

History of Masjid al-Aqsa

Khutbah Series:

04. Defenders of Masjid al-Aqsa

The Defenders of Masjid al-Aqsa (May Allah have mercy on them)

In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Beneficent.

The Sahabah had peacefully captured Jerusalem in the time of Caliph Umar (RA). And for a long time, life in Palestine, and in Jerusalem in particular, was largely peaceful for worshippers of all faiths who stayed in the Holy Lands. But this changed once the Crusaders arrived from Europe.

On the 15th July 1099, Jerusalem fell to the Crusaders. In their evil zeal, the Crusaders slaughtered most of the population of Muslims and Jews. Even the ones who had surrendered or taken refuge in the holy places of worship, were not spared. Men, women and children alike were either beheaded or burned alive. It was the darkest day in Masjid al-Aqsa's history.

In the aftermath, the Crusaders either destroyed, desecrated or converted every Jewish and Muslim place of worship.

Places like the Musallah Marwani were made into stables, the Dome of the Rock Masjid was made into the templar knights' headquarters. Throughout the compound, images of animals etc, were carved onto Islamic monuments, e.g. the Mihrab of Umar. Even the Qibli Masjid was sacrilegiously converted into a palace, where royal excesses were committed.

The Crusades were among the most inhumane part of human history. The European Crusaders occupied the holy lands for nearly 100 years. It took the vision, sincerity and bravery of three amazing Muslim leaders to repel them completely.

These three defenders of Masjid al-Aqsa and Palestine were:

1. Nur ad-Din Zangi
2. Salah ad-Din Ayyubi
3. Rukn ad-Din Baybars

Nur ad-Din Zangi

Nur ad-Din was born in the month of Shawwaal 511 After Hijrah. Which is just over 900 years ago in the year 1118. His name was Mahmood (which means praiseworthy). His title, Nur ad-Din, which means "The Light of Faith", was given to him due to his amazing qualities.

Nur ad-Din is known for three major points.

1. His sincere vision and character
2. His role in protecting the Prophet's honour
3. His supporting and nurturing Salah ad-Din

1. His Sincere Vision and Character

Nur ad-Din spent all his time and efforts in trying to unite all the Muslim cities and kingdoms. Because they were all enemies of each other, the Crusaders could attack without fear of reprisals. So, Nur ad-Din gave priority to forging alliances and making treaties among all the Muslim rulers.

If any of them were attacked by the Crusaders, even without promise of rewards or compensation, he would help defend his allies. Even if they gave him nothing for his aid, he still supported them. This generous and sincere quality made him the hero of the public. So much so, that when the leader of Damascus – a city which Nur ad-Din defended against the Crusaders – turned his back on Nur ad-Din to ally with the Crusaders, his own people overthrew him and opened the gates to the city to allow Nur ad-Din to come in and take over peacefully.

Imagine how great his character was, that even the East Orthodox Christians under their emperor Manuel joined him in a peace treaty, instead of allying with the Crusaders – their fellow Christians. And he wasn't the only one – many Jewish and Christian people are believed to have made treaties with Nur ad-Din for his protection against the Crusaders, and he accepted them without discrimination.

This marriage of character, vision, and righteous action laid the foundation to overthrow and repel the Crusades.

2. His Role in Protecting the Prophet's Honour

Even though Nur ad-Din was born about 500 years after the Prophet (SAW) passed away, and lived in Syria – a thousand miles away from our Prophet (SAW) – Allah chose this noble man to have the honour of defending his beloved Prophet (SAW) in Madinah.

One night, after Tahajjud Salaah, Nur ad-Din went to sleep and had a dream. In this dream, he saw the Prophet (SAW), who called him and told him to protect

him from two people. These two people were shown in great detail to Nur ad-Din so that he would be able to recognise them.

That same morning, Nur ad-Din reported his dream to his imam after the morning Fajr prayer. The imam told him to go to Madinah without delay, because this dream was real, as Shaytan cannot impersonate the Prophet (SAW) in dreams. This dream meant that the Prophet (SAW) really was summoning Nur ad-Din to aid him.

Nur ad-Din immediately made preparations to set off for the Prophet's (SAW) Masjid in Madinah. And in preparation, he readied an entire caravan of gifts for the people of Madinah. (This was in 1162CE, as he was going to travel to Madinah, he also made intention for Hajj.)

Once Nur ad-Din reached Madinah, he offered his prayers at the Masjid and said Salaam to the Prophet (SAW). After that, one by one he called for every citizen of Madinah to come see him and receive a gift from him. During this gift-giving, he carefully studied each person to see if he could recognise them from his dream.

