

# The Preminence of Ahmad Ibn Tulun as the Leading *Amir* of the Tulunid Kingdom

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**Abstract:** *The Abbasid Empire emerged as the main power ruling the Muslim world in the year 132H/750CE with its centre in Baghdad, after defeating the Umayyad Dynasty in the battlefield. The Abbasid Empire began to achieve its golden age during the era of Caliph Harun al-Rashid (171-193H/787-809CE). However, the Abbasids gradually experienced decline after the rise of the Turkic military which was brought en masse during the rule of Caliph al-Mu'tasim (218-226H/833-841CE). The Turkic military began to seize power and some of them set up their own small kingdoms. The most influential leader among the Turkic was Amir Ahmad ibn Tulun (254-270H/868-884CE), who succeeded in founding the Tulunid Kingdom in Egypt. Thus the objective of this research is to examine in detail the biography of Amir Ibn Tulun and attempt to understand and appraise from history, his attitude, interests and authority as the leading Tulunid ruler. This is in view of the close relationship partially between an individual's current interests and behaviour with the environment in which he grew up. This is a qualitative research using historical and biographical study. This research uses documentation as a method of collecting data by focusing on primary and secondary sources. Analysis of data is descriptive using content analysis and interpretation of sources based on historical interpretation. Research results find that Ibn Tulun succeeded in laying down the ultimate benchmark in the history of Egypt by establishing his domain extending from Syria to the borders of Iraq in the East and to Libya in the West, and declaring full independence from the Abbasid Dynasty centred in Baghdad at that time.*

**Index Terms:** *Ahmad ibn Tulun, the Tulunids of Egypt, the Abbasids, military history, military leadership.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Amir Ahmad ibn Tulun is indeed a distinguished name associated with a historical Muslim kingdom which once ruled Egypt. He was the founder of the Tulunid Kingdom in*

Egypt from the year 254H/868CE to 270H/884CE. In the beginning, his position was only as *wali* (resident governor) of Egypt, sent by the Abbasid representative General Bakbak, but not long afterwards, he strengthened his position and successfully led Egypt to become an autonomous and independent kingdom, highly esteemed by surrounding major powers such as Roman Byzantine Empire, Persia and Abbasid Caliph himself (Bonner 2010: 573).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This article finds a dearth of research that highlight particularly on Ibn Tulun, particularly in the Malay language, although historical issues of Muslim kingdoms have been much discussed by many writers. Among local writers who dominate studies in this field are Jamsari, Ashari and Nor (2013) who discussed Islamic history in India based on the book, *al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh* by Ibn al-Athir. Further, Jamsari et al. (2011) also analyzed the history of the golden age of the Nasrid kingdom which ruled Granada for a period of two hundred and fifty years. In their research of the Marinid kingdom in North Africa (The Maghrib), Jamsari and Ashari (2014) also focused on issues related to the naval military strength of the Marinid kingdom. Meanwhile, Jalal, Ghani and Ismail (2017) also touched on the discussion of Islamic Education for new members of the Malaysian Armed Forces. In their writing, Jalal et al. (2017) discussed the planning of the military institution implemented by Rasulullah (PBUH), which was laden with *maqasid al-shari'ah* related to human dignity and human rights protection granted by Allah SWT.

However, works on the history of the Muslim military was also widely examined by many Western writers, specifically relating to Ibn Tulun's policies on government, politics and military (Bacharach 1981; Bianquis 2006; Bonner 2010; Brockelmann 1979; Swelim 1994; Tillier 2011; Waterson 2007; William 1990). Therefore, the issue is still on debate. Hence, studies relating to the excellence of contemporary issues in Islamic history and civilization are also assayed by local scholars, covering various issues such as discussion of the military history of the Tulunid Kingdom (Rahman & Jamsari 2018), the warfare and historian of al-Andalus (Jamsari et al. 2017; Jamsari et al. 2014; Jamsari & Talib 2014), the Ottoman's great strategic planner (Jamsari, Isa & Ashari 2014), the history and development of the Marinid military and administrative system (Jamsari et al. 2012a; Jamsari et al. 2012b), as well as the various issues on astrolabe and *astrofiqh* studies (Safiai et al. 2016; Ibrahim, Safiai & Jamsari 2015).

