

Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi and the Crusaders

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Abstract

Salah al-Din lived in a spiritual and strategic environment which he took forward. At al-Adib and Nur al-Din's death, he rose to power. Yet, diplomatic arrangements to keep truce with the Franks could not be sustained indefinitely. The occasion to wage war presented itself which led to the victory of Hattin. His main objective was Jerusalem. As the Hattin campaign absorbed the majority of the Frankish troops and there was no prospect of relief, time to surrender Jerusalem arrived. Jerusalem back in Muslim hands, the holy sites needed restoration. To consolidate his hold on the Near East, Salah al-Din had to conquer the remaining Frankish lands. Priority was the port of Tyre, but this could not be achieved. Exhaustion due to years of war, continuous diplomatic encounters and tests of strengths and weaknesses exhausted Salah al-Din who died age 56. Yet, questions are still to be viewed holistically and cross-culturally.

Keywords: Faith; diplomacy; mercy; loyalty; generosity; justice.

1. Introduction

I have often wondered how Salah al-Din could gather different leaders in the 12th century disrupted states, to fight the Franks and conquer Jerusalem again. Different leaders, different objectives, different personalities and the fear that the new leader, Salah al-Din, would then overcome other states and other leaders once Jerusalem is conquered. One major denominator seemed to be the bases of Salah al-Din objectives: the reconquest of the third holy lieu of Islam, Jerusalem. And yet, Jerusalem is the holy city for three monotheistic religions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. What underlay the Sultan success than religion to achieve his goal were military and political terms, generosity and perhaps luck. In 1163, Commander Nur al-Din (ruler of Aleppo, Damascus and Mosul) was thrashed by the Franks at Krak des Chevaliers, the finest of all crusaders' castles. It was a profound shock to the leader who was ousted in open battle. This loss seemed to have had a cathartic effect on the Emir and prompted to sharpen his focus on the jihad in its internal and external forms.

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Later, ibn-Adīm, an Aleppo chronicler, reported that a man asked Nur al-Dīn how he would succeed when in his camp, one could find bottles of alcohol, hear the tambourine and the flute played and see other objects abhorred by God. Nur al-Dīn performed then penance and discarded luxurious clothing for coarse materials, more appropriate image for the jihad. He abolished practices that were contrary to divine law and punished immoral behavior. This was the spiritual and strategic environment that Salah al-Dīn grew up in, which he was able to take forward. Over the next decade Nur al-Dīn did much to energize the spiritual spirit of the Sunni, laying the ground of the holy war for Salah al-Dīn. With the defeat of the Second Crusade, Muslim hope of regaining Jerusalem became plausible. Salah al-Dīn as a youth was with the close circle of Nur al-Dīn. Such a position gave him the vantage point to absorb the impetus of the jihad and to watch the calculation and complexities of Nur al-Dīn high-level diplomacy. Religious texts interpreted on four themes: the importance of the obligation of jihad to God and his messenger Muhammad, the punishments for those who do not carry out these obligations; the rewards for those who participate in and support the jihad and the requirements that a good jihad fighters must fulfil. This was Salah al-Dīn faith which surrounded him. Besides the Sultan's faith, military terms were needed. He acquired control of Egypt which generated strategic opportunities and challenges. The eastern border with the Franks was limited by the Sinai Peninsula, leaving just a couple of land routes. By coincidence, al-Adīb, last of the Shi'ite Fatimid caliphs, became seriously ill, his ability to exercise power was limited and the near extinction of the Fatimid army emphasized his impotence. At al-Adīb's death in 1171, Sunni Islam became the leading power in Egypt. Hence, the way lay open for Salah al-Dīn to establish his position, that of his family and the Sunnis. Yet, his independence from Nur al-Dīn influence was to be attained. Salah al-Dīn managed to evade a direct confrontation with the former, but the Syrian ruler remained suspicious of the Ayyubids, in spite of the fact that annual tribute was part of Salah al-Dīn's demonstration of loyalty. In 1174, Nur al-Dīn fell seriously ill and a few days later he died. The Sultan's rise to power began to draw the attention on international level.

In 1172, within the context of tensions between Emperor Frederick Barbarossa of Germany, the papacy, the rulers of Norman Sicily and the Byzantine Empire, the Germans sent envoys to Cairo offering friendship. The Sultan's response brought a series of gifts to the imperial court. By early 1187, the Sultan had spent a decade proclaiming his desire to liberate Jerusalem. He then had the men and the resources of Egypt, Syria and part of the Jazira at his disposal and diplomatic arrangements in place to prevent unwanted distraction that could not be sustained indefinitely. In fact, Prince Reynald's attack on the trade caravan violated the truce which provided the Sultan with a cause for war.

