

The Effects of the Bedouin Marauding on the Mamluk Economy (872-922AH/1468-1517AD)

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to determine the relationship between the Circassian Mamluk and the Bedouin during the half-century before the fall of the Mamluk sultanate and how these relationships influenced the Mamluk economy. The article reveals that the Bedouin tribes in Egypt often threatened Mamluk politics and undermined its economy. Their marauding increased during the period under discussion due to the inability of the sultans to control them. As the government's internal troubles increased, the Bedouin tribes intensified their disturbances, affected many areas of the economy and weakened Mamluk sources of revenue by disrupting the economic activities of local inhabitants.

Key words: Effects · Bedouin · Marauding Mamluk · Economy

INTRODUCTION

The Bedouins or *'Urban* were a social group who lived in the countryside and rural areas and who played an important role in the history of Egypt. Indeed, their significance since the early Islamic period can be seen from the various works of Egyptian historians such as *al-Bayan wa al-I'rab 'amma bi Ard Misr min al-A'rab* by Taqiyy al-Din Ahmad b. 'Ali al-Maqrizi (d.845AH/1442AD) [1]. The Bedouins in Egypt were the descendants of various Arab tribes of Arabia who entered that country at the time of the Islamic conquest or later. They preserved a tribal organisation, reacted to a greater or lesser degree to *'Asabiyya* (tribal loyalty) and were primarily shepherds and warriors [2]. More particularly, the Bedouins were the unsettled tribes (al-Qaba'il al-Mutajawwila or nomads) of the desert districts. However, some of them sometimes settled in villages along the Nile and in parts of northern Egypt [3]¹. These latter were known as *al-Qaba'il al-Mustaqirra* (settled tribes) and in their villages they engaged in some form of agriculture [4-5]². Nevertheless, they still readily responded to tribal

calls and became warriors again, sometimes because of economic need and sometimes due to intertribal or internal tribal quarrels [6].

The Bedouin Before the Period under Review: From the early Mamluk³ period, the Bedouin's role was sometimes negative and sometimes positive. When they were at peace with the government, they played a positive role. They protected the regions in which they settled from danger and from the attacks of nomads. Some of the Bedouin auxiliaries were employed in military service [7]. Some of them received *Iqta's* (fiefs) from the government and, in return, they had to 'protect' the commercial and pilgrimage routes which linked Cairo and the Nile valley to the Red Sea ports of Qusayr and 'Aydhab [8]⁴. They were also charged with an additional task: the supply of horses for the Royal horse post (Barid) on the routes from Bilbays to Damietta and from Bilbays to al-Kharruba [9].

These were the few positive roles played by the Bedouin. However, the Mamluk chronicles are more full of their revolts and misdeeds. When the Bedouins were in conflict with the authorities, they became hostile, causing

the destruction of everything in the countryside and sometimes also in the cities. al-Maqrizi says that most of the Bedouin refused to pay taxes after the rise to power of the Mamluks, claiming that they were the masters of the lands because they had faithfully served the Ayyubids and thus deserved to be rulers more than the Mamluks. According to them, the Ayyubids were *Khawarij* [10]⁵ and the Mamluks were nothing but the slaves of the *Khawarij* [11].

Some historians list the revolts led by the Bedouin against the central government during the Turkish Mamluk period. For example, the Bedouin launched revolts in 650AH/1252-1253AD, 660AH/1262AD, 698AH/1298-1299AD, 701AH/1301AD and 749AH/1349AD [12]. In 650AH/1252-1253AD, Hisn al-Din ibn Tha'lab, the leader of al-Ja'fari tribe revolted in Upper Egypt in command of 13,000 'Urban, blocking the roads, disrupting the activities of merchants and preventing the collection of the agricultural taxes [13-15]. In 660AH/1262AD, the 'Urban revolted again in Upper Egypt killing 'Izz al-Din al-Hawwash, the governor of Qus [16]. Meanwhile in 698AH/1298-1299AD, the Arab tribes of Upper and Middle Egypt launched an uprising that continued for three years until its severe oppression by a Mamluk expeditionary force [17]. In the year 701AH/1301AD, Mamluk historians mention the anarchy caused by the 'Urban of Upper Egypt which had reached deplorable levels:

They resorted to highway robbery and imposed on the merchants and the craftsmen in Asyut and Manfalut a tax similar to the *Jaliah* (the common term for the poll-tax imposed on non-Muslim). They rejected the authority of the local governors and prevented the payment of the agricultural *Kharaj* taxes (land taxes). Their leaders called themselves by the names of (the Mamluk) amirs, one calling himself Baybars and another calling himself Sallar. They armed themselves and released all prisoners imprisoned in jails. In the light of this, the amirs called upon the *Qadis* and the jurists and asked their opinion on the permissibility of waging battle against (the 'Urban) and the (jurists) gave a *Fatwa* to that effect [18-19].

In 749AH/1349AD, subsequent to the first occurrence of the Black Death (al-Mawt al-Aswad), many of the Arab tribes in Upper Egypt were again involved in a loosely organized revolt centered on the regions of Asyut and Qus. This rebellion was only put down in 754AH/1354AD [20-21].

Signs of disorder among the Bedouin became more obvious in the last decades of Turkish rule, while during the Circassian period things went from bad to worse.

In his early days as the first ruler in the Circassian period, Sultan al-Zahir Barquq (d.801AH/1399AD) transferred the Hawwara tribe from Lower to Upper Egypt because of their impiety and their refusal to pay taxes. In 796AH/1394AD, he arrested two Arab tribal chiefs, Jamal al-Din Mahmud al-'Inabi and Musa b. Muhammad b. 'Isa, after they attempted to seize the throne. The Hawwara tribe revolted again in 798AH/1396AD and killed Amir Qatlubugha, the sultan's viceroy in Upper Egypt. Sultan al-Zahir Barquq sent Amir 'Umar b. Ilyas to apprehend them but this failed [22].

From the beginning of the ninth/fifteenth century, the mastery of the Bedouin over Lower and Upper Egypt became apparent. According to Ibn Taghri Birdi (d.874AH/1469AD), in 868AH/1463-1464AD, the province of al-Buhayra was on the 'verge of ruin' because of pillage by the Bedouin who revolted against the central government. Thus, most of the inhabitants of that province moved to other provinces such as al-Sharqiyya and al-Gharbiyya. The weakness of the sultan became more obvious when he opened negotiations with the Muharib tribe. Their representative came to Cairo and was received with great honour by the sultan himself and both sides reached an agreement. This was an extremely rare event [23-24].

The Bedouin During the Period under Review: There were number Bedouin tribes which were involved in the conflicts with the Mamluks and caused problems to the economy during the period under consideration. Among them were the Banu Sa'd, Banu Wa'il, Banu Hiram, Banu 'Atiyya, Banu Nu'ayim [25]⁶, the tribe of Ibn 'Umar, Ban-Hawwara, Banu Ahamida and Banu 'Azzala [26]⁷. These Bedouins took advantages of the disorder and the weaknesses of some sultans to disturb economic activities.

The Mamluk sources mention an increase in Bedouin marauding after Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay's enthronement. For instance, a revolt of the Bedouin in al-Buhayra in 872AH/1468AD reached considerable dimensions. Lajin, a senior amir, who had previously been sent to patrol the province appealed to Cairo stating that he was under siege and requesting reinforcements to put down the rebellion. The sultan decided to reinforce Lajin's troops by sending a military expedition consisting of 2,000 *Mamluk al-Sultaniyya* (the Royal Mamluks). This was considered to be a very impressive force even in a war against a major enemy [27-28]⁸. Any unrest in Cairo or political chaos or general crisis in the sultanate was exploited by the Bedouin in order to increase their power.

This was what they did when the Mamluk army was defeated by Shah Suwar [29-31]⁹. Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay was under pressure and he had to send reinforcements against the enemy in north Syria and, at the same time, provide forces to face the enemy in Egypt, the Bedouin [32].

