

Article

# Vanquishers of the Crusaders: Mujāhidūn Characters in Arabic Folk Epics

Oleg Sokolov

Faculty of Asian and African Studies, Saint Petersburg State University, 199034 Saint Petersburg, Russia; o.a.sokolov@spbu.ru

**Abstract:** Although the militant jihād remains one of the most popular topics in modern Islamic studies, most of the works focus on ideologies and actions, leaving out the popular perception of this phenomenon. Our study of the storylines about confronting the Franks (*ifranj*) in the Arabic folk epics, inspired by the Crusades, shows that the protagonists of the epics are presented in the narratives precisely as the holy warriors, i.e., mujāhidūn, whose key attributes are the power of faith, which often goes through tests in the fights against the infidels, as well as the divine support and readiness for martyrdom on the path of jihād. The widespread jihād and anti-Frankish rhetorics in the epics make them a valuable source for the study of the Crusades' memory in the Medieval Arab culture.

**Keywords:** Crusades; Arabic folk epic; Islamic history; jihad

## 1. Introduction

The concept of militant jihād has long been one of the most popular research topics in the field of Islamic studies. The relevance of these studies is defined by the intensification of the use of the term jihād in socio-political discourses in the 21st century, the significant role of the Crusade-jihād opposition in the mutual perception of the West and the Muslim world, as well as the heated debates around the concepts of Orientalism and neocolonialism. As David Cook aptly points out, “the term is at once at the heart of polemics against Islam and of apologetics for Islam” (Cook 2005, p. 2).

Analysis of the modern existence of the concept of jihād embraces the widest range of academic approaches, including, among other things, the examination of the perception of the jihād concept in popular culture, as well as covering different aspects of this phenomenon from doctrines of the largest theologians and organizations to local and regional practices. However, if we turn to the studies of the idea of jihād and its functioning in the Middle Ages, we would find that the vast majority of inquiries are devoted to the analysis of the theory of jihād in the theological and historical literature related to elite culture, while the perception of the holy war “from below” in medieval Muslim communities remains insufficiently explored.

Arabic folk epics, which are one of the main types of works of Arab medieval folk culture, can be taken as an important source for studying the image of jihād in medieval Muslim societies. The Arabic folk epics absorbed the influence of ancient Arabian narratives, including materials from *Ayyām al-'Arab* (Days of the Arabs), legends and fairy tales of the ancient Near East, and the works of medieval Arab historians (Heath 1996, p. xvii).

Works on the theory and practice of jihād do not consider in detail the Arabic epics as a source for studying the popular perception of this phenomenon in the Middle Ages. From the studies that have touched on this topic, we should name Michael Bonner's *Jihad in Islamic history*, though the author only briefly mentions “the Epic poems about Sayyid Battal, Abu Muslim and other Muslim heroes” describing the environment of the genesis of the early Ottoman state (Bonner 2006, p. 146). We should also note the illuminating work of



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Thomas Hegghammer; however, speaking about the art and social practices of jihadists, the author limits his discussion to the modern Islamic movements and organizations, and does not analyze a diachronic aspect of jihād images in the folk art (Hegghammer 2017). The recent study by Harry S. Neale dedicated to the images of Sufi Jihād in the Middle Ages covers a topic closely related to ours, but it is based on Muslim hagiographical sources (Neale 2022).

We should also mention researchers, who analyze the appeal of jihād in close connection with the history of the Crusades. The fundamental studies of David Cook (2005) and Malcolm Lambert (2016), dealing with the evolution of Jihād, do not consider the folk epics as relevant sources. Carole Hillenbrand, in turn, points out that the epics deserve more attention as they depict folk perception of the Crusades and anti-Crusading campaigns under the banner of jihād (Hillenbrand 1999, pp. 263–65). The same opinion is shared by Malcolm Lyons in his short review of the Crusader stratum in this type of source (Lyons 1993, pp. 147–61) as well as by Jonathan Phillips, who underlines the importance of the folk epics for the study of the Crusades memory preservation (Phillips 2011).

