The Hub of Learning-The Abbasid Caliphate Internal Failures Causing the Decline of the Islamic Empire

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Predeceasing, the first era of Islam and the first Caliphate, Muhhamed, as well as the era of the Umayyad, The Abbasid Caliphate was once one of the most powerful and influential empires in the world. Founded in 750 CE, it brought great advancements in science, culture, and trade to the Islamic world. Baghdad, the Abbasid capital, became a center of learning and culture, known for its scholars and libraries. However, by the time the Mongols invaded in 1258, the Abbasid Caliphate was just a hint of its former greatness. While the Mongol invasion destroyed Baghdad and officially ended Abbasid rule, the empire had already been weakened from within long before the attack. Over the centuries, internal problems grew and broke down the strength of the Abbasid state. Political issues, such as rival leaders and regional governors gaining too much power, reduced the authority of the caliph in Baghdad. Instead of one strong central government, the empire became divided and hard to control. Along with the many ethnic groups that comprised the empire, there were numerous conflicts between them, which made it harder for a central government to maintain control. Economic corruption also became a serious issue; many officials and landlords used their positions for personal gain rather than helping the people or supporting the government. This misuse of money and resources weakened the empire's ability to fund its armies and maintain public works. While the Mongol invasion was the final blow, it was the Abbasid Caliphate's own internal weaknesses—political fragmentation and economic corruption—that truly caused its fall. These long-term problems left the empire fragile and unable to survive the challenges that came from both inside and outside its borders.

While looking back at the prime of the empire and during its golden age, Baghdad stood as one of the most advanced cities in the world, representing power, culture, and education. Baghdad was the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, located on the Tigris River, similar to one of the first civilizations in the world, Mesopotamia, it allowed cities to become a center of trade and ideas between Asia, Europe, and Africa. For example, merchants from distant regions brought goods like silk and spices on the Silk Road turning Baghdad into a wealthy city. Looking at the primary source, "Yakut: Baghdad under the Abbasids, c. 1000 CE" we can get insights on the beauty of the empire. Extracted from *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources, 2 Vols, Vol II: Rome and the West, pp. 365-367* by William Stearns Davis and modernized by Dr. Jerome S. Arkenberg at Cal. State Fullerton, the source tells us, "The city of Baghdad formed two vast semi-circles on the right and left banks of the Tigris, twelve miles in diameter. The numerous suburbs, covered with parks, gardens, villas and beautiful promenades, and plentifully supplied with rich bazaars, and finely built mosques and baths, stretched for a considerable distance on both sides of the river. In the days of its prosperity the population of Baghdad and its suburbs amounted to over two millions!"[1] Baghdad became a beacon of knowledge, institutions such as the House of Wisdom attracted scholars who translated ancient Greek, Persian, and Indian texts into Arabic, preserving and expanding the world's knowledge. Fields like mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and philosophy flourished, shaping the future. As a result, Baghdad developed impressive infrastructure, including libraries, palaces, mosques, and gardens, which reflected the city's riches and complexities. Ultimately, Baghdad's glory during this period symbolized the power and creativity of the Islamic Golden Age, proving that curiosity and cultural exchange can lead to crucial achievements.

During the late Umayyad period around the year 740 and the early years of the Abbasid Caliphate in the mid-8th century, politics and the military were strongly influenced by old tribal divisions that went back to the first Islamic conquests. The biggest

[1] https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1000baghdad.asp

division between the two main Arab groups was between the Qays and the Yamans. The Qays, or northern Arabs, were from central and northern Arabia and Syria, and the Yaman, or southern Arabs, were from South Arabia with strong communities in Syria and Iraq. These groups were not families but rather political alliances that had formed during the early Umayyad rule. The Umayyad rulers depended heavily on the Syrian Arab tribes, making up their armies from tribal groups, which allowed for strong influencein government and military affairs. The caliphs who followed tried to keep peace by balancing the interests of both the Qaysi and Yamani sides, but favoritism often made things worse. For example, Caliph al-Walid II favored the Qays tribe, which caused even more anger and division. By the 740s, these tribal rivalries turned violent. The Qaysi and Yamani groups fought openly against each other, which greatly weakened the Umayyad military. Because of this internal conflict, the Umayyad dynasty lost its stability and strength. These divisions and civil wars made it easier for the Abbasids to rise up, defeat the Umayyads, and take control of the Islamic Empire.

