

Samarra and the Spatial Politics of Power: Reassessing the Abbasid Capital Relocation under al-Mu'taṣim

Akhmad Najibul Khairi Syaie^{1*}, Ahmad Syafi'ie Hadi², Haukil Hannan¹

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia

²Universitas Dr. Soetomo Surabaya, Indonesia

*Correspondence: ✉ najib@uinsa.ac.id

Abstract

The relocation of the Abbasid capital from Baghdad to Samarra in 836 CE under Caliph al-Mu'taṣim has long been interpreted as a decisive administrative maneuver that temporarily redefined the geography of Islamic governance. However, prevailing narratives often overlook the deeper political complexities and long-term ramifications of this move. This article seeks to reassess the motivations behind al-Mu'taṣim's decision and critically examine the consequences of transferring the seat of power to Samarra. Employing a historical-analytical methodology grounded in primary and secondary sources, the study interrogates factors such as military exigencies, personal predilections, and the caliph's broader political calculus. The findings reveal that while Samarra emerged as a militarized enclave catering to the needs of the Turkish guard, it failed to eclipse Baghdad's enduring political and symbolic centrality. The relocation inadvertently exacerbated factionalism and destabilized the caliphal institution, particularly under al-Mu'taṣim's successors. This article concludes that the capital shift did not yield the strategic coherence envisioned by its architect and, instead, exposes the fragility of centralized authority within the Abbasid polity. By reevaluating a pivotal yet understudied episode in Abbasid history, the study contributes to broader discussions on urban relocation, imperial governance, and the limits of caliphal power. Further research is needed to explore the *longue durée* implications of Samarra's decline for subsequent Islamic political configurations.

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INTRODUCTION

The decision of Caliph al-Mu'taṣim to relocate the Abbasid capital from Baghdad to Samarra in 836 CE presents a historical problem that continues to invite scrutiny (El-Hibri, 2011). Unlike most capital relocations in premodern empires, this shift did not correspond to the founding of a new dynastic era, the collapse of a previous regime, or the conquest of new territories. Instead, it occurred at the height of Abbasid rule, raising questions about what political, administrative, or social pressures necessitated such a drastic move (S. Nasution, 2017). The abrupt nature of the transition, the construction of a purpose-built city on the Tigris, and the continued relevance of Baghdad in subsequent decades all suggest that the rationale behind this decision was more complex than mere imperial expansion or urban congestion. Understanding the reasons behind this unprecedented capital relocation—and the tensions it reflects within the Abbasid political apparatus—remains a central problem in the study of medieval Islamic governance.

Undeniably, there is scarce scholarly discourse on capital relocations in Islamic history, let alone the transfer of the Abbasid Caliphate capital from Baghdad to Samarra. Even if existing, it remains a small part of a larger historical narrative, such as royal biographies, political intrigues, conquests, and other glorified events (Abdullah, 1999; Hannan, 2012). Ibn al-Athīr and al-Suyūṭī include the relocation of the state capital from Baghdad to Samarra as a minor aspect in their biographies of al-Mu'taṣim. Several contemporary studies show a similar phenomenon. Tayeb El-Hibri (El-Hibri, 2011) briefly mentions Samarra in his extensive work on the biography of al-Mu'taṣim. Through her historiographical study, Ghada Janyusi-Lehn (Janyusi-Lehn, 2007)

mentions Samarra as al-Mu'taṣim's attempt to accommodate Turkish troops. Meanwhile, Al-Bili (Daniel, 2003), Yusuf (Yusuf, 2014), Mayasari (Mayasari, 2015), Nasution (S. Nasution, 2017), and Fathiha (Fathiha, 2021), in their discussions on military control and the decline of the Abbasids during al-Mu'taṣim's reign, do not draw any conclusions regarding Samarra. The only study focusing on the transfer of the Abbasid Caliphate capital from Baghdad to Samarra was conducted by Ismail (Ismail, 1968). However, Ismail solely focuses on the relationship between al-Mu'taṣim and the Turks and how al-Mu'taṣim eventually solidified his choice of Samarra as the new state capital. Similarly, Ismail does not delve further into the impact of the capital relocation, as will be elaborated in this study.

This article investigates the political decision of Caliph al-Mu'taṣim to relocate the Abbasid capital from Baghdad to Samarra in 836 by addressing three central questions: Who was Caliph al-Mu'taṣim, and what was the socio-political situation during his reign? What prompted the caliph to initiate the transfer of the capital at the peak of Abbasid power, and what were the immediate and long-term consequences of this relocation for the Abbasid political order? The study advances the argument that the move was driven not solely by practical or military considerations, but also by deeper political insecurities and the caliph's desire to assert greater control over his increasingly influential Turkish military corps. The hypothesis proposed is that, while intended to consolidate authority and stabilize governance, the relocation to Samarra ultimately produced adverse effects, including heightened political fragmentation and a weakening of caliphal legitimacy—particularly in the eyes of the Abbasid elite centered in Baghdad. By foregrounding these tensions, the article contends that the episode reveals fundamental contradictions in the Abbasid strategy of centralized rule through militarized urban space.

