

ALI IBN TAHIR AL-SULAMI  
*Muslim Reaction to the Crusade*

1105

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*The first Arab writer we have who seems to have understood the crusade in terms of holy war was Ali ibn Tahir al-Sulami. His 1105 treatise calling for a unified Muslim response to the crusaders' aggression in the Middle East, however, would go more or less unheeded for the next seventy-five years.<sup>1</sup>*

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In the name of God, the just and merciful!

The apostle of Allah says, "The caliphate pertains to the Quraysh, authority to the Ansari, the call to Islam to the Abyssinians, and the hijra and jihad henceforth pertain to Muslims."<sup>2</sup> The statement that jihad henceforth pertains to Muslims proves that the duty falls on all Muslims, and if it falls on all of them, it will do so until the day of Resurrection.

Abu Muhammad Sunayd b. Da'ud at-Tartusi says in his Book of Commentary, "Makhul turned toward the qibla and made ten oaths that warfare is an obligation," adding, "If it pleased you, you could do more."

In terms of general consensus, the first four caliphs, also companions of the Prophet, agreed after the Prophet's death that jihad is the duty of all. In effect, none of the four neglected it during his reign, and the caliphs after them continued to follow that model. Every year the ruler personally led attacks against the lands of unbelievers or else charged someone to lead the attacks in his place. Such was the practice until one of the caliphs neglected this duty out of weakness. His successors did the same, for the same reason or else for similar ones. This suspension of jihad—worsened by the failure of Muslims to carry out other obligations of the law as well as their violations of certain legal prohibitions—resulted inevitably in God pitting the Muslims against one another. Enmity and hatred grew among them, and their enemies felt a new desire to drive them from their lands and thus assuage their own greed. One group of unbelievers made a surprise attack on Sicily, profiting from the divisions and rivalries that prevailed there. In the same way unbelievers have captured city after city in Spain.<sup>3</sup> When they heard rumors of the disturbances in this country,<sup>4</sup> where rulers hated each other and battled one another, they resolved to invade. And Jerusalem was the target of their desire.

In Syria, they saw the states at odds with one another, separated in their beliefs and their relations undermined by an unceasing desire for vengeance. The unbelievers' greed grew strong and reinforced their determination to attack. In fact, they zealously practiced jihad against Muslims, who for their part brought only listlessness and disunity to war, each striving to leave this duty to others. Thus the unbelievers successfully conquered lands far greater than they had intended, massacring and humiliating the local population. At this very moment they are striving

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Sivan, "La genèse de la contre-croisade: Un traité damasquin du début du XIIe siècle," *Journal Asiatique* 254 (1966): 214–22. This translation is based on Sivan's French translation. This excerpt is from the *First Crusade*, edited by Jay Carter Rubenstein (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2015), 156–160.

<sup>2</sup> The Quraysh were Muhammad's tribe in Mecca; the Ansari were Muhammad's allies in Mecca; the hijra is Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Medina, year 1 of the Islamic calendar. The intent of the sentence is to stress that jihad is the duty of all Muslims and not of any particular group.

<sup>3</sup> A reference to eleventh-century wars in Italy and Spain that preceded the First Crusade.

<sup>4</sup> Syria.

to increase their conquests. Their greed knows no limits because of the torpid opposition they have met from men content to live free of danger. Now they expect confidently to become masters over the whole country and make prisoners of all who live here. Their wishes are nearly fulfilled.

Al-Shafi'i says:<sup>5</sup> "The minimal obligation on the leader of the community is to make one incursion a year into the lands of the unbelievers, led either by himself or by his troops, in the name of Islam and after the fashion of jihad. It must happen every year, except in unusual circumstances." He adds, "If not enough troops are mobilized to carry out the attack in a satisfactory manner, then the duty of fighting the unbelievers falls on everyone left behind, following the command of God the most high." Thus he demonstrates that in case of necessity, jihad becomes a personal obligation, as is the case now, when these troops unexpectedly attack Muslim lands.

