

ORIGINAL ARTICLE


The Impact of War, Famine, and Disease on Insecurity in Northern Sham From 488 to 521 / 1095 to 1127 - A Statistical Survey

Abstract

The battle of Muslims with the Crusaders took place when disturbances in the region of Sham, especially in the north, prevented their confrontation with European forces; as a result, the circumstances were brought about for the establishment of European rule in Edessa, Antioch, Jerusalem and Tripoli. Internal conflicts in the northern cities of Sham and prolonged encounters with the Turkmens, Crusaders, and rulers of Mosul and southern Sham caused insecurity in these areas. This insecurity was intensified by factors, such as epidemics, consecutive famines and the maladministration of governors. In this paper, the researcher attempts to use statistical data to evaluate the impact of war, famine and disease on insecurity in Northern Sham on the verge of the Crusaders' attack. For this purpose, primary sources such as "*al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh*", *Ibn al-Qalanisi's "Mudhayyal Ta'rikh Dimashq"*, and "*Zubdat al-halab min tarikh Halab*" were examined; cases of insecurity were extracted and the severity of their impact was analyzed based on the words these sources used to describe the "insecurity" and its underlying factors.

Key words: Sham, Crusades, Famine, Disease, Aleppo, Cholera

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Introduction

During the Middle Ages, the regions of Sham was split into a norther and southern parts due to geographical divisions and the presence of important cities in its north and south. Each of these areas, led by the major cities in their own part, primarily acted differently from one another and sometimes even competed with each other.¹ The leadership of the cities in the northern region was with Aleppo, while the southern cities were headed by Damascus. Before the arrival of the Crusaders in the area, extensive attacks by the Turkmens and Seljuks had led to significant changes in their social and political relations. In the pre-Seljuk period, the Buyids from Iraq, Byzantines from Anatolia, and the Fatimids from Egypt, each tried to thwart the regional supremacy of the others.² But the Seljuq attack imposed new conditions on the region, the most important being the rise of war and militarism. The Turkmen's raid upon their arrival at the region caused much economic and demographic loss to the people of Sham. But after the settlement of government rulers such as *Tutush* and *Qasim al-Dowlah Aqsunqur*, order returned to the region once more. However, with the death of *Sultan Malikshah* and the ensuing conflicts, Sham underwent great unrest.

These disorders were caused by the conflicts of Seljuk military officers with each other and with the Fatimids and Byzantines. Meanwhile, the death of Tutush in 487 raised chaos in the region. Competition between his successors and their inability to control the leaders and military commanders brought about much chaos in the region at the threshold of the Crusaders' attack on Sham.

Conflicts between Muslims continued even after the arrival of the Crusaders. The Crusaders who were now the new political and military power in Sham, fought many wars with Muslims, thus weakening the Muslims of the region more than ever before. In the meantime, the northern region of Sham suffered most from war and chaos due to its neighborhood with the Crusader states of Edessa, Antioch, and Tripoli. This region, with the centrality of Aleppo, repeatedly witnessed internal crises and foreign wars after the rise of *Ridwan* ibn Tutush. The addition of ongoing wars with the Crusaders and their plunder around this region led to a different situation compared to the Southern region of Sham. Constant raids, lack of proper food resource management, and internal conflict led to several stages of famine and disease in Northern Sham. In this way, the unrest caused by numerous wars between the Muslims and the Crusaders, internal clashes in cities between powerful individuals, rivalries for successorship, frequent famine and epidemics caused insecurity

1- Zakkar, 1995: 65.

2- Heidemann, 2005: 290.

in this region to reach a stage that a powerful individual was welcomed by the people in order to establish a stable and safe government in the region. This took place in a few stages for a number of provincial governors such as Toghtekin and Aq-sunqur, but due to their inability in providing security, 'Imad ad-Din Zengi was ultimately welcomed by the people as their savior. The people of Northern Sham were in need of stability and security, thus they supported the Zengid Atabegs. During the rule of 'Imad ad-Din, their most important base for confronting the Zengids of Sham was Aleppo; Aleppo was chosen as their capital during the time of *Nur al-Din*.

This research is a statistical study which attempts to find and analyze the impact of war, famine and disease on insecurity in Northern Sham after the death of Tutush up until the rule of 'Imad ad-Din Zengi. For this purpose, the researcher studied primary sources such as "*Ta'rikh Dimashq*" by *Ibn al-Qalanisi*, "*at-Tarikh al-Baher fi'l-Dowlat-al-Atabekiyah*" and "*al-Kāmil fi al-tārikh*" by *Ibn al-Athir*, "*Bughyat al-Talab fi Tarikh Halab*" and "*Zubdat al-halab min tarikh Halab*" by *Ibn al-'Adim*. What all of these sources had in common were the wars between the Muslims and the Crusaders; however, sources such as "*al-Kāmil*" which generally focused on the history of the world presented fewer details about the situation of the cities in Northern Sham. "*At-Tarikh al-Baher*" also was on the events of this region after the rise of the Zengid Atabegs. Although *Ibn al-Qalanisi's* "*Ta'rikh Dimashq*" provided news from the northern regions, it mostly reported information about Damascus. Out of these sources, "*Zubdat al-halab min tarikh Halab*" provided the most information about famines, disease, and Muslim conflicts; subsequent sources such as "*Nahr al-dhahab fi tarikh Halab*" quoted these reports from this book. Therefore, the statistical data was mostly derived from the book "*Zubdat al-halab min tarikh Halab*". The researcher then double-checked the information given in this book with the other sources to the extent possible. Our endeavor was to study the data extracted from these sources over a historical period starting from 488 to 521 AH/1095 to 1127 in order to assess changes. To this end, the researcher attempted to examine and analyze the grounds of insecurity in Northern Sham prior to the arrival of the Zengid Atabegs.