This research aims to delve into the often-overlooked events of the Abbasid era, particularly the relocation of the Abbasid capital from Baghdad to Samarra in 836 under the leadership of Caliph al-Mu'taṣim Bi'llāh. Historically, the Abbasid Caliphate underwent two capital relocations: firstly, from Hashimiyya (established by Abū al-'Abbās al-Saffāh) to Baghdad (built by Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr), and secondly, from Baghdad to Samarra (constructed by al-Mu'taṣim) (Syalabi, 2000). The transfer of the capital did not occur in isolation but rather as a result of the surrounding socio-political dynamics.

Despite its peculiarity, the relocation of the Abbasid Caliphate capital from Baghdad to Samarra in 836 was indeed successful. Al-Mu'taṣim was the first Abbasid caliph in Samarra, a region whose name was later changed to *Surra man ra'ā*, 'the joy of those who see it' (Baghdadi, 2011). Samarra's position was 60 miles away from the Tigris. After al-Mu'taṣim (r. 833-861), seven caliphs led the Abbasid caliphate in Samarra, namely al-Wāthiq Bi'llāh (r. 842-847), al-Mutawakkil 'Alā'llāh (r. 847-861), al-Mustansir Bi'llāh (r. 861-862), al-Musta'in Bi'llāh (r. 862-866), al-Mu'tazz Bi'llāh (r. 866-869), al-Muhtadi Bi'llāh (r. 869-870), al-Mu'tamid 'Alā'llāh (r. 870-892), before returning to Baghdad again (Hitti, 2008).

METHODS

This research is a qualitative historical study that focuses on the political and socio-cultural dynamics surrounding the relocation of the Abbasid Caliphate's capital from Baghdad to Samarra in 836. The material object of this study is the political decision-making process of the Abbasid elite, particularly under Caliph al-Mu'taṣim, within the broader context of caliphal authority and the integration of military elites into the structures of governance. Therefore, this article falls within the category of political history, employing a socio-political analytical approach to explore the underlying structures of power and authority behind the capital relocation.

To achieve historical understanding, this study employs the classical historical method, consisting of four main stages (Abdurrahman, 2007). The first stage is heuristic, involving the collection of relevant data from both primary and secondary sources. Particular attention is given to classical Islamic historiography works authored by near-contemporary scholars such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Ya'qūbī, al-Mas'ūdī, Ibn al-Athīr, and al-Suyūfī. These texts are selected not only for their

credibility but also for their narrative richness, political insight, and proximity to the events under investigation, making them indispensable for reconstructing the motivations and consequences of the capital's relocation.

The second stage is source criticism, which, in this study, is applied selectively. While the classical sources have long been established as foundational in Islamic historiography and require minimal authentication, modern works—such as those of Ahmad Amīn—demand more critical engagement (Kuntowijoyo, 2005). The third stage is interpretation, through which the data are analyzed in light of relevant social and political theories to uncover the underlying causes and implications of the move to Samarra. Given the political nature of the research question, this study is informed by a socio-political analytical framework that considers elite power consolidation, urban spatial strategies, and military patronage as integral to historical interpretation. The final stage is historiography, whereby findings are presented in a descriptive-analytical format (Abdurrahman, 2007). Throughout the discussion, the study employs key historical concepts such as chronology, diachronism, synchronism, continuity, and change to situate the episode within its temporal and structural context (Supriatna, 2006; Supardan, 2009). These conceptual tools help frame the relocation not as an isolated event, but as part of broader patterns in Abbasid statecraft and urban transformation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Reign of al-Mu'taṣim

This al-Mu'taṣim was born in Zapetra in the year 793 to a concubine (*jāriya*) named Maridah (Hasan, 1963; Suyuti, 1974). His full name was Abū Ishāq b. Hārūn al-Rashīd b. Muḥammad al-Mahdī b. 'Abd Allāh b. al-'Abbās (Atsir, 1987). He was known to be physically very strong. According to accounts, he could easily break someone's arm, courageous, strong-willed, although his knowledge was not extensive. He had a medium build, fair skin, a long brownish beard, and beautiful eyes (Suyuti, 1974). He had several characteristics, such as clear speech, his poetry was quite beautiful, when angry he paid no heed to whom he faced, his demeanor was like that of foreign kings, and during his reign, he delighted in gathering tens of thousands of Turkish slaves (Atsir, 1987).

From childhood, he was trained in military skills, which made him courageous. As a result, he did not acquire much knowledge, so his father did not appoint him as the crown prince. However, his military career was prominent during the reign of al-Ma'mūn. He was trusted as the right-hand man of the caliph, especially for solving emerging issues and quelling rebellions. Due to his achievements, he was appointed as the governor of Syria and Egypt (Syalabi, 1978). While serving in Egypt, he was bestowed the title al-Mu'taṣim Bi'llāh, meaning 'one who seeks refuge in God' (Brockleman, 1974).

