

A PATRON OF MEN: SITT AL-MULK AND THE MILITARY AT THE FATIMID COURT

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In 2007 the Austrian writer Johanna Awad-Geissler published a book titled *Die Schattenkalifin (The Shadow Caliph)*. The work, based on the life of the Fāṭimid princess Sitt al-Mulk (d. 413/1023), is - to my knowledge - the only historical novel written for a Western audience entirely dedicated to a female figurehead of the pre-modern Islamic world. Such a tribute to the daughter of the Fāṭimid imam-caliph al-‘Azīz (d.386/996) and half-sister of his successor, al-Ḥākim (d.411/1021), is not surprising. Given the overall limited amount of historical information about women in the pre-modern Islamic period, the visibility that Muslim medieval chroniclers and historiographers accorded to Sitt al-Mulk is quite remarkable. However, the relatively numerous accounts on Sitt al-Mulk’s involvement in the affairs of the Fāṭimid court present challenges, in wishing to establish with a degree of certainty the extent and nature of her role at court, in that they often contradict each other and show inconsistencies. This is particularly the case for those narratives that point to her as the instigator behind the elimination of the imam-caliph al-Ḥākim. While a relatively extensive number of studies have been dedicated to the life and deeds of this princess,¹ the interaction between Sitt al-Mulk and the Fāṭimid military has remained hitherto unexplored. This omission is particularly striking when considering that Sitt al-Mulk is, so far, the sole named female figure in medieval Islamic history known to have been given a military-like contingent as ‘gift’ by her father. In this paper I will contextually analyse the multiple levels of engagement that are reported to have occurred between the princess and the military with a view to raise questions regarding the nature of authority that might have enabled Sitt al-Mulk to establish herself as a credible female leader in a men’s world, ‘a patron of men’.² In attempting to answer these questions I will examine Sitt al-Mulk’s influence over members of the military apparatus in light of the reciprocal adherence to formal and informal rules of loyalty and obligation that prevailed in pre-modern Islamic courts, determined by the need to shape dynastic politics to mutual advantage.

The earliest recorded instance of a connection between Sitt al-Mulk and the military relates to when the imam-caliph al-‘Azīz assigned (*afrada*) to his beloved daughter the occupancy of the Western Palace³ –built opposite the Grand Palace- and gave her a squadron

*I wish to thank Prof. Yaacov Lev for his suggestions and feedback while researching this paper. Any errors are mine only.

¹ See Cortese and Calderini, *Women and the Fatimids*, p.117-127; Halm, “Sitt al-Mulk”, p.685-686; Halm, “Le destin”, p. 69-71; Lev, “The Fāṭimid Princess”, p. 319-328; Rustow, “A petition”, p.1-27; Walker, “The Fatimid Caliph”, p. 30-44.

² Walker, “The Fatimid Caliph”, p.39.

³ The Western Palace (also known as Small Palace or the River Palace) was no small dwelling. Not much is known about this no-longer extant vast complex, except that it was built at some point during the reign of al-‘Azīz. The palace occupied approximately what today is the area where the Qala‘ūn complex stands. The front of the structure faced the façade of the Fāṭimid royal Grand Palace, approximately coinciding today with the stretch of

(*tā'ifa*) to take care of her or to protect her (*bi-rasmi-hā*) called *al-qaṣriyya*.⁴ The only recorded event that saw the *qaṣriyya* in action while serving Sitt al-Mulk is an episode that places the princess at the centre of an alleged attempted coup aimed at preventing the access to the throne of her half-brother al-Ḥākim. Ostensibly, she sought to install her cousin, the son of 'Abd Allāh (d.364/975) - her deceased paternal uncle- in al-Ḥākim's stead. To that aim, upon the death of al-'Azīz in Bilbays in 386/996, Sitt al-Mulk is reported to have marched to the palace at around midnight escorted by the *qaṣriyya* on horses and accompanied by three high dignitaries: the *qāḍī* Muḥammad b. al-Nu'mān (d. 389/999), Raydān the holder of the ceremonial parasol and Abū Sa'īd Maymūn the chief of police. In the end, the coup came to nothing as the princess and her entourage's irruption into the palace was halted by Abu'l-Ḥasan Yānis al-Ṣaqlabī (d.389/998), the dignitary in charge of the palaces during al-'Azīz's times of absence.⁵ According to at least one source the eunuch Barḡawān (d.390/1000), who had the young presumptive heir to the throne al-Ḥākim in his care, kept Sitt al-Mulk under arrest in her palace and placed her under the guard of 1,000 horsemen.⁶ Due to its rather extraordinary character, the reporting of this episode has attracted scholarly attention. Paul E. Walker dismisses the veracity of the plot having taken place as described above on the ground of the anti-Fāṭimid nature of the source narrating it, the 5th/11th century Syrian historian Ibn al-Qalānisī. Instead, he reinterprets the events that followed the death of the imam-caliph al-'Azīz according to what he believes might have been a more plausible chaotic sequence of events, without, however, providing any evidence to substantiate his view.⁷ More convincing is Heinz Halm's analysis of the plot and the sources that report it. While Ibn al-Qalānisī's reliability could be arguably called into question, the episode is nevertheless briefly mentioned by the Fāṭimid courtesan and historian al-Rūḍbārī – an eye witness to the events surrounding the death of al-'Azīz- in his *Balaṣkar al-udabā'* (quoted by Ibn Sa'īd al-Maḡribī). In addition to that, al-Rūḍbārī's narrative might

buildings along the Aqmar Mosque. The back of Sitt al-Mulk's *qaṣr* overlooked the *ḥalīj*. See Sayyid, *La capitale de l'Égypte*, p.300-301. According to Daftary, *The Ismā'īlīs*, p. 159 the plan of the palaces' complex had been drawn by al-'Azīz's father, the imam-caliph al-Mu'izz (d.365/975).

