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The Death of al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʾmūn and a “Thwarted” Coup d’État

John P. Turner, Colby College

This article focuses on the point at which the slave soldiers of al-Muʿtaṣim (r. a.h. 218–227/833–842 c.e.) rose to the political forefront and came to dominate the holder of the Caliphal seat. It is a study of the mechanisms by which the center of the state, and more specifically the Caliph, came to be their captives. D. Ayalon has argued that “the appearance of the Mamluks as a major military force under the ʿAbbāsids roughly coincided with the beginning of the disintegration of their caliphate, a fact which prevented the caliphs from making proper use of them.” Let us now explore that disintegration from a very different viewpoint. To begin, let me turn to al-Dīnawarī, who wrote:

1 This article was first presented to the “Origins and Early Nature of Military Slavery in the Islamic World; International Workshop in Honor of David Ayalon,” December 18, 2008, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. There are many who deserve my thanks: Reuven Amitai and Amikam Elad for the invitation, and the participants and attendees for their comments and rigorous questions that greatly strengthened the paper. Amikam Elad deserves special thanks for reading and commenting on an earlier draft. The anonymous reviewers provided much-valued feedback as well. Any remaining faults are mine. I am also thankful to Colby College for the generous Social Science Grant 01.2236 that funded the research for this article.


And indeed he [al-Maʾmūn] had the oath of allegiance taken for his son al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʾmūn as heir apparent (waliʾ al-ʿahd) after him and he delegated responsibility for Iraq to him; and when he died he was on the River Budandūn along with his brother Abū Iṣḥāq, Muhammad b. Hārūn al-Muʿtaṣim bi-llah. And he called the senior commanders and soldiers to join him and he called them to swear allegiance to him and they paid allegiance to him. And so he left from Tarsus until he arrived at the City of Peace. He then entered it and removed (deposed) al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʾmūn from it (the throne) and defeated him. The important people (al-nās) swore allegiance to him in it. And his arrival in Baghdad was at the beginning of the month of Ramadan of the year 218 (mid-September, 833). And so he stayed there two years and then moved along with his Turks to surra man raʾā.4


With the above account in mind, I would like to explore a two-part hypothesis: first, that Al-Muʿtaṣim with the aid of Ahmad b. Abī Duʿād murdered al-Maʾmūn; and second, that the Amorion campaign and subsequent purge of al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʾmūn and of al-Maʾmūn’s generals were the final consolidation of that act.6

The Death of al-Maʾmūn

To elucidate the support for this hypothesis, let us now turn to the last five years of al-Maʾmūn’s reign.7 In 213/828 the Caliph placed his son al-ʿAbbās in charge of the frontier provinces bordering the Byzantines, apparently preparing him for the succession.8 By 215/830, without supplanting him, al-Maʾmūn had effectively moved the court closer to the Byzantine frontier where he was on a campaign of conquest.9 He was not merely engaging in pro forma seasonal raiding, but was intent on capturing and holding a position north of the Cilician Gates. By 216/831, Tuwâna/Tyana was being used as an operational staging site.10

The campaign of 218/833 was of a similar character. Al-Maʾmūn set off for the Byzantine frontier from Tarsus after having an exchange of letters with the Byzantine Emperor the year before (217). Given the tenor of both letters (as recorded in al-Ṭabarî), al-Maʾmūn was spoiling for a fight.11 At about the same time, al-ʿAbbās was dispatched to fortify a large installation at Tuwâna.12 It was massive and intended as a permanent foothold. Al-Ṭabarî tells us that the walls had a circumference of three farsaks, which is between fifteen and twenty kilometers. After having passed through the Cilician Gates on his way to join forces with al-ʿAbbās at Tuwâna, al-Maʾmūn paused at the halfway point at Budandūn.13

While there, al-Maʾmūn died under most suspicious circumstances. According to al-Ṭabarî, while resting he ate some newly arrived dates and became ill.14

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6 El-Hibri makes a passing and unexplored observation that is key for my argument: “Other evidence shows that al-Muʿtaṣim succeeded to the throne either by altering the caliph’s will, hastening the death of al-Maʾmūn, forcing al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʾmūn (the legitimate heir apparent) to renounce his rights of succession, or by doing all three.” El-Hibri regards the historicality of the entire episode with deep suspicion. T. El-Hibri, Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography (Cambridge, 1999), 120. He reiterates this in more directly accusatory fashion on p. 141, n. 119. While acknowledging the validity of the skepticism, I perceive threads of historical connection worthy of exploration in a different fashion. Ghada Jayyusi-Lehn explores the death of al-Maʾmūn and perceives him to have connection worthy of exploration in a different fashion. Ghada Jayyusi-Lehn, “The Caliphate of al-Muʿtaṣim: Succession or Capture?,” in Abbasid Studies II: Occasional Papers of the School of Abbasid Studies, ed. J. A. Nawas (Leuven, 2010), 107–18.

