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Ayyubids, Mamluks, and the Latin East in the Thirteenth Century*

There was, once upon a time, a widely accepted myth that the Muslim rulers and peoples of southwest Asia were from the outset bitterly opposed to the presence among them of the Crusaders (variously portrayed as infidels or proto-imperialists), and that they struggled unceasingly if ineffectually to expel them. But that myth has long since been discarded among serious scholars. A series of essays in the mid-1950s by Claude Cahen and Sir Hamilton Gibb demonstrated that we can only perceive a consistent policy and ideology of opposition to the Crusades with the rise to power of Nūr al-Dīn (r. 1146-1174), and then in a more heightened manner under Saladin (r. 1169-1193). A more precise definition of this process, covering the whole two centuries of Crusader rule in Syria-Palestine, was developed for the first time in the splendid monograph of Emmanuel Sivan, *L'Islam et la Croisade*. Sivan almost certainly understated the sanctity of Jerusalem in Islamic consciousness in the pre-Crusade era, and he may not have done justice to the military efforts of the later Fatimids and the Saljuq amirs of Syria, both of whom had to contend with a very unfamiliar threat from a position of grave weakness. But on balance his account remains the best introduction to the subject of the "Counter-Crusade."¹

In spite of Sivan's important contribution, however, the nature of the relations between the Muslim rulers of Syria and Egypt and the Crusader states after the death of Saladin (1193) has remained something of a puzzle. But in the last three decades we have had an important series of studies on the eastern Mediterranean

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¹H. A. R. Gibb, "The Achievement of Saladin," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 35 (1952-53): 44-60; reprinted in *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, ed. Stanford J. Shaw and William R. Polk (London, 1962), 89-107; idem, "The Career of Nur al-Din," in *A History of the Crusades*, ed. Kenneth M. Setton (Madison, 1955-89), 1:513-27, esp. 514-16; and idem, "The Rise of Saladin," *ibid.*, 563-89. Gibb's near-apotheosis of Saladin should not be allowed to obscure his political acumen. Claude Cahen, "L'Islam et la Croisade," *Relazione del X Congresso internazionale dei scienze storiche, Roma 1955: Storia del medio evo* (Florence, 1955), 625-35. Emmanuel Sivan, *L'Islam et la Croisade: Idéologie et propagande dans les réactions musulmanes aux Croisades* (Paris, 1968).



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world in the thirteenth century. These began with two major books by Jonathan Riley-Smith, and now include studies on Crusader Cyprus by Peter Edbury, Crusader-Mamluk diplomacy by Peter Holt, the mid-thirteenth-century Crusades and the Mongol invasions by Peter Jackson, and the reign of Sultan Baybars by Peter Thorau and Reuven Amitai-Preiss. Taken together, these have brought the key issues into far sharper focus and suggested how they might be resolved.²

The problem, long familiar to students of the period, is simply that Saladin—by long-term design or happy accident—had left the Crusader states of Syria in a shambles. Even after the bitter and frustrating struggle with Richard Lion-Heart, the Crusaders retained only a few ports on the coast, with a hinterland no more than ten miles deep. The forces of the Franco-Syrian barons had been shattered in 1187-1188, and apart from their severe manpower losses, they had been stripped of almost all the landed possessions which had allowed them to support the surprisingly large military forces of the Kingdom of Jerusalem—forces which had been very nearly equal to those which Saladin himself could mobilize, though of course they were very different in character. And yet the Crusader states, even the frail Principality of Antioch, survived and even flourished for another century.³ They were clearly prosperous, more so than in the twelfth century. Finally, significant pieces of land, especially in Galilee and southern Lebanon, were recovered and refortified; even Jerusalem reverted to Latin control for about fifteen years, between 1229 and 1244, albeit in a very conditional and tenuous manner. How did they do it?

Part of the answer is certainly that the Crusader states were in reality far less fragile than we had once supposed. A number of scholars, but Professor Riley-Smith in particular, have underlined two key resources which these states still possessed:

²Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Knights of St. John in Jerusalem and Cyprus, ca. 1050-1310* (London, 1967); idem, *The Feudal Nobility and the Kingdom of Jerusalem, 1174-1277* (London, 1973). Riley-Smith's more recent publications have focused on the earlier phases of the Crusades, in particular the nature of the movement and the motives which drove its participants. Peter W. Edbury, *The Kingdom of Cyprus and the Crusades, 1191-1374* (Cambridge, 1991). Peter Jackson, "The Crisis in the Holy Land in 1260," *English Historical Review* 95 (1980): 481-513; idem, "The End of Hohenstaufen Rule in Syria," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 59 (1986): 20-36; idem, "The Crusades of 1239-41 and Their Aftermath," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 50 (1987): 32-60. Peter M. Holt, *Early Mamluk Diplomacy (1260-1290): Treaties of Baybars and Qalāwūn with Christian Rulers* (Leiden, 1995). Peter Thorau, *The Lion of Egypt: Sultan Baybars I and the Near East in the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Peter M. Holt (London, 1992). Reuven Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-Īlkhānid War, 1260-1281* (Cambridge, 1995).

³This point is argued by Riley-Smith in *The Feudal Nobility*, but the evidence for it was already presented by Wilhelm Heyd, *Histoire du commerce du Levant au Moyen Age*, trans. Furcy Reynaud, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1885-86).



