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Political Relations between the Almohad and Ayyubid States

Dr. Touileb Abdallah

Department of Human Sciences, University of Saida Dr Moulay Tahar, Algeria. Email:
abdellah.touileb@univ-saida.dz ; Orcid: 0000-0002-3306-4321

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Abstract

This article examines the political relations that emerged between the Almohad state in the western Islamic world and the Ayyubid state in the eastern Islamic world. These states experienced a political reality marked by the Crusades in the Levant, as well as the conflict between Christian kingdoms and Muslims in al-Andalus. This context had a significant impact on their relations, which therefore did not reach an advanced level due to the external and internal challenges faced by both states. Nevertheless, political relations did exist between them and were expressed in various forms and manifestations.

Discussing the political ties between two Islamic states that held great importance at the time compels us to delve deeper into identifying the features of these relations. Since the studies that addressed this topic are very limited, this research attempts to clarify some of the ambiguity surrounding the subject.

Keywords: Almohads, Ayyubids, political relations, Islamic Maghreb , Egypte

Introduction

The subject of relations between the Islamic East and West is one that has long been neglected, and historians did not begin to pay attention to it until the modern era. Relations between the East and the West form a vast and complex field of study. For this reason, I chose the period of the Almohads and the Ayyubids, setting the timeframe from the mid-sixth to the mid-seventh century AH. This era witnessed serious events that affected the Islamic world: the Almohad state was engaged in continuous warfare with the Christian West in al-Andalus, while the Ayyubid state

was confronting repeated Crusader campaigns. Thus, the situation in both regions was similar.

In studying this topic, I relied on a set of primary and secondary sources. Among the primary sources are al-Bayān al-Mughrib by Ibn ‘Idhārī al-Marrākushī, al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh by Ibn al-Athīr, al-Rawḍatayn fī Akhbār al-Dawlatayn al-Nūriyya wa al-Ṣalāhiyya, al-Sulūk li-Ma‘rifat Duwal al-Mulūk by al-Maqrīzī, and al-Anīs al-Muṭrib by Ibn Abī Zar‘. Among the secondary references are Studies in the History of the Islamic Maghreb by ‘Izz al-Dīn ‘Umar Aḥmad Mūsā, Relations of the Almohads with the Christian Kingdoms and Islamic States by Hishām Abū Rumayla, The Near East in the Middle Ages (The Ayyubids) by al-Sayyid al-Bāz al-‘Arīnī, and The Ayyubids and Mamluks by Qāsim ‘Abdu Qāsim and ‘Alī al-Sayyid ‘Alī.

My approach to this topic led me to formulate the following central question: What were the reasons behind the weakness of Almohad–Ayyubid relations despite the shared Crusader threat that both states faced?

To address this topic clearly and facilitate understanding, I examined the following key elements, aiming to simplify and interpret the subject matter as effectively as possible.

1. Qarāqūsh’s Expeditions

To understand the Ayyubid position regarding the conflict over Barqa, Tripoli, and Ifriqiya, we must first clarify the true motives behind Qarāqūsh’s campaign (Moussa, 1983, p. 24). Al-Tījānī, in his *Rihla*, links it to the tension between Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and Nūr al-Dīn (al-Tījānī, 1958, p. 112), and Ibn Khaldūn follows him in this view (Khaldūn, 1959, p. 394). In addition, Nūr al-Dīn wrote to the Abbasid caliph al-Mustaḍī saying: “Likewise, the Egyptian forces... took control of Barqa and its fortresses until they reached the borders of the Maghreb Islamic , and from their efforts they achieved what was thought impossible” (Moussa, 1983, p. 20). Ibn Khaldūn also explains Qarāqūsh’s connection with Ibn Ghāniya by stating that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn instructed him to do so at the request of the Abbasid caliph, since Ibn Ghāniya used to show loyalty to the Abbasids. Supporting this view—which attributes responsibility for Qarāqūsh’s actions to Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn—is the fact that Qarāqūsh used

to deliver sermons in the name of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and Taqī al-Dīn (al-Maqrīzī, 1956, p. 60).

The first to link Qarāqūsh's campaign to the estrangement between Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and Nūr al-Dīn was Abū Muḥammad al-Tijānī. Al-Tijānī wrote in early eighth century AH in Tunisia, making him distant in time and place from the events in question—especially since Eastern historians of the Ayyubid state did not mention this claim, although they did record the Yemen affair (Abū Shāma, 1991, pp. 203–204). Even if Nūr al-Dīn or Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn wrote to the Abbasid caliph asserting Qarāqūsh's actions as their own, this alone is not conclusive evidence, for Nūr al-Dīn often attributed Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's actions to himself. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, in turn, took shelter under Nūr al-Dīn's authority, and a similar pattern appears with Qarāqūsh when he gave sermons in the name of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and Taqī al-Dīn.

Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn emerged under exceptional circumstances. His position in Egypt would not stabilize unless he guaranteed safety from the Crusaders in the Levant. Had stability been achieved, he would have extended his authority over the Almohad–Sicilian zone of conflict. For this reason, we find him in 582 AH preventing his nephew Taqī al-Dīn from marching toward the Maghreb Islamic, stating the same justification: “When we conquer Jerusalem and the coast, we will proceed toward those kingdoms” (Abū Shāma, 1991, p. 130).

Taqī al-Dīn, the nephew of Salah al-Din, is described by Abū Shāma: “When Shams al-Dawla took control of Yemen, the soul of his nephew Taqī al-Dīn yearned for kingship, and he began searching for a place that could secure him authority. He was informed that the fortress of Zīrī was the gateway to the Maghreb Islamic” (Mousa, 1983, p. 22). Supporting Abū Shāma's statement is the fact that when Salah al-Din, in 582 AH, appointed al-Zāfir over Aleppo, al-‘Azīz over the government of Egypt, and al-‘Ādil as his deputy there (Abū Shāma, 1991, p. 130), Taqī al-Dīn resolved to march toward the Maghreb Islamic. Salah al-Din appeased him by expanding his authority in the Euphrates region (Ashour, 1996, p. 33). Based on this, we may conclude that the official Ayyubid involvement was not undertaken with Qarāqūsh, but Salah al-Din's desire for intervention certainly existed—though the circumstances were not favorable.

It seems that Taqī al-Dīn's initial preparations alerted Qarāqūsh to the possibility of gaining authority and rule in the Maghreb Islamic. For this reason, we

may accept the account stating that when Taqī al-Dīn refrained from going, his mamlūk Qaraqūsh and Ibrāhīm Qarāqtīn fled with a group to the Maghreb (al-Tijani, 1958, p. 112). Supporting this is the case of Bawāzba, the mamlūk of Taqī al-Dīn, who departed after the second attempt (Abū Shāma, 1991, p. 70). Thus, Qaraqūsh acted on his own initiative; and in an effort to gain legitimacy, he delivered sermons in the name of Salah al-Din and Taqī al-Dīn. His relationship with his master remained good, and he even wrote to summon him in 582 AH (Abū Shāma, 1991, p. 70). It is therefore unsurprising that Salah al-Din would adopt his actions and order him to cooperate with the Majorcans (Khaldun, 1959, p. 398), especially since they, like him, invoked the name of the Abbasids. Ayyubid relations with the Majorcans remained positive, to the extent that Ibrāhīm ibn Ishāq ibn Ghāniya died in Damascus while residing under the protection of Sultan al-‘Ādil (al-Marrakushi, 2006, p. 270).

The sources are inconsistent and contradictory regarding the beginning of Qaraqūsh’s campaign in the Maghreb. According to Abū Shāma, it began in 571 AH (Abū Shāma, 1991, p. 259). According to al-Tijani, in 568 AH (al-Tijani, 1958, p. 111). According to al-Maqrizi, in 573 AH (al-Maqrizi, 1956, p. 60). Al-Maqrizi’s account cannot be accepted, for despite being chronologically later, his reports are contradictory, attributing to Ibrāhīm Qarātkīn what other sources attribute to Qaraqūsh. As for al-Tijani, he mentions the year 586 AH in the context of Ibn Matruh’s arrival in Alexandria, which results in a mixing of distinct historical periods.

If we recall that Taqī al-Dīn’s preparations were related to the war in Yemen in 569 AH, it becomes more likely that the beginning of Qaraqūsh’s activities occurred between 569 AH and 571 AH. His campaign in the Maghreb passed through five stages.

The **first stage** began with the flight of Qaraqūsh and Ibrāhīm Qarāqtīn: Qarāqtīn took control of Qafsa and remained there until he was killed by the Almohad caliph al-Mansūr, while Qaraqūsh seized Santriyya, Zalla, and Awjila. This phase ended with his return to Egypt in 571 AH.

The **second stage** began with Qaraqūsh’s control of Tripoli in 579 AH. The **third stage** represents his alliance with Ibn Ghāniya after 571 AH. The **fourth stage** is the period during which he submitted to the Almohads beginning in 583 AH.

The **fifth stage** represents his flight from the Almohads, his second seizure of Tripoli, his conflict with the Majorcans, and his eventual end.

