

**The Economic Crises and Famine in Egypt as  
Chroniced by Al-Maqrizi in Hhis Book  
“Eghathat Al Umma Fi Kashf Al Ghumma” (The  
Rescue of the Nation Through Plight  
Eradication)  
Al- Mustansiriyah Plight as an Example\***

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## Abstract

*This study addresses the economic crises and famine that Egypt went through throughout the Islamic history, with special focus on the great famine that afflicted Egypt during the reign of Caliph al-Mustansir Billah - the fifth Caliph of the Fatimid State in Egypt. Historians named this famine as "al-Shidah al-Mustansiriyah" (al-Mustansiriyah plight) as it was one of the most severe famine that impacted Egypt.*

*The study started by reviewing the economic crises and famines that afflicted Egypt since the advent of Islamic rule in 21 AH/642 AD till the end of the Fatimid caliph reign, al-Mustansir Billah, in 487 AH/1094 AD. The study discussed two research topics. The first topic was divided into two sections. The first section tackled the crises that occurred in Egypt over the period of time that extended from the beginning of Islamic Ruling in Egypt till the end of Ikhshidid dynasty in 358 AH/969 AD. Whereas the second section addressed the famines and crises that happened during the period that extended from the Fatimid ruling in Egypt till 427 AH/1036 AD. The study focused on the economic crises' causes and economic, social and political impacts.*

*The second topic of the study addressed the economic crises during the ruling of Caliph al-Mustansir Billah (427-478 AH/1036-1094 AD). Special focus was devoted on al-Mustansiriyah plight and its reasons of occurrence, intensity, the extent of its impact on the state and the Egyptian society at that time, in addition to the measures that were taken by the state to escape this crisis.*

*The study concluded with general recommendations deduced from exploring the famines' causes, impacts and the measures taken by the state to limit them.*

**Keywords:** Economic Crises, Famines, Walis Time, Tulunian State, Ikhshidid State, Fatimid State, Al-Mustansir Billah, Mustansiriyah Plight

الأزمات الاقتصادية والمجاعات في مصر كما أرخ لها المقريري في كتابه "إغاثة الأمة في كشف الغمة": الشدة المستنصرية أنموذجاً

## ملخص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الأزمات الاقتصادية والمجاعات التي عاشتها مصر عبر التاريخ الإسلامي، مع التركيز على تلك المجاعة الكبرى التي حلت بها إبان حكم الخليفة المستنصر بالله\_ خامس خلفاء الدولة الفاطمية في مصر-والتي أطلق عليها المؤرخون لشدها اسم " الشدة المستنصرية".

بدأت الدراسة باستعراض الأزمات الاقتصادية والمجاعات التي حلت بمصر منذ بداية الحكم الإسلامي سنة 21هـ/642م وحتى نهاية حكم الخليفة المستنصر بالله الفاطمي سنة 487هـ/1094م، وذلك ضمن مبحثين. احتوى المبحث الأول على قسمين، تناول القسم الأول الأزمات التي حلت بمصر في الفترة الزمنية الممتدة من بداية الحكم الإسلامي على مصر وحتى نهاية العهد الإخشيدى سنة 358هـ/969م. في حين اختص القسم الثاني بالمجاعات والأزمات التي حدثت إبان الحكم الفاطمي على مصر حتى سنة 427هـ/1036م. وركزت الدراسة في استعراضها لتلك الأزمات الاقتصادية على أسبابها وأثارها الاقتصادية والاجتماعية والسياسية.

وفي المبحث الثاني تناولت الدراسة الأزمات الاقتصادية في عهد الخليفة المستنصر بالله (427-487هـ/1036-1094م)، مع التركيز على موضوع الشدة المستنصرية بالبحث في أسباب حدوثها، وشدها، وعمق تأثيرها على الدولة وفئات المجتمع المصري آنذاك، والإجراءات التي اتخذتها الدولة للخروج من هذه الأزمة العاتية.

وختمت الدراسة بتوصيات عامة استنبطتها من بحثها في أسباب المجاعات وأثارها والإجراءات التي اتخذتها الدولة للحد منها. كلمات مفتاحية: الأزمات الاقتصادية، عصر الولاة، الدولة الطولونية، الدولة الإخشيدية، الدولة الفاطمية، المستنصر بالله، الشدة المستنصرية.

## Importance of the Study

The importance of studying the economic crises and major famines that afflict the states stems from:

1. The need to acquire knowledge on the negative impacts such crises would leave on political, economic, social and developmental aspects of the states.
2. The need to understand that economic crises and famines are considered a significant indicator to measure states' strength and resilience in overcoming such crises and curbing their damages.
3. The fact that major famines are often associated with violence, disorder and the lack of security and stability. If this was associated with weakness in the central state control, then such famines may lead to the collapse of such states.

