

Alp Arslan and the Rise of the Seljuk Empire during His Reign

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Abstract

This article reveals key pages in the history of the great Seljuk state, particularly its transformation into a vast empire and the role played by Sultan Alp Arslan in this process. The article also analyzes Alp Arslan's qualities as a great politician who supported science and religion, as well as his abilities as a skilled military strategist and a talented commander.

Keywords: Seljuks, Byzantium, West, khutba, malik, sultan, tribute (khiroj), madrasa, reform, expedition, Europe.

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Throughout history, many dynasties and states have ruled the world. Some developed and ruled for long periods, playing important roles in global politics, while others quickly fell into disintegration and disappeared. By the medieval period, many dynasties began to form in the East, especially in Asia. One of these dynasties was the Seljuks. This state, which held high prestige in its time, significantly influenced not only the East but also the West. Moreover, in the territories they conquered, the Seljuks not only formed feudal relations but also brought considerable changes to the social and cultural lives of the people.

The Seljuk state ruled from 1038 to 1308. The founder of this state is considered to be Sultan Muhammad Tughril Beg (1038–1062). At the peak of its power, the empire encompassed nearly all of Central Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, the South Caucasus, and parts of Western and Asia Minor. [1]

Like all sultans who came to power, Tughril Beg carried out active military campaigns during his rule. His brother Chaghri Beg, the governor of Khorasan, was a major pillar of his reign. Together, the two Seljuk brothers conquered vast territories. In 1063, Sultan Tughril, the founder of the Seljuk state, passed away, and his nephew Alp Arslan, son of Chaghri Beg, was declared the new ruler. [2]

The development of the Seljuk Empire is directly associated with Muhammad Alp Arslan. Today, many historians remember Alp Arslan primarily for the famous Battle of Manzikert against Byzantium. The victory in that battle elevated the Seljuks' status not only in Asia but also in Europe. In reality, when Alp Arslan came to power, it was a politically complex time. Conflicts with both Byzantium and the Ghaznavids required a strong political strategy. In my opinion, for any state to become a powerful political force, its leader must implement a consistent and complex policy. Alp Arslan followed this path.

Despite several marriages, Sultan Tughril had no children, and he had designated his nephew, another son of Chaghri Beg named Sulayman, as his heir. Before Alp Arslan ascended the throne, he was supported by Vizier Kunduri, who aimed to establish a regency through Sulayman's accession. At this time, Alp Arslan began his journey from Khorasan to claim power. [3] After several struggles, he unified the country under his authority, launching continuous military campaigns that expanded the empire's territory.

Alp Arslan was born in 1029. While it is unclear who gave him his name, the Turkish word "Alp" means "hero" or "brave," and "Arslan" means "lion," symbolizing power and strength. Perhaps he was named with the hope that he would be a brave youth leading the nation through darkness into light. The addition of "Muhammad" to his name likely reflected his Islamic faith and devotion to the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.v). [4] Growing up observing his father Chaghri Beg and uncle Tughril's efforts to build the empire during a challenging period provided a strong foundation for his future leadership.

Sources describe Alp Arslan as tall, bearded, and intimidating. He was an expert archer, as well as a just and brave ruler. For instance, during Ramadan, he distributed 15,000 gold coins to the poor and maintained lists of those in need. He was eloquent, courageous, patient, compassionate, honest, and even respected his enemies. He valued the opinions of experienced advisors and embodied the ideal qualities of a ruler. [5]

As mentioned earlier, the name Alp Arslan includes the Islamic name "Muhammad," likely granted by the Abbasid Caliphate. Seljuk rulers adopted these names upon gaining power, indicating the Caliphate's religious and symbolic influence. For example, Tughril was given "Muhammad," Chaghri was "Dawud," and Sanjar was "Ahmad." This tradition highlights the political authority the Caliphate held over the Muslim world at the time.