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This research begins from a statement put forward by Bonner (2010: 573) in his journal entitled, *Ibn Tulun's Jihad: The Damascus Assembly of 269/883*, which asserted that Ibn Tulun succeeded in leading Egypt to emerge as a strong and powerful Muslim kingdom even though it was previously overshadowed by other major powers.

His success was due to his wisdom in driving Egypt's political power as a largely independent province following the weakness and internal turbulence occurring in the Abbasid central government at Baghdad then. He said:

Ahmad ibn Tulun was famous as the first ruler of Egypt in Islamic times, who became to a large degree, independent of the central caliphate. Between his appointment as governor in 254/868 and his death in 270/884, Egypt emerged as a serious power in the Islamic and Mediterranean world, after centuries of subordination to the Roman Byzantine, Persian and Caliphate empires.

The above statement generally shows that the Tulunid Kingdom in the era of Ahmad ibn Tulun's rule achieved the peak of success and became a class of its own. This raises overwhelming zeal in the researcher to examine in detail the secret ingredients of the recipe applied by him to produce this magical touch whereby a newly established kingdom was able to emerge as a largely independent and much envied kingdom in a crevice of the big powers' dominance. This question is answered by several writers and researchers such as Ibn Khallikan (1968, 1:173), Ibn al-Athir (1997, 6:428), Lane-Poole (2008: 61), al-Tabari (1967, 9:363) and Hamadah (1983: 180) who highlighted that among the important elements which underpinned the authority of his leadership were the aura and charisma of his personality since childhood, adolescence and till he became the number one man in the Tulunid Kingdom.

### III. METHODOLOGY

Therefore, the objective of this research is to examine in detail his biography in order to understand his attitude, personality, interests and credibility as a leader which can only be appraised through history. The reason for this is that an individual's personality, interests and behaviour are partially and closely related to the environment in which he was brought up. This is a qualitative research which applies biographical study. It uses documentation method for data collection focusing on primary and secondary sources. Among the important primary sources referred to is *Sirat Ibn Tulun* by al-Balawi (1939) while the main secondary source of reference is the book, *Ahmad ibn Tulun* written by Kashif (1965). Research analysis uses a descriptive method by content analysis and historical interpretation of sources. Next, research findings are arranged based on themes to identify the main ones, particularly relating to Ibn Tulun's biography as discussed by writers in authentic and highly valued works.

## IV. RESULT ANALYSIS

### A. Life of Ibn Tulun

According to Gordon (2000: 616) and Ibn Khallikan (1968, 1:173) his full name was Abu al-'Abbas Ahmad ibn Tulun and he was born in the month of Ramadan in the year 220H/835CE (al-Balawi 1939: 33; al-Maqrizi 1986, 2:313; Ibn Khallikan 1968, 1:174; Ibn Khaldun 2000, 4:385). There is a slightly different view as cited by Ibn Kathir (1998, 14:587), that his birthdate was in the year 214H/829CE. The strongest opinion based on the observations of Ahmad (2004: 87) and Kashif (1965: 17) regarding his birthplace was that he was born in Baghdad whereas Ibn Khallikan (1968, 1:174) chose Samara city. According to Kashif (1965: 17), this difference of opinion was due to the difference in the date of the existence for Samara city itself.

His father's name was Tulun which means full moon (or *al-badr al-kamil*) as recorded by Ahmad (2004: 87), Kashif (1965: 17) and al-Bustani (n.d.: 368). He was originally a Turkish slave of Nuh ibn Asad ibn Saman al-Samani, Governor of Bukhara. He was given to Caliph al-Ma'mun as a gift in the year 200H/814CE and then was liberated. In the Caliph's palace, his political career developed, beginning as an ordinary security guard until he was promoted as the chief of the elite security of the Caliph's palace. In the year 240H/855CE, he died when Ibn Tulun was 20 years old.

Similar to his father, Ibn Tulun's mother was originally a Turkish slave. A few names for his mother were recorded by historians recorded, that is, Nasim, Hashim or Qasim as reported by Ibn Khaldun (2000, 4:385), al-Balawi (1939: 34), Ibn Taghri Birdi (1932: 3) and Ahmad (2004: 87). However, Ibn Khallikan (1968, 1:174) and al-Dhahabi (1992: 46) argued that Ibn Tulun had the status of an adopted son, but this view was rejected. After Tulun's death, his mother was married a second time to Bugha al-Ashgar and then to Bakbak the third time. Both the subsequent husbands were high ranking military leaders in the Abbasid Empire then. Their influence made an impact and created a big opportunity for Ibn Tulun to develop his potential which led to his success as a *de facto* ruler of Egypt.

