

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## Manzikert, Battle of

**Contributed by Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD**

The Turks forced their way onto the world stage with thunderous momentum. Their galactic advance is marked by three critical events that provide historic benchmarks: the hiring of a Turkish guard by the Abbasid Caliph al Mu'tasim (833); the disappearance of the Samanid State based in Bukhara (999); and finally, the Battle of Manzikert (August 1072).

After Caliph al Mu'tasim, the Abbasids in Baghdad were in disarray. A series of incompetent successors left the Caliphate ineffective and incapable of ruling the vast territories extending from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indus River. The Turkish bodyguard seized upon this opportunity and became the power broker. In a brief span of nine years, between 861 and 870, the Turks brought into power and then got rid of three Caliphs. The weakness of Baghdad encouraged local rulers to assert themselves. By the year 850, the Aghlabids in Algeria and Morocco were minting coins in their own name. In 868 a Turkish general, Ahmed ibn Tulun, seized control of Egypt and Syria and established the Tulunid dynasty. The Ithna Ashari Buyids, challenging the authority of the Sunni Abbasids, seized control of Iraq in 945 and held Baghdad itself under their sway. In 900 the Samanids brought Khorasan under their control and established their authority from the Oxus River in Central Asia into the very heart of Persia. Trade with India and China along the silk route and with the Vikings through the Volga River into Europe brought them prosperity. The Samanids are best remembered for their patronage of science, culture and Farsi literature. Ibn Sina, perhaps the most celebrated scientist of the Middle Ages, did his work in Khorasan under the Samanids.

As long as the powerful and brilliant court of the Samanids maintained its power, the Turkish tribes beyond the Amu Darya were kept at bay. But powerful internal forces were operating within the Islamic body politic that weakened the Samanids. Towards the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the global struggle between the (Shi'a) Fatimids based in Cairo and the (Sunni) Abbasids based in Baghdad was at its height. The world body of Muslims was rent asunder by two competing visions of Islam. The Fatimids, after overrunning North Africa and Egypt (969), projected themselves into Syria and the Hejaz. Emirs and rulers as far away as Multan (in modern Pakistan) followed the Fatimid lead. The Samanid emirs could not escape these convulsions. One of the Samanids, Nasr al Saeed, who ruled Bukhara from 914 to 943, favored the Fatimids. The Khorasanis, who were predominantly Sunni, resented this and the Samanids lost their legitimacy in the eyes of a majority of their subjects. There were economic reasons as well. The Fatimids in Cairo successfully diverted trade between India and Europe from the Persian Gulf

to the Red Sea. The result was prosperity for Egypt and impoverishment of the Samanids in Khorasan and the Buyids in Iraq. The military burden of containing the Turks to the north took its toll as well. Gradually, power slipped from their hands and the Samanid dynasty disappeared in 999.

The dissolution of the Samanids opened the floodgates to Turkish migrations. The Kara-Khanis, a Turkish tribe, crossed the Amu Darya (Oxus River) and occupied Bukhara in 999. In 962, Alaptagin established another powerful Turkish dynasty further to the south, in Ghazna. The Turkish tribes were restless, constantly on the move and challenging each other for turf. In the subsequent decade, another general Sabugtagin gained control of Ghazna (977). It was Sabugtagin's son Mahmud who raided India 17 times between 1000 and 1030. Mahmud tried to contain the Turkish flood by dispersing the Turkish tribes and settling them in the far-flung areas of Khorasan. But this was in vain. Between 950 and 1000, a group of Turkish tribes, the Oghuz, who inhabited the areas north of the Caspian Sea, accepted Islam and migrated south to Khorasan. The Oghuz Turks were welded into a remarkable fighting force under their leader Seljuk. Seljuk's son Arsalan fought Mahmud of Ghazna to a stalemate. When Mahmud died (1030), the tide turned decidedly in favor of the Seljuks.

The Seljuks were fearless warriors. They considered it their duty to struggle in the path of faith. It was they who introduced the term *ghazi* (from the Arabic word *ghazza*, namely armed struggle) into languages spoken by Muslims. As followers of the Hanafi *Fiqh*, they championed the Sunnis against the Fatimids. The Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad, under increasing military pressure from the Fatimids in Egypt and the Byzantines in Syria, were only too glad to accept the protection of the Seljuks.

The Ithna Ashari Buyids held Iraq under the leadership of Basasiri who formed an alliance with the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir of Egypt to contain the Seljuks. Meanwhile, Taghril Beg had succeeded Arsalan (1036) and a fierce struggle ensued between him and Basasiri for the control of Baghdad itself. The city changed hands several times between 1056 and 1060. Finally, Taghril fought his way into Baghdad in 1060. Basasiri was killed in combat. With Basasiri's death, the Fatimid challenge receded from Persia and Iraq. In 1058, Taghril was anointed by the Abbasid Caliph Kaim as "Sultan of the East and the West", charged with the authority to rule and the responsibility to protect the orthodox (Sunni) vision of Islam and defend the ummah against enemies of the faith. The Turks valiantly discharged this role for over 800 years.

By 1058, the Turks had changed the character of the Caliphate and without abolishing it, they had replaced it with a new institution, the Sultanate. This institution prospered during the age of the soldiers (through the 18<sup>th</sup> century) and has survived to this day in parts of the Islamic world.

Taking advantage of the internal struggles among Muslims, the Byzantines occupied Armenia and thrust deep into Syria. Soon, this thrust came up against the Turks whose relentless advance in search of pastureland had taken them to the borders of Anatolia. Taghril died childless in 1063 and his nephew Alap Arsalan assumed the leadership of the Seljuks. The Byzantines tried to stem the Turkish tide but were defeated in a series of skirmishes (1063 to 1070). In desperation, the Byzantine Emperor Romanus Diagonus raised a huge army consisting of Greek, Russian, French and Italian mercenaries and marched against Alap Arsalan. The two armies met at Manzikert, near Lake Van, in August 1072. The French mercenaries quarreled with the Emperor before the battle began and left the battlefield. The static defense of the Byzantines was no match for the rapid movements of the Turkish cavalry. The Seljuks cut down the Byzantines, Emperor Diagonus was taken prisoner and the day belonged to the Turks. Alap Arsalan was as chivalrous in victory as he was swift on the battlefield. He sent the Emperor back to Constantinople under military escort.

The Battle of Manzikert was a momentous event and a turning point in global history. It destroyed Greek power in Asia Minor and opened it up to Turkish settlements. The Turks, surging forward in wave after wave in search of pastureland, moved deeper into Anatolia. The Greek landlords and fiefs, abandoned to their fate by the retreating Byzantine armies, fled. The peasants accepted Islam and joined up with the advancing Turks. Several groups of Ghazis emerged, each marching forth deeper towards Constantinople (modern Istanbul) to the West and towards the Black Sea to the north. It was only a matter of time before the Ghazis would cross the Straits of Dardaneles into Europe. Thus Alap Arslan accomplished what Emir Muawiya could not accomplish in 668 and what successive Abbasid Caliphs only dreamed of achieving for four hundred years, namely, opening up Anatolia to Islamic penetration.

The disaster at Manzikert raised a general alarm in the Latin West. The cries of help from Emperor Diagonus and his son Alexius reverberated through the Church of Rome and produced, 25 years later, in 1096, the preaching of the First Crusade by Pope Urban II.

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