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Dr. Shainool Jiwa

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Al-'Aziz bi'llah, the first Fatimid Caliph of Egypt

Al-'Aziz bi'llah Abu Mansur Nizar b. Abu Tamim Ma'add al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (955–996 CE), the fifth Fatimid imam-caliph was the first sovereign of his dynasty to begin his rule in Egypt. Al-'Aziz's reign epitomises the cultural, intellectual and architectural efflorescence of Fatimid rule in Egypt. It also established the Fatimids as a vibrant Mediterranean Empire, pursuing trade, diplomacy and warfare with their Byzantine, 'Abbasid and Andalusian Umayyad counterparts.

Al-'Aziz bi'llah was born on 14 Muharram 955 CE at al-Mahdiyya, the first purpose built capital of the Fatimid state in Ifriqiya. He was among the retinue that accompanied his father, al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, on his journey from al-Mansuriyya to al-Qahira (Cairo) in 973 CE, an event which marked the transference of the Fatimid seat of authority from Ifriqiya to Egypt. As the third son of the Imam-Caliph al-Mu'izz, al-'Aziz is unlikely to have been groomed for public office during his early life. Al-Mu'izz bypassed his eldest son, Tamim, for succession either due to his inability to conceive or because of his political inclinations, designating instead his second son 'Abd Allah as his heir apparent.

'Abd Allah's sudden death during his father's lifetime led to Nizar's designation as heir to the Fatimid caliphate on 4 Rabi' al-Thani 975 CE (dates ranging from 4–23 Rabi' al-Thani 976 CE are

provided in the sources concerning Nizar's accession; Idris 'Imad al-Din, 6/432–455; al-Antaki, 371; Ibn Khallikan, 5/371; al-Maqrizi, *Itti'az*, 1/236–237). He assumed the regal title al-'Aziz bi'llah. A week later, al-Mu'izz passed away. The public declaration of al-Mu'izz's death and al-'Aziz's succession was deferred for some eight months, a practice that was fairly common across all dynastic appointments at the time to ensure the stability and continuity of state governance. Al-'Aziz formally announced his own succession at the celebration of 'Id al-Nahr on 10th Dhu al-Hijja 365AH/9th August 976 CE.

Expanse of the Fatimid Caliphate by the time of Al-'Aziz

Although the Fatimid presence in Egypt was nascent, the empire which al-'Aziz inherited was on the whole politically stable and geographically extensive, spanning Ifriqiya, Sicily, Egypt, the Hijaz and parts of Syria. By the end of his reign, the legitimacy of his caliphate had been acknowledged in the symbolic Friday prayers in both Yemen and Mosul in Northern Iraq. Through its *da'wa* network, the Fatimid sphere of influence also extended to swathes of Iran and India including Khurasan and Sijistan, as well as Makran and Sind.

Fatimid Empire and the cosmopolitan Mediterranean milieu

Reflecting the cosmopolitan Mediterranean milieu of its age, the Fatimid Empire during al-'Aziz's time was inhabited by a populace which was ethnically and religiously diverse. Egypt, the centre of Fatimid rule, exemplified this diversity. Ethnically, the empire's subjects included Arabs, Berbers, Greeks, Turks, Armenians and Sudanese. Religiously, Sunni Muslims constituted the majority of the populace in Egypt, with an established Ithna 'Ashari and Ismaili Shi'i presence. Sizeable, indigenous non-Muslim denominations were also present throughout the empire, in particular, Christian Copts, Melkites and Nestorians, as well as a number of Jewish communities. Judicious governance of this multi-religious and multi-ethnic populace proved to be one of the perennially challenging features of Fatimid rule. As such, it engaged al-'Aziz's effort through the duration of his reign.

Governance Policies of Al-'Aziz

In the governance of his empire, al-'Aziz built upon the policy of his father, al-Mu'izz, which had been informed by decades of experience of their dynasty's rule over North Africa. Drawing upon the Fatimid claim to the universal imamate, al-Mu'izz invoked the notion of *dhimma* (legal protection) as one that encompassed all their subjects, irrespective of their race, ethnicity or belief. This invocation culminated in the proclamation of the *aman* (protection) document which was issued following the Fatimid conquest of Egypt in 969 CE.