After coming to power, Alp Arslan undertook military campaigns to expand the empire's borders. He first negotiated with the Abbasid Caliphate to legitimize his rule. Having khutbas read and coins minted in his name solidified his position as the official Seljuk sultan.

The Seljuks pursued a defensive strategy in the East and an offensive one in the West. Alp Arslan continued his uncle's policy.[6] Initially, the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt was a primary concern in the West, but later the Byzantine Empire became the main focus. Unlike his predecessor, Alp Arslan achieved concrete results in the West. He also conducted effective policies in the East, benefiting from earlier treaties made by Tughril and Chaghri.

Seljuk governance was directly led by the sultan but was not as absolute as in Byzantium or China. The sultan was a rank above the maliks, amirs, and beks, and was addressed as "Sultan al-Azam." [7] With Alp Arslan's rise to power, the previous dual rulership ended, consolidating authority under a single ruler. He surrounded himself with trusted advisors, including his chief minister Nizam al-Mulk, whose work "Siyasatnama" remains an important historical source.

Each Seljuk ruler held specific titles. Tughril, Alp Arslan, and Malik Shah used the title "al-Sultan al-Mu'azzam Shahanshah" on coins. Some sources mention Alp Arslan being referred to simply as "al-Sultan al-A'zam." [8]

Initially, the Seljuks adopted administrative methods from previous Turkic states like the Qarakhanids and Ghaznavids.[9] During Tughril and Alp Arslan's rule, Oghuz customs were preserved, though under Malik Shah these practices gave way to Persian models. Sultan Sanjar, however, remained strongly connected to Oghuz traditions.[10]

Great states achieve dominance through extensive military campaigns and territorial expansion. This was true for the Seljuks under Alp Arslan, who emphasized national unity and loyalty in his military ranks. He famously told his commanders that "it is easy to pluck a single horse's hair, but impossible to pluck many at once," emphasizing unity.[11]

Alp Arslan was a fair and conscientious ruler. He only collected tribute (khiroj) and split it into two

payments to ease the burden. During a campaign in Diyarbakir, when the local governor Nasr ibn Marwan presented him with 100,000 dinars and gifts, Alp Arslan ordered the money returned to the people upon learning it was forcibly collected. [12]

His domestic policies were also people-oriented, aiming to improve public welfare. Cultural development, particularly in education, was another focus. His reign marked a turning point in Seljuk cultural life. The greatest achievement in this field was the construction of madrasas—higher education institutions comparable to modern universities. Unlike earlier states where madrasas were built by private individuals, the Seljuk rulers and officials initiated their construction. There is some debate on whether madrasas under Alp Arslan were state-run or private.[13] Compared to Europe, where universities began emerging in the 12th century, the Seljuks were already building them in the 11th century, making this a clear sign of the East's cultural advancement.

Conclusion. In conclusion, in my opinion, the reign of Sultan Muhammad Alp Arslan served as the foundation for the development of the Seljuk Empire. During his rule, the implementation of broad internal and external reforms and the simultaneous ability to defend the state were of particular importance. Given the political instability of the 11th century, it was necessary to defend the state and resist forces that were ready to undermine the Seljuks' position.

Especially during this period, the changing political situation in Europe and the gradual initiation of military expeditions against Eastern cities and states further complicated matters. Although the formal Crusades did not begin during Alp Arslan's reign, the West's initial blows were later received by his successors. The idea behind the Crusades—essentially a “struggle of the cross against the crescent,” or the Christians' war against Muslims—officially began in 1096, but covert preparations had started much earlier. In fact, the Crusades were a pre-planned campaign, and the initial attacks coincided with the reign of Alp Arslan. The Byzantine Empire began its military actions against the Seljuks during his time by seizing small fortresses.

Thus, in this complex political environment, Sultan Alp Arslan did not spare his life for the sake of his state and the peace of his people. Undoubtedly, his efforts did not go in vain—his policies laid the groundwork for the Seljuks' future strength and success.

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