## 2. Arabic Folk Epics as a Look “From Below”

As we can see, there is still much room left for analyzing the theme of jihād in the Arabic folk epics. Though this type of source provides little material for a positivist historian, who studies the military and economic aspects of the history of the medieval Middle East and North Africa, it offers a valuable account for examining the world of ideas and moods of Muslim communities of that time, as well as deconstructing the identities of the inhabitants of these regions from the late Middle Ages to the Arab Renaissance (al-nahḍa) (Sokolov 2022, pp. 172–81). Among the most significant components of identities are the images of the others, a wide diversity of which is found in the folk epics, where the main characters encounter adherents of different religions and representatives of various ethnicities.

In this study, I am inspired, in part, by the methods of people’s history, which were developed in Arabic and Islamic studies in the works of Albert Hourani (2002) and Charles Lindholm (2002), who, among other things, tried to reconstruct the perception of the realities of life in medieval Muslim states from the point of view of non-elite groups. Based on their approach, I assume the actuality of analyzing the image of jihād and mujāhidūn (those who participate in jihād) in the Arabic epics, since this type of work of folk culture represents a rare, little-studied look at these concepts “from below”. Moreover, as the folk epics emerged mainly in the 12th–15th centuries (Allen and Donald 2008, *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, vol. 6, pp. 294, 307–8), i.e., during the Crusades or right after them, they are relevant for studying the memory of this era, as Malcolm Lyons briefly noted in his landmark study of the epics, “the memory of the Crusades has left a formidable enough impression on audiences” (Lyons 1995a, p. 27).

Under the term “works of Folk culture”, in this case, I imply anonymous works widespread among the broad illiterate masses. Thus, I see three main reasons why the Arabic folk epics can be attributed to this type of source.

Firstly, although there are traces of historical treatises and hagiographic literature in the folk epics, they are anonymous (or information about the authors is legendary), and they existed for a long time in oral form (Allen and Donald 2008, *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, vol. 6, p. 313), which is indicated by their structure, the presence of numerous inserts and turns from the spoken language, the appeals of the narrator to the listeners within the text, and also the fact that most of them are predominantly composed in the form of saj’, i.e., rhymed and rhythmic prose (Galley 1998, pp. 129–49). In this study, we are dealing with later editions printed on the basis of the manuscripts of the folk epics of the 17th–18th centuries.

Secondly, the folk epics were rejected by the elites as primitive and not deserving attention, and were not considered by medieval Arab intellectuals as a full value literature (Connelly 1986, pp. 9–11). For example, *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* cites Ibn Kathīr’s (d. 1373) opinion on the epics: “As for what the common folk [‘amma] mention

regarding [the hero] al-Baṭṭāl in the epic [sīra] attributed to Dalhimma [= Dhāt al-Himma], the amir ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and the qāḍī Uqba, it is nothing but lies, falsehood, stupid writings, complete ignorance and shameless prattle which is only in demand by fools and lowly ignoramuses. The same is true of the fabricated epic of ‘Antar al-‘Absī” (Allen and Donald 2008, The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature, vol. 6, p. 260).

Thirdly, and most importantly, the folk epics were far and wide performed by folk narrators and storytellers, forming special professions such as *‘anātira* (those who make a living performing *Sīrat ‘Antara ibn Šaddād*), *zāhiriyya* (those who make a living performing *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*), etc. The extensive popularity of folk epics among both the urban and rural population in the Arab societies of Ottoman times is reported by many travelers and researchers, such as Dominique-Vivant Denon (1747–1825), Antoine-Barthélemy Clot-Bey (1793–1868), Alphonse de Lamartine (1790–1869), and Edward Lane (1801–1876), who witnessed the widespread performing of the epics at coffeehouses and markets of the Levant and Egypt.