Although he spent a great deal of time thoroughly checking everyone, Nur ad-Din did not find the two people he saw in his dream. So, he asked the locals if anyone had refused to come. The locals told him that there were two men, who recently came to Madinah, who had not come.

Nur ad-Din called for them, and when he saw that they were the same two men from the dream, he ordered his men to check their house, while he spoke to them.

His men searched their house and saw that the two men were digging a tunnel straight to where our beloved Prophet (SAW) was buried. Nur ad-Din found out that these men were Crusaders, who had come to take the body of our beloved Prophet (SAW) – to humiliate him and all Muslims.

Nur ad-Din had these men punished. And as a precaution, he had men dig around the Prophet's (SAW) grave area and build an underground wall made of metal, to stop anyone from trying to do such a thing in future. This underground wall is still there today.

Imagine the status of Nur ad-Din Zangi, that Allah chose him from over 1,200 kilometres away, to come to the Prophet's defence.

We really need to study this great man's life and achievements to understand why he was chosen to receive such a great honour.

May Allah reward him with Jannatul Firdaws.

3. His Supporting and Nurturing Salah ad-Din

Nur ad-Din's father, Imad ad-Din Zangi was once saved by Salah ad-Din's father Ayyub, when Ayyub was the governor of Tikrit (a city in Iraq). And when Ayyub and his family were forced out of their homes and in need of assistance, Imad ad-Din sheltered them and gave them a high position in his kingdom. The two families were very close.

Nur ad-Din was about 18 years older than Salah ad-Din, and had a very favourable impression of him as a trustworthy and intelligent child. When Nur ad-Din became the king, due to his respect for the young Salah ad-Din, he sent him with his uncle Shirkuh to defend Egypt against the Crusaders and their allies.

Shirkuh passed away during the campaign, and even though Salah ad-Din was still young, Nur ad-Din fully supported him to take over as his general. Salah ad-Din achieved so much in Egypt, that he eventually became its king.

This did not make Nur ad-Din jealous or suspicious, but instead it made him happy, and he continued to support Salah ad-Din, who because of this trust, loyally kept sending aid and assistance to Nur ad-Din to help him in his struggles against the Crusaders.

It was now time for both great men to work together to defeat the Crusaders in Jerusalem and free Masjid al-Aqsa. Sadly, before this happened Nur ad-Din passed away.

When there was a threat that Nur ad-Din's generals would split the kingdom for themselves, Salah ad-Din stepped forward and supported Nur ad-Din's young son, Ismail. He kept Nur ad-Din's dream alive by keeping the people united.

Nur ad-Din was such a great man that even his enemies could not speak ill against him. They too could only praise him.

And this great man had such vision and hope that Masjid al-Aqsa would be freed, that he commissioned a beautiful Mimbar to adorn Masjid al-Aqsa when it was

freed. This Mimbar was placed into a liberated Masjid al-Aqsa for him by Salah ad-Din.

The minbar is considered one of the finest examples of woodwork art and one of the most significant historic minbars of the Muslim world for both its artistic and symbolic merits.

It was made of interlocking pieces of pine wood decorated with inlaid mother-of-pearl, ivory, and ebony. Composed of about 6,500 pieces, it was held together without glue or metal nails by using a special interlocking technique aided by wooden nails or pins.

Sadly, this Mimbar was destroyed in a terrorist arson attack in 1969. A reconstruction has since been made, but a very important piece of history is sadly lost.

May Allah reward the great Nur ad-Din and raise him in status in both worlds.

Salah ad-Din Ayyubi

Yusuf the son of Ayyub was born in 1137CE, almost 900 years ago. He was born in a town called Tikrit (Tikreet) in Iraq. However, on the day he was born, his family were exiled by the local ruler, so they moved to Mosul in Syria.

Yusuf was later given the title “Salah ad-Din” (Righteousness of the Ummah) due to his character and achievements.

Salah ad-Din is also known for three main points:

1. His work in Egypt and why he became so trusted
2. His victory over the Crusaders and his defence of the holy lands
3. His character that even his enemies had to acknowledge

1. His work in Egypt and why he became so trusted

Under the support of Nur ad-Din and his father (Imad Zangi), Salah ad-Din was given a very good education. He excelled in all areas of study, from mathematics and poetry to Qur'an and law. Furthermore, he was given full military education which encompassed navigation, strategy, leadership and combat.

His academic achievements were noticed by Nur ad-Din, who instructed him to go with his uncle, Shirkuh, to Egypt to defend it from the Crusaders.

