

Muslim Disunity and Lost in the First Crusade

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Abstract

The Frankish army in the First Crusade were moved by the call of Pope Urban II in 1095. Over the next four years, they succeeded in capturing important cities in Asia Minor and al-Shām (Greater Syria), such as Nicaea, Edessa, Antioch and Jerusalem. The strength of the crusading forces was actually not greater than that of the Muslims and they were also not advanced in term of culture and science vis-a-vis the Muslims. In hindsight, this shows that there were other reasons that caused the defeat of the Muslims during the First Crusade. This study uses historical analysis as its methodology to see the correlation between the defeat of the Muslims and the political division that was prevailing among them during the First Crusade. This study suggests that there is a strong correlation between disunity and the defeat of the Muslims during the First Crusade.

Keywords: The First Crusade, disunity, Muslim defeat, al-Shām.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the 11th century, seven Crusades have occurred in the span of two centuries. The Crusaders were not successful in most of their endeavors in al-Shām or Levant (Greater Syria). However, they were successful in the First Crusade (Jones, 2005). In terms of power, the Franks were actually not stronger than the Muslims. The case was also the same in terms of science and culture. Usāmah ibn Munqidh (1929), who lived between the first and the third crusades, viewed the Franks as uncivilized human beings who lacked scientific understanding, particularly in medicine, and generally more backward than Muslims. However, the Muslims during the First Crusade (1095-1099) were in great disunity, which gave an opportunity for the Crusaders to invade Muslim cities and provinces in al-Shām.

On the surface, the disunity was the effect of the political crisis that occurred soon after the deaths of two Seljuq leaders—the Wazir Niẓām al-Mulk and the Sultan Malik Shah—in 1092. There was a prolonged struggle for power among the children of Malik Shah. The situation only began to improve with a gradual tendency for unity during and after the Second Crusade, which is not part of this article’s discussion.

On the Christian side, there was an increase in military power and religious zeal in the Latin world during the same period, particularly within the Frankish nation, which, in part, led to the crusading enterprise. The Christians were actually not free from internal conflict. Throughout the First Crusade, for example, there was a growing distrust between the Franks and the Byzantine Empire. After the first success of seizing Nicaea in Asia Minor, the Crusaders became frustrated with the Emperor’s cordial treatment of the Turkish guards who defended the city (Runciman, 1969a). The anonymous author of *Gesta Francorum*, who was one of the eyewitnesses of the First Crusade, wrote:

“Then the [Byzantine] emperor, full of vanity and iniquity, ordered that they [the Turkish garrison in Nicaea] could leave unpunished and without any fear and had them brought to Constantinople in great faithfulness. He dealt with them gently so that they might the more set up ambushes and obstacles for the Franks” (Dass, 2011, p. 38; Tyerman, 2012, p. 150).

The relation between the two would deteriorate even further in the following crusades, to the extent that the Crusaders would go on to conquer the Byzantine capital in the Fourth Crusade.

There was also the conflict among the knights in the Frankish camp in their competition to secure lands and counties for themselves, like the case of Baldwin and Tancred in the Armenian region (Runciman, 1969a). However, their dispute, at least during the First Crusade, was not as serious as that of the Muslims.

This study intends to examine the relationship between Muslim disunity and defeat in the First Crusade, and how their internal dispute had contributed to their lack of ability to defend their territories from the Frankish invasion. This study will use historical analysis as its methodology. The discussion will be organized according to several major cases chronologically from the beginning until the end of the First Crusade. However, the topic of Muslim unity and disunity is first discussed below to provide a general framework for the subsequent discussion.

2.0 ON MUSLIM UNITY AND DISUNITY

No one disputes the importance of unity for any nation or civilization to create harmony and strength that enable its internal advancement and defense against outside enemies. On the

contrary, unresolved discord will lead to the weakening and decline of a nation or civilization. The main sources of Islam—the Qur'an and the Sunnah—oblige Muslims to work together for the unity of the *ummah*. In one of his *hadith*, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) analogizes the Muslim *ummah* to one single body, whereby the pain of certain parts is supposed to be felt by all other parts of the body (Junid, 2002; Sahih Muslim, no. 2586).