Throughout Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay's reign, the Bedouin continued their hostile operations and showed very little concern for the regime's responses. For example, in Jumada al-Ula 874AH/November-December 1469AD, the Bedouin created havoc in al-Buhayra by attacking the Mamluk officer there [33] and in Muharram 875AH/July 1470AD, they once again pillaged the same province. The government representative in the province requested reinforcements from Cairo and Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay responded by sending Atabak Azbak to lead an expedition there [34-35]¹⁰. In Dhu al-Hijja 875AH/May-June 1471AD, the sultan sent a contingent led by the chamberlain to another province namely, al-Sharqiyya, after he received several reports of serious looting by Sa'd and Wa'il tribes [36-37]. The Mamluk sources report security was weak even in the vicinity of Cairo. In Dhu al-Qa'da 876AH/April-May 1472AD, the Banu Hiram ravaged al-Khankah [38] and a month after that, in Dhu al-Hijja 876AH/May-June 1472AD, Cairo was threatened by feuding between the Banu Sa'd and Wa'il [39-40]. In Sha'ban 879AH/December 1474-January 1475AD, the Bedouin became aggressive and they captured and stripped a Mamluk officer in the vicinity of Cairo [41].

The Bedouin used to steal the horses of the Mamluks as they were pasturing near Cairo and nobody could stop them. Thus, in Dhu al-Qa'da 879AH/March-April 1475AD, the 'Azzala tribesmen attacked Jiza province and stole horses from the royal herd. Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay dispatched a contingent to chase them but no one was apprehended [42]. Indeed, few expeditions sent by the sultan to counteract the misdeeds of the Bedouin achieved their goals. For instance, in Muharram 881AH/April-May 1476AD, the Banu Labith created havoc and the Atabak pursued them into the desert where his soldiers suffered terribly [43]. In Jumada al-Ula 881AH/August-September 1476AD, Amir Yashbak returned to Cairo from Upper Egypt after he failed in an expedition against the Ibn 'Umar tribe [44]. Another expedition which was sent to al-Buhayra in Shawwal 891AH/October 1486AD retreated without achieving victory [45]. In Rajab 893AH/June-July 1488AD, Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay was shocked when he heard rumours that the Bedouin were plotting to overthrow him [46].

The same disturbances occurred throughout the reigns of the four incompetent sultans (901-906AH/1495-1501AD) after al-Ashraf Qaytbay. The power of the Bedouin grew and they were on the way to becoming a military factor in the struggles inside the Mamluk aristocracy. For example, during the reign of al-Nasir Muhammad b. Qaytbay (901-904AH/1495-1498AD), Amir Aqbardi al-Dawadar persuaded the tribes of Banu Wa'il and Banu 'Azzala to support his uprising. Meanwhile al-Zahir Qansuh, al-Nasir's uncle, joined the tribe of Banu Hiram to counter the attack from Aqbardi [47]. During the reign of al-Zahir Qansuh (904-905AH/1498-1499AD), the Banu 'Azzala once again threatened the Mamluks by assaulting the *Kashif* (Inspector-Governor) of al-Buhayra province and forcing the sultan to dispatch several expeditions to crush them [48].

Throughout his reign, Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri also continued to court danger from the Bedouin, who frequently created havoc and disorder. In Sha'ban 907AH/February-March 1502AD, Qansuh al-Ghawri's prefect of al-Gharbiyya failed to restore order among the Bedouin in that province [49]. Meanwhile in Dhu al-Qa'da 908AH/April-May 1503AD, Bedouin looting in the Delta and Nile Valley became widespread and the *Iqta'* holders feared for their estates [50]. The province of al-Buhayra was once again attacked by the Bedouin in Rabi' al-Awwal 912AH/July-August 1506AD. This time they broke the dykes there and as a result the granaries were flooded [51]. Several months later, in Shawwal 912AH/February-March 1507AD, the Bedouin from al-Sharqiyya captured caravans transporting Qansuh al-Ghawri's assets [52]. The city of Cairo itself was alarmed over the escape of Bedouin criminals from prison in Safar 913AH/June-July 1507AD. However, there was no inquiry made by the regime [53]. In Muharram 916AH/April-May 1510AD, Tumanbay, Qansuh al-Ghawri's adjutant, led an expedition to Upper Egypt in a vain attempt to prevent feuding during the harvest period [54]. However, in Rabi' al-Awwal 920AH/April-May 1515AD, Tumanbay was successful in capturing several leaders of the Ghazala tribe who had been ravaging Jiza province [55]. Nevertheless, this did not prevent other tribes from creating similar disturbances.