As the Abbasids gained power, they worked to strengthen their control by including powerful families, military leaders, and regional rulers, especially those from Khurasan and of non-Arab backgrounds in their government. By bringing these influential groups into their circle, the Abbasids faced less opposition. Many possible rivals were given roles within the government, while others who refused to cooperate were pushed aside. This approach was very different from the one used by the late Umayyad rulers, who depended mainly on a few tribal alliances and were weakened by constant fighting between the Qays and Yaman factions. The Abbasids, on the other hand, looked beyond tribal loyalties and built a broader base of support which reinforced the stability and unity of their ruling. Instead of being the leaders of only one group or tribe, the Abbasids presented themselves as rulers of the entire Islamic world. This allowed them to gain the loyalty of both Arabs and non-Arabs and helped create a stronger and more inclusive empire during the early years of their reign.

The divisions among Arab tribes played a significant role in shaping political and social conflicts toward the end of Umayyad period and right when the Abbasids took over. Historian Hugh Kennedy notes, “The Arabs of northern Syria and Mesopotamia were divided, by the end of the Umayyad period, into two blocs, usually, but not always, called Qays and Yaman”[2] (Kennedy 27). Tribal rivalries created division within the empire, weakening the empire as a whole and enabling competition for power by tyrants. These divisions impacted both local conflicts and broader politics, as rulers often relied on tribal alliances and outside aid to maintain authority. Therefore, the Qays-Yaman split foreshadowed the downfall of the regime as internal conflicts destabilized the state. As these tribal divisions grew stronger, they turned from small local problems into major political struggles across the empire. Rival groups began fighting for power and influence, making it harder for the caliphs to keep control and hold the empire together. The growing rivalries created unstable conditions that eventually collapsed Umayyad state.

Factional conflict was a major factor in the decline of the Umayyad Caliphate. Kennedy explains, “Disputes between these two factions dominated the later years of the Umayyad Caliphate and were, at least in part, responsible for its downfall”[3] (Kennedy 27). These disputes reveal that internal divisions, particularly between rival Arab groups, weakened the stability of the empire. Instead of uniting as one against all, the Caliphate became consumed by rivalries and the lust for power, which, politically, left it vulnerable to external challenges. Therefore, internal disputes were not just a sign of instability but a major force in speeding up the collapse of rule.

Even though the Abbasids rose to power promising unity and justice, they inherited a deeply divided political landscape shaped by years of tribal and factional rivalry. Recurring factors such as competition for influence and struggles for control that weakened the Umayyads continued to affect the new dynasty. As the Abbasids expanded their rule, they depended heavily on powerful families, military leaders, and regional elites to maintain order. However, as these groups gained wealth and independence, the central government’s authority gradually weakened. The strategy originally aimed to stabilize power eventually doomed the Umayyads, as personal ambition and local loyalties took precedence over unity and loyalty to the caliph.

As powerful families and influential individuals gained control within the Abbasid Caliphate, their dominance reduced the amount of opposition. Wealthy elites, military leaders, and provincial governors began to exert significant influence over political decisions, which weakened the authority of the caliph himself. Over time, loyalty shifted away from the central Abbasid leadership

[2] https://archive.org/details/earlyabbasidcali0000kenn/page/n5/mode/2up

[3] https://archive.org/details/earlyabbasidcali0000kenn/page/n5/mode/2up

toward these local power holders, allowing them to act independently with little resistance or oversight from Baghdad. Such influences drove leaders to become corrupt in their pursuit of money, power, and control. In Mosul itself, however, almost all the leading families belonged to the Yamani group, and despite encouragement from outsiders, the local Qaysis seemed reluctant to challenge them. As a result, it was more possible for such people to alter elections in their favor. Rivalries within tribes further destabilized the central government even during the Umayyad period, which predated the Abbasid era.