In the words of Lane, “reciters of romances frequent the principal *kaḥwehs* (or coffee-shops) of Cairo and other towns, particularly on the evenings of religious festivals, and afford attractive and rational entertainments . . . The most numerous class of reciters is that of the persons called “Sho’ara” < . . . > They are also called “Aboo-Zeydeeyeh” or “Aboo-Zeydees” from the subject of their recitations, which is a romance entitled “the Life of Aboo-Zeyd”. The number of these Sho’ara in Cairo is about fifty; and they recite nothing but the adventures related in the romance of Aboo-Zeyd. < . . . > The Sha’er always commits his subject to memory, and recites without book. The poetry he chants; and after every verse, he plays a few notes on a viol which has but a single chord, and which is called “the poet’s viol” or “the Aboo-Zeydee viol” from its only being used in these recitations” (Lane 2003, pp. 391–92). He also mentions that “next in point of number to the Sho’ara, among the public reciters of romances, are those who are particularly and solely distinguished by the appellation of “Moḥadditeen” or Story-tellers (in the singular, “Moḥaddit”). There are said to be about thirty of them in Cairo. The exclusive subject of their narrations is a work called “the Life of Ez-Zāhir” (“Seeret Ez-Zāhir” or “Es-Seereh Ez-Zāhireeyeh”). They recite without book” (Lane 2003, p. 399). Lane also mentions a large number of reciters of other epics (Lane 2003, pp. 414–25).

Another account of the performing of the epics in Egypt can be found in the legacy of Antoine-Barthélemy Clot-Bey, who points out that all the epics are read by heart by storytellers, who form a special class. They are divided into many types, each of which has to tell only one story during his life (Clot-Bey 1840, pp. 69–73).

As for the Šām, we have reports of Alphonse de Lamartine, who witnessed the reciting of the epics throughout this region. For example, describing his rest near Jerusalem, he notes: “The men had gathered in the shade of the largest of the olive trees; they had spread their Damascene mats on the ground, and they were smoking, telling stories of the desert, or singing verses of Antar. < . . . > Later, the memory of those hours thus spent listening to these verses, which I could not understand, made me search carefully for some fragments of popular Arab poetry, and especially of the heroic poem of Antar” (Lamartine 1836, p. 207). Near Beirut, he also highlights gatherings dedicated to the reciting of the folk epics: “The men and the young boys go on Sundays to sit for their relaxation on mats spread out at the foot of some tall sycamore tree, not far from a fountain; they stay there motionless all day, telling marvelous stories, drinking from time to time a cup of coffee or a cup of cold water” (Lamartine 1836, p. 239).

Therefore, using the abovementioned theoretical precept, I seek to determine how *jihād* narratives function in the epics, what traits, emotions, and characteristics of the characters make them holy warriors, and how their mission to protect Islam is depicted.

Edward Lane, in his description of the life of the Egyptians of the 19th century, emphasized the four most popular folk epics, and it is these that we will consider as sources in this study (Lane 2003, p. 415).

*Sīrat ‘Antara ibn Šaddād* is an epic about the pre-Islamic warrior-poet ‘Antara ibn Šaddād, a hero of the Arabian tribal wars and a composer of the famous poems.

*Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is an epic describing the long journey of the Banū Hilāl tribe from the Arabian Peninsula to the lands of Maghrib through the Levant and Egypt.

*Sīrat Dāt al-Himma* is an epic centered around the figure of the Arab warriorress Fāṭima, nicknamed Dāt al-Himma (“the one possessing zeal”). The epic mainly talks about a constant struggle between Arabs and Byzantines on the Anatolian frontier in the early Abbasid period.

*Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars* is an epic dedicated to the Mamlūk Sultan of Egypt, al-Zāhir Baybars (1223–1277). The work describes the wars with the Crusaders and other enemies, as well as the struggle of the Sultan with the unjust officials (Luengo 2003, pp. 465–84).

The examples will be given as they are presented in the texts of the sources, though certain grammatical forms are incorrect from the point of view of the literary language, as they are most likely repercussions of the oral existence of the texts.