The negotiations between the Mamluk sultans and the Bedouin during the period under discussion also reveals the inability of the sultans to put them under their control. For instance, Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay was agreeable to proposals of a ceasefire from previous Bedouin rebels [56]. In Sha'ban 876AH/January-February 1472AD, he accepted the Yasar tribe's invitation to share

their hospitality at a lavish feast on the fringes of the desert. Having formerly launched attacks through Jiza, this tribe now placed itself under the regime's authority [57]. Similarly, Mamluk historians mention several accounts of Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay reconfirming tribal chiefs in their positions. Thus, in Dhu al-Hijja 875AH/May-June 1471AD, he agreed to the appointment of a new Shaykh of al-Sharqiyya province [58] and in Dhu al-Qa'da 898AH/August-September 1493AD, he confirmed the position of the Shaykh of Huwwara tribe in Upper Egypt [59]. Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri made similar actions. In Rabi' al-Awwal 910AH/August-September 1504AD, he re-established the position of Baybars b. Ahmad, one of the famous figures from al-Sharqiyya, as *Shaykh al-'Arab* of that province. Several months later, Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri confirmed his title and received him as a guest at the Citadel in 918AH/1512AD [60].

The Bedouin also created problems in Mamluk domains such as Syria and Hijaz, disrupting the economic activities of the local inhabitants and once again revealing the inability of the Mamluk sultans to control them. For example, some districts such as Nablus and Hawran in Syria continued to be dominated by the local Bedouin. Other tribal groups also moved freely in the regions and plundered the peasants and the residents of the cities [61]. During the middle years of Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay's reign, the Banu al-Fadl, led by its violent leader Sayf, ransacked Aleppo and other north Syrian towns [62-63]. Meanwhile between 912AH/1506AD and 921AH/1515AD during Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri's reign, the Banu Lam, the most recalcitrant tribe, looted Palestine and Trans-Jordan [64]. The frequent marauding of these Bedouin demonstrated the Mamluks' loose rein over the local tribes of Syria-Palestine. As the regime's internal troubles got worse, these tribes increased their disturbances [65].

Regarding the situation in the Hijaz, the fifty years before the downfall of the Mamluk sultanate witnessed the reluctance of some local tribes to acknowledge the Sharif of Mecca, who was appointed by the sultan in Cairo. There were strife and competition among the Bedouin leaders to occupy this post and they even dared attack Mamluk officers when the opportunity arose. For more than ten years Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay faced revolts led by the amirs of the Hujr clan, who frequently raided Yanbu' port and often tried to bring down the Sharif of Mecca [66]. They also seized the pilgrims' belongings at Yanbu' [67] and also assaulted the Sharif of Mecca's relatives when they were there [68].

Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri had to deal with the increasing frequent rebellions led by al-Jizani [69], who was joined by the tribe of Banu Ibrahim. They pillaged the central Hijaz, plundered the Syrian pilgrimage caravan proceeding toward Mecca and raided the Egyptian pilgrimage on its way home. al-Jizani also attacked his brother, Barakat, who occupied the post of Sharif of Mecca [70]. An expedition led by Qayt al-Rajabi in 908AH/1503AD to capture him failed but he was finally killed in Mecca in 909AH/1504AD [71]. This did not, however, end the turmoil in Hijaz because it was continued by the Banu Ibrahim and Yahya b. Sab', the amir of Yanbu'. As a result, in 911AH/1506AD, Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri could not guarantee the safety of pilgrims [72]. The Banu Ibrahim were only defeated in 913AH/1507AD after Khayrbak al-Mi'mar, the governor of al-Gharbiyya province, led a mass expedition against them [73]. Meanwhile, after several years Yahya b. Sab' received Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri's re-confirmation of his authority over Yanbu' [74].

The continuous revolts of the Bedouin in the Mamluk domains showed the waning of Mamluk power to control their realms and contributed significantly to the deterioration in the economic life of the local populace and the safety of the pilgrims. The Mamluk economy was also seriously affected by the cost of the military campaigns to crush them. Thus, during the period under consideration the problems caused by the Bedouin not only destabilized Mamluk politics but also undermined its economy. Even though Mamluk historians do not give statistical data on the economic losses caused by the Bedouin, their accounts of Bedouin disturbances appear on almost every page of their works, explaining how they threatened Mamluk sources of revenue and disrupted economic activities.

