Boaz Shoshan

FĀṬIMID GRAIN POLICY AND THE POST OF THE MUḤTASIB

Students of Islamic history more or less agree that the Fāṭimid regime conducted what may be loosely termed a liberal economic policy, and that the rulers of tenth- to twelfth-century Egypt intervened in the Egyptian economy to a minimal degree. Goitein, maintaining that the Fāṭimid period "was one of relative tolerance and liberalism, if compared with the preceding and, in particular, the following periods," also stresses the "comparatively little interference by the [Fāṭimid] governments in the trade of their subjects."1 Ashtor tells us that "a striking feature of the Fāṭimid regime was freedom of enterprise," and that "all sectors of economic life were free—crafts, industry and trade."2 Staffa asserts that "the [Fāṭimid] government made no attempt to impose strict control over the economy."3 It may be suspected that the notion of Fāṭimid "liberalism," as opposed, say, to Ayyūbid or Mamluk "conservatism,"4 had helped some decades ago to mold the thesis (now generally discarded) that the origins of guilds and professional organizations in the Islamic Near East are to be sought in the Fāṭimid state.5

We must beware, of course, of the serious limits of generalities. Given the nature of our information, and especially that which is scattered in Arabic chronicles of the period, a detailed reconstruction of Fāṭimid principles of economic conduct is very difficult. Conclusions are bound to be based more on the silence of the sources than on direct evidence, more on impressions than on hard facts. Even the many Geniza documents, our main source for studying the Egyptian economy of the period, seem to deal only cursorily with the question of Fāṭimid involvement. But they certainly teach us that an unqualified characterization of Fāṭimid economic policy is impossible. So Goitein rightly refrains from unequivocal conclusions, since what emerges from the documents is that elements of supervision, guidance, protection, interference, or oppression were present, but within reasonable limits, depending on the place, the specific ruler and the historical circumstances.6

Furthermore, taking the sector of commerce, the one we know best for the economy of medieval Egypt, it seems difficult to make a distinction between the policies of the "liberal" Fāṭimids and the "conservative" Ayyūbids. Truly, the former contributed to the revival of the Mediterranean trade in the "high" Middle Ages by allowing European merchants a foothold in the Levant. Yet the little we know of the Ayyūbid attitude toward the commercial sector does
not imply a marked difference. Goitein relies on the Geniza papers to argue that despite the "spirit of mounting religious strictness, if not intolerance" prevailing in the Ayyûbid state, "much of the mundane and liberal attitudes of the two preceding centuries still prevailed." We should also keep in mind that establishing state monopolies through the Office of Commerce (matjar) was, after all, a Fāṭimid invention. It was during the reign of the Fāṭimid al-Munstansîr (427/1036–487/1094) that the creation of a matjar was suggested. Its purpose was to enable the state to materialize its right of preemption on incoming timber, iron, lead, soap, honey, and other goods. We also learn from a number of Geniza letters of the Fāṭimid government’s prerogatives to take possession of commodities against the will of the merchants carrying them.

On Fāṭimid industry we know less than on trade. Scholars have stressed the existence of flourishing private industries, notably textile and sugar, side by side with state factories, and have made the logical connection between the prosperity of these Egyptian industries and Fāṭimid leniency. It has been argued that the Fāṭimids adhered to the "principle of free enterprise," that is the abstention from establishing industrial monopolies. These observations may be valid. Yet we need to know more on the relative share of the so-called Egyptian bourgeoisie in the industrial sector of the period to be able to go beyond mere generalizations.

There is finally another point. It seems to me justified to argue that the specific features of each of Egypt’s economic sectors may have conditioned Fāṭimid as well as other regimes’ attitudes toward this or that sector of the Egyptian economy. Perhaps it is more meaningful to speak of a number of policies instead of one, since a policy as regards one area of economic activity could not be entirely applicable as regards another. To put it somewhat differently, what I wish to suggest is that concerning at least one area, that of food provision, there was no essential difference of policy between the "liberal" Fāṭimids and the "conservative" Mamluks.

Elsewhere I have attempted to show that in the Mamluk state the availability of food, grain in particular, in Egyptian urban centers (unfortunately only Cairo can be examined in this respect), all the time and at reasonable prices, was of major concern to both the Egyptian people and the Mamluk regime. This certainly applies to many other regimes, and the Fāṭimid is no exception. Now it appears that the necessary conditions for the proper functioning of Egypt’s system of grain supply, such as the annual flood of the Nile, the seasonal shipping of grain to Cairo from Upper Egypt in the spring, the distribution of grain in the markets, have all joined in a structure (to use Braudel’s relevant concept), that is, a system changing little over long periods of time. Our task is then to show that the technical and sociopolitical problems which were part of that system, as well as the means adopted by the Fāṭimid administration for solving them, were quite similar to what we find in the later medieval period.