Al-Mu'taṣim was appointed as caliph on the day of al-Ma'mūn's death, or precisely in the year 833 (Hasan, 1963). Al-Ma'mūn chose his brother as his successor because he saw his discipline, which had been instilled since a young age, and also because al-Mu'taṣim himself was a military man. This was related to strong pressure from the Byzantines at the time (Sou'yb, 1977). Therefore, after being appointed as caliph, al-Mu'taṣim carried out several of al-Ma'mūn's bequests, his predecessor caliph. First, he continued the *mihna*, a doctrine stating that the Quran is created (H. Nasution, 1973; Grunebaum, 1970). This doctrine was mandatory for officials, prospective officials, and even the entire populace (Suyuti, 1974). Al-Mu'taṣim's policy regarding the *mihna* was exactly the same as al-Ma'mūn's (Amin, 1936). Second, he fought against the *Zot* people. According to Ibn Khaldūn, the *Zot* people were a combination of several nations, mostly from India, who caused unrest in Baghdad (Bik, 1969). The unrest caused by the *Zot* people, known as the Zangi rebellion (Sou'yb, 1977), had actually been quelled by al-Ma'mūn but resurfaced at the beginning of al-Mu'taṣim's reign (Bik, 1969). Third, he destroyed the Khurami group. This group was led by Bābik al-Khurāmī, who claimed divine attributes within himself and advocated for people to fulfill their carnal desires (Hamka, 1975). This naturally stirred up the Abbasid

government, particularly during the reigns of al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'taṣim. Fourth, he continued the war with the Romans, who had rebuilt their strength after consecutive defeats from Islamic armies in 832-833 (Atsir, 1987).

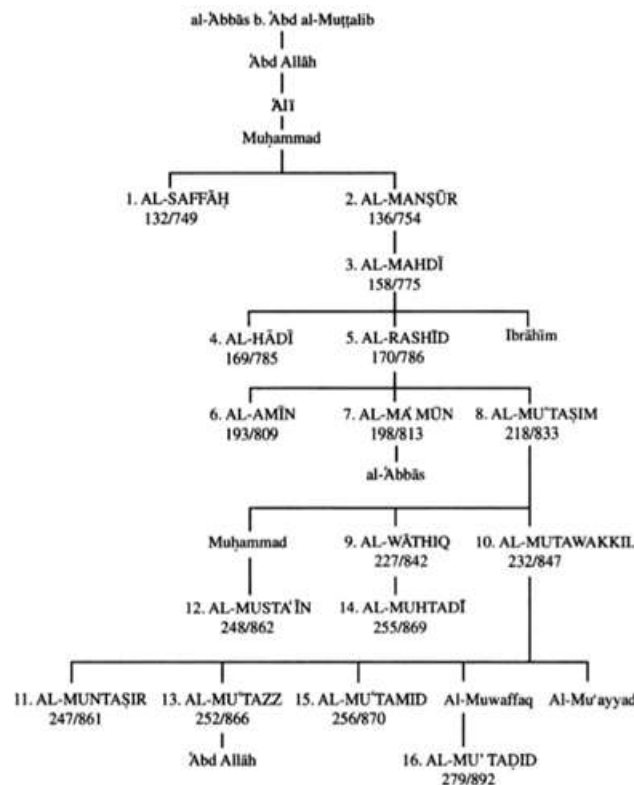


Figure 1. The lineage of the Abbasid Caliphs at the Beginning of Their Rule

Additionally, al-Mu'taṣim also had his own policies. Among them was the appointment of Turks as important officials in the government. The Turks referred to here are not the people of modern Turkey with Ankara as their capital, but rather slaves originating from Central Asia (Ismail, 1966). This is due to the fact that al-Mu'taṣim was of Turkish descent from his mother's lineage (Zaidan, 1958). Consequently, al-Mu'taṣim's government showed the dominance of Turks, unlike the dominance of Arabs in al-Amīn's reign and Persians in al-Ma'mūn's time. Another notable policy was the construction of the new capital, Samarra. Al-Mu'taṣim relocated the government center from Baghdad to Samarra in 836. Samarra was an ambitious project for al-Mu'taṣim. He built the city to be on par with Baghdad in terms of buildings, facilities, and infrastructure (Syalabi, 1978; Brockleman, 1974; Grunebaum, 1970).

Al-Mu'taṣim occupied the caliphate until the year 842, concurrent with the reigns of several caliphs or kings in other parts of the world, namely 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ḥakam b. Hishām (r. 821-853) ruler of the Umayyad Caliphate II in Andalusia, Muḥammad b. Idrīs (r. 818-836) and 'Alīb. Muḥammad (r. 836-849) rulers of the Idrisid Dynasty in Maghreb, Ziyādat Allāh I (r. 817-838) ruler of the Aghlabid Dynasty in Africa, Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ziyādī (r. 818-860) in Yemen, 'Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir (r. 828 M-845) in Khurasan, Theophilus son of Mikail (r. 829-842) in Byzantium, and Louis I, known as Leon (r. 814-840) in France (Bik, 1969).

Baghdad Rejected: Military Tensions and the Founding of Samarra

When the Abbasid Caliphate first seized power from the Umayyad Dynasty centered in Damascus, the city was not welcoming to the Abbasids. Damascus was far from Persia, the power base of the Abbasids. Al-Saffāḥ, the first Abbasid caliph, began searching for a place to establish

his government. He chose Hāshimiyya until his death. The relocation of the first capital of the Abbasid Caliphate can be understood to some extent, as the selection of Hāshimiyya by al-Saffāh at the time seemed more like an initial attempt to undermine the authority of recently overthrown Damascus, which was not yet free from sympathizers of the Umayyad Caliphate (Syalabi, 2000). Hāshimiyya was chosen because the city was considered safer and more representative for establishing an entirely new Islamic empire. However, in Hāshimiyya, there were no visible strategic plans regarding the construction of a capital city.

Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr succeeded al-Saffah as the second Abbasid caliph. He searched for a new city and eventually found a location in a small village near Persia called Baghdad. Baghdad, which in Persian means “established by God” (Bobrick, 2013), was once an ancient city situated between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. During the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, it was a bustling market town, but when Caliph al-Manṣūr visited, those markets had disappeared and were replaced by Christian monasteries (Bobrick, 2013).

