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## INFORMATION, SPIES, AND SECRECY IN A 12TH CENTURY ARABIC MILITARY TREATISE

### Abstract

Since ancient times, information has been one of the most valuable bargaining products. Throughout history, large and small states, various organizations, and groups have waged a relentless battle to obtain information vital to them. Along with high-profile war battles and diplomatic negotiations, there was always a secret, behind-the-scenes war waged by people unknown to the general public. Considering the secrecy of the mentioned activities, manuals were not written very often regarding the mentioned issues. However, in the military-political works created throughout history, some information still appeared. One such example is the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Muslim author al-Harawi's work, *Al-Harawi's Treatise on Military Tricks*. It is noteworthy that the author worked during the era of the famous Muslim Sultan and commander-in-chief, Salah al-Din Ayyub, and probably performed secret missions for him. Al-Harawi's work coincided with such important events as the capture of Jerusalem by Salah al-Din and the Third Crusade. It is natural that during such a global conflict, intelligence activities and covert battles were of great importance. Opposing parties tried by all means to obtain information about the enemy and its plans, form secret coalitions, and gain the favor or obedience of the local population in order to win a strategic advantage and strengthen their own positions.

In his work, al-Harawi mainly discusses military-political issues, although he also emphasizes the importance of intelligence activities to some extent. According to the author, every government should have a well-organized intelligence network through which it will receive important information and influence the population. Also, according to al-Harawi, the governor should carefully approach any kind of information so that no important issue is left without attention. In addition, the governor should carefully analyze and reconcile the information received and act only after a deep study and analysis of all data. Based on his experience working in the conditions of global geopolitical confrontation and his own secret activities, al-Harawi is distinguished by his deep knowledge of the issue, pragmatism, and realistic approaches.

**Keywords:** history, Middle East, military treatise, intelligence, al-Harawi.

### 1. Introduction

#### Methods of Obtaining Information and the Importance of Prior Information in the Middle Ages

In any field, obtaining correct and time-sensitive information is of utmost importance. More importantly, it is vital to acquire information at the state level, which can be considered one of the cornerstones of determining correct foreign or domestic policy. During combat operations and in a war situation, prior and confirmed information about the enemy is of vital importance because timely awareness is one of the main prerequisites for victory. That is why, since ancient times, various intelligence institutions were created and developed, which were engaged in obtaining valuable information in any way, including both legal and illegal. Throughout history, every political, economic, or

military entity had its own intelligence service, and great empires had large and well-organized intelligence networks. Medieval empires and political entities were no exception, especially during such a global event as the Crusades. The treatise, parts of which we will discuss in this article, was written during the Third Crusade. However, before we talk directly about the content of the text, it is necessary to describe briefly the mentioned period and the author's identity.

## 2. Al-Harawi

### 2.1. The Period of Activity

According to available sources, al-Harawi wrote his work, *Al-Harawi's Treatise on Military Tricks*, during the Third Crusade, when the Muslims occupied Jerusalem, and Christendom marched back into the Middle East to recapture the Holy City. The loss of Jerusalem found a great response among European monarchs and nobles. Soon, King Richard of England (Lionheart), King Philip IV of France, and Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa expressed their willingness to march to the Holy Land and reclaim Jerusalem (Asbridge 2012, 388-389).

At those times, the main forces of the Crusaders in the Holy Land were preparing to defend themselves against Sultan Salah al-Din. The development of events revealed that the Sultan had made a tactical mistake when he did not conquer the city of Tyre. This strategically important port city became a major stronghold of Crusader resistance and a center for the supply chain from Europe. For his part, in exchange for ransom or territories, Salah al-Din began to release noble captives and war prisoners. The Sultan calculated his own policy well: on the one hand, he accepted new territories without waging war, and on the other, he stirred up strife in the ranks of the Crusaders (Astakhishvili, Akhmeteli, and Narimanishvili 2020, 306). In the summer of 1191, a Christian army marched towards Acre and encamped near the city's approaches, although they did not attempt to take the city. Soon, Salah al-Din also approached the Christian camp, and small skirmishes began. On June 8, Richard the Lionheart, who arrived from Europe, joined the crusaders encamped near Acre. In late June, Salah al-Din received additional reinforcements from Egypt and Mosul.

