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The Barmakids and the Abbasid state “A state within the state”!

The story of the Barmakids with the Abbasid state is one of the most important political events in the history of the latter. The importance of this matter is due to the fact that it revealed the permanent desire of the Abbasids to preserve the entity of the state, not allowing the formation of centers of power that would become, with the passage of time, "a state within the Abbasid state". However, the key matter in those events was that it became clear to the Abbasid caliphs, and indeed to the Arabs in general, that the Persian component had become an imminent threat to the caliphate state and that the Persians' quest to restore their ancient glory was mixed with racism towards the Arabs, while the state could not have "two ruling heads". So, who are the Barmakids and what is their story with the Abbasid state, especially in the era of Harun al-Rashid?!

The origin of the Barmakid family goes back to Khorasan region in Fars; a region that supported the Abbasid call out of spite in the Umayyad state, which, in the Persians opinion, cherished the Arabs and raised them to a higher position and banished the Persians from the offices of government. We cannot understand the story of the Barmakids and their end unless we remember the role of Abu Muslim al-Khorasani, the "Persian" who supported the Abbasid call at its inception and was the right arm of Caliph Abu al-Abbas al-Saffah. However, the influence of Abu Muslim al-Khorasani grew throughout the state and the caliph al-Mansur feared that such authority shall impact the prestige of the state, so he ordered to kill Abu Muslim al-Khorasani.

Historical sources mention that the first Barmakids who entered the service of the Abbasids was grandfather Khaled. Khaled al-Barmaki reached the position of advisor to Caliph al-Mansur, which is a position that allows him to be influential in decision-making.

At the beginning of Caliph Harun al-Rashid era, the Khorasani Persian influence returned again through the Barmakids, who were a family with origin that goes back to the city of Balkh in the Khorasan region. The influence of the Barmakids began to increase in the era of Harun al-Rashid, especially with Yahya al-Barmaki who became the supreme voice in the affairs of the state and the servants and took over the Delegation Ministry. For the first time, Yahya al-Barmaki had the authority to write directly to the workers of the states; a right that used to be solely to the caliph. Yahya took advantage of his closeness to Harun al-Rashid; that he was the one who undertook the preparation of al-Rashid politically and taught him the arts of governance and administration, to glorify the Barmakids and their influence and the Persian role in governance in general.

There is no evidence that the Barmakids worked secretly and publicly to restore Persian glory at the expense of the Abbasid state, and the Arab element in general, clearer than the Barmakids' bias and their influence on Harun al-Rashid to push him to entrust the mandate of the covenant to al-Ma'mun because his mother was Persian. This matter aroused the ire of the Arab element, especially Zubaydah, the wife of Harun al-Rashid, who worked to ensure that the position shall go to her son, al-Amin, because he is of Hashemite parents and his blood was not mixed with the Persian element.

From that point, the Arab element began to express its dissatisfaction with the growing role of the Barmakids, especially Jaafar bin Yahya Al-Barmaki, and fear that Al-Ma'mun would take power only to become a puppet in the hands of the Persian Barmakids. Here, Harun al-Rashid realized the extent of the danger of the Barmakids' growing influence and that they had become a "state within the state." Harun al-Rashid was afraid of the wrath of the Arabs, who were the legitimate basis of the state, as the caliphate was from the Quraysh. With the Barmakids, the prestige of the caliphate will be lost and the Arabs will be forced to defend the caliphate from the encroachment of the Persian element.

Thus, Harun Al-Rashid realized the need to move quickly and get rid of the Barmakids. He ordered to arrest them and confiscate their wealth. Thus, Al-Rashid succeeded in eliminating the influence of the Barmakids, which had spread throughout the state and threatened to cause strife between the Arabs, the main component of the state, and the Persians.

What Al-Rashid did in eliminating the Barmakids was reflected in his historical image, especially in literary sources, especially the tales of One Thousand and One Nights. Persian writers deliberately distorted the image of Harun al-Rashid and portrayed him as a playful, idle caliph, who spends his time drinking, surrounded by beautiful maids and neglects state affairs in order to hear them singing and watch them dancing.

Contrary to that image, most of the reliable historical sources provide us with another image of Harun al-Rashid, being "a conqueror and a pilgrim" because he used to invade a year for the sake of jihad and make a pilgrimage to the House of Allah in the following year. Thus, Persian racism played a role in distorting the image of Harun al-Rashid because of his attitude towards the Barmakids and for his concern for the prestige of the caliphate state.