To be sure, grain supply is not among the more carefully treated topics in Fāṭimid sources. Yet there is little doubt concerning at least two facts. First, the Fāṭimid regime did impose some control over the grain market, although Ashtor may be generally right in stating that such control was maintained only
“to guarantee the supply of wheat to big towns.” Second, contrary to some scholarly opinions that the office of “market inspector” (muhtasib) did not exist in the Fātimid administration, there is interesting material on the muhtasib’s role in the grain business.

In traditionally as centralized a country as Egypt, where state granaries were an important institution since Pharaonic times, an expected measure of dealing with the sensitive problem of grain supply could be a monopolization by the regime of grain provision. We know of such measures in the days of the Mamluk Barsbāy (825/1422–841/1438), the notorious “monopolizer.” But Fātimid caliphs did not avoid similar policies. Thus in 415/1024 al-Zāhīr (411/1021–427/1036) seized all ships loaded with grain (probably from Upper Egypt) and transferred them from the port of al-Maqs to his palace. We are also informed that the Fātimid policy, at least sometime before the mid-eleventh century, was to buy each year grain in the value of 100,000 dinars and turn it into a source of profit as an item dealt by the matjar. Only upon the qādī’s advice in 444/1052–1053 was grain replaced by other items such as timber and iron. Again, in a brief note about al-‘Ādīd’s reign (555/1160–567/1171) the historian al-Maqrizī states that the Fātimid caliph monopolized the grain business. Given the deficient information it is impossible to decide whether such a policy was intended to help the Egyptian people or merely to promote the rulers’ interests and bring them financial gain. For we learn from the reports on both al-Zāhīr and al-‘Ādīd that their acts caused a price increase.

Be that as it may, grain shortage and period of high prices were not only a more excusable alibi for governmental intervention in the grain business but, one may argue, precisely the circumstances on which the authorities had the duty to ease the people’s suffering. The Fātimids, exactly like the Mamluks several centuries later, could not have been blind to their responsibility toward their hungry subjects. Here, unlike the sectors of commerce or industry, the question of life and death was much more immediate and apparent. So there was an urgent need to satisfy public demand and thus preserve order and stability.

As one would expect, the contemporary writings on the Fātimid period do not abound with descriptions of Cairo’s crowds in a time of hunger. Yet we may get a sense of their behavior from a few relatively detailed accounts of years of shortage. In 398/1008 bread was expensive, so the people raised their voices about its scarcity and low quality. They also made a symbolic gesture and sent the caliph al-Hākim a loaf of bread. In 414/1023 the flood of the Nile was insufficient and, as a result, the people of Cairo turned turbulent. Carrying Qurans they assembled near the Muqattam Hill (al-jabal) to pray for a better flood. Then they returned to Cairo and crowded in the markets to buy grain which could be obtained only surreptitiously. The following year, possibly one of the most difficult under Fātimid rule, was a time of plague and famine. Many people, especially the poor, died of hunger. As the caliph al-Zāhīr was riding in Fustāt (madīnat Misr) the inhabitants there complained bitterly about the grain shortage. Upon arriving at the palace, al-Zāhīr was even cursed by one ‘Abdallāh Muhammad b. Jaysh b. Samsām al-Kutāmī who, our source
tells us, was insane. The latter was punished, yet the general unrest had to be diffused somehow, as grain prices kept mounting. In addition, the muhtasib appears to have taken a counterproductive measure, and for some reason listed one hundred and fifty granaries and sealed them (*khatama 'alayha*). So he was reprimanded by the caliph and, next, grain was sold from granaries to the millers for a fixed price. The latter were instructed not to sell their products above a fixed price as well. Later in the same year about 2,000 Sudanese troops of the Fātimid army, complaining about hunger, pillaged houses, stores, and grain near the dock of the Nile (*sāhil*). Their riot resulted in a clash between them and the authorities who, this time, were also supported by the public in the struggle against the common antagonist.

The sale of grain owned by the state directly to millers, apparently to prevent hoarding and speculation by private people, appears as a measure taken by the Fātimid regime during a few occasions of shortage. Looking at things from a somewhat different perspective, millers and bakers, being considered a key element in the marketing of grain and bread, were at times held responsible by the authorities for a price increase or failures in supply. On occasions they were even punished for that. Incidentally, according to al-Maqrīzī, at least around the middle of the eleventh century, bread sellers or bakers (*khabbūtun*) were organized under their own "Head of Profession" (*'arif*).