Tensions existed within the Yamani bloc itself, particularly between the Hamdanis and the Azdis, which influenced the political dynamics of the region. These internal disputes proved effective even before the final days of the empire, meaning these problems were rooted deep; they impacted the relationships of the people and many allies. As a result, these fractures amplified existing tribal rivalries but also contributed to the instability that hurt the Caliphate's control. In the final years of the Caliphate, a mix of political, economic, and social problems slowly tore the empire apart. Overexpansion made the empire too large to govern effectively, as distant provinces across North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia became harder to control. Local rulers began gaining power and independence, weakening the authority of the central government in cities like Damascus and Baghdad. Corruption spread through the system, especially in tax collection, where wealth was often wasted or stolen instead of being used for public needs like defense or infrastructure. These economic struggles, along with ethnic and regional divisions, created deep instability. Without unity or strong leadership, the empire could no longer defend itself or maintain order, leading to its gradual collapse.

As the empire expanded and its leadership weakened, corruption infested the government. Tax officials and local rulers often kept much of the collected money for themselves instead of sending it to the central treasury. This misuse of funds damaged the economy and depleted the government' financial resources to pay soldiers, build infrastructure, or protect its borders. Over time, this financial instability made it increasingly difficult to sustain society, as trade slowed, poverty grew, and public services declined. Corrupt rulers focused more on personal wealth and power than on the needs of their people, and with less money for defense, the empire became more vulnerable to outside attacks and internal rebellion.

This weakening economic foundation directly affected the empire's ability to sustain its military and administrative structures, creating openings for instability and external threats. As the caliph lost grip on the population, fewer taxes flowed into the economy, discouraging central armies and militias from forming, leaving the empire prone to external threats like the Mongols and Seljuks. Tax farming in the Abbasid Empire was a system where the state outsourced tax collection to private individuals who paid the government a fixed amount in advance for the right to collect taxes in a given area. These tax farmers kept whatever they collected beyond that amount, which often led to harsh practices. For the Abbasids, the system ensured steady revenue, but for ordinary people, it usually meant heavier responsibilities. This practice became especially common from the mid-9th century onward, as central authority weakened and the caliphs relied more on provincial elites and military commanders. By the 10th century, tax farming reflected the Abbasids' shift from a strong, centralized fiscal system to a more fragmented and privatized one. It bridged the gap between social classes as it exploited the poor. "It was only a short step from this sort of arrangement to the large-scale tax farming typical of the late third and fourth centuries. This separate fiscal administration necessarily weakened the position of the governor since an important area of the life of the province was outside of his control"[4] (Kennedy 35), explains Kennedy. By the 10th century, tax farming showed how far the Abbasid Caliphate had drifted from a strong, centrally organized empire to a fragmented and corrupt state that depended on local elites and military leaders to manage basic functions. In the long run, this privatized and exploitative system eroded both economic stability and public trust, further accelerating the decline of Abbasid power.

The corruption of the tax system weakened the Umayyad state (the predecessor of the Abbasid Caliphate) by breaking both fairness and the ability for commerce. As historian Ulrika Martensson explains, "The system allowed for abuse because there was no central control over the landlords. Although the landlords should adjust the tax proportion according to circumstances which might affect the harvest, there was no guarantee that they actually did so: moreover, powerful landlords tended to buy up smaller landlords and thus acquire vast estates, the tax revenue from which they often withheld from the state"[5] (Martensson 219). Wealthy landlords exploited their power to expand their land and avoided paying taxes, which took away money and goods from the Caliphate's necessities. The growing differences between powerful elites and ordinary people, such as farmers, not only harmed the economy but also broke trust in the government. A growing greed for economic control became one of the most destructive forces within the empire, as wealthy

[4] https://archive.org/details/earlyabbasidcali0000kenn/page/n5/mode/2up
[5] https://www.jstor.org/stable/544368

landowners prioritized personal gain over loyalty to the state. The government grew increasingly unstable as powerful landowners exploited the tax system, gaining significant control over key aspects of the empire, such as agriculture, the peasantry, and regional administration. Martensson explains,

