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# Political Intercession at the Court of Caliph al-Muqtadir

*Les intercessions à la cour du calif al-Muqtadir*

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## *Political Intercession at the Court of Caliph al-Muqtadir*

**Abstract:** The caliphal court in Baghdad was the arena of countless conflicts and struggles for power between the caliph and the political elites of the 'Abbasid empire. In many of these conflicts third parties were asked – or styled themselves – as intercessors to intervene on behalf of the subordinate party to ask for mercy or a favour from the superior party. This article will analyse these intercession processes and the types of intercessors that were involved. At the court of caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 295-320/908-932) a colourful group of courtiers – chamberlains, eunuchs, harem stewardess, concubines and the queen mother – functioned as go-betweens in various kinds of conflicts. Their roles as intermediary and their own influence upon the settlement processes are vividly described in the sources. By analysing three cases of political intercession at the court of caliph al-Muqtadir, this article will demonstrate that successful and reliable intercessors were often marginal figures whose position as outsider made them particularly suitable for this job.

**Keywords:** caliphal court, al-Muqtadir, conflict resolution, intercession, women, eunuchs, *ḥājib*

**Résumé:** *Les intercessions à la cour du calif al-Muqtadir.* La cour de Bagdad fut le théâtre d'innombrables conflits et luttes de pouvoir entre le calife et les élites politiques de l'empire abbasside. Des tiers furent souvent invités à agir comme intercesseurs – ou assumèrent ce rôle de leur propre chef – afin de plaider la cause d'un individu auprès d'un adversaire en position d'autorité. Cet article analyse ces processus d'intercession, ainsi que les catégories d'intercesseurs impliquées. À la cour du calife al-Muqtadir (r. 295-320/908-932), un groupe haut en couleur de courtisans – chambellans, eunuques, intendantes du harem, concubines

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et reine-mère – agissaient comme intermédiaires dans diverses sortes d’antagonismes. Leur rôle, et l’influence personnelle qu’ils exercèrent sur le règlement des conflits, sont dépeints de manière saisissante par les sources. S’appuyant sur trois cas d’intercession politique à la cour d’al-Muqtadir, cet article démontre que les intercesseurs fiables et efficaces étaient souvent des figures marginales, dont l’action était favorisée par leur position d’outsiders.

**Mots-clés** : cour califale, al-Muqtadir, résolution des conflits, intercession, femmes, eunuques, *ḥājib*

## Introduction

The *dār al-khilāfa*, the caliphal palace complex situated on the Eastern bank of the Tigris in Baghdad, was the political arena par excellence after the return of the Abbasid caliphs to Baghdad in the late third/ninth century. The caliph’s ear was the key to power. Anyone seeking influence and power at the highest level had to gain access to the caliph and find an entry at his court.

In the palace the caliphs surrounded themselves with a wide variety of advisors, servants, military and administrative officials. In the late third/ninth century the administrative apparatus had expanded to form an extensive body of bureaucratic machinery, consisting of numerous officials working in specialized departments and sub-departmental offices. The top-ranking positions were often the domain of a limited number of families from the Sawād, Baghdad’s hinterland, who were connected with one another in continuously shifting alliances. The vizier stood at the top of this hierarchy. He assigned the most important bureaucratic positions to members of the scribal families and his clients. Consequently, when a new vizier took office, the entire upper stratum of the administration was replaced.

Whereas the administration was manned by free persons, the military in this period consisted almost exclusively of slaves and manumitted, former slaves with a Central-Asian background. Unlike the people of the pen these swordsmen lacked family networks within the caliphate. Nevertheless, they competed with one another and with other power groups at court and were able to influence the political decision making processes at the caliphal palace. These troops, mostly garrisoned in Baghdad, also acted as palace and ceremonial guards of honour at audiences.

In addition to the scribal and military officials who were part of a more or less circumscribed hierarchy, there was a large community of potentially influential persons at court whose members had a highly diverse background and status. Head of the palace staff, including several palace regiments, was the *ḥājib* or chamberlain. He too was recruited from among slaves or freedmen. An extensive and miscellaneous group of attendants and boon companions, consisting of royal princes, secretaries, scientists, poets, musicians, servants, and the women of the caliphal harem, were also part of this community.