7 In the interest of space I will not be discussing the Miḥna here.


10 El-Hibri discusses the different versions from a literary perspective.

11 Ibid., iii, 1109–11. For an in-depth discussion of the letters, see V. De Gifis, “Qu’arabic Rhetoric in the Politics of al-Maʾmūn’s Caliphate” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2008), 189–221.


13 Budandūn is almost exactly halfway between Tarsus and Tuwâna. Al-Ṭabarî said that it was also the name of a river. Al-Maʾmūn died under circumstances that are described in al-Ṭabarî, reinterpreted by H. Kennedy as a river that formed a spring. Al-Yaʿqūbī describes it as between Tarsus and Luʾluʾa, see Strange, Lands of the Eastern Caliphate, 134, 139.

14 al-Ṭabarî, Taʾrīkh, iii, 1134–36. Al-Masʿūdī provides a different version which says that he was splashed with very cold water, caught a chill and died as a result. Al-Masʿūdī, Muʾjam al-dhilal, v. 4, 39–40. El-Hibri discusses the different versions from a literary standpoint, highlighting their suspiciousness. El-Hibri, Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography, 112–21.
narrator takes pains to assure the reader that both he and al-Muʿtaṣim ate the dates and became ill at the same time as al-Maʾmūn.15 Because his death on the frontier was entirely too convenient for al-Muʿtaṣim, the point of the interjection was to obviously and plausibly allay suspicions that al-Maʾmūn was poisoned. Al-Maʾmūn died on Rajab 17, 218/August 10, 83316 and was buried in Tarsus.17 It is usually thought that after the disastrous attempt to appoint ʿAlī al-Riḍā as heir, al-Maʾmūn had failed to fill this position until very near the end of his life.18 Nawas argues that as a result of family pressures, al-Maʾmūn was left little choice but to designate al-Muʿtaṣim as heir.19 Imme-

20 al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, iii, 1140. Al-Yaʾqūbī said the 17th. al-Yaʾqūbī, Taʾrīkh, iii, 1140.

21 Gordon has asserted that the entirely reasonable proposition that al-Muʿtaṣim took advantage of the untimely death of a caliph (his brother) to seize control.21 However, upon closer examination, something else is at work here. Despite being labeled by al-Ṭabarī as an oration, al-Maʾmūn's will is reflective, closely worded, argued and thought out, and not the words of a dying man moving in and out of lucidity.22 This text deserves closer scrutiny than it has received up to this point. Under the circum-


18 Nawas, “All in the Family?” 2005), 122. According to Nawas, Jayyusi-Lehn has addressed this in her dissertation, which I have not had a chance to read.

19 al-Ṭabarī also said Rajab 18. al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, iii, 1140. Al-Yaʾqūbī said the 17th. al-Yaʾqūbī, Taʾrīkh, iii, 1140.

20 al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, iii, 1135–36.


23 El-Hibri, without going into depth, notes some of the provi-


16 Al-Ṭabarī also said Rajab 18. al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, iii, 1140. Al-Yaʾqūbī said the 17th. al-Yaʾqūbī, Taʾrīkh, iii, 1140.


18 For more on that appointment see D. G. Tor, “An Historico-


20 al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, iii, 1140. al-Dīnawarī, al-akhbār, v. 4, 396.


few years. Either al-Muʿtaṣim was a complete slave to his brother’s will, or it was written at a later date. 26

We should now go through its provisions point by point; after the burial instructions, there are thirteen of them. First, al-Muʿtaṣim was exhorted to hurry his brother’s will, or it was written at a later date. 26 He entered it on 1 Ramadan 218/30 September 833, about forty days after al-Maʾmūn’s death. The will indicates that he had to do this to secure his position. Most sources recount that he left in great haste, with some indicating that he did so in fear of the officers by whom he was surrounded. Those sources say that they were upset that al-ʿAbbās had been passed over and were inclined to pledge their support to him. Al-Muʿtaṣim had to work hard to forestall this possibility. He used the entire forty-day mourning period to march back to Baghdad. Although there is no discussion of mourning rituals, neither is it stated what took so long. The “Fragmenta,” which so often is in agreement with al-Ṭabarī’s version of events, does not differ much here; where it does differ, however, is intriguing:

He was Abū Isḥāq Muḥammad b. Hārūn al-Rashid, and his mother was Mārida and she was an umm walad. The oath of allegiance was taken on the day al-Maʾmūn died and he was with him in Tarsus in Rajab of the year 218. 29 At the time when al-Maʾmūn died the army rioted against al-Muʿtaṣim and they demanded al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʾmūn. They acclaimed al-ʿAbbās by the name of Caliph. And so al-Muʿtaṣim sent for al-ʿAbbās. And he took the oath of allegiance to him. Al-ʿAbbās went to the army and he said to them: “what is this stupid affection, indeed I took the oath of allegiance to my uncle and handed the Caliphate to him.” The army became quiet and al-Muʿtaṣim, with al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʾmūn, quickly and in fear for himself from the commanders, left for Baghdad. Indeed they were clamoring in distress about him and they demanded al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʾmūn. And so he [al-Muʿtaṣim] heaped scorn on them and he approached Baghdad on Saturday the first day of Ramadan in the year 218. 30

