

The Social Life of the Levant during the Era of Wars with the Franks

Prof. Monzer Mohammed Al-Hayek ♦
University of Homs, Syria
monzer.hayek@gmail.com

Received: 21 /09/2024	Accepted: 06/11/2024	Published: 31/12/2024
-----------------------	----------------------	-----------------------

Abstract:

During the time of the Crusades, political borders in the Levant did not have the same meaning as they do today, and there was frequent interaction between the areas controlled by the Franks and those of the Muslims. Additionally, the Franks did not constitute a majority in their territories; most of the population consisted of locals who continued their previous occupations. The Franks lived as feudal lords or warrior knights in cities and fortresses that served as control points. Although the Franks were united by religion, they were from various national and ethnic backgrounds, preventing them from establishing a single state. It appears that the divisions prevalent among the Muslims at the time also affected the Franks.

Keywords: Crusades; Settlement; Military Feudalism; Role of the Population; Social Relations.

♦ *Corresponding Author : Prof. Monzer Mohammed Al-Hayek*

The Social Life of the Levant during the Era of Wars with the Franks

1- Introduction:

Muslims referred to the Levantine coastal strip as "Al-Tiraz Al-Akhdar" due to its high rainfall and fertile soil (Abu Shama, 1991, p. 179). Even within this strip, which the Franks occupied, they did not form a single state. Instead, they immediately divided into political units after their settlement, such as the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the County of Tripoli, the Principality of Antioch, and others. The political division of Frankish entities in the East was not the basis for the distribution of military forces, as there were multiple military orders with diverse allegiances. No kingdom or principality had control over all the military forces on its territory. The king or prince had their own forces, while other forces resided on their lands, either permanently or temporarily. Among the permanent forces were the military-religious orders such as the Hospitallers, the Templars, the Teutonic Knights, and others (Armstrong, 1988, p. 114).

In addition, large coastal cities housed various merchant communities, such as the Venetians, Genoese, and Pisans, who actively participated in the fighting to support the Franks. However, these communities were often at odds with each other, sometimes even engaging in conflict, and did not submit to the authority of the host country. They were protected by special privileges and rights that they often acquired. The temporary forces consisted of crusading pilgrims, arriving individually or in groups, who frequently formed significant military units with their own leaders, systems, and strategies. Their primary characteristics were religious zeal and eagerness for battle (Naqash, 1946, p. 31).

The Kingdom of Jerusalem only held nominal sovereignty over the other principalities. Additionally, the Templars and Hospitallers were independent of any authority, including that of the King of Jerusalem. They were directly affiliated with the Pope and declared that they were only subject to his orders. The internal conflicts between these two orders, as well as their struggles for dominance, sometimes led to internal fighting,

contributing to many of their political and military setbacks, which ultimately played a role in ending their control in the East (Al-Hariri, 1981, p. 97).

2- The Division of the Frankish Settlers:

When the first Frankish crusade arrived in the Levant, it consisted of a united group of people, despite their different origins. Their goals and interests were aligned, and through great cooperation and harmony, they managed to conquer vast areas of the Levant. However, once they established themselves there, they became infected with the divisions of their Muslim neighbors and enemies, splitting into emirates, states, factions, and sects. The geographical diversity of the Levant may have played a significant role in this division among the Franks.

As time passed, a new generation of Franks emerged, with unique characteristics. One of the most notable traits of this generation was the disappearance of the blind fanaticism that characterized the men of the first crusade. Due to the continuous influx of crusading pilgrims from Europe, Frankish society in the Levant became divided into two large, distinct classes, with a small but visible class of the poor (Stevenson, W., 1968, p. 314). This impoverished class, known as the "Tafurs," was primarily concerned with securing their sustenance. The term "Tafurs" invites comparison with the colloquial Levantine term "طفر" (Tafran), meaning poverty or the poor. The Frankish poor were distributed across the following two classes:

A. The Immigrants: These are the newcomers, often fervent religious pilgrims eager to fight, but their stay is usually temporary.

B. The Locals (Polainz): This group consists of the second and third generations and those born in the Levant, who are influenced by the customs, traditions, and culture of the region. A misconception exists that the Polainz are the offspring of mixed marriages between Franks and local Christians and Muslims. However, contemporary historians clearly indicate that the Polainz descended from original Crusaders, representing a new generation of Crusaders. The term "Polainz" is derived from a French word meaning "young animal" (Polain - pullus) (Morgan, 2001, p. 239).