Texts describing the functioning of the Abbasid court pay lengthy attention to the rules and regulations concerning the accessibility of the caliphs. Generally, these descriptions contain two seemingly contradictory messages. Some authors stress the ideal of the accessible ruler who is personally dealing with the redress of wrongs and correcting his cunning and corrupt servants. Here the caliph is a highly approachable figure, even for some of his most humble subjects<sup>1</sup>. Yet, other narratives linger on the great pomp and ceremony of the court, the numerous palace buildings, its inaccessible corridors, the enormous staff and the various stages the visitor had to go through before he finally reached the audience hall of the caliph. Indeed these narratives emphasise the caliph's majesty through his inaccessibility. They picture a ruler who can only be approached directly by a select group of favourites, his immediate entourage.

This article is about these favourites, their networks and their role as intercessors in political conflicts. More specifically, it will look at intercession processes and the types of intercessors that were involved in political conflicts at the Abbasid court. As any high profile political arena, the caliphal court in Baghdad was also the stage of countless conflicts and struggles for power between the caliph and his officials and among officials themselves. While some of these conflicts might have been dealt with in bilateral negotiations, without the intervention of third parties, the ones that many sources expatiate upon are often more complex and involve individuals in some sort of intermediary position.

The narratives analysed in this article are from the reign of the eighteenth Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–32). The many contemporary and near-contemporary sources for this period are particularly rich on the vicissitudes of individuals at the caliphal court. They unfold their quarrels and negotiations and their alliances and competitions. They enable us to reconstruct the everyday power struggles and policy making at the Baghdadi palace.

At the court of caliph al-Muqtadir a diverse group of court individuals functioned as go-betweens in political conflicts. Among them were harem stewardesses, members of the caliphal family, chamberlains and eunuchs. They were well-connected and highly influential and they had easy access to the caliph or those close to him. However, at the same time they were no real threat to the competing political groups and individuals due to their background, gender, social status, position within the specific conflict or otherwise marginal position. By analysing three cases of political intercession at the court of caliph al-Muqtadir, I will argue that it was exactly their position as relative outsiders that made these individuals excellent candidates for an intermediary role in political conflict resolution. All three cases are related to some of the most contentious moments in the reign of al-Muqtadir: the regime changes of the vizier. Since they deal with conflicts between the highest authority, the caliph, and a subordinate party, the vizier, the intermediaries in these conflicts can best be qualified as intercessors who

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1 See, for example, on the petition and response procedures (*maẓālim*), van Berkel, 2014: 229-242.



intervened on behalf of the subordinate party to ask for mercy or a favour. In one case, in which a dismissed vizier has a conflict with his successor, the go-between could be defined as a mediator (*mutawassit*)<sup>2</sup>.

## A manager of the carpet repository and a harem stewardess

In the year 306/918 the caliph ordered the arrest of his vizier Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. al-Furāt. His arrest marked the end of Ibn al-Furāt’s second vizierate for caliph al-Muqtadir and this time he had managed to stay in office for a period of a year, five months and nineteen days. The reason for Ibn al-Furāt’s dismissal was his delay of payment to the military due to lack of immediate cash. The troops mutinied and Ibn al-Furāt asked al-Muqtadir a cash advance from the caliph’s private treasury. This demand enraged the caliph who dismissed his vizier.

After his arrest Ibn al-Furāt was subjected to a severe interrogation process by his successor, the new vizier Ḥāmid b. al-‘Abbās. These interrogations formed part of a series of discharge procedures which were common after the dismissal of officials since Umayyad times (Løkkegaard, 1950: 162)<sup>3</sup>. These procedures were generally referred to in Arabic as *muṣādara* or *munāzara*. The goal of these procedures was to call officials to account for their spoils of office and regain their riches by establishing an agreement on a reimbursement sum.

To prevent him from hiding his assets after his fall from power, Ibn al-Furāt was brought to the caliphal palace and imprisoned in the chambers of the *qahramāna Zaydān*. *Qahramānas* (harem stewardesses) were the managers of the caliphal household. Narratives describing the early years of al-Muqtadir’s reign dwell on the political influence of the harem stewardesses at the court of this underage ruler and often emphasise their negative role in daily politics (see, for example, al-Ṣābi’, *al-Wuzarā’*: 353-354). While, obviously, these judgements should not be taken for granted and understood within their historical context, the stories describing the actions of these women enable us to analyse their influential and intermediary roles.