1) The positive role of the military orders, whose income from gifts and their vast landed holdings in Europe allowed them to garrison a large number of castles throughout Syria, and even to undertake the defense of new ones.

2) The revenues generated by the growing commerce of the Levant, especially through Acre, but Tyre, Beirut, and Antioch/San Simeon as well, largely replaced the agricultural rents and dues of the twelfth century.

Both of these points clearly imply that the Crusader states of Syria flourished because western Europe was flourishing—more precisely, because some part of the new wealth of Europe was siphoned off to keep them going. In spite of the undoubted contribution of Acre to the burgeoning commerce of Pisa, Genoa, and Venice, one suspects that on balance the Crusader states gained a good deal more from this commerce than they contributed to it.

Such considerations are strengthened when we look at the Crusades of the thirteenth century—which were far more numerous and better organized than those of the preceding era. Indeed, the recovery of Jerusalem and the security of the Latin Kingdom were a major focus of concern by the Papacy throughout the century. Apart from the two massive Crusades aimed at Damietta (the Fifth Crusade of 1217-1221 and the Crusade of St. Louis in 1249-1254), there were many smaller expeditions which focused on the Holy Land. These latter ironically achieved far more than the two big expeditions. Even when (as was often the case) the new Crusades were more a nuisance than a help to the Crusader states, they were always a standing threat, one which Muslim rulers had to keep constantly in mind in framing their policies. Even the miraculous victories of 1221 and 1250 had been a very near thing indeed—gifts of Crusader stupidity rather than the fruits of Muslim military prowess.

Yet even these elements of strength in the Crusader position do not explain the durability of the Frankish domains in Syria, beset as they were by structural fragmentation and (especially after 1210) weak leadership. This is especially the case after the catastrophic battle of La Forbie (al-Ḥarbīyah) in 1244, which decimated their military resources and led to the dissolution of the last vestiges of political cohesion among them. Even under these circumstances, the Franks managed to hang on for almost half a century longer. The Muslims plainly held an overwhelming theater advantage; they ought to have been able to eliminate these infidel vestiges at almost any moment had they really wanted to do so. But on the contrary, they often went to some lengths *not* to drive away the Franks, and indeed to incorporate them within their alliance and economic structures.

We have all been conditioned to interpret Muslim/Crusader interactions in ideological terms; even when we know better we cannot stop ourselves from measuring actual policies against the normative criteria of ideology, and then being mildly outraged by the inevitable gulf between one and the other. Even with



this caveat, however, it can be instructive to compare the pursuit of concrete goals by the two sides with their professed values. When we do that, we obtain an interesting result. Broadly speaking, the Franks of Syria were occasionally induced by the ideals of Crusade and Holy War to do things that they might otherwise have avoided on grounds of solid material interest. On the other hand, Muslim political elites during the thirteenth century appealed to the idea of *jihād* only to legitimize policies which were clearly demanded by very concrete geopolitical, economic, and military imperatives. That does not mean that this appeal was in any way hypocritical. But the concept of *jihād* is a plastic one, which can be deployed in widely varying ways for varying ends. For thirteenth-century Muslim rulers, there was a happy and all too rare marriage of values and interests. Our task in the balance of this paper is thus to search out the imperatives which underlay the apparently vacillating, shifting Muslim policies toward the Crusader states during the decades between 1193 and 1291.

Policy can only be generated within and applied through political institutions, and so we should begin by noting that Egypt and Syria were governed (more or less) by two very distinct political formations during this period: the Ayyubid Confederation created by Saladin and his kinsmen in the 1170s and 1180s, and the Mamluk Sultanate established by the palace guards who assassinated the last Ayyubid ruler of Egypt in 1250. These two formations had much in common—their formal ideologies, their fiscal administration, many (though certainly not all) of their basic military institutions—but on the deeper level of the often unspoken values, attitudes, and assumptions which shaped political conduct, the rules of the political game, they were fundamentally different.⁴ One question we have to ask is

⁴Claude Cahen, "Ayyūbids," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 1:796-807. R. Stephen Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols: The Ayyubids of Damascus, 1193-1260* (Albany, 1977). There is no modern, full-length monograph on the early Mamluk regime (from 1250 to 1310). However, the concise survey of Robert W. Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate, 1250-1382* (Carbondale, 1986) is a good introduction. For brief treatments, see Peter M. Holt, "Mamlūks," *EF*, 6:321-31; and R. Stephen Humphreys, "Mamluk Dynasty," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1982-89), 8:70-78. Reflections on the relationship between the two regimes are found throughout the voluminous publications of David Ayalon; see especially his "Aspects of the Mamluk Phenomenon: Ayyubids, Kurds, and Turks," *Der Islam* 54, no. 1 (1977): 1-32; and idem, "From Ayyūbids to Mamlūks," *Revue des études islamiques* 49, no. 1 (1981): 43-57. Ayalon insists on the fundamental identity of the Ayyubid and Mamluk political and military systems. As always, his arguments are enlightening and richly documented; in spite of his criticisms, however, I still adhere to the main conclusions in my "The Emergence of the Mamluk Army," *Studia Islamica* 45 (1977): 67-99, and 46 (1977): 147-82. A recent reevaluation of the early Mamluk state is given in Amalia Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of al-Nasir Muhammad Ibn Qalawun, 1310-1341* (Leiden, 1995), who departs from Ayalon on certain important points.



whether, or to what degree, these changes in political structure led to changes in policy. We should not take it for granted that the shift from Ayyubid to Mamluk rule necessarily entailed changes in Muslim policy toward the Crusaders, of course, but neither should we just dismiss the possibility.