### 3. Attributes and Qualities of Mujāhidūn-Characters in the Folk Epics

First of all, we find that the protagonists are not just epic heroes, but holy warriors opposing infidels.

In this case, we should note the dedication and courage of characters, which is manifested primarily in the readiness to fight being greatly outnumbered. For example, Sultan Baybars, in one of the episodes, rushes alone into battle against the army of the Frankish king Franjīl:

*Wa hajama ‘alā maymanat al-kuffār wa-ḡāša fihim fa-qatala arba’ rijāl wa-hajama ‘alā al-maysara wa-ḡāša fihim fa-qatala ḥamsat abṭāl* (Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars, vol. 1, p. 765) (And he attacked the right flank of the infidels diving into their [ranks] and killed four of their men and [then] attacked the left flank diving into their [ranks] and killed five of their heroes).

After that, Baybars recites a poem in which he promises to defeat the army of infidels and mentions that he already killed Franjīl’s son. This infuriates the king, and he turns his entire army on Baybars:

*Hajamat al-li’ām fī wasī’ al-ākām wa-iḥtātū bi-l-amīr min kull jānib wa-makān fa-lammā ‘āyana dālīka al-amīr baybars minhum fa-tabassama lahum wa-istaqbalahum miṭla mā tatalaqqā al-arḍ al-‘aṣṣāna awwā’il al-nīl* (Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars, vol. 1, p. 765) (The blasphemers attacked on a wide hill and surrounded the emir from all sides and places, and when emir Baybars witnessed that from them, he smiled at them and met them as the parched earth embraces the first waters of the Nile).

Then, Baybars recites the verses of the Qur’ān and, with the help of the coming mamlūks, defeats Franjīl’s army.

We should also mention that the characters position themselves as mujāhidūn. For example, Baybars, who was captured by the ruler of Tyre, declares that he cannot be killed because he is the leader of the Muslim warriors at the forefront of the holy war:

*Yā mal’ūn anā al-malik al-zāhir kayfa taqtulunī wa-warā’ī ‘askar al-islām* (Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars, vol. 3, p. 2077) (Damned one, I am al-Malik al-Zāhir, how can you kill me, [if] the army of Islam [stands] behind me).

Another important feature of the characters of the considered folk epics is their readiness for martyrdom in the struggle against the infidels. This illustrates, for example, the address of Dāt al-Himma to her warriors before the battle:

*Idā muttu amūtu šahīdatan wa-idā ‘iṣtu a’iṣu sa’īdatan* (Sīrat Dāt al-Himma, vol. 1, p. 398) (If I die, I would die a martyr, and if I live I would live happy).

Similarly, Baybars’s companion Ibrāhīm says he is ready to die in battle against the infidels:

*Fa in 'išnā 'išnā su'adā' wa-in mutnā mutnā šuhadā'* (Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars, vol. 2, p. 1305) (If we live, we live happy, if we die, we die as martyrs).

The hero also clarifies that he swore by the name of Allah, that he would not retreat even against the large number of Franks:

*Wa idā maṭarat al-samā' ifranj* (Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars, vol. 2, p. 1305) (Even if the sky rains Franks).

Thereafter, we observe the functioning of the image of a holy warrior with its main attributes, such as complete self-giving and readiness for self-sacrifice in the struggle for true faith.

In the epics under consideration, the characters are also subjected to tests of faith that should shake their will and hurt their feelings as true believers. Such trials include, in particular, the actions of Christians when they capture Muslim heroes. A common story is that, in captivity, a Muslim hero becomes a swineherd. For example, in the Hilālī cycle, one of the main characters, Sirḥān, is captured by a party of Frankish pirates. When Sirḥān informs the captain of the Frankish ship that he was a king in his country, the raider mockingly replies:

*Yā sirḥān ana ḡadan aj'aluka malik fī bilādī 'alā ru'yān al-ḡanāzīr* (Sīrat Banī Hilāl, p. 92) (Oh, Sirḥān, tomorrow I will make you a king of swineherds in my country).