The Qur'an, *hadith* and many Muslim scholars throughout history have underlined the importance and obligation of Muslims to maintain their unity. Said Nursi, for example, considers unity as the soul of Islam and a characteristic of a healthy society. Unity, solidarity and a few other values will enable a society to attain progress, while disunity and discord will bring weakness and cause the collapse of a civilization (Akhmetova, 2015). The theme of Muslim unity is also painted in many of Muhammad Iqbal's poems, in which he bewails the disharmony among Muslims caused by racial, linguistic and caste differences. It certainly drags them to a disgraceful position and negates their role and status as the ideal society (*khayr al-ummah*) (Junid, 2002).

At the beginning of his narration on the Crusades, Ibn al-Athīr (2003) mentions about the rise of the Franks and the fall of two important regions in the western hemisphere of the Islamic world, namely Toledo in Andalusia (Spain) and Sicily in southern Italy. At the same time, however, the fall of these two regions was also triggered by internal divisions among Muslims. In Andalusia, the Umayyad Dynasty collapsed in the early decades of the 11th century, after which came the formation of the Petty kingdoms, namely the division of Andalusia, into many small kingdoms. Although Muslims in Andalusia still maintained high culture and knowledge in this era, their division and internal disputes brought about its own downfall before the enemy, which led to the fall of Toledo in 1085 (Chejne, 1974). The fall of Sicily was also triggered by internal division. At the end of the Muslim period, Sicily was led by several local rulers who tried to extend their influence by fighting each other. Eventually, in 1060, one of these rulers invited the Normans in the Southern Italian Peninsula to engage in the Sicilian power struggle. The Normans accepted the invitation and gradually conquered the island within the next 30 years, not for the benefit of the Muslim ruler, but for the Normans to establish a new kingdom for themselves (Aziz Ahmad, 1975). These are just a few examples that show the importance of unity and the negative impact of divisions that prevailed in the Islamic world.

3.0 MUSLIM DISUNITY AS AN “INVITATION” FOR THE FIRST CRUSADE

Prior to the First Crusade, the Islamic world was divided into three major regions. In the West, there was the Almoravid Berber Dynasty, which ruled Maghrib and Andalusia. Egypt and Tunisia were ruled by the Fatimid Dynasty, whose people practiced Ismaili Shia. In the East, there was the Seljuq Turkish Dynasty, which ruled the Central Asian region up to al-Shām and parts of Asia Minor on behalf of the Sunni Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad (Jaspert, 2006).

In the first half of the 11th century, the Fatimids expanded its territory to al-Shām and Hijaz, undermining the declining Abbasid Caliphate. However, in the middle of the 11th century, the Seljuq entered Baghdad with the blessing of the Caliph and, not long after, recaptured al-Shām and Hijaz regions from the Fatimids, who had now retreated to Egypt. The Seljuqs did not only repel the Fatimids, but also challenged the Byzantine Empire. They invaded the northern part of al-Shām, taking Antioch which fell to the Byzantine a century before, and came into Asia Minor, seriously threatening the Empire. The Byzantine Emperor, Romanus IV, brought his troops in

1071 to face the Seljuq, who were led by Sultan Alp Arslan. However, he was severely defeated at Manzikert (France, 2004). The Turks would stay forever in that region.

However, in 1092, the great Seljuq Wazir, Niẓām al-Mulk, was killed by an assassin and, a few months later, the great Sultan of Seljuq, Malik Shah, passed away. In 1094, the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad and the long-ruling Fatimid Caliph in Cairo also died. The death of the Fatimid Caliph was followed by the unresolved split in the Ismaili community between the supporters of the new caliph enthroned by the Wazir al-Afdal and the followers of Nizar, the crown prince who was halted from the Cairene Caliphate and was then executed. A strong Nizari faction would soon develop and be centered in northwestern Iran, and would be well known as the Assassins (Jaspert, 2006). The Fatimids gradually deteriorated since then and never recovered.

