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Holy Warriors in Medieval Arab Folk Narratives: Martyrdom and Ethnicity

Oleg A. Sokolov

Abstract
This article aims to analyse what makes Christian and Muslim warriors in Medieval Arab Folk narratives holy, as well as to trace the relationship between religion and ethnicity in the images of Muslim warriors. The research highlights the omnipresence of examples of martyrdom discourse among the Muslim characters in this kind of narratives. Another essential feature is the Arabization of the very struggle against Franks and Byzantines, by emphasizing the role of Arabs and reducing the role of Turks, Kurds and Persians and subordinating representatives of these ethnic groups to Arabs in the narratives under consideration.

Keywords
Holy war; Crusades; Arab Folk culture; Islam; Jihād; Martyrdom.

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HOLY WARRIORS IN MEDIEVAL ARAB FOLK NARRATIVES: MARTYRDOM AND ETHNICITY

Oleg A. Sokolov*

The Christian-Muslim confrontation in the Mediterranean lasted throughout the entire Middle Ages. An important aspect of the analysis of these historical events is the study of the mutual perception of the sides of this struggle, while of particular interest is how the opposing parties imagined each other's motivations, primarily the role of religion in the actions of the enemy.

In the case of Medieval Muslim sources, this issue is being examined almost exclusively in materials of elite culture (chronicles and theological treatises), while the perception of the concept of holy war in the Folk narratives of the Muslim Middle East remains poorly researched. Most studies of the phenomenon of the *jihād* in the Islamic world do not resort to these types of sources,[1] or only briefly mention the presence of the holy war discourse in them.[2] At the same time, historians of the crusades point to the importance of studying folk narratives. Carole Hillenbrand, in her research on the Islamic perspectives of the Crusades, emphasises the importance of the folk epics: "This literature is a vast and largely untapped source of popular attitudes, beliefs and stories which helped to create Muslim stereotypes of the Franks."[3] Jonathan Phillips

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[1] See, for example: R. Firestone. *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); D. Cook. *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); S. Hashmi, ed. *Just Wars, Holy Wars, and Jihads: Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Encounters and Exchange* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[2] M. Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 146.

[3] C. Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 267.

also highlights the significance of studying these sources for the analysis of the memory of the Crusades.[4]

Among the studies of Arab folk narratives, it is necessary to note the publications of Malcolm Lyons[5] and Niall Christie,[6] devoted to the image of the Crusaders and Europeans in these sources; however, they do not focus on the topic of the sanctity of war in these texts.

In this chapter, I am aiming to analyse two important aspects of the image of holy warriors and holy war in Medieval Arab folk narratives. I will try to analyse what makes Christian and Muslim warriors holy, and what the relationship is between religion and ethnicity in the images of Muslim warriors.

According to *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, the best-known type of Arabic folk narratives from the postclassical period is the popular *sīra*, the mixed verse and prose Epic. Over a dozen of these Epics appear in the period from the twelfth to the fifteenth century and have remained popular until the present. They are distinguished by their extraordinary length. Some contain a great deal of magic, sorcery and other supernatural elements, while others are primarily heroic and semi-realistic in tone. They all share a basically historical framework and purport to tell biographies of heroic characters from the pre-Islamic, early Islamic and medieval periods.[7] In this research I will consider the following Epics:

Sīrat ʻAntara ibn Shaddād (Life of ʻAntara ibn Shaddād). The main character of this Epic is the semi-legendary pre-Islamic poet ʻAntara ibn Shaddād (c. 525–608), a well-known warrior from the Banū ʻAbs tribe and the author of famous poems. Although the story takes place in pre-Islamic times, the protagonist travels throughout the Mediterranean, with many of his adventures involving him fighting the Franks and Byzantines.

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[4] J. Phillips, The Image of Saladin: From the Medieval to the Modern Age. European Receptions of the Crusades in the Nineteenth Century. Franco-German Perspectives. International Workshop – Research Group 'Myths of the Crusades'. Eckert. Dossiers 4. 2011. https://repository.gei.de/bitstream/handle/11428/129/ED_2011_04_06_Phillips_Reputation_of_Saladin.pdf (accessed June17, 2025).

[5] M. Lyons, "The Crusading Stratum in the Arabic Hero Cycles.," in *Crusaders and Muslims in twelfth-century Syria*, ed. Maya Shatzmiller (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 147-161; Lyons, Malcolm. "The Land of War: Europe in the Arab Hero Cycles," in *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, ed. Angeliki Laiou, Roy Mottahedeh (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001), 41-51.