Apart from the change in regime per se, the Ayyubids and early Mamluks each found themselves acting within a very different international milieu. For most of their existence, the Ayyubids faced no serious threat from their neighbors in southwest Asia; the Crusaders were the only dangerous "foreign" problem on the radar screen.⁵ The Mamluks, of course, had to contend with a very powerful and extremely hostile Mongol presence on their eastern and northern borders. The Il-Khans, we should recall, could draw on the fiscal and manpower resources of Iran, Iraq, the Jazira, and Anatolia, and they made a number of serious efforts to add Syria (and perhaps ultimately Egypt) to that list. On the other hand, after the end of Louis IX's venture in 1254 the threat of new Crusades receded markedly. Obviously one could take nothing for granted, and the Mamluks always had to be prepared to confront a new expedition from overseas. But in the event they never had to do so; in effect, the Muslims were now free to take the offensive against the Crusader states in Syria.

With these general points in mind, let us return to the first of our two questions. How did the characteristics of the Ayyubid and Mamluk political systems affect their policy toward the Franks of Syria?

The Ayyubid domination did not represent any sort of unified and centralized state; it was rather a confederation of autonomous appanages or principalities. (At least the principalities desperately desired to be autonomous.) Each of these principalities was governed, usually in a fairly regular hereditary succession, by an appanage prince belonging to a lineage stemming from Saladin's father Ayyūb or (in one case) his uncle Shīrkūh. For most of the six decades between 1193 and 1250 there were six major principalities (Egypt, Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Jazira-Armenia), and each of these might claim suzerainty over one or more satellite principalities held by a cadet member of the locally dominant lineage.

There were no formal administrative structures to ensure general cohesion within the confederation. Such cohesion as there might be was achieved through the sense of common descent among the princely lineages, reinforced (not too strongly) by marriage ties. In addition, all the princes owed allegiance and personal deference to the senior member of the Ayyubid house (*al-bayt al-ayyūbī*, *banū Ayyūb*), who was usually the ruler of Egypt. The senior prince had the customary

⁵To be precise, there were two bad moments: an invasion of northern Syria by the Rum Saljuqs in 1218, at the very moment the Crusaders were laying siege to Damietta, and the penetration into Armenia and the Jazira by the stateless warlord Jalāl al-Dīn Mankūbirī in 1225-1226 and 1228-1230. Threatening as they seemed, both of these dangers were quickly dispelled by Ayyubid counter-attacks.



right to confirm the succession to the throne in the other principalities, and he was expected to go to the aid of any appanage prince threatened by outside attack. This frail web of obligation and deference had real political consequences only in a few situations, however. First, when every appanage prince owed his current status and future hopes to the head of the family, as under Saladin and later his brother al-‘Ādil. Second—perhaps a special case of the first—when the head of the family was the father of the most important appanage princes and could use his position within the family to dominate them. (Happily the Ayyubids were not given to patricide.) If the nominal head of the confederation had the bad luck to be merely the older brother or nephew of the key appanage princes, he could enforce only a modicum of deference to his authority through cunning and war. These tools were wielded brilliantly by al-Kāmil (1218-1238), the son of al-‘Ādil and the brother of the princes of Damascus and the Jazira, but even he only got the upper hand in the last decade of his rule.

Political formations of this kind were very widespread throughout the Nile-to-Oxus region between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, and obviously they are inherently unstable. We might have expected the Ayyubid Confederation to fragment into a congeries of city-states after two or three generations, as so many such entities did. Instead, in the course of a complex series of internal struggles between 1237 and 1245, it bifurcated into two large and relatively centralized states. Egypt, Palestine, and Damascus were ruled by al-Šāliḥ Ayyūb (r. 1240-1249), who created a unitary, centralized regime with its capital in Cairo; in al-Šāliḥ’s domains all territorial government was assigned to men who belonged to his inner circle, either his personal *mamlūks* or free-born amirs with demonstrated loyalty to him, and these deputies held office at his pleasure. In building this regime, al-Šāliḥ created the model for the Mamluk Sultanate, though the turmoil following his death prevented this model from being deployed in any conscious and effective way for more than a decade. But when Baybars finally seized power in 1260, he proclaimed from the outset his firm resolve to follow the practices of his revered master al-Šāliḥ Ayyūb.⁶

In northern Syria, the troubles of 1237-1245 yielded a state centered in Aleppo and ruled by a great-grandson of Saladin. This entity was more loosely structured than the rival regime of al-Šāliḥ Ayyūb, since it was still based on the old appanage or confederative principle, but now the appanage princes were far more closely supervised than in the past. The “reformed” Ayyubid principality of Aleppo survived the Mamluk coup d’état in Egypt in 1250 and even occupied Damascus and part

⁶David Ayalon, “The Great Yasa of Chingiz Khan: A Re-examination,” *SI* 36 (1972): 156-58. See also Humphreys, “Emergence of the Mamluk Army,” 154-55.



of Palestine for the next decade. But it had no future, and was swept away in the Mongol deluge of 1259-1260.

What are the implications of the Ayyubid political system for Muslim-Frankish relations? In my judgment there are two main points to consider.