Nevertheless, the Sultan did not launch a large-scale attack on his opponent, as the Europeans strengthened their positions and built strong defensive walls. On July 3, the crusaders attacked Acre. They blew up part of the wall, and the city surrendered on July 11 (Painter 1969, 69). After the capture of Acre, the Crusaders and the Sultan negotiated the following terms: the lives of all the inhabitants of the city would be spared, and in return, Salah ad-Din would pay the Crusaders 200,000 gold dinars and release 15,000 Christian captives and 100 nobles, and the Christians would be given back the True Cross (Runciman 1995, 50).

According to the terms of the agreement, the release of the Christian prisoners and the payment of money were to be made in three stages. Richard the Lionheart sent an embassy to Salah al-Din in order to carry out the mentioned process smoothly. On August 11, Salah al-Din sent Richard the first part of the money and prisoners but kept some of the nobles as hostages. Richard declared this a breach of the treaty and ordered the execution of the 2,700 defenders of the city and their wives and children captured in Acre. Only a few physically strong individuals were left alive and enslaved (Runciman 1995, 53).

On August 22, Richard the Lionheart marched south from Acre with the Crusader army, with Salah al-Din moving parallel to him. The battle between the adversaries took place on September 7, on the plain north of Arsuf, which the Crusaders won convincingly. Although the losses on both sides were relatively small, the outcome of the battle was of great political importance. The outstanding defender of Islam, Salah al-Din, was defeated, and the Crusaders won their first victory since the Battle of Hattin (Asbridge 2012, 473), which boosted their morale. On the other hand, the defeat in the battle with the Crusaders weakened the authority of the Sultan, and discontent appeared in the Muslim camp. After the combat, Salah al-Din retreated to Ramla, while Richard arrived at the town of Jaffa, as he needed a port for supplies. After entrenching in Jaffa, the Crusader army also occupied Ascalon to prevent additional Muslim forces from being sent out of Egypt. Only then did Richard send an ambassador to negotiate with Salah al-Din's brother, al-Adil, who was encamped in the city of Lod. The King of England offered the following terms to the Muslims: Al-Adil was to receive all of Palestine to rule from Salah al-Din and marry Richard's sister Joan. Al-Adil and Joan were to rule the Holy Land together from Jerusalem, and Christians were to be allowed to enter the Holy City. Also, all prisoners on both sides were to be released, and all property to the Knights of Templars and Hospitallers was to be returned. In addition, Richard offered Al-Adil conversion to Christianity. Al-Adil refused these conditions but invited the King of

England to Lod. The meeting took place on November 8 in a friendly environment, and the parties exchanged valuable gifts. It was at this time that the ambassador of the ruler of Tyre, Conrad de Montferrat, was with Salah al-Din, who presented the Sultan with the following offer of his suzerain: If the cities of Sidon and Beirut were returned, Conrad would stop supporting the Crusaders and hand over Acre to the Muslims, although he would not act forcefully against Richard. The next day, Richard's ambassador also arrived at the Sultan, who informed him of the terms offered to Al-Adil by the King of England. Salah al-Din hesitated for a long time to make a final decision, and at the onset of winter, he returned to Jerusalem. At this time, Richard marched towards the Holy City and, on January 3, 1192, fortified at Castle Bait Nuba, located about 20 kilometers from Jerusalem. Despite the cold and rainy weather, the European knights were ready to attack Jerusalem. However, they were opposed by local nobles who knew the environment well. They advised the King of England to refrain from attacking because, depending on the current situation, if the city was taken, the Crusaders would not be able to keep it for a long time. The King of England observed the situation for five days and, finally, gave the order to retreat.

Richard returned to Ascalon and sent another ambassador to Salah al-Din. When the ambassador of the king of England arrived in Jerusalem, he was met there by the ambassadors sent by Conrad. This circumstance greatly alarmed Richard, but Salah al-Din was still playing a double game. On March 20, Richard was visited by al-Adil and offered the king the following peace terms: the Crusaders would keep the conquered lands, and they would be allowed to worship in Jerusalem. In addition, the True Cross would be returned to them. These terms were acceptable for both sides, and a peace treaty was made, and the King of England left the Holy Land (Runciman 1995, 57-63).