⁴ Al-Maqrīzī based on Ibn Muyassar. al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ*, 2, p. 495 and 4, p.696. Ibn Sa'īd, quoting al-Rūḍbārī, uses *fi ḥifāratihā* -'to guard her', 'to protect her'- with the latter meaning being preferable in the context in which the term occurs. Ibn Sa'īd, *al-Nuḡūm*, p. 54. What this 'protection' might have meant or consisted of in the context of Fāṭimid palace politics is hard to say, since it might have been intended to ensure her safety but also as a way to implement some sort of restraint.

⁵ For the varied reports of the events surrounding this episode see: Ibn al-Qalānisī, *Dayl*, p.44; Ibn Muyassar, *Annales*, p. 50 (repeated almost verbatim in al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 1, p.291); Ibn Sa'īd, *al-Nuḡūm*, p. 54; Halm, "Le destin", p.69-72; Walker, "The Fatimid Caliph", p. 30-44. On Yānis, Ibn Muyassar, *Annales*, p. 53, al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-durar*, 6, p. 238; al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* (Būlāq), 2, p. 285.

⁶ Ibn al-Qalānisī, *Dayl*, p. 44.

⁷ Walker, "The Fatimid Caliph", p.34.

have formed the basis for the report by another Fāṭimid court insider, Ibn Muyassar, who also briefly mentions the circumstances of Sitt al-Mulk's dramatic arrival at the palace. Notwithstanding the possibility that some embellishments might have been added by Ibn al-Qalānīsī in his account, such as for example the love story between Sitt al-Mulk and her cousin (not mentioned by the other two sources), the reference to the circumstances of Sitt al-Mulk's arrival at the palace as described in sources close to Fāṭimid circles lend credibility to her involvement in activities against her half-brother.⁸

Very little is known about the *qaṣriyya* or *qayṣariyya*. The ethnic composition of this corps is not known.⁹ Beside the involvement in Sitt al-Mulk's attempted coup, **the activities of a squadron by the same name are randomly reported in subsequent periods.**¹⁰ In 410/1019-1020 – a year marked by hyperinflation and severe famine- the *qayṣariyya* and other corps rioted in the capital, looting the shops of cloth merchants and causing havoc in the coppersmiths' market. They burned a disused public building block as well as shops and a number of houses.¹¹ More references to the *qayṣariyya* coincide with yet another period of economic crisis in 414-415/ 1024-1025, during the reign of the imam-caliph al-Zāhir (411-427/1021-1036). In those years, the commander Ibn Saḥrān al-Qayṣarī, with a large faction of the *qayṣariyya*, sized goods for fear that they might be looted by a large crowd of armed country folk composed of black slaves, known as Ġawwāla, who were heading to the capital aiming to reach the royal palace.¹² Subsequently however, *qayṣariyya* and Ġawwāla were to join forces to loot, in Ġīza, a caravan from the Maghreb which had been joined by merchants carrying goods worth 200,000 *dīnār*-s. Also in those two years: a group of 100 horsemen from the *qayṣariyya* were dispatched to al-Qarāfa to protect the people. The *qayṣariyya* took part in a parade of military squadrons that escorted the imam-caliph al-Zāhir and the high dignitaries of the regime to visit a mosque in occasion of the celebrations of the month of Ramaḍān. A group, including the *qayṣariyya*, attempted to assault and loot a pilgrim caravan of *mağāriba* and Berbers on their return to Egypt. *Qayṣariyya* fought and robbed members of the Turkish contingent in the Fāṭimid army, an action that prompted the retaliation of the Turks. That the *qayṣariyya* came off well out of these incursions, is testified by a petition presented to al-Zāhir by the Kutāmas –once the Mağribī army darlings of the regime- who complained that, among all the army factions, they were the only ones to starve and suffer unlike other groups such as, among others, the *qayṣariyya*.¹³ In his description of al-Qāhira, the Ismā'īlī Persian poet and missionary Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw who visited the Fāṭimid capital in 439/1047 defined the *qaṣriyya* as *sarāyban*-s. He described them as a multiethnic army of some 10,000 foot soldiers who responded to separate commanders and sported different

⁸ Cf. Halm, “Le destin”, p.70.

⁹ For an overview on the organisation and the administration of the Fāṭimid army see Lev, “Army”, p.337-366. On the *qayṣariyya* see p. 344.

¹⁰ **This does not automatically mean that it is necessarily the same squadron associated with Sitt al-Mulk.**

¹¹ al-Dawādārī, *Kanz*, 6, p. 298. On the famine in that year see al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 2, p.115.

¹² On the Ġawwāla see Lev, “Army”, p. 341.

¹³ al-Musabbihī, *Aḥbār miṣr*, 1980, 1, p.40, 57, 169, 171, 180, 194, 240 and 1978, 1, p. 43, 96. See also al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 2, p. 165.

weaponry depending on their respective ethnic origins.¹⁴ Yaacov Lev, however, dismisses Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw’s description of this faction as implausible.¹⁵ We are none the wiser as to the exact nature of the formal relationship that existed between the princess and this squadron other than being one of ‘care for’, ‘intended for’ or ‘protection’. **What these terms might have meant actually to indicate in the context of Fāṭimid palace politics is hard to say, since they might point to a system set in place to ensure her safety but could also be seen as expressing a sort of restraint.** We do not know when the palace that Sitt al-Mulk came to occupy was built. **It is plausible that, given the vast size of its whole structure, this military division was already guarding the palace, hence the name *qaṣriyya* or *qayṣariyya*, before the princess’ arrival and that it had subsequently been instructed by the imam-caliph ‘to take care’ of his daughter upon her instalment.**

