

# The Rise and fall of an Empire in the Islamic History: The Case of Fatimid Caliphate

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**Abstract:** *The existing study is concerned with the rise and fall of the Fatimid caliphate which occupied an influential historical background in Muslim history. Abu Muhammad Abdullah al Mahdi billah (909–934) is known as to be the founder and first caliph of the Fatimid dynasty whereas al-Adid (1160–1171) was the last ruler of the dynasty. Fatimids or al-Fatimyun claimed to be as the descendant of the daughter (Fatimah “SA”) of the Last Prophet of Islam. In Islam, politics cannot be separated from the faith as it deals with all institutions of life hence religion always became an integrating part of the Muslim rule to administer the regions under their government. The religious ideology of the Fatimids caliphate originated on the basis of Ismaili Shia's philosophy. Likely, Fatimid applied religion as an influential weapon to conquer the sentiment of people to rule and establish a dignified empire in the Muslim world. The Fatimids rule emerges from Africa claimed to legitimize themselves to be the descent of the last prophet of Islam and it controlled the central Maghreb, which consists the regions like Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. There are a number of factors that became an ultimate cause of the rise and fall of the Fatimid caliphate in which the internal conflicts, rise of the Turkish influence, dilemma of drought and famine in Egypt, independence of Berber from the Fatimid influence, rising Abbasids power had turned down the Fatimid dynasty.*

**Keywords:** Fatimid, Rise, fall, Origin, Islamic History

## Introduction

The Fatimid Caliphate was ruled by the al-Fatimiyyun (909 to 1171 AD) who claimed to be the descendants of the daughter (Fatimah SA) of the last prophet of Islam. Fatimids conquered north Africa, and expanded the empire at large to occupy the Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Arabia and the Mediterranean Islands and built the city of al-Qahirah (Cairo) to be their new capital in Egypt in 969 AD which highlight its mighty role and contribution in civilization and the Muslim world. The conquest of Egypt was the first series of conquests which extended Fatimid rule from Sicily to Sindh. The Fatimid caliphates were an Arab origin of the Shia dynasty to rule the Mediterranean coast of Africa and made Egypt the center of the caliphate of the administration and intellectual contribution and set of learning (Hsain 2004). The success of the Fatimid power and influence of the Islamili sect was based on the secret campaign of the movement which became an ultimate cause of the Islamili rule in the North Africa and some part of Middle East. Likely researcher argues that the rise of the Fatimids and their expansion followed a secret mechanism to spread the message of their faith that erected the Fatimid dynasty in the North Africa and founded the Cairo as the capital of the empire (Halm, 1996). After the conquests of Fatimid in its initial stage, caliphate sustained the doctrine of the religious tolerance towards all others sects of Islam as no Shia and non-Muslims such Copts, Christians, Jews, and Maltese (Justin 2003). In this way, tolerance of the Fatimids to others also encouraged them to adjust large segment of population in a common cause of the Fatimid government that ultimately developed a huge empire and maintained a significant position in the Muslim history and Islamic administration.

The possession of the Islamili movement by the caliph Abdullah al-Mahdi encouraged his control and expansion of

the empire in the overall Maghreb that encompasses the countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, Libya and Algeria which he ruled from Mahdia the capital of the Fatimid (Yeomans, 2006). Al-Mansuriya as a newly built city in the Tunisia near the Kairouan served as the capital of the Fatimid during the reign of the caliphate Imams Al-Mansur Billah (946–953) and Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (953–975) besides numerous cities served as the capital of the Fatimid and the list of the Fatimid capital can be enumerated as below.

- ✦ Raqada (909–921).
- ✦ Mahdya (921–948).
- ✦ Al-Mansuuriya (948–973).
- ✦ Cairo (973–1171).

Fatimid conquered the Egypt in 969 (AD) and under the leadership of the General Jawhar and built a new palace city near the Fustat that came to know al-mansuriyya. The conquest of the Egypt brought the end of the Ikhshidi rule in the region and Fatimids stepped the Egyptian land. It was the reign of the Fatimid caliph Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah the Ikhshidid Wilayah conquered and founded the new city as Al-Qahria (Cairo) in the 969 AD (Irene 1969). Fatimids came in power via defeating the Aghlabids (Ziadatullah the Abbasid governor was defeated by the Fatimid in the Tunisia and drove him out of the country), who were Arab Tunisian dynasty of Najdi tribe of Banu Tamim as they rule the Africa and Italy's southern parts and served as nominally on behalf of the Abbasid caliph, for about a century. There were fourteen caliphs of the Fatimid caliphate as the list of these caliphs mentioned here as.

- ✦ Abu Muhammad “Abdu l-Lah (Ubaydu l-Lah) al-Mahdi bi'llah (909-934) (He was the founder of the Fatimid dynasty and the first ruler of the caliphate).
- ✦ Abu l-Qasim Muhmmad Al-Qa, im bi-Amr Allah (934-946) (He was the eldest son of the Al-Mahdi).