The principles which were vouchsafed by al-Mu'izz in the *aman* document came to underpin al-'Aziz's framework of governance. Whilst reiterating the Fatimid claim to the sole legitimate spiritual and temporal authority over the Muslim *umma*, the *aman* document nonetheless guaranteed the customary and legal legitimacy of the various Sunni *madhhab*s. The mechanisms of the judiciary provide an illustrative example of the negotiation between the Ismaili claim to supreme religious authority while maintaining the legal validity of the other Muslim schools of law, thus ensuring religious and social cohesion.

Underwriting the link between the principles of righteousness and justice, the holder of the highest rank in the *da'wa* organisation, the *da'i al-du'at*, was also invested with the responsibility of being the *qadi al-qudat* (chief justice) of the Fatimid Empire. One such appointee was 'Ali b. al-Nu 'man,

the son of the renowned Ismaili jurist and scholar, al-Qadi al-Nuʿman. However, he shared the post of the chief *qadi* with the seasoned Sunni Maliki jurist, Abu Tahir, who had been the chief justice of the Ikhshidid judiciary. Abu Tahir's continuing leadership within the Fatimid judiciary was predicated on the condition that on matters related to public law, he would adjudicate according to the Fatimid *madhhab*. It is only when Abu Tahir was unable to continue in this role due to his advanced age and infirmity that ʿAli b. al-Nuʿman was confirmed as its sole occupant.

The sources record that on his appointment as the chief justice, ʿAli b. al-Nuʿman, nominated two deputies: his own brother, Muhammad b. al-Nuʿman as well as a Sunni Shafiʿi jurist Hasan b. Khalil. Muḥammad b. al-Nuʿman in turn appointed a Hanafi jurist, Ibn Abi al-ʿAwwam, as the *qadi* for al-Fustat. The appointment of Ithna ʿAshari Shiʿi jurists to the Fatimid judiciary is also recorded. In 991 CE *qadi* ʿAbd al-ʿAziz, the son of *qadi* Muhammad b. al-Nuʿman appointed a body of *ashraf* (descendants of the family of the Prophet) to pronounce judgements in the Mosque of ʿAmr based on the *madhhab* of the *ahl al-bayt*. The following year, another Jaʿfari is noted to have been commissioned with a similar responsibility.

The Fatimid judiciary

These references demonstrate that the Fatimid judiciary drew upon scholars from a variety of Shiʿi as well as Sunni *madhhab*s. On matters related to personal or family law, they could pronounce judgement according to their preferred *madhhab*, Sunni or Shiʿi, but on matters related to social governance and public order, their pronouncements had to be based on the Fatimid legal code. Similarly, Fatimid doctrine had precedence in the performance of public ritual, notably those concerning communal prayers and worship.

The safeguarding of public order was also reinforced by ensuring that the most senior Fatimid officials personally administered the cases presented at the *mazalim* courts. These sessions provided a formal mechanism for any subject to present a grievance against the state or its bureaucrats. The sources note that after commander Jawhar al-Siqqilli had established Fatimid control in Egypt, he used to personally hear the *mazalim* twice a week. Similarly, in al-ʿAziz's reign, the vizier Yaʿqub b. Killis is recorded to have adjudicated the *mazalim* cases every day after the morning prayers. In the later years of al-ʿAziz's rule, Muhammad b. al-Nuʿman assumed that function.

The Ahl Al-Kitab (People of the Book)

An attested feature of al-ʿAziz's governance is the fostering of cordial relations between the Fatimid state and the substantial Christian and Jewish minority communities of his empire. Al-Muʿizz's *aman* declaration stipulated those regulations accorded through custom to the *ahl al-kitab* would be upheld. Fatimid policy under al-Muʿizz and al-ʿAziz extended such privileges notably by granting permission for the renovation and upkeep of Christian houses of worship. Al-ʿAziz permitted the Copts, the largest indigenous Egyptian Christian community, to rebuild the Church of St. Mercurius near al-Fustat even though this was opposed by some Muslims.