The second large military division with loose connections to Sitt al-Mulk was the ‘*uṭūfiyya*. This army squadron (*ṭā’ifa jayushiyya*) took its name from ‘Uṭūf, a black ‘slave’ (*ḡulām*) who had been at the service (*ḥādīm*) of Sitt al-Mulk. As *ḡulām*, ‘Uṭūf was no mere ‘slave boy’, but rather a person who enjoyed a privileged status in his relationship with the master. According to Roy Mottahedeh, the soldier *ḡulām* owed his training, equipment, privileged place in society to the care and interest of the patron, who usually acted as foster parent of the *ḡulām* from adolescence. Training included inculcation of obedience to the patron. Gratitude of the *ḡulām* for these benefits was strengthened by the general ethic of *ni‘ma* and filial duty.¹⁶ In strictly Fāṭimid context, these sentiments between the master and his military personnel in general were enshrined in legal theory, as reflected in the guidelines given to the ruler on how to handle properly the affairs of his army recorded in al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān’s (d.363/974) book on *ḡihād* in his *Da‘ā’im al-islām*.¹⁷ **In the year 395/1005 the ‘*uṭūfiyya* is listed among those divisions that were issued decrees of protection by al-Ḥākim.**¹⁸

As it was typical for important *ḡulām* commanders of this period, ‘Uṭūf had a large number of *ḡilmān* at his service. Such regiments, founded on the patronage of a leading commander, lasted a generation or two after the founder’s death. As ‘Uṭūf is described as ‘black’, and given that multiethnic squadrons were unheard of in the Fāṭimid army,¹⁹ we can safely assume that the *ḡilmān* forming his corps were black slaves too. This would make the ‘*uṭūfiyya* most likely an infantry division since the Fāṭimids –particularly up until the end of al-Ḥākim’s reign - usually **appointed blacks** to that role.²⁰ In 401/1010 ‘Uṭūf was killed by a faction of Turkish soldiers by order of al-Ḥākim. Despite his demise, **his legacy and that of**

¹⁴ Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw, *Book of Travels*, p. 62-63.

¹⁵ Lev, “Army”, p. 344.

¹⁶ Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*, p. 84.

¹⁷ al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, *The Pillars of Islam*, 1, p. 444-446. Based on the teachings of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. For a broader discussion on aspects of patronage with specific references to the Fāṭimid period see Rustow, “Formal and Informal Patronage”, p. 341-382.

¹⁸ al-Maqrīzī, *Itti‘āz*, 2, p. 55-56.

¹⁹ Lev, “Army”, p. 344.

²⁰ Cf. Bacharach, “African Military Slaves”, p. 482. On Fāṭimid military black slaves (*‘abīd*) in general and the ‘*uṭūfiyya* in particular see also Lev, “Army”, p. 340-342.

his squadron is testified by the fact that a quarter in al-Qāhira was named *‘uṭūfiyya* after the military group. The *‘uṭūfiyya* was renowned as one of the best quarters in al-Qāhira with amazing houses, *ḥammām-s*, *sūq-s*, and mosques.²¹ The connection between the *‘uṭūfiyya* and Sitt al-Mulk was celebrated in verses that also give us a clue as to the location of this quarter, which I would therefore place north-east of *al-ḡūdariyya* (located south of the Western Palace) and at the opposite end of the *bāṭiliyya* which, in turn, was near Bāb al-Zuwayla.²² The existence of the *‘uṭūfiyya* quarter challenges the claim that, while black soldiers lived in al-Qāhira, no specific quarter was assigned or named after them.²³ Both the *al-ḡūdariyya* and *al-bāṭiliyya* garrison quarters are mentioned by Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw among the ten he listed as shaping the landscape of al-Qāhira at the time of his permanence. Since no mention is made of the *‘uṭūfiyya* in his account, we can infer that by the time of his visit the quarter had lost its prominence.²⁴

Sitt al-Mulk’s association with the *qaṣriyya* is one the most oft-referred facts in profiling the portrayal of this princess. It is however in more subtle dealings with other military groups and personalities that Sitt al-Mulk is shown to have displayed the full force of her leadership, strategic and diplomatic skills. Following the enthronement of al-Ḥākim, there is evidence that she owned eunuchs of ‘Slav’ origins within her entourage. In 387/997 she is reported to have included 10 *ṣaqāliba* with a gift of 50 eunuchs. During the Fāṭimid period, the *ṣaqāliba*’s role was to serve the court as well as being as a caste of military officers.²⁵ In the early years of her half-brother’s reign, Sitt al-Mulk’s use of military force stretched as far as Syria, where she owned extensive estates. When a Christian civil official in Syria who formally took care of her affairs (*ra’iya-hā*)²⁶ alerted her about the locals’ resentment against the governor of Aleppo, Fātik, who had been appointed by al-Ḥākim in 407/1017, Sitt al-Mulk conspired with Badr - a *ḡulām* of Fātik - to replace him. As explained by Roy Mottahedeh “Essential to the survival of the ruler was the corps of *ḡulāms* whose training he had himself fostered. These were the ‘king’s men’ in a very special way and no one else was supposed to temper with their affection for the king unless conspiracy or revolution was intended”.²⁷ Sitt al-Mulk intervened by exploiting to her advantage a breakdown in master-*ḡulām* relationship between Fātik and Badr, caused by Fātik’s withdrawal of favours from Badr to benefit instead another *ḡulām*. Backed by the princess, Badr, with his contingent of

²¹ Based on al-Musabbiḥī, al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ*, 3, p. 36-37.

²² On the *Bāṭiliyya* see Lev, “Army”, p. 340. The verses of Ibrāhīm al-Mi’ mār dedicated to Sitt al-Mulk read “ In al-ḡūdariyya, I saw a crescent-moon face/ Leaning towards al-Bāṭiliyya instead of al-‘Aṭūfiyya”. Cf. Cortese and Calderini, *Women*, p.126-127. The ‘Ḥàrat el ‘Oūṭoufiyeh’ is featured in the 1889 map of Fāṭimid Cairo by Paul Ravaisse, based on information from al-Maqrīzī.

²³ Bacharach, “African Military”, p. 481.

²⁴ Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw, *Book of Travels*, p. 66.

²⁵ al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ*, 2, p. 499. On the *ṣaqāliba* see Lev, “Army”, p. 338-339.