To combat price increase in a time of shortage the Fātimid administration at times imposed price control. Like the Mamluks later, however, it faced serious problems when trying to carry out such a policy. Since price control disfavored various groups in the market, they opposed the government on that issue and succeeded, at least occasionally, to force it to cancel its plans. We have one detailed account of the power struggle between the two camps. In 415/1024 the muhtasib Baqi "the Black" (*al-khādir al-aswad*), who was also appointed prefect of both Cairo and Fustāt (*shurṭatayn*), decided to fix the price of both the poor (*khushkār*) and fine (*huwwārī*) bread. To this millers and bakers reacted by closing their mills and shops, aggravating the already existing shortage. Consequently, Baqi was replaced, enjoying his office only a single day. His successor announced that only bread sold directly from ovens (*alladhi yubūtū fil-afrān*) would have a fixed price, the rest being sold at a market price. The result was that bread reappeared in the markets.

Another measure of Fātimid control in periods of shortage was the forcing of grain owners and brokers (*samāṣira*) to sell their grain to the administration, or to supervise the sale of grain in the markets. There is one interesting report in our sources about the methods used by grain merchants in conducting their business. In 446/1054–55, as the Nile was low and prices were rocketing, merchants concluded agreements with the peasants, the latter being under pressure to pay their taxes to the *diwān*. According to that agreement the merchants paid for the right of harvest later in the year, planning to make profits then. The powerful vizier al-Yāzūrī intervened, however, and he himself bought the grain from the merchants. He then stored it in the state granaries and sold it to the hungry people. He saw that both Cairo and Fustāt received the grain
needed to feed their population (1,000 tillis, or about 67.5 tons per day according to our source), and also delivered bread to the khabbâzûn.36

From this last report, as well as from a number of others, we learn that not only measures of control characterized Fatimid grain policy in times of shortage. Controlling the state granaries Fatimid caliphs, like the later Mamluk sultans, opened their storages and sold grain to their subjects at lower prices. Thus, in 516/1122–23, 2,000 irdabbs (about 140 ton) were distributed among the needy.37 In 524/1130 the powerful vizier Abû ‘Ali Ahmad b. al-Afdal sold hundreds of thousands of irdabbs from the central granaries.38 Again in 532/1137–38, another difficult year, caliph al-Ḫâfîzh ordered to open the granaries and sell grain for reasonable prices. Yet the vizier, who led an opposition against him, did not follow the word.39

We now turn to the Fatimid muhtasib, whose existence has been known thus far mainly through al-Qalqashandî’s general report on the Fatimid administration.40 Thanks to more concrete information in al-Maqrîzî’s Ittī‘az al-hunafî, as well as his Iqṭâ‘at al-umma, and thanks to detailed accounts in Musabbiḥî’s Akhbâr Miṣr,41 we are able to appreciate much better the muhtasib’s actual role in the period under consideration. To start with, a muhtasib is reported to have functioned in Egypt as early as 358/969, that is, the year in which Cairo was founded.42 Although, for unclear reasons, the post is mostly mentioned during the first fifty years or so of Fatimid rule, we learn about its existence around the mid-eleventh century and also in the year 509/1115–16.43 There is no doubt that the term “muhtasib” was not used by al-Maqrîzî anachronistically. First, he himself served for some time as a muhtasib in the Mamluk administration,44 so it is hard to believe that he might have used the term inappropriately. Second, from what we have already seen above about the Fatimid muhtasib, and from what will be added shortly, it may be concluded that the official appointed to the hisba in the discussed period was charged with some of the “classical” duties of the post,45 as well as with those carried by muhtasibs in the post-Fatimid period.46

The Fatimid muhtasib was assisted by a‘wân or nuwwâb stationed in the markets, while he himself sat daily in one of Cairo’s main mosques or in his headquarters (majlis al-hisba).47 He and his assistants were entitled, at least from time to time, to collect special fees (mukûs),48 or to receive the post on the basis of tax-farming (damân).49 Appointments of muhtasibs were decreed officially,50 and celebrated in public.51 At times the muhtasib also combined the job of a qâḍî or “Supervisor of the Mint.” Its noteworthy in this respect that following the execution of the qâḍî al-Fâriqi in 405/1014–15, no qâḍî was appointed in Cairo for several months, and the muhtasib, together with another official, took over the post during that period.53 Other muhtasibs combined the job with that of prefect or wâli.54 One particular muhtasib, Ibn Abî Najda, was of unusual background: a vegetable seller (baqqâl) who climbed the social ladder only to be executed in 391/1000 for mismanaging the job.55 At the other end of the social pyramid we find the famous vizier Ibn Killis assuming, among the many responsibilities he had, also the hisba.56 Even the enigmatic caliph al-Ḫâkim who, as we know, was at a certain phase of his reign terribly con-
cerned with the piety of his subjects, took once upon himself the hisba, the foremost duty of which was after all "promoting good and repressing evil." 57