Al-ʿAziz also established familial relations with the Melkite Christian community, a minority Christian confession in Egypt which had a significant following in Syria. Al-ʿAziz's most favoured consort was a Melikte Christian who was the mother of the famous Fatimid princess, Sitt al-Mulk. Sitt al-Mulk's two uncles, and al-ʿAziz's brothers-in-law, Arsenius and Orestes, were subsequently appointed as Melkite Patriarchs of Alexandria and Jerusalem respectively. Towards the later part of his reign, in 994 CE, al-ʿAziz promoted the Christian bureaucrat ʿIsa b. Nasturus to assume

responsibility for the overall administration of the state having earlier been an overseer of the financial bureau. ʿIsa, in turn appointed the Jewish administrator, Manashsha b. Ibrahim, as financial controller over Syria.

These appointments led to disquiet among some Muslims who felt that their privileged status was being displaced. Excesses committed by a number of non-Muslim officials seem to have similarly contributed to the tensions. Sporadic outbursts of opposition to church restoration were followed by direct accusations concerning the conduct of ʿIsa b. Nasturus and Manashsha b. Ibrahim. Both were accused of dismissing Muslim officials from their posts and replacing them with their co-religionists.

Daʿwa

The Ismaili *daʿwa* network which had been instrumental in establishing Fatimid authority in North Africa and subsequently in Egypt became an integral part of the state administration under Fatimid rule. Cairo became the headquarters of the Fatimid *daʿwa* and in time Ismaili *daʿi*s from far flung regions came to the city to pay homage to the Fatimid imam-caliph as well as to study at its various seminaries. The al-Azhar Mosque, founded under al-Muʿizz, became a centre of learning and instruction for Fatimid *daʿi*s under al-ʿAziz. Thirty-five scholars were appointed to teach at al-Azhar and were housed adjacent to it.

The Fatimid *daʿwa* appears to have thrived in Syria with centres such as Damascus, Sur (Tyre), Ramla and Asqalan each having their own resident *daʿi*. The appeal of the Fatimid *daʿwa* similarly spread beyond the urban centres into the rural fabric of the region. The anti-Ismaili *qadi* of Rayy, ʿAbd al-Jabbar (d. 1024 CE) mentions Fatimid *daʿwa* activity in the Jabal al-Summaq, the mountainous region located south-west of Aleppo and north of Maʿarrat al-Nuʿman, indicating that the Fatimid *daʿwa* had established a footing in the villages of this area. *Daʿwa* activity in this vicinity seems to have secured sustained support, as Jabal al-Summaq is noted to have been a bustling centre of Ismaili activity in the following century. The other known areas of *daʿwa* activity in al-ʿAziz's reign include Baghdad, Balochistan, Khwarazm, Kirman, Sind and Yemen. It is not coincidental that many of these places where the *daʿi*s established themselves were also flourishing centres of trade and enterprise.

Vizerate

The Fatimid vizierate was formally instituted during the reign of al-ʿAziz. Abu al-Faraj Yaʿqub b. Killis, the first Fatimid vizier, was among the most illustrious administrators of his age. Having converted to Islam from Judaism in 942–943 CE, Yaʿqub's exceptional acumen led to his rapid promotion through the Fatimid state bureaucracy. In 973–974 CE, al-Muʿizz appointed him alongside ʿUsluj b. al-Hasan, a senior Ifriqiyan administrator, to oversee and reform the collection of the Egyptian revenues. Their stringent fiscal monitoring yielded such remarkable results that the Mamluk historian al-Maqrizi (*Ittiʿaz*, 1/147) states that their efficiency in tax-collection had been unheard of in Egypt prior to this time.

Following this accomplishment, al-Muʿizz extended Ibn Killis' role to provide oversight of the entire Fatimid administration, which was formalised on 18 Ramadhan 979 CE. Ibn Killis regulated the fiscal system and streamlined the collection of taxes. He broadened the Fatimid state's sources of revenue and encouraged state ownership of certain lucrative industries such as the manufacture of the prestigious *tiraz* fabrics, while also creating incentives for private trade and enterprise.