The deaths of Niẓām al-Mulk and Malik Shah in 1092 were soon followed by serious divisions in the Seljuq world. Malik Shah's sons fought each other for years over the position left by their father. Their uncle, Tutush ibn Alp Arslan, who was the governor of Damascus, took the opportunity to seize power, but was killed in early 1095. Soon after, Riḍwān ibn Tutush went to Aleppo and took control of the city. His brother, Duqaq, initially also came to the city, hosted by Riḍwān. However, Duqaq suspected Riḍwān's plot to kill him, so he left Aleppo secretly after receiving an invitation from his father's deputy in Damascus. Riḍwān sent troops to chase him, but Duqaq managed to escape to Damascus, which he would then rule (Ibn al-Athīr, 2002). Riḍwān indeed plotted to kill his brothers to make himself the sole inheritor of his father's realm. He killed his other brothers, Abū Talib and Bahram, in Aleppo (Ibn al-'Adīm, 1996). Thus, severe enmity occurred between the two remaining sons of Tutush and, hence, between the two most important cities in al-Shām, Aleppo and Damascus. The enmity continued to persist even after the deaths of both brothers. The other important cities, namely Antioch and Homs, were governed independently and respectively by the Emirs Yaghi Siyan and Jannah al-Dawlah (Cahen, 1969). The fates of the other cities and regions in al-Shām were also the same—each was ruled by an independent emir, who was usually a Turk, who tried to maintain his own position, sometimes at the expense of the others (Irwin, 1999).

The situation in Asia Minor was almost the same. Being recently invaded by the Turks prior to the First Crusade, there were three Turkish sultanates in the region that previously belonged to the Byzantine Empire. The first and most important sultanate was the Sultanate of Rum, which was based in Nicaea and led by Emir Qilij Arslan. The second was located in the northeast of Asia Minor, led by Emir Danishmend. The third, which was sited in the western part of Asia Minor, precisely in Smyrna, and was headed by Chaka, was a small but menacing sultanate to the Byzantine Empire due to its proximity to its imperial capital, Constantinople. Around 1092, upon instigation by the Byzantine Emperor, Alexius Comnenus, and perhaps feeling threatened himself, Qilij Arslan killed Chaka, his own father-in-law, after a banquet, thus eliminating a competitor of both parties (Charanis, 1969; Runciman, 1969a). Qilij Arslan was also not on good terms with Danishmend and was in constant rivalry with the latter (Irwin, 1999).

The Byzantine Emperor was aware of the serious split that occurred in the Seljuq Sultanate after 1092. This situation gave him a good opportunity, or a kind of “invitation”, to reclaim the Byzantine territory that was taken by the Turks. However, he was not confident enough to attack directly. Since he needed troops from Western Europe, he sent an appeal, perhaps with an exaggeration about the dangers of the Turks (Michaud, 1852), to the Catholic Pope, Urban II (Murray, 2006; Tyerman, 2005). When the Pope agreed to help, he added his own agenda to the Byzantine proposal, namely the liberation of Jerusalem. Given this fact, the emergence of the

First Crusade was not simply a response by the Pope to the request of the Byzantine, but it was also undeniably an important stimulus for what happened next (Phillips, 2002). Thus, in 1095, the First Crusade was launched.

4.0 THE FIRST ENCOUNTER IN ASIA MINOR

Around the time of the defeat of the first batch of Crusaders or the People's Crusade in Asia Minor, the real Crusade who was planned by the Pope had begun and the Crusaders had already gathered in Constantinople. They were led by several Frankish knights, such as Raymond IV of Toulouse, Godfrey of Bouillon and his brother, Baldwin of Boulogne, as well as Bohemond of Taranto and his nephew, Tancred (Lloyd, 1999).

Lulled by the previous success of destroying the People's Crusade, Qilij Arslan somewhat underestimated the threat that was coming from the same direction. He was busy fighting with Danishmend in the east over the possession of Melitene when he heard that the Franks, who were assisted by the Byzantine, started to lay siege on his capital city, Nicaea. He speedily returned to rescue Nicaea but it was already too late (Runciman, 1969a). The city finally fell into the hands of the Crusaders—or rather the hands of the Byzantine—and Qilij Arslan was forced to withdraw his troops. He attempted to attack the Crusaders once more in Dorylaeum, which was close to Nicaea, but was again defeated. So, he withdrew with his troops to the interior of Asia Minor.

