

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 Ab-basid 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-Kufah. 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 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 rebelled 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 Byzantines¹ with the army from Syria and Khorasan.² 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, Khafar al-Marwizi, Abu al-Asbagh 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.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵

According to Omar, Abdullah's revolt had some motives. Importantly, it indicated the revolt of Syrian people who exploited Abdallah'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. Baladhuri 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 re-

cord 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.⁶ 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 Mur-yani 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-

tary assured him with the opposite opinion and expected to add to Abu Muslim's victory by defeating Abdullah.⁷ 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.⁸ Fearing the disloyalty of the Khurasani army within his force, Abdullah killed seventeen thousand of them.⁹ 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-

ment as governor of Syria. On hearing this, the Syrians left Abdullah to defend their city where they had their properties and families. Abu Muslim was also able to contact secretly the rest of Khurasanis in Abdullah's camp who had already started to defect. In fierce battle at Nasibin on 7th Jumada II in 136-137, the Syrians were utterly defeated and began to retreat. Abdullah with a number of his close associates took refuge to his brother, Sulayman b. Ali at Basra and stayed there in hiding, while Abdullah's followers were given security by Abu Muslim.

Al-Mansur sent a letter to Sulayman asking him to dispatch Abdullah.¹⁰ With a guarantee of safety Sulayman brought Abdullah to al-Mansur who treacherously arrested Abdullah and imprisoned him for seven years.¹¹ Later in 147 al-Mansur intended to go on pilgrimage to Mecca. He might have felt that Abdullah's life was a danger for his son and for him as well. Therefore, he planned to get rid of his uncle and his nephew Isa b. Musa by making a double plot to kill them.¹² Before going on pilgrim-

age al-Mansur gave Isa a secret order to kill Abdullah, but the latter did not obey the order and kept Abdullah alive, instead. Al-Mansur's idea, as Zaydan puts it: *if Isa killed his uncle, Abdullah, the latter's relatives would demand a revenge, and al-Mansur would hand Isa over to take it, so that al-Mansur would get rid of the two once.*¹³ While on the way to Mecca, al-Mansur sent letter to Isa, asking whether the order had been carried out. Isa informed him that he complied with his order.¹⁴ On his return from Mecca, al-Mansur incited Abdullah's brother to ask for his release and ordered Isa to produce him. Al-Mansur was surprised and disappointed when Isa actually brought Abdullah. Isa also informed that the caliph had ordered him to kill Abdullah. But the caliph denied Isa's accusation and Abdullah was finally killed in obscure circumstances in 147 H.¹⁵ The most popular story about his death is that the house in which Abdullah confined was built on the foundation of salt. The water was allowed to run into the foundation [or when heavy

rain came], the house collapsed upon him, so he died at the age of 52.¹⁶ 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.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.¹⁸

When Abdullah had been defeated the caliph sent Abu al-Khasib to Abu Muslim to count all the wealth that had been taken.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.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-

Mansur was more eagerly desirous than his brother and his utmost interest was to keep the revenues coming to the treasure house.²¹

Al-Khasib came back to al-Mansur informing him what happened and reminded him that Abu Muslim prepared himself to set out for Khurasan. The caliph, fearing that Abu Muslim would go to Khurasan, sent a letter offering him the governorship of Syria and Egypt. Whereas the actual aim of al-Mansur was to keep him away from Khurasan, the basis of his power. Al-Mansur was quite aware that if he let Abu Muslim and his troops go to Khurasan, they could make any counter revolutionary movement and cause his downfall since he lacked a military force with which he challenge the troops from Khurasan. The battle between the caliph and Abu Muslim had to be one of wits and slyness.²² Abu Muslim, however, realizing the aim of the caliph and the acute conflict between them, made up his mind to proceed to Khurasan. When he was entering Iraq, the caliph journeyed from Anbar and stopped at

