

## Place and role of Central Asian Turks in the history of Abbasid Egypt

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The history of Turkic-Arab ties goes back to the pre-Islamic period and the establishment of the Arab-Moslem state.<sup>1</sup> The Arab caliphate saw serious and radical changes in the Turkic-Arab integration that increasingly intensified and assumed a comprehensive form within the framework of the two ethnoses development.<sup>2</sup> Equally with Arabs and representatives of other nations, Turks played an important role in the creation, formation, strengthening and development of the Islamic civilization.

Note that from the very outset relations with Turks were in the focus of attention of the first Abbasid caliphs – Abu-l Abbas as-Saffah (750-754) and, particularly, Abu Jafar al-Mansur (754-775).<sup>3</sup> In words of al-Makrizi, medieval chronicler, “al-Mansur was the first caliph to have granted power to Turks within the state system”.<sup>4</sup> Besides, he drew Turks in the creation of an army of the latest pattern. His personal guard served as impact force to secure personal safety of caliph and his inner circle. The guard was usually formed of young Turks who came from the Central Asia.

It has to be kept in mind that the promotion of the representatives of Turkic ethnoses as leading political and military force in the Abbasid caliphate was typical primarily for the centre, though it tended to take place in the remote Arab provinces as well. In this regard, of great interest is the history of Egypt that became a province of the caliphate in North Africa after Abbasids’ advent to power, as did Iraq for Asia.<sup>5</sup>

The article aims to examine activities of governor-generals of the Central Asian origin in Abbasid Egypt. The author lays an emphasis on persons that had an enormous impact on the history of the country and its development.

Note that there were 78 governor-generals in Abbasid Egypt (750-969), of whom 24, i.e. slightly below than one third, were Turks. However, approx.130 years out of 220 years of the Abbasid rule (750-969), i.e. slightly above half, fell to the share of Turks. Suffice it to say that Abu Salih al-Harasi (779-780) was the first Turkic governor-general of Egypt.<sup>6</sup> As the forty seventh governor-general of Egypt, he was in the focus of attention of medieval historians. He was the first governor-general whose past and personal qualities, as well as ethnic roots and genealogy, were referred to in various sources.<sup>7</sup>

Of interest is the fact that while Turks had previously been perceived as armed force, especially in the first years of Abbasids, later on they were actively drawn in the public administration. Al-Harasi’s appointment by caliph al-Mehdi as governor-general of Egypt was not something new from caliphate’s point of view. That was novelty for the history of Egypt. Al-Harasi proved to be the first

one in the long list of Turks ever involved in the public administration in this province of the caliphate.



*General view of the mosque Ibn Tulun.*

Contributing to this was the fact that Abbasids had for long declined from combat operations against their neighbors, though the Mediterranean coast abounded in fortresses to secure the caliphate against external enemies. Note that a certain part of these fortifications was located on the Egyptian-Byzantine border. Turks

constituted an essential part of the troops whose mission was to patrol the border,

and their number kept on rising. The tendency was typical both for the reign of caliph Harun ar-Rashid<sup>8</sup> and later on. In the first years of caliph al-Amin (809-833), a newly appointed governor-general of Egypt arrived there under escort of thousands of Turkic soldiers.<sup>9</sup> During the reign of caliph al-Mamun (813- 833), the role of Turks in all the spheres of the Egyptian life, including military-political force, increasingly intensified.<sup>10</sup> Earlier 832, caliph al-Mamun entrusted a Turk from Sogdiana – Heydar Nasr ibn Abdullah (II. 832-II.834) to act as governor-general of Egypt. Note that the latter headed a 4,000 strong Turkic army, mainly recruited of Bukhara natives.<sup>11</sup>

As a whole, a new stage of consolidation of Turks not only in Egypt but in other regions of the caliphate started from this date. Turks prospered not only in the military but administrative sphere as well, and thus succeeded in consolidating their position. As for the reign of caliph al-Mutasim (833-842), Turks rose to higher positions and turned into a leading military-political force both in the army and power structures.

