

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Salahuddin Ayyubi

Salahuddin (Saladin) and the Battle of Hittin

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A divided Islamic world offered feeble resistance to the Crusaders who consolidated their hold on the eastern Mediterranean and imposed their fiefdoms on the region. The Seljuks, preoccupied with defending their eastern flank against the Afghan Ghaznavids, had thinned out their western defenses. The pagan Turkish tribes across the Amu Darya on the northeastern frontiers were a constant menace. The advancing Crusaders received valuable assistance from the local Orthodox and Armenian communities. The Venetians provided transportation. Faced with a determined offensive, Tripoli surrendered in 1109. Beirut fell in 1110. Aleppo was besieged in 1111. Tyre succumbed in 1124. The warring Muslim parties did not take the Crusader invasion seriously at this stage. They considered the Christians to be just another group in the motley group of emirs, prelates and religious factions jostling for power in West Asia.

Meanwhile, the internal situation in Egypt went from bad to worse. Power had long ago slipped from the Fatimid Caliphs. The viziers had become the real power brokers. Notwithstanding the rout of the Egyptian army by the Crusaders and the loss of Jerusalem, al Afdal, the grand vizier was more interested in playing politics in Cairo than in recovering the lost territories. When the old Caliph Musta Ali died in 1101, al Afdal installed the Caliph's infant son Abu Ali on the throne and became the de-facto ruler of Egypt. But this did not sit well with Abu Ali. When he grew up, he had al Afdal murdered. In turn, Abu Ali himself was assassinated in 1121.

Anarchy took over Egypt. Abu Ali left no male heirs. His cousin Abul Maimun became the Caliph. But he was deposed by his own vizier, Ahmed and put in prison. Not to be outmaneuvered, Abul Maimun plotted from his prison cell and had Ahmed murdered. After Abul Maimun, his son Abu Mansur succeeded him. Abu Mansur was more interested in wine and women than in the affairs of state. His vizier Ibn Salar ran the administration but his own stepson Abbas murdered him and became the vizier.

The Fatimid Caliphs in Cairo had no power and became pawns in the hands of the viziers. And the institution of vizier was usurped by anyone who was ruthless and powerful. In 1154, Nasr, the son of vizier Abbas, assassinated Caliph Abu Mansur. The sisters of Abu Mansur discovered this act of murder and appealed to Ruzzik, the governor of Upper Egypt for help in punishing Nasr. They also appealed to the Franks in Palestine. Nasr ran for his life but was captured by the Franks and sent back to Cairo where he was nailed to a cross.

Egypt was like a ripe plum ready to be plucked. The Crusaders knew that control of Egypt would deal a devastating blow to the Islamic world. The local Maronite and Armenian communities would welcome them. From Egypt they could open land communications with the Christian communities in Ethiopia and command the trade routes to India. Several invasions of Egypt were launched. In 1118, the Crusaders landed in Damietta, ravaged that city and advanced towards Cairo. The Egyptians repelled the invaders but the resources consumed in defending their home turf prevented them from defending Palestine. The last Fatimid stronghold in Palestine, Ascalon, fell in 1153.

With Egypt in disarray and the Seljuks under increasing pressure from the Ghaznavids and the Turkish Kara Khitai tribes, Crusader rule in Jerusalem went unchallenged for almost a century. The task of defending against European military invasions had to be organized from northern Iraq and eastern Anatolia. Today, these are the Kurdish provinces of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Persia. Maudud, a Seljuk officer from Mosul, was the first to take up the challenge. In 1113, he defeated King Baldwin of Jerusalem in a series of skirmishes. But Fatimid assassins murdered Maudud in 1127. Another Turkish officer, Zengi, continued Maudud's work. Zengi was a first rate soldier, a man of righteousness, fairness and piety. He ruled with firm justice, making no distinction between a Turk and a non-Turk. In 1144, Zengi captured the city of Edessa. This provoked a new Crusade in which Emperor Conrad of Germany and Bernard of France took part. Zengi inflicted a crushing defeat on the invaders, forcing the Germans and the Franks to withdraw. But two events took place that delayed the task of expelling the Franks from Jerusalem. In 1141, the Seljuks suffered a major defeat from the pagan Turkoman Kara Khitai at the banks of the Amu Darya. In 1146, the Fatimid assassins murdered Zengi himself.

His son Nuruddin pursued Zengi's work with even greater vigor. A man of extraordinary ability, Nuruddin organized a systematic campaign to expel the Crusaders from West Asia. Nuruddin was a man of piety, bereft of prejudice, of noble disposition. The unsettled military conditions provided ample opportunities for capable persons and non-Turkish soldiers rose rapidly through the army. Among them were two officers, Ayyub and Shirkuh, the uncle of Salahuddin. Systematically, Nuruddin's officers brought all of northern Iraq, eastern Syria and eastern Anatolia under their control. Damascus was added in 1154. With the resources of these vast territories behind him, Nuruddin was ready to challenge the Crusaders in Palestine and fight for control of Egypt.