Madain.²³ Here again, al-Mansur showed his determination and shrewdness to get hold of Abu Muslim by making the following steps. 1. He asked his uncle Musa and other family of Hashim to write to Abu Muslim. They wrote the letters, rising up his position and appreciating his services; asking him to be loyal to the caliph and warned him of the consequences of disloyalty to the caliph. 2. When the method of leniency failed, al-Mansur sent Abu Hamid al-Marwarudhi to persuade Abu Muslim with the gentlest word and assured him of the caliph's good intention and at the same time he warned the caliph's determination to kill him if he disobeyed him. 3. Al-Mansur sent a letter to Abu Dawud, Abu Muslim's deputy in Khurasan, promising him the government of Khurasan. Tempted by the caliph's promise, Abu Dawud was pleased and sent a letter to Abu Muslim advising him not to set out for Khurasan unless the caliph allowed him. 4. To make sure about al-Mansur's attitude and the inclination of the house of Hashim, Abu

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 he would forgive him.²⁴

Thus the trick worked with him and gave him no way than visiting the caliph. Abu Jafar'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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷

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,

Abu Muslim from Khurasan who was entrusted by the Imam to lead the movement. Abu Ja'far with his sharp discernment and sagacity saw in Abu Muslim's inconsistency, fickleness and jealousy behind which he concealed his strongest ambition. He often heard Abu Muslim trying to trace his humble origin to a high descent which was in fact not true. Among his Khurasani circles Abu Muslim claimed to have been a descendant of "Buzur Jumhur," the Sasanian king. If he was among the Arabs, he claimed to be son of Salith b. Abdullah. Abu Ja'far's enmity towards Abu Muslim became deeper and deeper during the days of al-Saffah in which Abu Muslim showed his superior character.²⁸ The influence of Abu Muslim increased after he won a number of victories in the east so that the people of Khurasan considered him not only as their leader but also their savior.²⁹ The men of Khurasan believed in Abu Muslim from different points of view. They believed in him because he was a man from Khurasan; others believed in him because he was their lea-

der; and some believed in him because he represented a symbol of religious movement and tribal solidarity.³⁰ That is why the Persians welcomed his propaganda, obeyed his orders and joined him under the banner of his revolution.³¹

Abu Ja'far was the first of the Abbasids who felt the danger of Abu Muslim and perceived his infiltration against the Arabs.³² When Abu Muslim won victory after victory, Abu Ja'far gratified him, yet at the same time he worried about the bloodshed caused by Abu Muslim's indifferent butchery without justification except the blind hatred and the extreme *shu'ubiya*³³ to which Abu Muslim's notoriety was attributed. He also incited the disappointment from the Arabs and Persians as well. It is said that Abu Muslim killed more than 10,000 [Tabari mentioned 600,000] Arabs without distinction between Mudar and Yemen or Hashimite, and between enemy and friend or *naqib* as long as he had a desire to kill and a thirst for blood.³⁴

After the Abbasid dynasty had been established, Abu Muslim had set up himself as a sole authority not only of Khurasan, but also of the eastern provinces. He had the right of appointing governors to the provinces as far as Fars and Sind. He even had influence in the affairs of the court. For example, the assassination of Sulayman b. Hisham, Ibn Hubaira and Abu Salama al-Khallal was executed on Abu Muslim's suggestion.³⁵ Realizing the wickedness and disloyalty of Abu Muslim, al-Mansur, as already mentioned, suggested his brother al-Saffah to have Abu Muslim murdered. Al-Saffah, however, did not agree with his brother's plan, because he feared that the people of Khurasan would rise in revolt against him in this early stage of the Abbasid dynasty.³⁶

After al-Saffah's death, al-Mansur was determined to eliminate Abu Muslim, and the execution was committed before him. If we consider how great was the role of Abu Muslim in establishing the Abbasid dynasty and in saving the throne of al-Mansur, the

murder of this great leader could hardly be understood. On the other hand, if we reckon the victims of his brutality which mounted to 600.000 [no doubt with huge exaggeration] his powerful personality for whom his followers would have sacrificed their lives, his influence and his disloyalty of which the caliph feared most, Abu Muslim deserved his fate and his elimination was a political necessity.³⁷ On this, Jahiz relates that Abu Ja'far quotes two verses before killing Abu Muslim, *Abu Muslim, you have three qualities which render you liable to die: disobedience, vainglory and demagoguery. To avoid a possible revolt after the murder of Abu Muslim, the caliph bribed his army. According to one account, the caliph offered 1000 dirham to some of them and 500 to the other, and they were given free choice whether to stay with the caliph or return to Khurasan. Some of them commented, we sold our master for dirham. They refrained from causing any trouble because as Jahiz puts it, they were far away from Khurasan and were surroun-*