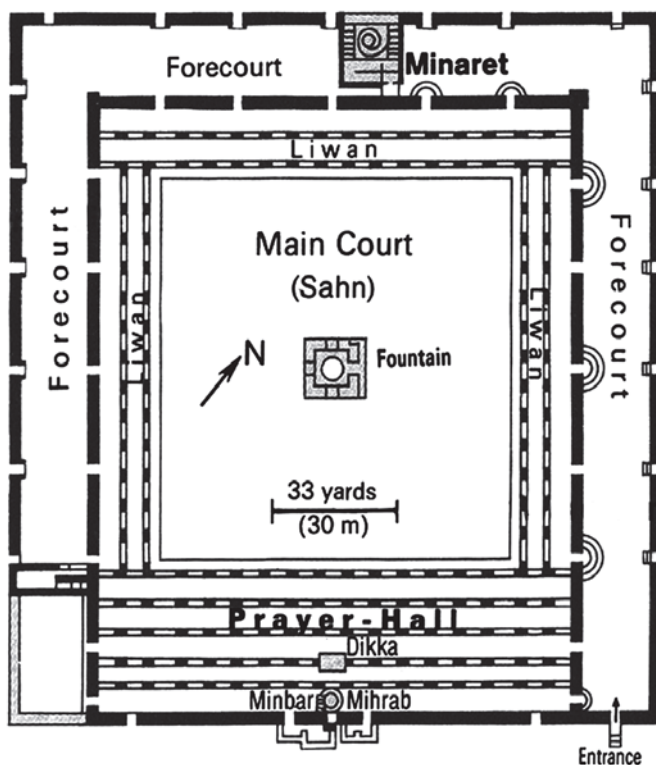
Among the first measures of caliph al-Mutasim was that governor-general Heydar Nasr ibn Abdullah who reserved his post of governor-general. Also, the caliph ordered to cease granting subsidies to Arabs.<sup>12</sup> Al-Makrizi pointed out: “Commander of the faithful al-Mutasim went under the control of Turks and thus belittled Arabs. He ousted them out of diwan, deleted their names and deprived them of all privileges. Meanwhile, he made Turks as stronghold of the state and seated them at the head of the table”.<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that Heydar Nasr ibn Abdullah was followed by his son Muzaffar as governor-general (IV.834-VIII.834). In mid 834, the caliph appointed to this post a well-known Turkic commander Ashnas at- Turki. The latter entrusted, first, Muzaffar, then other persons, with acting as governor-general. Note that Ashnas headed the caliphate’s strongest army, was intimate with the

caliph and took active part in the struggle against Byzantine.<sup>14</sup> He succeeded in restoring order in Egypt; the same was true of Malik ibn Heydar (I.839-I.841) who was entrusted by Anshas to act as governor-general in Egypt.<sup>15</sup>

As distinguished from his predecessors, caliph al-Mutavakkil (847-861) took unsuccessful attempt to decline from services of Turks in favor of Arabs. This attempt coincided with the period when the caliphate was plunged in disorders and mutiny that, in Th.Noldeke's words, "gave birth to the start of crisis in the weakened Abbasid caliphate".<sup>16</sup> Governor-generals to Egypt of non-Turkic origin proved to be unable to restore order and tranquility in the country that increasingly aggravated after a victorious campaign of Byzantine in 853. The same year, the last Arab-origin governor-general Anbasa ibn Iskhak (852-856) was replaced by the Turkic-origin commander Yazid ibn Abdallah at-Turki (856-867), following which the political power in the country had finally gone over to Turks.

As governor-general, Yazid ibn Abdallah at-Turki took a number of measures to get out of the crisis.<sup>17</sup> However, these measures turned out insufficient to solve serious social problems of Egypt in mid-9 century. The popular movement that involved broader masses and all the malcontent increasingly intensified. In 866, the caliph had to dispatch a large army headed by influential Turkic commander Muzahim ibn Khagan (III.867-I.868) who was successful in suppressing the uprising. As a result, caliph al-Mutazz (866-869) appointed him as governor-general in Egypt to replace Yazid ibn Abdallah at-Turki.<sup>18</sup>



*Scheme of Mosque Ibn Tulun.*

Following Muzahim ibn Khagan's death, it was, first, his son Ahmed ibn Muzahim ibn Khagan (I.868-III.868) and later Uzdjur at-Turki (III.868-X.868)<sup>19</sup> who succeeded to him as governor-generals. The rule of the three governor-generals marked the aggravation of political and social contradictions in the country that lasted up to the establishment of the state of Tulunides (868-905).

The state's title originates in the name of Tulun, father of dynasty's founder. He came from Turks-Oghuzes<sup>20</sup> who, in 200 Hegira (815/816) together with a

detachment of young Turks, was presented by the ruler of Bukhara to caliph al-Mamun.