[6] N. Christie, "Exploring Europe through Medieval Islamic Folk Literature," in *The Historian of Islam at Work: Essays in Honor of Hugh N. Kennedy*, ed. Maaike van Berkel, Letizia Osti (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 503-520.

[7] D. Reynolds, "Popular prose in the post-classical period," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature, Vol. 6. Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, ed. Roger Allen and Donald Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 259-260.

Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma (Life of Dhāt al-Himma). The main heroine of the epic is Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma, a warrioress from the Banū Kilāb tribe. The epic also features her son ʻAbd al-Wahhāb and emir Abū Muḥammad al-Baṭṭāl as key characters. The action takes place on the Arab-Byzantine frontier in the early Abbasid period, but in addition to the Byzantines, the Arabs are also regularly attacked by the Franks. The main villain is ʻUqba, a Christian posing as a Muslim and trying to cause all sorts of harm to the main characters and the Muslim Ummah.

Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars (Life of al-Ẓāhir Baybars). The plot of this epic is built around a real historical figure of the Mamluk Sultan Baybars I (1223-1277). A significant part of the narrative is occupied by the protagonist's struggle against the Franks, who are incited to attack the Muslim world by the main antagonist Juwān (John).

Alf layla wa layla (The Thousand and One Nights). This collection of tales contains large narratives, involving the struggle against Christians. In this article, I will consider "The Tale of King ʻUmar ibn al-Nuʻmān," the story that describes the confrontation between Arab king ʻUmar ibn al-Nuʻmān and his sons and the Christian kings, and "The Tale of ʻAlī Nūr al-Dīn and Maryam the Girdle-girl," in which the Frankish princess Maryam is captured by Muslims, and after the conversion to Islam, falls in love with the main character Nūr al-Dīn. *The Thousand and One Nights* also includes two smaller tales touching the struggle against the Franks: "The Tale of the Man of Upper Egypt and His Frankish Wife" and "The Tale of ʻAlāʼ al-Dīn Abū al-Shāmāt". Qasem Abduh Qasem rightly notes that more than 200 nights in the collection are associated with the memory of the Crusades. He also suggests that the appearance of these stories in *The Thousand and One Nights* is an artistic response of the common people to the shock of the First Crusade.[8] This assumption, however, seems controversial, primarily because of the abundance of religious war rhetoric in these stories, which was not typical for the first decades after the First Crusade, which allows us to attribute their genesis more likely to the time of the active propaganda of *jihād* during the times of Nūr al-Dīn Zankī (1118-1174), Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī (1137-1193) and Mamluk sultans. In this chapter, I will use the reissue of the Calcutta II edition of *The Thousand and One Nights*, which in turn is based on Būlāq edition.

The choice of these sources is due to their wide distribution and popularity in the Levant and Egypt in the late Middle Ages and early Modern times, which was unanimously noted by European travellers and researchers of the

[8] Qāsim ʻAbduh Qāsim, "Al-Ruʼya al-shaʻbiyya li al-ḥurūb al-ṣalībiyya fī alf layla wa layla [People's view of the Crusades in The Thousand and One Nights]," *Al-Maʻthūrāt al-shaʻbiyya* 6 (1987): 88.

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[9] If in the case of the epics there is no doubt about their active circulation among the masses of Egypt and the Levant, then with *The Thousand and One Nights* the situation appears to be more complicated. Discussions continue about its popularity in the Middle East before the wave of European interest in it in the eighteenth century. However, as it will be shown below, structurally the narratives of *The Thousand and One Nights*, containing the discourse of holy war, are similar to the above-mentioned epics, as they presumably depict the same realities of the crusades, so it seems logical to consider them in the same context as the aforementioned Epics.