In the year 762, when first building the city of Baghdad, during the laying of the first stone, Caliph al-Manṣūr said, “*Bism Allāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm.*” The Earth belongs to Him. He bequeaths it to His righteous servants as He wills. Victory belongs to the God-fearing” (Khalidun, 2000). Hundreds of thousands of skilled workers, including architects, stonemasons, carpenters, painters, sculptors, and others brought from Syria, Mosul, Basra, and Kufa, were mobilized to build the city of a thousand and one nights at a very high cost. Historians say that Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr financed the construction of Baghdad with 18,000 dinars (Tim Riset dan Studi Islam Mesir, 2013). With such a large budget, magnificent structures were erected: palaces, mosques, bridges, water channels, and various fortresses and defense fortifications that were difficult to penetrate.

The palace was built in the midst of the round city of Baghdad, and beside it was constructed the Grand Mosque. The caliph's palace was constructed magnificently, with its doors adorned with abundant gold leaf. Made of stone and marble, it boasted a large green dome crowned with a statue of a horseman rotating like a weather vane. Along the inner wall, a balcony stretched the length of the fortress, spacious enough for the caliph to mount his horse and survey the surrounding area. There were four city gates with four highways marking the four cardinal directions, spreading outward like spokes of a wheel with the caliph's palace at its center. Each gate was named after a major city or region to which it led: Damascus, Basra, Kufa, and Khurasan (Bobrick, 2013). Over time, the city acquired large public squares for horse racing and polo. A palace was built around a pure silver tree with mechanical birds chirping. There was also a zoo with tethered enclosures for lions, elephants, peacocks, tigers, and giraffes (Bobrick, 2013).

Further elaborating on how al-Manṣūr built the new capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, Baghdad, Hitti illustrates it as follows.

To construct his city, completed over four years, al-Manṣūr expended a cost of 4,883,000 dirhams and employed around 100,000 architects, craftsmen, and laborers from Syria, Mesopotamia, and other regions... *Madīnat al-Salām* (the city of peace), the official name of al-Manṣūr's city, lay on the western bank of the Tigris River in the same valley that once hosted various great capitals of the ancient world. The city was circular in shape, hence also dubbed the Circular City (*al-mudawwara*), with double-layered walls, a deep moat, and a third wall towering 90 feet high surrounding the central area. These walls boasted four equally spaced gates, from which four highways stretched from the city center, forming the spokes of a wheel towards the four sides of the realm. Thus, they all formed concentric circles pivoting on the caliph's palace, known as the Golden Gate (*Bāb al-Dhahab*) for its gold lining, or the Blue Dome (*al-Qubbat al-Khaḍrā'*). Adjacent to the palace stood a grand mosque. The dome covering the palace's assembly hall soared 130 feet high. Later accounts mention that atop this dome stood a horseman wielding a spear, which, in critical moments, would be raised towards oncoming enemies (Hitti, 2008).

Hitti's illustration of Baghdad above evokes extraordinary awe for a "City of Peace" deemed as the heir to the power and prestige of cities like Ctesiphon, Babylon, Nineveh, Ur, and other ancient Eastern capitals. This new location paved the way for the growth of ideas and thoughts from the East. In constructing this remarkable city, al-Manşūr relied entirely on the auspicious predictions of court astrologers. Therefore, the second capital relocation, from Baghdad to Samarra (an entirely new territory), appears peculiar and more indicative of bold actions or radical policy maneuvers undertaken by Caliph al-Mu'taşim rather than strategic planning, as previously done by Caliph al-Manşūr. The act of "escaping" from the "city of peace" is certainly not an easily acceptable reality. At first glance, it appears paradoxical.

After the death of al-Manşūr, the city of Baghdad experienced rapid growth due to its role as a center of Islamic civilization and culture. Many scholars from various regions came to this city to deepen their knowledge. During the reigns of al-Rashīd and al-Ma'mūn, Baghdad reached its peak of progress (the golden age). At that time, Baghdad became the highest center of civilization and culture in the world. Political prestige, economic supremacy, and intellectual activity were the three hallmarks of this city. Science and literature flourished rapidly. Many books on science and literature were translated into Arabic and developed by Muslim scholars. Among them were books from India related to medicine, mathematics, astronomy, music, and literature. From Persia, many books related to astronomy, law, history, music, and literature were translated. Meanwhile, from Greece, many books related to philosophy, logic, governance, and astronomy were translated. From Egypt, many books related to chemistry and anatomy (biology) were translated. From Chaldea, many books related to agriculture were translated (Yatim, 2007).

In the field of economics, its development progressed alongside political advancements. During the eras of al-Rashīd and al-Ma'mūn, trade and industry thrived rapidly. The economic life of this city was supported by three bustling ports frequented by international trade caravans (from China, India, Central Asia, Syria, Persia, Egypt, and other African countries), two in Basra and Sirat in the Persian Gulf (Syalabi, 1978).