²⁶ Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*, p. 120-121 on *ra’iya*. See also Rustow, “Formal and Informal Patronage”, p. 363-366.

²⁷ Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*, p. 88.

gilmān, took over Fātik's fortress and wrote to the princess to report on his former master and his dealings. In return, as a way of thanking Badr for having protected the fortress' treasury and sealing his loyalty to her, she bestowed him with an honorary cloak (*ḥil'a*) and restored to Badr what he had been deprived of by his master.²⁸

Her power did not go unnoticed among the Ğarrāḥids in Damascus and Palestine. Ḥassān, son of Mufarriġ, the head of this tribe constantly shifting alliances in favour and against the Fāṭimids, took fight against al-Ḥākīm. Threatened by the imam-caliph with severe retaliation, Ḥassān backed off and asked al-Ḥākīm's forgiveness by sending his mother to beg Sitt al-Mulk to intercede for him. When, however, after some time Ḥassān conspired again against the regime by entering into alliance with the Fāṭimid commander 'Alī al-Ḍayf who aspired to be sent to Palestine, Sitt al-Mulk had the commander killed and Ḥassān only narrowly escaped her wrath.²⁹

The year 411/1021 saw Sitt al-Mulk at the centre of one of the great *causes célèbres* in the whole history of the medieval Islamic world. In that year the seemingly erratic imam-caliph al-Ḥākīm disappeared in mysterious circumstances. A number of medieval chroniclers of that event point to Sitt al-Mulk as the chief instigator of his murder. Inconsistencies between sources reporting the episode and, in some significant cases, total silence about Sitt al-Mulk's presumed involvement in her half-brother's demise, leave us with an open verdict about the princess' culpability. Nevertheless, the narratives pointing to Sitt al-Mulk's role are of relevance here as illustrative of the levels of power that Sitt al-Mulk was seen to be able to exercise on the highest ranking military men of her time. In 1987 Yaacov Lev published the first academic paper solely dedicated to Sitt al-Mulk, discussing extensively the nature and reliability of primary sources dealing with (or silent on) the princess' part in al-Ḥākīm's death.³⁰ In that article - like in most of the publications that dealt with the killing of al-Ḥākīm and the possible role of his half-sister in it - the focus is on the most outspoken statement detailing Sitt al-Mulk's plot to dispose of her brother, found in a passage by the strongly anti-Fāṭimid historian Hilāl al-Ṣabī', quoted by the Mamlūk historian Ibn Taġrībirdī. The passage consists mainly of a reported dialogue between the princess and the Kutāma chief military commander Ibn Dawwās where she is shown persuading him to eliminate her brother for her safety's sake and that of the regime. In return for the deed, Sitt al-Mulk is quoted promising the commander ownership and leadership of al-Ḥākīm's army as well as rule of the regime.³¹ The very narrative style - a dialogue- adopted by the author to report on these events is fanciful enough to cast a long shadow of suspicion over the truthfulness of the events described. The absence of any reference to this story in the accounts of many historians who were contemporary to the events described by Hilāl al-Ṣabī' - be they linked to the Fāṭimid court or strongly adverse to it- has led to a consensus among scholars to treat the story of Sitt al-Mulk's collusion with Ibn Dawwās in the killing of al-Ḥākīm with great caution at the very

²⁸ See addenda in footnote based on Hilāl al-Ṣabī' in Ibn al-Qalānisī, *Ḍayl*, p. 72.

²⁹ Canard, "Djarrāḥids", *EI2*, 2, p. 484.

³⁰ Lev, "The Fāṭimid Princess", p. 319-328

³¹ Ibn Taġrībirdī, *al-Nuġūm*, 4, p. 186-187.

least if not to dismiss it outright.³² Some historians who reported on Sitt al-Mulk's involvement – without adding necessarily further proof either way- are interesting in that they appear to have had access to strands of the story independently of Hilāl al-Ṣabī's account. Ibn al-Aṭīr (d.630/1233) for example, adds that Sitt al-Mulk's promised to bestow Ibn Dawwās land grants (*iqṭā'āt*) generating 100,000 *dīnār*-s annually.³³ Al-Maqrīzī reported the plot in his *al-Muqaffā* but in his *Itti'āz*, while narrating the same story, he also added that it was false.

In the days following al-Ḥākim's disappearance it was to Sitt al-Mulk - and not the high dignitaries of the regime - that the army and the people are reported to have appealed to enquire about the imam-caliph's whereabouts.³⁴ While, as shown above, a fair degree of prudence is necessary before embracing as fact the accounts on Sitt al-Mulk as the mind behind al-Ḥākim's killing, such caution can be eased when appraising narratives reporting events that involved Sitt al-Mulk in the post-al-Ḥākim period. We find that chroniclers and historians broadly agree as to the way in which Sitt al-Mulk mobilised, manipulated and controlled the military in securing the succession of her protégé nephew, al-Ẓāhir, in avenging the death of al-Ḥākim, and in gathering consensus for al-Ẓāhir's reign while in her role as regent.

First there was Abu'l-Qāsim 'Abd al-Raḥīm b. Ilyās (d. 411/1021) to deal with. He was a cousin of al-Ḥākim that the imam-caliph had nominated as his heir apparent in 404/1013 and ruler of Damascus in 409/1019. This potential departure from direct genealogical succession prompted Sitt al-Mulk's intervention to maintain the dynastic succession within her family line. At around the same time of 'Abd al-Raḥīm's nomination as heir, she gave shelter in her palace to her nephew, al-Ḥākim's son Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī (later to take the dynastic name of al-Ẓāhir), and his mother to protect them from al-Ḥākim's persecution. When al-Ḥākim died, Sitt al-Mulk dispatched one of the military commanders (*quwwād*), 'Alī b. Dā'ūd, to the Egyptian seaside town of al-Farama. Reportedly, she instructed him to arrest and to take to Tinnīs the impostor *walī al-'ahd* if he tried to enter Egypt. According to other versions of the same event, Sitt al-Mulk wrote to the army (*jund*) in Damascus instructing them to bring 'Abd al-Raḥīm to Egypt. This they did and the heir apparent was subsequently arrested and disposed of. Another variant is that Sitt al-Mulk ordered the Fāṭimid chief commander Ḥaṭīr al-Mulk to attract into a trap 'Abd al-Raḥīm by writing to him - pretending to be al-Ḥākim - to invite him to come to Egypt. As enticement, she collected 2,000 *dīnār*-s that she shared with her allies and dispatched to the commander (*qā'id*) in charge of defending the shores.³⁵ Irrespective of which version of events may appear to be more plausible, there is unanimous agreement among the sources that Sitt al-

³² For example Heinz Halm in Halm, "Le destin", p. 71 holds such a view.