In Medieval Arabic folk narratives, almost all military operations of Christians against Muslims are carried out by *ifranj* and *rūm.*[10] While the term *ifranj* can be accurately translated as Franks, i.e. Europeans in general, the term *rūm* has a much more complex nature. In addition to the direct translation "Byzantines," it is also necessary to take into account that many of the contexts where *rūm* act in folk narratives, are most likely related to the events of the Crusades; respectively, this lexeme designates the crusaders, and secondly, in medieval Arabic-language monuments it could also designate Western Europeans. In this case, it seems important to make a digression and give an example of a written monument of elite origin, demonstrating the confusion in the use of these terms, namely *Tuḥfat al-nuẓẓār fī gharā'ib al-amṣār wa 'ajā'ib al-asfār* (A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling) by the famous traveller Ibn Baṭṭūta (1304-1369). It is noteworthy that the author uses both terms to refer to the crusaders in the Holy Land. While in the following passages about Acre and Damietta the crusaders are called *ifranj*, in the fragments dedicated to Jerusalem and Tripoli Ibn Baṭṭūta speaks about *rūm*:

> Waṣaltu ilā madīnat 'akka wa hiya kharāb wa kānat 'akka qā'idat bilād al-ifranj bi al-shām wa marsā sufunihim[11] (And I arrived in the city of Acre, and it was in ruins, and Acre was the base of the country of *ifranj* in [the lands of] Levant and a harbour for their ships).

[9] O. Sokolov, "Vanquishers of the Crusaders: Mujāhidūn Characters in Arabic Folk Epics," *Religions* 14, no. 8 (2023): 1042.

[10] The only exception is the epic *Sīrat sayf ibn ḏī yazan* [Life of Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan], where the principal opponents of the main characters are Ethiopians.

[11] Abū 'Abdullāh Muḥammad Ibn Baṭṭūṭa. *Tuḥfat al-nuẓẓār fī gharā'ib al-amṣār wa 'ajā'ib al-asfār* [A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling] (Winsūr: Mu'assasat hindāwī, 2017), 44.

> Wa dumyāṭ hādhihi ḥadīthat al-binā' wa al-madīna al-qadīma hiya allātī kharabahā al-ifranj 'alā 'ahd al-malik al-ṣāliḥ[12] (The current city of Damietta is newly built; the old city was destroyed by *ifranj* during the time of al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ).
> Wa ammā ṭarābulus al-qadīma fa kānat 'alā ḍiffat al-baḥr wa tamallakahā al-rūm zamānan fa lammā istarja'ahā al-malik al-ẓāhir khuribat wa uttukhidhat hādhihi al-ḥadītha[13] (The old city of Tripoli was on the seashore and was held for some time by *rūm*, and when it was recaptured by al-Malik al-Ẓāhir [Baybars], it was destroyed and this new [city] was founded [in its place]).
> Wa kāna al-malik al-ṣāliḥ al-fāḍil ṣalāḥ al-dīn bin ayyūb jazzāhu Allāh 'an al-islām khayran lammā fataḥa hādhihi al-madīna hadama ba'ḍ suwarhā thumma istanqaḍa al-malik al-ẓāhir hadmahu khawfan an yaqṣidahā al-rūm fa yatamanna'ū bihā[14] (The pious and noble king Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn bin Ayyūb, may Allah reward him with good in the name of Islam, when he captured this city [Jerusalem], destroyed part of its walls, and subsequently al-Malik al-Ẓāhir [Baybars] completed its destruction out of fear, lest *rūm* [again] occupy it and defend themselves in it).

As can be seen, Ibn Baṭṭūta is well aware of the history of the Crusades and calls Acre the main city of *ifranj*. He also talks about them in the case of the siege of Damietta by the army of Louis IX of France (1214-1270) on 5-6 June 1249 during the Seventh Crusade (1248-1254). However, mentioning the reconquest of Tripoli, which remained in the hands of the crusaders for 180 years, he refers to the Muslim opponents as *rūm*. It should be noted that although the city was taken in 1289 by Mamluk Sultan al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn (1279-1290), Ibn Baṭṭūta attributes this victory to Baybars. Ibn Battūta's mistake is notable because it demonstrates how popular tradition had already focused on Baybars as the hero who drove out the crusaders.[15] At the same time, Ibn Baṭṭūta also mentions Qalāwūn, but only in the context of his conquest of the Syrian fortress of Marqab, and the Sultan's opponents in this case, as indicated, were also *rūm.*[16]

[12] Ibidem, 46.
[13] Ibidem, 47.
[14] Ibidem, 42.
[15] H. Gibb. *The Travels of Ibn Battuta A.D., 1325 – 1354* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), vol. 1, 88.
[16] Abū 'Abdullāh Muḥammad Ibn Baṭṭūṭa. *Tuḥfat al-nuẓẓār fī gharā'ib al-amṣār*, 59.