## Methodology

The study used the descriptive historical and analytical method. Information was collected from historical sources, references and research papers that tackled the crises that inflicted Egypt. The gathered information was then subjected to scientific research principles and process, to form an image that is close to the historical facts, while following, at the same time, the principles of historical writing methods and rules.

## Temporal Borders of Study

The study tackles the economic crises and famines that inflicted Egypt in the following Islamic periods: Walis time (21-245 AH/42-868 AD), Tulunian State (254-292 AH/868-905 AD), Abbasid Caliphate direct ruling over Egypt (292-324 AH/868-935 AD), Ikhshidid ruling (324-358 AH/935-969 AD), and Fatimid State till the end of al-Mustansir Billah reign (358-478 AH/969-1094 AD).

## Resources

The study used several historical resources and references, yet it concentrated on the books of Taqi-Eddin al-Maqrizi, “Eghathat Al Umma Fi Kashf Al Ghumma” and, “Ettiath Alhunafa Be Akhbar Alaimma Alfatimeyyn Al-Kholafaa”. Taqi-Eddin al-Maqrizi was considered one of the most important historians of Egypt in the ninth Hijri century. He left an extensive collection of books that included “Ettiath Alhunafa Be Akhbar Alaimma Alfatimeyyn Al-Kholafaa” which is considered the most

comprehensive resource on the Fatimid history. Moreover, he wrote, “Eghathat Al Umma Fi Kashf Al Ghumma” in which he chronicled the famines and economic distresses that afflicted Egypt before Islam up to year 808 AH/1405 AD. In the book, he studied the causes of each crisis and their impacts on the state and the people. He also drew a number of views and analyses that are important to each learner interested in the Islamic Egyptian economic history.

## First Research Topic: Introduction to Economic Crises and Famines that Occurred in Egypt Up to Year 478 AH/1094 AD: Causes and Effects

We will review in this topic the most important economic crises and famines that occurred in Egypt throughout the Islamic periods up to year 478 AH/1094 AD. However, the aim of this section is to emphasize the fact that the people who were able to survive such crises and famines in the past, have special traits that qualify them along with their children and grandchildren to override the hardest difficulties on their path to building their future.

### 1.1 Economic Crises and Famines that Afflicted Egypt since the Arab Conquest to the End of Ikhshidid Rule (21-358 AH/624-969 AD)

When reviewing Egypt's economic crises and famines, references should be made to historical sources that were concerned with recording such crises, at the top of which is the book of “Eghathat Al Umma Fi Kashf Al Ghumma.” AL-Maqrizi emphasized in the book that the first time prices hiked in Egypt was in the year 87 AH/706 AD, in the period of Walis.(1)

The period of Walis started in Egypt in 21 AH/642 AD, and ended with Ahmad Ibn Tulun<sup>1</sup> in 254 AH/868 AD. This period is named the age of Walis because Egypt was then a territory subjugated to the Islamic State, governed by Walis who are appointed by the Caliph. The caliphates used to send the Walis from their main centers in Medina in the time of the righteous caliphs, and from al-Kufa in the time of Ali bin Abi Taleb, and from Damascus in the

<sup>1</sup>\*Ahmad Ibn Tulun (220-270 H) he was the governor of the Abbasside State in Egypt, then became independent from the Caliphate to establish the Tulunian State in Egypt and the Levant in the period (254-280 H). Vide: Ibn

KHelkan, Ahmad bin Mohammad, Wafeyyat al-Ayan Waabnaa al-Zaman, studied by Ihsan Abbas, Dar al-THaqafa, Beirut, 1972 AD, Vol. 1, P. 172.

Umayyads time and lastly from Baghdad in the time of the Abbasids(2). However, studies argued that the economic life during this period was characterized by prosperity as Walis heeded to agriculture, trade and industry.(3) However, this does not imply that this period was free of economic crises. Al-Maqrezi stated in his book "Eghathat Al Umma Fi Kashf Al Ghumma," that the first time prices hiked in Islamic Egypt was during the reign of Abdullah bin Abdelmalik bin Marwan in 87 AH/706 AD.(4) This narrative was supported by al-Kindi in his book "Walis of Egypt." He stated "during his reign (Abdullah bin Abdelmalik bin Marwan) prices went up in Egypt, hence Egyptians saw him as an evil omen. That was the first plight they witnessed. They alleged that he was bribed. His adversaries multiplied wildly."(5)

The age of Walis witnessed another severe drought documented by Abu al-Mahasen in his book "Brilliant Stars" during the second ruling of al-Wali "Hafs bin al-Waleed" who was appointed by Hisham bin Abdelmalek to Egypt in 124 AH/741 AD. The drought was caused by decline in the water level of the Nile River,(6) which prompted al-Wali to pray to God for rain.(7)