Military tactics and expertise were also essential in the conquest of Jerusalem. Some of these terms were used in the battle of Hattin. Although the consensus among the crusaders' nobles and the masters of the Military Orders was not to fight, Gerard Ridefort decided otherwise, for he did not trust the advice of Count Raymond. So war was declared under the torrid sun of July. It was a Frankish army that stretched out over a kilometer in length. Imad al-Dīn wrote, "They looked like mountains on the march, like seas boiling over, as waves clash" [1]. The Sultan's men were arranged in three groups, with Salah al-Dīn in the center, Taqi al-Dīn, his nephew, commanding the right wing and the left under the experienced warrior Keukburi, Lord of Harran. Besides, the Sultan's logistical preparations were immense: 400 wagonloads of arrow, along with seventy camel-loads ready when needed. The Sultan had suffered enough defeats to know how dangerous the Franks could be, but now he

could witness the series of tactical errors that he had forced upon them. As pace of the Christian slowed, it became clear how badly they were struggling with the heat, the lack of water and the relentless bombardment of the Muslim archers. At night, the Sultan commanded fire to be lit. This delivered choking smoke towards the enemy, adding to their thirst and dragging down their morale. Playing oppressive loud music with drums and horns was part of warfare. Cries of 'God is great, there is no god but God' emphasized the conviction to the army while the presence of holy men added to the sense of expectation. The Sultan himself went among his troops encouraging the ranks and urging them to victory. The Franks were consumed by three types of worldly fire: the fire of flames, the fire of thirst and the fire of arrows. Yet, Raymond gathered a group of senior nobles and they plunged towards Taqi al-Din squadron. The sultan's nephew reacted with brilliant tactical awareness. He drifted his men aside, allowing the knights to pass through their position, then closed ranks. Taqi al-Din dexterity removed away the Frank's strongest troops at no cost. The bulk of the Christian army, showered with ceaseless volleys of arrow-fire coupled with the lack of water demoralized especially the infantry. This state of near total disarray was partly due to a poor discipline, untrained troops and weak leadership. As ibn al-Athir wrote, the Muslim vanguard shot arrows like swarms of locust and gaps in the Christian ranks began to appear. The demoralized Franks laid down their arms, sat on the ground and surrendered. The call went out to round up, captured Templars and Hospitallers with a reward of fifty Egyptian dinars for each one. Salah al-Din men stripped the shattered bodies of their armors and valuables and in the summer heat, the corpses putrefied. A couple of years later ibn al-Athir wrote, 'I passed by the sight of the battle and saw the ground covered with their bones, visible from afar, some of them heaped up and others scattered' (Phillips 2019:185). This was the victory of Hattin in 1187.

This victory toppled the balance of power in the Near East. But Jerusalem remained the primary goal. Yet the coastal cities and the ports were a source of great wealth, and if the Sultan intended to rule these lands, he needed to control the economy. Over seven weeks, he organized campaigns across the kingdom of Jerusalem. In terms of strategic and financial importance, Acre was the most desirable target. Two days march from Tiberias and the Sultan forces arrived at the Mediterranean coast on July 8. With no fighting men to defend its walls, Acre capitulated. Salah al-Din took pity on the inhabitants and promised them their lives. Most of the merchants had fled, which left the Sultan free to distribute their wealth. Sidon and Beirut soon fell too.

Salah al-Din reached Jerusalem in September 20, 1187. His ultimate goal was the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque. His troops set up camp around the Jaffa Gate and the north-west towards the Damascus Gate. A blast of trumpets accompanied by pounding drums and fierce chanting generated an atmosphere to intimidate the Christian inhabitants. Arrow-fire rained towards the walls causing heavy toll on the defenders. Hospital of St. John, the greatest hospital in Latin Christendom, could hardly cope with the numbers of wounded. The Hattin campaign had absorbed the vast majority of the Frankish troops. After the Sultan's reconnaissance, the Muslims decided to move away from strongly fortified area around the Tower of David and the Jaffa Gate to set up camp to the east and north-eastern side of the city. As the defenders saw their enemy breaking their tents, they thought the enemies had given up, only to realize that it was a strategic move, not a retreat. Relentless bombardment from the Sultan trebuchets and Greek-fire, drove the defenders from the walls. Cavalry forces prevented sorties by the Franks which allowed sappers to fill in the ditch and bring a section of the fortifications to the verge of collapse. The scale of the defeat of Hattin meant there was no prospect of a relief army coming

to rescue. Morale among the Franks crumpled and they realized that it was time to start surrender negotiations. Some sources said that Salah al-Din wished to deal with Jerusalem the same way the Christians did when they took it from the Muslims 88 years ago, that is, inundate it with blood. However, the response was that the Dome of the Rock and al-Aksa Mosque will be demolished. The advantages of avoiding bloody conflict were self-evident, let alone the saving of Muslim lives and holy places. Also, the opportunity for financial gain, slaves and ransoms would enrich and continue to reward the troops in a way that corpses would not. The Muslim troops swarmed in and closed the gates to prevent anyone from escaping. Important Frankish nobles such as Balian, Patriarch Heraclinus and Queen Sibylla were identified and held. With the capture clearly established, the Sultan displayed mercy, especially towards women. Christian authors reported merciful examples later.