Many contemporary chroniclers mention the serious effects caused by the Bedouin to the economy in the Mamluk kingdom [75-76]. For example, al-Asadi (last known biographical date: 855AH/1451AD) says that the Bedouin's nefarious acts and revolts weakened the wealth of Egypt [77]. Most modern scholars also hold the same view regarding the Bedouin encroachment on the economy in the Mamluk sultanate without giving a detailed description [78-83]. On this matter Carl F. Petry remarks that 'the attendant level of anxiety on the regime's part implies its significance (Bedouin predation) as another factor debilitating the economy [84].

Among the activities of the Bedouin which appear to have undermined the resources and the economy of the realm are:

- They attacked and burnt the villages, damaged and stole the crops and property belonging to the peasants. Sometimes, they let their camels and sheep graze on the peasants' crops. The Bedouin also stole livestock including camels, cattle, oxen and donkeys, which were very important in the peasants' farming activities [85-86].
- They killed some of the peasants who were the manpower in farming activities [87-88].
- They damaged the irrigation system by destroying dams and canals. The implication of this was that cultivation could not take place or the floods covered some of the cultivated area and destroyed the crops [89]. It was often the habit of the Bedouin to intentionally break the dykes or canals as a means of taking over and adopting the land for their own use [90].
- Some powerful tribes imposed their domination on some districts of Egypt and became the real rulers there. An example is the Hawwara, who became the real rulers in Upper Egypt [91]. In this way, they controlled and dominated many of the *Iqta's* [92].
- They compelled the peasants under their protection to assist them in their struggles with the authorities and in their feuds with other tribes. In this environment, the peasants could not be productive labourers [93].
- The Bedouin imposed their own taxes on the peasantry in some districts [94]. They were always prepared to use violence against the villages which opposed their orders [95]. The misdeeds and cruelty of the Bedouin caused many peasants to flee from their villages to find a better life [96].
- They burnt the ships that brought grain from Upper Egypt to Cairo, this eventually leading to a rise in the price of crops. Such events are reported twice by Ibn Taghri Birdi in the year 873AH/1469AD [97]. More seriously, in 876AH/1471AD and 879AH/1474AD they attacked the city of Cairo and robbed the shops and civilians [98].
- The Bedouin also raided caravans and thus interrupted the lucrative long distance and international trade. They are reported to have cut the road between Cairo and Qatya and even to have imposed high taxes on the traders and shops which were under their control. Indeed, travel in Egypt was

more secure during the Turkish period. Merchants could travel from Cairo to Aswan or other places without fear of Bedouin pillaging [100]. During the period under discussion, however, when the Mamluks' power weakened and the power of the Bedouin increased, the land route was not safe due to the Bedouin plundering the trade convoys [101].

- The River Nile was also unsafe as a trading route for merchants because of the Bedouin who attacked and plundered any ship or boat that sailed on the Nile without a guard. This made the merchants fearful of bringing their merchandise to Cairo [102] and the frequent pillaging of ships undermined domestic trade. The situation became worse when there was political unrest or rebellion in Cairo since the Bedouin took the opportunity to strengthen their power and robbed many ships [103]. According to Ibn @ajar al-'Asqalani (d.852AH/1449AD), the price of goods increased due to assaults by the Bedouin on the ships that brought grains and foodstuff from Upper Egypt [104]. During the period under review, the Bedouin continued to disrupt river trade and there is evidence that this happened a number of times in 873AH/1469AD [105].
- The local tribes also formed themselves into groups of thieves. In a situation of general instability they seized the opportunity to enter into the city and disrupt the economic activities. Thus, they looted the markets in Cairo and stole merchandise in shops and stores, Ibn Iyas (d.930AH/1524AD) reporting that such events occurred in 887AH/1482AD, 891AH/1486AD, 901AH/1495AD, 905AH/1499AD, 913AH/1507AD, 918AH/1512AD and 922AH/1517AD [106]. According to him, a group of thieves could consist of sometimes more than one hundred individuals, some on horses and others on foot, equipped with weapons such as crossbows and swords [107-108]. He adds that in many cases of theft the authorities failed to identify those involved and no arrests were made [109-114]. The inevitable effect of the unrest caused by these thieves was an increase in the prices of goods and the disruption of trading activities.