Note that the army continued to clamor even after al-ʿAbbās’s statement. It is very interesting that al-ʿAbbās was described as having handed over the Caliphate. This of course implies that he was in possession of it and that it was his to give. 31 Al-Ṭabarī said the exact same thing, with the exception that in his account al-Muʿtaṣim was not fleeing the imperial army in fear for his life. 32 Ibn Aṯām, also giving much the same information, added that the commanders from whom he was fleeing had accused him of murdering al-Maʾmūn. 33 That he was accused by some of the commanders makes sense of his hurried departure for Baghdad. 34 At the very least, the sources provide compelling circumstantial evidence that al-Maʾmūn was murdered. Ibn al-Ṣābiʿ and Ibn Abī Usaybiʿa both quoted al-Ṣulī’s kitāb al-awrāq as saying that al-Muʿtaṣim interfered deliberately in al-Maʾmūn’s medical care, leading directly and intentionally to his death. 35 Those sources implicated al-Muʿtaṣim’s occasional, but not regular, doctor, Ibn Māsawayh.

26 El-Hibri observes this as well; ibid.
27 al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkhī, iii, 1138.
29 Note that the place of death is different.
Given the circumstances and outcome, the culprit and his motives appear obvious. Add to this the discontent registered by the officers and that the purge with which the Amorion campaign was concluded was so complete and severe that there must be a connection between the events. Ibn Qutayba’s account is eye-opening:

He is Muhammadd b. Ḥārūn and he was given the kunya Abū Ishāq and his mother was Mārida, a slave girl and Abū Ishāq was with his brother and al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʿmūn at the time when he died in the land of the Byzantines. The [important] people (al-nās) wanted to pledge allegiance to al-ʿAbbās but al-ʿAbbās rejected it and ceded to Abū Ishāq the command [rulership] and then Abū Ishāq turned his face towards Baghdad quickly and he was fearful for himself about a group of the commanders who were disquieted by him. And thus he arrived at it at the beginning of the month of Ramadan of the year 218/833. He stayed in it two years, then he moved to surra man raʾā in the year 220/835. . . And then Byzantium attacked Zibatra. And so Abū Ishāq turned his face towards Dhu al-Hijja of that year. And Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī died in surra man raʾā in the month of Ramadan of the year 224/839 and he gibbeted al-Afshīn in the year 226/840–41.

Through context, Ibn Qutayba connected al-Muʿtaṣim scurrying back to Baghdad in fear for his life to the raid on Amorion. Given the distance, something around forty days is hardly scurrying quickly. As well, Ibn Qutayba made no mention of a coup attempt. He merely stated that al-Muʿtaṣim assaulted al-ʿAbbās and ʿUjayf on his way. He approached surra man raʾā in Dhu al-Hijja of that year. And Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī died in surra man raʾā in the month of Ramadan of the year 224/839 and he gibbeted al-Afshīn in the year 226/840–41.

The second provision of the will was that, with reference to the Byzantines, al-Muʿtaṣim should “be mindful/wary of these people in whose front yard you are and do not ignore them at any time.” The destruction of the fortifications under construction at Tuwāna and the removal of its colonists was al-Muʿtaṣim’s first act as Caliph. Al-Azdī and al-Ṭabarī agree that he did this before heading for Baghdad. This would make sense of the forty-day journey from Tarsus to Baghdad. As noted above, al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʿmūn, under orders from his father, had been fortifying the town and settling new residents in it. It served as a forward base of operations but was more than a mere hilltop-outpost. Significant investment had been made to insure that it was added permanently to the Caliphate. Al-Muʿtaṣim’s destruction of it and the removal of all weaponry could be interpreted as an effort to pull back from an exposed position leaving nothing usable for the enemy. Or, equally likely, it could be interpreted as the destruction of a possible base of operations for a powerful ʿAbbāsid rival to whom many in the military leadership wished to swear allegiance.

Note that Tuwāna was not as exposed a forward position as is often asserted. In 216/831 there were a series of very successful raids originating from there deep into Byzantine territory. Thus it was under continuous occupation and had been for some time.