In al-Harawi's Discussion on the Stratagems of War commissioned either by Salah al-Din or his son al-Zahir Ghazi, one gets a strong guide towards merciful treatment of the defeated. There is an encouragement to use self-control, to be aware of the reputational boost that act of mercy can generate. Ultimately, mercy is a sign of authority, strength and power. Other sources indicated further acts of integrity and mercy. A western writer described Saphadin, Salah's brother, asking for 1000 prisoners and then freeing them. The legacy of Salah al-Din's actions at Jerusalem have echoed down the centuries in contrast with the stories of bloodbath of 1099 and sparing of thousands of Christian lives in 1187 stand to his credit.

The Sultan chose to remain in Jerusalem until the end of October. One source recorded that 22000 dinars had been raised from ransom, all of which the Sultan distributed to the religious men and his emirs, and they in turn gave it to the troops. Once again, his generosity was extraordinary and the conquest of Jerusalem gave him the chance to exercise patronage on an immense scale. Couldn't one see in the above narrative that beside his faith in the reconquest of Jerusalem, what underlay the sultan success to achieve his goal were military, diplomatic terms and generosity?

Jerusalem back in Muslim hands, the holy sites needed to be staffed and clerics and readers arrived in Jerusalem to take over important positions. A madrasa would help the long-term spiritual care of the city. The Sultan discussed the matter with his inner circle and they recommended the creation of colleges and hostels. An inscription, inside al-Aqsa Mosque, stated that the restoration took only 5 months, an indication how high a priority this was for the Sultan and the vast resources and manpower that he directed towards the work.

What about the Christian sacred places? The fate of the Holy Sepulcher provoked animated discussion. Salah al-Din had anticipated as such and kept the building closed for the first few days after the conquest to prevent random acts of violence. Some urged that the church should be destroyed, but the Sultan was not convinced, arguing that even if the building was erased, Christians would seek to worship and recover the place of crucifixion. He also chose not to convert it into a mosque. He noted that the caliph Omar had confirmed Christian possession in the 7th century. In fact, in 638 AD, when Omar ibn al-Khattab conquered Jerusalem, he assured the patriarch that the life and the belonging of the inhabitants would be respected. Then the caliph asked the Greek Patriarch to make him visit the sacred Christian lieux. As he was in the Holy Sepulcher, time for prayer was called. The caliph refused to pray in the Holy Sepulcher stating, 'If I do so, the Muslims would next appropriate the place saying, Omar prayed here'. He went outside and prayed. It is in that place that the

mosque in his name was built.

The Sultan gave also permission for 10 brothers to stay at the great Hospital of St. John and care for the sick. Jerusalem was settled down to the Muslim by late October. With the major task accomplished, the Sultan was well aware that he would have to confront new crusades from the West. To consolidate his hold on the Near East, he had to conquer the remaining Frankish lands. His next priority was the port of Tyre. But, caliph al-Nāsir of Baghdad was concerned about the political consequences of dealing with Salah al-Dīn. The former criticized the Sultan for using the title of al-Malik al-Nāsir, title borne by caliph al-Nāsir himself. In fact, the Ayyubid Empire was starting too formidable for Baghdad's liking. Al-Nāsir's thought were if the Franks were expelled or vanquished then the Ayyubids could turn their attention eastwards and impose their influence on the caliph. Yet, Salah al-Dīn indicated that he used the title al-Malik al-Nāsir for years, and reaffirmed his obedience to Baghdad. Yet, the siege of Tyre was primordial. After 6 weeks, the attack was delayed badly, and the leadership debated its next move. According to Baha' al-Dīn (chief biographer) many of the troops refused to fight, and the siege was lifted on January 3, 1188. Yet, the pilgrimage route to Mecca and Medina was safe, and other Frankish castles in the area such as Shanback (where defenders reportedly suffered blindness after running out of salt) and Petra capitulated. Then the road linking Damascus to Egypt was under control. However, there were times over the decades when the Ayyubid clan unity had fractured. For instance, Taqī al-Dīn (Salah's nephew) had put his own affairs ahead of his uncle when the needs of the Sultan were paramount.