The situation in Northern Sham before the Arrival of the Crusaders in the Region

After the death of *Malikshah, Tutush Ibn Alp Arslan* left for Rayy to confront his nephew, *Barkyaruq* and seize the throne of his brother; contrary to the expectations of Tutush,



he was defeated and killed in this battle³. Before going to war with *Barkyaruq*, *Taj ad-Dawla Tutush* enjoined his followers to give their allegiance to his son, *Ridwan*. Therefore, before the battle in the region of Hamadhan, he wrote a letter to *Ridwan* informing him of the issue, ordering him to go to Iraq and settle in Baghdad. *Ridwan* set out to Baghdad with a large retinue, including *Ilghazi ibn Ortuq*, *Emir Waththab ibn Mahmud ibn Salih ibn Mirdas*, and others.⁴ When *Ridwan* drew near Hit⁵, he heard of the death of his father⁶, so he returned to Aleppo.⁷ *Tutush's* efforts to draw an army from Sham and the Jazira greatly reduced the military power in these regions and brought about difficult conditions for his children. Under these circumstances, the Seljuk rulers of Sham took advantage of this military weakness and imposed their wants on the children of Tutush. This was true both for rulers outside of Aleppo and Damascus such as *Yağsıyan* and for rulers who were working for them. Due to this, *Ridwan* had to strengthen his position inside and outside Aleppo before all else. This plan, which was carried out almost throughout his rule, was never accomplished.

The city of Aleppo had powerful individuals, and Tutush was not able to force them into obeying him. These people came from different classes, such as the Turkish militants, the viziers, the Turkmen commander, the rulers of neighboring cities, and some were the leaders of the ahdath (urban militia). From the time *Ridwan* gained power until the arrival of the Crusaders in Sham, eleven people were known to be influential individuals in the political relations of northern Sham: *Ridwan*, *Saqman*, *Yağsıyan*, *Janah ad-Dawla al-Husain*, *Yusuf ibn Abaq*, *Majen* the leader of the ahdath in Aleppo, *Daqaq*, *Tughtegin* the Atabek of Duqaq, *Najm al-Din Ilghazi*, the Arabs of Shaizar and *Banu Kilab*, and *Amir Qarajeh*, the ruler of Harran.⁸ From around the year 488 AH/1095 up to 490 AH/1097 AD, these individuals battled against each other sixteen times and formed alliances against each other, which often did not last long; after a while, they entered into an alliance with one of their enemies against a former friend. This caused political division and insecurity in the region in various aspects and shook the military and economic backings of this part of Sham on the verge of the Crusaders' arrival.⁹ During this two-and-a-half-year period, divergence between the units of power was intensified by individuals like *Yağsıyan*. *Yağsıyan*, the ruler of Antioch, who governed this city since the time of *Tutush* and was on one hand the father-in-law of *Ridwan*, did not receive *Ridwan* gladly. *Yağsıyan*, who had come to Sham with *Qasim al-Dowlah Aqsunqur*, probably figured from the fate of his

3- Jalali, 1999: 60.

4- Zakkar, 1995: 217.

5- A city on the banks of the Euphrates, from the districts of Baghdad, above Anbar. The town was known for its agriculture and its many palm groves. It is located beside the desert, and is on one end of the Iraqi border. To its north is the Jazira, and to its west is the Arabian Peninsula. and it is located in the Third Territory, and it is said that this city was named Hit because it is a gore (a triangular piece of land); see Sajjadi, 1997: 49.

6- Ibn Asakir's book "Tarikh Dimashq" mentions that the news of the death of Tutush reached *Ridwan* in Anbar, but Ibn al-Athir's report seems to be more precise; see Ibn Asakir, 1994, Vol. 18: 153.

7- Ibn al-Athir, 1965: 247.

8- Other than those mentioned, people like Abolqasem Vizier were also involved in political affairs, but they were not mentioned here because they did not initiate wars and were insignificant in battles.

9- Among these, we can point to iqta of the village of Ma'arret to Saqman and the clashes between the local rulers over the iqta. Jundi, 1994: 142.

friends in relation to *Tutush*¹⁰ that the presence of an individual from the Seljuk family close to his government was a very serious threat to him.¹¹ Therefore, he opposed *Ridwan* upon his entry to Aleppo, but after *Ridwan* minted coins in his name in Aleppo, *Yağsıyan* accepted his rule and became one of his companions.¹² Following the death of his younger brothers in the hands of *Ridwan* and his other brother's escape to Damascus, *Yağsıyan* emphasized on separating from *Ridwan* and encouraged him to establish an independent government in Damascus.