Ibn Qutayba, al-Maʿarif, 392.
37 Of course, his purpose was not to be comprehensive, and leaving such details out could have been an editorial decision.
This supports the contention that al-Maʾmūn ordered al-ʿAbbās to reinforce and strengthen an already existing emplacement. At the same time that he ordered al-ʿAbbās to fortify and expand it, al-Maʾmūn levied troops from Syria and Egypt. A large number of men were placed under al-ʿAbbās’ command with him in Ṭuwāna. Al-ʿAbbās was modifying the fortifications to accommodate the addition of this new larger contingent on a permanent basis. Though forward and more exposed than other areas, when al-ʿAbbās was given this task, the fort had been operational for some time. As such, it was unlikely to have been in any greater danger from the Byzantines at the death of al-Maʾmūn than before, particularly since a massive force was already garrisoned there in preparation for an intended assault towards Constantinople.43

Given the description of the number of troops, one easily infers that this was to be an expedition of the same size if not larger than the one that al-Muʿtaṣim made against Amorion. Three months before he died, al-Maʾmūn set his son up in a fortified position with a large army. The army would gain experience, and al-ʿAbbās would gain renown in what was going to be a major expedition against the Byzantines. Al-ʿAbbās would have strengthened his hand in establishing himself as a legitimate ruler and continuator of his father’s policies (of course, not reckoning that his death was imminent). His credentials as a military commander and ghazi Caliph would be secured. Al-Muʿtaṣim would need these credentials as well, and would pursue a similar course of action to attain them. Given the circumstances of al-Muʿtaṣim’s ascension to the throne, taking this opportunity away from al-ʿAbbās was of paramount importance.44

While primogeniture was not the established mechanism for inheritance of leadership, almost every prior Caliph, when able to express his wishes concerning succession, indicated a preference for his own son. Succession by a brother was not by any means anomalous but neither was it a foregone conclusion. Clearly al-Maʾmūn was establishing a rivalry between the two main contenders for the throne.45 Given recent precedents, al-Muʿtaṣim must have discerned the prospects of being sidelined. As Nawas points out, both al-ʿAbbās and al-Muʿtaṣim were equally qualified for succession.46 That al-Muʿtaṣim was older does not necessarily mean that he had an edge; consider al-Mansūr’s succession struggle with his uncle ʿAbdallāh and the sidelining of Ṣa b. Mūsā.47

Now we turn to the third and fourth provisions of the will. Al-Muʿtaṣim was told to pursue Bābak and the Khurramiyya, along with a description of the type of commander for the task. Al-ʿAbbās is not named, but the description given applies well to both him and his behavior on that campaign. The will also specifies the behavior of the Caliph. It is a suspiciously prescient account of how both al-ʿAbbās and al-Muʿtaṣim would conduct themselves in the course of the campaign. This argues for a dating of the forgery of the will to the period after al-Maʾmūn’s death and before al-ʿAbbās’ disgrace in 225/839.

Fifth, the will warned that “exhortation” must be backed up by action. Al-Muʿtaṣim would have to follow the same path as his brother to prove his credentials, but it was vital that he brought them to a successful conclusion. As no specific target was mentioned, nor was glorious victory predicted (as with the above concerning the Khurramiyya), this helps to confirm my dating of the document and narrows it even further to a point before the launch of the Amorion campaign.

At this point there is a break in the will, which notes that al-Maʾmūn’s condition worsened and he summoned his brother to his bedside. This serves the purpose of signaling that the designation of his brother as heir was in place and not the product of a deathbed pronouncement. The narrative in al-Ṭabarî explicitly places the first half of the will chronologically while al-Maʾmūn was still alive and al-Muʿtaṣim was elsewhere. The interjection seems to address the legal problem that one could not issue or even make changes to a will from the deathbed.48 If he issued the proclamation and then promptly died, the missive would have been...
invali. Summoning al-Mu'tasim underscores that al-
Ma'mūn had made his designation well in advance of
his death throes.49 Al-Tabarī explicitly says this before
recounting the text of the will.

Addressing the deathbed issue at this point intro-
duces a problem for points six through thirteen, which
follow the interjection. These could be later inter-
polations that solved the deathbed issue, while also
accounting for al-Mutawakkil's actions regarding Ibn
Abī Du'ād and a continuing concern over the inde-
pendent position of the Tāhirids.50 But, given that it
was the will of a Caliph, a document publicly used to
validate the claim of the presiding Caliph, how likely
is it that such a visible emendation would have left no
other traces? It is more likely that it was a device to
attest to the authenticity of the will.

The sixth provision chided al-Mu'tasim to be just,
so that the change in succession was justified “as I have
transferred it from other than you to you.”51 Bosworth
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The sixth provision chided al-Mu'tasim to be just,
so that the change in succession was justified “as I have
transferred it from other than you to you.”51 Bosworth
in his translation glosses “it” as meaning “[the Mes-
enger of God's protection]” whereas I read this as an
acknowledgement that al-ʿAbbās had already been de-
clared wali al-ʿaḍl as al-Dīnawarī asserted.52 To affirm
the orality and thus the authenticity of the document,
al-Mu'tasim interrupted the dying Caliph to say that
he would do as he had been told.

Continuing with the seventh point, al-Mu'tasim
was told to rely on ʿAbdallāh b. Tāhir. My assess-
ment is that this is merely what it purports to be, an
exhortation not to jumble the power structure of the
state. Of course, al-Mu'tasim would do just that on
the Amorion campaign; but the author of the will ap-
peared not to know that. The eighth point seems to
be an admonishment to continue the Miḥna, whereas I read this as an
acknowledgement that al-ʿAbbās had already been de-
clared wali al-ʿaḍl as al-Dīnawarī asserted.52 To affirm
the orality and thus the authenticity of the document,
al-Mu'tasim interrupted the dying Caliph to say that
he would do as he had been told.