*ded by enemies. They therefore, gave in and capitulated.*³⁸

The death of Abu Muslim incited a man called Sunbadh, a Magian from Nisabur and was one of Abu Muslim's commanders. He avenged Abu Muslim's death and attracted a large number of followers. Al-Mas'udi called Sunbadh's followers Muslimiyyah (derived from Abu Muslim), claiming that Abu Muslim had not died and would return to fulfill the world with justice. Sunbadh and his followers took control over Nisabur, Qumis and Rayy, capturing children and women and intended to march to Hejaz to demolish Ka'bah. Al-Mansur sent Jumhur b. Marrar who defeated Sunbadh's followers and Sunbadh himself was killed at the place between Tabaristan and Qumis. The victorious general then revolted to the Abbasid after taking Abu Muslim's treasury, but he was quickly crushed and put to death.³⁹

The revolt of Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya

The death of al-Saffah and the transfer of the caliphate to al-Mansur incited the Alid issue and inflamed the hope of Muhammad b. Abdullah b. al-Hasan al-Mahd.⁴⁰ Added to the fact that his father spread the issue that his son was al-Mahd, of which the glad tidings had been given and he used to relate that the Prophet said,⁴¹ *if there only remained for the world a single day, God would prolong that day to send in it our Mahdi or our leader. His name will be like my name and the name of his father like of that of my father.* The people of Haramain (Mecca and Madina) were very much attached to him due to the fact that he was a descendant of the prophet and was indifferent to worldly things (*zuhd*) and pious.⁴² They also credited him with merit, nobility and leadership. All this served as basis of power for Muhammad and a threat to religious authority of the caliphate. Muhammad al-Nafs Zakiyya took the lessons of the Abbasid propaganda. He wanted to spread his propaganda in secrecy and paved the way for

his movement. Accordingly, he lived in concealment and dispatched his missionaries from among his family to some provinces. In some areas (except Syria) the Alid movement became a rallying point to rise against the Abbasid policies. A lot of people who stood against the Abbasids changed their loyalty to the Alids. Moreover, the idea of Mahdi (the one who is divinely guided) served as a means of attraction and persuasion to which the poor and miserable classes of people were drawn.⁴³ On the part of al-Mansur, after he had been proclaimed caliph, he did not forget the Hashimite conference at Abwa near Mecca in 127, in which Muhammad was nominated for the caliph.⁴⁴ It said that al-Saffah and al-Mansur took the oath of allegiance to him. The memory of that oath darkened his life and deepened his suspicion.⁴⁵ The oath of allegiance to him was arguable according to Omar, who asserts that the meeting did not reach the agreement on *bay'ah* (homage) to him. He further argues that it is hardly understandable if the Abbasids would

give the oath of allegiance to anyone else of the Hashimites when they realized that the Hashimite movement in Khurasan worked for the cause of the establishment of the Abbasid dynasty in 98 H. If the Abbasids took the oath of allegiance to Muhammad, the latter must have referred to the *bay'ah* in his famous letter sent to al-Mansur in 145.⁴⁶ When al-Mansur went on pilgrimage to Mecca in 144, Muhammad and his brother did not appear before him. This led him to become suspicious of their intention.⁴⁷ He tried every effort to find them and sent spies in search of Muhammad throughout Madina and among the tribes. Until 144 the search of him and his brother did not bring any result. Al-Mansur went on another pilgrimage and insisted on Abdullah al-Mahdi to present his sons, but the latter refused to produce them.⁴⁸