Although this behavior led *Yağsıyan* to stand against *Ridwan* for some time, he later managed to rejoin his allies. After a while, relations between *Janah al-Dawlah* and *Ridwan* were strained by *Yağsıyan*, causing them to separate.¹³ His behavior with Saqman also led to a division among *Ridwan*'s army. In this way, *Ridwan* got involved in a series of internal and external conflicts. During these two years, eleven cases of external conflicts, five cases of civil conflicts and encounters occurred in Aleppo and the Northern cities of Sham. The opponents in five of these external conflicts were Damascus and its rulers; only one of these conflicts occurred near Damascus, which did not cause much damage. The other battles of *Ridwan* against his brother took place in the Northern part of Sham, leading to the devastation of this region. From the total of these sixteen conflicts, nine were futile for both hostile sides; thus, each sought a stronger ally, to the point where the possibility of *Ridwan*'s alliance with the Fatimid caliph was also raised.^{14, 15} This led to the entry of the Ortuqid Turkmen to political and military issues. The brutal behavior of the Turkmen had already caused much ruin through the plunders in the 6th and 7th decades of the 5th century AH. Now, their impact on the relations between Aleppo and Damascus intensified the damage. During these turbulences, agriculture faced recession due to the plunder of farms.^{16, 17} This issue, together with the Crusaders' invasions and their plunders in the region, caused the outbreak of numerous famines in Northern cities. Overall, the unrest that followed *Ridwan*'s gain of power led to the weakening of the military and economic bases of Sham and brought about insecurity in the Northern regions.

Clashes between Muslim after the Arrival of the Crusaders

Due to the lack of a superior military power in the region, conflicts between the Muslim governments of the region continued, which exacerbated political chaos. Over time, from the year 488 to 521 AH / 1095 to 1127 AD, the units of pow-

10- They took the side of Barkyaruq in his first battle with Tutush; thus they were tortured and starved to death by the ruler of Damascus in the year 487; see Ibn al-'Adim, n.d., Vol. 4: 1956.

11- For more information on the destiny of the Seljuk emirs of Sham refer to Abu Shama, 1997: 102.

12- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 338.

13- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 339.

14- Ibn Taghribirdi, 1972: 158.

15- Kurd Ali, 1983: 244.

16- Ibn al-Athir, 1965: 247.

17- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 342.



er in Sham were weakened and removed from the political scene as a result of ongoing clashes with each other, the Jazira's units' of power and the Crusaders. Thus, over the course of these 33 years, the number of Muslim governments in the region diminished and the grounds for the rise of a powerful government were provided. In this way, the conditions for the establishment of the Zengid Atabegs' rule were brought about. This new government, using its military power, eliminated the remnants of these political units and succeeded in uniting all of Sham, the Jazira, and later Egypt (see Figure 1).

18- Khakrand, 2017: 30.

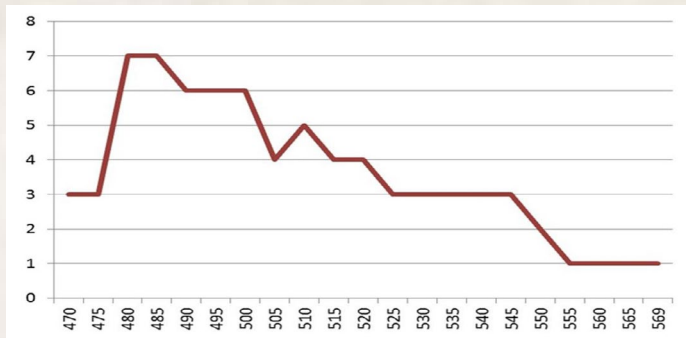


Figure 1. The number of Seljuq governor-dynasty in Sham¹⁸

Until the reign of the Zengid Atabegs, the Muslims of northern Sham experienced 62 cases of unrest (from 488 to 521 AH), 34 of which were domestic and 28 were foreign conflicts. From 488 to 521 AH, the number of foreign conflicts reduced and the number of internal unrest increased (see Figure 2).

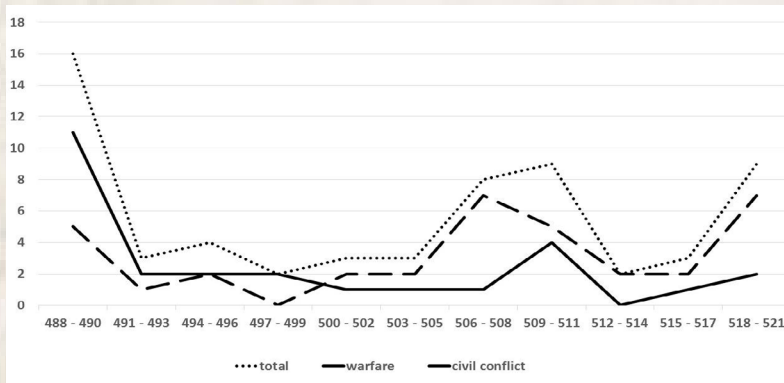


Figure 2. Civil conflict and warfare between Muslims in Northern Sham

The inability to resist against the Crusaders, as well as the gradual weakening of the governments in Sham, can be seen as the factors for the reduction of foreign conflicts. In the



same way, clashes between the heads of state and the arrival of groups such as the Ortuqids in the political relations of northern Sham, especially Aleppo-which had tribal origin and was dependent on the Turkmen forces- led to increased internal unrest. The reduction of external conflicts between Muslims was not due to concord between them, but because of their gradual elimination and the strengthening of the Crusaders in the region. The increase of internal unrest naturally undermined the Muslim states of northern Sham, so that they were not only vulnerable to the Crusaders, but also remained defenseless in the face of drought, famine and disease. This trend of rising internal unrest led to mismanagement. However, this issue can also be viewed from another perspective. The increasing internal unrest was partly due to the rapid change of rulers. Lack of a strong ruler led to an increase in disorder and intensified internal chaos in the Northern Cities of Sham; this was so severe that in the period between 508 and 517 to 521 / 1114, 1123 to 1127 AD, there was at times no ruler in Aleppo, and its people requested the rulers of the Jazira and Damascus to protect Aleppo from the Crusaders. During this period, the city judges and the ahdath took charge of the city.¹⁹