First, each principality within the Ayyubid Confederation had interests of its own, and each had to make its own arrangements with the Crusader states on its borders. Solidarity in the face of the infidel was hardly even an ideal, and was certainly not a reality. Thus, Aleppo was constantly embroiled with Cilician Armenia, and only once (in 1207) did the head of the confederation intervene. Aleppo also signed a series of four commercial treaties with Venice, with no reference to Cairo or anyone else. Likewise, Homs got little help in its constant skirmishes with the Hospitallers of the Crac des Chevaliers. Damascus and Cairo had the same neighbor (the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem) and were equally affected by new Crusades, but from 1227 on they consistently lined up on opposite sides of any conflict. A Crusader threat to one was a welcome opportunity to the other.

Second, because the Crusader states down to the battle of La Forbie (1244) still represented a considerable military force, they were inevitably drawn (albeit with some reluctance) into the internecine quarrels of the Ayyubid princes. Their participation came with a price tag, of course, and they often gained substantial if temporary advantages from Ayyubid princes bidding for their support. Most significant perhaps was the series of concessions granted by al-Ṣāliḥ Ismāʿīl during his struggle with his nephew al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb during the early 1240s; these restored many of the castles in Galilee and south Lebanon lost to Saladin a half-century earlier, and the Franks would retain them until the campaigns of Baybars in 1265. Most shocking to contemporaries, no doubt, was al-Kāmil's agreement in 1229 to return Jerusalem to the Emperor Frederick II for a period of ten years. Indeed, the evidence suggests that al-Kāmil had himself initiated discussions with Frederick three years before, well before the Emperor had even begun to gather his forces for his long-promised and oft-postponed Crusade. At that time al-Kāmil had indicated that he might return Jerusalem to the Franks in return for Frederick's aid against his troublesome brother, al-Muʿazzam of Damascus.

Only in moments which combined grave crisis and an unusual degree of internal cohesion could the Ayyubids act in concert against the Franks. The severest test fell in the summer of 1218, when al-ʿĀdil died at a critical moment in the siege of Damietta. His eldest son and successor, al-Kāmil, was able to obtain the active support and close cooperation of his brothers ruling in Damascus and the Jazira until the collapse of the Crusade in 1221. This situation was never replicated, and it is worth asking how it happened even once. Any answer to that question is a matter of speculation rather than hard evidence, but I offer the following reflections. First, it was obvious to everyone that the summer of 1218 represented a very



grave crisis, one which could easily have led to the end of Ayyubid rule. Second, al-Kāmil was defending his own lands; his armies in the Egyptian Delta posed no threat to any other Ayyubid prince. Finally, the three brothers had not yet had any opportunity or need to test their positions vis-à-vis one another; each had been securely ensconced in his own principality for many years, and each had been kept on a very short leash by his autocratic father. The usual rivalries surfaced quickly enough after the crisis passed in 1221.

The political structure of the Ayyubid Confederation does much to explain the restraint, the eagerness to make a deal, which seems so anomalous in a dynasty which owed its legitimacy to the *jihād* of Saladin. But it does not explain everything. Let us examine two points in particular:

1) Sometimes the Ayyubids hastened to make concessions which were not compelled by internal feuding or external pressure. For example, al-‘Ādil restored a number of places on the Palestinian coast to the Franks in the quite petty Crusades of 1198 and 1204. Only once did they launch a serious sustained offensive; in 1247, the armies of al-Şāliḥ Ayyūb recaptured Tiberias and Belvoir/Kawkab in eastern Galilee along with the coastal town of Ascalon. Otherwise, Ayyubid forces always stuck to a defensive posture.

2) How were the Ayyubids able to square their conduct with the demands of the ideology of *jihād* which they had inherited from Saladin, and which they were obligated to exemplify in order to retain their mandate to rule?

The latter point first. As Sivan showed (following the lead of earlier scholars like Elisséeff and Max van Berchem), *jihād* was a complex concept in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Far more than a struggle against the foreign infidel, it was also an internal struggle within the Dār al-Islām against laxity and heresy. The commitment to *jihād* found expression not only in military expeditions and occasional inquisitions, but in such positive works as the founding of *madrāsahs*, *khānqāhs*, and other institutions of piety and sound learning. To the men of religion and the urban notables generally, the inward-looking face of the *jihād* was perhaps more significant. Indeed, as Michael Chamberlain has recently reminded us, they profited far more directly from this aspect of *jihād* than from any number of victories over the Franks—here again, that happy marriage of interest and religious values which frustrates our efforts to probe the inner motives of these people.⁷

⁷Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350* (Cambridge, 1994), 51-66. See also Sivan, *L'Islam et la Croisade*, chap. 5; Nikita Elisséeff, *Nur al-Din: Un grand prince de la Syrie musulmane aux temps des Croisades* (Damascus, 1967), especially vol. 3. Van Berchem's ideas are scattered throughout his *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum*, especially the three volumes on Jerusalem: *Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale au Caire*, vols. 43-45 (Cairo, 1920-27).