The eleventh point of the will said to choose a good
Vizier. This is tantalizing, yet problematic, because it
was immediately followed by point twelve, in which
Yaḥyā b. Aktham, the rival, immediate predecessor,
and successor to Ibn Abī Du'ād as chief qāḍī was spe-
cifically singled out for opprobrium. This would have
been an odd commentary coming from al-Maʾmūn,
as he had two years before placed Yaḥyā b. Aktham in
charge of a very successful raid into Byzantine terri-
ty in the year 216/831.56 It would not have been
odd coming from al-Mu'tasim and Ibn Abī Du'ād,
however, with whom bad blood existed.57 As Yaḥyā’s
and al-ʿAbbās’ positions strengthened, those of Ibn
Abī Du'ād and al-Mu'tasim weakened. This could be
read as the motive for the timing of murdering al-
Maʾmūn. Point twelve serves as prime evidence that
Ibn Abī Du'ād was the author of the will. However,
it is important to underline that Yaḥyā b. Aktham
was not the vizier. He was the chief qāḍī. Of course
Ibn Abī Du'ād would have known this, as would any

45 al-Tabarī, Taʾrīkh, iii, 1135–36.
46 El-Hibri briefly mentions the possibility of the will having
been altered later. El-Hibri, Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography,
120–21.
47 al-Tabarī, Taʾrīkh, iii, 1138.
48 Abū Jaʿfar Muhammad b. Ḫarīr al-Tabarī, The Renunification
of the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate, trans. C. E. Bosworth, vol. 32 (Albany,
NY, 1987), 229.
49 For more on this period, see J. P. Turner, “The End of the
50 Amikam Elad, in his comments on a draft of this paper, makes
a compelling argument that this was actually ʿAbd al-Wahhāb b.
ʿAli b. Muhammad (al-Mahdī) b. ʿAbdallāh (al-Mansūr) who led
the family to Samarra and not the ʿAbd al-Wahhāb whom Bosworth
identified in his translation of al-Tabarī. See Abū Bakr Ahmad b.
ʿAli al-Khāṭīb al-Baghdādī, Taʾrīkh madīnati as-salām, ed. B. A.
Maʿrouf (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islāmi, 2001), v. 12, 282. I thank
Amikam for pointing this out to me.
51 Nawas, “All in the Family?”
52 al-Tabarī, Taʾrīkh, iii, 1104.
53 amikam Elad, in his comments on a draft of this paper, makes
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Maʿrouf (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islāmi, 2001), v. 12, 282. I thank
Amikam for pointing this out to me.
contemporary readers. Thus these must have been two separate provisions, but one is left with the unsettling perception that perhaps they were not.

And finally point thirteen: be kind to the ‘Alids. It was a general admonishment without any specific recommendations and was to be expected from al-Ma’mūn. The text of the will then moved to its conclusion with a quote from the Qurʾān (3:102). It is odd that, for a man obsessed with the Qurʾān (compare to al-Ma’mūn’s Miḥna letters), this was the only reference to scripture in the whole of the document. Al-Muʿṭasim was told to “fear God” and rule as a good Muslim. The text ends with a plea for the forgiveness of al-Maʾmūn’s sins. Next at the age of forty-eight or forty-nine years old58 he died, and al-ʿAbbās and al-Muʿṭasim took the body to Tarsus for burial. Al-Ṭabarī and al-Yaʿqūbī both reported that al-Muʿṭasim and not Muʿṭasim was his younger brother, Abū Isḥāq, the father’s court and not really of the faction of al-Amīn, al-Muʿṭasim was not part of the factional politics of their future al-Muʿṭasim. Ismāʿīl al-Bilī asserts that, as al-Muʿṭasim was his uncle. From this he extrapolates that the issue of succession did not arise between the two, as everyone was too busy. I find this hard to accept. Succession struggles were the defining narrative for all of the Caliphs from the beginning. Al-Muʿṭasim was essential to al-Maʾmūn’s plans—but then again, so were al-ʿAbbās, the Tāhirids, and al-Maʾmūn’s other generals.

Another important consequence of the fourth fitna was the profoundly negative effect it had on the stability and discipline of the army. The imperial army of the metropole had been defeated and al-Maʾmūn’s new army (with elements of the old) had stepped into its place but could not do so completely.62 He tried his best to co-opt the abnāʾ al-dawla but was reluctant, with good reason, to rely on them. The years 204–218/819–833 were a period of reconstruction and reconsolidation of the empire. Thus, the bulk of al-Maʾmūn’s reign was engaged in restoring control.63 It was mostly successful except in regards to the ‘Abbāsid family and with a few trouble spots like Bābak’s Khurramiyya.