³³ Ibn al-Aṭīr, *al-Kāmil*, 7, p. 305. Ibn Ẓāfir, *Aḥbār*, p. 57 in reporting the event, comments on her organising skills in carrying out such complex affair.

³⁴ Ibn al-Aṭīr, *al-Kāmil*, 7, p. 306; al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 2, p. 116-117; Ibn Taḡrībirdī, *al-Nuḡūm*, 4, p.189.

³⁵ Ibn Taḡrībirdī, *al-Nuḡūm*, 4, p. 189; the second version is based on al-Quḍā'ī, p. 194; al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 2, p. 116.

Mulk disposed of an unwanted contender to the throne by exercising her power to mobilise elements of the army.

Sitt al-Mulk's next move in her effort to secure dynastic stability was the elimination of the executors of al-Ḥākim's murder. Once again, while agreeing on the role of the princess as the coordinator of this purge, the sources present us with varied narrations of events. All versions however show Sitt al-Mulk to be in a position of authority over military factions within the Fāṭimid army. Firstly, she is reported to have extracted, at knife point, a confession out of six black guards who had accompanied al-Ḥākim on what was to be his fateful last outing.³⁶ More sophisticated was the plot to neutralise the Kutāma chief military commander Ibn Dawwās, the man consistently named as the executor of the conspiracy to kill al-Ḥākim. To carry out the mission, Sitt al-Mulk summoned Nasīm al-Ṣaqlabī, an officer in charge of the royal screen (*satr*) and the ceremonial sword. He had with him a military squadron of 100 men known as *al-sa'diyya*, specialising in the royal mounts and each carrying a decorated sword. Not much is known about this division also known as 'the holders of the bejewelled swords' (*aṣḥab suyūf al-ḥalī*), however there is indication that it enjoyed a fair degree of prominence at court. Yaacov Lev identifies *al-sa'diyya* with *al-rikābiyya*, black slaves who formed part of al-Ḥākim's escort and received his patronage (*al-rikābiyya al-sūdān al-muṣṭani'a*).³⁷ Al-Maqrīzī reports an episode for the year 405/1014 which saw three of al-Ḥākim's *rikābiyya* accepting presents from Byzantine envoys in visit to al-Ḥākim. Taking the acceptance of the gifts as a sign of possible betrayal, the imam-caliph had the three killed.³⁸ In the year 414/1024 *al-sa'diyya* were involved in actions to quell turmoil caused by the rise in prices³⁹ and in time of food crisis they were trusted by the market supervisor of Fuṣṭāṭ with the policing of the trade of grain.⁴⁰

Sitt al-Mulk reportedly ordered Nasīm to lock inside the palace Ibn Dawwās with his military commanders and personnel, to denounce him in front of them as the killer of al-Ḥākim on the authority of the new imam-caliph and to order *al-sa'diyya* to kill him. Nasīm carried out the mission as instructed and brought back the head of Ibn Dawwās to Sitt al-Mulk. She then completed the purge by instructing Nasīm to eliminate all the men that formed Ibn Dawwās' entourage and dump their corpses at the gate of the palace.⁴¹

All that was now left for the princess to do was to secure the loyalty of the army to her as regent, ruling on behalf of the new imam-caliph. This Sitt al-Mulk proceeded to do by resorting to the informal but no less binding forces of 'benefit' and 'favour', activated through rallying to her the military by distributing privileges, money and gifts to them.⁴² According to Ibn Taḡrībīrdī the army formally pledged loyalty to her through an oath.⁴³

³⁶ Ibn Zāfir, *Aḥbār*, p.59.

³⁷ Lev, "Army", p. 341. See al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 2, p. 121.

³⁸ al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 2, p. 107-108.

³⁹ al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 2, p. 165.

⁴⁰ Lev, "Army", p. 341.

⁴¹ al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 2, p. 126-127; Ibn al-Aṭīr, *al-Kāmil*, 7, p. 307.

⁴² al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 28, p. 203; Ibn Taḡrībīrdī, *al-Nuḡūm*, 4, p. 189, 248; al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 2, p. 125.

The remarkable picture of Sitt al-Mulk that we draw from the sources is that of a **woman who commanded military** men who, in turn, appear to have bowed unconditionally to her commands. Seemingly without intermediaries, she spoke, wrote, dispatched, gave and took away powers, whether to chief commanders or mere soldiers. But where did Sitt al-Mulk derive from the power that enabled her to exercise the type of authority we would more typically associate with a (male) ruler? Throughout the history of the Fāṭimid dynasty, to be mothers of the imam-caliphs or even ‘just’ their wives or concubines was an empowering position to be in at court, primarily because of the ‘succession investment’ that came with such statuses. Yet, no Fāṭimid royal mother or consort dared to go as far as Sitt al-Mulk - a spinster daughter, half-sister and aunt of imam-caliphs - in gaining loyalties for the exercise of power. If acquiring and keeping loyalties rested on the mutually advantageous calculus of liabilities between the parties involved, what was the military expecting to gain from obliging to the demands of someone who would otherwise count as a peripheral royal figure? Which mutual interests might have brought about such an unlikely partnership?