### B. Marriage

Ibn Tulun settled down by marrying his cousin named Khatun al-Balawi (1939: 34-35), Kashif (1965: 17) The interesting thing according to Swelim (2015: 27), is that the proposal came from her father, Yarjukh, a Turkish general who was very influential and highly respected by the Turkish society. Ibn Tulun later married Miyas, a slave who was a gift from Caliph al-Musta'in as a token of appreciation for foiling a heist by a group of bandits for valuable goods brought from the Roman Empire to Baghdad (al-Balawi 1939: 34-35). According to Kashif (1965: 265-267), Ibn Tulun then married Khadijah, daughter of al-Fath ibn Khakan al-Turki and Asma', an Egyptian. The offspring from his marriages totalled 33 persons, as mentioned by Ibn Kathir (1998, 14:591).

According to al-Balawi (1939: 349), the names of his sons were al-'Abbas (the eldest), Abu al-Jaysh Khumarawayh, Abu al-'Asha'ir Mudar, Abu Mukarram Rabi'ah, Abu al-Maqanib Shayban, Abu Nahid 'Iyad, Abu Ma'ad 'Adnan, Abu al-Karadis Khazraj, Abu Habshun 'Adi, Abu Shuja' Kindah, Abu Mansur Aghlab, Abu Lahjah Maysarah, Abu al-Baq' Huda, Abu Mufawwad Ghassan, Abu al-Faraj Mubarak, Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad and Abu al-Fath Muzaffar. And his daughters were Fatimah, Lamis, Safiyyah, Khadijah, Maymunah, Maryam, 'A'ishah, Ummu al-Huda, Mu'minah, 'Azizah, Zaynab, Samanah, Sarah and Gharirah.

### C. Personality and Character

Ibn Tulun's charisma and aura were striking as he possessed all the praiseworthy traits and character. This was asserted by Ibn Khallikan (1968, 1:173) and Ibn al-Athir (1997, 6:428), who portrayed Ibn Tulun as a just ruler, honourable, courageous, humble, virtuous, loved by the people, mentally acute, willing to listen to the problems of the masses, frequently solved problems without relying on his subordinate officers, selflessly worked hard to prosper the country, kept the welfare of the people and loved the '*ulama*' (scholars). He would provide meals equitably for all the people every month and donated a fixed monthly amount of 1,000 dinar for charitable purposes.

Further, Lane-Poole (2008: 61) highlighted his courage in foiling the heist of valuables sent by the Byzantine kingdom to al-Musta'in, in which incident Sa'id ibn Salih also killed the bandits, as recorded by al-Tabari (1967, 9:363). Ibn Tulun's refusal to murder Caliph al-Musta'in, according to Hamadah (1983: 180), showed his assertiveness in adhering to the principle of defending the truth, which was intrinsic in his character, as he did not want to compromise in any abuse of power and tyranny. The reason for this is that it is treason for any subordinate officer to ignore or disobey a decision by the top leadership. According to al-Safadi (2003: 104), Ibn Tulun also had a strategy in administering his rule. He was always monitoring his subordinate officers by planting spies to prevent them from betraying him. The reality was that he succeeded in showing his greatness as a leader in forming a strong kingdom which achieved the peak of its own civilization in various fields. The pinnacle of his success was when he declared his kingdom to be independent of the Abbasid Caliphate of that time.

### D. Religious and Military Education

During adolescence, Ibn Tulun had already showed his calibre as a champion and was always ahead of his peers. He made the military his life-time career and served in the Caliphs's army as his father's legacy. In order to develop his military and religious knowledge, he visited Samara and Tarsus. There, he studied in-depth various disciplines such as Arabic language and literature, '*aqidah*' (Islamic creed) and philosophy, al-Qur'an and *Ahadith*, pursued the discipline of Fiqh, especially the *madhhab* (school of jurisprudence) of Abu Hanifah, and Tafsir, as explained by al-Balawi (1939: 34-35) and Shalabi (1990: 88). According to Kashif (1965: 20), Ibn Tulun, while still an adolescent, was appointed as war commander to lead a *jihad* mission at the Tarsus border in order to resist the Byzantines.