North Africa and Sicily

Ifriqiya had been the centre of Fatimid rule for the first sixty years of their caliphate (909–969 CE). Following the transference of the Fatimid seat of power to Egypt, administration of the region was delegated to the Zirids, a vassal dynasty of the Fatimid caliphs. Upon al-'Aziz's succession, Yusuf (Buluqqin) b. Ziri was reconfirmed as the Fatimid governor of Ifriqiya and was granted control over a number of additional towns including Tarablus, Surt and Ajdabiya (Ibn al-Athir, 8/264; al-Maqrizi, *Itti'az*, 1/237–8; Ibn Khaldun, 4/51, wherein Ajdabiya is named Jarabiya).

However, the geographical as well as ideological distance between Ifriqiya and Egypt led to a gradual move towards autonomy by the Zirids, causing occasional fissures between them and their Fatimid sovereigns. Publicly, cordial relations were upheld, with the Zirids maintaining protocol by sending valuable gifts and tributes to the Fatimid imam-caliph. Yet tentative attempts by the Fatimids to re-establish direct control met with stiff opposition. The most notable example was al-'Aziz's dispatch of the *da'i* Abu al-Fahm Hasan al-Khurasani in 987 CE to recruit from amongst the Kutama Berbers, the tribal group who had been the mainstay of Fatimid rule in Ifriqiya.

Having secured Kutama support, Abu al-Fahm began to gather an army, mint coins and prepare banners. Yusuf b. Ziri, alarmed by these threats to his sovereignty, marched personally against the *da'i* and had him killed on 3 Safar 988 CE. Yet, this debacle strained relations between the Fatimid ruler and his Zirid governor for a limited period only. Moreover, the Zirids continued to prove instrumental in checking the recurrent insurgencies in North Africa sponsored by the Umayyads of al-Andalus. In 992 CE Badis b. Ziri, a brother of Yusuf, was appointed by al-'Aziz himself to quell an Umayyad-led uprising in the region. In that same year, al-'Aziz confirmed Yusuf b. Buluqqin's choice of the latter's son, Abu al-Fath Mansur, as successor to the governorship of Ifriqiya. This conferred hereditary status to Zirid rule in Ifriqiya, thus contributing to their eventual independence from Fatimid rule.

As with the Zirids in Ifriqiya, the Fatimids retained their hold over Sicily through the appointment of dynastic governors from a local elite family, the Kalbids. Accordingly, al-'Aziz confirmed the appointment of Abu al-Qasim 'Ali b. Ḥasan as the Fatimid governor of Sicily, an appointment which al-Mu'izz had initially made in 970 CE. An intrepid soldier, Abu al-Qasim 'Ali extended Fatimid influence into Italy, fortified his hold over Rametta and expelled the Byzantines from Messina. He also repeatedly raided their lucrative bases in Calabria and Apulia. Although 'Ali b. Hasan died while battling Germanic forces led by their Emperor Otto II in 982 CE, the Sicilians emerged victorious. This momentous victory assured Kalbid rule over Sicily and ensured Sicilian dominance in the central Mediterranean over the course of the next half century, which only subsided following the Norman incursions into the island in the 1060s CE.

Syria and Palestine

Syria's strategic value to Egypt necessitated the inevitable and inextricable Fatimid involvement in the region. In the 4th/10th century Mediterranean littoral, Syria became a buffer between the major powers of the time: Byzantium to the north, the 'Abbasids (under their Buyid amirs) to the east, the Hamdanids in Northern Iraq and Syria and the Fatimids to the south-west. Consequently, it was the scene of frequent battles and struggles for supremacy between these rival dynasties. The local Syrian overlords and tribal chieftains safeguarded their survival by aligning themselves with whichever power served their interests at the time. This contributed to the political volatility in Syria which permeated al-Mu'izz's short rule in Egypt and dominated the course of al-'Aziz's entire reign. As

such al-'Aziz expended considerable resources in the complex and protracted struggle to establish Fatimid supremacy over Syria and Palestine.

No sooner was the conquest of Egypt completed in the reign of al-Mu'izz when the Fatimid general Jawhar al-Siqilli sent an expedition to Syria. The seasoned Maghribi commander, Ja'far b. Falah, was selected to lead this military encounter. Yet forced to fight for a prolonged period in terrain that was geographically and militarily unfamiliar to the Fatimid armies, Ja'far was compelled to withdraw in 971 CE.