The Social Life of the Levant during the Era of Wars with the Franks

The conflict between the locals and the immigrants reached a level of open hostility. After a Frankish king was crowned in the Kingdom of Jerusalem from among the newcomers, a song circulated that said:

"Despite the locals,
We have a king from the immigrants.
This hatred and animosity
Will cause us to lose the Kingdom of Jerusalem." (Morgan, 2001, p. 300)

The Arabs sensed this division within Frankish society, referring to the immigrants as "the strangers" or sometimes "the sea people" (Ibn Wasil, 1957, p. 140), due to their arrival by sea. However, Muslims did not benefit from this division, as nothing united the locals and the immigrants like their animosity toward Muslims.

Moreover, the locals felt a desperate need for the strength of the immigrants to continue the holy war, as the immigrants were its fuel. This need helped sustain their coexistence and prevented a complete isolation of the Frankish emirates from Europe. The greater the danger to the Frankish emirates, the more they clung to Europe and recognized the importance of the immigrants (Poole, 1964, p. 127).

Thus, when a new Frankish society formed that included generations born in Syria, it did not separate from Europe or fully integrate into the Islamic East. Instead, a wide chasm remained between them, making it impossible to connect the two sides (Smail, 1985, p. 88).

Perhaps one of the results of this separation was that the Franks remained a ruling class in Syria, while most Syrian Christians and Muslims, under Frankish rule, retained their cultural identity in terms of language, religion, and customs. Their allegiance to the Franks was merely a matter of time, dependent on the Franks' strength. When the Franks were defeated and their forces withdrew, life would simply return to normal for the local population.

3- Social Relations Between Locals and Franks

The cultural exchange between local Franks and the indigenous population was quite natural, dictated by the realities of life in the East. They employed local doctors, cooks, servants, and artisans, dressed in loose local garments in their homes, adorned their palaces with mosaics and colored glass, and enjoyed the sounds of birds and the presence of fountains. They used soap for cleanliness and sugar for sweetening, and they developed a taste for Eastern dishes (Hillenbrand, 1978, p. 368). Some, including certain princes, mastered the Arabic language, facilitating communication between the immigrants and the Muslims (Ibn Shaddad, Y., 1964, p. 213). Many friendships formed between local Franks and Muslims, one of the most famous being that of Usama ibn Munqidh, who spoke of his friendships with Frankish princes and knights (Ibn Munqidh, 1988, p. 122).

However, these interactions did not make the local Franks true Levantines or distance them from their European identity. The cultural exchange and friendships with Muslim counterparts were merely individual occurrences and superficial matters (Smail, 1985, p. 85). The Franks lacked the courage to completely break away from their Crusader spirit, and Muslims consistently rejected their presence. A clear example of this refusal is the position of the judge of Jabala, Mansur ibn Nabil, who was close to Bohemond, the prince of Antioch. Yet, when Saladin's forces approached, he helped liberate his city, driven by his zeal for religion (Ibn al-Athir, 1974, p. 12).

Despite numerous agreements, truces, negotiations, and trade exchanges, the Islamic perception of the Franks remained that they were outsiders who had occupied Muslim lands and needed to be expelled. Even during periods of Muslim weakness, they ultimately reaped the rewards of their refusal to accept the status quo and successfully expelled the Franks from Arab territory.

The Social Life of the Levant during the Era of Wars with the Franks

4- Local Society Under Frankish Rule

It is believed that the vast majority of the population in the Frankish emirates or kingdoms established in Syria were Arab Christians or Muslims. The Franks mostly consisted of knights and fighters who formed an aristocratic ruling class, relying on the presence of local peasants for their survival. Even in cities where a number of Frankish residents were available, local populations were essential for daily tasks, as the Franks were often occupied with wars that required all their military resources.

This necessity led Frankish rulers to grant a significant degree of autonomy and perhaps even self-governance to the locals, allowing them to practice their religious rituals and customs with tolerance. This Frankish tolerance and the evident effort to establish good relations with the local population were not purely humanitarian; it was clear that these actions aimed to stimulate economic activity within their emirates, thereby increasing their financial resources (Ateya, 1962, p. 271).