On the Frankish island, Sirḥān tends to 200 pigs and receives pig's milk as food. Eventually, after a series of misadventures, his faithful wife rescues him from captivity.

Another type of test involves unholy practices of Christians against the Qur'ān. This kind of plot we find, for instance, in *Sīrat Dāt al-Himma* in the passage where the main characters Abū Muḡammad al-Baṭṭāl and 'Abd al-Wahhāb are captured by Frankish pirates and taken to the Island of the Rock. The heroes introduce themselves to the king of the island as Christian monks from Jerusalem and even convince him to give them gifts for the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, but at the last moment, they are recognized by the local patriarch Luke:

*Wa qāla ayyuhā al-malik a mā ta'rif ḡadā allādī waṣala ilayka wa-aḡbala 'alayka ḡadā muḡarrib al-kanā' is wa-l-biya' wa-mu'ammir al-jawāmi' bi-l-juma' wa-muḡzim al-'asākir wa-mubīd al-'aṣā'ir wa-mumazziq al-jamā'āt wa-sāriq al-banāt allādī ma daḡala madīna illā wa-saraḡa ṣāḡibaha wa-lā budda illā wa-ahraḡa dimā' ahliha allādī ḡalaba al-ṣayḡ al-najīḡ wa-ḡujjat al-masīḡ ḡadā al-luṣṣ al-muḡtāl abū muḡammad al-baṭṭāl wa-iltafata ilā 'abd al-wahhāb wa-qāla lahu wa-ḡadā sayf al-islām wa-l-asad al-ḡirḡām al-baṭāl al-ḡammām sayyid banī kilāb al-fāris al-mahāb al-amīr 'abd al-wahhāb* (Sīrat Dāt al-Himma, vol. 1, pp. 808–9) (And he said, "O king, do you not know this one who has come to you and approached you? This is the destroyer of churches and synagogues, the builder of mosques by Fridays, the crasher of squadrons, the exterminator of clans, the tearer of groups, and the thief of girls. He did not enter a city without kidnaping its owner, and there is no chance he would not shed the blood of its people, [he is the one] who defeated the wise elder, and the authority of Christ, this is the guileful thief, Abū Muḡammad al-Baṭṭāl", and he turned to 'Abd al-Wahhāb and said to him, "This is the sword of Islam, the fierce lion, the tireless hero, the master of the Banu Kilab, the feared knight, prince 'Abd al-Wahhāb").

The characters answer that this is not true, to which they are offered to pass the test and tear up the Qur'ān:

*Fa qāla al-malik lā bal ḡāt al-muṣḡaf allādī 'indaka yā abūnā fa-'inda dālika arsala lūḡā fa-atūhu bi-muṣḡaf mudahhab bi-ḡaṭṭ wādīḡ fa-qaddamahu ilā al-ḡawm fa-lammā nazarahu abū muḡammad al-baṭṭāl iṣfarra lawnuhu wa-taḡayyara kawnuhu* (Sīrat Dāt al-Himma, vol. 1, p. 809) (And the king said, "No, but bring the Qur'ān that you have, our father". Then Luke send [to bring it], and they brought him the Qur'ān

covered in gold, written in clear script, and he showed it to the people. When Abū Muḥammad al-Baṭṭāl saw it, he turned yellow and his inner peace trembled).

The heroes, in response, declare that “the Qur’ān is no less holy to them than the Gospel,” and thus give themselves away and are taken prisoners. In this case, the epithets with which the Patriarch refers to the characters (“destroyer of churches”, “builder of mosques”, “sword of Islam”) are also important, as they additionally emphasize the sacred nature of the confrontation.

