

The Abbasid Ma'mun and his Ominous Objectives

The Abbasid Ma'mun, named 'Abd Allah son of Harun al-Rashid, whose mother was an ugly slave-girl called Marajil who served in Harun's court, was born in 170/786 – the year his father took over caliphate – and died at the age of 48 in 218/833, i.e., fifteen years after Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) martyrdom.

His mother died at his birth and Ma'mun left him with Ja'far b. Yahya al-Barmaki to be trained. His instructor was Fadhl b. Sahl who was famous as Dhu al-Riyasatayn and later on became Ma'mun's vizier. He was killed by Ma'mun in a bath-house in Sarakhs.

Contrary to Amin, Ma'mun lived an industrious life far from welfare; he became skillful in various sciences and more learned in jurisprudence and theology than all other caliphs.

In his predictions about the Abbasid caliphs, Imam 'Ali (a.s.) said about him: "The seventh among them will be the most erudite of all."¹

Ma'mun's Problems

It was obvious that Ma'mun was not in an ideological and spiritual mindset to hand over the caliphate to another person, since he had made great efforts in obtaining it, and had even killed his brother Amin to this end; other incidents clearly confirm this issue.

Thus, the reason for his offering the caliphate to the Imam and his insistence on his offer is to be taken as his cunning policies and plots; and the main reason is considered to be the problems he was facing, which he thought he had no choice to avoid in order to preserve his rule, except by offering the heir apparenacy. The problems he faced were:

1. He was considered a rebel by the people, especially by the Abbasids, who revolted despite Harun's will and murdered his brother Amin, who was formally the caliph.

2. Originally, he was not of adequate nobility, as his mother was a non-Arab slave-girl who lacked social distinction, contrary to Amin, whose mother, Zubayda Hashimi, was a learned woman.
3. Members of Ma'mun's inner circle were mostly Iranians, an issue with which the Arabs, especially, the Abbasids were dissatisfied.
4. The Alawis ('Alawiyan), who were very influential in Iran and particularly in Khurasan and were dissatisfied with the Abbasids, especially with Ma'mun's father whose hands were stained with many of the Alawis' blood, would rise up in revolution in different regions; Abu al-Saraya in Kufa, Zayd b. Musa in Basra, Muhammad b. Ja'far in Mecca and Hejaz, Ibrahim Musa in Yemen, Muhammad b. Sulayman in Medina, Ja'far b. Zayd b. 'Ali in Wasit, Muhammad b. Isma'il in Mada'in, etc.
5. Ma'mun was very worried of Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) influence among the Shi'as and Iranians who were loyal to him and wanted to keep his holiness under surveillance by any means possible.

In order to control the situations and to solve the problems, he thought by conferring heir apparency to Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) he could remove the main part of his problems by controlling the Alawis' revolts, legitimizing his rule, and ensuring the Iranians' consent. This had several benefits for him:

1. Suppressing the Alawis' revolt;
2. Legitimizing his rule by means of Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) joining the court;
3. Attracting the attention of the Iranians who were advocates of the Alawis;
4. Keeping Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) under surveillance and becoming secure of his holiness' probable actions (against his rule);
5. Reducing Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) prestige by getting him involved in the problems of the rule (*hukuma*) and ruining his spiritual reputation by presenting a profane and secular picture of him.

Having been forcefully submitted to heir apparency, Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) acted in a way that Ma'mun's sinister plot resulted in his own loss and made him repent of what he had done.

The actions his holiness took were divisible into the following instances: 1. Refusing to accept heir apparency for some time to the extent that Ma'mun forced his holiness to accept it. 2. Making the acceptance of heir apparency conditional on non-interference in rulership. 3. Widespread scientific and cultural activities towards the promotion of the Ahl al-Bayt's (a.s.) school of thought. 4. Expressing the power of *wilaya* and Imamate by presenting clear miracles. 5. Frequent protests against Ma'mun and his opinions on different occasions.

['Id al-Fitr Prayer](#)

One of the significant events during the era of Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) heir apparency is the Imam's setting off to perform the 'Id al-Fitr prayer.

Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) told him: "There were certain conditions set forth between you and me, on which I accepted this matter (i.e. I set the conditions that I would not interfere in the rule's affairs)".

Ma'mun said, "I just wanted to reassure the people and the troops and those rendering services and make them aware of what Allah has made you superior in." He kept insisting until his holiness said, "I would rather you spare me; otherwise, I would set off (for 'Id al-Fitr prayer) the same way as the Apostle of Allah (S) and 'Ali b. Abi Talib (a.s.) did.

Ma'mun said, "Set off as you wish."