Despite this, local Muslims and Christians continued to view the Franks as outsiders. Events demonstrated that they were always waiting for the balance of power to shift back to the Muslims before they would act. While the locals played a significant economic role in supporting the Frankish war machine, they posed a deadly threat to the Franks when a Muslim leader effectively utilized their resources. As William of Tyre stated, "No enemy is worse than the enemy who dwells among you." The Latin phrase he used was: "nulla enim pestis efficacior ad nunc dum quam familiaris inimica" (of Tyr, 1976, p. 109).

5- Muslims Under Frankish Rule

The Franks did not make serious attempts to convert Muslims to their faith, even though they closed most Islamic mosques. The Arabic language remained prevalent throughout Frankish territories, including cities, with little influence from European languages such as Latin or French on the local population. Even the Maronites, who were the closest to the Latins, continued to speak Arabic. It appears that multiple

languages coexisted in Frankish-controlled regions, none dominating the others; indeed, it is said that a Frank would need a translator in Tripoli (Kahn, 1995, p. 216). The commercial scribes in Acre "wrote and spoke in Arabic" (Ibn Jubayr, n.d, p. 274). However, it is important to note that Ibn Jubayr describes the relationship between local Muslims and the Franks specifically in Acre and Tyre. Generally, it can be said that the local population did not assimilate into Frankish society, nor did they have any significant impact on the public life of the Frankish kingdoms or the relationships between Islamic kingdoms and Frankish emirates.

6- Muslim Peasants in Frankish Territories

In his travels through the Levant from Damascus to Acre, Ibn Jubayr describes the condition of Muslim peasants under the rule of Frankish landlords. He notes, "We traveled from Tabnin, and our entire route was dotted with connected estates and organized buildings, all inhabited by Muslims, who lived in luxury with the Franks... They paid them half of their harvest at the time of gathering, a tax of one dinar and five qirats per head, and were not bothered in any other matter. They paid a light tax on the fruit of their trees, their homes and all their property were left to them, and all the cities in the coastal region of the Levant were similarly structured, with their estates being entirely for Muslims" (Ibn Jubayr, n.d, p. 279).

From what Ibn Jubayr describes, we can deduce that:

- The Franks were keen on developing and investing in the land, as indicated by "our entire route was dotted with connected estates and organized buildings."
- All peasants on Frankish lands were Muslims, possibly the long-standing farmers whom the Franks retained, as he states, "Their estates are entirely for Muslims."
- The Franks aimed for the stability of the peasants and cared for their welfare, reflected in "they lived in luxury with the Franks."
- The Franks did not impose excessive taxes; rather, their taxes were moderate and easily manageable by the peasants.

The Social Life of the Levant during the Era of Wars with the Franks

- The Franks did not interfere in the internal affairs of Muslim subjects, as he states, "Their homes and all their affairs were left to them."

- The Franks appointed a local Muslim to oversee each village, as indicated by "the overseer was a Muslim appointed by the Franks." These leaders seemed to enjoy considerable freedom, exemplified by a wealthy Muslim official near Acre who hosted an Islamic caravan without hesitation from Frankish authorities, demonstrating his ability to provide hospitality to everyone (Ibn Jubayr, n.d., p. 279).

However, several observations can be made regarding Ibn Jubayr's account:

- Did all Muslims receive the same treatment across all Frankish kingdoms? This remains questionable (Kahn, 1995, p. 216).

- Did Ibn Jubayr mention the condition of Muslim peasants under the Franks to praise them, or for some other reason?

In truth, it is difficult to arrive at a definitive answer, but it is clear that Ibn Jubayr did not intend to praise the treatment of the Franks. He was not naive enough to present these details solely to serve the Franks, as he was a devout believer calling for jihad against them and condemning any dealings with them (Ibn Jubayr, n.d, p. 280). Likely, his information was accurate and contextual, but he shared it not to laud the Franks but to alert Muslim rulers about the necessity of treating peasants well, avoiding heavy taxation, and highlighting the benefits of such treatment for both the state and the populace. He noted that many Muslim peasants in Frankish territories were attracted by the fairness of the Franks, stating, "The hearts of most of them were captivated by the sedition of what they observe among their fellow Muslims in the local estates, for they live in stark contrast to the luxury and kindness of the Franks. It is indeed a tragedy for Muslims that one segment of the Muslim community should complain about the oppression of their own kind, while praising the conduct of their adversaries, the Franks" (Ibn Jubayr, n.d, p. 282).