## 2.2. Short Biography of Al-Harawi

The famous Arab historian and author of a biographical dictionary, Ibn Khallikan, writes about al-Harawi:

Abu al-Hasan Ali b. Abu Bakr b. Ali, a native of Herat, born in Mosul, a well-known traveler living in Aleppo. He traveled through countless countries and almost circled the earth twice. He has left no land, no sea, no plain, and no mountain among the lands that can be visited. In every place he visited, he made an inscription on the wall, and I saw this in the many countries I visited (Ibn Khallikān n.d., 346<sup>1</sup>).

In one of his works, *A Guide to the Places of Pilgrimage*, al-Harawi recounts his travels to various countries, including Egypt, Palestine, the Maghrib, Sicily, Cyprus, the Byzantine Empire, and Iraq, where he met local rulers and other important figures (Al-Harawiyyi 2002). As a result of studying his work, the French researcher Janine Sourdél-Thomine suggests that al-Harawi traveled in the period of 1173-1189 years during the reign of Sultan Salah al-Din. In addition, he accompanied the Sultan of Egypt on several expeditions (Sourdél-Thomine 1986, 178).

Janine Sourdél-Thomine suggests that al-Harawi also performed the duties of an emissary on behalf of several rulers. In particular, Salah al-Din and other Muslim rulers sent al-Harawi to the enemy's doorstep to gather intelligence, while al-Harawi himself acted in the guise of a traveler (Sourdél-Thomine 1961, 207).

Janine Sourdél-Thomine also suggests that al-Harawi had a real influence on the Ayyubid Sultans of northern Syria and on their decisions. He wrote the work in the last years of his life when his influence at the court of the Ayyubid dynasty was at its zenith (Sourdél-Thomine 1961, 206). Accordingly, al-Harawi was free to give military-political recommendations to the Ayyubid Sultan. His work, *Al-Harawi's Treatise on Military Tricks*, is proof of this.

Another circumstance confirms the opinion about the strong influence of al-Harawi in the court of the Ayyubid dynasty. According to Ibn Khallikan, the third son of Salah al-Din and Ayyubid emir of Aleppo, al-Malik al-Zahir Ghazi, has built a madrasa in the name of al-Harawi at the gates of Aleppo (Ibn Khallikān n.d., 347). Such an action from the ruler's side must indicate respect for al-Harawi and the importance of his figure (Sourdél-Thomine 1986, 178).

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Abd al-Jabbar Sheikh Ali for his support in translation.

### 3. Treatise and the Related Parts

#### 3.1. Information About the Treatise

The exact creation date of *Al-Harawi's Treatise on Military Tricks* is unknown, but according to various sources, the work should have been written between 1192 and 1215 (Sourdel-Thomine 1961, 206).

The treatise is a series of advice to the Sultan and, with its content and historical context, consists of 24 chapters and has the character of a didactic epistle in form. It is for this reason that the work is written in a concise manner, although it has an ambitious purpose of pointing out ways to solve the problems that any leader may face (Sourdel-Thomine 1961, 205). According to Janine Sourdel-Thomine, the treatise should have been written for Salah al-Din's third son, al-Zahir Ghazi (Sourdel-Thomine 1961, 206).

It is noteworthy that the work mainly deals with military affairs. Al-Harawi discusses important issues such as movement, logistics, planning operations, military training, siege and siege defense, and other tactical matters. In addition, al-Harawi discusses important political aspects such as the ruler's administration, diplomatic missions, intelligence activities, etc. (Hamblin 1992, 230).

Spanish researcher Olga Torres Díaz points out that the fundamental principles of al-Harawi's political recommendations are based on almost pathological mistrust, personal and thorough control of all issues, instilling feelings of uncertainty and, at the same time respect in subordinates, while thoroughly examining people and various issues before taking practical steps (Díaz 2014, 9).

On the other hand, Janine Sourdel-Thomine emphasizes that the fundamental characteristics of Al-Harawi, the taste for observation and, sometimes, the desire for critical reflection, are distinctly revealed in the treatise. In addition, al-Harawi clearly respects such human characteristics as pride, courage, vigilance, prudence, and perseverance under trial (Sourdel-Thomine 1961, 206).

It is interesting that in the work, we do not see the religious context of politics or war. Moreover, religious aspects are entirely ignored in the treatise, which makes it more practical (Díaz 2014, 8; 22).