Prominent German orientalist A. Miller placed the dynasty of Tulunides on the same level with the dynasties of Aglabides (800-909) and Hamdanides (905-1004), this “famous trinity”, as he put it. In his view, these dynasties (by rights, Ikshidides as well) differed from their origin, activity and destiny standpoint; their common feature was as follows: they were successful in establishing strong state formations in one of the major important regions of the caliphate – emirates and thus protect the local population against long-term revolts and intra-military-political clashes.<sup>21</sup>

As distinct from other states of the “trinity” – Aglabides and Hamdanides – the state of Tulunides had existed for slightly above 37 years. Below-listed are representatives of the dynasty that headed this state: 1) Ahmed ibn Tulun (868-884); 2) Khumaraveikh ibn Ahmed (884-895); 3) Abu-l Askar Jeish ibn Khumaraveikh (895-896); 4) Harun ibn Khumaraveikh (896- 904); 5) Sheyban ibn Ahmed (904-905).



*Mosque of Ibn Tulun .*

The state reached its summit during the reign of Ahmed ibn Tulun, founder of the dynasty.<sup>22</sup> He won over to his side prominent Turkic commanders from the Central Asia together with the Egyptian court nobility and thus succeeded in consolidating the power and creating a numerous and strong army. In so doing, he managed to unite Syria and Palestine and start conquering Hijaz. In a while, he declined from paying taxes to Baghdad and thus put an end to any relations with the central power. Note that coins came to be minted in 879/880 to symbolize the independence of the state. The coins were of the value of 1 dinar and titled “Ahmedi”.<sup>23</sup>

Ahmed ibn Tulun died in 884 to leave 17 male individuals, so an impression was that this dynasty would outlive centuries; however, things took a turn for the worse. His successor and son Khumaraveikh (884-896) and his heirs failed to proceed with the successful political line of the dynasty founder. Unlike Ahmed ibn Tulun, they resorted to finances, not political and diplomatic resources, to solve their problems. As a consequence, Egypt was faced with serious political and financial crisis that marked the end of Tulunides. Availing himself of the situation, caliph al-Muktafi (902-908) sent an army to Egypt. It was the military defeat of January 11, 905 that put an end to the state of Tulunides, and the power of Abbasid caliphs was restored in Egypt<sup>24</sup>

Of interest is the fact that even after Egypt's transition under the power of the caliphate the country was, nevertheless, managed by Turkic governor-generals. Their main purpose was to maintain stability in the country and stave off military campaigns from the neighboring state of Fatimides (909-1171) that from the very outset strove to capture Egypt. Despite all efforts of caliphate's governor-generals, no radical changes in the struggle against Fatimides were brought about. Under these circumstances, caliph ar-Radi (934-940) appointed in 935 a well-known commander from the kin of Fegrana rulers of "Ikhshidides" Mohammad ibn Tugj as governor-general of Egypt. That was a period when as a result of the aggravated socialpolitical crisis in the caliphate, a personal power of local rulers in the province evolved into a dynastic power.<sup>25</sup> Mohammad ibn Tugj followed the same way to found a state of Ikhshidides (935-969) in Egypt.

Shortly after, Mohammad ibn Tugj won fame as skillful ruler and thus conduced to the transformation of Egypt into an influential power of the region. It came to the situation when he, taking advantage of the militarypolitical crisis in Bagdad, tried to make the caliph to move to Egypt and declare Fustat as a centre of the caliphate.<sup>26</sup> The plan being ineffective notwithstanding, the very fact evidenced, nevertheless, of considerable political influence and ambitions of Mohammad ibn Tugj.

Throughout his political activity Mohammad ibn Tugj showed his worth as prescient and strong-willed ruler. Like his predecessor Ahmed ibn Tulun, from 940 to his death he minted coins with his name to thus symbolize the independence of his power.<sup>27</sup> Sources single out him a person capable of adopting independent and effective decisions on internal and foreign policy of the state of Ikhshidides. After his death in 946, he was succeeded by his sons Onudjur (946-960) and Ali (960-966), regenteunuch Kafur (966-968) and, finally, juvenile Ali's son Ahmed Abu-l Favaris (968-969) – all of whom failed to continue traditions of the public management laid down by Mohammad ibn Tugj. As a result in July 969, Egypt was conquered by Fatimides,<sup>28</sup> and the rule of Abbasids in this country came to an end.

It would be appropriate to note that the judgments above cover mainly the military-political activity of natives of the Central Asia. As governor-generals, they won fame and glory in other spheres of public life as well. Some of them for example, Tulunides and Ikhshidides, were renowned as political figures who managed to create independent states. Others declined from sending a greater portion of taxes to the centre, Baghdad, and, instead, used them for meeting economic and social needs of the Egyptian population. It is no mere coincidence that all the spheres of the country's economy of the reviewed period were on the rise. For instance, al-Makrizi wrote that Egypt's area under crops amounted to 28 million feddans. Prior to the advent of Tulunides this figure dropped to 1 million feddans. It was Ahmed ibn Tulun's personal care for the agrarian sector that areas under crops rose to 24 million feddans.

