

Lessons from Salahuddin's Liberation of Palestine

Many continue to watch in horror at the massacre taking place in Palestine. What began in Sheikh Jarrah and spread to al-Quds with the attack on al-Aqsa Mosque has shocked many across the world. This turn of events is the latest iteration of a decades' long occupation by Zionists and their supporters and the slow-motion expulsion of the indigenous people. After years of calling for UN resolutions and the West to intervene, many have now come to the realisation that the occupation needs to be reversed through liberation by the Muslim armies.

The Islamic texts and history are replete with evidence and examples of liberation struggles that ended occupations. The most relevant of these and to take lessons from is the liberation of Palestine by Salahuddin in 1187, after 88 years of occupation by European Crusaders.

11th Century Geopolitics

The political dynamics in the 11th century of rival entities and balance of power politics is not very different to today in the Muslim world.

The Abbasiyah Khilafah (Abbasid Caliphate) had been the central leadership of the Ummah, but by the 11th century, they were well past their former glory and were just a shell of their former self. The heartland of the Muslim world between Egypt and Persia was disunited. Political decentralisation, led to the emergence of hereditary governorships, leading to the creation of rival centres of power against the Khilafah.

The main rivals were the Fatimids, an Ismaili sect who claimed they had a right to rule being descendants of Imam 'Ali (ra) and Fatima (ra), leading to the name "Fatimid". The Fatimids made it their duty to take over the Muslim world and establish Isma'ili rule and from 909, they directly challenged the Abbasids authority. When they conquered Egypt in 969, they became the most powerful force in the Muslim world. By the end of the 11th century, the Fatimids ruled over North Africa, Egypt, Makkah and Madinah and parts of Syria and Palestine.

The other major political players were the Seljuks. During the era of decentralisation, the Abbasids used slave soldiers brought in from Turkic lands of Central Asia to serve in their militaries in order to balance against the Fatimids. These Turkic tribes migrated to the Islamic lands and embraced Islam and then set up their own states in the political chaos of the 10th century. The Seljuks built a stable state that stretched from Syria to Central Asia. But the Seljuks assumed the role of protectors of the Khilafah. It was the Seljuks that prevented Fatimid expansion in the 11th century. By the end of the 11th century, the Seljuks had expanded throughout Anatolia until they appeared on the shores opposite Constantinople.

Before the crusades even began, the Muslims were disunited. There were rival rulers and kingdoms. This situation, much like the Muslim world today with competing Muslim nations and rival rulers, was ripe for exploitation by anyone that had designs for the region.

11th Century European Colonialism

When the Byzantine Emperor Alexios realised he could not battle the Muslims in 1095, to prevent the fall of the Byzantine Empire, he appealed to his rival Pope Urban II in Rome. Pope Urban took the opportunity to rally a pan-European Christian army in the name of Christ that numbered in the tens of thousands. In reality, the Pope had his sights on Jerusalem and called on all Christians to support an expedition to conquer the city and establish a Crusader Kingdom in Palestine, under the authority of the Papacy.

From 1096, armies led by nobles and knights began marching towards Eastern Europe from modern day France, Germany and Italy. Along the way, European Jews were massacred due to the religious zeal stoked by the Church. When the Crusaders arrived at the walls of Constantinople, Emperor Alexios refused to allow them entry into the city, for fear that they would plunder it as they did with dozens of cities and towns along the way.

When the Crusaders reached the ancient city Antioch on the Syria-Turkey border (today's Antakya in Turkey), the politics in the region were in their favour. Antioch, like many towns and cities, was really a lone island. The Seljuk Empire was no longer a united political entity. Instead, petty Turkic Amirs administered individual cities, and were constantly quarrelling with each other. The major cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Mosul were all disunited, and their Amirs had all been in perpetual war. When the ruler of Antioch asked for help from the other Amirs against the Crusaders that surrounded his city, he never received a response.