After his father's death, *Ridwan* gained control of the Northern territory which his father had left behind. His rule over Aleppo and the surrounding areas lasted until 507 AH. The land of Edessa was first under his control until one of its people rebelled against *Ridwan*; after some time, this city was surrendered to Baldwin the Crusader.²⁰ *Ridwan*'s nineteen-year government was less powerful compared to his father's rule. His disparity with his brother prevented them from forming a united power and they did not recognize each other's interests. Moreover, when the crusaders entered Sham, *Ridwan* united with them against Duqaq. His Ismaili tendencies and inability to defend the city of Aleppo²¹ resulted in his leaving an unstable state to his descendants. The dispersion of the ahdath²² from others around him and his successors' incompetence to gather popular militant groups contributed to the deterioration of this government. *Alp Arslan ibn Ridwan* ruled Aleppo for one year and *Sultan Shah ibn Ridwan* governed this city for three years. With the death of *Sultan Shah*, people of Aleppo handed the city over to *Najm al-Din Ilghazi* for the fear of the Crusaders.²³ In this way, the 23-year rule of the Seljuks of Sham in Aleppo was dismantled. The rule of *Alp Arslan ibn Ridwan* in Aleppo only caused more corruption in the city.^{24,25} During his reign, the leader of Aleppo and Toghtekin, the atabeg of Damascus, managed the city for him. After him, the heads of Aleppo such as *Lu'lu'*

19- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 387, 390, 412 and 421.

20- Runciman, 2007: 271.

21- see Ibn al-Qalanisi, 1983: 230.

22- Groups of young militia-men and ayyarun were called ahdath during this time period in Sham.

23- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 384.

24- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 376.

25- Ibn Asakir, 1994, Vol. 9: 205.



al-Yaya practically ruled the city because *Sultan Shah* was only 6 years old. During this time, the tension among powerful individuals was so great that they turned to killing each other.²⁶ In the year 511, *Ilghazi ibn Ortuq* entered Aleppo upon its people's request owing to their fear of the Crusaders.²⁷ Aleppo had four Ortuqid governors, each ruling for less than two years. *Tamartash ibn Ilghazi* was the only ruler who gained power through inheritance, after *Sulaiman ibn Abd al-Jabbar* and *Balk ibn Bahram*. Other than *Ilghazi*, his other descendants in Aleppo ruled for less than a year, after which the rule of Aleppo was handed over to the leaders of the Jazira. Two years after the reign of *Tamartash*, *Sulaiman ibn Abd al-Jabbar* ruled Aleppo for only a few months. After that, *Ibrahim ibn Ridwan* took hold of the city²⁸ which was handed over to the rulers of Mosul again. After the death of *Ridwan*, Aleppo experienced its most turbulent period. Over a 14-year period, from 507 to 521 / 1113 to 1127 AD, eleven rulers governed the area, meaning that each person ruled for an average of less than one year and three months.²⁹ Stability returned to this strategic region of Sham only after the arrival of *Imad ad-Din Zengi* in 521 / 1127 AD. *Imad ad-Din* and his son *Nur al-Din* alone governed the area for 48 years, twice as much as the preceding rulers.³⁰ And it was largely due to this that they were able to make great achievements against the Crusaders. Beside *Imad ad-Din* and his son, *Mas'ud ibn Bursuqi* was the only ruler who gained power in this city by inheritance; he also ruled the city only for a few months.³¹

The violent behavior of the Ortuqids in Aleppo and their reliance on the Turkmen led to the weakening of the economic bases of Aleppo. For example, during the siege of Aleppo in the hands of *Balk ibn Bahram* in 517 AH, the city's farms were destroyed, causing great famine in the years to come.³² In addition, since the Ortuqids were reliant on the Turkmen, they needed to plunder in order to meet their expenditures. However, it should be kept in mind that all of the Ortuqid rulers were not as qualified as *Ilghazi* and *Balk ibn Bahram* in military affairs; therefore, they were unable to provide their expenses through war. For this same reason, they failed to provide security in Aleppo against the Crusaders; most of the Ortuqid rulers avoided Aleppo and stayed in their own towns such as Myyifariqin and Mardin, so that *Tamartash ibn Ilghazi* refused to return from Mardin even when the Crusaders besieged Aleppo and Dobais. As a result, Muslim conflicts with each other, internal unrest, constant and rapid change of rulers, recurrent attacks of the Crusaders on Northern Sham, and famine and illness caused severe insecurity.

- 26- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 383.
- 27- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 384.
- 28- Ibn al-'Adim, n.d., Vol. 7: 3216.
- 29- Khakrand, 2017: 19.
- 30- Khakrand, 2017: 20.
- 31- Khakrand, 2017: 429.
- 32- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 414.