The Crusaders were problematic, because as soon as they would hear about an army approaching, they would retreat and disappear on their boats. This would leave the chasing army to waste resources.

Salah ad-Din found their spies and supply routes and laid a trap. Once the Crusaders fell into the trap, they had no choice but to fight. This took place in an area called Babayn. Salah ad-Din successfully baited the Crusader knights to chase them into the desert. As soon as they reached there, the horses were ineffective in soft sand against the camels, which could charge through it. This allowed them to defeat hundreds of knights who were covered from head to toe in armour.

This amazing victory ended Crusader hopes in Egypt. After subsequent battles and skirmishes, including those against treacherous Muslims who allied with the Crusaders, Salah ad-Din gained so many victories and the trust of the citizens that he became the Sultan of Egypt.

With this much power, and having more resources than Nur ad-Din, he could have easily become independent. Instead, he remained loyal and continued supporting Nur ad-Din with supplies and wealth, so that he could continue fighting against the Crusaders.

Even when Nur ad-Din died, Salah ad-Din supported Nur ad-Din's young son and defended him against the commanders who wanted to betray him. When the child fell ill, to make sure that the empire did not break apart, Nur ad-Din's wife proposed that he should marry her and become the new king, which he accepted. Even most of the other commanders supported him to lead them.

His noble reputation and the support of the people allowed him to take control of all the Muslim areas in the region before starting his work against the Crusaders.

2. His victory over the Crusaders and his defence of the Holy Lands

Before moving against the Crusader, Salah ad-Din extensively studied their strength against his own army's. Seeing that the Crusaders were better trained and far better equipped, Salah ad-Din spent several months training his army to

increase their skill and battle experience. There wasn't much he could do about the Crusaders' better equipment... yet.

Salah ad-Din kept a lot of pressure on the Crusaders, who could not commit their normal evils freely anymore, due to the fear that Salah ad-Din would attack. And in this time, Salah ad-Din would start his planning.

This was until the evil in the Crusaders, could no longer be contained, and they started attacking defenceless civilians – even unarmed pilgrims.

Salah ad-Din moved his army and the Crusaders knew war was coming. Salah ad-Din led his army to a place called Hittin, and started his strategy.

(1) He covered the wells on the Crusaders' route so that they would remain thirsty. (He repaired them afterwards so the locals didn't suffer.)

(2) He chose the higher ground, making it easier for him to attack, and difficult for the tired Crusaders to counter.

(3) He got his army to the location early, so that they could rest and the Crusaders had to start immediately, while they were tired.

(4) He sent mounted archers as skirmishers – quick moving units who would constantly harass and stay beyond the reach of the Crusaders as they marched to Hittin – this wasn't to cause damage, but just to make sure that the Crusaders could not rest at all.

All these strategies were to make sure that the heavy armour of the Crusaders acted as nothing more than weights to chain them down. This amazing strategy not only brought victory, but did so while minimising his own casualties. This made his soldiers respect him even more.

Remember that if Salah ad-Din had lost Hittin, there wasn't any other Muslim army to challenge the Crusaders. Allah alone knows how history would have changed, had the Crusaders been victorious.

This wasn't the end of Salah ad-Din's struggles. After Hittin and the surrender of Jerusalem, Europe launched another Crusade, headed by King Richard of England. Salah ad-Din kept on defending the people of the Holy Lands until eventually Richard was forced to give up and return.

It seemed that from the time Salah ad-Din entered adulthood, to his death (soon after Richard's departure) – his entire adult life, he remained on the battlefields, struggling for the sake of Allah. May Allah reward him with Jannatul Firdaws.

3. His Character that even his Enemies had to Acknowledge

Salah ad-Din had amazing qualities. His honourable nature was mentioned time and again by all, even European historians.

When the Crusaders captured Jerusalem, they murdered the entire population. Even women and children were not spared.

But when Salah ad-Din lead the Muslims into Jerusalem, not one person was harmed. Those who wanted to leave, were given safe passage to Christian lands, and those who were willing to live peacefully under Muslims rule, were allowed to do so.

Although the Crusaders were expelled, Christians from the Eastern and African Orthodox Churches were welcomed back into the city that the European Crusaders had expelled them from.

The Jewish tribes, were also welcomed back with open arms.

Furthermore, Salah ad-Din was advised by many people that he could end the Crusades by demolishing the main church of the Christians. In response, Salah ad-Din completely forbade this. Saying that our beloved second Khalifa Umar (RA) had guaranteed its safety, and we all have a duty to protect it.

Not only as a leader was Salah ad-Din amazing, but even his personal character was full of qualities that we can learn from and be inspired by.