In the morning, when people found out that Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) would set out for 'Id prayer, a throng of people, man and woman, young and old, filled up the lanes and rooftops; commanders had also gathered in the Imam's house.

At sunrise, Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) performed a *ghusl* (major ablution) and while having a white turban on and having one end let down his chest and the other between his two shoulder blades, stood up and addressed his followers: "Do as I did." Then, while holding a walking stick in hand, he came out, raised his head to the sky, and said *takbirs* (God is the greatest) in such a way that we thought the air and the walls were responding to his holiness.

Having put on their best clothes, the commanders and the people dismounted their horses and took off their shoes as soon as they saw his holiness and the entourage in that state. It is related in a tradition that some even had to cut off their footwear laces with a knife.²

The Imam (a.s.) stood next to the door and said out loud: "*Allahu akbar 'ala ma hadana....*" And those present repeated; the sound of the crowd's crying and shouting sent tremor through the city of Marv.

His holiness started to move on and after every ten steps he would pause and say three *takbirs* in a way that the heaven and the earth would respond to him. Fadhl b. Sahl – Ma'mun's vizier and commander of army – said to him: "If (Imam) al-Ridha goes on to say prayer like this, the people will be fascinated and deceived by him. You had better ask him to return." Ma'mun sent someone to the Imam to ask him to return. The Imam put on his shoes and returned.³

[The Story of Di'bil al-Khuza'i](#)

Di'bil al-Khuza'i is one of the famous poets of Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) era. He went to the presence of his holiness and said, "O son of the Apostle of Allah! I have composed a lyric poem about you and I have sworn not to recite it for anyone except after I read it to you."

His holiness said, "Read it!" and Di'bil started to recite his famous poem that begins with the following lines:

*The schools of Divine signs are left devoid of recitation [of the Qur'an],
And the descending place of Revelation has become slack and worn-out.*

After expressing the oppressed state of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) and their deprivation from their own rights, he went on with the poem:

*I see their spoils are being divided among others,
And their hands are empty of what is theirs.*

At this moment Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) wept and said, "O Khuza'i! You told the truth." Di'bil continued until he got to these lines:

*I was apprehensive in the world and in its time of striving;
And I hope to be safe after I die.*

Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) told him: "May Allah keep you safe in that Great Dread [on the Resurrection Day]. Then, Di'bil pointed out the dispersion of the Ahl al-Bayt's (a.s.) graves until he got to the following poem:

*And a grave in Baghdad [that is, Imam al-Kazim's (a.s.) grave]
For a purified soul that the Merciful God has encompassed him in chambers [of Paradise].*

Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) said, "Shall I add two couplets to this stanza to make your poems perfect?"

Di'bil said, "Yes. O son of the Apostle of Allah!"

The Imam (a.s.) said,

*And there is a grave in Tus; what a tragedy
That sets the hearts on fire that will be burning
Till the Resurrection until God will raise the Qa'im (the awaited Imam),
Who will relieve us of our sorrows and tribulations.*

Di'bil said, "O son of the Apostle of Allah! Whose is this grave that is in Tus?" His holiness answered: "It is my grave. In the near future, however, Tus will become the frequenting place of my Shi'as and visitors.

Indeed, whoever visits (makes a pilgrimage to) me in my desolation in Tus will be with me in the same rank on the Resurrection Day, while having been forgiven.

Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) Gift to Di'bil

When Di'bil finished reciting the poems, Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) told him to stay on and went into the house. After a while, the Imam's servant brought one hundred Radhawi *dinars* (which were minted in the name of his holiness) and said to Di'bil: "My master says spend these for your journey expenses."

Diʿbil said, “I swear by God that I did not come for this and I did not write my poems for a reward.” He gave back the money bag and asked the Imam to give him one of his garments to get blessed by it.

Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) sent back the money along with a robe and told the servant: “Tell him to take this bag, as he is soon going to need it.”

Diʿbil took the bag and the robe and left for Marv with a caravan. When they reached Mayan Qawhan, the highway robbers waylaid and plundered the caravan and took all the people of the caravan as captives, including Diʿbil.

The robbers were busy dividing the booty while one of them was reciting the couplet:

“I see their spoils are being divided among others,

And their hands are empty of what is theirs.”

(And this was the very poem that Diʿbil had written!)

Diʿbil asked him: “Who said this poem?” The man answered: “Someone from Khuza‘a named Di‘bi b. ‘Ali.” Then Diʿbil said, “I am Diʿbil.”

The robber rushed to his chief and informed him of what had happened. The chief came to Diʿbil and said, “Are you Diʿbil?” he said, “Yes.” The man told him to recite his poem and Diʿbil did so.

The chief of the robbers ordered Diʿbil and all others to be freed and gave them back their properties out of respect for Diʿbil.