#### 3.2. Intelligence and the Importance of Information in the Treatise

##### *Door 12<sup>th</sup>*

##### **About Spies and Information Carriers**

The Sultan must have loyal, pious, and trustworthy spies who are content with the rewards and favors that come from him without thinking of seeking high positions and income. He should send them both to his own people in the east and west, and the neighboring lands, to bring him [the Sultan] news from all sides, and not to leave behind him events or conversations, to add to the information conveyed by travelers and merchants, so that he may not make mistakes and his power not be affected by it; [the Sultan] must interrogate those who come and go, Bedouin or townspeople, cover up his own decisions, gain and hide information at the same time. By means of intelligence, he must gain the respect of the people; they must fear his power, fear his wrath, and not understand his methods (Al-Harawiyyi n.d., 15).

##### *Door 15<sup>th</sup>*

##### **About the Meaning of Secrecy**

The Sultan should cover up his decisions, not talk about them, not make them obvious, and only reflect them in his actions because it is possible that the enemy will be informed and warned about them; He should not reveal his intentions in the conversation; A truly wise man relies only on action and a fool on words, the wise man was right in his words: "A wise man's tongue is in his heart, but a fool's heart is in his lips." He should not be suspicious of all information – and if he does not trust a particular report, he should at least listen to everything he is told and respond, though not act until he has ascertained its reliability<sup>2</sup> (Al-Harawiyyi n.d., 18).

<sup>2</sup> We would like to thank Abd al-Jabbar Sheikh Ali, Tamar Tsintsadze, and Elene Svianadze for their support in translation.

#### 4. Conclusion

Al-Harawi seems to be a very pragmatic person. He speaks briefly and succinctly about the methods of obtaining intelligence information and the need for deep analysis of the information received. In the excerpts from al-Harawi's treatise, the main duties of the intelligence services are clearly defined: intelligence, counter-intelligence, and information-psychological operations. In particular, the author talks about the diversification of obtaining information, the reconciliation and analysis of intelligence data, the need to cover one's own plans, and the creation of the necessary attitudes among the population. Al-Harawi pays special attention to security measures and information leakage threats, which O. Díaz perceived as views approaching paranoia. However, given the period of the author's work, al-Harawi's pragmatism and approaches are not surprising. Al-Harawi operated during a period of global geopolitical conflict when the struggle between the Islamic and Christian worlds reached another peak. In the created situation, the behind-the-scenes battle acquired particular importance; the opposing sides resorted to all means to gain a strategic advantage. It is in the conditions of such processes that the effectiveness of the intelligence services acquires significant importance when it is a result of the successful work of secret diplomats, obtaining vital information, misleading the enemy, establishing secret alliances, and successful informational-psychological activities to ensure the support of the local population, which ultimately becomes one of the most important levers for gaining strategic victory.

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## Appendix

## تذكره الهروية لحيل الحرية

باب الثاني عشر

## في حال الجواسيس وأصحاب الأخبار

و يجب على السلطان أن يكون له جواسيس قد عرف منهم الثقة و الدين و الأمانة مقتنعين مما يفيض عليهم من إنعامه و يصل إليهم من إحسانه و لا يحدثون أنفسهم بطلب المناصب و حرص المكاسب فينشرهم في بلاد و يرسلهم على العباد شرقا و غربا و قربا ليطلعوهم بالأخبار من جميع الأمصار لئلا ينكتم عنه حال و لا يطوي عنه مقال و ليضم إلى ما يوردونه عليه و يرسلونه إليه التماس الأخبار من المسافرين و التجار و ذلك لئلا يتم عليه زلل و لا يداخل الملك خلل و يسأل من الوارد و الصادر و البادي و الحاضر و ليكم أمره و يتجسس و يخف نفسه و يتجسس ليشمل الناس هيئته و يخافوا سطوته و يحذروا شره و لا يأمنوا مكره.

الباب الخامس عشر

باب الخامس عشر

## في كتمان السر

و يجب على السلطان أن يستعين على أموره بالكتمان و إذا عزم على أمره فلا يذكره و لا يكشفه و يظهر إلا فعلا فرما نُقل عنه إلى عدوه فأخذ حذره و إياه أن يظهر ما في نفسه قولا فإن العاقل يعتمد على فعله و الجاهل على قوله و لقد صدق الحكيم في قوله "لسان العاقل في قلبه و قلب الجاهل في فيه" و إياه أن يكذب خبرا و إن لا يصدق أثرا فإنه يجب على السلطان أن يسمع جميع ما يُنقل إليه و يرد عليه بل لا يعمل به إلا بعد الكشف عن صحته و البحث عن حقيقته.