In the Arabic folk epics, opponents also try to tempt Muslim heroes with material goods and power. For example, the Byzantine emperor Manuel wants to bribe Ġarīb, the character of *Sīrat Dāt al-Himma*, but he refuses and says that he will not sell his place in paradise:

*Fa qāla malik al-rūm wa-ḥaqq dīnī law daḥalta fī dīninā wa-qātalta bayna aydaynā la kuntu u’ṭika ‘amūriyya fī bilādika al-rūm wa-l-mawṣil fī bilād al-‘irāq fa-qāla ḡarīb mā kuntu bi-lladī abī’u al-āhira bi-l-dunyā al-ḡādīra wa-lā abḡī dīnan yudḥilunī al-nār* (*Sīrat Dāt al-Himma*, vol. 1, p. 853) (And the king of the Byzantines said, “I swear by my religion, if you accept our religion and fight with us, I would give you Amorium in Byzantine land and Mosul in the land of Iraq”. Ġarīb said, “I will not be the one who sells the Hereafter for a treacherous mundane world, nor will I want a faith that would lead me to the Hellfire”).

The characters also face mystical and magical trials associated primarily with jinn. For example, Baybars survives in a prison, where he was put on the orders of the main antagonist Juwān, since the jinn recognize his true faith and obey him:

*Fa ra’ā ṭu’abān abyad muqbilan fa-qāla al-salam ‘alaykum yā malik al-islām* (*Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, vol. 3, p. 2078) (And he saw a white snake approaching, and it said “Hello, the King of Islam”).

The episodes described above, in which heroes overcome impurity and dark forces, create the images of the sacred power of the characters, which is determined by divine support.

Another key aspect is the sacred and eternal nature of the confrontation between the Arabs and the Franks. It must be emphasized that among all the opponents of the mujāhidūn characters in the Arabic epics, it is the Franks who are the most principal and irreconcilable ones. Byzantines, Ethiopians, Armenians, and Persians (the latter are commonly called “fire worshipers”) can be both adversaries and allies of Arabs, but the Franks are always enemies. The descriptions of Franks’ sentiments about the Holy Land and Holy War also explain the mujāhidūn-characters’ motivations.

This is clearly illustrated by examples from *Sīrat ‘Antara ibn Šaddād*, in which the protagonist helps the Byzantines to defeat the Franks several times. ‘Antara personally fights on the side of the Byzantines against the Franks, including the naval battles:

*Wa ‘antar yadribu fihim yamīnan wa-šimālan wa-yurīhim al-‘ajā’ib wa-l-ahwāl <...> wa-anzala fihim al-maṣā’ib wa-awqa’a al-ifranj fī al-balā’* (*Sīrat ‘Antara ibn Šaddād*, vol. 7, p. 351) (And ‘Antara was smiting them to the right and to the left and showing them miracles [of swordsmanship] and [striking] fear <...> and he cast down misfortunes on them and caused affliction to the Franks).

In another episode, after a long war between the Byzantines and the Franks on the one side and the Arabs on the other, Caesar (ar. qayṣar, the Byzantine emperor) wants to conclude a truce. The King of the Franks, Ḥalijān, accuses him of laziness and duplicity and wants to lead the Franks and the Byzantines against the Arabs, plotting at the same time to kill Caesar, and then rule the Holy Land himself. As Ḥalijān declares:

*‘Awwaltu an aḥmila bi-‘asākiri’ alā hawlā’i wa-ajtahida an aksira ha ulā al-ru’āt fī aqṭār al-fulāt wa-a’ūda ilā dālīka al-malik al-ḥāmīl allādī ištāgala ‘an āḥiratīhi bi-dunyāhu wa-lā azāla kaḍālīka ḥattā u’ajjila qatlahu wa-amlika ba’dahu bilād al-maṣīḥ wa-uḏhira fihā al-‘adl al-ṣaḥīḥ* (*Sīrat ‘Antara ibn Šaddād*, vol. 4, p. 238) (I decided to attack those with my forces and to strive to smash those cattlemen in the desert lands,



and to come back for this half-hearted king, who devoted himself to the mundane life instead of the Hereafter, and to keep on this until I hasten his killing and rule the land of Christ after him, and impose true justice there).