In attempting to address these questions, we can only respond with speculative answers based on a contextualised analysis of factors and events that surrounded Sitt al-Mulk’s expressions of influence as inferred from the narratives of the episodes in which she was portrayed as having played a significant part. The sources at our disposal neither elaborate on the origin of Sitt al-Mulk’s authority nor comment on what made her authority to be recognised as legitimate. **Several medieval** historians and chroniclers reporting on her qualities agree that she had *hayba*⁴⁴, the ‘awe’ or ‘dread’ that surrounded the ruler’s authority by virtue of its threat of coercion.⁴⁵ It was seemingly by this virtue that Sitt al-Mulk’s *hayba* grew far and wide, proportionally to the successful outcomes of her stratagems.

The immediate answer to the above questions is that Sitt al-Mulk was a very rich woman.⁴⁶ The practice of allocating property and distributing wealth among the women of the Fāṭimid royal family is well documented.⁴⁷ The imam-caliph al-‘Azīz followed in his father’s footsteps in allowing his daughter to accumulate wealth that, in time, continued to grow through investments, revenues from land grants, real estates and commodities as well as the odd ‘diversion’ of Treasury money to her *dīwān*. The distribution of money and property to military of all ranks was by far the most persuasive means through which pre-modern rulers of the Islamic world could seal loyalties and expect favours in return. Since the military followed wealth, the risk of rapidly shifting alliances depending on the financial fortunes of

Lev, “The Princess”, p. 325. On the remuneration of the Fāṭimid army at the time of al-Ḥākim’s reign see Lev, “Army”, p. 355. On the binding force of *ni‘ma* and *iṣṭinā‘* in the medieval Islamic courts see Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*, p. 73-93

⁴³ Ibn Taḡrībī, *al-Nuḡūm*, 4, p. 189.

⁴⁴ al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 28, p. 204; al-Maqrīzī, *Itti‘āz*, 2, p. 125, 129; Ibn al-Aṭīr, *al-Kāmil*, 7, p. 307.

⁴⁵ Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*, p. 151, 165, 184.

⁴⁶ On Sitt al-Mulk’s wealth and riches see Cortese and Calderini, *Women*, p.155-157.

⁴⁷ Cortese and Calderini, *Women*, ch. 5.

the masters was a constant menace. In keeping with this rule, from the narratives of episodes illustrating Sitt al-Mulk's dealings with the military, we can observe that her promise of money and/or the distribution of it to her henchmen were a constant factor in securing the carrying out of her orders, obtaining the successful outcome of the operations she commissioned and consolidating her status in their aftermath.

But this is just a partial answer to a bigger question. Why Sitt al-Mulk? At the Fāṭimid court there were several royal female contemporaries of Sitt al-Mulk who were far richer than she ever was and far more prominent in kinship to the imam-caliph and in seniority.⁴⁸ Yet none of them is reported as having used their wealth to exercise command over the army or as having closely interacted with individuals or groups within the military. In the second half of the 5th/11th century, Raṣād, the mother of the imam-caliph al-Mustanṣir, rose to prominence within the Fāṭimid court and impacted on the balance of powers within the Fāṭimid army, by supporting the black troops at the expense of the Turkish contingents.⁴⁹ While her influence over military affairs is well documented, there are no references, however, to instances of interaction with military chiefs and personnel that are comparable to the ones that of Sitt al-Mulk is reported as having established in the course of her life. Since all but one of the military activities connected to the princess coincide with crucial moments in the dynastic succession history of the Fāṭimids, we can infer that Sitt al-Mulk not only had money but also genealogical capital of a special kind that the army regarded as worthy investing into.

The reign of al-ʿAzīz was marked by a major change in the ethnic composition of the Fāṭimid army. This reform impacted negatively mostly on the *maḡāriḇa* contingents which, from being the military élite of the Fāṭimid army saw the paternal-like favours (*iṣṭināʾ*)⁵⁰ of the imam-caliph being increasingly channelled towards the *mašāriqa*, that is Turks and Daylamis.⁵¹ One outcome of this diversification of military powers was that both *maḡariba* and *mašāriqa* sought whatever means they could to protect their respective interests, at each other expense. At a basic level, this entailed the seeking and/or securing of patronage from prominent members of the royal family with a view to manipulate dynastic politics to the mutual advantage of the master and the client. At the death of her father, with al-Ḥākim still in his early youth, Sitt al-Mulk's status must have risen to become that of one of the most prominent adult figures in the royal family, let alone woman, to be in the position of impacting on Fāṭimid dynastic politics. One can interpret the circumstances underlying Sitt al-Mulk's challenge to al-Ḥākim's accession to the throne as the first example of two unlikely parties joining forces to shape dynastic succession to their mutual benefit. As already mentioned earlier in this paper, in his narration of the events leading to the attempted coup Ibn al-Qalānīsī states that Sitt al-Mulk was in love with the person she was intending to place

⁴⁸ See Cortese and Calderini, *Women*, p.149-163.

⁴⁹ Cortese and Calderini, *Women and the Fatimids*, p. 112.

⁵⁰ Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*, p. 77 sgg.; Rustow, "Formal and Informal Patronage", p. 366-375.

⁵¹ Ibn Muyassar, *Annales*, p. 52. See also al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 28, p. 168.

on the throne, the son of her paternal uncle, ‘Abd Allāh.⁵² While the romantic angle to the story could be considered fruit of writer’s licence, the narrative is nevertheless valuable in that it places Sitt al-Mulk in correlation to a close relative in her family that was in the position to make claims to power. On the basis of al-Rūdbārī’s eye witness account this potential counter-contender was ‘Alī b. Aḥmad b. al-Mahdī who was suspected of having gathered propagandists in his favour.⁵³ The closeness between Sitt al-Mulk and a cousin –be it dictated by love or expedient- would make sense when seen from the perspective of Ismā‘īlī genealogical history and against the broader backdrop of underlying succession disputes that had been tainting the Fāṭimid royal family since the North African phase of the dynasty. In these succession contests, the rules of patronage and loyalty determined that each contender attracted his own supporters. Following the reforms in the army brought about by al-‘Azīz that penalised the North African contingents, at least some factions among the *mağāriba* must have seen an advantage in rallying around the son of ‘Abd Allāh or ‘Alī b. Aḥmad b. al-Mahdī whose accession to the throne could have been secured through Sitt al-Mulk’s support. As Maghrebis, the *mağāriba* might have looked at Sitt al-Mulk and her cousin as congenial masters to be aligned with since both belonged to the last surviving younger generation of élite North African-born stock of the dynasty that lived in al-Qāhira.

The imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz had nominated his son ‘Abd Allāh as his heir apparent. In 364/975 however ‘Abd Allāh unexpectedly died. The Ismā‘īlī tradition offered a model to follow in cases where the heir apparent would die before the incumbent imam. The 5th Ismā‘īlī imam Ğā‘far al-Ṣādiq had appointed his son Ismā‘īl as his successor. When Ismā‘īl died before his father, the appointment passed to Ismā‘īl’s son, Muḥammad (not Ismā‘īl’s brother, as imam-ship from brother to brother was only allowed between al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn). This model was however overruled on two occasions in the early phase of the Fāṭimid imamate. When the son and heir apparent of the second imam-caliph al-Qā‘im, Qāsim, predeceased his father, it was his brother al-Manṣūr that was nominated successor. **Al-Qāsim had two sons who remained in North Africa and deemed stupid by the court secretary Ğawdhār (d.362/973).** Upon the death of ‘Abd Allāh, al-Mu‘izz should have passed the imamate to ‘Abd Allāh’s son, that is the cousin that, according to Ibn al-Qalānisī, Sitt al-Mulk wanted to install on the throne. Instead, al-‘Azīz - ‘Abd Allāh’s younger brother - became the anomalous recipient of the imamate. There is no doubt that internal factionalism reigned at the Fāṭimid court, caused by dissent over succession issues. **From documents contained in the Ğawdhār’s biography,** written during the reign of al-‘Azīz, we gather that discords had raged within the inner circles of the Fāṭimid royal family during the reigns of al-Manṣūr and al-Mu‘izz. Apparently, some of the sons of the first two Fāṭimid imam-caliphs, that is, al-Manṣūr’s uncles and brothers, disagreed with the policies of al-Manṣūr and his successor and became hostile to them. Tamīm (d. 374/984), the first-born of al-Mu‘izz, was found to have kept in close contact with these relatives through secret correspondence, thus

⁵² Ibn al-Qalānisī, *Dayl*, p. 44.

⁵³ Ibn Sa‘īd, *al-Nuğūm*, p. 55.

showing that the disputes were protracted generation after generation.⁵⁴ There is evidence of dissent over succession following the death of al-Manṣūr in 341/952. Al-Manṣūr had five sons: Abū Tamīm Ma‘ad, Hāšim, Ḥaydara who died in Egypt in 382/992, Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥusayn and Abū Ğa‘far Ṭāhir.⁵⁵ Possibly one of these sons, other than Abū Tamīm who was to take the dynastic name of al-Mu‘izz, must have attracted strong following as the preferred candidate for succession. There is indication that these supporters maintained their loyalty to this son of al-Manṣūr also after Abū Tamīm’s ascent to the throne. An anonymous Isma‘ili work titled *Muqābalat al-adwār wa mukāšafat al-asrār* (*The Collation of the Cycles and the Disclosure of the Secrets*) features a list of contents indicating a section in its ninth chapter dedicated to the imams from al-Madhī to al-Manṣūr, the latter hidden son and the period of concealment after him.⁵⁶ Beside challenges from his brothers, al-Mu‘izz had to contend on several occasions with the hostility of Aḥmad, a son of the first imam-caliph al-Mahdī.⁵⁷ There is some indication that Aḥmad b. al-Mahdī, who died in Egypt in 382/992-3⁵⁸, might have had good reason to resent al-Mu‘izz and the imam-caliphs in his line as usurpers. According to Ibn ‘Idārī, in 316/928, al-Qā’im had been alerted by his son Qāsim of rumours according to which al-Qā’im’s father, al-Mahdī, had appointed Aḥmad, not him, as heir apparent.⁵⁹ In response, al-Qā’im asserted himself at court in order to secure his succession as the second imam-caliph in the dynasty by keeping the death of his father hidden for a year.⁶⁰ Likewise, the announcement of al-‘Azīz’s imamate was made public only eight months after the death of al-Mu‘izz which was kept secret⁶¹ thus indicating that the consensus over his appointment might have been questioned in some quarters. It is perhaps not a case that al-‘Azīz bestowed the hefty sum of 167,000 *dīnār*-s to his elder brother Tamīm.⁶² During the reign of al-‘Azīz, to complicate the succession game further, Sitt al-Mulk’s brother or half-brother Muḥammad, who had been al-‘Azīz’s first choice as heir apparent, died in 383/993. The event brought about once again the brother-to-brother transference of the imamate, this time with the added problem that the heir apparent, who took eventually the dynastic name of al-Ḥākīm, was under age. This combination of circumstances, when

⁵⁴ See [al-Ġawḍarī], *Inside the Immaculate Portal*, p. 59-64,103. It has been suggested that Tamīm’s collusion with his relatives was the reason, together with his alleged libertine lifestyle, for him to have been by-passed in succession in favour of ‘Abd Allāh. According to Walker, “The Fatimid Caliph”, p. 30-1 Tamīm was not considered suitable to be named as heir apparent due to inability to have progeny. That all was not smooth in al-Mu‘izz’s appointment of ‘Abd Allāh may be reflected in the fact ‘Abd Allāh’s nomination that was kept secret for seven months. See Daftary, *The Ismā‘īlīs*, p. 173.

⁵⁵ al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 28, p. 119.