As a center of scholarly activity, al-Ma'mūn established a large library named Bayt al-Ḥikma (Balty-Guesdon, 1994). In this place, scholars and scientists engaged in discussions and conducted studies on religious and scientific matters. Additionally, many academies, colleges, and madrasas were founded. Among them were al-Nizāmiyya established by the prime minister Nizām al-Mulk, al-Mustanşiriyya founded by al-Mustanşir, Madrasa AbūḤanīfa, and Madrasa al-Başiriyya. The majority of madrasas in Baghdad taught the jurisprudence of a single school of thought (*madhhab*), except al-Mustanşiriyya and al-Başiriyya which taught all four *madhhabs* (Ḥanafī, Malikī, Shāfi'ī, and Ḥanbālī) (Rusydi et al., 2023).

Baghdad, during the time of al-Rashīd and thereafter, became a metropolitan city with the largest population in the world, reaching two million inhabitants. Its rival was the city of Cordoba in Spain under the rule of the Umayyad Islamic Dynasty with 500,000 souls (Sirjani, 2011). Meanwhile, Paris, which at that time was the largest Christian city in Europe, only had a population of 200,000 to 300,000 (Lombard, 1975).

When al-Mu'taşim ascended to the throne, Baghdad was already at least 70 years old. At that age, Baghdad had grown into a metropolitan city for an Islamic caliphate. Baghdad had a very strong economy, especially in trade and agriculture. This could not be separated from two factors. First, the fact that Baghdad had a geographical advantage that not all cities possessed. Baghdad was intentionally founded by al-Manşūr in a selected geographical space, not by chance. The choice of geographical location had been consulted with many experts, so Baghdad could provide comfort to anyone living in it.

Second, Baghdad was the center of the Abbasid caliphate's government and the residence of the caliph. In total, at that age, Baghdad had been led by six caliphs. These two factors are why Baghdad quickly grew into a city that dominated almost all fields, including economics, politics, and culture (Yaqubi & Juynboll, 2022; Al-Hamawi, 2015). Baghdad had come a long way from its early days when it was founded by al-Manşūr. Baghdad had developed in terms of size, population,

wealth, and the character of its inhabitants. Even the caliph's palace, which made this city important, was just a small part of the very large city of Baghdad. Baghdad seemed to be a protector of the palace and the caliphate's administrative center.

The beautiful stories about Baghdad then changed under the rule of al-Mu'taṣim. The presence of the palace and the administrative center were no longer driving forces for the economic and cultural life of Baghdad. Therefore, instead of being protectors of the palace and the administrative center, Baghdad now seemed not to want either. Al-Mu'taṣim did not appreciate the cultural development in Baghdad. According to al-Ḥamawī, he did not like Baghdad. He seemed unfamiliar with the atmosphere and spirit of the city of Baghdad. Additionally, during al-Mu'taṣim's reign, the economic life of Baghdad reached a point where the presence of the palace was considered to have no influence whatsoever (Goitein, 1956). The only thing taken seriously by the people of Baghdad was when their material, cultural, and economic lives began to be disrupted by the palace. This truly happened after the arrival of the Turks in Baghdad.

They were soldiers deliberately brought by al-Mu'taṣim to protect his reign. Al-Mu'taṣim intentionally chose Turks because he wanted to erode the dominance of Arab and Persian influences in the previous periods of rule. Additionally, al-Mu'taṣim was descended from a Turkish concubine, Maridah. For al-Mu'taṣim, these Turkish soldiers were protectors who would secure his reign from various disturbances. However, for the people of Baghdad, they were a real threat to the harmonious life of Baghdad. These Turkish soldiers were notorious for their lack of discipline. They enjoyed roaming the streets with their horses and causing chaos here and there. They often killed civilians, including children, women, and adult men (Al-Tabari, 1967; Yaqubi & Juynboll, 2022; Mas'udi, 1409; Hitti, 2008). Especially their treatment of women had caused many problems (Al-Ḥamawī, 2015; Hamdun, 1927), which later led to the emergence of antipathy among the people of Baghdad towards them, including towards the caliph as the main reason for their arrival. Because of the actions of these Turkish people, the existence of the palace was then seen as antithetical to trade life. The people of Baghdad came to the conclusion to free their city from the caliph and his soldiers. They wanted to restore their city as *Madīnat al-Salām* 'the city of peace'.

Therefore, the people of Baghdad presented demands to al-Mu'taṣim, asking him to discipline his soldiers and move them from Baghdad without moving his palace (al-Mu'taṣim had to remain in Baghdad) along with his soldiers (Al-Ḥamawī, 2015; Hamdun, 1927). On one hand, the demand aligned with what he thought. He believed Baghdad was not the right place for him and his soldiers. However, on the other hand, the demand posed difficulties for al-Mu'taṣim because he could not possibly stay separated from his soldiers. The people of Baghdad were then faced with two choices: to choose to have both (the palace and the Turkish people) or to lose both. Eventually, problem after problem, the people of Baghdad chose to lose both. They assumed that even if the caliph moved from Baghdad, he would not move far from it. Considering various anti-al-Mu'taṣim protests emerged everywhere, Iraq seemed to be the safest place for the caliph.