The rule of Walis ended in Egypt in 254 AH/868 AD, and the age of the Tulunian State started. It lasted until 293 AH/905 AD. Historical studies argued that Egypt lived through economic welfare and prosperity in that period.(8) However, it was not really free of economic crises, notably this was witnessed in 290 AH/902 AD,(9) in which the Nile water level diminished below the standard level, so people became thirsty and turned to praying to God for rain. Nonetheless, the Nile water remained low, and the economic crisis aggravated over the subsequent years. It seems that this crisis had helped in the disruption of the Tulunian political conditions, and finally the fall of their state in 293 AH/905 AD.

After the fall of the Tulunian State, Egypt returned to direct subjugation to the Abbasids caliphate for three centuries (292-324 AH/868-935 AD). It seems that the states in this period were not subjected to economic crises and famines similar to the previously witnessed ones. This was evidenced by al-Maqrezi in his book "Eghathat Al Umma Fi Kashf

Al Ghumma" where no plight was mentioned in which Egypt went through during these years, nor did he point to any decrease in the Nile water level below the safe level.(10)

The Ikhshidid ruled Egypt in the period 324-358 AH/935-969 AD and during this age economic crises accelerated in pace and increased in number.(11) The age of Ikhshidid witnessed an unprecedented number of economic crises that never occurred in all the preceding ages of Islamic Egypt since the Islamic conquest. This was documented by different resources that indicated that these economic crises lasted for consecutive years; starting from 341 AH/952 AD due to huge number of mice that consumed the crops and wasted the vines. These events were concurred with the decrease in the Nile's water level. The plight continued for three years and peaked in 343 AH/954 AD where wheat disappeared from the markets, and famines exacerbated. Consequently, people revolted and broke the dais of al-Fustat mosque.(12) Al-Maqrezi added that such crisis reoccurred in 352 AH due to the decline in the Nile water. Consequently, the price of bread and wheat tripled. The crisis continued for nine consecutive years, and the Nile water level continued to decline, which deprived the land of water. Thus, the crisis intensified, prices multiplied, and the "Ardeb"<sup>2\*</sup> of wheat was sold for 6 dinars. Moreover, tribulations increased, estates and vintages were looted, and wars expanded among the Ikhshidid soldiers.(13) These successive series of famines were behind the fall of the Ikhshidid State.(14)

## **1.2 Economic Crises and Famines in Cairo during the Fatimid Ruling Up to Year 427 AH/1036 AD.**

Dr. Mohammad Barakat indicates in his study on economic crises and scourges in Islamic Egypt that the Fatimid era was the stage of economic contradictions. It was considered the golden age for Islamic Egypt, where the economy reached a high level of strength and prosperity. However, it also witnessed economic crises that never preceded in any time of the Islamic Egypt history. (15)

Fatimid era started in Egypt with the entry of the commander Jawhar al-Siqilli<sup>3\*</sup> to Egypt

<sup>2\*</sup> Ardeb: Islamic measure used in weighing and measuring during the Islamic ages and equals 159 Kg.

<sup>3\*</sup> Jawhar al-Siqilli (928-992 AD), known also as JAWHER Al-Rumi, one of the most famous leaders of the Fatimid State. He is the founder of Cairo city and builder of al-Azhar Mosque. Vide: Ibn KHelkan, Wafeyyat al-ayan.

accompanied by the soldiers of the Fatimid ruler al-Muez le-Deen Ellah\*4 in 358 AH/696 AD. Egypt was then suffering from severe economic crisis.(16) Al-Maqrezi mentioned that "there was no parallel crisis before in the Islamic state."(17)

The crisis was aggravated by the decline in the Nile's water level, and the death of the ruler Kafour Ikhshidid.<sup>5\*</sup> Many riots erupted, and tribulations multiplied and there were many fights between the soldiers and Emirs in which many people were killed. Moreover, during the crisis, markets blundered, money was lost, prices hiked and the supplies were short, even the Ardeb of wheat was sold at one dinar."(18)

One of the priorities of the commander Jawhar al-Siqilli since entering Egypt was limiting the economic crisis sustained by the country. Thus, he established order and security, reclaimed the value of the currency after it was devalued and limited cheating. He revived the cultivation of the land utilizing the stability in the Nile water level, and compensated the affected poor and needy people. In addition, he reduced taxes(19) and appointed a rigid man called Suleiman bin Izza to handle finances. Bin Izza monitored and controlled wheat traders and supervised the millers and cut the monopoly that caused the hike in prices.(20) In spite of such measures, the country's fierce economic crisis continued and only subsided after almost three years.(21) By the end of this famine, the Fatimid al-Muez Ledeen Ellah came to power in Cairo. In order to limit the crises caused by the decline in the Nile level, he ordered to submit to him and to Jawhar al-Siqilli only a daily report showing any developments in the Nile water level, first hand.(22) Supposedly, this was one of the factors preventing economic crises from reoccurring in Egypt for the rest of al-Muez Ledeen Ellah reign.