Once, in April 1191, a French woman lost her baby in the city. She went around in panic, searching for her child. People told her to go to Salah ad-Din for help. Even though he was the busy sultan, Salah ad-Din not only gave her an audience, but he ordered his men throughout the city to look for the baby. When they found the child, Salah ad-Din went personally to give the baby back to the mother.

He was very generous and would regularly donate his wealth to charity. He would go out of his way and find out who needed help, so that he could assist them.

He never tried to save money for himself. When he passed away, people were surprised that he had no personal savings – even though he was their sultan.

Rukn ad-Din Baybars

Baybars was an amazing personality who is sadly forgotten by most Muslims. However, his achievements on the battlefield, and his legacy of making advancements in many different fields are unmatched.

Baybars was born in 1223 CE, about 800 years ago.

Baybars is known for four amazing qualities/achievements

1. His rise from slave, to vizier, to Sultan
2. His victories against the Mongols
3. His victories against the Crusaders
4. His contribution to Islamic Advancement

1. His rise from slave, to vizier, to Sultan

According to most historians, Baybars was born in the area north of the Caspian Sea. His family was of a Kipchuk Turk tribe that were fleeing Westwards away from the invading Mongols. They had got to the Crimean Peninsula when his tribe and the other fleeing tribes were all caught and killed by the Mongols, who took him and the other children as slaves.

Baybars was bought by an Egyptian trader called Alaauddin Bunduqdari, from whom Baybars inherited the Bunduqdari “nisbah” (family or origin name), which he used gratefully throughout his life. Alaauddin saw how clever Baybars was and started educating him in a number of different fields, including teaching him Arabic. When they reached Egypt, Baybars was taken by the Sultan Salih Ayyubi (Salah ad-Din’s brother’s grandson). Baybars was only 20 years old at this time.

Because of how skilled and brave he was, Baybars very quickly rose to a position of command within Sultan Salih’s closest officers. The Sultan would often entrust scouting and strategy planning to Baybars.

When Salih died, he instructed his son, to continue to trust and rely on Baybars and the other Mamluks. Baybars showed his value, in the Battle of Mansurah.

Mansurah was a castled town that the Crusaders were planning to capture. Baybars evacuated the city in secret and left the gates open for the advanced wing of the Crusaders to take the abandoned city... But this was a trap. Once inside, the gates were closed and the Crusaders were trapped. The entire wing of the army was destroyed, with only five knights managing to escape.

2. His victories against the Mongols

After the battle against the Crusaders, Baybars had moved to Palestine. While there, the Mongols had invaded. They had already destroyed Baghdad and all the Muslim countries to the East of it. Now they had invaded and destroyed Emesa (Homs), captured Damascus, and were coming to Jerusalem.

Baybars joined Qutuz, a fellow officer under Sultan Salih, who had only just become the new sultan in response to the Mongol threat.

Qutuz knew how brilliant Baybars was on the battlefield, so had him draw up the plans and choose the battlegrounds. Baybars chose **Ain Jalut** (the Spring of Goliath) in Palestine to be the battleground.

Baybars found a place to keep Qutuz's army hidden in ambush. He then took his own horsemen to the road that the Mongols were coming from. Despite his horsemen being small in number against the massive Mongol army, they engaged in hit-and-run skirmishes that really angered the Mongols, who chased them straight into the trap.

Without formation and discipline, they were quickly surrounded by Qutuz's men. But still, this was no easy victory, as the Mongols had almost 5 times the number of the Muslims. This was when Baybars unleashed the second part of his plan. Gunpowder hand-cannons. For the first time in the Muslim lands – some historians say the first time in the entire world – hand-cannons were used in open warfare (i.e. not just for defending castles). This scared the Mongol horses, spread chaos in their ranks, and led to their swift defeat.

Qutuz was also instrumental in this victory. Not only was he the leader of the army, but whenever he saw that the Mongols might break out of the trap, he would charge in with his men with the battle-cry of "For Allah!" and "For Islam!" which would supercharge the morale of his troops and restrict the Mongols.

Even though Qutuz was the leader of the Muslims and an important figure in this battle, all historical sources attribute the victory to Baybars.

Qutuz sadly passed away almost immediately after the battle, and Baybars – because of his mastery in warfare – was immediately made the next sultan. As the sultan, he went on to defeat the Mongols in another three important battles.

The Battle of Ain Jalut, in Palestine, is seen as one of the most important battles in history. This is because, the Mongols were unstoppable in warfare, and that the Mamluk army was the last unified army in their way. Had the Mongols won, there was no other army to stop them going into Europe, and no obstacle at all that could stop them from heading south towards Makkah and Madinah.