However, before Ibn al-Furāt could benefit from the conciliatory talents of the *qahramāna Zaydān*, he seems to have depended on the services of a certain court servant, Abū l-Qāsim b. al-Ḥawārī. The precise position and function of Ibn al-Ḥawārī are unknown, but he is mentioned as manager of the carpet repository of the palace and clearly functioned as court favourite and advisor of caliph al-Muqtadir during the vizierate of Ibn al-Furāt’s successor, Ḥāmid b. al-‘Abbās (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 52, 58, 87-88, 91, 113; Ṣābi’, *Wuzarā’*: 38-40, 84-85;

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2 On the distinction between mediation and intercession, see the introduction of this volume by Mathieu Tillier.

3 On the discharge procedures in general and this specific casus I have written in more detail in van Berkel, 2010: 303-318.

Sourdel, 1960: 410, nt. 2). When Ḥāmid b. al-‘Abbās was aggressively interrogating Ibn al-Furāt on his spoils of office, Ibn al-Ḥawārī is said to have presented himself as mediator (*mutawassīṭ*) between the dismissed vizier and his successor. According to Miskawayh he was, however, a biased mediator, since “his language showed that he was endeavouring to damage Ibn al-Furāt” (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 63).

Fortunately, Ibn al-Furāt had a second chance with the intercession of the harem stewardess Zaydān in whose custody he had been placed. She turned out to be a much more reliable negotiator. More importantly, she was able to plead his case directly with the caliph instead of with Ibn al-Furāt’s main competitor, the new vizier. Zaydān skilfully observed the state of mind of the two parties: the caliph interested in the riches of his dismissed vizier, but not willing to see him die at the hands of his successor, and the former vizier prepared to pay a large amount if his dignity and life were protected. By intervening at the right moment she was able to reach an agreement between the two out of a previously deadlocked conflict (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 66).

Can we explain Zaydān’s success as intercessor in this political conflict at the caliphal court? First and foremost, Zaydān had direct access to both parties between whom she negotiated. Apparently, she could speak freely, without intermediary, to the caliph about the man she kept in custody in her apartments. She was certainly an influential individual at the caliphal court, able to negotiate and act on her own account. However, as a woman she did not challenge the political power of both opponents, the caliph and the (dismissed) vizier. Finally, her successes might not in the least place have been due to her tactful negotiation methods. Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) sets out the details of her intercession. When she became aware of “the state of al-Muqtadir’s mind” she shared this information with Ibn al-Furāt at a tactful moment, when the latter was telling her about a dream in which his brother admonished him to use the family’s hoarded assets for the payment of his reimbursement sum (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 66)<sup>4</sup>. Zaydān thus manoeuvred the two parties towards a solution while allowing both to leave these negotiations with heads held high.

## A chamberlain, a eunuch and the queen-mother

In the year 311/932 the recently dismissed vizier Ḥāmid b. al-‘Abbās arrived at the caliphal palace in Baghdad in the garb of a monk (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 96). Ḥāmid b. al-‘Abbās had been an outsider in the bureaucratic circles of Baghdad. He was said to have started his career humbly as vendor of water, dates and pomegranates. After he had gained great wealth in business he became a tax farmer with lucrative contracts in Fārs and Wāsiṭ. Even later, when he was over eighty

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this article the translations of passages from Miskawayh’s *Tajārib* are based on the English translation by Margoliouth, 1920-1921, with small adjustments in wording and transliteration.



years old, he successfully lobbied for the vizierate (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 25, 57; Bowen, 1928: 159).

Unlike most other viziers Ḥāmid spent most of his time in office away from Baghdad in his favourite Wāsiṭ where he took care of his tax farming operations. He left the daily administration in the hands of his deputy, the experienced and skilful ‘Alī b. ‘Īsā. Ḥāmid’s vizierate was marked by turbulent events, such as the interrogations of Ibn al-Furāt, during which Ḥāmid could not control his temper and sprang on the ex-vizier to pluck his beard, but also riots in the streets of Baghdad and the trial and execution of the famous Ṣūfī al-Ḥallāj (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 60-68, 72-75, 76-81). In 311/923 Ibn al-Furāt, who was still in custody, started to find support for his own return in the vizierate and succeeded in regaining the trust from al-Muqtadir. ‘Alī b. ‘Īsā was arrested, and Ḥāmid, who feared Ibn al-Furāt and his alliances, travelled from Wāsiṭ to Baghdad in disguise.