Immediately on becoming caliph, al-'Aziz turned his personal attention to Syria, where the Turkish commander Alp Takin (also known as Alptegin or Aftakin), had secured control over Damascus. After his expulsion from Buyid Iraq along with his Turkish troops, Alp Takin entered Syria at a time when the Byzantine Emperor, John Tzimisces, was pursuing a campaign of aggressive expansion. The Emperor marched as far south as Caesarea on the coast of Palestine and in 975 CE, seized control of Ba'albak and Tiberias, towns which had been previously occupied by the Fatimids. The deaths of both Tzimisces and al-Mu'izz in 975 CE emboldened Alp Takin who, having established his authority over the Damascenes, now proceeded to secure the support of the Qaramita of Bahrain, who were active at the time in Iraq and the Arabian peninsula, and were militantly opposed to the Fatimids. Together, they set out to occupy the Syrian coastlands that had recently come under Fatimid control.

The Conquest of Damascus

Upon al-'Aziz's accession, he sent his most senior general, Jawhar al-Siqilli, with a large force to fight Alp Takin and retrieve Damascus. Seventeen months of fighting followed during which Jawhar secured some initial success. However, the failure of the Fatimid troops to withstand their opponents forced Jawhar to eventually accept a humiliating surrender. Success in Syria was considered critical for the Fatimids such that al-'Aziz decided to take to the field in person. The ensuing Fatimid force defeated Alp Takin and subdued the Qaramita. By Muharram 368 AH / August 978 CE, Alp Takin had been taken prisoner and was presented to al-'Aziz, who treated him magnanimously. In recounting this incident, Ibn Khallikan notes that the new sovereign 'forgave him after defeating him' (Ibn Khallikan, 5/371).

While the Fatimids had developed a honed army of Maghariba (westerners, that is, North African) soldiers of whom the Kutama were the mainstay, the repeated failures of this army in Syria highlighted the necessity for a revised military strategy. Whereas the Maghariba fought as an infantry-heavy force whose strength was to provide a solid, central flank to the army, warfare in Syria required composite armies with aggressive cavalries. The Turkish *ghilman* who dominated the Syrian battlefields were adept armoured cavalrymen and became much sought after as an effective fighting force. In pardoning Alp Takin and commissioning him to galvanise Turkish forces, al-'Aziz sought to introduce this critical element into the Fatimid armies.

The introduction of Turkish troops into the Fatimid armies became a marked feature of the reign of al-'Aziz, a policy that had significant short and long term consequences for the Fatimid state, as it set in motion the decline of the dominance of the Kutama and led to subsequent bifurcation of the Fatimid armies based on the ethnic distinctions of the Maghariba and the Mashariqa (easterners).

Fatimid Expansion to Southern and Central Syria

Over the next ten years, al-'Aziz was gradually able to bring southern and central Syria under Fatimid control. However, the local potentates who utilised the rivalries of the regional dynasties to bolster their own position posed a significant and recurring challenge to the establishment of Fatimid control. Qassam, the leader of the Syrian urban militia (*ahdath*), controlled Damascus while al-Mufarrij b. al-Jarrah, the bedouin chieftain of the Banu Tayy, maintained a firm grip over Palestine. Both feigned nominal allegiance to the Fatimids. Nonetheless, their tenuous allegiance required several unsuccessful expeditions before the Fatimids, under their Turkish commander Yal Takin, were finally able to oust Qassam from Damascus in 372 AH/982 CE and Ibn al-Jarrah from Ramla in the following year.

Bakjur, the governor of Hims, typified the tendency amongst the local Syrian potentates to vacillate in seeking patronage and protection. Originally a client of the Hamdanid dynasty, Bakjur reneged from his Hamdanid overlords and sought to secure the governorship of Damascus through al-'Aziz. Though the latter acceded, Bakjur proved a callous and tyrannical custodian over the city and was eventually removed by Munir (also known as Mu'nis) al-Saqlabi who had been sent from Cairo in 988 CE to restore order. However, within three years, Munir himself had transferred his allegiance to the 'Abbasids and their Buyid overlords. After being accused of treasonable dealings, Munir was defeated in 991 CE by Mangu Takin, another Fatimid Turkish commander who arose as a protégé of Alp Takin. Upon securing his footing in Damascus, Mangu Takin set out towards northern Syria. His march at the head of a well-equipped force reflected al-'Aziz's ambition of establishing Fatimid hegemony over Aleppo, the doorway to Iraq, whose conquest had remained of prime interest to the Fatimids.