Diplomatic encounters played their role in the Sultan's affairs. Negotiated peace was always a possibility, even if the terms fluctuated dramatically, depending on the rise and fall in each side's fortune. Also some of those meetings were used simply as a means of keeping dialogue as the well-known maxim, keep Moāwiyah's link. Other meetings were undertaken in a genuine hope of a resolution, but every encounter offered an opportunity to test opportunities strengths and weaknesses. Luck also played a role. In 1171, al-Adīb's death, led the power to the Sunnis and the Sultan's family. In 1174, Nur al-Dīn's death liberated him in his movements and influence. In 1190, the death of Frederick Barbarossa, assumed to have had a heart attack while bathing at the foot of Mount Taurus, avoided miraculously the German danger. In 1191, Count Philip of Flanders died of disease during his crusade. In 1192, Richard III, whose arrival with an enormous well trained cavalry and equipments, shook the morale of the Muslim army, left for home having not taken Jerusalem. A year earlier he was afflicted with a severe fever, possibly an infectious disease, and received messages of trouble in his kingdom. But, the well-formed diplomatic channels remained open, offering the prospect of a settlement away from the battlefield.

By 1192, the Sultan's physical health was bad and he was described as being emotionally exhausted. One year later, he showed signs of severe fatigue, lack of energy and his usual sharpness was absent. On March 4, 1193 Salah al-Dīn al-Ayyubi age 56 died and Imād al-Dīn wrote, 'With him died the hope of humanity' [2]. The funeral was extremely rapid with the body washed and shrouded for burial. The sultan's generosity had almost emptied his personal treasury and money had even to be borrowed to complete the burial arrangements.

2. Conclusion

It is the military, religious, political, diplomatic and generosity terms that made Salah al-Dīn al-Ayyubi a

successful admired figure and mythologized character in both East and West. Yet, one could argue about the objectives of the Crusaders. Was liberating Jerusalem from the Muslims the main objective? How was the geopolitical pinch in the European states? What about the turbulent state of the Papacy? Were Lords under the control of royalties in their states? Was there wealth in the Levant that diverted the aflame Crusaders from their religious zeal? If answers to these questions are attempted, perhaps a holistic view is comprehended and Salah al-Din's aims understood cross-culturally.

Yet, there are fundamental features to many aspiring rulers, regimes, and features that enemies can admire. They are cross-cultural qualities, transferable outside the structures of dynasties and beyond political and religious classes [3].

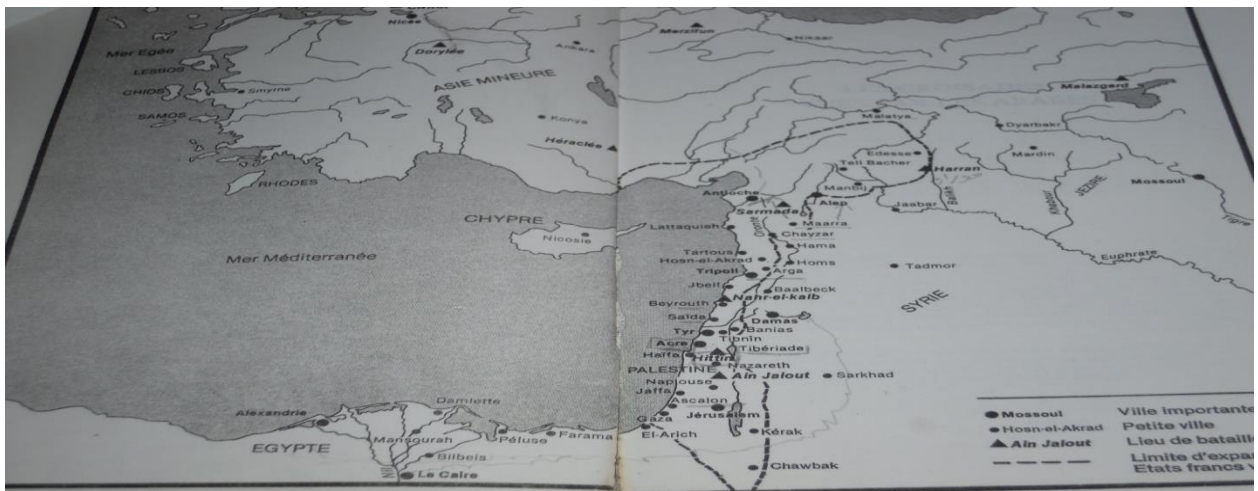


Figure 1: Map at the crusaders' time.

References

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