

THE CREATION OF THE CITY OF BAGHDĀD: STRIKING A BALANCE BETWEEN RELIGION AND THE QUEST FOR POWER

Spahiç Omer

Introduction

The Islamic theory of general planning and urbanization is as old as the Muslim community. Its fundamental principles have been comprehensively laid in the Holy Qur'an, as well as in the sayings and practices of the Prophet, peace be upon him. Certainly, the best manifestation of the early Islamic planning and urbanization is the establishment of the Muslim society in Madīnah in the wake of the migration from Makkah. The matter henceforth was evolving steadily, corresponding with both the rapid spread of Islam throughout the world and the incredible growth of the civilization and culture inspired by the Islamic worldview.

In this article, we shall focus on the creation of the city of Baghdād,¹ the then new capital city of the vast Muslim empire, by the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Manşūr. The task commenced in the year 145/762 and was completed the following year. The construction of Baghdād served to the caliph al-Manşūr as an avenue to consolidate his position in particular and that of the 'Abbāsīd family in general on the Islamic political scene, apart from carrying out religious and societal responsibilities as the leader of the Muslims and at the same time help his subjects do

¹ The city was initially called Madīnat al-Salām (The City of Peace) because the Tigris, where the city was situated, was called Wādī al-Salām (The Valley of Peace), or because its establishment was aimed at harboring and disseminating peace worldwide, on one hand, and at creating a platform for advancing the frontiers of the civilization and culture inspired by the Islamic world-view, on the other. (See a lengthy discussion on the matter in: Al-Baghdādī al-Khaṭīb, *Tarīkh Baghdād*, Al-Maktabah al-Salafiyyah, Al-Madīnah al-Munawwarah, vol. 1, 58–62)

the same. It is really interesting to learn the methods and means by which the caliph tried very hard to strike a balance between various, and sometimes conflicting, interests and aspirations in himself and others. In the whole exercise, al-Manşūr admittedly was fairly successful.

Since numerous factors were considered before undertaking this mammoth project, they will be dealt with first. Next, we shall discuss the process of surveying and choosing the city site, and finally, some light will be cast on the most remarkable features of the city plan, its construction and the architectural design of some of its edifices.

Need for a New Capital

The 'Abbāsīd movement to topple the Umayyad government started as a secret propaganda in the region of Khurāsān, the birthplace and nucleus of all subsequent revolutionary activities. The 'Abbāsīd leadership realized the explosive and fertile conditions in the whole area of Khurāsān, which was ripe for the recruitment of a venerable and spirited revolutionary army, and eventually the setting up of a revolutionary movement. Khurāsān was intermittently overlooked and badly handled by many Umayyad rulers. However, in the wake of the triumph of the revolution, 'Irāq was chosen to serve as the core of a new administration.

The choice of 'Irāq is quite understandable and could have been anticipated. The 'Abbāsīds could not really make Khurāsān their administrative center as some of its frontiers were still vulnerable and much of its populace, especially those at or near such frontiers, were yet to undergo a complete process of Islamization. Moreover, it was positioned extremely east, and as such was very much isolated from the hitherto religious, intellectual and political centers of the vast Muslim state. Dealing smoothly and effectively with issues of administration of provinces, security and development would have become almost impossible under such circumstances.

Because of the strong and undivided Umayyad support and