2. The Contact Between Salah al-Din and al-Mansūr al-Muwaḥḥidī

The sources mention only one attempt at coordination between the two states, in 585 AH, initiated by Salah al-Din, who requested naval assistance from the Almohads. Most Eastern and Western sources remain silent on this matter. To understand the reasons for this silence, we must examine three points:

1. Salah al-Din's situation
2. The nature of the sources
3. The mentality of the Maghrebis and the impact of al-Mansūr's reply upon them.

Salah al-Din did not feel secure from the Crusader threat, particularly as Guy de Lusignan was still besieging Acre. The fall of Jerusalem had ignited intense reaction in the West, whose rulers began preparing for a third crusade. From 585 AH onward, reports of these preparations began reaching Salah al-Din (Mousa, 1983, p. 33). These developments worried him, and he began sending envoys in all directions, including to the King of the Maghreb. The Almohads possessed a powerful naval fleet dating back to the era of Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf ibn 'Abd al-Mu'min. Ibn Abī Zar' says of him: "He amassed wealth, increased his armies and troops, stabilized the lands, and brought under his obedience all those on both shores... and wealth multiplied in his days" (Ibn Abī Zar', 1972, p. 134). Supporting this is the fact that the King of Sicily feared him, sent him tribute, and concluded a truce agreeing to deliver a yearly sum (al-Marrakushi, 2006, p. 252). From this, it is clear that the Almohad ruler al-Mansūr possessed the resources and armaments needed—particularly at sea.

The letter carried by 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Munqidh from Salah al-Din to al-Mansūr al-Muwaḥḥidī described the situation of the Muslims in the East: how they defended Islamic lands and the victories they had achieved, but also how the Christian West had begun reinforcing its warriors with men, supplies, and ships (Mousa, 1983, p. 36). In *Kitāb al-Rawḍatayn*, the address to al-Mansūr employs unofficial epithets yet conveys admiration and respect, such as: "Upholder of nobility and pinnacle of leadership, essence of excellence, judge of

judges, scholar of scholars, supporter of religion and its guardian, leader of Islam and its standard-bearer, protector of the faith, exalter of the Almohads over the atheists—may God perpetuate his victory” (Abū Shāma, 1991, pp. 172–173). However, al-Qalqashandī addresses him as “Amīr al-Mu’minīn,” though within the text of the letter he repeatedly uses the expression “our lord” without mentioning the caliphal title (al-Qalqashandī, 1915, p. 526).

Ibn Munqidh departed for the Maghreb Islamic on 28 Sha‘bān 586 AH, and he reached Ifriqiya in Rajab of the same year (al-Marrākushi A., 1985, p. 209). Although he kept the purpose of his journey concealed, he was received with great honor by Abū Zayd in Ifriqiya and Abū al-Hasan in Bijāya, following the instructions of the caliph al-Mansūr. He proceeded until he reached Fes, where he waited for al-Mansūr, who was absent in al-Andalus (Mousa, 1983, p. 38). When his stay grew long, Salah al-Din sent a message urging him to hasten.

Al-Mansūr returned from al-Andalus and settled in Marrakesh due to illness, where he received Salah al-Din’s envoy in Muḥarram 588 AH (al-Marrākushi A., 1985, p. 183). Ibn Munqidh presented Salah al-Din’s gift to al-Mansūr, which consisted of:

“a noble Qur’anic codex in an ornamented case, three hundred mithqāls of ambergris, ten necklaces numbering six hundred beads, aloe wood in a chest weighing ten *umnān*, balsam oil—one hundred and one dirhams—Indian sword blades...” (al-Nāṣirī, 1954, p. 163).

He then conveyed Salah al-Din’s letter after employing all his rhetorical skills in praising al-Mansūr. The latter lavished him with gifts (al-Marrākushi A., 1985, p. 184). Al-Salāwī reports that he told him: “*We have given you what we gave you out of respect for your merit and for the honor of your house.*” (al-Nāṣirī, 1954, p. 164)

Abū Shāma attributed al-Mansūr’s refusal of Salah al-Din’s request to the fact that he did not address him with the title *Amīr al-Mu’minīn*. Yet this alone is not sufficient to explain al-Mansūr’s rejection. The actions of Qaraqūsh—which we previously detailed—although not directly linked to Salah al-Din, had aroused the resentment of the Almohads toward the Ayyubids. Salah al-Din himself explained to Ibn Munqidh how he should respond if questioned about the matter, saying: “If he is asked about Yūzba and Qaraqūsh, and what they did in the frontiers of the

Maghreb Islamic together with the refuse of men who were expelled from the ranks of battle, he should inform them that these two mamlūks and those with them are not among the notable mamlūks nor among the commanders... God forbid that we would command a corrupter to spread corruption upon the earth.” (Abū Shāma, 1991, p. 171)

There is no doubt that the Almohads attributed Qaraqūsh’s actions to the Ayyubids.