During the caliphate of the Fatimid el-Aziz Bellah<sup>6\*</sup> (365-368 AH/979-996 AD), Egypt witnessed several consecutive economic crises, which started in 371 AH/981 AD and continued up to

374 AH/984 AD. These crises were described by Ibn Ibek saying, "high prices continued and people suffered from famine none like in all territories... They were difficult years. We seek refuge in God from such likeness."(23) In spite of the negative impacts that such crises left on people and the state, the reforms made by the caliph el-Aziz Bellah had mitigated its severity.

During the caliphate of the Fatimid al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (386-411 AH/996-1020 AD),<sup>7\*</sup> Egypt witnessed a series of violent economic crises and famines, which resulted in merciless outcomes. This includes the crises which happened in 387AH/997AD, mainly in the year following the assumption of power by al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah. Al-Maqrezi documented the crisis and stated that it was a serious economic crisis, "the price was stripped, and wheat was demanded but couldn't be bought. Fear was intense among people and women were seized from streets. The conditions aggravated, and the bread price reached one DH (4) per pound." (24)

In 395 AH/1004 AD another economic crisis broke out due to the decline in the Nile water level. Thus, prices went up, and the crisis was aggravated by tampering in the exchange rate by traders and the increased value of dinar.(25) Consequently, there was a need to call upon the central authority to intervene and redress currency. Thus, twenty boxes were sent from the Muslims treasury full of new DHs divided among banks. People were required to replace the old DHs with new ones, and they were obliged to use them. Nonetheless, such crisis could have been resolved if the authority made the value of the new DHs within the rationale exchange rate. However, they decided to sell each new DH to people for four old DHs. The bread and wheat were also rated according to the new DH, which was the reason behind the increase in prices. AL-Maqrezi stated, "commotion increased among people, they were overburdened with expenditure, and conditions stalled for this reason."(26) Conditions became worse with the decline of the Nile water level the following year. The states risked true famine. In order

<sup>4\*</sup>Appendix: list in names of the Fatimid state caliphs in Egypt

<sup>5\*</sup>Kafour Al-Ikhshidi: (292-357AH/905-968AD), he was an Ethiopian slave and became the fourth Ikhshidid state ruler in Egypt and the Levant. His rule lasted for 23 years and he is credited with the survival of AL Ikhshidid state

in Egypt. To know more, vide: IBN KHelkan, Wafeyyat Al-Ayan, vol. 1, p. 376.

<sup>6\*</sup>Appendix: list in names of the Fatimid state caliphs in Egypt

<sup>7\*</sup> Appendix: list in names of the Fatimid state caliphs in Egypt

not to aggravate the situation, the central authority intervened through imposing stringent measures, described by al-Maqrezi as follows, "orders were forwarded to Masoud al-Saqlabi, who was appointed to manage security affairs (Alsetr), and to review pricing. Consequently, grain traders, millers and bakers were summoned and the inventory in the stock were seized, and orders were issued not to sell them but to millers"(27) in order prevent storing them by people, so they were pacified in the presence of bread.(28)

In 398 AH/1007 AD, the decline in the Nile water level reoccurred, and similar crisis lasted up to 399 AH/1009 AD. Therefore, people rebelled and congregated in front of the ruler's palace asking for help. Thus, the ruler "rode his donkey" as expressed by al-Maqrezi and went out of "Bab al-Bahr". He stood there and said, "I'm going to Rashda Mosque, I swear by God if I come back and find on the road tread led by my donkey not covered with grain, I'll cut the neck of whoever keeps some grain, and I'll burn his house and loot his property. Therefore, no one in Egypt and Cairo kept any grain in the houses and carried it from their houses and placed it on the roads... thus the eyes of people were filled, and souls satiated."(29) Through this measure, the ruler al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah<sup>8</sup> was able to save his country from indubitable famine atrocities. After that year, al-Maqrezi did not mention in his book "Eghathat Al Umma Fi Kashf Al Ghumma" any new famines and economic crises, although the level of the Nile water kept alternating. Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah was able to control such scourges and reduced their negative impact on his country.

In the age of al-Thaher Leezaz Dein Ellah bin Alhakim (411-427 AH/1020-1035 AD)<sup>9\*</sup> Cairo witnessed a number of fierce economic crises and famines, the severity of which was intensified due to his weak personality and being indulged in pleasures, leaving the responsibility of the state management to state men, who ransacked the country. The most severe famine lasted two years (414-416 AH/1023-1026 AD). Another famine occurred in 426 AH/1044 AD(30).