Muslim Conflicts with the Crusaders

The arrival of the Crusaders in Sham coincided with foreign wars and internal unrest in Sham. Hence, the military power of the region had deteriorated and the cities of Aleppo did not have the possibility of confronting European powers. But in general, the military force of the cities of Sham was greater than the number of knights in the First Crusade. As in the siege of Antioch by Kerbogha, a large number of fighters from different parts of Sham and the Jazira gathered together. But the disputes among them were so great that when the Crusaders attacked one Muslim city, other Muslim cities did not show any reaction, as they did in the siege of Ma'arret, when neither *Ridwan* nor *Janah al-Dawlah* took any action against the Crusaders and did not help the Muslims there.³³ This was partly due to the great hostility among them. Anyhow, this lack of timely reaction against the Crusaders allowed the European fighters to create bases in the region and to capture important cities such as Edessa, Antioch, Jerusalem and Tripoli. Due to the small number of knights and their reliance on European human resources, the Crusaders did not have the possibility of widespread movements against Muslims; thus they turned to building forts and capturing strategic regions. This way, they were able to take hold of the connection routs to Sham and put its cities under pressure. This issue was more tangible for the North of Sham than the South because the area was adjacent to the County of Edessa in the North and to Antioch in the West. After some time, with the capture of Tripoli, the western parts of Homs (Emesa) fell into the hands of the Crusaders. The military expansion of the Crusaders to Turbessel (Tell Bashir) and the east of Aleppo almost left Aleppo and its environs in the siege of the Crusaders. This was accomplished by taking advantage of the Muslims' weakness; this itself intensified their weakness through military defeat, plunder of farms, confiscation of caravans and the capture of small towns in the area.

From the time of their arrival in Northern Sham in 490 / 1096 until 521 / 1127 AD, the Crusaders had 103 military confrontations with the Muslims, with the averages of more than three battles per year. Out of this number of encounters, the Crusaders were victorious 64 times while the Muslims won only 29 battles. Ten of these conflicts ended with no outcome for none of the hostile sides. Alongside these struggles with the Crusaders- which were the prevalent conflicts of the Muslims at the time- the conflicts between Muslims and civil unrest were an added cause of insecurity in the region. This led to widespread insecurity in the region which was on the one hand due to the military threats of cities and villages, the

33- al-Tabbakh, 1988: 344.



capture of families and the killing of the people, and on the other hand, challenged people's livelihood due to the plunder of agricultural resources and threatened trade routes. The disruption of livelihood itself had other consequences, such as several periods of famine and disease, which had a large impact on the decline of population in this part of Sham. During the battles of the Crusaders in the North of Sham, the towns of the east, north and west of Aleppo were captured, and the city of Aleppo was directly threatened 25 times, six times of which the city was besieged. In some of these blockades, such as the those from the year 518 / 1124 onward, the city was besieged for a long period of time.³⁴ As a result of these wars, the fertile regions of Aleppo, such as Azaz and Athareb, were taken from the hands of the Muslims³⁵; this was a major blow to their economy and livelihood. It was written about the plunder of Athareb that "with the capture of Athareb, Aleppo faced a major weakness"³⁶. In addition, the attacks of the Crusaders of Edessa on the Turkmen and Kurd tribes and the plunder of their herds left the people of Aleppo short of tribal food sources.³⁷ The victories of the Muslims at this time were mostly attained by the Turkmen under the leadership of the Ortuqids³⁸ and as previously stated, the Ortuqids failed to utilize these victories (see Figure 3). This led them into giving ransom and surrendering some regions to the knights of Edessa and Antioch in several stages in order to provide the security of the city against the Crusaders.

- 34- Ibn al-Athir, 1965: 610.
- 35- Zakkar, 2007: 339.
- 36- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 367.
- 37- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 414.
- 38- see Sibti ibn al-Ajami: 1996: 194.

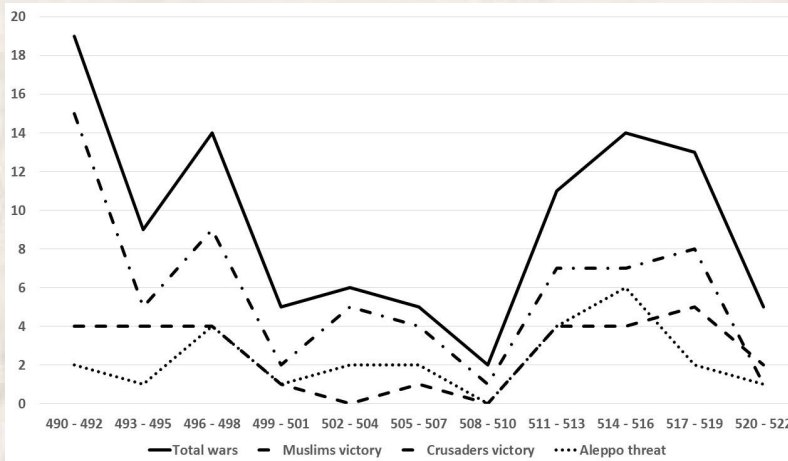


Figure 3. Muslim wars with the Crusaders in northern Sham

This method was used several times during *Ridwan's* rule, but at the time of *Ridwan* and *Ilghazi's* successors in Aleppo, this method was not useful; the helplessness of Aleppo in providing its security has sometimes been mentioned in

some resources in this way:

“On the 3rd day of *Sha’ban, al-Afranj* (the Franks) decided to turn down the city of Aleppo. The people of the city fled; some of them were plundered and some captivated. Aleppo’s situation collapsed from Leilan to Shaizar and fear replaced safety and security. People of the Jazira and Leilan fled to Aleppo, but the European army reached them, captured a large number of people, and killed a number of them. This calamity which befell the areas of Syria was greater than the first calamity that befell *al-Kala’a*.³⁹”