CONCLUSION

During the period under review, the Bedouin tribes in Egypt threatened Mamluk politics and undermined its economy. They were occasionally so powerful that some sultans were unable to counter them by force and were

therefore obliged to open negotiations with them. Their marauding increased during the period under discussion due to the inability of the sultans to control them. As the government's internal troubles increased, the Bedouin tribes intensified their disturbances, affected many areas of the economy and weakened Mamluk sources of revenue by disrupting the economic activities of local inhabitants. With no apparent concern for the regime's responses, they disturbed the grain supplies and seized a considerable quantity of local crop yields from some of Egypt's wealthiest districts. They also moved all over the fertile central districts, disrupting husbandry and trade, looting riverboats and launching attacks on the capital itself. The cost of the military campaigns which were sent to crush them were also detrimental to Mamluk economy.

¹ There are many Bedouin tribes in Egypt. During the period of Ottoman Egypt (922-1213AH/1517-1798AD), there were about forty-five settled tribes spread all over both Upper and Lower Egypt.

² According to Jonathan P. Berkey, those Bedouins who settled in agricultural or even urban areas engaged in a process of 'opportunistic adaptation' rather than true sedentarisation, taking advantage of temporary conditions which drew them from their desert home. Sato Tsugitaka, however, said that it would probably be more appropriate to consider the life-style of the 'Urban' as varying in reality from cattle breeding to agriculture.

³ In Islamic history the word *Mamluk* indicates a slave, more specifically a white slave, who was employed in the military establishment. In the Ayyubid kingdom, while the Mamluks initially served as soldiers within the army they later went on to accede to the throne and to appoint themselves as sultans. For more than two hundred and fifty years they ruled Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Palestine. Mamluk rule can be divided into two periods. The first is from 648AH/1250AD until 783AH/1381AD and is known as the Turkish Mamluk period. The second extends from 784AH/1382AD until 922AH/1517AD and is known as the Circassian Mamluk period. The Mamluk kingdom reached its zenith under the Turkish sultans and then fell into a prolonged phase of deterioration under the Circassians. Between 872AH/1468AD and 922AH/1517AD, the period under consideration, seven individuals were installed as sultans. Two of these (al-Ashraf Qaytbay and Qansuh al-Ghawri) ruled for a combined total of forty-four years while the remaining five (al-Nasir Muhammad, al-Zahir Qansuh, al-Ashraf Janbalat, al-'Adil Tumanbay and al-Ashraf Tumanbay) reigned for a total of only five years.

Indeed, there was a good deal of political turmoil during the reign of the latter five sultans, while even under the rule of two longest reigning sultans there were internal and external problems.

⁴ For example, Sultan al-Zahir Baybars (d.676AH/1277AD) invited the amirs of the Bedouin, gave them *Iqta's* and charged them with guarding the roads of the Mamluk sultanate up to the borders of Iraq.

⁵ Those who abandoned 'Ali in the battle of Siffin, who reject both Shi'ism and Sunnism.

⁶ These Bedouin tribes continuously created havoc in Lower Egypt especially in the province of al-Sharqiyya. Sometimes they even entered the city of Cairo.

⁷ The area of these tribes was Upper Egypt, although they occasionally caused disruptions in the vicinity of Cairo.

⁸ The size of the expeditions against the rebellious Bedouin varied between 100 (or 150) and 500 men, very rarely reaching 600. However, this uprising of the Bedouin reached such massive proportions that the sultan decided to send against them a military expedition of 2,000 *Mamluk Sultaniyya*.

⁹ Shah Suwar was the eighth ruler of the Dhu al-Ghadir dynasty and he threatened Mamluk supremacy shortly after the accession of Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay.

¹⁰ Azbak was one of the grand amirs during Qaytbay's reign and was appointed as *Atabak* (Marshal of the Army). He presided over most long-range military planning.

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