Accordingly, al-Mansur brought Abdullah and other Alids to Iraq where they were imprisoned and treated badly.⁴⁹ When a rumor spread in Madina that al-Mansur wanted to kill all the imprisoned

Alids, among whom was Muhammad's father, Muhammad contacted his father, asking his advice and expressing his intention to give up in order to save his relatives' lives. Contrary to Muhammad's expectation and other Hasanids, the ambitious Abdullah suggested his son to carry on his struggle. Encouraged by his father, Muhammad continued his propaganda until the first of Rajab 145/September 762 when he declared revolt. On Muhammad's motives in timing his revolt, there is disagreement among historians. Omar quoted Baladhuri and Mas'udi that the imprisonment of Muhammad's relatives and the circulated news of his father's death in prison were the immediate cause of Muhammad's premature uprising. While Tabari and Isfahani refer to the arrest of his brother, Musa b. Abdullah by Riyadh for his failure to find his two brothers.⁵⁰ There are still other possible factors, which, in combination incited Muhammad's determination to proclaim himself because he could no longer bear the hardship of continued hiding and

of the intensive search of him by Riyadh day and night. In addition, he was in a very critical situation in which his partisans prepared and urged him to appear on a certain night.⁵¹ Moreover, the caliph ordered provincial governors and army officers to promise him their support. Even al-Mansur himself forgot some letters in the name of certain provinces, expressing their sympathies for Muhammad, which made him confident that most provinces were on his side. Muhammad made his first appearance with 250 followers. Having freed the prisoners and seized the treasure house, he arrested Riyadh al-Murri (the governor of Madina) and delivered a speech accusing the caliph of being tyrannical. He was proclaimed caliph and appointed a governor of Madina and a judge and sent his men to take Mecca by force because the city was not pro-Alids in its political attitudes. Only some moderate traditionists such as Abu Bakr b. Sabra supported the rising.⁵² In addition, Malik b. Anas's decision that the oath of allegiance to

the Abbasids, having been obtained by force was of no binding obligation encouraged a lot of people to go to Muhammad,⁵³ including most notables of Madina.⁵⁴ Al-Mansur was beginning to lay the foundation of Baghdad when he received the news of Muhammad's revolt. He stopped the construction and turned his attention to face the critical situation.⁵⁵ On receiving the news, he said, *now at last I have the fox out of his hole.*⁵⁶ Though the caliph rejoiced when he heard of Muhammad's appearance, he did not take immediate action, but entered into a long correspondence with Muhammad.⁵⁷ It was possibly meant to take time or look for the excuse to fight the Alids. Al-Mansur started his letter with threat of punishment for those who fought against God and His Messenger, which he quoted from Qur'an. He then offered pardon and lavish maintenance to the whole family of Muhammad if he withdrew his claim and surrendered.

Muhammad answered al-Mansur with an eloquent letter in which he first referred

to the corruption made by Paraoh and then claimed that it was rather for him to offer pardon to al-Mansur who had usurped the right of a direct descendant of the Prophet through Fatima, his daughter. He also emphasized his superior claim to the caliphate, and expressed his doubt of al-Mansur's promise of security, referring to his broken promises given to Ibn Hubaira, Abu Muslim and his uncle, Abdullah b. Ali. Al-Mansur immediately and skillfully answered Muhammad's letter, explaining that according to the Arab custom, inheritance did not follow through a female, but through a son. Since Muhammad had no son, his nearest male was his uncle al-Abbas whose descendants should be the rightful claimants to the caliphate,⁵⁸ based on legal, religious and customary grounds.⁵⁹ Finding no clue of surrender from the pretender, al-Mansur sent his nephew, Isa b. Musa with 4000 men and reinforced him with another 5000 men under the command of Humayd b. Qahtaba al-Tai.⁶⁰

The appointment of Isa had a political advantage which al-Mansur's treacherous instinct often worked out. He would be equally pleased who ever killed, Muhammad or Isa, whom he was now determined to dismiss as heir apparent, in favor of his son, al-Mahdi.