The key to Palestine lay in Egypt. As long as the Fatimids ruled Egypt, coordinated military action against the Crusader kingdoms was not possible. The race to Egypt was of great immediacy. In 1163, there were two rival viziers in Cairo. One of them invited the Franks to intervene in Egypt. The other appealed to Nuruddin. Nuruddin promptly dispatched Shirkuh to Cairo. In 1165 both the Seljuks and the Crusaders appeared in Egypt but neither was able to establish a base. Two years later Shirkuh returned to Egypt with his nephew Salahuddin. This time he was successful in establishing his authority in the Nile Delta. Mustadi, the last Fatimid Caliph was forced to appoint Shirkuh as his vizier. In 1169, Shirkuh died and his nephew Salahuddin was appointed in his place.

Salahuddin was the man of the hour. He fought off repeated attacks by the Crusaders on Egypt, put down revolts within the army and gave Egypt respite from incessant civil war. Despite three centuries of Fatimid rule, the Egyptian population had remained Sunni, following the *Sunnah* schools of *Fiqh*. In 1171, Salahuddin abolished the Fatimid Caliphate. The name of the Abbasid Caliph was inserted in the *khutba*. So peaceful was this momentous revolution that the Fatimid Caliph Mustadi did not even know of this change and quietly died a few weeks later.

The Fatimids, once so powerful that they controlled more than half of the Islamic world including Mecca, Madina and Jerusalem, passed into history. The Sunni vision of history, championed by the Turks, triumphed. With the disappearance of the Fatimid schism, a united orthodox Islam threw down

the gauntlet to the invading Crusaders.

Historians often argue whether it is man that influences history or it is his circumstance and the environment that shape the course of events. This argument misses the point. There is an organic relationship between the actions of men and women and the circumstances under which they operate. Those who chisel out the edifice of history do so with their power, bending the flow of events to their will and leave behind a blazing trail for others to follow and sort out. But they succeed because circumstances are in their favor. Ultimately, the outcome of historical events is a moment of Divine Grace. It is not obvious, a priori, what the outcome of a critical historical moment will be.

Salahuddin, perhaps the most celebrated of Muslim soldiers after Ali ibn Abu Talib (r), was a man who molded history with his iron will. His accomplishment in evicting the Crusaders from Palestine and Syria are well known. What is less well known is his achievement in welding a monolithic Islamic body politic, free of internal fissures, which offered the Muslims, for a brief generation, the opportunity to dominate global events. It was the generation of Salahuddin that not only recaptured Jerusalem, but also laid the foundation of an Islamic Empire in India and briefly contained the Crusader advance in Spain and North Africa.

With the dissolution of the Fatimid Caliphate in Cairo and the consolidation of Salahuddin's hold on Syria and Egypt, the balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean tilted in favor of the Muslims. Arabia, Yemen as well as northern Iraq and eastern Anatolia were also added to Salahuddin's domains. It was only a matter of time before the weight of this power was brought on the Crusaders. The cause for hostilities was provided by one of the Latin chiefs, Renaud de Chatellon. Renaud was the king of the coastal cities in Palestine and Lebanon. To quote the well-known historian Bahauddin: "This accursed Renaud was a great infidel and a very strong man. On one occasion, when there was a truce between the Muslims and the Franks, he treacherously attacked and carried off a caravan from Egypt that passed through his territory. He seized these people, put them to torture, threw them into pits and imprisoned some in dungeons. When the prisoners objected and pointed out that there was a truce between the two peoples, he remonstrated: "Ask your Muhammed to deliver you". Salahuddin, when he heard these words, vowed to slay the infidel with his own hands."

Sybilla, daughter of the previous king Amaury and her husband Guy de Lusignan ruled the Frankish kingdom of Jerusalem at the time. Salahuddin demanded retribution for the pillage of the caravan from Guy de Lusignan. The latter refused. Salahuddin sent his son Al Afdal to hunt down Renaud. His capital Karak was besieged. The Franks, upon hearing of this siege, united and advanced to meet Al Afdal. In turn, Salahuddin moved to assist his son. The two armies met on the banks of Lake Tiberias, near Hittin, on the fourth of July 1187. Salahuddin positioned himself between the Crusaders and the lake, denying them access to water. The Franks charged. By a skillful maneuver, Salahuddin's forces enveloped the Franks and destroyed them. Most of their leaders were either captured or killed. Among those taken prisoner were Guy de Lusignan, King of Jerusalem and Renaud, the rogue king of the coastal cities who had caused the hostilities. Included among the escaped leaders were Raymond of Tripoli and Hugh of Tiberias. Salahuddin treated Guy de Lusignan with courtesy but had Renaud beheaded.

The retreating Franks moved towards Tripoli, but Salahuddin would offer them no respite. Tripoli was taken by storm. Acre was next. Nablus, Ramallah, Jaffa and Beirut opened their gates to the Sultan. Only Tripoli and Tyre remained occupied by the Franks. Salahuddin now turned his attention to Jerusalem, known as Al Quds to Muslims. The city was well defended by 60,000 Crusader soldiers. The Sultan had no desire to cause bloodshed and offered them a chance for peaceful surrender in return for freedom of passage and access to the holy sites. The offer was rejected. The Sultan ordered the city besieged. The defenders bereft of support from the coastline, surrendered (1187).