During this period, there was some cooperation between the Muslims and the Crusaders, but every alliance of the Muslims in Northern Sham with the European forces was ultimately to the disadvantage of the Muslims. In 502 / 1108, *Ridwan*’s alliance with Tancred against Jawuli and the Knights of Edessa was futile; immediately after that, the eastern parts of Aleppo were plundered by the Count of Antioch. With the conquer of Tripoli in 503 / 1109 AD, these plunders became more intense and affected the Homs area.⁴⁰ In 518 / 1124, the collaboration between Dabis and the Crusaders brought about severe destruction to the city and its farmlands after which the famine of the previous year became more intense.⁴¹ Thus, Aleppo’s course of weakening pushed its people into welcoming any strong Muslim government: in 508 / 1114, Toghtekin, in 512 / 1118, Ilghazi, in 518 / 1124, Aqsunqur Borsoghi⁴² and in 522 / 1128, ‘Imad ad-Din Zengi were welcomed and the city was left at their disposal. Out of these individuals, ‘Imad ad-Din managed to provide security in Sham for a relatively long time.

Famine and Disease

Sham region has experienced many diseases in its history. Some of these diseases, such as the Plague of Emmaus, had a profound effect on the region’s history. Due to the geographical location of the tropical⁴³ region, deadly diseases, such as cholera and plague took hold in the area. But there are a few things to note about Sham diseases. First, Sham region had neutral boundaries because of the Islamic border (the Thoqour)⁴⁴, where many scholars who had been expelled from the Abbasid and Byzantine government centers gathered there. Its important cities were Harran and Edessa. This led to the presence of a significant number of physicians in the area. Second, the urban character of Sham, especially in the south, made it more accessible to health facilities than the rural and nomadic communities. The third was India’s trade routes to Europe and Asia⁴⁵ to Africa, enabling people to buy medicines. But what is happening at this time zone

و قصد الفرنج بلد حلب فأجفل أهله، و نهب من نهب و سبي من سبي، و ذلك في الثالث من شعبان و اضطربت أحوال بلد حلب من ليلون إلى شيزر، و تبدل الخوف بعد الأمن و السكون، و هرب أهل الجزر و ليلون إلى حلب، فأدرتهم خيل الفرنج فسبوا أكثرهم، و قتلوا جماعة و كانت هذه النكبة على أعمال حلب أعظم من النكبة الأولى على كلاً.

Ibn al-’Adim, 2004: 363.

40- Ibn al-Qalanisi, 1983: 264.

41- Ibn al-’Adim, 2004: 422.

42- al-Halabi al-Ghazzi, 1998: 76.

43- Many of the Companions of the Prophet and Tabi’un were killed in the epidemic (see: Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, 1992: Vol. 1: 303; Vol. 2: 672, 699, 794 and 796; Vol. 3: 1135, 1270 and 1405; Vol. 4: 1576, 1595 and 1711.

44- ثغور

45- see: Al-Maqdisi, 1991: 161.



was the closure of the trade lines from Mesopotamia to Sham and from Sham to Egypt. Therefore, the possibility of drug and food trade also disappeared. Therefore, according to local history, diseases were associated with famines. Although library sources are not yet clear on the nature of the disease, cholera has been mentioned in some cases.

With the Crusaders entering Sham, a new population mix emerged that provided some information concerning the transmission of diseases between the newcomers and the indigenous people, but none of the Islamic sources referred to this transmission of disease, and numerous sources also cited the disease before the arrival of the Crusaders. As such, it was less likely for the disease to transmit from European populations to Muslims.

Furthermore, there is no approved historical record to indicate the possibility of disease transmission from European populations to Muslims. But on the other hand, there are European sources frequently referring to the disease of the Crusaders. According to Latin sources, the Frank warriors were not adapted to Sham's weather and hence they could not fight well in such climates. What is now most evident about the diseases at this point in history in Sham⁴⁶ is that Turkmens' attacks and its escalation by the Crusader invasion, have led to a decline in people's livelihoods, resulting in food scarcity in the North of Sham. After these famines, historical documents have also mentioned the presence of the disease.

Famine and disease were observed in Sham mostly at the time of the siege of cities or the supremacy of tribes, as in the battle of the Hamdanids with the Byzantines where cases of famine and ensuing disease were reported.⁴⁷ However, most reports of hunger and scarcity in this area linked famine to the siege of cities. This was also seen in the conflict between the tribes of Banu Merdas and Banu Kilab. But since the arrival of the Turkmens in Sham and their confrontation with the Arab tribes, together with their invasion of the cities and farmlands and the plunder of cities, famine and cholera broke out in Sham. Eight periods of famine struck northern Sham in the years 459, 460, 461, 468, 469, 471 and 472 / 1066, 1067, 1068, 1075, 1076, 1078 and 1079 seven of which were severe. Historical texts described these periods as follows:

“Great hunger; great epidemic; high prices; disease; cholera; prices increased until people ate each other; many deaths; increased price so that some killed others and ate their meat”^{48, 49}.

Out of this number, three cases of famine were reported with concurrent outbreaks of disease, two of which was diagnosed as cholera. The Turkmen played an important role

46- Phillips, 2017: 124.

47- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 136.

48- جوع عظيم، الوباء العظيم، الغلاء، و العلة، و الوباء، غلت الأسعار بها حتى أكل الناس بعضهم بعضا، و موت كثير، اشتد الغلاء بها، قوم قد قتلوا قوما و أكلوا الحومهم

Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 252, 255, 257, 289 and 299.