Al-Mansur told Isa b. Musa before his departure to Madina not to make bloodshed if the people of Madina raised their upper hands.⁶¹ This indicates possibly his respect for the sanctity of the Prophet's city and a lot of notables and traditionists. In Madina Muhammad disobeying the advice of his partisans to come out, entrenched the city by restoring the Prophet's ditches. This work caused the astonishment of the Arabs who stood against him and many clear-headed men saw that the enterprise had small prospect of success,⁶² including Ja'far Sadiq of the Husainids who abstained from Muhammad's political activities and even predicted his failure.⁶³

When Isa's army was approaching Madina, Muhammad told his followers that

they were free to leave or abide with him. On this, the bulk of his supporters began to steal away and left him with about 300 men, who were ready to fight the army of al-Mansur. Added to it, Isa's secret contact with some important figures led many of them to abstain from Muhammad. Isa himself offered amnesty to Muhammad, but the latter found no way except to fight.⁶⁴ When the battle broke out, a woman of the Abbasids, Asma binti Gasan ordered her servant to hoist a large black clothes on the tallest minaret of the Prophet's mosque. Upon this, a lot of people concluded that Madina had been taken and they fled.⁶⁵ Muhammad who unsheathed *zūl fiqār*, the prophet's sword, plunged into the battle gallantly. It is said that he killed about 70 men by his own hand. After a heroic struggle, late on Monday afternoon, 14 Ramadhan/ 6 December 762, he was killed. His head was sent to the caliph and was paraded around Kufa and other cities.⁶⁶ The failure of Muhammad's revolt was caused by the following factors: 1. Hejaz had not the

Alid tendency in its politics. 2. Hejaz was not a suitable province for the rising from the economic point of view. 3. The restoration of the [Prophet's] trenches facilitated the siege and caused a negative result. 4. The dispersion of Muhammad's army to seize Mecca reduced his power. 5. His speech convulsed the spirit of his followers who had shown their loyalty to him. 6. The ability of Isa b. Musa and his secret correspondence with the leading figures of Madina.⁶⁷ 7. The revolt of Ibrahim b. Abdullah. 8. Like his brother Muhammad, Ibrahim spent years in hiding and wandered from place to place: from Madina to Aden, Syria, Sind, Mosul, Anbar and Wasit until finally settled in Basra in 143/760 to propagate his brother's interest.

At the time the revolt broke out in Madina, as it was agreed upon, another revolt was to occur in Basra led by Ibrahim. But he did not rise in revolt until about two months after his brother's revolt. Accounts differ on the cause of his delay. Some historians assert that Ibrahim had small fox,

others say that he simply was not ready. According to the latter's opinion, Ibrahim was worried and regarded that a revolutionary movement as premature at that time. Yet, he also realized further delay was dangerous for Abu Ja'far who already knew that Ibrahim's activities began to reinforce his army there. On the first Ramadhan Ibrahim rose with about twenty followers, but was soon joined by several Arab chiefs and their tribal groups,⁶⁸ including a great number of mystics and men of religious knowledge.⁶⁹ He received considerable support from the lower classes of Basra and the whole of Sawad, Arabs and non-Arabs who were economically and socially depressed. The people were also attracted by the religious character of the revolt. Added to it, was the support of Abu Hanifah [great traditionalist], Sufyan al-Thauri, the Zaidiya and Mu'tazila and many others who showed great concern for him.⁷⁰ After capturing the palace and treasure house from the governor of Basra, Sufyan b. Muawiya, Ibrahim took control over Basra easily; Fars,

Ahwaz and Wasit and other neighborhoods were occupied by the rebels. His *dīwān* (register) is reported to have reached 100.000 men. When he marched to Kufa, he was followed by only 10.000 men.⁷¹ Nevertheless, the crisis was sufficiently dangerous to the caliph,⁷² who, at that time had only about two thousand men around him because the Abbasid army was scattered in some provinces. Distressed by the critical situation, al-Mansur swore that he would never live in the capital with less than 30.000 men.⁷³ Al-Mansur was so alarmed by Ibrahim's uprising that he planned to send an agent to Ibrahim to make an agreement with him on a cease-fire and avoid war. It is also reported that he intended to flee to his son, al-Mahdi at Rayy.