Because of this, Baybars is rightly considered as a Defender of Islam.

3. His victories against the Crusaders

Baybars had taken a commanding role in the battles of Mansurah and Fariskur in 1250 CE, to end the 7th Crusade.

He further repelled the Crusaders and local Christian warlords in battles (from 1260 CE) leading up to and including the 8th Crusade (1270 CE). Although the 8th Crusade was concentrated against Muslims in North Africa; Baybars defeated their kings and lords in Syria, Armenia, Antioch (Turkey) and Jaffa (Palestine), making sure that the separated Crusaders could not work together.

He also repelled the 9th Crusade that took place in 1271-1272 CE. By this time the Crusaders realised that they could not beat the Mamluks on their own, so they attempted to join hands with the Mongols to try to defeat them. However, this alliance was also defeated by Baybars.

This was the last Crusade, aimed at capturing Jerusalem and the Holy Lands. Baybars had succeeded in repelling the Crusades and protecting Masjid al-Aqsa. May Allah reward him for his amazing achievements against all the enemies of the Muslims.

4. His contribution to Islamic Advancement

Baybars contributed to Islam in many ways. Not only did he defend the Muslims fiercely against both the Crusaders and the Mongols, but he also made an alliance with the Golden Horde Mongols who had broken away from the Mongol Empire. The leader of the Golden Horde, Berke Khan, had become a Muslim, and through an alliance with Baybars, had many of his subjects travel to Egypt to learn about Islam. Through this, the entire Golden Horde Empire, became Muslim.

In warfare, Baybars had brought the Muslims into the age of gunpowder-based warfare. For years the Muslims were behind the Romans in technology due to their “Greek Fire” which was used against boats, as it could burn on water. This was the reason why for centuries, the Romans had complete control of the Mediterranean Sea. Baybars understood the need for technology and used it effectively in battle.

Baybars invented a quick way of relaying important messages between the empire. This was necessary, as he was facing the enemies to the West, North, and East simultaneously. Previously a message could take weeks getting from Cairo to Damascus. With his message relay system, he was able to send such a message in only four days.

Baybars also dedicated a lot of resources to infrastructure. He made bridges, canals and harbours to improve transport for his people. He made irrigation systems to improve their harvest. He made many Masjids and Madrasahs, including many in Masjid al-Aqsa to teach the importance of faith and the need for good education to all.

Sultan Baybars was also known to look for especially talented students and scholars to sponsor and support. A notable example of his vision, is his support of the talent and legacy of Ibn Nafis.

Ibn Nafis was a visionary surgeon and man of medicine, whose contribution to anatomy, surgery, and medicine are still celebrated and respected today.

It is a beautiful quirk of taqdeer (fate), that Ibn Nafis studied first in Nuri Hospital, a hospital established by Nur ad-Din Zangi, then moved to Egypt to work at Naasiri Hospital, which was founded by Salah ad-Din Ayyubi. And lastly, he was appointed by Baybars as the Royal Physician, and also to head research and practice at the Mansouri Hospital, which Baybars founded.

Additionally, Baybars provided him with all the support and funds he needed to become the pioneer of his field. A pioneer who achieved his greatness due to the legacies of these three amazing defenders of Masjid al-Aqsa.

May Allah reward them and all who defend Masjid al-Aqsa.

May Allah put in our hearts true love and appreciation for Masjid al-Aqsa and its people. And may Allah make us all and reward us all for being among those who seek to protect Masjid al-Aqsa and its people, using every means available to us.

Lastly, please remember three points that we all need to adopt in order to be counted among those who truly want to help Masjid al-Aqsa and its people.

1. Remember Masjid al-Aqsa and the people of Palestine in your prayers – as often as you can.
2. Try to visit Masjid al-Aqsa with your family. Your going there helps defend the Masjid, and gives hope and support to its people.
3. Keep up-to-date with what is happening there, and take part in whatever way you can to get as many people involved in speaking/emailing about the situation in Al-Aqsa.

Remember, no matter how small or insignificant you think such actions are, for you and me, they may be an act which Allah rewards us His mercy, and forgiveness.

اللهم احفظ فلسطين وأهل فلسطين،
والقدس وأهل القدس،
والأقصى وأهل الأقصى،
واربط على قلوبهم وثبتهم،
يا رب العالمين.

O Allah! Protect Palestine and the people of Palestine,
and (protect) Quds and the people of Quds,
and (protect) Masjid al-Aqsa and the people of Masjid al-Aqsa,
and strengthen their hearts and keep them steadfast,
O Lord of the Worlds.