Al-Ghazali says:<sup>6</sup> "Each year that a raid was not organized, all Muslims who were free, responsible for their own actions, and able to carry arms went out in sufficient numbers to make war against the enemy. Their goal was to exalt the word of God; to make their religion triumph over their enemies, the polytheists;<sup>7</sup> to win the heavenly reward that God and his apostle promised to anyone who fights on behalf of God; and to plunder the wealth, the women, and the property of the unbelievers." The reason is that jihad is a collective duty, such that a community that borders the enemy can by itself make war against unbelievers and thus keep at bay the danger. But if a frontier community is too weak to hold the enemy in check, then the duty to help falls on the neighboring country—in this case, Syria. If the enemy attacks a Syrian city that is unable to resist it, then all the cities in Syria must raise an army capable of opposition. Other countries are exempted because the cities of Syria together can be considered as essentially a single city. But if all the warriors in Syria are not enough for the task, then the inhabitants of neighboring countries are duty-bound to help, in a perimeter large enough to drive out the enemy. The countries further removed are exempted from this duty....

Devote yourself to the duty of jihad! Help one another to protect your religion and your brothers! Seize the opportunity to invade the unbelievers' lands. It will not require great effort, and God has prepared you for it. It is a paradise that God brings near to you, a good that you may readily acquire in this world, a glory that will last for many years. Do not lose this opportunity; otherwise, God may condemn you in the next life to suffer the fires of hell.

Your doubts dissolved, you must now feel sure of your personal obligation to wage war for the faith. This burden falls especially on the sultan to whom God has entrusted his subjects' fates, in that he must care for their needs and defend Muslim lands. It is absolutely essential that the sultan each year attack the lands of the unbelievers and chase them from them and that he enjoin upon the emirs henceforth to exalt the word of the faith and to discredit that of the unfaithful. In this way he might discourage the enemies of God's religion from undertaking anew such military campaigns. It is astonishing to think how sultans continue to lead lives of ease and tranquillity in the face of this ongoing catastrophe—to wit, the unbelievers' conquest of their country, the forced deportation of some, and the lives of humiliation imposed upon others, with everything that entails, including slaughter, imprisonment, and continual suffering day and night.

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<sup>5</sup> A ninth-century Muslim jurist.

<sup>6</sup> A Persian jurist and philosopher and a contemporary of al-Sulami.

<sup>7</sup> Muslims often refer to Christians as polytheists because of their veneration for the Trinity, an incomprehensible doctrine to adherents of strict monotheism.

In the name of God, O sultans of this country and of you who obey them, brave soldiers and warriors, property owners great and small, “Go forth, with light or heavy arms, and strive with your goods and your lives for the cause of God!” “O you who believe, if you help God, He will help you and firmly plant your feet.”<sup>8</sup> Do not quarrel with one another, for fear that you will suffer defeat and your troops will be decimated. Have faith in the divine struggle, and you will be raised above your enemies. Strive to drive fear from your hearts; be assured that your religion, even if it is sometimes touched with weakness, will endure according to the promise of God until the Last Judgment. Never lend an ear to the words of his enemies, apostates, worshippers of the stars, and astrologers. Know well that God has sent this enemy against you only to punish and to test you, as is read in his book: “We will test you to know among you those who strive to the best of their abilities and who are steadfast, and we will test what is said of you.”<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, you must learn that the Prophet promised victory over the enemy to a group within his community, naming especially the inhabitants of Syria. Perhaps it is you whom he designated? The Apostle of God<sup>10</sup> also said, “Part of my community will never cease to fight and to triumph in the cause of the true religion until the End of Days; no desertion can harm them.” According to one tradition, which seems to me to have a reliable chain of citations, these troops are Syrians. According to another tradition, the struggle will concern the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the surrounding area.

And here is the proof that Jerusalem is going to return to the hands of Islam and that a community of believers, whose inhabitants will have these characteristics, will establish themselves in Jerusalem until the Last Days. This tradition is authentic:

We have heard a hadith<sup>11</sup> from a reliable chain of transmission that says that the Byzantines will take Jerusalem for a predetermined period and that the Muslims will assemble against them, chase them from that city, and kill most of them. Then they will pursue the survivors on the road back to Constantinople, which they will besiege and conquer. This hadith is certain. If so, it clearly follows that the community that will fight and triumph for the faith is the same one that, thanks to heavenly assistance, will drive the unbelievers from Jerusalem and from other Muslim territories—the same one that will also capture Constantinople.<sup>12</sup> Apply yourself, then, to this holy war. It is just possible that you are the ones destined to win the prize of that great conquest, the ones chosen for this noble distinction.

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<sup>8</sup> Qur'an 9:41 and 47:7.

<sup>9</sup> Qur'an 47:31.

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad.

<sup>11</sup> A saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad or a story about him outside the Qur'an.

<sup>12</sup> The implication of this passage is that the Franks represented the Byzantine Empire.