What were the main functions of the muhtasib during the Fāṭimid period? He appears to have been occupied mainly with executing the regime’s policies on grain provision. Thus in times of shortage he supervised the activities of grain merchants and brokers, and also inflicted punishment on suspected millers. 58 A number of "market inspectors" were in charge of the docks of the Nile near Cairo (sāhil, pl. sawāhil), where ships loaded with grain used to arrive from Upper Egypt. 59 Another task of the Fāṭimid muhtasib, already mentioned, was imposing price control in years of famine. 60 From a dialogue between caliph al-Zāhir and the muhtasib Dawwās(?) which took place in 415/1025 we learn about the regime’s approach to the role of the latter. Since that year was a time of shortage, Dawwās was reminded that upon receiving the job he had taken upon himself (hādhā khaṭṭuka bi damānika) to see that grain and bread were available. Since he did not keep his promise, the caliph accused him of "starving the people to death and destroying the country." 61

Although the subject here is the muhtasib’s role in the grain business, it should be noted that "market inspectors" are occasionally mentioned in the sources performing other duties. Thus in 362/972 the muhtasib dismissed for some reason a number of "bankers" (sayrīfa), probably working for the state. 62 In 415/1025, a year in which animals for work were scarce, the muhtasib Da‘ūd b. Ya’qūb al-Kutaymi ordered butchers (jazzārūn, harrāsūn) to stop the slaughtering of cattle. 63

To sum up: the involvement of the Fāṭimid regime in the Egyptian grain market, occasionally through the post of the muhtasib, may not preclude an overall Fāṭimid liberalism. Yet it certainly calls for a distinction among the different sectors of the contemporary economy. Grain supply, perhaps more than any other economic area, was of sociopolitical as much as of economic importance, and being an extremely sensitive business required unusual governmental interference. With respect to grain the relatively liberal Fāṭimids appear to have resorted to policies not essentially different from those used in the considerably more paternalistic Mamluk state.

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NOTES

Author’s note: The author is indebted to the reader for IJMES for helpful suggestions.


4"Liberal" and "conservative" in this context are, of course, dissimilar, one may say entirely the opposite, of what we mean by these terms in a modern political economy.

5The pioneering works by Louis Massignon and Bernard Lewis on the subject are well known.
8Goitein, A Mediterranean Society, I, 38.
10Goitein, A Mediterranean Society, I, 268.
12It appears from the Geniza that "the normal form of production was that of a small workshop run by a single craftsman, a family, a clan, or by a number of partners, usually not more than five." The "big" sugar plant, owned by the two Jewish brothers sons of Ibn al-‘Lebdî, appears to be an exception (see Goitein, A Mediterranean Society, I, 80-81, 367).
13See my "Grain Riots and the ‘Moral Economy’: Cairo, 1350-1517," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, X, 3 (Winter, 1980), 459-478. Information on this topic for other periods seems too scarce to allow a similar analysis.
15Bernard Lewis implies the absence of a muhtasib in the Fatimid state in his "The Islamic Guilds," Economic History Review, 8 (1957), 25. Goitein, relying on the silence of the Geniza, maintains that the office became prominent in Egypt only by the twelfth century, owing to Mesopotamian influence in Egypt and Syria during Ayyûbid times (see A Mediterranean Society, I, 270; Vol. II. The Community [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971], p. 369). According to Staffa the muhtasib "does not appear in Egypt . . . until the Ayyûbid period" (see Conquest and Fusion, 157 n. 2). Ashtor should be credited for first suggesting the existence of the post in the Fatimid period in his "L’administration urbaine en Syrie médiévale," Rivista degli Studi Orientali, 31 (1956), 83. The importance of the hisba in Fatimid bureaucracy is also discussed in Emile Tyan, Histoire de l’organisation judiciaire en pays d’Islam (Leiden, 1960), p. 624.
16For state granaries (ahrâ’, al-makhâţîn al-sulţâniyya) in Fatimid Egypt see al-Maqrîzî, Iṭṭi‘âz al-hunafâ‘ bi akhâhâr al-a’ima al-fâtîmiyyûn al-khulafâ‘ (Cairo, 1967-1973), II, 224; 226; III, 72, 86, 165-166, 341 (hereafter Iṭṭi‘âz). The Fatimid granaries are reported to have stored as much as 1 million irdabbs or 70,000 tons during the vizierate of the famous al-Afdîl (487/1094-515/1121) (see III, 72).
18Iṭṭi‘âz, II, 144.
19Or over 100,000 irdabbs, that is, over 7,000 tons, if we accept Ashtor’s calculation that the normal price of 100 kg of wheat at the beginning of the eleventh century was about 1 dinar (see Eliyahu Ashtor, Histoire des prix et des salaires dans l’Orient médiéval [Paris, 1969], p. 124).
20Iṭṭi‘âz, II, 225; Rabie, Financial System, 92.
21Iṭṭi‘âz, III, 244.
22Iṭṭi‘âz, II, 74.
23Ibid., pp. 134-135.
24His father Jaysh b. Samsâma was one of the first Fatimid governors of Damascus (see details in Ibn al-Qalsâni, History of Damascus [Leiden, 1908]).
25Iṭṭi‘âz, II, 164-165.
For 386/996 see Itti‘āz, I, 291. For 395/1004–5 see al-Maqrizi Ighathat al-umma bi kashf al-ghumma (Cairo, 1957), p. 16 (hereafter Ighāthat). For 446/1054–5 see Itti‘āz, II, 226. See also Ighāthat, p. 28.