49- Ibn al-Athir, 1965: 100, 105.



in seven occurrences of these famines. They caused these disasters by plundering the areas of Sham and Anatolia, destructing farms and orchards, captivating farmers and blockading cities. During the rule of Muslim ibn Quraysh Oghili, *Qasim al-Dowlah Aqsunqur* and *Tutush*, the nutrition of the people improved and as a result, illness and famine were not considered a threat any more. However, it should be noted that the economic status of Sham weakened after the plunder of the Turkmen. Although historical sources provided little quantitative data, given their descriptions of the number of slaves the Turkmen brought from Antioch and Anatolia, or the amount of goods and the number of cattle available for sale after their plunder,⁵⁰ the damage incurred was not compensated during the rule of *Muslim ibn Quraysh*, *Qasim al-Dowlah* and *Tutush*. This made Sham prone to further famine in times of chaos, especially in its northern regions. When *Ridwan* came to power in Aleppo, the livelihood of its people was threatened because of his numerous conflicts with the Muslims and the Crusaders, and also because of the city's internal unrest during and after the reign of *Ridwan*. This, on the one hand, resulted from the mismanagement of individuals such as *Alp Arslan ibn Ridwan*, and on the other hand was due to the insecurity of trade routes and the plunder of caravans during the Crusades; more importantly, it was due to the plunder of towns and cities by the Crusader and Muslim rulers. Thus, 14 cases of famine, disease and plunder of farms were reported from 488 up to 521 AH/1095 to 1127 AD. This means that, on average, famine, disease, or plunder of farms took place almost every two years. During this period, there were nine famines, six of which were severe, described in the following quotation:

“They ate the dead and the animals; prices increased and hunger intensified in Aleppo, until they ate the dead.”^{51, 52}

Among these famines, three cases of cholera were reported which caused a great number of deaths. The number of famines increased and their severity intensified from 517 to 520 / 1123 to 1126 AD. This was, on one hand, due to the plunders of *Balk ibn Bahram* and the Turkmen in Aleppo's surroundings; on the other hand, because of the number of famines, diseases, wars and earthquakes, which led to the decrease of population in these areas, diminishing the defensive force against the plunders of the Crusaders and the agricultural workforce. This itself intensified the famines that occurred during the stated years.

This decline in population in Northern Sham took place during a course of massacres, deaths from disease and famine, and the migration of people to other areas. These events

50- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 255.

51- أكل ... الميتات و التواب، شدة الغلاء و الجوع بحلب، حتى أكلوا الميتات

Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 350, 352, 385, 414 and 422.

52- Ibn al-Qalanisi, 1983: 338.



were reported in the years 488, 490, 491, 493, 502, 503, 508, 511, 514, 517, 518 and 520 / 1095, 1097, 1098, 1100, 1108, 1109, 1114, 1117, 1120, 1123, 1124 and 1126 AD. In 488 / 1095 AD, the farmlands in Edessa were ruined by the army of *Ridwan*.⁵³ In 490 and 491 AH/1097 and 1098 AD, a severe famine struck Antioch due to the long blockade of the city by the Crusaders and then by Kerbogha.⁵⁴ In 491 / 1098 AD, a severe famine struck Aleppo where people turned to eating the dead. This was due to the plunders of the Crusaders in the area and the internal and external conflicts of the Muslim governments of the region.⁵⁵ In 493 / 1100 AD, famine in Aleppo was so severe that nothing was cultivated on its lands; cholera broke out, causing the Arabs a large casualty and the residents evacuating the towns. This was due to the grazing of cattle in the fields of Ma'arret, Kafartab, Hama, Shaizar, *al-Jesr* and other cities by the *Banu Kilab* and other Arabs.⁵⁶ In 502 / 1108 AD, there was a severe hunger in Mayyifariqin due to the siege of the city by Saqman.⁵⁷ In 503 / 1109 AD, the population of Aleppo declined and famine struck due to the plunder of Aleppo's surrounding by Tancred and the killing of farmers and the capture of their families.⁵⁸ The threat to the Muslim Family Institute was considered as one of the factors making people immigrate to other regions, resulting in the decline of the population. In 493 / 1100 AD, a large number of Muslims fled because of the Crusaders' invasion.⁵⁹ This was so severe that *Ridwan* sold the towns of Aleppo in order to appease the people and invite them to stay in the city.⁶⁰ In 508 AH, *Lu'lu'*, the ruler of Aleppo, sold many villages in Aleppo to spend the money on the city military expenses.⁶¹ Insecurity, famine, disease, population decline and numerous wars caused instability in Aleppo's situation so that during a drought, the city suffered from famine, like what took place in the year 511 / 1117.⁶² The possibility of importing food from other areas was also a rather difficult task at a time when trade routes were threatened by the Crusaders. On the other hand, cities such as Azaz and Athareb, which were Aleppo's food sources, were at this time captured by the Crusaders; as a result, Aleppo was deprived of this food sources, as well.

It should be noted, however, that fear of famine was not restricted to the Muslims of Northern Sham. Fear of famine was serious for the Crusaders too. Thus, in the year 505 / 1111 AD, despite all of *Toghtekin's* attempts to force the Crusaders to free Sur (Tyre), they only ended the siege when they feared that *Toghtekin* would set their crops on fire.⁶³ This was while the Crusaders, in addition to the cultivation of the coastal regions, maintained part of their food supply

53- Ibn al-Athir, 1965: 247.

54- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 350.

55- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 352.

56- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 356 and 357.

57- Ibn al-Qalanisi, 1983: 263.

58- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 368.

59- al-Azimi quoted by Zakkar, 1995, Vol. 11: 5170.

60- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 368.

61- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 378.

62- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 385.