Diʿbil continued with his journey until he reached Qum. People of Qum asked Diʿbil to recite his poem. He told them to gather in the grand mosque, and when they did, he recited the poem. People of Qum gave him a lot of money and gifts as *sila* (prize given to a poet).

Then, the people happened to get informed of the robe that Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) had given to him. They asked him to sell that robe to them for a thousand *dinars*. Diʿbil did not accept. They said, “Sell a piece of that to us for a thousand *dinars*.” He refused and left Qum.

In one of the villages near Qum, a group of Arab youths grabbed the robe from him. Diʿbil went back to Qum and asked them to return the robe.

The youth refused; they even did not listen to their elderly and told Deʿbel: “We do not give back the robe; take a thousand *dinars* for it, instead.” Diʿbil did not accept, but as he got hopeless, he asked them to give him a piece of it. They agreed and gave him a piece of the garment along with a thousand *dinars*.

Diʿbil returned home and found out that the burglars had stolen all his furniture. He sold the hundred

dinars that Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) had given to him to the Shi'as for one hundred *dirhams* each. Thus he obtained ten hundred *dirhams* and recalled that the Imam had said, "You are soon going to need it.

The Healing Robe

Di'bil had a handmaiden who was very dear to him. She was afflicted with severe eye disease. The physicians said her right eye was incurable and is lost, but they would try to cure her left eye.

Di'bil got very sad and restless, until he remembered the piece of cloth from the robe that the Imam (a.s.) had given to him; he rubbed it to her eyes and tied it to her head before she slept at night.

When the morning came, her eyes were cured and even healthier than before with the blessings of Imam al-Ridha (a.s.).[4](#)

Ma'mun's Disappointment, Problems, and New Policy

After the event of Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) heir apparenacy, Ma'mun encountered some problems the he had not foreseen so that he got caught in the traps he had set for Imam al-Ridha (a.s.).

These problems include the presence of Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) in scientific circles and his discussions with the dignitaries from among the Jews and Christians and other groups and his indisputable triumph over them, leading to the dissemination of the scholarship, piety, spirituality, and praiseworthy morality of his holiness among the people; the Imam's various endeavors in different fields that indicated his mistrust and disbelief in the ruling system; the displeasure of the Abbasids and their dignitaries with Ma'mun who had killed the then caliph, Amin, and more importantly that he had appointed Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) as his heir apparent, which would pave the way for the transformation of *hukuma* from the Abbasids to the Alawis leading to the rise of dissidence by the Abbasids which was mainly exemplified in the revolt of the people of Baghdad against Ma'mun and his dismissal and swearing allegiance to Ibrahim b. Mahdi, also known as Ibn Shakla.[5](#)

Groups and tribes other than the Abbasids and Alawis also sparked the unrest in such a way that it created much anarchy and rebellion almost causing the overthrow of his rule.[6](#)

The First Step, Killing Fadhl b. Sahl

Since Ma'mun found his policy failed, he decided to reconsider it, turning from political to military action. To this end, he set out for Baghdad so as to appease the dissident Abbasids and restore peace in there.

It is said that in his first step he decided to murder Fadhl b. Sahl, his trainer, vizier, and chief of armed forces, the one who had made great attempts to strengthen Ma'mun, whose caliphate was indebted to his policy and sincere measures.

The story goes that, upon Ma'mun's decision, Fadhl b. Sahl came to Marv in order to set out for Baghdad and Ma'mun ordered four of his agents to kill him incognito in the bath-house. After the order was executed, Ma'mun, to evade murder charge, ordered his men to mobilize for finding the murderers of Sahl and set a prize for their arrest.⁷

He finally charged those four agents with murder, executed them, and sent their heads to his brother Hasan b. Sahl for condolences.⁸ Thus, this was the first step he took toward pleasing the Abbasids, for Fadhl b. Sahl was one of the main culprits of transferring caliphate to the Alawis.

It is related in some traditions that Hasan b. Sahl had asked his brother Fadhl to go to the bath-house with Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) and Ma'mun and bleed by cupping so that the blood may fend off the ill-fatedness that had been augured for him!

When he sent this request to Ma'mun and the latter asked Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) to go to the bath-house with him, his holiness answered: "I do not go to the bath-house tomorrow and I do not consider it to be in your best interest to go, either.

It is not in the best interest of Fadhl either to go to bath tomorrow." And as Ma'mun insisted his holiness said, "I saw the Apostle of Allah tonight in a dream who told me: 'O 'Ali! Do not go to the bath-house and I do not see it in your interest that you and Fadhl go to bath-house.'" And Ma'mun consented.