Once the Crusaders captured the city, its population was put to the sword. The massacre of Antioch and other cities along the way to Jerusalem instilled terror in the surrounding areas. Muslim Amirs were keen to avoid conflict with the Crusaders, and once they realised the target was Jerusalem, many decided to support the Crusaders with food, arms and safe passage rather than to fight them. By the summer of 1099, the Crusaders had reached the walls of Jerusalem. On 15 July 1099, after a siege lasting only a week, the Crusaders managed to seize Jerusalem from the Muslims. For the first time since 'Umar (ra) entered the city 462 years prior, Jerusalem was lost. All of this was possible due to the disunity of the Muslim leaders and the "*Sharif Hussains*" and "*Mir Jafars*" of that time who aided the Crusaders.

The entire civilian population, over 70,000 people, was massacred. In al-Aqsa, the blood of Muslims was up to the knees of the colonialists. Mosques and synagogues throughout the city were destroyed. Even Christians suffered, as the Crusaders sought to impose their own Catholic version of Christianity instead of the traditional Greek, Armenian, Georgian and other churches in the city.

Vassal States

With the Muslim world in disarray, the Crusaders were able to consolidate their position in Jerusalem. Within four years, four Crusader Kingdoms were established - the County of Edessa, the Principality of Antioch, the Principality of Armenian Cilicia, the County of Tripoli with the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

Due to internal divisions and disunity, the Muslim world was too weak and fractured to mount any resistance. The traditional centres of power in Baghdad, Damascus or Cairo were in no position to respond due to this. Some of the surrounding Muslim villages and cities even began trading with the Crusader states which further cemented their presence.

Strength in Unity

It would take half a century from the loss of al-Quds for a Muslim response to take shape. It would begin from the Turkic Amir, Imad al-Din Zengi, who ruled over the city of Mosul in north Iraq. He united Mosul and Aleppo into one state and with the combined power of two of the largest cities in the region, his army conquered the County of Edessa, the northernmost Crusader state in 1044. At the time, Edessa was the weakest Crusader state and the Crusaders looked upon its loss much like the petty Amirs did with Antioch, and this was a big mistake.

Imad al-Din's strategy was to forge a united Syria in the face of the Crusader threat by bringing Damascus under his control, but the ancient city remained out of his grasp as the Amir of Damascus did not want to give up his domain, even in the name of Muslim unity.

Imad al-Din Zengi died in 1146 and his son Nur al-Din Zengi picked up the struggle to unify the Muslim world. Imad al-Din conquered most of the territory around Antioch in 1149, and in 1154, he overthrew the Amir of Damascus with the help of the local population who had grown sick of his alliance with the Crusader states.

With Syria unified under the one ruler, only the issue of Egypt remained. At this point, the Crusaders turned south to conquer Egypt in order to expand their foothold in the region. The Fatimids sensing they would be defeated, reached out to Imad al-Din, who sent an army in the name of Islamic unity, but once the Crusaders were defeated, the Fatimids made an alliance with the Crusaders who were just defeated to expel Nur al-Din's army in Egypt. This was treachery of the highest order. Nur al-Din's army retreated from Egypt but just four years later the Fatimids were forced to reach out to Nur al-Din, again, as the Crusaders were back to conquer Egypt. This time Nur al-Din Zengi defeated the Crusaders in Egypt and then defeated the Fatimids. He left his top general Shirkuh as wali. He died a few months later due to illness and his nephew Yusuf was put in charge of Egypt in 1169, who we all know as Salahuddin al-Ayyubi.

Surrounding the Enemy

The groundwork for the liberation of al-Quds had been laid for Salahuddin and he began straight away to build upon this and liberate al-Quds. He began by consolidating Egypt and putting all remnants of the Fatimids in the dustbin of history. The heterodox Fatimids, who had been a thorn in Muslim world for centuries, were officially abolished. The al-Azhar University, once a bastion of Isma'ili propaganda, was converted into a traditional Islamic school, and it remains so today.