### 1.3 Study of the Causes of Economic Crises and Famines that Afflicted Egypt Since the Islamic

Conquest in 21 AH/642 AD until the End of Al-Hakim Bi-Amr Allah Ruling in 411 AH/1020 AD.

After reviewing the most important famines that Cairo witnessed across the Islamic eras, the study explains in the following section that most famines were associated with two factors, natural factor and human factor.

First, the natural factor is the alternating level of the Nile water, where the increase or decrease in the Nile water level would affect directly and tangibly the life of Egyptians with either prosperity or drought. Thus, Walis of Egypt, since the time of Caliph Omar bin al-Khattab –may God have mercy on his soul– paid special attention to measure the Nile flood, to estimate land taxation on agricultural lots, and forecast the years of hardship and boom. They were concerned with rectifying old measures in addition to creating new measures. Most notably –as al-Maqrezi stated in his book– the Walis followed three measures. The first one is the Fulfillment measure and sometimes called "al-sultan" measure, which was used to indicate that the Nile water reached a satisfactory level that suits the country needs of irrigation water. Measure of fulfillment equals 16 cubits. The Walis used this measure since the beginning of the Islamic conquest. The second measure is the level of drought, which pointed to the decline in the Nile water level and portends a year of drought and aridity. It equals 12 cubits and was used from the beginning of Islamic conquest. The third measure is "al-estibhar" in which the Nile water would exceed overly 18 cubits.(31)

With the passage of time, the Nile measure changed due to silt sedimentation brought by floods, and due to the negligence of the state to clean the canals, watercourses and water conduits. This resulted in the rise of the river's level. This explains the cause of famine that occurred in 387 AH/997 AD. Although the water reached 16 cubits and seven fingers,(32) it did not reach the level of adequacy which is 12 cubits. This also explains the famine that occurred in 398 AH/1007 AD though the Nile water level reached 17 cubits and 10 fingers.(33)

As for the second factor, it is a human factor and it is the reason behind economic plights in Cairo. It includes the weakness of rulers, political commotions, tribulations and local conflicts and

<sup>8</sup>\* Appendix: list in names of the Fatimid state caliphs in Egypt

<sup>9</sup>\* Appendix: list in names of the Fatimid state caliphs in Egypt

clashes, in addition to administrative and financial corruption. Moreover, it includes the assumption of responsibilities and important political positions such as the ministries, judiciary territory representation and finance by inefficient and incompetent persons. This was indicated by al-Maqrizi, who stated that the first reason for plights is the "mismanagement by rulers and leaders, and their indifference to look into the interests of people." (34) In addition to "obtaining the Sultan plans and religious positions by bribe... so they are accessible only through plentiful money. Thereby, they are given to ignorant and corrupt and unjust aggressors." (35)

## **Second Research Topic: The Economic Crises and Famines in the Time of al-Mustansir Billah (327-487 AH/ 1036 - 1094 AD)\*10**

### **2.1 Famines and Economic Crises that Preceded al- Mustansiriyah Plight**

Al-Mustansir Billah took over the reign of rule following the death of his father al-Thaher, where Egypt witnessed a series of fierce famines, the most severe one was al-Mustansiriyah plight or the great famine.

The series of famines started in the time of al-Mustansir Billah entailing the incident of the high prices in 444 AH/1052 AD, which al-Maqrizi chronicled by saying that the main reason behind this crisis is the decline in the Nile water below the standard limit required for irrigation. This led to higher prices and shortage of grains in the Sultan stores. The Sultan stores were emptied of grains by the vizier abu Mohammad al-Eazouri.<sup>11\*</sup> It was common to purchase grains for 100,000 dinar annually by the caliph to stock and trade them. Thus, the caliph determines the selling price of the grains. This forced the traders to sell the grains at the same rate, so that prices would remain constant. Moreover,

the grains bought by the caliph annually represented the strategic reserve of the country in emergency times. The state used to distribute such grains to bakers and millers at the time of crises to alleviate the suffering of people.<sup>(36)</sup> However, the vizier al-Eazouri did not take measures regarding the grain stores the way a responsible state man should act. On the contrary, he was the same as the traders, chasing profits and looks after his interests.<sup>(37)</sup> He convinced the caliph of the necessity to replace those grains with stuff that generates more money not junk materials such as timber, iron, lead, soap, honey and others. The caliph accepted his vizier proposal without heeding the consequences.<sup>(38)</sup>