Entering the palace as a monk, Ḥāmid went straight to the chambers of the chamberlain (*ḥājib*) Naṣr al-Qushūri, his former ally (Osti, 2008: 10-14), to gain the latter’s support and ask him to plead his case directly with the caliph. However, as Miskawayh notices, “Ḥāmid’s lucky days were over” (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 96). Naṣr treated him in a rude manner – he refused to rise and greet him – but nevertheless summoned the eunuch Muflīḥ who guarded access to the caliph when the latter was in his private apartments and pleaded Ḥāmid’s case with him. Thanks to Naṣr’s intermediary role, Ḥāmid was able to explain his position to Muflīḥ and ask the latter to deliver his message to the caliph.

Tell our lord the Commander of the Faithful that I am prepared to be confined in the palace as ‘Alī b. ‘Īsā is confined, and to be examined by the vizier, Muḥassin [the vizier’s son] and the clerks in the presence of the jurists, judges, and chief military leaders. If I be found to have incurred a fine, I am prepared to pay it after I have had full opportunity to set out my defence, and provided my life be secured, and Muḥassin be not given power over my blood, so as to avenge himself for the tortures which I inflicted on him by the will of our lord the Commander of the Faithful when he was a lad, whereas I am an old man, at whose advanced age a little torture will prove fatal. (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 96-97)

Muflīḥ thereupon promised to act as Ḥāmid’s intermediary in the latter’s negotiations with the caliph and to bring this message to al-Muqtadir. In reality, says Miskawayh, Muflīḥ delivered Ḥāmid’s message “in a style that was the contrary of what he had promised to adopt” (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 97). He thus turned out to be an unreliable negotiator. Fortunately, Ḥāmid still had other allies. Hearing Muflīḥ’s argument, al-Muqtadir’s mother, *al-Sayyida* Shaghab, gave her view on Ḥāmid and tried to convince her son that “there would be no harm in Ḥāmid’s confinement in the palace and his being examined provided his life were spared” (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 97). Muflīḥ, on his turn, interrupted at this point and made it very clear that if Ibn al-Furāt was to collect substantial revenues from Ḥāmid he should be given a free hand in the interrogations. Al-Muqtadir agreed with Muflīḥ and Ḥāmid was handed over to Ibn al-Furāt. After humiliation and

heavy torture, he is said to have been poisoned by Ibn al-Furāt's son, al-Muḥassin (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 98-104).

Unlike Ibn al-Furāt in the previous case study, the vizier Ḥāmid b. al-'Abbās did not have the good fortunes of successful intercession after he fell from power. From the moment he entered the palace in disguise he was at the mercy of, first, a grumpy, then, an unreliable and, finally, an unsuccessful intercessor. Naṣr the chamberlain in whose hands he put his fate after his return to Baghdad did not hide his disdain and refused to treat him in a manner appropriate for a man of his rank. He did, however, plead Ḥāmid's case with the eunuch Muflīḥ. This powerful eunuch, on his turn, misled Ḥāmid and once out of his sight he became his main opponent. Finally, the queen-mother was no longer able to turn his fate.

However, similar to the harem stewardess Zaydān in the previous case study, these three intercessors were very well-connected and able to negotiate directly with the caliph or, when in his private chambers, with someone who had direct access to him there. While Naṣr regulated access to the caliph in public audiences (see El Cheikh, 2013: 147–156), Muflīḥ did the same for the private apartments (see El Cheikh, 2005: 244-249), and it was in these private apartments that Shaghab, the queen-mother, was able to exert influence on her son. All three were influential, but no political challenger for either the caliph or the dismissed vizier. Yet, apparently, none of these intermediaries was willing to do the utmost to save Ḥāmid. He had made too many enemies, his old allies were reluctant to interfere and saw him as “an object of pity” instead of strength (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 96). Indeed, his lucky days were over.

## **A concubine**

During the last years of al-Muqtadir's reign, when financial problems became ever more precarious and the army more powerful, viziers succeeded one another with bewildering speed. Unable to collect enough revenues and incapable of reversing inflation, high bread prices, popular rebellions and army riots, most of them had to step back already after a few months in office. One of these later viziers was al-Ḥusayn b. al-Qāsim, a member of one of the oldest and renowned secretarial families of his age, the Banū Wahb, who spent seven months in office in the years 319/931-320/932. His hazardous position is illustrated by Miskawayh's observation that he “had already borrowed half the revenues of the year 320 some months before its actual collection had begun” (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 226).