Fatimid Expansion to Northern Syria

Northern Syria, however, had numerous stakeholders. The Hamdanids had been firmly established as rulers over the area and exhibited increasing co-operation and alliance with the Byzantines, their once erstwhile foes. For the Byzantines, control of the permeable border region of Northern Syria was militarily imperative to their security and economic prosperity. It was in cognisance of these factors that al-'Aziz ordered Mangu Takin's march to Aleppo. Mangu Takin set out in 992 CE, following the news of the death of the Hamdanid Sa'd al-Dawla and with the knowledge that the Byzantine Emperor Basil II was occupied with fighting the Bulgars in the Balkans. Beginning his campaign in spring, Mangu Takin occupied Hims and Hama and subsequently took possession of Shayzar and Apamea. By 994 CE, he arrived in the vicinity of Aleppo, equipped for a lengthy siege of the city.

The Fatimid conquest of Aleppo was considered to be a threat of such magnitude that the notables of Hamdanid Aleppo sent urgent appeals to the Byzantine Emperor. Basil II immediately responded, and his march across Anatolia compelled Mangu Takin to lift the siege and withdraw from the city. Having entered the region, Basil restored Byzantine control over Aleppo. He then marched across central and southern Syria to restore Byzantine authority over that region. The Byzantine Emperor's incursions into southern Syria and his sacking of the Fatimid towns were perceived as military belligerency by the Fatimid sovereign, who announced his decision to personally lead an army against the Byzantines. Accordingly, al-'Aziz commissioned a major mobilisation of his land and sea forces and set out for Syria. However, as preparations were underway, al-'Aziz fell ill with severe colic and gall stones and died at his encampment at Bilbays on 8 Ramadhan 386 AH/996 CE. He was 42 years, 8 months and 14 days old at the time. His death brought the Fatimid war effort to a temporary halt.

Trade and Diplomacy

The efficient governance of the Fatimid state under al-ʿAziz not only secured their political and naval dominance across the North African littoral, but also initiated a period of economic prosperity that came to define Fatimid administration in this period. Administrative stability catalysed trans-Mediterranean trade, laying the foundations for Fatimid Egypt to become the entry point between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea over the following century.

The growing strategic and economic importance of the Fatimid empire amidst the political instability and turbulence in the region galvanised the neighbouring dynasties, namely the Byzantines and the Buyids, to send diplomatic delegations to the Fatimid court. The renowned Buyid emir, ʿAdhud al-Dawla, is noted to have initiated contact with al-ʿAziz in 367-368 AH/977–978 CE. In his correspondence addressed to al-ʿAziz, he referred to him as *al-hadra al-sharifa*, implicitly acknowledging his ʿAlid lineage from the *ahl al-bayt*. Al-ʿAziz responded positively to his overtures. However, the Buyid-Fatimid honeymoon waned within three years. Once ʿAdud al-Dawla had secured his supremacy over all the other Buyid contenders and had consolidated his position at the ʿAbbasid court, he assumed a more threatening posture towards the Fatimids. In time, Buyid hostility and opposition to the Fatimids on the Syrian battlefield overshadowed their diplomatic overtones at the Egyptian court.

While Fatimid forces had encountered Byzantine armies in Syria from the inception of al-ʿAziz's reign, it was in 987 CE that the first recorded Byzantine embassy arrived at al-ʿAziz's court. At that time, the Byzantine Emperor Basil II was beset by various challenges. Byzantine forces were facing reversals in Bulgaria and Basil's own authority was undermined by rebellions led by the veteran generals, Bardas Phocas and Bardas Skleros. Hence, Basil sought an alliance with al-ʿAziz to bolster his position in the face of internal and external foes. The terms of the Byzantine truce were particularly favourable to the Fatimids: the Byzantines would release all the Muslim prisoners held by them; the *khutba* in the congregational mosque of Constantinople would henceforth be pronounced in the name of al-ʿAziz, instead of the ʿAbbasid caliph, and the Byzantines would guarantee the supply of all the provisions that al-ʿAziz sought from them.