Another medieval historian Ibn Iyas described Tulun's attention to the agriculture: "He started reviving peasants, built bridges and water reservoirs, dug canals and gulfs. Grains, sowing implements

and draught were granted to indigent peasants. If a peasant could not pay taxes to the state, he forgave them".<sup>29</sup>

During the reign of Ahmed ibn Tulun, much attention was paid to land-reclamation and irrigation work. Thus, he ordered to build two water gauges "Migyas an-Nil" to thus regulate Nile overflows and the rational use of its waters for farming purposes. Following these measures, living conditions and incomes of peasants visibly improved. This is vividly confirmed by the fact that if before Tulunides, total amount of annual taxes in Egypt made up 800,000 dinars, under Tulunides taxes paid by peasants made up 4,300,000 dinars. This tradition was typical for the reign of Ikhshidides as well.

Note that representatives of the both dynasties, particularly their founders – Ahmed ibn Tulun and Mohammad ibn Tugj attached a great attention to the townplanning and improvement of towns, as well as erection of architectural monuments.

In the first turn, account has to be taken of Tuluninitiated construction of the town Gatai. It started in 870 and ended in 3 years.<sup>30</sup> In A.Metz's words', the town had a new urban infrastructure that arose in the Moslem world in the reviewed period.<sup>31</sup> By the way, along with the famous residence and the mosque of ibn Tulun, the town was divided into territories (parts) intended for representatives of various social and ethnic groups, masters, merchants and traders, in the form of separate blocks. Besides barracks and blocks of Arab tribes, there were blocks of artisans and traders. There were also rich bazaars where bags and gifts of sea, brocade and incense were sold; numerous stores owned by cooks, shroffs and bakers.<sup>32</sup>

As viewed by researchers, Gatai was the first town to have been built in the Nile valley and on a river's bank.<sup>33</sup> In a while, Gatai mushroomed so much that it merged into Fustat. Following the blending of the three towns, Fustat became a unified capital of Egypt, and its status of the new capital did not change up to the foundation of Cairo in 969. Of the largest structures of Gatai there stands out a hospital built in 873<sup>34</sup> and a mosque of ibn Tulun built in 876-877.<sup>35</sup> According to sources, no medical institution capable of serving such a great quantity of patients had ever been in Egypt prior to this hospital.<sup>36</sup> The hospital was intended for civilians; treatment and medicine were free of charge.<sup>37</sup>

As for the mosque of ibn Tulun, this was the third mosque ever built in Egypt. By personal order of ibn Tulun, special fire-proof materials were used for its construction.<sup>38</sup> This was a monument famed for its distinguished architectural features. Suffice it to say that its three-level 40 m minaret has no analogues in the Egyptian architecture.<sup>39</sup>

As a whole, rulers of the Tulunid dynasty paid a great attention to the improvement of Egyptian towns. The reign of ibn Tulun and his son Khumaraveikh saw the restoration and repair of the Alexandrian lighthouse; construction in 870 of the wharf Rashid<sup>40</sup> in the mouth of Nile, etc. Sources say that in 882

while at the town Tinnis, Ahmed ibn Tulun initiated to erect several facilities, including “underground warehouses of Emir (Ahmed ibn Tulun)”, water intakes, and numerous shops.<sup>41</sup>

In the reviewed period, a special emphasis was laid on the construction of ships; reconstruction of the shipyard “al-Jazira” in Fustat; a new dockyard was built for warships.<sup>42</sup>

Note that the founder of the dynasty of Ishkhidides Mohammad ibn Tugj also started his activity with the construction of a new shipyard at the juncture of Fustat and Nile known under the title “As-synaa al-Kubra” or “Synaa Mysr”.<sup>43</sup> Sources provide information about the construction of a caravanserai in Fustat on the initiative of Khumaraveikh<sup>44</sup> and Mohammad ibn Tugj.<sup>45</sup>

As a whole, it was architectural masterpieces above, including the mosque of ibn Tulun, civil buildings, engineering and artistic patterns that brought fame and glory to Egypt, both in the reviewed period and subsequently.

One can say with certainty that governor-generals of Abbasid Egypt, natives of the Central Asia, played an important role not only in the military, political-administrative spheres but also left their appreciable imprint on the cultural life of the country.

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