The Crusaders were indeed successful in Asia Minor and in its surrounding regions, but they did not win easily against the Turkish soldiers. The Franks had to confront many obstacles and difficulties in their path before they reached Antioch and later Jerusalem. Despite the fact that the Seljuq Empire had just been in rupture and all the emirs were engaged in internal struggle, they still became a serious barrier for the crusading army (Michaud, 1852). If the Franks had started the crusade a few years earlier, when the Muslim Empire was still a great force under the leadership of Malik Shah, they would most likely not be able to pass Asia Minor (Phillips, 2002).

4.1 Long Struggle in Antioch

After the failure of the Turks in Asia Minor to expel the Crusaders, news about the march of the Frankish army reached al-Shām. Even though the Muslims in al-Shām had ample time to prepare for the coming of the enemy, they remained in enmity among themselves and did not work together to fight the Crusaders.

The Crusaders arrived in Antioch on October 20, 1097 (Runciman, 1969b). However, the Emir of Antioch, Yaghi Siyan, had prepared the city for a long siege, so the Crusaders were unable to easily capture it. The city was under siege by the Franks for more than seven months, during which there was no serious effort from the other emirs in al-Shām to help Antioch.

Yaghi Siyan's dispute with Riḍwān of Aleppo prompted him to seek help from Duqaq and Jannah al-Dawlah, whose regions were somewhat distant from Antioch (Runciman, 1969b). At the end of December 1097, a group of soldiers from Damascus and Homs came to attack a group of Crusaders who ventured into the Muslim region outside Antioch, but they could not defeat the latter (Dass, 2011). This Muslim army, which was led by Duqaq and Janah al-Dawlah and previously gathered in Shayzar, encountered the Crusaders in al-Barah, after which the party returned to their respective region (Ibn al-Qalānisī, 2002). The indecisive result of this battle and the hesitant support from Damascus caused Yaghi Siyan to turn to Riḍwān for help (Ibn al-'Adīm, 1996). In February 1098, Muslim troops from Aleppo came to help, but were again defeated and

pushed back by the Crusaders (Dass, 2011). In the following month, an embassy from the Fatimid Caliph arrived in the Crusaders' camp, offering a proposal to divide al-Shām into two, the northern part for the Crusaders and the southern part for the Fatimids (Runciman, 1969b). This offer, of course, was not accepted by the Crusaders. However, it made them increasingly aware of the divisions in the Muslim world. The Fatimids proceeded with their plan and soon seized Jerusalem from its Turkish guards in the middle of 1098.

No further reinforcement came to rescue Antioch from the siege of the Crusaders, except for the troops from Mosul, led by Karbughā, that arrived later. Antioch fell on June 3, 1098, due to the betrayal of a tower guard (France, 2004; Runciman, 1969b). Yaghi Siyan died after trying to escape. His son and a group of soldiers defended themselves from inside the citadel, but the entire population were ultimately killed by the Crusaders.

Karbughā's army departed from Mosul, Irak, in May 1098, six months after the Crusaders began their siege of the city, and arrived two days after Antioch fell to the Crusaders. On their way to Antioch, the army tried to take Edessa, which was captured some time before by Baldwin, a junior leader in the Crusader's camp who ventured his own territorial gain. Edessa was surrounded for three weeks without success, after which they continued their journey to Antioch (Runciman, 1969b). Arriving at the city, the Muslim troops—which comprised Karbughā's army, accompanied by the armies from Damascus, Homs and others—put Antioch under siege, exhausting the Franks, who eventually ran out of food while trapped desperately inside the city.