It seems that the negative impacts of emptying the Sultan stores from grains by al-Eazouri was noticed after three years from the date this procedure took place in 447 AH/1055 AD.<sup>12\*</sup> During that year, a decline occurred in the Nile flood level, and the agriculture was disrupted so the traders seized this opportunity and started stocking and hiding wheat crops. This escalated the prices of wheat crops and the people conditions became worse. The vizier Abu Mohammad al-Bazouri recognized his mistake and attempted to treat this crisis by confiscating the traders' stocks, sealing and lodging them into the Sultan stores. Moreover, he fixed the wheat prices and forced the traders to sell the wheat crops at the same rates. He imposed penalty on whoever would violate this and allocated a daily share of wheat to bakers to bake and sell to the people. These measures helped in overcoming this crisis until the Nile water level returned to normality. In this al-Maqrizi said, "Al-Earouzi had managed very well, for 20 months until the second year, grains were abundant, and people were relieved as the high prices of the wheat crops were controlled due to the good measures taken." (39)

<sup>10\*</sup> Al-Mustanser Bellah: Abu Tamim Maad bin al-Thaher Leezaz Dein Allah, the 5<sup>th</sup> of Fatimid caliphs in Egypt, and their 8<sup>th</sup> from AL-MAHDI. He assumed the Caliphate after the death of his father, and ruled over the period (427-478 AH/1036-1094 AD). To know more, vide: IBN KHelkan, Wafeyyat al-Ayan, vol. 5, pp. 229-231.

<sup>11\*</sup> Al-Yazouri: bu Mohammad al-Hasan bin Ali bin Abdelrahman master of viziers in the rule of Fatimid

caliph al-Mustanser Bellah, Ibn al-Sirafi, Aleshara lmn nal-alwezara, reviewed by Abdallah Mukhlis, BIFAO 1924, pp. 40-45.

<sup>12\*</sup> Ibn al-Athee Rcited in the events of 447 AH "in which high prices and epidemic aggravated and death prevailed in Egypt", Ibn al-Atheer, al-Kamel fi Attarikh, vol. 9, p.631.

## 2.2 Al- Mustansiriyah Plight: Causes and Effects

Historians used the term of “al- Mustansiriyah plight” to refer to the great famine that afflicted Egypt during the reign of the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir Billah that lasted for seven years. Al-Maqrezi cited that the beginning of this plight was in 457 AH/1066 AD and described it as a “prohibitively high prices, badly memorized, and went on for seven years.”(40)

The causes behind such plight were various. It seemed that from al-Maqrezi writings, one would assume that the main cause behind the fall of the ministry’s condition and the killing of vizier Abu Mohammad al-Bazouri, were as he said, “when the vizier Abu Mohammad was killed, the state had not witnessed good governance, nor the affairs were straightened, and no vizier had ever retained good governance, or his measures accepted. There was an escalation in the conditions of the state, differences occurred between the state slaves, and viziers powers declined in managing the state affairs due to their relative tenure.”(41) It is understood from this script that the speed by which viziers were changed after the murder of al-Barouzi had attenuated the ministry institution. Viziers were not able to manage the state affairs, the fact which enabled other men of the court and army commanders to dominate the caliph who run most of the country management to his state men. In addition to that, disorder prevailed the country due to the conflicts that broke out between different army subjects. This is what al-Maqrezi meant by saying “and the difference occurred between the state slaves.”(42) The Fatimid military was establishing its army which included different racial subjects such as the Moroccans, Turks, Black subjects from the Negros and slaves in addition to Bedouins and Egyptians. However, few conflicts had erupted between these subjects since the rule of al-Hakem and al-Thaher. The state authority could curb them. In the time of al-Mustansir Billah, conflicts among the soldiers became prominent, and their risks on the state increased as the viziers asked for help from some members of the military. The security and stability disarranged in the country, and the actual authority of the state started to fall into the hands of the military’s conflicting groups.(43)

The country suffering due to aggravation of seditions and wars among its militaries. All of this was accompanied with recurred decline of the Nile flooding throughout seven consecutive years leading the country to extreme famine. Due to the weak ruling

authority, the damages of such famine exacerbated as results were seen in the disaster that was about to devastate the country.