> In the imperial system, landlords were given land with accompanying peasants and had the rights and duties to extract taxes from the peasants to cover their own living expenses, to raise armed forces for the common defense of the imperial realm, and to remit the remaining tax revenue to the state treasury. However, many landlords desisted from submitting their share to the state while benefiting personally from the right to tax peasants and raise an army. Many made themselves independent rulers by using the imperial system in this way, to the effect that the imperial state inevitably declined. "Free riding" thus means to enjoy the right to land, tax revenue, and raising an army.[6]

(Martensson 209) The passage highlights how the imperial system, while designed to maintain order and efficiency, enabled the rise of landlords whose growing power undermined central authority. The system granted landlords both economic and military privileges: control over land, peasants, and tax collection in exchange for loyalty and contributions to the empire's finances. However, many landlords abused this control, keeping tax revenue for themselves and using their personal armies to secure regional dominance. As the local powers drew control away from the central government, empire became more fragmented than ever.

The widespread greed and abuse of power set the stage for the empire's deeper collapse. The desire of wealthy landlords to protect their own wealth and influence came at the expense of the state's stability and unity. The failures of the imperial system caused by the large numbers of landlords neglecting their duties to the state. Similar to issues with taxation, landlords prioritized their own desires at the expense of the stability of the empire. "Such landlords were the free riders of the political economy, who took advantage of the rights related to the land without contributing their share to uphold the empire. Secondly, there was the fiscal level where the problem was how to manage the survival of the peasants in relation to the overall economy and what would be the state's and the landlords' roles in the collection and redistribution of tax revenue," explains Martensson (Martensson 214). Those free riders neglected many things as they kept resources to themselves and neither paid taxes nor cared about the peasants. As a result, many peasants suffered under their corrupt local powers as the caliphate collapsed even faster. Governors struggled in face of the instability between local powers and the central government. Many relied on the local elites to secure high tax revenues, yet those elites resisted many requests. Kennedy highlights, "The governor was thus in an unenviable position, caught between his political masters who demanded high tax yields and the local leaders on whom he depended for military support but who would not give him this support if, like Musa b (general and governor of North Africa). Musa b, he went beyond the accepted limit" (Kennedy 35). Kennedy reveals how governors struggled to meet tax expectations with the resistance of local landowners. The result was many governors having their "power" stripped away as more and more tension grew between the central power and local landlords.

As corruption spread through the empire's political and economic systems, its military strength also began to deteriorate. The weakening of central authority not only affected governance and taxation but also undermined the empire's ability to maintain a loyal and unified army. A major weakness of the empire was its reliance on local military militias, which made centralized coordination and effective defense efforts extremely difficult. Another major problem was within those local armies: the leaders of those militias were uncertain in terms of loyalty to the caliphate. Kennedy describes, "The key to the governor's weakness was that they were dependent on troops raised locally and commanded by leaders of local communities… Though militant about their pay, they were less impressive when faced with an enemy, especially when this enemy was composed of Muslim Egyptians with whom they had many links and interests in common"[7] (Kennedy 35). This shows that the military within the empire prioritized private interests and dismissed the needs of the government. Governors lacked control of these armies and power over the problem of taxation, which proved the governors and the armies unreliable on the battlefield, and especially under an invasion. Corruption in tax collection allowed local officials to keep revenue for themselves, depriving the Caliphate of essential funds. While the urban elite became wealthier, most ordinary citizens faced worsening living conditions and rising inequality. Economic troubles such as disrupted trade, inflation, and declining trust in the currency further weakened the state's stability. As mercenaries grew more costly and social unrest spread, loyalty to the government faded, deepening the empire's decline.

[6] https://www.jstor.org/stable/544368
[7] https://archive.org/details/earlyabbasidcali0000kenn/page/n5/mode/2up