The truce was to last for seven years. In addition to the significant political and diplomatic advantages, the Fatimids reaped substantive economic benefits. The truce lifted the embargo which the previous Byzantine Emperor, John Tzimisces, had imposed in 361 AH/971 CE, forbidding Venetian merchants from carrying essential maritime supplies such as iron, arms and timber to Fatimid lands. This invigorated the Fatimid ship-building industry, thus enhancing its naval capability as well as its capacity for seafaring trade across the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.

Cairo

The political stability and economic prosperity of al-ʿAziz's reign generated remarkable wealth in the Fatimid Empire. This was manifest in the opulence of al-ʿAziz's court in Cairo and in his own affinity for luxurious rarities which included precious stones, crystal ware, finely-spun embroidered cloth and rare animals. Fatimid Cairo itself flourished under al-ʿAziz's patronage of urban construction, which included an array of mosques and mausoleums, palaces and pavilions, as well as bastions, bridges and baths. The most enduring of these buildings is the *Jamiʿ al-Anwar* (al-Maqrizi, *Ittiʿaz*, 1/267), popularly called the Jamiʿ al-Hakim, as it was completed in the reign of al-ʿAziz's successor, al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah. This continues to function as a mosque in the Cairo metropolis to this day.

The regal processions and royal ceremonials which al-'Aziz instituted as public symbols of the imam-caliph's authority subsequently became part of the Fatimid repertoire of celebrations, which included indigenous agrarian as well as religious festivals. In reflecting on the grandeur of al-'Aziz's reign, the Fatimid author al-Qurti is quoted by al-Maqrizi, as stating: 'Al-'Aziz's days in Egypt were pointed out as a model, for each day was like an 'Id festivity and a wedding celebration' (al-Maqrizi, *Itti'az*, 1/295).

Portrayals of Al-Aziz

Citing the eye-witness description of the Egyptian historian al-Musabbihi (d. 420 AH/1030 CE), the sources provide a vivid description of this Fatimid sovereign noting that al-'Aziz was tall and broad shouldered, with a tawny complexion, auburn hair and large, deep blue eyes. He was generous, brave and forgiving and was just and humane to the people. He was fond of horses and falcons and was knowledgeable about them. He excelled at lion-hunting. He was also a connoisseur of jewellery and furniture and a man of culture and refinement (Ibn Muyassar, 175; Ibn al-Athir, 9/81; Ibn Khallikan, *Wafayat*, 3/371–372; al-Maqrizi, *Itti'az*, 1/245). His mother was an *umm walad* called Durzan Taghrid.

She was the first lady from the Fatimid house to commission a mosque and a mausoleum in the Qarafa cemetery, which subsequently became a sought-after site for royal tombs. Al-'Aziz introduced a number of measures to ensure the just and efficient governance of his empire: he maintained rigorous supervision of the state finances and even subjected his household expenses to scrutiny. He provided regular and fixed salaries to all his officials including his palace staff and made provisions for their family members as well. He deterred his officials from accepting bribes and stipulated that payments were to be made to them only upon the production of documentary proof.

While al-'Aziz's death was unexpected, the state apparatus that he had fostered during the course of his 21-year reign appears to have been sound enough to withstand his sudden demise. In Sha'ban 383 AH/993 CE, he had designated his son al-Mansur, with the regnal title al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, as his successor and had it affirmed by the state officials and Ismaili notables just prior to his death. Unlike his own succession which was kept a secret for over eight months, al-'Aziz's death was not concealed. Ibn Khallikan noted that at al-'Aziz's death, 'perfect order reigned' (*Wafayat*, 5/375). In the words of Ibn Taghribirdi: 'al-'Aziz was the best of the Fatimid sovereigns, in comparison to his father, al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah and his son al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah.' (2/10).

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