Al-Mu'taṣim's decision to move from Baghdad along with his soldiers was firm. He conducted surveys of several places that he deemed suitable not only as the residence of his soldiers but also as the capital of the country. He lived in and renovated several cities, such as Syammasiyya, Baradan, Bahnasa, Matira, and then Qatul. These cities were considered unable to meet the needs and goals of al-Mu'taṣim (Yaqubi & Juynboll, 2022). Finally, al-Mu'taṣim moved to the last city, Samarra, which he felt was suitable, and undertook massive construction there. He built large buildings, both for the caliph's palace, the residences of the generals and his important people, as well as the soldiers' residence. In this construction, he involved experts from all over the Abbasid state, especially from Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. Samarra was a major project for al-Mu'taṣim. He was required to build a capital city that was no less than Baghdad. However, Samarra's design was based on Baghdad, especially the design of the central craft market. However, unlike Baghdad, the streets in Samarra were wider. Likewise, Samarra did not have a circular wall like Baghdad (Ismail, 1968).

However, Samarra was built and became the new capital of the Abbasid state, it did not immediately overshadow Baghdad, especially in terms of trade and administration. Baghdad, with its very favorable geographical conditions, created a conducive environment for trade advancement, which was not possessed by the new capital city, Samarra. Furthermore, after the departure of al-Mu'taṣim, the administration of Baghdad was held by the Tahirids from Khurasan. They were known to be very proficient in administrative management, so it was widely acknowledged that Baghdad had a much better administrative system than the new capital city (Ismail, 1968).

Relocating the Capital City and Its Aftermath

In the works of al-Ya'qūbī, al-Mas'ūdī, and al-Ḥamawī, Samarra is depicted as a typical capital of the Islamic caliphate. It has several features such as mosques, palaces, gardens, public baths, markets, craft centers, councils, security headquarters, prisons, stables, and so on (Planhol, 1959). The construction of these city features was completed very quickly (835-836) (Rice, 1958). This is not surprising, considering that Samarra was deliberately built as a capital city from the beginning.

Samarra has wide and long streets. This, according to Ismail (Ismail, 1968), seems to be an evaluation of the relatively narrow streets in Baghdad and the frequent collisions of road users. In the city center, there is a main road '*shārī' al-a'zam.*' Along this main road are several public buildings, such as the police headquarters '*majlis al-shurṭa*', mosques, prisons, and the caliph's residence '*dār al-khalīfa wa hiya dār al-'amma*,' where the caliph meets his people on Mondays and Thursdays (Ismail, 1968). In addition to public buildings, along this road, there are also private buildings. Furthermore, on both sides of the road are residential areas, local markets, and craft centers for daily needs, leading to the grand market, which is nothing but the business center of Samarra (Yaqubi & Juynboll, 2022; Mas'udi, 1409).

Furthermore, Samarra is renowned for its magnificent buildings with highly sophisticated Islamic architecture. This is evident in structures such as Dār Khalīfa, al-'Āshiq, al-Jawsaq, al-Malwiyya, Jāmi' Abū Dulaf, and so forth (Creswell, 1958; Saba, 2022; Farjood et al., 2024; Majeed, 2023), each built by the reigning caliphs. It must be acknowledged that Samarra's architecture was greatly influenced by previous Islamic cities such as Damascus, Fustat, and especially Baghdad, but Samarra had its own distinctive features, not merely imitation. Moreover, according to al-Ṭabarī, al-Mu'taṣim had a passion for architectural art, resulting in a valuable legacy of palaces he built (Al-Tabari, 1967).

The beauty of the new capital's appearance apparently did not necessarily reflect the tumultuous, intrigue-filled, and even anarchic life within the palace. This was especially true after the departure of al-Mu'taṣim, where the Turks played a significant role in the state structure. Instead of being protectors of the caliph, the Turkish soldiers consolidated themselves and engaged in manipulation, infighting, coups, and even assassinations of the caliphs in Samarra. The caliphs in Samarra were nothing more than puppet rulers (Marsham, 2021; Le Strange, 1899; Allehbi, 2022) who could be raised and deposed at any time. The Turkish generals were the actual rulers. The political intrigues of the Turkish generals in Samarra reached their peak during the years known as the "era of anarchy" (Kennedy, 2004; Ravshanbekovna, 2022), referring to the period of leadership of three caliphs, namely al-Muntaṣir (r. 861-862), al-Musta'in (r. 862-866), and al-Mu'tazz (r. 866-869).

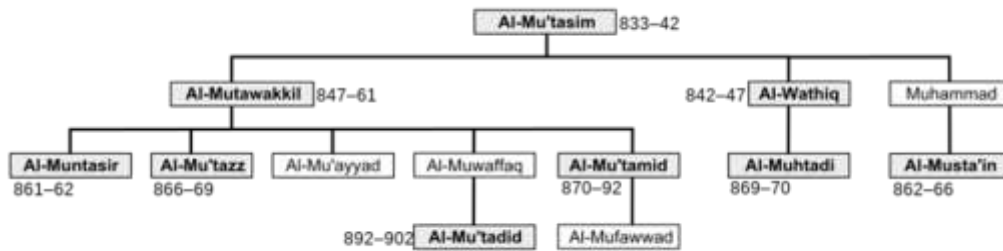


Figure 2. Genealogy of the Abbasid Caliphs who ruled in Samarra

Al-Muntaṣir became caliph immediately after al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861) passed away. The era of al-Mutawakkil was characterized by the construction of the magnificent Great Mosque of Samarra, featuring a spiral minaret reaching 52 meters in height, the tallest in the world at that time. Additionally, during his reign, al-Mutawakkil revoked the *miḥna* and became the first Abbasid caliph to adhere to the doctrine of *ahl al-sunna wa al-jamā'a*, instead of Mu'tazila (Afdillah, 2022; Melchert, 1996). Al-Mutawakkil was assassinated by a group of Turkish individuals who conspired with al-Muntaṣir, his own son (Suyuti, 1974). Al-Muntaṣir ascended the throne, although he was not entitled to it. This is because al-Mutawakkil had previously appointed al-Mu'tazz as his successor. Al-Muntaṣir's reign lasted only six months. There was not much he could accomplish in such a short period. He was soon killed by a group of Turks who had helped him assassinate his father. Before breathing his last breath, he said, "Oh my mother, the world and the hereafter have vanished from me. I killed my father, and now I am killed" (Suyuti, 1974).