Al-Mansūr had recently emerged from revolts and upheavals that had exhausted him—some led by members of his own household, others provoked by his governors, and many fueled by the alliance between the Majorcans, the Egyptian *ghuzz*, and Arab tribes rebelling against Almohad authority, in addition to the Christian threat in al-Andalus. All these factors, among others, were what ultimately pushed al-Mansūr al-Muwahhīdī to reject Salah al-Din’s request.

3. Travel Between the East and the West Islamic

Biographical sources mention a considerable number of individuals who travelled to the East for various motives—religious, scholarly, commercial, and even touristic. Some of them returned to their homelands, while others settled permanently in the East. Undoubtedly, the Christian reconquest of parts of al-Andalus influenced migration to the East and encouraged residence there, especially at the beginning of the seventh century AH following the Almohads’ defeat at the Battle of al-‘Uqāb. Ibn Jubayr’s journey reveals that many Maghrebians fought alongside their East brethren against the Crusaders, and some of them were captured. The East would give priority to ransoming West over their own people, out of sympathy for their estrangement. Their settlement was further facilitated by the good treatment the Ayyubids extended to foreigners, particularly the Maghrebians: they provided them with schools, hospitals, sustenance, and accommodations, and personally supervised their affairs. Ibn Jubayr referred to Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s kind treatment of the Maghrebians (Ibn Jubayr, n.d., p. 14).

To appreciate the frequency of Maghrebians travel to the East, it suffices to note that such journeys produced, during the Almohad period, a new genre within geographic literature: the literature of travel narratives (*adab al-riḥla*). It began with

Ibn Jubayr and the author of *al-Istibṣār*, and reached its height in the Marinid period with Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, al-Balawī, and al-ʿAbdarī.

The motivations for travelling east were diverse, combining religion, learning, and commerce. Some travellers found the East agreeable and remained there, such as Abū al-Khaṭṭāb Ibn Dunya and his brother Abū ʿUmar, and Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī, who took up residence in Damascus (Ibn Khallikān, 1949, p. 11). Others stayed for a period to teach the Mashriqīs or study with their scholars, and then returned home. Ibn al-Abbār reports in *at-Takmila* that Ibn al-Ruhbayl—Abū Jaʿfar al-Ḥasan ibn al-Ḥasan al-Anṣārī—travelled, performed the pilgrimage, and resided in Alexandria until 572 AH before returning to his hometown Bijāya. Students in Alexandria crowded around him to hear Abū ʿUmar’s exegesis (Ibn al-Abbār, 2001, p. 693).

The same applies to Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī ibn Yāsir al-Anṣārī (Ibn al-Abbār, 2001, p. 526). Ibn al-Abbār also mentions Abū Yaḥyā al-Yasaʿ ibn ʿĪsā ibn Ḥazm ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Ghāfiqī al-Jiyānī al-Balsī, who travelled to the Mashriq in 560 AH and settled in Egypt. He became close to Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, who honored him and granted him intercession in people’s needs. He died in Egypt in 575 AH and authored a book entitled *al-Gharb fī Akhbār Maḥāsin Ahl al-Gharb* (Anonymous, 1979, p. 84).

Travel was not exclusive to the Maghreb Islamic ; Mashriqīs also travelled to the Maghreb islamic, though not in the same numbers. Ibn Khallikān notes that Shaykh Tāj al-Dīn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ḥamawiyya, the Shaykh al-Shuyūkh of Damascus, travelled to the Maghreb islamic and wrote sections concerning the Almohad state. Ibn Khallikān transmitted from him several reports about the Battle of al-Arak (Ibn Khallikān, 1949, p. 5).

Conclusion

Relations between the Ayyubid and Almohad states were marked by stagnation and inactivity for several reasons, which can be summarized as follows:

- The unstable situation in Barqa due to the actions of Qaraqūsh, the Egyptian *ghuzz*, and the Arab tribes allied with Qaraqūsh, who sought to gain control over the Lesser Maghreb Islamic.

- The Crusader campaigns against the Islamic world, both in the East and the West.
- Internal conditions in both states caused by revolts, such as the Banu Ghāniya uprising against the Almohads, and the struggle for power within the Ayyubid family after the death of Salah al-Dīn.

Despite all this, connections between the East and the West Islamic were maintained through the pilgrimage, trade, and the pursuit of knowledge, in addition to exploratory journeys. Most of these travels were undertaken on an individual, personal initiative.

The Reconquista wars in al-Andalus had a significant impact on both collective and individual migration to the Mashriq, especially after the fall of the Almohad state. Furthermore, the division of the Islamic world into small, conflicting political units increased the lack of relations between them, whereas the Christian West united in order to eliminate Muslims in both the East and the West Islamic.

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