While in office al-Ḥusayn used one of al-Muqtadir's favourite concubines, Dimna, as his agent in his dealings with the caliph. Dimna, a concubine who had borne her master a son, operated as a go-between by delivering Ḥusayn's letters directly to caliph. Her role was, however, not limited to delivering the mail. Miskawayh states that she looked after Ḥusayn's interests and that he paid her a



vast sum for it in return. He particularly sought her support and intercession when he felt he risked being dismissed by the caliph. As confidante of the caliph she was his ideal ally (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 220).

The connections between al-Ḥusayn and Dimna were reinforced when al-Ḥusayn arranged for his son, Qāsim b. al-Ḥusayn, to become the scribe of Dimna's son, prince Abū Aḥmad b. Ishāq. With this double alliance he not only provided his son with a position and income of his own, but also gained himself another intermediary at court. That both alliances were interconnected becomes clear from Miskawayh's observation that at one point al-Ḥusayn offered to pay Dimna's son, the Abbasid prince, a hundred dinars a day if she, the prince's mother, would see that al-Ḥusayn was not dismissed (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 220).

Again we see a woman at court with close relation with the caliph, operating as an agent and intercessor at the highest level of state politics. This favourite concubine, as Miskawayh referred to her, operated not only on her own account, but also deployed her personal network, including her own son. For the vizier the concubine Dimna was a valuable ally who had direct access to the caliph when relations between the two became more strained. For the caliph she was a trustworthy favourite and the mother of one of his sons. For both the vizier and the caliph she was a reliable intermediary and, as a woman, for neither of them a threat to their own power and position.

In the end Dimna seems to have been unable to rescue al-Ḥusayn from a fall from power. Like so many other viziers of his age, his term in office was very short. Less than seven months after he ascended the vizierate, he was dismissed by the caliph when the financial crisis became ever more severe and al-Ḥusayn was unable to come up with solutions. Whether Dimna also tried to help al-Ḥusayn in this final phase is uncertain. The sources do not mention her anymore.

## Conclusions

Unlike some of his predecessors<sup>5</sup>, caliph al-Muqtadir is portrayed as a distant and majestic ruler approachable for only a small group of favourites. Contemporaries might have exaggerated the number of retainers and the magnificence of the palace buildings protecting the caliph from the outside world, but the message they try to convey is clear: access to al-Muqtadir is extremely well-guarded. Indeed, hardly any story exists on his approachability. To deliver a message to the caliph one needed an intermediary.

Most of these intermediaries were court servants or inhabitants of the palace who were able to communicate directly with the caliph whether in his private chambers, the inner circles, or in the more public, outer, parts of the court. Notably, many

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, on the accessibility of al-Muqtadir's father caliph al-Mu'taḍid (r. 279-89/892-902), al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār*: I, 326-328 and II, 248; see also Marmer, 1994: 36-41.

of the intercessors were women. Contemporaries' judgement on these influential women is far from positive. Al-Tanūkhī (d. 384/994) narrates how al-Muqtadir's father, caliph al-Mu'taḍid (r. 279-89/892-902), exclaimed with dismay one time "the women will get control of him" (al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār*: I, 287-288), while Miskawayh disapprovingly notices that "women and slaves became supreme in the empire" (Miskawayh, *Tajārib*: I, 13). While challenging these negative judgements, the attention given to the role of women and slaves in these sources allows us nevertheless to analyse the processes of intercession in which they were involved. This article discussed three case studies describing conflicts between the caliph and his highest official, the vizier. Women, eunuchs, chamberlains and other court servants acted as intercessors in these political conflicts. They were either invited to interfere or they forced themselves upon the disputants endeavouring to bring them towards a solution. They were certainly influential, but, generally, at the same time too marginal to become part of the conflict and competitors themselves. This combination of well-connectedness and marginality made them acceptable for the conflicting parties and ideal for a role as intercessor. While the sources present us with an image of court politics under al-Muqtadir as highly contentious – a more or less permanent struggle for power between individuals and factions – they also testify to the existence of a series of mechanisms to smooth out the edges of permanent infighting. Intercession certainly was one of these mechanisms.

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