Antara, however, kills Ḥalijān, to the delight of Caesar, and the Byzantines conclude a truce with the Arabs. In this example, it is also essential to underline that the Franks are depicted as the most fanatical of Christians, and they are set against all odds to conquer the Holy Land.

Another significant point is that the epics often emphasize the eternal nature of the war with the Franks, who were opposed, according to the narratives, by many generations of the mujāhidūn. For example, in the Hilālī cycle, when the Franks besiege al-Andarin (Androna), one of the main charterers Zayd al-'Ajjāj asks whether the Franks are attacking the city because of a blood feud and is told that even "his father fought against the father of this damned Frank" (Lyons 1995b, p. 296).

The abovementioned trends demonstrate the great influence of the Crusades on folk narratives, in which the Franks eclipsed the Byzantines with their hostility and cruelty, though the latter had been the main opponent of the mujāhidūn on the Anatolian and Syrian frontiers for many centuries before. We should also note that the Arabs in the epics, describing the Islamic times, are always depicted as Muslims (at the same time, other ethnic groups are mentioned among Muslims, primarily the Turks and Kurds), which is important in the context of studying the image of the holy war and opposition to the Franks. In the narratives, which take place in pre-Islamic times, the main characters are portrayed as zealous monotheists, and in the case of 'Antara, after his death, his descendants soon convert to Islam with the beginning of the prophetic mission of Muḥammad.

In this case, the spatial and temporal expansion of the Holy War paradigm and the creation of the image of an eternal war with the Franks are crucial. This makes it possible to clarify and supplement the estimates of the impact of the Crusades on the Muslim world. For example, David Nicolle states that "the impact of the Crusades upon the Islamic world was minimal and localised. Indeed, the whole Crusading episode was of far less importance to the Islamic world than is generally recognised. The Crusaders and the States that they established in the Middle East were more of an irritation than a real threat" (Nicolle 2001, p. 64). After that, he also emphasizes the insignificant influence of the Crusades on the Byzantines, adding that "much the same could be said of the impact the Crusades had on the lives of ordinary people in the Islamic world, whether they were Muslims, Christians or Jews" (Nicolle 2001, p. 67). Although this assessment seems to be the most accurate in relation to the political and economic spheres, it does not take into account such dominant aspects of local identities as cultural memory and the image of the other. A similar opinion is expressed by Jonathan Riley-Smith, who notes that the memory of particular heroes has survived, but in general, Muslims have forgotten about the Crusades: "In the Islamic world the Crusades almost passed out of mind, although, as we have seen, legendary heroes of resistance like Baybars continued to figure in folk memory" (Riley-Smith 2011, p. 70). However, in my opinion, when it comes to the memory of the Crusades, the key point is not the remembrance of the specific events, such as sieges of cities, or battles, or historical figures such as Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (1137–1193), who is, by the way, the character of *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars* and the Arabian Nights. What matters is the placing of the conflict with the religiously motivated Franks in much earlier eras as in the *Sīrat Dāt al-Himma* and Hilālī cycle, or even in the pre-Islamic times, as in the case of 'Antara, which draws a picture of the eternal jihād against Western Christians seeking to conquer the Holy Land.

It is also important that the confrontation with the Franks goes beyond clashes on the battlefield, and, in order to gain the upper hand, mujāhidūn characters use non-military methods, relying on their strong faith and on the prevalence of the true religion.

Another type of plot is the pattern of the conversion of Frankish princesses to Islam by the heroes. For example, when Ḥalīl ibn Qalāwūn (the epic here depicts al-Aṣraf Ḥalīl (1260–1293), a son of the Sultan al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn (1279–1290)) is captured by the

Frankish ruler of Tyre, he becomes a servant of ruler's daughter and she converts to Islam under his influence:

*Wa idā huwa yuṣallī wa-qālat lahu li-ay ṣay' ta'malu hadā al-a'māl fa-qāla uṣallī fa-raḍiyā fa-qālat 'allimnī hattā uṣallī fa-qāla lahā awwalan aslimī wa-kāna qaṣaduhā al-istihza' bi-l-ṣalāt fa-'allamahā al-ṣahāda wa-l-islām fa-aslamat* (Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars, vol. 3, p. 2079) (And when he was praying she said to him "Why are you doing this?", and he said "I pray, and [Allah] is pleased", and she said "Teach me, so I pray", and he said to her "First, convert to Islam", and her purpose was to mock [his] prayer, and he taught her shahada and Islam and she became Muslim).