Al-Mustansiriyah plight left great impacts on the Egyptian people, and whoever followed the historians’ documentation of incidents realizes what Cairo had suffered during this famine. We find that the suffering was intolerable as what Ibn al-Qalansi mentioned. He said that the lack of food and severe hunger, forced people to eat corpses, the dead meat, dogs and cats, where the price of one dog might reach 5 dinars and the cat 3 dinars. Such animals disappeared and no animals remained to be slaughtered, even in the stable of the caliph himself.(44) On the other hand, al-Maqrezi added, that the conditions became worse and people started to kidnap each other in order to survive. Corrupt people used to live in low-ceiling houses close to passages, where it was easy to kidnaped people. Hooks and ropes especially made for that purpose were used. The kidnapers would strike them with pieces of wood in order to dissect their flesh and eat them.(45) In another narrative, al-Maqrezi mentioned that once a day the vizier Abu Almakarem al-Musharraf bin Saad bin Aqeel would get off of his mule, and while his guard would not take notice because of hunger, the mule was seized by three men and slaughtered. However, the vizier caught and crucified them. But in the morning, the only thing left of them was their bones as people have devoured them.(46)

The conditions became critical in Cairo to the point that people sold all what they owned in order to obtain food. It was narrated that a well-off woman was seen selling her valuable necklace worth 1000 dinar to get a handful of flour. But people stole it on her way home and she was left with an amount enough to make one loaf only. She took the loaf and stood on a high ground near the palace of al-Mustansir Billah and shouted at the top of her voice “people of Cairo pray for our ruler al-Mustansir Billah who pleased the people during his reign and brought them the blessings of good care in order to pay 1000 dinar for this loaf.”(47) In another similar narrative, a wealthy man appeared before al-Mustansir Billah complaining that people stole wheat from him which he had bought for 70 dinar and nothing was left but a mere seventy grains.(48)

This famine was associated with eating corpses, dead meat and human flesh, where plague pestilence spread and took the lives of many people until the people couldn’t shroud their victims. As a



result, they threw the dead in the Nile without shrouds. This action increased the proliferation of pandemics and diseases, and some estimated that such plague had claimed the lives of two-thirds of the Egypt population.(49)

Facing such disasters, people fled to the Levant and Iraq, led by the traders who sold al-Mustansir Billah clothes and property which they looted from his treasures.(50)

About the condition of the caliph during the crisis, al-Maqrizi said, "the matter had reached an extent to which al-Mustansir sold all his palace belongings such as supplies, clothing, furniture, weapons and other stuff. He reached a phase where he was sitting on straw mats and his divans disrupted and lost his reverence. Women of his palace were coming out with their loose hair and shouting: the hunger, and some of them died because of hunger at the time."(51) Al-Mustansir, during this plight, used to ride alone, and all his entourage were on foot without animals to ride on, and in such a procession they used to fall on the roads because of hunger, and ultimately al-Mustansir's mother and daughters headed to Baghdad due to extreme hunger in 462 AH.(52)

Among the impacts of this fierce crisis, the state of al-Mustansir Billah started to collapse and fall, losing many territories. Baghdad returned to the Abbasids Caliphate, and the sermon for al-Mustansir was disrupted in Mecca and al-Medina. The Normans entered Sicily, and occupied it in 463 AH/1071 AD after it had remained for a long time part of the Fatimid state property.(53)

### **2.3 Measures Taken by al-Mustansir Billah to Reduce the al- Mustansiriyah Plight**

Al-Mustansir Billah tried to reduce the famine that afflicted his country. Al-Maqrizi narrated in his book "Eghathat Al Umma Fi Kashf Al Ghumma", that al-Mustansir Billah summoned the wali of Cairo and threatened to kill him if he couldn't make bread available in the markets. This wali brought some prisoners already sentenced to death, and dressed them in traders clothing, then he convened a great council in which he gathered the city traders, millers and bakers and before their eyes he ordered the killing

of prisoners on the basis that they were the traders who monopolized the supplies causing the destruction of the county. As a result, the attendees feared and promised to bring out the supplies, operate the mills, fill the markets with bread and agreed on a suitable selling price of the bread. AL-Maqrizi argued that such measures put an end to the plight, where he said, "traders fulfilled the terms, and God protected the people and the Nile flourished, seditions subdued, people planted and bread accumulated, the plight cleared, and the crisis disappeared. God would straiten and enlarge and to whom you will return."(54)

It appears that from reviewing what other historical resources said about the end of al-Mustansiriyah plight that al-Maqrizi was not right when he attributed the immediate factor in the end of the plight to the trick which Cairo's wali resorted to. As Ibn Ebek and al-Maqrizi himself underlined in his book "Ettiath Alhunafa" that the vizier Bader al-Jammali\*13 had extricated the country from the calamities of such plight with his prudence and wise management. Ibn Ebek said in his narrative about Bader al-Jammali, "he managed the affairs properly and lowered the prices after a long time of hiked prices over those past years..."(55)

Ibn Ebek agreed with what al-Maqrizi said in his book "Ettiath Alhunafa" that when the caliph found himself unable to reinforce order, peace and stability in his country, the country suffered seditions and revolts by soldiers and famines. He wrote to the Emir of the military Bader al-Jammali "wali Acre" calling him for help to save him. Al-Mustansir Billah promised him wealth and part of the country."(56)