Salahuddin signed peace treaties with the Kingdom of Jerusalem in order to give him the time to unify the Muslim lands around Jerusalem. When Nur al-Din died in 1174 from disease, Salahuddin as wali marched into Syria unopposed and with broad public support he fully united Egypt and Syria for the first time since the Fatimid uprising. Salahuddin then united Iraq under his authority and this now meant the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem was surrounded by a powerful, united Muslim state under a ruler who believed it was his duty to liberate Jerusalem.

At the Battle of Hattin in 1187, Salahuddin's army completely routed the Crusader army of Jerusalem. Only a few knights were left in the holy city, which capitulated to Salahuddin. Unlike the Crusaders who massacred everyone in the city, Salahuddin gave all the residents safe passage to Christian lands and were allowed to take their belongings with them. Christian sites in the city were protected and pilgrimage to them allowed.

There are many lessons we can learn from the liberation of al-Quds which are applicable to our situation today.

Disunity – The Crusaders were able to gain a foothold in the Muslim world due to the lack of unity amongst the Muslim rulers. Their petty differences made them rivals of each other and they were more concerned about fighting each other than dealing with the Crusader threat. This is much like the Muslim world today where we are divided into nation states and compete with each other whilst the disbelieving West use these petty nationalistic differences to achieve their own interests.

Removing the Rulers – Salahuddin showed us how to deal with disunity. He fought and removed all the rulers who refused to unite in retaking Jerusalem. When he led the conquest of Fatimid Egypt, he had the support of the people who not only wanted liberation from the Fatimids but also wanted al-Quds liberated. Salahuddin was in line with the sentiments of the people rather than the Fatimid rulers. We face a similar situation today where we have rulers who are in complete odds with the sentiments of the Ummah. Whilst the Ummah craves the liberation of Palestine, the rulers make excuses about how weak the Muslims are, how

strong the Zionist entity is and how their hands are tied. Salahuddin showed us in this scenario that these rulers need to be removed and replaced with those whose sentiments are in line with the Ummah.

Agent Rulers – The Crusader states were able to consolidate their position in the region as the petty Muslim rulers around Jerusalem facilitated them. The Crusader Kingdom's aim was to use Jerusalem in order to strengthen its position in the Levant and expand. Today the Zionist entity plays this role as the 21st century Crusader Kingdom and the rulers of Egypt, Jordan and Syria have treaties and relations which consolidated the Zionist entity, without which it just couldn't survive. Salahuddin, facing the same reality, conquered all the territories around Jerusalem, removing these agent rulers and in effect cutting the supply line that sustained the Crusader Kingdom.

Supply Line – Salahuddin from the very beginning saw that the trade between the villages and petty Muslim rulers is what sustained the economy of the Crusader Kingdom in Jerusalem, so he cut this supply line by conquering these territories and thus cutting the economic lifeline of the Crusader Kingdom. When he began the siege of Jerusalem, the Christians were unable to put up any resistance and surrendered as they were unable to sustain a war with the forces of Salahuddin. We find a similar situation today with the Zionist entity where water is provided to it by Jordan and natural gas by Egypt. The rulers in the region sustain the foreign entity.

Forward Base - The Crusader states were established as a forward base by the Church in Europe in order to gain the Holy Land and colonise the region. Despite numerous Crusades, the European Christian colonialists were never able to maintain their forward base. The longest was the 88 years that Salahuddin brought to an end. This is the role of the Zionist entity in the region today. It was established to be used as a base to interfere in the region and this is why the West arms, funds and supports the Zionist entity. Like the Crusader states which made treaties and agreements with the petty Muslim rulers in order to strengthen their position and be a forward base for their Christian Brethren in Europe, the Zionist entity is an aircraft carrier for the US in the region today. It is one of the tools the US uses to maintain its influence in the region. Expelling the Crusader Kingdom from the region as Salahuddin did in the 11th century is exactly what needs to be done today in order to cut this tool for foreign interference in the region.

Salahuddin has shown us that reunification amongst the Muslims and the removal of agent rulers from our midst and the conquest of Palestine is how we liberate the blessed land, with Allah (swt)'s permission. This needs to be the priority and only this will end the situation we are witnessing today.

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