⁵⁶ Ms. 1315 (ArI, ZA) in the collection of the library of The Institute of Ismaili Studies London. Cf. Cortese, *Arabic Ismaili Manuscripts*, p. 125. Unfortunately the part of the manuscript including this section is no longer extant.

⁵⁷ [al-Ġawḍarī], *Inside the Immaculate Portal*, p. 111-112.

⁵⁸ al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 28, p.114.

⁵⁹ Ibn ‘Idārī, *al-Bayān*, 1, p. 193.

⁶⁰ al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 28, p. 114.

⁶¹ al-Maqrīzī, *Itti‘āz*, 2, p. 229.

⁶² al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, 2, p.593.

appraised in the contest of already volatile family relations, must have caused further rifts among the imam's relatives. When Sitt al-Mulk tried to challenge al-Ḥākim's succession it was only three years after Aḥmad b. al-Mahdī's death. On the basis of al-Rūdbārī's account, these events appear to coincide with the emergence Aḥmad b. al-Mahdī's son, 'Alī, as contender. It is possible that in reporting collusion between Sitt al-Mulk and a cousin, Ibn al-Qalānisī might have assumed that this must have been 'Abd Allāh's son when in fact the relative in question was 'Alī b. Aḥmad b. al-Mahdī. This identification would make al-Rūdbārī's claim on this figure consistent with the dynastic dispute mentioned by Ibn 'Idārī and the Fāṭimid insider al-Ġawḍarī, indicated above. In the context of long-running family disputes, it is relevant here to note that at some point al-Ḥākim must have sided with the faction that supported al-Mahdī's line since he appointed one of Aḥmad's descendants - 'Abd al-Raḥīm b. Ilyās⁶³ - as heir apparent, preferring him to his own son.

The rallying in support of Sitt al-Mulk's backing of her cousin as successor instead of al-Ḥākim should be therefore appraised against the backdrop of underlying disputes between factions seeking to restore or defend the imamate to what in some quarters must have been regarded to be the 'correct' family bloodline and, in the specific case of the *maḡāribā*, a pro-*maḡribī* one since there is evidence of *maḡāribā* support for Sitt al-Mulk's action against her half-brother. In attempting to enter the palace, she was escorted by the *qāḍī* Muḥammad b. al-Nu'mān, scion of the most prestigious *maḡribī* family serving the Fāṭimid dynasty and she was not challenged by the most important high officer of the regime at the time of the event, the Kutāma al-Ḥasan b. 'Ammār.

The failure of the attempted coup and the instalment of al-Ḥākim as imam-caliph marked the beginning of the gradual decline of the *maḡāribā* influence at court and in the army.⁶⁴ It also meant that, in time, it would be wise for Sitt al-Mulk to forge new alliances and acquire new loyalties. Once again she used her power to manoeuvre the army –mainly *mašāriqa* chiefs and contingents this time- to control dynastic succession. This time, however, her empowerment in handling the demise of al-Ḥākim and its consequences for the dynasty, derived from genealogical capital in her hands whose contours were more clearly defined. Following al-Ḥākim's appointment of his cousin 'Abd al-Raḥīm as heir apparent, Sitt al-Mulk took physical control of the bloodline of succession by sheltering in her palace al-Ḥākim's son.⁶⁵ We can assume that she must have recognised him as the sole legitimate successor to the throne by virtue of birth right. As holder of money and minder of a youth with strong imam-caliph potential, Sitt al-Mulk became a very attractive figure for the military to rally to. The army took a gamble by supporting Sitt al-Mulk in possibly killing al-Ḥākim, eliminating the alleged perpetrator of al-Ḥākim's murder and all his entourage and disposing of the appointed heir apparent 'Abd al-Raḥīm. As it turned out, the bet paid off as,

⁶³ al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 28, p. 203; al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 2, p. 100-101.

⁶⁴ In 395/1005 al-Ḥākim issued decrees for the protection of the *ḡilmān* of the Turks, Daylamites and many other army groups, but there is no mention of the Kutāma. al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 2, p. 55-56.

⁶⁵ Ibn Taḡrībī, *al-Nujūm*, vol. 4, p.193-4.

once al-Zāhir became enthroned, she reinforced the loyalty of the military with great dispensation of money, gifts and favours. Sitt al-Mulk must have seen the need to overcompensate to secure consensus for al-Zāhir since his accession to the throne lacked *naṣṣ*, the foremost important condition needed – at least in theory- to be formally recognised as successor: there is no indication that he was ever openly appointed heir apparent by his father or that al-Ḥākim’s nomination of his cousin had been revoked (*wa kāna āḥir al-‘ahd bi-hi*).⁶⁶ In the absence of this endorsement, it is interesting to observe that the military identified Sitt al-Mulk as the royal figure with the strongest dynastic authority to sanction the appointment of the new imam. It was on the authority of ‘our lady’ that the chief commander Ḥaṭīr al-Mulk formally announced al-Zāhir’s succession to the throne. The role of Sitt al-Mulk as the champion defender of the Fāṭimid royal descent in the line of her grandfather was symbolically sanctioned at al-Zāhir’s coronation ceremony where it is reported that it was *she* who had bestowed upon the neo-caliph the crown that had belonged to al-Mu‘izz.⁶⁷

For all **her involvement in** military affairs, it was Sitt al-Mulk’s ability in carefully **balancing military**, court and dynastic politics that caused her to be remembered in history not so much as a warmonger but rather as a bringer of peace and economic stability as well as a diplomat in the years that followed the reign of her half-brother. **Sitt al-Mulk emerges in the sources as a figure of prominence in conjunction with disputes that emerged at crucial moments in the history of Fāṭimid dynastic succession. Whether deliberately or by default, Sitt al-Mulk appears to have skilfully navigated her way through opposing family factions finally playing a significant role in ensuring that the rule of the ‘Mu‘izzī’ branch of dynastic succession would be ultimately preserved, continuing to rule until the end of the Fāṭimid regime in 567/1171. She was *Die Schattenkalifin* after all.**

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