Thus 218/833 would have been a propitious time for al-Muʿṭasim to remove al-Maʾmūn. The disruptions had abated enough so that al-Muʿṭasim could stage a coup without worrying about destroying the whole empire. Upon winning the war against al-Amīn, one of the first things that al-Maʾmūn had to do was to make his army into an imperial army.64 Al-Maʾmūn’s army under Tāhir was strong enough to set about restoring order and reintegrating the Caliphate, but he needed others to avoid becoming too dependent on any one general. One need only recall the position of Abū Muslim to recognize the predicament. For this, he turned to his brother who had been actively creating a private guard of servile origins. Given the chaos of Baghdad from the siege until al-Maʾmūn’s arrival

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58 This, in an interesting parallel, was roughly the same age at which his father, his brother al-Muʿṭasim, and his nephew al-Mutawakkil would die. Al-Wāthiq would die before the age of forty, confirming the trend of early death in the family.
60 For more see Nawas, “All in the Family?”
61 O. S. Ismāʿīl al-Bīlī, Prelude to the Generals (Reading, UK, 2001), 33.
64 See Gordon, Breaking of a Thousand Swords, 30.
seven years later in 204/819, this was likely initially a private bodyguard prudently hired for protection during an almost total breakdown of law and order. This force would, in time, grow, but would never be very large. Ītākh, Wasīf and Ashinās, the top rank of the first generation of the Samarran elite, were purchased at this time. It is important to note that this was not a proper army of the imperium, nor was it intended to be. Al-Yaʿqūbī tells us that al-Muʿtaṣim had 3,000 slave soldiers (ghilman) by the end of al-Maʾmūn’s reign.65 While large, this was his personal guard and not a field army. Ultimately, it reinforced his power over a ruling elite who would never organize effectively enough to defeat or eliminate them.

Gordon has argued that at first these soldiers were somewhat ceremonial.66 For example, upon entering Baghdad for the first time as Caliph, al-Yaʿqūbī tells us that al-Muʿtaṣim equipped his guard with “gilded silk brocade,”67 thus marking them off as special. While their “ceremonial” purpose can be debated, al-Muʿtaṣim had had some success against the kharijītes as Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī’s agent during the chaos of Baghdad at the beginning of al-Maʾmūn’s reign, but his troops had not really been tested. Being chosen by Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī for that task indicates nothing more than that he had a moderately organized force in a time when there were few of those at hand.

In 214/829–830, al-Muʿtaṣim was sent to Egypt to put down a rebellion for al-Maʾmūn.68 He did so, but the province erupted in revolt once again in the next year and al-Maʾmūn had to go personally; with the aid of Ītākh and Bughā, his success was more firmly brought the Caliphate under his control. The campaign and the subsequent purge more firmly brought the Caliphate under his control. We know more about the campaign against Amorion than practically any other.74 We also find it glorified.

The Amorion Campaign and the Purge

Ironically, coming roughly halfway through his reign, the Amorion campaign established al-Muʿtaṣim as a ghazi caliph. The campaign and the subsequent purge more firmly brought the Caliphate under his control. We know more about the campaign against Amorion than practically any other.74

Gordon speculates that Bughā’s abysmal performance could explain “why the Turkish guard was kept in Iraq...” Gordon, Breaking of a Thousand Swords, 76.

71 al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, iii, 1117–82, 1187–1234.

72 Ayalon notes that in spite of generally unimpressive results, the mamlūk troops were preferred for their “military superiority;” he is certainly correct, and the position of Ītākh and Bughā high-light this; Ayalon, “Military Reforms,” 25.

73 Given the hints and allegations surrounding al-Afšīn that he was after the Tāhirid domains, perhaps with some encouragement from the court, it is not a far reach to suspect that such a gambit was in the offing but proved unsuccessful with al-Afšīn bearing the full brunt of retribution for the failure.

74 It is interesting that al-Afšīn’s campaign against Bābak is the other campaign that we know the most about. In fact, al-Ṭabarī...
in Abū Tammâm's famous Qaṣīda.75 One problem with all of that is that the campaign really was not worthy of the accolades. It was a relatively minor and fleeting victory. It received such notice because of the internal propaganda value it yielded for the Caliph. It provided "proof" that the Caliph was a legitimate ghaza, or at the very least as legitimate as his brother and more so than his nephew. It also proved that his Turks were a capable and competent field army and not just a personal guard. Al-Afshīn, in spite of having met, fought and defeated the Byzantine Emperor on his way to Ankara, was virtually ignored in the account as a battlefield commander.76 The campaign on Amorion, despite its minimal impact, was a major logistical operation. It began in 223/838 with a great deal of preparation. Al-Afshīn was in charge of the northern prong of a prolonged pincers movement converging first on Ankara and then Amorion. Al-Muʿṭasim with Ītākh and Ashinās commanded the southern prong. The attack did not necessarily go as planned, but in the end Amorion was taken after a relatively short siege.