- ✚ Abu Ṭahir Isma'īl al-Mansūr bi-llah (946-953). (Al Q' Al-im succeeded his son Al mansure and Mansure crushed the rebellion in the empire and built the city Almansurah).
- ✚ Abu Tamim Ma'add al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (953-975) (He was the son of the Al-Mansur and on his success Fatimid entered into new phase. In the reign of the al-Mu'izz Egypt was conquered and Morocco came under the Fatimid Caliphate).
- ✚ Abu Mansūr Nizar al-Aziz bi-llah (975-996).
- ✚ Abu 'Ali al-Mansūr al-Ḥakim bi-Amr Allah (996-1021).
- ✚ Abu'l-Ḥasan Ali al-Zāhir li-I'zaz Din Allah (1021-1036).
- ✚ Abu Tamim Ma'add al-Mustansir bi-llah (1036-1094).
- ✚ Al-Musta'li bi-llah (1094-1101) Quarrels erupted in the way of his succession that led to split the Nizari.
- ✚ Al-Amir bi-Aḥkam Allah (1101-1130) (The Fatimid rulers of Egypt after him are not recognized as Imams by Mustaali Taiyabi Ismailis).
- ✚ Abd al-Majid al-Ḥafiz (1130-1149).
- ✚ Al-Zafir (1149-1154).
- ✚ Al-Fa'iz (1154-1160).
- ✚ Al- Aḍid (1160-1171).

The rise of the Fatimid dynasty was based on the religious sentiment and the ideology notion of the Fatimid caliphs to propagate the Ismaili faith and effective missionary materialized the Fatimid rule in the Muslim History. Fatimids massively contributed in the development of the civilization and Muslim world. Egypt flourished, the trade extensively under the Fatimids and trade network in the mediterranean and in the Indian Ocean were established and their trade and diplomatic ties, extending all the way to China under the Song Dynasty (960–1279). The Fatimid paid attention on the agriculture and increased it further and the use of cash crops and the propagation of the flax trade allowed Fatimids to import other items from various parts of the world (Cortese, 2015). Besides commercial navigation, throughout Egyptian history during Fatimid rule as the river was used to sustain transport of people, supply of water, and whole Muslim world continued to penetrate Egypt. In comparison with Iraq, Egypt contributed relatively little to Arabic literature and Islamic learning during the early 'Abbāsīd period but Fāṭimids' intense interest in the propagation of the Ismaili faith made Egypt an important religious and intellectual centre. The founding of the mosque-college of al-Azhar (970-972) as well as of other academies drew Shite scholars to Egypt from all over the Muslim world and stimulated the production of original contributions in literature, philosophy, and the Islamic sciences.

### Rise and fall of the Fatimid caliphate

Many arguments prevail regarding the rise and fall of the Fatimid caliphate that results to become the Fatimids success and failure in the political existence. Fatimid caliphate occupied the political identity via religious sentiment as the

caliphate was an ismaili shia caliphate and the only shia Arab origin dynasty in the Muslim history (Ilaiane, Hsain 2004). There are number of factors that became the chief casue in the rise of Fatimid caliphate in which religious zealous of the Islamiali followers and an active movement to mobilize the message of their faith. Likely the researcher argues that long struggle of the Fatmids in the muslim world materialized the political domination in the north Africa, Algeria and Scily, Egypt, some part of Syrian and holy cities in Arabia (Walker, 2002). An effective religious zealous and constant struggle of the Islamiali preachers to mobilize the message of the Faith via Ismaili dawah (movement) in the 9<sup>th</sup> century in Salamiyah, Syria by the eighth Ismaili Imam, Ahmad al-Wafi (Yeomans, 2006). The support of the Fatimid military which was based largely on the Kutama Berber tribesmen which were brave and strong to defeat the ruling governor Ziadatullah at North Africa. capable General Jawhar came true to bring Egypt under the Fatimid dynasty and prominent statesman for the Fatimid Caliphate under Caliph al-Mustansir proved to restore the fortunes of the Fatimid state to defend it from the collapsing and strengthen the military power.

Under the Fatimids, Egypt became the centre of an empire that included at its peak parts of North Africa, Sicily, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Red Sea coast of Africa, Tihamah, Hejaz, Yemen, with its most remote territorial reach being Multan (in modern-day Pakistan) (Daftary, 2007). Egypt flourished, and the Fatimids developed an extensive trade network both in the Mediterranean and in the Indian Ocean. Their trade and diplomatic ties, extending all the way to China under the Song Dynasty (r. 960–1279), eventually determined the economic course of Egypt during the High Middle Ages. The Fatimid focus on agriculture further increased their riches and allowed the dynasty and the Egyptians to flourish under the Fatimid rule. The use of cash crops and the propagation of the flax trade allowed Fatimids to import other items from various parts of the world (Cortese, 2015).