### E. Appointment As Governor of Egypt and Sham (Syria)

Ibn Tulun's early arrival to Egypt in the year 254H/86CE as resident governor for the Abbasid representative, General Bakbak who was granted Egypt province under the land distribution system to the kingdom's nobility and relatives of the Caliph (*al-iqta*' system) by Caliph al-Mu'tazz as recorded by al-Kindi (2003, 1:160). The authority to rule Egypt was held by some influential individuals appointed by the Caliph. The province of Alexandria (Iskandariyyah) was under the authority of Ishak ibn Dinar, whereas Barqah province and Libya were administered by Ahmad ibn Isa al-Sa'idi. Bakar ibn Qutaybah headed the State Judicial Department and the Postal Service was headed by Shaqir al-Khadim. And Ahmad ibn al-Mudabbir headed the Customs Department. Hence, Ibn Tulun's authority to rule was limited to only Fustat city (now Cairo), while administration of other cities and the main positions were still under the mentioned individuals (al-Balawi 1939: 42-43).

After the assassination of General Bakbak in the year 256H/870CE, Egypt province changed hands to Yarjukh. The implication is that Ibn Tulun's career increasingly soared when he was given the authority to administer the whole of Egypt, Iskandariyyah and Barqah as reported by al-Balawi (1939: 46) based on the contents of a letter from Yarjukh to Ibn Tulun "...please accept from yourself for yourself". These words mean that Yarjukh gave full authority and complete freedom to Ibn Tulun to continue administering Fustat city and the whole of Egypt. Yarjukh also gave the clear signal of full recognition of the authority held by Ibn Tulun and officially and totally appointed him as the representative to Egypt and the territories surrounding her. When Yarjukh passed away in the year 258H/872CE, Ibn Tulun remained as the Governor of Egypt which was directly governed and administered from the central government of the Abbasid Caliphate.

### F. Death

As was reported by Ibn Khaldun (2000, 4:385), after Ibn Tulun ruled Egypt with full authority and power, he ultimately returned to his Creator on the 10th of Zulkaedah in the year 270H/10 May 884CE at the age of 50. Based on reports by al-Balawi (1939: 310-31) and William (1990: 229) in their study, they stated that the cause of his death was the extremely cold weather and the effect of cholera which afflicted him in his last military operation against Yazman al-Khadim at Tarsus. What is interesting is that while he was dying and fighting for his life, all the inhabitants of Egypt regardless of whether they were Muslims, Christians or Jewish, including women and children, gathered together at the hillside of Muqattam, Fustat to supplicate to Allah SWT in order to save his life, as reported by Bianquis (2006: 103).

However, he met his Lord on the 10th of May 884 and was buried in the hillside of Muqattam. According to al-Balawi (1939: 349-350), Ibn Tulun left a legacy and state wealth of 24,000 *ghilman* (Turkish slave-soldiers), 7,000 *mawali* (non-Arab Muslim slave-soldiers/freed men/employees), 7,000 horses, 3,000 camels, 1,000 donkeys, 350 ceremonial horses and 200 fully equipped warships and, Kashif (1965: 199) added, as much as 10 million *dinar* of fiscal reserve for public interest. The duration of his rule of about 16 years was one of the longest for any founder of a kingdom ever recorded in the history of Muslim kingdoms.

## V. CONCLUSION

Ibn Tulun's rule over Egypt was a seminal event as it influences Egyptian history of subsequent centuries. For the first time in Muslim history, a general of Turkish blood succeeded in making his own autonomous dynasty.

Beginning with limited powers granted by the Caliph as custodian of Egypt's wealth heritage, he ultimately realized his potential and dream of leading Egypt out of the control of the Abbasid central government. In fact, he also extended his rule to include Sham and Barqah. He did this not merely through astute political manipulation in Egypt, but in fact sustained his rule through military empowerment he carefully and thoroughly developed. Ibn Tulun achieved his main objective to conquer Arabs before he succeeded in uniting large territories, ethnic groups and religions, and fairly and equitably distributed Egypt's economic wealth. According to Mahfuz (1994: 14-20) and Faraj (1979: 281-289) this was possible because of his wisdom in implementing his rule based on Divine Revelation and the Prophet's (PBUH) guidance relating to military strength and defence based on true *aqidah* (faith) and power of *jihad* (striving hard) for the sake of seeking Allah's SWT pleasure.

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