At first, she wants to mock him, but then she becomes a true believer and wants to marry Ḥalīl and run away with him. He uses this opportunity to escape and bring in the Muslim army.

There are many similar examples in the epics, and it is often the case that a Frankish princess, who converted to Islam, escapes from the country of the Franks under the pretext of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. For example, the character of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, Badrān, the nephew of the main character Abū Zayd, spent a long time as a prisoner of the Franks; at first, he was a swineherd, and then became the servant of Princess Narjīs, who then converted to Islam after having heard him reciting the Qur'ān. (Sīrat Banī Hilāl, pp. 590–92).

The analyzed contexts demonstrate that the folk epics emphasize the religious motivation of the Christians invading the lands of Šām, as well as their preoccupation with the possession of Jerusalem and the sacred spaces of the Holy Land in general. The description of the goal setting of the Franks is decisive for explaining the mission of the heroes to protect Muslim lands.

In the folk epics, the heroes also take advantage of the religious gullibility and fanaticism of the Franks. In particular, Baybars, opposing the Frankish ruler of al-'Arīš, enters the city under the guise of a divine Christian emissary sent to help the Franks:

*Fa qāla lahu franjīl ma ismuka qāla lahu sayf al-masīḥ al-qāṭi'* (Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars, vol. 2, p. 1091) (And Franjīl asked "What is your name?", and he said "[I am] The Cutting Sword of Christ").

Baybars is allowed into the city; the next day, he allegedly goes out to fight the Muslims and "captures" his own men, with whom he returns to the city and then strikes at the Franks from the inside.

#### 4. Conclusions

As we can see, the Arabic folk epics represent a notable case of the popular perception of jihād.

The aforementioned characters are not just epic heroes, but they have features of holy warriors: the strong faith is their power, which is emphasized both through their thoughts and actions and a description of their emotional state in the military and non-military struggle against the infidels, and through the image of their archenemies—the Franks, who are singled out as the most implacable rivals and outstrip other ethnic groups of Christians by their religious zeal. The motivation and sentiments of the Franks in the considered narratives are essential for explaining the mission of the mujāhidūn characters. It is noteworthy that the Muslim heroes are presented as holy warriors with their prime virtues, such as complete dedication and fearlessness during their fighting against wicked opponents, whose impurity is hypertrophied by extensive pig symbolism and other ways of dehumanization. Furthermore, we should bring into focus the presence of the idea of self-sacrifice of mujāhidūn, which is important for the studies of the concept of martyrdom in the way of jihād from a historical perspective. It is also important that, in the epics, the war with the Franks is presented as eternal, given that the Franks have been attacking the Middle East since the pre-Islamic times, and both 'Antara and Dāt al-Himma, who lived centuries before the Crusades, fought against them, which spatially and temporally expands the jihādī narratives.



Moreover, although the very image of the Franks fits into the main patterns of de-humanization and stereotypes about this ethnic group that existed in the Middle East in the Middle Ages, the crucial point is the very spread of the jihādī narratives and images of the mujāhidūn in the epics. Thus, the image of the eternal enmity with the Franks, which emerged in the epics during the era of the Crusades, survived until the 19th century due to the high popularity of this genre among the masses, which can be considered an important trace of the Crusades in the cultural memory of the Muslims of the Middle East. This circumstance is also relevant for studying the genesis and popular perception of the concept of jihād in the 19th–21st centuries.

Further analysis of these and other sources of the folk culture should be an illustrative addition to the study of the concept of jihād in the theological, jurisprudential, and historical treatises of the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.

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