While waiting for the reinforcements from the Abbasid troops which were scattered in various provinces, the caliph declared a curfew and divided his soldiers of 1300 to three regiments, each of which was charged to make a patrol in the city. During the night, the caliph ordered to

make fire in different sections of the army camp to delude the people of Khurasan of a large number of his army. In the early morning he ordered the regiment of his army to enter the city as though a new enforcement had arrived from other provinces.⁷⁴ At the same time, al-Mansur sent Khazim b. Khuzayma, who later occupied Ahwaz and pursued Ibrahim's governor. From Rayy Salim b. Qutaiba and his soldiers arrived at Basra to win over the hearts of the Bahili tribe. Ibrahim, on the other hand, was uncertain and hesitated to move and march to Hashimiya in order to create a sudden attack towards al-Mansur, who was about to flee to his son al-Mahdi at Rayy. He also rejected the advice to rush and raid Kufa on account that it would cause much harm to the innocent people. He preferred, instead, to face the Abbasid army directly.⁷⁵

Among his friends from Basra advised Ibrahim to stay and send the army to Kufa so that he could reinforce his troops when they were defeated, while the Kufans suggested

him to set out for Kufa because there were people who once saw him would sacrifice for him otherwise they would restrain from giving support. At last Ibrahim complied with the Kufans and marched towards Kufa with more than 10,000 men. His march to Kufa was also incited by the news of the death of his brother, Muhammad three days before Id al-Fitr (public prayer on the 1st of Syawwal).⁷⁶

Ibrahim's army was encountered by Isa b. Musa's troops numbering 15,000 men. The two armies fought each other at Bakhamra, about 16 *farsakh* [96 Km] from Kufa. At first, Ibrahim was successful in defeating the vanguard of Isa's army.

However, Ja'far and Muhammad, sons of Sulayman surprised Ibrahim's army from the rear which forced Ibrahim to fight on two fronts. His followers started to desert him except for about 500, most of which were Zaidiya.⁷⁷ After a fierce battle, a random arrow struck Ibrahim in the throat. He was killed on 25th Dhul Qa'da 145 [14th February 763] and his head was sent to the

caliph. As for the caliph, on receiving the head of Ibrahim he ordered it to be set up in the bazaar of Kufa. It is also reported that when the head was brought to al-Mansur and placed in front of him, he wept until his tears fell on Ibrahim's face and said, *By God, I hated to do this, but you tried me sorely, and I tried you.*⁷⁸ According to Omar, the failure of Ibrahim's revolt was caused by the following factors: 1. The divergent elements which supported the rising. Ibrahim's attitude was uncertain between this and that element which led to difficulty in coordinating the Arab tribes who supported him. A majority was against the Abbasids, but they had no real Alid tendency. Ibrahim himself realized this defection and tried many times to leave Basra to escape from this critical situation and choose other city, like Wasit as his centre. Therefore, it was not surprising that Ibrahim's uprising failed. 2. Economic life seems to have been improved at that time in Basra. Accordingly, its inhabitants like merchants preferred to stay and avoided every affair which

caused political problems, brought about war and reduced their advantages. 3. Ibrahim refused the advice of his companions who had experiences in warfare to make onslaught on Kufa. 4. The delay of the revolt and Ibrahim's inability to incite the rising at the same time with that of his brother, Muhammad. 5. The fragmentation and dissension among his followers led him to hesitate in making his decision, which had to be taken decisively and quickly if he wished his revolt to have been successful.⁷⁹

With the death of Ibrahim, the caliph now felt much greater relief and was confident that henceforth no Alid claimant could be of danger to him. It is true that he ordered to have the whole family of the Alids strictly watched, but he was particularly willing to receive into his service any member of the Alids whom he could trust. Perhaps the old Arab feeling for family ties played its role, or perhaps it was meant as a gesture to show the subjects that both the main branches of the Hashimites still held on to each other.⁸⁰