For 359/970 see Itti‘āz, I, 120; Ighāthat, p. 13. For 398/1007 see Itti‘āz, II, 71; Ighāthat, p. 16. In 415/1025 several bakers were punished for mixing flour with orgil (see Itti‘āz, II, 166).

There is uncertainty about the precise meaning of the term khabbāz. Lapidus, writing about the Mamluk period makes a distinction between farrān and khabbāz. The former was a baker or, literally, an oven owner or operator, who received dough from the people and baked bread but did not sell it. The khabbāz baked bread and sold it as well (see Ira M. Lapidus, “The Grain Economy of Mamluk Egypt,” Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, 12 [1969], 10–11). A remark in a source for the Mamluk period suggests that the khabbāz was a shopkeeper specializing in the sale of bread who received bread from bakeries (see Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī, Inbā‘ al-ghumr bi anbā‘ al-‘umr, Vol. III [Cairo, 1973], p. 70).

For 359/969–70 see Itti‘āz, I, 120, 122; Ighāthat, pp. 13–14. For 398/1007–8 see Ighāthat, p. 18. For the later Fatimid period see Ighāthat, pp. 27–28. See also Bianquis, “Une crise frumentaire,” p. 91.

For the Mamluk period see my “Grain Riots,” p. 466.


For another case in the same year see I, 165. For 397/1006 see ibid., II, 69; Ighāthat, pp. 15–16; Bianquis, “Une crise frumentaire,” p. 81.

For 395/969–70 see Itti‘āz, I, 120, 122; Ighāthat, pp. 13–14. For 398/1007–8 see Ighāthat, p. 18. For the later Fatimid period see Ighāthat, pp. 27–28. See also Bianquis, “Une crise frumentaire,” p. 91.

For the tillis see Ashtor, Histoire des prix, p. 124 n. 1.


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Cl. Cahen and M. Talbi (“Hisba”, E.I., s.v.) state that the muhtasib checked prices, although he did not normally have the power to fix them. He reprimanded and even punished merchants who charged exorbitant prices, although he did not normally have the power to fix them. He reprimanded and even punished merchants who charged exorbitant prices, particularly in periods of scarcity. He also dealt severely with hoarding.

For the Mamluk muhtasib see my “Grain Riots,” pp. 466, 470–474.

For 395/969–70 see Itti‘āz, I, 277; II, 135; III, 342; Subh al-a‘sha, III, 487.

For 395/969–70 see Itti‘āz, I, 277; II, 96.


For 395/969–70 see Itti‘āz, I, 117, 122; Ighāthat, pp. 13–14.

For 395/969–70 see Itti‘āz, II, 225; III, 55.


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58For examples, in the year 359/969-70 see Ittī‘āz, I. 120, 122. For 395/1004-5 see Ighāthat, p. 16.

59For 383/994-5 see Ittī‘āz, I. 277; for 390/1000 see II, 31; for 414/1023 see II, 135.

60In addition to references cited in n. 33 above see also Ittī‘āz, II, 135.


62Ibid., I, 132. Bankers working in dār al-sarf, the Exchange of Fustāt, had a semiofficial status (see Goitein, A Mediterranean Society, I, 238).

63Ittī‘āz, II, 149–150.