Salahuddin, in his magnanimity, made the most generous terms of surrender to the enemy. The Franks who wanted to reside in Palestine would be allowed to do so, as free men and women. Those who wanted to leave would be allowed to depart with their households and their belongings under full protection of the Sultan. The (Eastern Orthodox) Greeks and the Armenians were permitted to stay on with full rights of citizenship. When Sybilla, Queen of Jerusalem, was leaving the city, the Sultan was so moved by the hardship of her entourage that he ordered the imprisoned husbands and sons of the wailing women to be set free so that they might accompany their families. In many instances, the Sultan and his brother paid the ransom to free the prisoners. History has seldom seen such a contrast between the chivalry of a conquering hero like Salahuddin who treated his vanquished foes with generosity and compassion and the savage butchery of the Crusaders when they took Jerusalem in 1099.

The fall of Jerusalem sent Europe into a frenzy. Pope Clement III called for a new Crusade. The Latin world was up in arms. Those taking the Cross included Richard, King of England; Barbarosa, King of Germany; and Augustus, King of France. The military situation in Syria favored Salahuddin on the ground and the Crusaders at sea. Salahuddin sought an alliance with Yaqub al Mansur of the Maghrib to blockade the western Mediterranean. Yaqub had his hands full with the Crusaders in his own backyard. The monarch of the Maghrib did not appreciate the global scope of the Latin invasions. The alliance did not materialize and the Crusaders were free to move men and material across the sea.

The Third Crusade (1188-1191) was the most bitterly fought of all the Crusades in Palestine. The European armies moved by sea and made Tyre their principal staging port. Acre was the first major point of resistance in their advance on Jerusalem. The three European monarchs laid siege to the city while Salahuddin moved to relieve the city. A long standoff ensued, lasting over two years, with charges and counter-charges. On many occasions, the Muslim armies broke through and brought relief to the city. But the Crusaders, with their sea-lanes open, were re-supplied and the siege resumed.

What followed was an epic armed struggle between the cross and the crescent. Salahuddin's armies were spread thin all across the Syrian coast and the hinterland to guard against additional Crusader attacks by land. Barbarosa, Emperor of Germany, advanced through Anatolia. There was only token resistance from the Turks. Barbarosa brushed this resistance aside, only to drown in the River Saraf on his way. Upon his death, the German armies broke up and played only a minor part in the Third Crusade. The defenders in Acre offered valiant resistance, but after a long siege, exhausted and spent, surrendered in 1191. The victorious Crusaders went on a rampage and violating the terms of surrender, butchered anyone who had survived the siege. King Richard is himself reported to have slain the garrison after it had laid down its arms. The Crusaders rested a while in Acre and then marched down the coast towards Jerusalem. Salahuddin marched alongside them, keeping a close watch on the invader armies. The 150 mile long route was marked by many sharp engagements. When the Crusaders approached Ascalon, Salahuddin, realizing that the city was impossible to defend, evacuated the town and had it razed to the ground.

A stalemate developed with Salahuddin guarding his supply routes by land while the Crusaders controlled the sea. Richard of England finally realized that he was facing a resolute man of steel and made an overture for peace. Meetings took place between Richard and Saifuddin, brother of Salahuddin. At first, Richard demanded the return of Jerusalem and all the territories that had been liberated since the Battle of Hittin. The demands were unacceptable and they were refused.

It was at this juncture that Richard made his historic proposals to bring peace to Jerusalem. According to its terms, Richard's sister would marry Salahuddin's brother Saifuddin. The Crusaders would give the coast as dowry to the bride. Salahuddin would give Jerusalem to his brother. The bride and groom would rule the kingdom, with Jerusalem as its capital, uniting the two faiths in a family bond.

Salahuddin welcomed these proposals. But the priests and many among the Franks were opposed. Threats were made for the ex-communication of King Richard. Tired and disgusted with the narrow-mindedness of his comrades, Richard longed to return home. Finally, a peace treaty was concluded between Richard and Salahuddin. Under its terms, Jerusalem would remain under the Sultan but would be open to pilgrims of all faiths. Freedom of worship would be guaranteed. The Franks would retain possession of a strip of land along the coast extending from Jaffa to Tyre but the bulk of Syria and Palestine would remain in Muslim hands.

The Third Crusade marshaled all the energies of Europe on a single enterprise, namely, the capture of Jerusalem. But all that the full might of Europe and the combined resources of its monarchs could claim was but one insignificant fortress, Acre. Salahuddin returned to Damascus, victorious and hailed by his compatriots as a symbol of valor and chivalry. He had achieved what few before him had achieved, namely a united *ummah* facing a common foe. He spent the remainder of his days in prayer and charity, building schools, hospitals and establishing a just administration in his domains. This prince of warriors passed away on the fourth of March 1193 and was buried in Damascus.

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