Multiple factors materialize the declination of the Fatimid dynasty in which rising power of the Ayyubid dynasty and Abbasids. Likewise researcher argues that during the late 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries the Fatimid caliphate declined rapidly, and in 1171 Saladin invaded its territory and founded the Ayyubid dynasty and incorporated the Fatimid state into the Abbasid Caliphate (Baer, 1983). While the ethnic-based army was generally successful on the battlefield, it began to have negative effects on Fatimid internal politics. Traditionally the Berber element of the army had the strongest sway over political affairs, but as the Turkish element grew more powerful, it began to challenge this, and by 1020 serious riots had begun to break out among the Black African troops who were fighting back against a Berber-Turk Alliance. The Fatimid caliphate was based on the ethnic-based army which was generally successful on the battlefield, it began to have negative effects on Fatimid internal politics.

Buwayhid dynasty in Iraq and al-Basasiri was a serious declining point for the Ftaimids as despite the efforts of the

Chief Da'i, of the Fatimid government was unable to provide effective support and the strong Sunni Seljuks to drive al-Basasiri out of Baghdad. From this point on the Fatimid Empire began to decline at a rapid pace. The rising drought and famine in the Egypt, declining of resources and ethnic civil war accelerated the problems among the different ethnic factions, and outright civil war began, primarily between the Turks under Nasir al-Dawla ibn Hamdan and Black African troops, while the Berbers shifted alliance between the two sides (Daly, 1998). With the revival of Christian power, the Fatimids had to face Byzantine offensives whereby they lost much of Sicily and Spain and had to cope with the wave of Crusades from the east. This did much to weaken the Empire. In the 1040s, the Berber Zirids (governors of North Africa under the Fatimids) declared their independence from the Fatimids and their recognition of the Sunni Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad, which led the Fatimids to launch the devastating Banū Hilal invasions of North Africa.

In the 1040s, the Berber Zirids (governors of North Africa under the Fatimids) declared their independence from the Fatimids and their recognition of the Sunni Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad, which led the Fatimids to launch the devastating Banū Hilal invasions of North Africa. After about 1070, the Fatimid hold on the Levant coast and parts of Syria was challenged first by Turkic invasions, then the Crusades, so that Fatimid territory shrank until it consisted only of Egypt. The Fatimids gradually lost the Emirate of Sicily over thirty years to the Italo-Norman Roger I who was in total control of the entire island by 1091. In the madrasa (religious college) Sunni Islam created a new and crucial weapon in the struggle for religious unity. In these great colleges, spreading all over the East, the scholars and theologians of the Sunna devised and taught the orthodox answer to the Ismaili intellectual challenge (Lewis, 1994). But the worst problems of all were at home in Egypt. Factional strife between the Sudani and Turkish battalions of the army caused chaos in the country. The Turkish troops, taking advantage of the situation, despoiled the palace, emptied the treasury and destroyed the library. Economic upheavals culminated in a series of disastrous famines, which, according to the chroniclers, reduced the people to a minimum standard of living. Finally in 1073, according to the summons of Imam Mustansirbillah, an able soldier, Badr al-Jamali, established a regime which restored order and some measure of prosperity in Egypt.

Most of the non-Egyptian Ismailis, especially those in Iran, did not accept this substitute and rejected the leadership of the remaining Fatimid Caliphs and became the Nizari Ismailis. On the death of the last strong Fatimid Caliph, Al-Amir (1101-1130), the Ismailis of Arabia and the Indian Ocean coasts rejected them, also becoming the Tayibis, now represented chiefly by the Indian merchant community of the Bohraas. The divergence between the Ismaili religion and state was now complete. The Fatimid Empire had been established to fulfill a religious ideal and had been sustained by the religious zeal of its supporters. Thus, without the support of its religious following, the empire collapsed. Al-

Afdal had, in effect, renounced the claims of the Fatimid Caliphate to the universal leadership of Islam. The petty remnants of the Fatimid state were brought to a final end by the Sunni Saladin in 1171 A.D. By the 1060s, the tentative balance between the different ethnic groups within the Fatimid army collapsed as Egypt suffered an extended period of drought and famine. Declining resources accelerated the problems among the different ethnic factions, and outright civil war began, primarily between the Turks under Nasir al-Dawla ibn Hamdan and Black African troops, while the Berbers shifted alliance between the two sides. The Turkish forces of the Fatimid army seized most of Cairo and held the city and Caliph at ransom, while the Berber troops and remaining Sudanese forces roamed the other parts of Egypt.

### Conclusion

Historical background in Muslim history meets number of caliphates, dynasties, and empires in which numerous notions and concepts go to relate with their rise and fall. Numerous factors follow towards empires when historians integrate it to make the long process of their rise and fall rather than a single reason behind the scene to explain imperial rise and collapse. This study also attempted to highlight the influential historical position of Fatimids in the Islamic History and inculcates the aspects of emergence and downfall of the caliphate and elaborative discussion encircled the Historical background of the Fatimid Caliphate and Rise and fall of the caliphate and Historical influential position of the dynasty. Fātimid Dynasty was a political and religious dynasty in the Muslim History that dominated an empire in North Africa and subsequently in the Middle East from AD 909 to 1171 and maintained a successful historical perspective in the Islamic world to mobilize culture, science and civilization. Moreover, the

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