7- Local Christians in the Frankish Emirates

The Franks were unable to fully integrate the local Christians—Arabs, Syrians, Armenians, and others—into their

societies. As William of Tyre stated, the Franks regarded themselves as "subjects of Christ" and viewed other nations as "children of perdition" (William of Tyre, 1995, p. 401). This perception extended to the Eastern Christians in Syria, who had frequent interactions with the Franks, especially during military conflicts with Muslims. Overall, the role of Eastern Christians in the wars against the Franks was marginal, largely because the Franks viewed them as heretical Christians and treated them little better than Muslims. If they could kill them, they would; if not, they were indifferent to plundering their churches and lands (Kahn, K., 1995, p. 97). The Franks held a condescending view of Eastern Christians, regarding them as a non-militant people (Samail, R., 1985, p. 88). William of Tyre described the Syrians as "a weak and effeminate people" (William of Tyre, 1994, p. 401). Despite being born in Syria, William still harbored a sense of superiority as a Frank. However, exceptions existed for the Armenians and Maronites, who had their own unique trajectories.

8- Cross-Border Trade Relations

In his travels, Ibn Jubayr remarked, "One of the strangest occurrences in the world is that Muslim caravans travel to Frankish lands while their captives enter Muslim territories" (Ibn Jubayr, n.d, p. 302). This clearly indicates that the benefits of trade outweighed political and military disputes, suggesting that Muslims and Franks reached agreements that were honored more rigorously than political or military obligations. This reflects the establishment of mutual benefit values in dealings that were unusual for that era, evidenced by Ibn Jubayr's astonishment at these interactions, attributing it to "moderation in politics" (Ibn Jubayr, n.d, p. 284).

The volume of trade between the Frankish emirates, particularly the Kingdom of Jerusalem—serving as the maritime front and housing the commercial ports of the Levant—and the Muslim territories was substantial by the standards of that time. This trade connected the economic depth of the Muslim world with access to the Far East. Evidence of this trade is seen in the significant influx of Frankish coins in Damascus. Abu Shama noted in the events of 658 AH (1260 CE), "People faced severe

The Social Life of the Levant during the Era of Wars with the Franks

inflation this year, largely due to the Franks minting the coins known as 'Yafiya' (named after the city of Jaffa), which were largely counterfeit and proliferated greatly in the region" (Abu Shama, 1971, p. 319).

The large number of Yafiya coins was certainly a result of transactions for goods sold to the Franks. Ibn Jubayr also noted that the Christian scribes at the port of Acre "wrote and spoke in Arabic" (Ibn Jubayr, n.d, p. 276). The Franks were lenient regarding taxes on goods entering their lands, as trade was crucial to their economic life. Taxation was one dinar and one qirat for each person crossing into Frankish-controlled areas, which was a reasonable amount for that time (Ibn Jubayr, n.d, p. 277).

Ibn Jubayr emphasized the favorable treatment of traders in Frankish territories, noting that they enjoyed freedom of movement and residence. He mentioned, "They would free a traveler with no goods to ensure he was not hiding anything and allowed him to settle wherever he pleased, all done gently and without coercion" (Ibn Jubayr, n.d, p. 279). Although we do not believe that the Popes exempted the Eastern Frankish Emirates from their strict prohibitions on trade with Muslims (Fabri, 2000, pp. 69-81), trade continued smoothly between Europe and Islamic kingdoms. Imports from the Levant via Latin Emirates continuously flowed into Europe, as did products from Egypt—linen, sugar, silk, and spices from the Far East—while European goods also flowed into Egypt and Syria (Sanuto, 1999, pp. 38-81).

9- Conclusion

The political boundaries in the Arab East during the time of the Crusades had no religious or ethnic significance; there wasn't even a clear or defined border on the ground. Generally, the Franks were mostly confined to a narrow and sometimes fragmented coastal strip (Ateya, 1962, p. 271). Additionally, the Franks did not constitute a majority in their regions, as most of the population consisted of local Muslims and Christians, who continued to engage in their previous occupations, particularly agriculture. The Franks lived as feudal lords or warrior knights in the cities and fortresses that served as points of control and

dominance. When they had no forces in the field, they were seen living behind their walls (Of Tyr, 1976, p. 486).