The turn of events after this point, as related by al-Ṭabarī, is confused. It is a strange and sordid tale indeed and one that stretches credulity. The narrative comes to a head with al-ʿAbbās getting drunk with the indeed and one that stretches credulity. The narrative al-Ṭabarī, is confused. It is a strange and sordid tale

devoted many more pages to it than to the Amorion campaign, yet it receives less attention.


77 al-Ṭabarī, Taʿrīkh, iii, 1265–66.

81 al-Ṭabarī, Taʿrīkh, iii, 1265.

82 Ibid., iii, 1266.

83 Ibid., iii, 1267.


85 Ismāʿīl said "Yaʿqūbī reports that he kept al-Maʾmūn's men in the administration for only three months and then dismissed
The Death of al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʾmūn and a “Thwarted” Coup d’État

In these events took place on the frontier, no one in the capital was in a position to gainsay it and those who survived the purge had little incentive to. In addition, eliminating officers after the troops had been well-paid and were on their way home was less likely to have sparked a revolt than at some other point. Gordon interprets the purge of the coup plotters and the removal of al-ʾAfshīn as leaving a vacuum that the Turkish guards were left to fill. This it did. However, given the events of the succession and the contrivances in the narrative of the purge, it is not a stretch to say that al-Muʿṭasim created the vacuum on purpose and that its focus was not merely to promote the Turkish guard but also to break the back of residual loyalty to al-Maʾmūn and al-ʿAbbās. Whatever the instigation, he benefited immensely from it. Khalīfa b. Khayyat’s account is informative in this regard:

And in the year 223/838 the Commander of the Faithful Abū Ḫishāq al-Muʿṭasim bi-l-lah set off at the head of a great multitude. And so he penetrated deeply into the land of the Byzantines and al-ʾAfshīn Khaydhar b. Kāwus approached and encountered the Tyrant (Byzantine Emperor) . . . And so he (al-ʾAfshīn) defeated him and he killed 4000 of his companions [i.e., soldiers]. The Commander of the Faithful set off (again) and alighted near ʾAmūriyya [Amorion] and al-ʾAfshīn came to him. Thus the Commander of the Faithful captured it forcibly on Tuesday with thirteen days remaining in the month of Ramadan (August 9, 838). And so a great many were killed and a great many were taken prisoner and he destroyed the city and he razed it. And before the Commander of the Faithful arrived at ʾAmūriyya he destroyed what he passed by of their villages and the Byzantines fled in all directions. And in it (223) he destroyed Ankara then the Commander of the Faithful turned his face homewards on Saturday with nine days remaining in the month of Ramadan. And then he cut off the heads of 4000 of the prisoners and he still continued to kill the prisoners on his journey and to burn until he entered the lands of Islam. And in it (223) the Commander of the Faithful brought forth the unbeliever Bābak. And so he commanded that his hands and feet be cut off. Then he cut his head off and gibbeted him and this was in Ṣafar of the year 223.92

The first thing one notes about Ibn Khayyat’s account is the jumbling of events, that Ankara was captured after Amorion. The details but not this order are well-attested elsewhere. However, there is something more important missing. He mentions neither a coup attempt nor succession troubles of any sort.93 Granted, his account is generally sparse, but one would expect such a major occurrence to make an appearance. Remember also that Ibn Qutayba’s account mentioned

92 al-ʿUsfurī, Taʾrīkh, 316–17.
93 Ibid., 315. In his note for the end of al-Maʾmūn’s reign, he merely mentioned the date of al-Maʾmūn’s death without any reference to al-ʿAbbās at all. Also al-ʿUsfurī, Taʾrīkh, 317.
a purge of ʿUjayf and al-ʿAbbās but no plot. As well, al-Dinawarī mentioned neither plot nor purge nor raid on Amorion. While this evidence is not ironclad proof, it does raise significant doubts as to whether al-ʿAbbās had really been plotting. Kennedy has noted that the narrator al-Ṭabarī used for the Amorion campaign intended to “justify” the purge of al-ʿAbbās and his supporters. Elsewhere, he had written that the narrative sought to bolster al-Muʿtaṣim’s army, to “stress their competence and loyalty, in contrast to the followers of al-ʿAbbās who are shown as undermining the military effort.” Perhaps al-ʿAbbās was plotting — and there is significant evidence for this — but whether he was or not, this served as a convenient pretext for clearing the decks of the “old guard,” those who had supported al-Maʾmūn. By killing al-ʿAbbās and his brothers, he eliminated the potential for a Maʾmūnid restoration. This in turn argues that whether or not he was or not, this served as a convenient pretext for clearing the decks of the “old guard,” those who had supported al-Maʾmūn. By killing al-ʿAbbās and his brothers, he eliminated the potential for a Maʾmūnid restoration. This in turn argues that whether or not he was or not, this served as a convenient pretext for clearing the decks of the “old guard,” those who had supported al-Maʾmūn. By killing al-ʿAbbās and his brothers, he eliminated the potential for a Maʾmūnid restoration.