The political intrigues of the Turkish generals did not stop there. The influential Turkish generals, namely Baghar, Bughā, and Wāṣif, sought an agreement to appoint the next "puppet" caliph. Thus, the name al-Musta'in emerged. Al-Musta'in was a puppet caliph, as depicted by al-Suyūṭī in his poem, "*Khalīfah fī qasf/bayn Wāṣif wa Bughā/Yaqūl mā qāl lah/Kamā taqūl babghā*" (A caliph in a cage / between Wāṣif and Bughā / he only repeats what they say / like a parrot says)."

Many disagreed with the appointment of al-Musta'in. Supporters of al-Mu'tazz, the brother of al-Muntaṣir, rioted on the day of al-Musta'in's coronation. They believed that al-Mu'tazz was more deserving of being the next caliph. The riots claimed many casualties, both in the al-Mu'tazz camp and the al-Musta'in camp. Protests came not only from al-Mu'tazz's supporters but also from the Turkish faction who felt betrayed, particularly Baghar, who felt betrayed by al-Musta'in, Wāṣif, and Bughā (Suyuti, 1974).

Due to the constant threats, al-Musta'in sought refuge in Baghdad, specifically with the Tahiri people. As a result, Baghdad was besieged by al-Mu'tazz's supporters until the city was paralyzed, and al-Musta'in surrendered. He relinquished the caliphate to al-Mu'tazz and was allowed to live as a common citizen. However, to preempt any potential harm, not long after, al-Musta'in was still killed on the orders of al-Mu'tazz. His assassin was named Sa'īd b. Sālīḥ (Suyuti, 1974). Allegedly, his head was severed while he was performing prayers. Al-Musta'in's head was brought before al-Mu'tazz, who was playing chess at the time. He reportedly told his envoy, "Just leave it there; I am not done playing chess." This demonstrates how little value an individual's life had for al-Mu'tazz and how politics and intrigue had blinded the rulers of Samarra to humanity.

Al-Mu'tazz's reign did not fare well either. The Turkish generals, the very ones who brought him to power, grew increasingly greedy. They treated the caliph like a milk cow, demanding high salaries and hefty fees for every command issued. Eventually, the state treasury ran dry. Al-Mu'tazz could no longer afford to pay his troops. According to al-Ṭabarī, it was reported that al-Mu'tazz even attempted to borrow money from his mother to fulfill his troops' demands. However, his mother refused to help, claiming she had no money (Al-Tabari, 1967). Yet, according to al-Suyūṭī, she had as much money as needed by al-Mu'tazz but lied about it. She chose to save her money and

let her son be tortured and killed by the Turks, who were none other than his own guards (Suyuti, 1974).

While the construction of Samarra may appear as a strategic and aesthetic success, a deeper analysis through a socio-political lens reveals that al-Mu'taṣim's relocation of the capital unintentionally engineered the erosion of centralized caliphal authority. Samarra's spatial and institutional design—ostensibly optimized for military control—ultimately disrupted the balance of power between the palace and the city. Unlike Baghdad, where the caliphate was embedded within a vibrant urban society that tempered autocratic impulses, Samarra was an artificial enclave dominated by the Turkish military elite. The physical and administrative insulation of the new capital facilitated the emergence of a parallel power structure, wherein the Turkish generals assumed functions of sovereignty that properly belonged to the caliph.

This shift represents not merely a failure of urban planning or elite management, but a fundamental breakdown in the Abbasid theory of governance. Drawing from military sociology, the case of Samarra underscores how unchecked praetorianism—where the army acts as both sword and scepter—subverts dynastic legitimacy from within. As al-Mu'taṣim's successors became dependent on the same Turkish corps for protection and authority, they also became vulnerable to its whims. The pattern of palace coups and puppet caliphates that unfolded in Samarra suggests a transition from a caliphal regime to a militarized oligarchy, wherein sovereignty was redistributed from the caliph to a factionalized military aristocracy.

Thus, the failure of Samarra should not be understood simply as the result of political instability, but as the consequence of a structural reconfiguration of power. The relocation fragmented the unity of symbolic, spatial, and institutional authority that had previously been centered in Baghdad. Al-Mu'taṣim's attempt to resolve Baghdad's urban and social tensions by displacement inadvertently exposed the Abbasid caliphate to a deeper internal rupture—transforming the military from a tool of governance into a sovereign actor. This analysis reframes Samarra not as a failed city, but as an unintentional blueprint for political disintegration under a regime that sought security at the cost of legitimacy.