Conclusion

The Abbasid emerged when the first caliph al-Saffah was proclaimed in 132/749. However, he enjoyed his reign for 4 years during which he succeeded in uprooting the Umayyads. His short reign left his successor, al-Mansur a great deal of economic and political problems. However, al-Mansur's main concern during his early years was to overcome the Abbasid enemies. No sooner did he ascend to the throne he was challenged by his brother, Abdullah b. Ali who claimed the succession because al-Saffah, according to his claim, had promised him the caliphate if he could defeat Marwan II. Thanks to Abu Muslim's brilliant skill in warfare and his loyalty to the Abbasids, al-Mansur's throne was saved. However, the man who had served the Abbasids since they launched the secret propaganda ended his life in brutal assassination by his own master. Whatever charges were accused against Abu Muslim, the most significant motives of al-Mansur to eliminate Abu Muslim was that he feared his influence would

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 following, according to some authorities, his *dīwān* 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 tried 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

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3. Tabari, *The Early Abbasid Empire*, Vol.1: *the Reign of Abu Ja'far al-Mansur AD 754-775*, tr.

- J. A. William (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 4-6.
4. Farouk Omar, *Al-'Abbāsiyyun al-Awāil*, Beirut: Dar al-Irshad, 1970, p. 40.
 5. A. Shalabi, *Mausū'ah al-Tārikh al-Islāmi wa al-Hadārah al-Islāmiyyah*, Cairo: Maktabah al-Nahdah al-Misriyyah, 1978, Vol. 3, p. 62.
 6. F. Omar, *Al-'Abbāsiyyun*, p. 138-139.
 7. *Ibid*, p. 140; al-Ya'qubi, *Tārikh Ahmad Ibn Ya'qub ibn Ja'far ibn Wādih al-Kātib al-'Abbāsi*, ed. M. Th Houtsma. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1883, Vol. 2, p. 238.
 8. A. J. Al-Jumard, *Dhiyyat al-'Arab, Abu Ja'far al-Mansur Muassisu Dawlat Bani al-'Abbās*. Beirut: Dar al-Tahrir, 1963, p. 134.
 9. Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kāmil fi al-Tārikh*, ed. C. J. Tonberg. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1867, Vol. 5, p. 177.
 10. F. Omar, *The Abbasid*, p. 187.
 11. S. Mustafa, *Dawlah Bani al-'Abbas*. Kuwait: Wakalat al-Matbuah 1974, Vol. 1, p. 213.
 12. A. Shalabi, *Mausu'ah*, p. 86.
 13. J. Zaydan, *Umayyads and the Abbasids, being fourth part of Jurji Zaydan's History of Islamic Civilization*, tr. D. S. Margoliouth, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1907, p. 159.
 14. A. Shalabi, *Mausu'ah*, p. 86.
 15. F. Omar, *The Abbasid*, p. 191.
 16. Tabari, *The Early...*, p. 188.
 17. A. Shalabi, *Mausu'ah*, p. 193.
 18. Al-Jumard, *Dhiyyat al-'Arab*, p. 153.
 19. Tabari, *The Early Abbasid*, p. 90.
 20. F. Omar, *Al-'Abbāsiyyun*, p. 90.
 21. Al-Jumard, *Dhiyyat al-'Arab*, p. 155.
 22. W. D. Bishai. *Islamic History of the Middle East: background, development and fall of the Arab Empire*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1964, p. 155.
 23. Tabari, *The Early Abbasid*, p. 15.
 24. A. Shalabi, *Mausu'ah*, p. 106.
 25. Tabari, *The Early Abbasid*, p. 14; Al-Ya'qubi, *Tārikh*, p. 440.
 26. A. Ali, *A Short History of the Saracens*, London: Macmillan, 1916, p. 215.
 27. Tabari, *The Early Abbasid*, p. 23.
 28. F. Omar, *The Abbasid*, p. 178; Tabari, *The Early Abbasid*, p. 21.
 29. R. A. al-Jumayli, *Dirāsāt fi Tārikh al-Khilāfah al-'Abbāsiyyah*. Rabat: Maktabah al-Maarif, 1984, p. 24.
 30. Yusuf al-'Ashsh, *Tārikh Aṣr al-Khilāfah al-'Abbāsiyyah* Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1982, p. 32.
 31. Z. Qaddurah, *Al-Ṣu'ūbiyyah wa aṣaruhu al-ijtimā' wa al-siyāsī fi al-hayāt al-islāmiyyah fi al-'asr al-'abbāsi al-awwāl*, Beirut: Dar al-Katib al-Lubnani, 1972, p. 27.
 32. Ibrahim Ahmad al-Adawi, *Al-Tārikh al-Islāmi*, Cairo: Maktaba Anjlu al-Misriyyah, 1976, p. 269.