The Franks did not establish a unified state but immediately after their settlement, they divided into political units. The Crusader campaigns gathered soldiers of different origins, which remained distinct and established separate states with often conflicting interests and ambitions. While they enjoyed religious unity, they belonged to various national and ethnic groups, each with its own language and customs. The Burgundians predominated in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the Normans in the Principality of Antioch, and the Provencals in the Principality of Tripoli, and the disputes of the founders were passed down to their children and then to their grandchildren (Runciman, 1954, p. 304). It seems that the division and fragmentation among Muslims spread to the Franks as well, as some Frankish princes and kings allied with Muslim princes and kings against rival coalitions of Franks and Muslims—a phenomenon we see echoed today.

The Franks settled in Palestine for nearly two centuries, driven by a strong religious obsession with protecting the tomb of the Savior, which is central to their faith in His death, resurrection, and redemption. They built a significant military and economic power, leading them to believe that Palestine was part of Europe. However, history has judgments that differ from human beliefs. When the sincere determination of the rightful owners of the land was found, along with a leadership that believed in their right to it, and the conditions to restore their rights were prepared, the land returned to its rightful owners, and they came back to it, while the settlers returned whence they came.

Sources and References:

- Ibn Al-Athir, Ali ibn Muhammad. (1974). *The Complete History*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Sadir.
- Ibn Jubayr, Muhammad ibn Ahmad. (n,d). *The Reminder of News about Travel Agreements*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Sadir.
- Abu Shama, Abdul Rahman ibn Ismail. (1991). *The Eyes of the Two Gardens in the News of the Two States*. Damascus, Syria: Ministry of Culture.

The Social Life of the Levant during the Era of Wars with the Franks

- Abu Shama, Abdul Rahman ibn Ismail. (1971). *The Supplement to the Two Gardens in the News of the Two States*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Ma'arifa.
- Ibn Shaddad, Yusuf ibn Rafi. (1964). *The Royal Anecdotes and the Virtues of Yusuf*. Cairo, Egypt: Egyptian Press.
- Ibn Munqidh, Usama ibn Murshid. (1988). *The Consideration*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Fikr al-Hadith.
- Ibn Wasil, Muhammad ibn Salim. (1957). *The Relief of Grievances in the News of the Ayyubids*. Cairo, Egypt: Amiri Press.
- Al-Hariri, Ahmad ibn Ali. (1981). *The Announcement and Clarification of the Departure of the Accursed Franks*. Damascus, Syria: Investigated by Dar al-Malah.
- Anuto, Tursillo "Marino". (1999). *The Book of Secrets for the True Crusaders - The Comprehensive Encyclopedia*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Fikr.
- Smail, R.C. (1985). *The Art of War among the Crusaders*. Damascus, Syria: Dar Talas.
- Al-Suri, William. (1994). *A History of the Accomplishments Beyond the Sea - The Comprehensive Encyclopedia*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Fikr.
- Al-Suri, William. (1995). *The Crusades: Eyewitness Accounts - The Comprehensive Encyclopedia*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Fikr.
- Zakari, Suhail. (1988). *Introduction to the History of the Crusades - The Comprehensive Encyclopedia*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Fikr.
- Fabri, Felix the Monk. (2000). *Journeys and Travels in Palestine - The Comprehensive Encyclopedia*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Fikr.
- Cohen, Claude. (1995). *The East and the West during the Crusades*. Cairo, Egypt: Sina Publishing.
- Morgan, Margaret. (2001). *A Study of William of Tyre's Chronicles - The Comprehensive Encyclopedia*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Fikr.
- Al-Naqash, Zaki. (1946). *Social and Economic Relations between Arabs and Franks*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnani.

Foreign Sources and References:

- Of Tyr, William. (1976). *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*. 2 vols, translated by E. A. Babcock & A. C. Krey. New York, U.S.
- Armstrong, Karen. (1988). *Holy War*. London, England: Macmillan.
- Ateya, Aziz. (1962). *Crusade: Commerce and Culture*. New York, U.S.
- Hillenbrand, Carole. (1978). *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*. London, England: Edinburgh University Press.
- Lane-Poole, Stanley. (1964). *Saladin and the Fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem*. Beirut, Lebanon: Cheats.
- Runciman, Steven. (1981). *A History of the Crusades*. London, England: Penguin Books.
- Stevenson, W.B. (1953). *The Crusaders in the East*. London, England: Cambridge University .