The relocation of the Abbasid capital to Samarra offers profound theoretical insights into the political stakes of urban displacement. Central to the failure of Samarra was the severance of the caliphate from a vibrant civic environment that had previously moderated autocratic excesses in Baghdad. This detachment permitted the militarization of governance without the tempering influence of an active urban society, leading to a structural distortion wherein the army evolved from an instrument of state into its sovereign. As al-Ṭabarī recounts, caliphs became increasingly beholden to Turkish generals, who treated the caliphate as “an inheritance to be divided among themselves” (Al-Tabari, 1967). The Samarra case thus illuminates a broader axiom: the relocation of a capital must preserve, not isolate, the symbolic and social foundations of political legitimacy.

From a practical standpoint, the Samarra experiment reveals that successful capital relocation demands a careful balance between strategic exigencies and civic integration. While al-Mu'taṣim prioritized military control, he neglected the essential role of heterogeneous civil society in sustaining political stability (Kennedy, 2023). The city's spatial configuration, optimized for military utility, inadvertently fostered oligarchic factionalism. Modern studies on urban governance similarly emphasize that overly centralized or militarized capitals tend to incubate instability rather than authority (Beissinger, 2022). Practical lessons derived from Samarra urge that planners of new political centers must ensure a continuity of civic vibrancy, institutional checks on military power, and symbolic resonance with the broader populace.

Comparative historical experiences reinforce these findings. In Islamic history, the relocation of the capital to Cairo by the Fatimids succeeded because it maintained close ties with the older urban fabric of Fustat while embedding religious and economic institutions within the new city (Lev, 2022). Likewise, Ankara's designation as the capital of Turkey in the twentieth century was rooted in its geographic centrality and nationalist symbolism, achieving political coherence despite its initial infrastructural deficiencies (Mango, 2000). Conversely, Samarra's disjunction from

Baghdad and overreliance on a singular military constituency parallels the pitfalls encountered in Islamabad's early years, where administrative isolation delayed civic maturation (Cohen, 2004). These cases underscore that spatial reorganization alone cannot rectify structural political vulnerabilities unless accompanied by integrative urban strategies.

In contexts involving societies with strong seasonal or nomadic traditions, successful capital relocations—such as Abu Dhabi's transformation in the United Arab Emirates or Riyadh's evolution in Saudi Arabia—combined centralized planning with deep respect for traditional networks of allegiance (Heard-Bey, 1996). Abu Dhabi's modernization, for instance, did not eradicate tribal loyalties but reconfigured them within a state framework, ensuring stability during rapid urban expansion (Hertog, 2011). Samarra's failure to embed the caliphate within an adaptable social matrix thus stands in stark contrast to these examples, illustrating that optimal capital relocation must negotiate spatial innovation without eroding the pluralistic bases of political legitimacy. The case of Samarra, ultimately, warns against the hubris of assuming that architecture and military might can substitute for the organic complexities of sovereign governance.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the rationale behind Caliph al-Mu'tasim's decision to relocate the Abbasid capital from Baghdad to Samarra in 836, as well as to examine the broader consequences of this relocation for the Abbasid political structure. Employing a historical-political methodology with a socio-political analytical lens, the research finds that the relocation was primarily a strategic response to rising tensions between the caliphal authority and the urban population of Baghdad, especially after the integration of Turkish military forces into the city's fabric. Rather than solving the underlying problems of governance, however, the move inadvertently deepened the fragmentation of Abbasid political authority. The findings suggest that Samarra, while impressive in architectural and logistical terms, failed to replicate the administrative vitality, economic dynamism, and cultural magnetism of Baghdad. More critically, the spatial separation of the caliph from the traditional bureaucratic and scholarly centers of power created a vacuum that was filled by an increasingly autonomous Turkish military elite. This transformed the caliphate from a centralized Islamic regime into a fragile and factionalized order in which military commanders manipulated succession, undermined legitimacy, and ultimately destabilized the political fabric of the empire. In this sense, al-Mu'tasim's flight from Baghdad was not merely a geographic repositioning, but a turning point that accelerated the Abbasid state's internal disintegration. This article argues that the relocation of the capital must be understood not only as a historical event but also as a lens into the dynamics of power, space, and military patronage in early Islamic governance. The Samarra episode reveals the risks of militarized urbanism and the unintended consequences of spatial strategies aimed at consolidating authority. Future studies may extend this analysis by comparing the Baghdad–Samarra transition to other episodes of capital relocation in Islamic history, such as those involving Medina, Kufa, and Damascus, to better understand how space, sovereignty, and legitimacy are negotiated across different political contexts.

Nevertheless, this study is not without its limitations. Its reliance on qualitative historical analysis, while offering rich contextual insights, inherently restricts the generalizability of its conclusions beyond the specific case of Samarra. The absence of a broader comparative sample, encompassing multiple instances of capital relocations across Islamic and non-Islamic contexts, constrains the ability to fully delineate universal patterns or deviations. Methodologically, the study prioritizes primary textual sources and socio-political interpretation, which, while robust, could benefit from interdisciplinary approaches incorporating archaeological, urban planning, and economic data to further substantiate its claims. External variables such as the evolving demographic composition of Samarra and the shifting geopolitical landscape of the Abbasid realm also introduce complexities that warrant deeper investigation. Future research should endeavor to employ a more systematic comparative framework, analyze the long-term socio-economic trajectories of relocated capitals, and interrogate how evolving military technologies and

administrative reforms mediated spatial politics. Such inquiries would not only refine the understanding of the Samarra episode but also enrich broader theories of urbanization, sovereignty, and statecraft in premodern societies.

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