As the central authority weakened and the government lost control over taxation, it could no longer afford to maintain a strong, loyal standing army. To fill this gap, the caliphs and regional governors increasingly hired mercenaries and soldiers motivated by payment rather than allegiance. While this provided short-term military strength, it came at a high cost. Mercenaries were notoriously unreliable, often shifting loyalties to the highest bidders. This dependence not only drained the empire's treasury but also eroded the sense of unity and duty within its armed forces. Ultimately, the reliance on mercenaries revealed the empire's internal decay—its inability to inspire loyalty, maintain financial stability, or defend itself without resorting to hired soldiers. The Caliphate's central government gradually weakened due to its heavy dependence on militarized state structures, which undermined cohesive governance and long-term stability. As described by Kennedy, "The provinces were ruled by governors sent by the caliph, and their authority was absolute until they were dismissed by their master. If any of the local people were so misguided as to attempt rebellion, then units of the great Khurasani army, which had brought the dynasty to power, could be drafted in to chastise them. The system was, in short, an absolute military dictatorship" (Kennedy 1). Provincial governance highlighted reliance on loyalty and the military overpowering its people rather than on genuine trust. While the caliph held control, real power often rested with governors and the Khurasani troops, weakening the connection between the city and the other regions of the empire. The Khurasani soldiers were from the northeastern region of Khurasan, and they helped the Abbasids overthrow the Umayyads. Made up of Arabs and Persians, they became the new Abbasid army and gained significant political influence. Over time, such a system developed hate, rebellion, and separation within the people. Therefore, the military that once helped the Abbasids gain control ironically led to their own decline.

The constant struggles between the Caliphs and the Seljuks revealed how the conquest of land often led to bloody armed conflicts, exposing deep flaws within the empire's military and political structure. These clashes were not merely battles for territory but also struggles for legitimacy and control, as both powers sought to assert dominance over the Islamic world. The Caliphs, weakened by corruption and overreliance on mercenaries, lacked the authority and resources to maintain a unified army. Meanwhile, the Seljuks, though initially allies and protectors, grew increasingly independent, turning their military strength into political leverage. This ongoing tension between the two powers demonstrated the empire's declining ability to balance ambition with stability, ultimately contributing to its fragmentation and loss of centralized control. Even though these conflicts created the opportunity to take back influence, these "opportunities" created even more problems. Historian Deborah Tor explains that, "All of this presented opportunities for a cunning caliph to try to undermine Seljuq authority and increase his own, and al-Muqtafī was not slow to avail himself of these. It led in the end, once again, to armed confrontation between sultan and caliph"[8] (Tor 309). Even though al-Muqtafī was ambitious and powerful, he got greedy easily as he deepened his rivalry with the Seljuks. Instead of taking back power for the Caliphs, there were more and more conflicts about control and authority.

Political mismanagement and manipulation further accelerated the empire's decline, revealing a leadership more concerned with preserving personal power than governing effectively. Corruption, favoritism, and deceit became central features of the political landscape, as officials exploited their positions for wealth and influence rather than public service. The Caliphs and their advisors often manipulated alliances, playing rival factions against each other to maintain control, but this only deepened divisions within the state. Such instability weakened the government's credibility, alienated the population, and allowed ambitious military and regional leaders to rise unchecked. Ultimately, the empire's internal decay stemmed not just from external threats but from the political games and moral failures of those meant to uphold its unity and strength. Historian Klaas Van Berkel explains, "A conviction for the embezzlement of state money was not regarded as an impediment to a future career in the state service."[9] (p. 713) The lack of accountability in the Abbasid government seriously weakened the empire's ability to govern effectively. Officials could embezzle state funds without fear of long-term consequences, and a conviction for stealing from the treasury did not stop them from returning to government service. This created an environment where corruption was tolerated and even expected, as personal gain often took priority over the needs of the state. When leaders and administrators knew they would face little real punishment, they had little incentive to act responsibly or fairly. Over time, this widespread corruption eroded public trust, weakened central authority, and made it even harder for the government to maintain order and stability throughout the empire.

[8] http://www.jstor.org/stable/4311763.