Bader al-Jammali responded to al-Mustansir Billah's call on the condition of entering Egypt with his army and being allowed by the caliph to exterminate the Egyptian military and viziers, whom al-Jammali considered the source of seditions and wars. Consequently, al-Mustansir yielded to that request.(57)

Bader al-Jammali entered Cairo in 466 AH/1073 AD with his entire army and took over the ministry. He started to get rid of the sedition leaders, ministers and court men by bringing them to his encampment, killing them and appropriating their houses and property. In this respect, al-Maqrizi said,

<sup>13</sup> \*Bader Al-Jammali, Armenian slave, owned by the Jammal Aldawlah Ibn Ammar, so he was surnamed AL-

Jammali, he could with his strong personality and intelligence to move up in higher ranks so he ruled the Levant then Damascus twice, then Acre, vide

“he was brutal and killed innumerable people and by killing the notable Egyptians of emirs, commanders, ministers and lords, Egypt became rectified after corruption and developed after destruction.”(58) Then he chased different cults of al-Mustanser Billah’s military and exterminated them one after another. This guaranteed him full dominance over Cairo, which al-Maqrezi described as, “so his power and force was strengthened and intensified and he built up authority.”(59)

Bader al-Jammali followed a prudent financial policy which enabled him to revive the Egyptian economy. This policy is aimed at making the state bear all financial matters from farmers to encourage them to return to and cultivate their farms. Moreover, the state reclaimed irrigation canals, waterways and bridges. These measures were accompanied with a rise in the Nile water level in the same year up to 18 cubits. Thus, crops were abundant and prices were reduced and things moved towards stability. At the same time, al-Jammali vizier was keen to secure the roads and punish the corrupts. Trade caravans returned to operate from and to Egypt safely and trade movement prospered. Traders came to Egypt in great numbers especially those who were displaced during the days of the plight.(60)

With these practical serious measures, Bader al-Jammali vizier could save Egypt from fatal doom. However, Ibn Ebek al-Dawadri commended the efforts of Bader al-Jammali saying, “Bader al-Jammali had managed the Egyptian states very well, people’s conditions redressed all evils, seditions and fear were removed, prices were lowered and thereby people’s condition were straightened up and imports of all kinds became abundant.”(61)

## Findings and Recommendations

The study concluded that the economic crises and famines that afflicted Egypt through Islamic ages, did happen due to a set of factors including: rare precipitations, decline of the Nile flood level leading the country to dryness, disrupted agriculture and price fluctuation. Traders exploited grains and crops, and controlled the prices and markets. Yet these factors would not have plunged the country into fierce crisis, unless the central authority of state was unable to address the negative impacts of it. The state domination, wisdom and soundness of managing its affairs is the main and true factor behind reducing the occurrence of economic crises and famines. Al-Ḥākīm bi-Amr Allāh, after he was no longer able to control the country directly, could surpass the

successive crises and famines to which the country was facing in spite of its intense challenges. In return, Egypt had sunk in dire crises that almost annihilated the country and people due to al-Mustanser Billah’s weakness. Al-Mustanser Billah left the ruling affairs in the hands of his ministers and army commanders, who rampaged the country and exposed it to scourges and catastrophes. In the end, whatever the force of natural disasters, they diminish before the wisdom and rationality of human powers.

## Notes

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### List of names of the Fatimid state caliphs in Egypt

	<b>Kunya</b>	<b>Given name</b>	<b>Laqab (Regnal name)</b>	<b>Birth</b>	<b>Death</b>
1	Abu Muhammad	Abdullah	<a href="#">Al-Mahdi Billah</a> 909–934	873	4 March 934
2	Abul-Qasim	Muhammad	<a href="#">Al-Qa'im Bi-Amrillah</a> 934–946	893 <a href="#">Salamiyah</a> , Syria	17 May 946
3	Abu Tahir	Ismail	<a href="#">Al-Mansur Billah</a> 946–953	913 <a href="#">Raqqada</a>	19 March 953
4	Abu Tamim	Ma'ad	<a href="#">Al-Mu'izz Li-Dinillah</a> 953–975	26 September 931	19 December 975
5	Abu Mansur	Nizar	<a href="#">Al-Aziz Billah</a> 975–996	10 May 955[1]	14 October 996
6	Abu Ali	Mansur	<a href="#">Al-Hakim Bi-Amrillah</a> 996–1021	Rābi'ū l-Awwal 985	13 February 1021
7	Abul-Hasan	Ali	<a href="#">Az-Zahir Li-L'zaz Dinillah</a> 1021–1036	20 June 1005	13 June 1036
8	Abu Tamim	Ma'ad	<a href="#">Al-Mustansir Billah</a> 1036–1094	2 July 1029 <a href="#">Cairo</a>	10 January 1094