33. *Shu'ubiyya* is a movement within the early Islamic commonwealth of nations which refused to recognize the privilege position of the Arabs, (Hans Wehr's *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*) p. 472.
34. al-Jumard, *Dhiyyat al-'Arab*, p. 92.
35. F. Omar, *The Abbasid*, p.177.
36. F. Omar, *Al-'Abbāsiyyun*, p. 79-81.
37. T. Noldeke, *Sketches from eastern History*, tr. John Sutherland Black, London: Adam and Charles Black, 189, p.118.
38. F. Omar, *The Abbasid*, p.117-180
39. Tabari, *The Early Abbasid*, p. 26
40. S. Mustafa, *Dawlah Bani al-'Abbas*, p. 216.
41. Ibn Tiqtaqa, *Al-Fakhri*, p.159.
42. Al-Mas'udi, *Muruj*, p. 145.
43. S. Mustafa, *Dawlat*, p.216.
44. F. Omar, *Al-'Abbasiyyun*, p.171.
45. A. Ali, *A Short History*, p. 220.
46. F. Omar, *Al-'Abbasiyyun*, p. 171.
47. S. Mustafa, *Dawlat*, p.217.
48. F. Omar, *Al-'Abbasiyyun*, p.174-175.
49. S. Mustafa, *Dawlat*, p. 219.
50. F. Omar, *The Abbasid*, p. 223-224.
51. Ibn Kathir, *Al-Kamil*, p.65.
52. F. Omar, *The Abbasid*, p.225.
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54. Ibn Tiqtaqa, *al-Fakhri*, p.159.
55. S. Mustafa, *Dawlat Bani al-'Abbas*, p. 159.
56. T. Noldeke, *The Sksetches*, p. 124.
57. Tabari, *The Early Abbasid*, p. 98-103.
58. W. D. Bishai, *Islamic History*, p. 231.
59. F. Omar, *The Abbasid*, p. 229.
60. Al-Jumard, *Dhiyyat -al-'Arab*, p. 187.
61. Tabari, *The Early Abbasid*, p. 109-110.
62. T. Noldeke, *The Sketches*, p. 129.
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64. Tabari, *The Early Abbasid*, p. 113.
65. Ibn al-Athir, *Al-Kamil*, p. 148.
66. Tabari, *The Early...*, p. 130.
67. F. Omar, *Al-Khilafah*, p. 75.
68. F. Omar, *The Abbasid*, p. 240-241.
69. Tabari, *The Early...*, p. 163.
70. F. Omar, *The Abbasid*, p.234.
71. Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kamil*, p. 432.
72. W. Muir, *The Caliphate: its rise, decline and fall*, Edinburgh: John Grant, 1915, p. 456.
73. Tabari, *The Early Abbasid*, p. 167.
74. F. Omar, *al-Khilāfah*, p. 78.
75. S. Mustafa, *Dawlat Bani al-Abbas*, p. 225.
76. Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kāmil*, p. 432; Tabari, *The Early...*, p. 171.
77. F. Omar, *The Abbasid*, p. 175.
78. Tabari, *The Early...*, p. 175.
79. F. Omar, *al-Khilāfah*, p. 80.
80. T. Noldeke, *The Sketches*, p. 128.

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