In the internal *jihād*, Saladin's heirs performed splendidly. Most of the Ayyubid princes were, if not pious, men (and women) learned in the religious sciences, skilled litterateurs and poets, and exceedingly generous in the establishment of religious foundations. In Damascus alone they founded sixty-three *madrasahs*, as many as the combined total of the regimes a century on either side.⁸ In their official epigraphic protocols, the Ayyubid princes consistently combined titles and epithets denoting three qualities: God-given military victory, religious learning, and royal justice. Victory, of course, could be won against heretics and rebels as well as foreign infidels. A few outrages, such as al-Kāmil's retrocession of Jerusalem to Frederick II in 1229, or al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā'īl's exchange of eastern Galilee for a military alliance with the Franks of Acre in 1240, provoked scorching public denunciations from a few '*ulamā*', but nothing the Ayyubids did of this kind ever provoked a crisis of legitimacy among either the men of religion or the military elite. The coup d'état of 1250 was rooted in quite different problems. In brief, the Ayyubids knew how to make the ideology of *jihād* serve their policy, however paradoxical it might seem to the literal-minded.

The first point, however—the characteristic and often needless military diffidence of the Ayyubids—is more elusive. It was certainly not a matter of cowardice, since they were bold and tenacious soldiers when they had to be. The solution to this puzzle, I suggest, lies on two levels.

First, material self-interest. The Ayyubids profited enormously from the trade opportunities brought them by the Frankish outposts in Syria. It is clear that from Jaffa, Acre, Tyre, and Beirut a great deal of wealth (and apparently considerable silver) was funneled into Damascus. Likewise, these ports were prime outlets for goods that came to Damascus by way of the pilgrimage road to Mecca, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf-Euphrates route. The major Syrian towns had their own products and manufactures as well, and the Frankish seaports provided a convenient outlet for these.

No doubt Italian and Catalan ships would have continued to visit these places had they been in Muslim hands, but the Ayyubid princes of Syria must have reflected how much more attractive they were if they remained in Frankish hands. Recall also that the Syrian Ayyubids at least had no naval resources at all. Hence if they did recapture the Syro-Palestinian seaports, they had no means of protecting them from piracy or reconquest.

A second reason for Ayyubid caution in dealing with the Franks was doubtless even more compelling. The Ayyubids had been on the verge of ruin on three

⁸R. Stephen Humphreys, "Politics and Architectural Patronage in Ayyubid Damascus," in *The Islamic World from Classical to Modern Times: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lewis*, ed. C. E. Bosworth et al. (Princeton, 1989), 151-74; idem, "Women as Patrons of Religious Architecture in Ayyubid Damascus," *Muqarnas* 11 (1994): 35-54.



separate occasions—the Third Crusade, the Damietta Crusade of 1217-1221, and the Crusade of Louis IX in 1249-1250. At Acre in 1189-1191 and again at Damietta in 1218-1219, the combined forces of the Ayyubid confederation had been inadequate to break a Frankish siege. Indeed, after the fall of Acre Saladin's splendid army never won another victory, and came perilously close to disintegrating altogether. After the fall of Damietta, al-Kāmil's forces almost dissolved. And on more distant horizons, the Ayyubids were certainly aware of the catastrophic Almohad defeat at Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212 and the subsequent loss of al-Andalus to the armies of Castile and Aragon.

In brief, the Ayyubids were terrified of the Franks, who, however badly mauled they might be, just kept coming back. For this reason, they often went to extraordinary lengths to avoid threatening the status quo, and even to make generous concessions, in order to fend off a new expedition which might, this time, be fatal. In view of the powerful forces behind the crusading movement in Europe, such a policy of appeasement was bound to fail, but it was at least a rational choice.

We turn at last to the Mamluk Sultanate. The Mamluk coup d'état of course took place during—and on some level as a consequence of—Louis IX's expedition to Egypt. Louis's forces were defeated and he himself captured during the brief reign of the Ayyubid Tūrānshāh, but the final dispositions for his evacuation were made under the new regime. So the Mamluks started their career not only as assassins of their sovereign, but as victors over the Crusaders. For the next decade, however, they paid precious little attention to the Franks of Syria; they were after all too busy struggling to stay in power, sorting out (in what we would now call a mean-spirited manner) problems among themselves, and finally cobbling together an army which could defend Egypt from the Mongols. Only after that terrifying man Rukn al-Dīn Baybars seized and secured his throne did the Mamluks turn their attention to the Franks in any serious way. After 1263, however, Baybars began a relentless series of campaigns that by 1271 left the Frankish states of Syria in ruins and utterly beyond any serious hope of restoration. How can we account for such a radical and sudden shift in policy?

To answer this question, I propose a line of inquiry based on the following five propositions:

1) The Mamluk Sultanate was in principle—and to remarkable degree in fact—a highly centralized autocracy. In contrast to the localized perspectives of the Ayyubid principalities, the Mamluk regime was well able to shape a unified policy toward the Crusader states.

2) The political center of the Mamluk state was Cairo; Syria was a province (or more precisely, a cluster of provinces), and down to 1310 it was also a vulnerable and often-contested frontier zone. As a result, the interests of Egypt always had primacy in the Mamluk political calculus. As a frontier zone, Syria



was strategically vital to the early Mamluks—they fought all their campaigns there—but economically and politically it was of secondary concern. For that reason, the Mamluk regime could quite readily envision neglect or even suppression of the Syro-Palestinian ports and trade routes. Indeed, there was good reason to funnel all commerce with Europe through Alexandria, where it would most directly benefit the Cairo elite, while simultaneously depriving the provincial governors of Syria of a lucrative source of revenue.