However, in the end, even this massive Muslim army lost the battle with the already weakened and encircled Crusaders. According to Christian reports, Karbughā underestimated the number and strength of the Crusaders and became disheartened when confronted face to face with the enemy in an open battle outside the walls of Antioch (Dass, 2011). This is true, but does not fully represent the complexity of the Muslims' circumstances. Silent animosity within the Muslim camp, which probably alerted some of the Frankish leaders (Runciman, 1969b), might have played a more important role in the embarrassing defeat of the Muslim army. The Arab and Turkish troops in the Muslim camp were at odds with each other. Karbughā's desire to invite Riḍwān had irritated Duqaq, who finally left Antioch for Damascus; the same went for Jannah al-Dawlah, who was worried that his position in Homs would be usurped by his brother (Ibn al-'Adīm, 1996; Runciman, 1995). According to Ibn al-Athīr, the emirs who deliberately deserted the Muslim camp when the Muslim and the Frank armies were battling each other shocked Karbughā. This was because they did not like the arrogance of Karbughā and were concerned about his effort to control al-Shām if he managed to drive out the Crusaders (Gabrieli, 2010; Ibn al-Athīr, 2003). Ultimately, the Muslim army lost without a significant battle and Karbughā returned to Mosul without the slightest victory.

For the Christians, their victory over the massive and stronger Muslim army was seen as a sign that they were under the care of God, especially after the discovery of the Holy Lance a few days before (Tyerman, 2005). However, for the Muslims, it was a perfect example of fierce internal strife and shameful betrayal in front of the enemy.

4.2 The Fall of Jerusalem and its Aftermath

After the fall of Antioch and Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, some emirs became pragmatic and initiated a cordial relationship with the Crusaders, so long as their region were not the latter's target. Certain emirs even offered assistance and guidance for the Crusaders to reach Jerusalem.

This certainly caught the attention of the Crusaders and added to their confidence. Tyerman (2005, p. 23) writes:

“... the crusaders may have been single-minded, pious, and brutal, but they were neither stupid nor ignorant. Their advance had taken account of local politics at every stage, notably the chronic divisions among their Muslim opponents that prevented united resistance.”

Therefore, it was understandable that a year later, despite facing various difficulties, the Crusaders succeeded in capturing Jerusalem on July 15, 1099, and killed its Muslim and Jewish inhabitants (Phillips, 2002). Thus, Jerusalem slipped from the hands of the Fatimids to the Crusaders. There was no effort from the outside to help the city prior to and during the siege and there was no noteworthy effort to recapture the city in the years that followed.

The Crusaders established the Latin Kingdom shortly after conquering Jerusalem and chose Godfrey as its first king. However, he passed away in the following year. His companions decided to send a message to his brother, Baldwin, to succeed to the throne. This was a highly crucial situation for the Crusaders and a golden opportunity for the Muslims to recapture Jerusalem. King Godfrey passed away in Jerusalem on June 18, 1100 (Runciman, 1995). At that time, all of the most important Frankish leaders were not present in and around the city. Baldwin was a great distance away in Edessa and would not arrive in Jerusalem until November 1100 (Runciman, 1995). Around the same period, Raymond of Toulouse accepted the invitation of the Byzantine Emperor and resided for a while in Constantinople (Runciman, 1995). Bohemond of Taranto, the ruler of Antioch, was not aware of what had happened in Jerusalem. He accepted the request of the Armenians Melitene to deal with Danishmend and the army of Qilij Arslan, but he himself was later captured by Danishmend and languished in prison for some time after (Ibn al-Qalānisī, 2002; Runciman, 1995).

Baldwin only departed from Edessa on October 2, 1100, along with his family and around 700 soldiers, including 200 knights (Runciman, 1995). Duqaq heard about Baldwin's journey to Jerusalem and invited Jannah al-Dawlah to attack Baldwin on his way. According to Ibn al-Qalānisī (2002), the Muslim forces defeated Baldwin at the port of Beirut and killed many of his friends. However, the fact that Baldwin finally arrived and became the second king of Jerusalem in the following month shows that the mission of the Muslim emirs was somewhat unsuccessful. Another explanation states that Baldwin heard about the planned ambush by Muslim troops from Damascus and Homs. In fact, the Emir of Tripoli, Fakhr al-Mulk, who was at odds with Duqaq, had received Baldwin in his city and provided him with supplies and information about Duqaq's plan so that Baldwin and his troops could anticipate the attack when they passed a narrow gap in Dog River, which was not very far from Beirut. Baldwin was then able to confront the Muslim forces and continue his journey to Jerusalem (Runciman, 1995).