63- Ibn al-Athir, 1965: 490.



from Muslim lands. In 514 / 1120 AD, Joscelin gathered the grains, plundered and seized the Muslim farmers, and set on fire everything from Naqara to Ohos, and killed and captivated its people⁶⁴. In 515 / 1121 AD, the grains of Western Aleppo were burned again by the Crusaders. In addition to the plunder of grains and the burning of agricultural products, the plunder of tribes and the seize of the Turkmen and Kurd tribes' cattle removed another food source from the hands of the Muslims. In 517 / 1123 AD, Joscelin plundered 10,000 herds of cattle from the Turkmen and Kurds in circumstances that Aleppo was suffering a severe famine due to the raids of *Balk ibn Bahram*.⁶⁵ With the increased weakness of most of the Muslim governments in Northern Sham, especially Aleppo, the Crusaders' plunders advanced toward Aleppo, such that in 520 / 1126 *Baldwin* destroyed Aleppo's farmlands along the Queiq River.⁶⁶ Beside the Crusaders' plunders in Northern Sham, the Turksmen's raids caused much damage to Aleppo. The presence of *Balk ibn Bahram ibn Ortuq* in the military scene of the region from the year 517 / 1123 was followed by a wave of famine caused by his devastations. His plunders around Aleppo and Khartbart caused widespread famine in Northern Sham, which severely affected Aleppo and *al-Rahba* until late 518 / 1124.⁶⁷

64- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 398.

65- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 414.

66- Ibn al-'Adim, 2004: 422.

67- Ibn al-Qalanisi, 1983: 338.

Conclusion

The Turkmen assault on Sham in the mid-fifth century averted the balance between the Arabs of Sham, the Fatimids and the Byzantines. This led to a reduction in the security of the region in the struggle between tribal military commanders and the Seljuk emirs. This was more evident in the rivalry between *Qasim al-Dowlah Aqsunqur* and *Tutush ibn Alp Arslan*. As a result of this rivalry between the rulers of Sham, the central power was gone; with the death of *Tutush* in the battle with the Seljuk sultan, there was practically no supreme power in Sham. This was more noticeable for the Northern regions of Sham because the number of units of power in this area was higher; as a result, tension between them caused more complications for the area. Prior to the arrival of the Crusaders, the conflicts in Northern Sham were mostly related to internal unrest and the struggle between local emirs; during the years 488 up to 491 / 1095 to 1098 AD, 16 wars were fought, nine of which were futile. These conflicts, whether between the rulers of northern Sham or between the southern emirs, took place in the Northern regions, resulting in the destruction of the northern cities. This number of battles between Muslims before the reign of the Zengid Atabegs included a total of 62 cases of unrest,



34 of which were internal unrest and 28 foreign conflicts. From 488 to 521 / 1095 to 1127 AD, the number of foreign conflicts decreased while the number of internal unrest increased. Alongside this, the excessive shift of rulers especially in Aleppo and rivalry over succession led to the entry of powerful groups such as the Ortuqid Turkmen to Aleppo, which heightened instability. With the appearance of the Crusaders in the political and military arena, insecurity took on a new form. Prior to the Crusaders' entrance, the Muslims' rivalry with each other had weakened their forces; with the arrival of the Crusaders who believed that Muslims were pagans, more chaos was brought about for the people of the area. From the time of their entry to Northern Sham in 490 to 521 / 1097 to 1127 AD, they had 103 military confrontations with the Muslims, which averaged to more than three battles per year. Out of this number of battles, the Crusaders succeeded 64 times while the Muslims were victorious in only 29 battles; 10 battles also ended without any result for both sides. Alongside struggles with the Crusaders - which were the Muslims' main battles at the time - conflicts between Muslims and civil unrest also contributed to the insecurity of the region. This led to widespread insecurity in the area. This insecurity, on one hand, was the result of the military threats of cities and towns, the capture of families and the killing of people, and, on the other hand, the plunder of agricultural resources and threatened trade routes, all which challenged people's livelihood. The disruption of livelihood itself had other consequences, such as several periods of famine and disease, which had a significant impact on population decline in this part of Sham. During the battles of the Crusaders in Northern Sham, the villages of the east, north and west of Aleppo were captured by them; Aleppo was directly threatened 25 times, and the city was besieged in six cases.

The conflicts between the Muslims themselves and between the Muslims and the Crusaders resulted in the rise of insecurity in the northern region of Sham. In addition to the killing of people, this insecurity was mostly because of plunders, famine and epidemics. From 488 to 521 / 1095 to 1127 AD, 14 cases of famine, disease and farmland plunder were reported. On average, famine, disease, and plunder of farms took place almost every two years. During this period, famine struck nine times, six of which were severe. Among these famines, three cases of cholera were reported, which caused a lot of death. The number of famines and their severity intensified from the year 517 to 520 / 1123 to 1126 AD. This was on one hand due to the plunders of *Balk ibn Bahram* and the Turkmen in Aleppo's surroundings; on the



other hand, with the number of famines, disease, wars and earthquakes the region went through, the population in these areas reduced and, as a result, the defensive forces against the plunders of the crusaders and workforce for agriculture diminished. These issues intensified the famines during the stated years. The population decline in northern Sham took place through a series of killings, deaths from disease and famine, and the emigration of people to other areas. This led to a reduction in the population of Sham, and as a result, people were in need of a strong government that could bring about security in the region. Therefore, when 'Imad ad-Din Zengi came to power in Mosul, the people of Northern Sham easily and willingly received him.

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