THE SIX ARMENIAN VIZIERS OF THE FATIMID EMPIRE

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By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 19 January 2023

Battered by internal and external foes, the Egypt-based Fatimid Empire was on its last legs in the 11th century when Armenian Badr Jamali pulled the empire from the precipice and in so doing extended the empire's life by a century. As a result, he became the all-powerful vizier while the sultan became a figurehead. In the next 96 years, five other Armenian viziers ruled as absolute leaders of the country.

Born sometime between 1005 and 1008, Jamali was a Mamluk (slave) in Tripoli (in today's Lebanon). After demonstrating his superb abilities as a warrior and military commander, he was appointed military governor of Damascus and then military governor of Akka (Acre) in Palestine.

Caliph al-Mustansir, who was destitute (his treasury had been looted), secretly sent a letter to Jamali to rescue Egypt from the Seljuk Turks and Nubians. Jamali wrote back that he would assist if he could bring his Armenian guards with him. Al-Mustansir agreed. In 1073, Jamali sailed to Egypt with 100 ships and mostly Armenian warriors. Depending on the source, the Armenian warriors numbered anywhere from 2,000 to 7,000.

Jamali's agenda's first item was the elimination of the Turkish forces. He organized a banquet in honor of Turkish military leader Ildekiz and his senior staff. During the banquet, Jamali's men killed all the Turkish chieftains and then massacred the Turkish soldiers.

Jamali then eliminated all the high officials, judges and emirs, in addition to the rebellious tribesmen. His men killed 20,000 Sunni Arab tribesmen who opposed the Ismaili-Shia Fatimids. The Nubians were chastened when they witnessed the power, wile, and determination of the Armenian soldier-politician who had cleared Cairo off the enemies of the caliphate.

Jamali then recovered some of the caliph's looted treasures.

Because the low level of the Nile had resulted in famine, Jamali borrowed money from leading merchants and bought food for starving people.

In gratitude for saving his empire, the caliph appointed Jamali vizier with absolute power to run the empire.

With the military and economic crisis largely overcome, Jamali acquired the titles of commander of the armies, director of the missionaries (the Fatimids were evangelical), and vizier.

Jamali also established Fatimid rule in Yemen and Hejaz, including Mecca and Medina. He defeated the Seljuk Turks and Turkmen who had taken Jerusalem and Damascus and had attempted to invade Egypt.

He promoted his Armenian officers, among them Amir Badis (Avedis) and Nasir al-Dawlah Aftakin. He increased Armenian influence and established an Armenian church.

Jamali was a handsome man. Hence his name (Jamali means beautiful in Arabic). A contemporary Arab historian described him as a man of great "haybah" (imposing looks). A perfectionist, he was severe with people who didn't give their best. He was in his eighties when he died in 1094.



Juyushi Mosque built during Badr Jamali's reign

He was succeeded by his son (Afdal Jamali) who was vizier from 1094 to 1121. The caliph wanted to take back the powers he had bestowed on Badr Jamali but the Armenian soldiers insisted that Afdal Jamali be the new vizier and inherit all of his father's posts.

In addition to the Turks, Afdal Jamali had a new foe: the Crusaders. At first, he thought he could persuade the Crusaders to forget conquering Jerusalem and to join forces with the Egyptians to erase Turkish power in the Middle East. The Crusaders insisted on taking Jerusalem which was an Egyptian possession. Afdal tried to stop the Crusaders but was defeated in the coastal city of Ascalon (Palestine). He managed to flee back to Egypt. After the Crusaders had taken Jerusalem, every year he attempted to take back the Holy City.

There were several assassination attempts on his life, including by one of his sons. In 1121 he was murdered by a Hashasheen (Assassin) in revenge for the killing of their founder Nizar Ibn el-Mustansir.

Afdal was succeeded by a Muslim Arab vizier. But in 1130, his son (Ibn Ahmed Ibin Afdal also known as Kutayfat Jamali) became vizier. He was assassinated after two years. In the next three years the

vizier post was either vacant or a Muslim Arab was the vizier.

In 1135, another Armenian (Abu Muzaffar Bahram) became vizier. His Armenian name was probably Vahram. Of the six Armenian viziers, he was the only one not to convert to Islam. He encouraged Armenian immigration to Egypt and gave high positions to fellow Armenians. He was forced out of office after a two-year rule.

After seven years of Muslim viziers, the Armenians were back in 1154. Tala'i Ibn Ruzzik became the fifth Armenian vizier. He patronized scholars and launched a new war against the Crusaders. After ruling for six years, he was assassinated in 1160. His son (Ruzzik ibn Talai) succeeded him. Ruzzik granted generous tax exemptions to citizens and lowered fees for government services. After a two-year rule, he was killed by a Sunni military officer. Throughout the Fatimid rule of Egypt, the Egyptians, who were mostly Sunni, resented Ismaili-Shite rule. They were particularly offended by the aggressive missionary activities of the Fatimids. Ruzzik ibn Talai was the last Armenian vizier. In the next six years four Muslim Arabs became vizier. The Fatimid empire ended when Kurd Salaheddin Ayubi (Saladin) conquered Egypt.

In the last century of its life (actually 96 years), the Fatimid empire was headed by six Armenians who ruled for a total of 59 years. Some of the mosques and other buildings they built are now tourist attractions.

There are no comments yet.