3) The Mongol invasion of Syria and the Jazira in 1259-1260 had drastically altered the international context of Mamluk policy. The Mamluks did not have one permanent enemy, as did the Ayyubids, but two; assessing the preponderance of danger had to be their constant concern. Moreover, the Mamluks had to conjure with the possibility of a Mongol-Frankish alliance, and hence to devise a strategy which could frustrate that possibility.

4) The early Mamluks rose to power at an extremely turbulent moment in Mediterranean political history, and the tensions cut right across the traditional regional boundaries of the basin. In the West, the final dissolution of Almohad power left Spain and the Maghrib up for grabs among a host of local contenders, including the rival Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. In the central Mediterranean, the struggle between the Papacy and the Hohenstaufen for the control of Italy also implicated the ruling house of France, the crown of Aragon, the Hafids of Tunis, and the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII. In the East, there was an ongoing contest between the Byzantines and their countless enemies to control Constantinople, along with the rivalry between Pisa, Genoa, and Venice to dominate the Levant trade. These constantly shifting political alignments provided some useful opportunities for the Mamluks, but also delicate challenges. After 1260 Mamluk policy had to be multi-focal, simply because the Sultanate's vital interests were challenged from every direction.⁹

5) Although the Mamluks maintained the formal ideology of the Ayyubids, with its emphasis on *jihād*, Islamic piety and learning, and royal justice, they laid far greater stress on the purely military dimension of *jihād*. Official Mamluk historiography and Mamluk chancery documents make it clear that in the final analysis *jihād* is war against the infidel. The tone of these texts is almost oppressively strident; a reader of Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir's official biography of Baybars almost gets a headache from the throbbing drums and the glare of sunlight on armor. The Mamluk regime was a near-perfect embodiment of the praetorian state, of course,

⁹The literature is far too vast to survey here. Kenneth M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant, 1204-1571*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1976-78), weaves together many of the threads. Naturally the general histories of the Crusades by Runciman and Setton are indispensable, uneven and out-of-date as they are.



so one should not be surprised at this. But the shift of tone is important and must be noted.

In following out the implications of these five propositions, we might begin by listing the main Mamluk campaigns against the Crusader states of Syria. The sequence is well-known and can be sketched as follows:

- 1265-1266: conquest of Caesarea, Arsuf, and Haifa on the coast, Safad and Toron in Galilee and south Lebanon
- 1268: conquest of Jaffa, Beaufort, and (the crown jewel) Antioch
- 1271: conquest of the Crac des Chevaliers, 'Akkar, and Montfort
- 1289: conquest of Tripoli
- 1291: conquest of Acre, followed by the Frankish abandonment of the remaining seaports, including Tyre, Sidon, and Beirut.

These major conquests clearly fall into two separate blocks, the first from 1265 to 1271, the second from 1289 to 1291. The apparent hiatus of almost two decades deserves some brief comment, since the campaign of 1271 had clearly set the stage for a final assault on Tripoli and Acre. The gap is partly an illusion, since this list of campaigns does not include Baybars's and Qalāwūn's extremely destructive raids on the Kingdom of Cilician Armenia, which was closely linked to the ruling house of Tripoli and Antioch. Nor does it include the incessant raiding by the two sultans against the coastlands, raids which both demonstrated Frankish defenselessness and deprived the Franks of any revenues from the villages around their main towns. Nor, finally, does it include Baybars's eradication of the *Ismā'īlī* strongholds in the mountains between Homs and Latakia.

But the eighteen-year break in campaigns against the Franks of Syria is not just an illusion. It reflects in part a complex transition of power. When Baybars died unexpectedly in 1277, he was succeeded by two of his sons, neither of whom was up to the job in the eyes of the Mamluk elite. The throne was ultimately seized (in 1280) by one of his most effective generals, Sayf al-Dīn Qalāwūn, but almost immediately he had to face a major Mongol invasion. When this was turned back at the battle of Homs (1281), Qalāwūn faced a severe struggle to secure his throne against the ambitions of other amirs, who regarded him as no more worthy than they. Only in 1289 did it again seem plausible to mount a major, and perhaps definitive, campaign against the Franks of Syria. For a brief time, the succession from Qalāwūn to his son al-Ashraf Khalīl (1290-1293) appeared to go smoothly, and al-Ashraf was able to complete the work commenced by his father. (Like his unfortunate predecessors Tūrānshāh and Quṭuz, he was unable to convert a brilliant victory into effective political capital, but that is a story for another time.)



Even though the war against the Franks of Syria was brought to an end under Qalāwūn and al-Ashraf Khalīl, it is clear that Baybars had made that end inevitable. His achievement therefore deserves closer inspection. Although Baybars was a soldier and spent much of his adult life on horseback, I think we must interpret his goals as essentially defensive rather than expansionist. He certainly realized that however powerful an army he might build—and he unquestionably devoted enormous resources and labor to this enterprise—he would never have the resources needed to capture and hold any substantial Il-Khan territories east of the Euphrates or north of the Taurus. With even greater reason, he could not hope to pursue the Franks beyond the sea. This sense of limits was surely confirmed by his two brief efforts to “expand the envelope”: the abortive naval attack on Cyprus in 1271, and his brilliant but evanescent victory over Il-Khan and Rum Saljuq forces at Elbistan in 1277.¹⁰ What he could do was to secure the borders of Egypt and Syria—essentially, just those lands held or seized by the Mamluks in the wake of ‘Ayn Jālūt. These he could make into a mighty citadel which his adversaries—the adversaries of Islam—could not penetrate or subvert, and that is what he tried to do. On the east, the Euphrates River, secured first and foremost by the great fortress of al-Bīrah, would fence out the Mongols. On the west, the Mediterranean Sea would be his rampart, and that explains his systematic dismantling of the port facilities of the coastal towns as they fell into his hands. (The great fortresses of the interior, like Safad and the Crac, were in contrast not only maintained but reinforced.)