After sunset, Imam al-Ridha said, "Say we take refuge in God from the evil being descended tonight." After the Morning Prayer he said, "Say we take refuge in God from what is being descended tonight..." Near the sunrise, his holiness told his servant, Yasir, to go on the rooftop to see if he hears anything.

He said, "When I went on the rooftop, I heard wailing and mourning." At this moment Ma'mun entered and told his holiness: "My master! May God reward you concerning Fadhl; they killed him in the bath-house! Soldiers and officers and loyalists of Fadhl gathered in Ma'mun's house and said, "Ma'mun has assassinated him."

They had brought fire to set the door of Mann's house on fire (and enter it). Ma'mun requested Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) to go to the people, if he deemed advisable, to disperse them. His holiness went to his house door and found the people thronging there.

He waved them to disperse and they all dispersed. By God, the people went away in such a hurry that they stumbled on each other; whomever he waved to would run to leave.⁹

Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) Murderer

Anyway, the killing of Fadhl b. Sahl was a great step toward appeasement of the Abbasids but it was definitely not enough, since their protest was mainly aimed at Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) heir apparenacy, which had disappointed the Abbasids. For this reason, Ma'mun decided to get rid of his holiness.

He had to execute this plot in such a skillful way that he would not only be accused but also would benefit from the martyrdom of the Imam (a.s.); and that was why he plotted the matter so cunningly that even some historians were mistaken or doubtful about his being involved in murdering Imam al-Ridha (a.s.).^{[10](#)}

Ma'mun left Marv for Baghdad. He killed Fadhl b. Sahl in the bath-house in Sarakhs and left for Tus to set out for Baghdad from there. He lingered for a while near his father's tomb in Tus to execute his ominous plot to martyr Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) and set the minds of the Abbasids' dissidents at ease in this respect before getting to Baghdad.

Islamic traditions and historical reports all denote the criminal role of the Abbasid Ma'mun in Imam al-Ridha's (a.s.) martyrdom. Imam 'Ali (a.s.) had said, "A man from among my descendants will be wrongfully poisoned to death; his name is my name, and his father's name is the name of Musa b. 'Imran. Let it be known that whoever visits (makes a pilgrimage to) him in his desolation, God will forgive their sins..."^{[11](#)}

Similarly, Imam al-Kazim (a.s.) said, "My son, 'Ali, will be wrongfully poisoned to death and buried next to Harun; whoever visits (makes a pilgrimage to) him is like the one who has made a pilgrimage to the Prophet (S)."^{[12](#)}

Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) himself said, "By God, there is no one among us who will not be killed as martyr." They asked: "O son of the Apostle of Allah! Who will kill you?" His holiness answered: "The most mischievous of God's creatures in my time will poison me to death."^{[13](#)}

Unsuccessful Assassination of Imam al-Ridha (a.s.)

It is reported through some narrations that once Ma'mun appointed some of his retainers with sharp and poisoned swords to attack Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) by night and cut his body into pieces. He offered them large rewards for this task and for concealing it.

They (apparently) performed the task and reported back to Ma'mun, imagining that they had killed the Imam. The next day, Ma'mun appeared in a distressed and disheveled appearance pretending to be mourning for the Imam, but when his courier notified him that the Imam is alive and well, he went pale, changed his clothes, and ordered to announce that the Imam had passed out and now has come to his senses. Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) said, "By God, these tricks are of no avail as long as what has been destined to come true."^{[14](#)}

^{1.} Ibn Shahrashub, Manaqib, vol. 2, p. 276.

^{2.} Muntaha al-Amal vol. 2.

^{3.} Kulayni, Usul al-Kafi, Kitab al-Hujja, vol. 2, p.407.

^{4.} 'Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha (a.s.), vol. 2, p. 267; Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 49, 238.

^{5.} Tabari, 7/140.

^{6.} Ibn Khaldun, Muqaddima, 1/405.

- [7.](#) Tabari, 7/148.
- [8.](#) Muhadhirat Ta'rikh al-Umam al-Islamiyya, p. 182; see: Imam 'Ali b. Musa al-Ridha (a.s.), p. 165.
- [9.](#) Usul al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 406 and 'Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha (a.s.).
- [10.](#) Cf. Al-Sayyid 'Ali b. Tawus and Al-Irbili, Bihar al-Anwar, vol.49, p. 311.
- [11.](#) Wasa'il al-Shi'a, vol. 10, chapter 82, Al-Mazar, hadith 9.
- [12.](#) Ibid, vol. 21.
- [13.](#) 'Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha (a.s.), vol. 2, p. 256.
- [14.](#) 'Uyun Akhbar al-Ridha (a.s.), vol. 2, p. 215.

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