous to his empire. Having eliminated both rivals: Abdullah b. Ali and Abu Muslim, al-Mansur had to face another enemies. They were the Alid pretenders, Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya at Madina and his brother Ibrahim at Basra. The Alid movement formed a dangerous threat to al-Mansur since this movement became a rallying point for those people who were dissatisfied with the Abbasid policy. However, Muhammad's revolt which was considered by historians as premature and supported by a very few followers was easily crushed by al-Mansur's troops. Unlike his brother, Ibrahim enjoyed a considerable followers, according to some authorities, his divān reached 100,000 men. But his delay in inciting the uprising and his hesitation to surprise al-Mansur when he was in a critical situation due to the lack of army around him, were among many factors which led to his failure. With the defeat of Ibrahim, the Hasanid Alid trial to capture the caliphate seemed for some time to stop and gave al-Mansur time to continue his project to build Baghdad, which was left during Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya's revolt in 145. From what has been explained above it is clear how al-Mansur cunningly and ruthlessly eliminated all of his enemies. He had never lost his wits to face a very critical situation and utilize any means to achieve his political goals. He did not hesitate to break his promises offered to his enemies or denied any accusations he actually did or said. In some occasions he had recourse to persuasions, employed some times threats of punishment and in others he committed very often treacherous undertakings. It is with these methods he successfully overcame various revolts and maintained the Abbasid caliphate.

Endnotes
33. Shu'ubiyah is a movement within the early Islamic commonwealth of nations which refused to recognize the privilege position of the Arabs, (I.Ians Wehr's Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic), p. 472.

34. al-Jumard, Dhikray al-'Arab, p. 92.


36. F. Omar, Al-'Abbasayyun, p. 79-81.


41. Ibn Tiqtaqa, Al-Fakhr, p. 159.

42. Al-Mas'udi, Muryj, p. 145.

43. S. Mustafa, Dawlat, p. 216.

44. F. Omar, Al-'Abbasayyun, p. 171.

45. A. Ali, A Short History, p. 220.

46. F. Omar, Al-'Abbasayyun, p. 171.

47. S. Mustafa, Dawlat, p. 217.

48. F. Omar, Al-'Abbasayyun, p. 174-175.

49. S. Mustafa, Dawlat, p. 219.


54. Ibn Tiqtaqa, Al-Fakhr, p. 159.

55. S. Mustafa, Dawlat Bani al-'Abbas, p. 159.


60. Al-Jumard, Dhikray al-'Arab, p. 187.


63. F. Omar, Al-'Abbasayyun, p. 171.

64. Tabari, The Early Abbasid, p. 113.


66. Tabari, The Early..., p. 130.

67. F. Omar, Al-Khilafah, p. 75.


69. Tabari, The Early..., p. 163.


71. Ibn al-Athir, Al-Kamil, p. 432.


74. F. Omar, al-Khilafah, p. 78.

75. S. Mustafa, Dawlat Bani al-Abbas, p. 225.


77. F. Omar, The Abbasid, p. 175.

78. Tabari, The Early..., p. 175.


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