The boundaries (and they really are boundaries, not fuzzy frontier zones) defined by Baybars remained almost unchanged down to the very end of the Mamluk Sultanate. The only area in which we find persistent efforts at territorial and administrative expansion is Nubia, and even that was foreshadowed in a pair of punitive campaigns sent out by Baybars. In the early fifteenth century, Sultan Barsbāy (1422-1438) did launch a far more aggressive policy, but his principal target was the Crusader Kingdom of Cyprus—a logical completion of the policy of Baybars and Qalāwūn. In any case, Barsbāy displays the only significant departure from the geopolitical conceptions of his great predecessor.¹¹

I have used the image of a fortress to describe the territorial entity constructed by Baybars. I might also have used the more Islamic metaphor of purification, a concept to which his propaganda often explicitly appealed. The enemies of the Mamluk Sultanate were in every case infidels and heretics—the Christian Franks, the Ismā‘īlīs, the pagan Mongols. In walling out the latter and eradicating the first two, he was purifying the lands of Islam from the pollution of unbelief. It is easy to think of Baybars as a wholly Machiavellian politician, a man obsessed with

¹⁰The best treatment of Elbistan is in Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks*.

¹¹Ahmad Darrag, *L'Égypte sous le règne de Barsbay* (Damascus, 1961), chaps. 7, 9.



power for its own sake. Certainly he was willing to do whatever it took to gain and hold power. But he also saw himself as a Muslim. We witness the public dimension of his commitment to the faith in his extensive program of public works and charitable/religious foundations, in his judicial reforms, in the quite puritanical public morality which he demanded, and—perhaps more persuasively—in his disciplined fiscal administration. The political elite was terrified of him, his ordinary subjects regarded him as a just and equitable monarch—and that was how things ought to be. Most intriguing, though a subject we cannot explore here, was his devotion to the shaykh Khaḍir al-Mihrānī, a man whom many of his contemporaries regarded as a despicable charlatan, but whom Baybars saw as a precious spiritual mentor. In any case, all the evidence indicates that Baybars was personally and deeply engaged with Islam, and this inevitably colored the way he envisioned his strategic policy.¹²

If it is fair to say that Baybars imagined his policies toward the Crusaders in a language of citadel-building and purification, we still need to review the substance of those policies. He was aware, to a very unusual degree, that he could succeed in his goals only within a favorable international environment, and he worked extremely hard to achieve such an environment. In the East, he strove to keep the Il-Khans “otherwise engaged,” to limit their opportunities to stage a new invasion of Syria. In the West, Baybars hoped to neutralize the possibility of any major new Crusades—and recall that only hindsight allows us to assert that after the fiasco of Louis IX, there was no longer any real danger from this quarter. Perhaps most of all, he had to do whatever he could to subvert a Papal-Mongol alliance.

To Baybars must surely go the credit for the first systematic and sustained diplomacy with Christian powers in Islamic history, and this he undertook right from the outset of his reign. In 1261 he established links with the Hohenstaufen in Sicily, knowing that they were not only the great barrier to Papal ambitions but also (since 1229) a traditional “friend” of the Egyptian court.¹³ But Baybars was a realist; when the Hohenstaufen collapsed in 1266 before the armies of the Papal

¹²A detailed list of his public works and charitable foundations is given in the contemporary biography written by ‘Izz al-Dīn ibn Shaddād, edited by Ahmad Hutait as *Die Geschichte des Sultan Baibars*, Bibliotheca Islamica, vol. 31 (Wiesbaden, 1983), 339-59. On his administration of religious institutions, see Joseph Escovitz, *The Office of Qādī al-Qudāt in Cairo under the Bahrī Mamlūks*, Islamkundliche Untersuchungen, vol. 100 (Berlin, 1984). On Khaḍir al-Mihrānī, see Peter M. Holt, “An Early Source on Shaykh Khaḍir al-Mihrānī,” *BSOAS* 46 (1983): 33-49; Thorau, *Lion of Egypt*, 225-29.

¹³A fascinating if all too brief “memoir” by Ibn Wāṣil, Baybars’s emissary to the court of Manfred in Sicily: *Mufarrij al-Kurūb fī Akhbār Banī Ayyūb*, ed. Sa‘īd ‘Abd al-Fattāh ‘Āshūr and Ḥasanayn Rabī‘ (Cairo, 1972), 4:48-251. For recent discussions and bibliography on the issues in this paragraph see: Thorau, *Lion of Egypt*; Holt, *Early Mamluk Diplomacy*; and Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks*.



candidate Charles of Anjou, he quickly moved to establish ties with the latter—and those ties may well have been instrumental in diverting Louis IX's second Crusade to Tunis in 1271. Likewise, in 1261, he sought a commercial treaty and a sort of alliance with the Byzantine emperor Michael VIII, newly reinstalled in the ancient capital of Constantinople. In harmony with his Byzantine alliance, he successfully sought an alliance with Genoa. Except for the commercial clauses (all-important in the case of Genoa), these treaties did not really commit any of Baybars's partners to anything substantive, but they did allow him to stay informed about events and trends in Christian Europe, and no doubt reinforced the innate coolness of his treaty partners toward the Crusading enterprise.