Conclusions and Tying Up Loose Ends

The Amorion campaign and the subsequent purge resolved two lingering issues left over from the death of al-Maʾmūn. First was the problem of al-ʿAbbās and those inclined to support him; and second, al-Muʿtaṣim’s legitimacy as holder of the office of the Caliph. The purge, whether al-ʿAbbās was plotting or not, solved one issue, but it could not be dealt with until the second issue had been resolved; a great and highly publicized victory would do quite nicely. Even if it was not a terribly consequential one, leaving few residual effects in terms of the war with the Byzantines, it was enough to have Abū Tammām’s poem ring loudly. The effect of the purge and subsequent removal of al-Afshīn, which assuredly was part of this process, was to force al-Muʿtaṣim into ever-greater reliance on his Turkish forces. As such, the over-reliance on the Turkish forces came as a result of the purge and not vice-versa. It was not a purge in favor of elevating the Turks, but one intended to eliminate opposition to al-Muʿtaṣim. The side effect was that Ibn Abī Duʾād and the Turkish officers became kings-makers long before the elevation of al-Mutawakkil to the throne.

According to al-Ṭabarī, al-Muʿtaṣim died as the result of a cupping gone wrong. Interestingly, Ibn Māsawayh, the doctor whom al-Ṣult accused of malfeasance in the death of al-Maʾmūn, is said to have also committed gross malpractice resulting in the death of al-Muʿtaṣim. Further, al-Wāthiq suffered from edema, which was relieved through the application of heat, and thus he died as a result of being left in an oven (tannūr) too long, while Ahmad b. Abī Duʾād, Ibn al-Zayyāt, Umar b. Faraj and al-Fadl b. Ishāq al-Hāshimī stood by—three of whom would be part of the cabal that selected al-Mutawakkil. Al-Ṭabarī furthered the suspiciousness of that episode by including a brief alternate version, which had Ibn Abī Duʾād alone with him when he was overcome by the heat. One does not have to stretch far to see this as a murder.

94 For more, see Gordon, Breaking of a Thousand Swords, chapters 2 and 3. Al-Afshīn appeared in the purge narrative rather prominently as a defender of al-Muʿtaṣim. He was one of the few of al-Maʾmūn’s generals to do so, and thus had to be dealt with in another way at another time; hence his trial in 225/840. For his trial, see J. P. Turner, “Al-Afshīn, Heretic, Rebel or Rival?” in Abbasid Studies II, ed. Nawas.
95 For a different take on the possibilities of a Maʾmūnid restoration, see Nawas, “All in the Family?”
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death as noted at the beginning were equally suspi-
cious. Importantly, Ibn Abī Duʿād was present for all
tree deaths. According to al-Dīnawarī, he led the
prayers over al-Muʿtaṣim. It is odd that the son, heir,
and new Caliph, al-Wāthiq, did not do that. Ibn Abī
Duʿād led the prayers over al-Wāthiq as well.

The purge was a successful consolidation of power,
but it left al-Muʿtaṣim in a vulnerable position. He was
able, due to the personal loyalty of the first genera-
tion of Turkish commanders, to maintain control in
Samarra. When he died, Ibn Abī Duʿād in conjunction
with that first generation was left in charge of the state
and its new, young ruler. Ashīnās, Ṣīkh, Waṣīf, Ibn
al-Zayyāt and Ibn Abī Duʿād were the power behind
al-Wāthiq, and it was they who chose al-Mutawakkil.
They “managed the succession” and they took care of
the business of ruling. However, they were unable
to completely control al-Wāthiq, who, in engaging in a
building program in Samarra, converting it from camp
into a city, was probably trying to curry favor with
the Turkish elite and thereby gain more independence
of action.

I posit that it was for this that Ibn Abī Duʿād mur-
dered him. He was unable to control the succession
and had to acknowledge Waṣīf’s objection that al-
Wāthiq’s minor son was too obviously a puppet. He
hit upon the idea of placing the young al-Mutawakkil
on the throne but did not count on his canny will for
independence. Al-Mutawakkil was able to break free
from him and the clique that had installed him, but in
doing so exacerbated his condition of dependence in
Samarra. In the end, this consumed him, and the fence
holding the Turkish forces at bay and under control
was smashed. In the end, internal dynastic concerns
were what thrust the Turkish guard to the front and
center as the power base for the Caliphs. Meanwhile,
the internal wrangling over control of al-Wāthiq and
al-Mutawakkil by Ahmad b. Abī Duʿād, Ibn al-Zayyāt
and the Turkish commanders left no one solidly in
charge.

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103 al-Dīnawarī, al-akhbār, 401.13. al-ʿUsfī, Taʾrīkh, 317, con-
firms some of the details given by al-Dīnawarī. Al-Ṭabarī gave no
indication of anyone praying over al-Muʿtaṣim.
104 Kennedy, When Baghdad Ruled, 231.
105 Gordon, Breaking of a Thousand Swords, 78–79. For more on
the specifics of his building, see Northedge, The Historical Topogra-
phy of Samarra, 99–100.
106 al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, iii, 1368.