Later on, Fakhr al-Mulk needed help from Duqaq and Jannah al-Dawlah to deal with Raymond and his troops who were threatening Tripoli, Lebanon. The two Emirs initially helped but then retaliated by leaving the field in the midst of battle. The incident would be the beginning of Raymond's siege of Tripoli until the city and the region finally fell into the hands of his family several years later.

What is mentioned above are examples of internal conflicts among Muslims in al-Shām (Greater Syria) and Asia Minor and their defeat by the Crusaders. There are actually several other similar examples, but are too lengthy to include in this article. All these, however, show a strong correlation between Muslim disunity and their deterioration and defeat by the enemy.

The Crusaders who stayed in Jerusalem after its conquest were minimal in numbers and strength compared to the Muslim forces in the surrounding regions. When describing how numerous Frankish pilgrims travelled to and from Jerusalem, Fulcher of Chartres wrote, "... Jerusalem was depopulated and there were not enough people to defend the city from the Saracens, if only they dared to attack us" (Krey, 1921, p. 280).

It is no exaggeration to say that the opportunity for the First Crusade, the success of the invasion and the ability of the Crusaders to maintain their victory for several decades were all made possible by the serious discord in the Muslim world. "Given the divided state of the Islamic world," Robert Irwin (1999, p. 218) writes, "the successive triumphs of the armies of the First Crusade in Anatolia, northern Syria, and Palestine are hardly surprising." The complication and turbulence in the Muslim world gave critical advantages for the Crusaders (Phillips, 2002). Finally, another source says, "One of the most important reasons for the success of the first crusade was the disunity within the Muslim nations in and around the holy land and their underestimation of the threat to which the crusaders posed" (*The Success of the First Crusade*, 2018).

5.0 CONCLUSION

Unity is vital to ensure the wellbeing of a society and civilization. Advancements in science and culture become less meaningful if the leaders and members of a community are hostile and contradict each other. In fact, the Qur'an clearly states that all believers are brothers and sisters. Likewise, the *hadith* and the Muslim scholars do not deny the importance of unity. However, the human weaknesses of the Muslims and the differences that exist among them in certain parts of history have trapped them in disputes and internal conflicts that actually hurt themselves.

This was what happened in al-Shām (Greater Syria) and Asia Minor in the years leading up to the First Crusade. The Muslim leaders in these regions had fallen into prolonged conflict. As a consequence, the Muslims were severely defeated in the First Crusade and Jerusalem was captured by the Crusaders. This shows how the potential strength and sophistication of a culture become meaningless in front of the enemy when serious internal discord happens and members of the society betray each other.

In fact, the divisive conditions of the Muslims in those regions basically "invited" the Byzantine Empire to reclaim its territory in Asia Minor with the help of the Catholic Church and the Franks. However, in 1095, in front of the Franks, Pope Urban II did not simply convey the appeal of the Byzantine Emperor, but added his own plan, namely the attempt to conquer Jerusalem from the Muslims, something that was enthusiastically accepted by the Frankish knights and the commoners among them.

Likewise, the success of the Franks in conquering Muslim cities one after another and their ability to defend the territories of Jerusalem, Antioch, Edessa and, later on, Tripoli, were due to the prolonged Muslim disunity and internal enmity in those regions. In fact, this internal enmity did not only cause the defeat of the Muslims in the First Crusade, but also prevented them from cooperating to reclaim the territories that fell into the hands of the Crusaders, since each Muslim leader only cared about the continuity of his own power. The presence of the Crusaders did not directly unite them to repel the invaders, but only added a new player in the existing conflict in the region. Several decades would pass before new Muslim leaders in the region were able to unite and recapture Jerusalem from the Crusaders.

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