In the second half of the thirteenth century, the Il-Khans clearly represented the deadliest and most immediate threat faced by the Mamluk Sultanate. At three points—1260, 1281, and 1299-1303—the very existence of the state was in question. But apart from these major invasions, Baybars had to deal with a large number of Mongol incursions, and at least a few of these went well beyond raids in force. In this light, Baybars's understanding with the Golden Horde was invaluable. First of all, the very location of the Golden Horde was important, since they could penetrate through the Caucasus passes into northwest Iran, which was the center of Il-Khan power. These same passes gave them access to Il-Khan communications with their Rum Saljuq clients in Anatolia, and to the trade termini in the region (Trabzon, Sīvās, Āyās). Second, the Golden Horde controlled the slave markets of southern Russia (the Dasht-i Qipchaq), and in the thirteenth century (though not later) these were an essential source of Mamluk military manpower. We need to stress, I think, that much of the tension between the Golden Horde and the Il-Khans lay in the fact that these two empires represented rival lineages within the house of Chingiz-Khān, and had conflicting claims to Azerbaijan and Anatolia.¹⁴ Nevertheless, these tensions were clearly exacerbated by the conversion of the Golden Horde ruler Berke Khān to Islam, while the Il-Khans remained firmly committed to traditional Mongol beliefs. Certainly Baybars was able to exploit the religious link between his regime and the Golden Horde to great effect in his early contacts with Berke Khān in 1261-1262. Obviously the conversion of the Il-Khan elite to Islam under Ghāzān Khān (1295-1304) changed the religio-political dynamic, but that lay decades in the future.

Apart from the direct threat represented by the Il-Khans, there was the constant shadow of a Mongol-Papal alliance. No doubt the fear of such an alliance was one of the things that encouraged an aggressive policy toward the Franks of Syria, so as to deprive both the Il-Khans and any European expedition of a foothold in

¹⁴On this point, see Peter Jackson, "The Dissolution of the Mongol Empire," *Central Asiatic Journal* 32 (1978): 186-244.



Syria. Again in hindsight, we can say that all the diplomatic coming-and-going between Rome and Karakorum or Tabriz was a farce, in view of the cosmic political claims of the two parties. But in the mid-thirteenth century this was not so clear. Not only did the Papacy send several missions to the Mongol court; it was ultimately able to establish several flourishing missions in northern China, which survived down to the Ming restoration in 1368. Several Nestorian Christians held high positions at the court of Hülegü—his best general Kitbughā and his wife Dokūz Khātūn, to name two. In 1260, the Christian rulers of Cilician Armenia and Antioch were active allies of the Mongols, though the Franks of Acre did maintain a nervous neutrality. There was, in brief, every reason for Baybars to assume that an effective alliance between the Pope and the Il-Khans might be brought off. In fact such an alliance was concluded at the Council of Lyon (1274), which also momentarily reunited the Greek and Roman Churches. Fortunately for Baybars, this alliance quickly disappeared, due to the death of its guiding spirit Pope Gregory X in 1276 and the conflicting interests of Charles of Anjou, now titular King of Jerusalem and the would-be emperor of Constantinople. But it had been a near thing, and no doubt Baybars felt that his efforts with Michael VIII and Charles of Anjou had been well-invested.¹⁵

We might, finally, take a glance at the diplomacy involved in maintaining regular access to the slave markets of southern Russia. It required three simultaneous alliances: with the Golden Horde, which controlled the manpower reservoir; with Genoa, which controlled the Black Sea trade and the shipping routes between Constantinople and Alexandria; finally, with Byzantium, which controlled the Straits. These three alliances required a nice calculation of the vital interests of each party, and a capacity to exploit the conflicts of each with outside forces. This latter point involved, for example, Genoa vs. Venice, the Golden Horde vs. the Il-Khans, and Byzantium vs. the Papacy and the Angevins. That Baybars and later Qalāwūn brought it off is a high testament to their knowledge of the world outside their borders as well as to their diplomatic skills.

It is time to conclude. The Ayyubids were indeed, as their critics then and since have maintained, reluctant warriors, but I have suggested that they had compelling reasons to be. And likewise the early Mamluks were intensely focused on ridding Syria of the Crusading states at the earliest opportunity. But although

¹⁵The most recent treatment of Mongol-Frankish diplomacy is Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks*, 94-105. Jean Richard has devoted many important articles to this subject; as examples, see "The Mongols and the Franks," *Journal of Asian History* 3 (1969): 45-57; and idem, "Les Mongoles et l'Occident: Deux siècles de contacts," in *1274, année charnière: Mutations et continuité* (Paris, 1977), 85-96. An older (much older than its date of publication) but carefully documented overview is Marshall W. Baldwin, "Missions to the East in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries," in Setton, *History of the Crusades*, 5:452-518.



this policy was in part driven by ideology, it was no expression of mindless fanaticism. On the contrary, the geopolitical realities of the world inherited by the Mamluks almost mandated such a policy; at the very least, it represented a sober and realistic assessment of the realities they had to face. Recall that both Ayyubids and Mamluks draped themselves in the mantle of *jihād*; they did so in very contrasting ways, with perfect accuracy and no doubt with perfect sincerity.



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