[9] https://www.academia.edu/715305/Embezzlement_and_Reimbursement_Disciplining_officials_in_Abbasid_Baghdad_8th_10th_centuries_A_D_

The Abbasid government's weak accountability extended beyond embezzlement, creating a system that perpetuated corruption at every level. Discharge procedures often focused on seizing the wealth of officials who were caught taking money, but once they repaid a set sum, or sometimes even just promised to, the officials were frequently reinstated. Once back in power, they often resumed the same corrupt practices, creating a cycle of mismanagement that repeated itself continuously. This recycling of dishonest officials meant that corruption became an accepted part of government, further eroding trust in the state, weakening central authority, and making it nearly impossible to enforce fair and effective governance across the empire. This demonstrates how the Abbasid state's policies often had the opposite effect of what they intended, actually worsening the corruption they were meant to control. By allowing officials who had been caught embezzling or mismanaging funds to return to government service, the system sent a message that dishonest behavior carried few real consequences. Instead of discouraging corruption, these policies made it seem acceptable and even routine, encouraging more officials to act in their own self-interest rather than for the good of the state. Over time, this not only deepened mismanagement but also undermined public trust, weakened central authority, and made it increasingly difficult for the government to maintain order and stability throughout the empire.

Weak central authority was one of the main reasons the empire began to fall apart. As the Caliphs lost control over distant provinces, local rulers, military leaders, and wealthy elites started acting on their own with little regard for the central government. The Caliphs no longer had the power to enforce laws, collect taxes fairly, or manage conflicts between rival groups. This lack of strong leadership made it difficult to coordinate defenses, maintain public order, or keep the loyalty of their subjects. Over time, the empire became increasingly divided, with different regions caring more about their own interests than the unity of the state, which ultimately weakened the empire from within. One internal weakness that caused the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate was the growing reliance on foreign military slaves, which showed a losing connection between the rulers and the people. As Historian Dr. Earl J. Hess comments, "We can begin an accounting for the presence of military slaves with Abbasid history. According to their critics, the Caliph was unable to generate wide public support for post-revolutionary policies, and therefore, a population less and less convinced of the legitimacy of their rule. As the distance between the society and the ruling class widened, the Caliphs fell back upon private armies of slaves imported from the Central Asian steppe to maintain the power of what became an increasingly autocratic elite."[10] This reliance on military slaves illustrates how the Caliphs could no longer depend on the loyalty of the people or traditional tribes. Instead, they isolated themselves by having their term consist of foreign forces who had no connection to the people they were supporting and defending, and it definitely affected the motivation behind the many conflicts and invasions they experienced. This further distanced the Caliph from the people, and public trust was reduced more and more, ultimately weakening the unity of the Caliphate.

The Caliph relied heavily on slaves and mercenaries, which further highlighted the instability of the empire. After the civil wars and armed conflicts, the leaders failed to maintain support from the general population as well and failed to strengthen many policies. "We can begin an accounting for the presence of military slaves with Abbasid history. According to their critics, the Caliph was unable to generate wide public support for post-revolutionary policies, and therefore, a population less and less convinced of the legitimacy of their rule. As the distance between the society and the ruling class widened, the Caliphs fell back upon private armies of slaves imported from Central Asia to maintain the power of what became an increasingly autocratic elite,"[11](Hess 36) explains Hess as the reliance on a military grew, this society shifted from a more democratic style of government into a more authoritarian regime, as the military became more and more important to the Caliph and the empire. The powerful leaders slowly lost more and more support and ultimately lost control.

The Abbasid Caliphate, once one of the most powerful empires in the world, eventually collapsed not because of one major invasion, but because of the misuse of money and resources, fragmentation of a central government, and the reliance of outsiders, the once mighty civilization slowly tore itself apart. Corruption spread throughout the government as officials and landowners focused more on personal wealth than loyalty to the state. Many local rulers stopped sending taxes to the central government, keeping the money for themselves and weakening the empire's economy. The Caliphs lost control over distant provinces, which led to political fragmentation and rivalries among regional leaders. The military, once strong and organized, became unreliable as mercenaries demanded higher pay and local militias refused to follow orders from Baghdad. Social inequality also grew as the rich benefited from corrupt systems while peasants suffered heavy taxes and poor living conditions. Over time, the people lost trust in the government and no longer felt loyal to the Caliphs. Without unity, money, or discipline, the Abbasids could not defend their empire from outside threats or control the chaos

[10] https://www.jstor.org/stable/544368
[11] https://www.jstor.org/stable/544368

within. In the end, the Mongols invaded just because they were strong, but they also noticed the many flaws the empire showed. The empire's greatest weakness came from inside, its own greed, corruption, and loss of order, which caused the once-great Abbasid Caliphate to crumble from within.

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