In another case, Ibn Baṭṭūta calls the Alfonso XI of Castile (1311–1350), an opponent of the Marinid Sultan Abū al-Ḥasan ʻAlī I (c. 1297–1351), a "tyrant of *rūm*":

> Wa kāna dhalika ithr mawt ṭāghiyat[17] al-rūm alfūns[18] (And this was right after the death of Alfonso, a tyrant of *rūm*).
> Fataḥahu mawlānā abū al-ḥasan riḍwān Allāh ʻalayhi wa istarjaʻahu min ayday al-rūm baʻda tamallukihim lahu ʻishrīna sana wa nayyifan[19] (Our lord Abū al-Ḥasan, may the mercy of Allah be upon him, conquered it [al-Jazīra[20]] and returned it from the hands of *rūm* after they had ruled it for more than twenty years).

Moreover, the term *ifranj* is not used at all by Ibn Baṭṭūta in relation to the description of the confrontation in al-Andalus. At the same time, for example, Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406), a contemporary of Ibn Baṭṭūta from North Africa, who also lived in the Levant, clearly distinguished between *rūm* and *ifranj*.[21] Thus, the topic of the relationship and use of the terms *ifranj* and *rūm* in the late Middle Ages deserves further research.

Based on all the above, let us move on to consider the features of the depiction of the holy war in Medieval Arab folk culture.

I. Images of Holy War and Holy Warriors in Medieval Arab Folk Narratives

First of all, it should be noted that many of the heroes of both sides of the Muslim-Christian confrontation in Arab folk narratives represent holy warriors, i.e. those who fight a just war for the cause of the true faith, with all their typical attributes.

It is essential to highlight that these narratives emphasise that the motivation and reasoning of Christians attacking the Middle East are not simply plunder or seizure of territory, but their conviction in the need to spread their faith and suppress the representatives of other cults. In particular, typical of the narratives under consideration are general calls for a holy war with the gathering of all Christians in order to establish Christianity throughout the world. For example,

[17] This term was used in Arabic sources to name Christian rulers in Andalusia, in order to emphasize the illegitimacy of their power.

[18] Ibidem, 481.

[19] Ibidem, 481.

[20] I.e. Algeciras.

[21] See, for example, the description of the interactions of the Crusaders with the Byzantines before the fall of Edessa: ʻAbd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn, *Taʼrīkh ibn Khaldūn* [History of Ibn Khaldūn] (Bayrūt: Dār al-fikr, 2000), vol. 5, 273-277.

Juwān, the main antagonist of *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars*, calls for a holy war, citing the will of Christ:

> Mā ataytu illā qahran ʻannī fa inna al-masīḥ amaranī an aṭūfa ʻalā sāʼir ṭawāʼif ummatihi min rūm wa ifranj wa arman wa aqbāṭ āmuruhum bi al-jihād ʻan millatihi ḥattā takūna jamīʻ al-umam masīḥiyya[22] (I came only by submission, [because] Christ ordered me to come around the rest of the communities of his people of Franks and Byzantines and Armenians and Copts and order them [to wage] a holy war for his religion, so all the peoples become Christians).

In addition to statements by Christian leaders about the need to wage a holy war and prepare for it, it is also important to note the direct threats to Muslims, as in the case of Dhat al-Dawāhī, the mother of the king of *rūm* in *The Thousand and One Nights*:

> Wa lā budda an naghzūkum wa naqtulukum wa naʼkhudhu minkum al-diyār fa tahlikūna ʻan ākharikum wa lā yabqā minkum dayyār wa man yanfukhu al-nār illā man yaʻbudu al-ṣalīb wa al-zunnār[23] (We must invade you, kill you, and take your homes, so you will perish to the last of you, and none of you will remain, nor anyone who blows the fire, except those who worship the cross and the *zunnār*-belt).[24]

The appearance of the Franks features the abundance of symbols of religious war, primarily a large number of crosses and clergy in their ranks. This feature is well illustrated by the description of the Frankish army in *Sīrat ʻAntara ibn Shaddād*:

> Wa aqbalat al-ifranj bi al-ṭawāriq wa al-ṣulbān ʻalā ruʼūs mulūkihā wa al-sādāt wa imtalaʼat bi al-ruhbān yaqraʼūna al-injīl wa yuʻaẓẓimūna al-ṣulbān[25] (And the Franks approached, bringing

[22] *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars* [Life of al-Ẓāhir Baybars] (Al-Qāhira: al-Hayʼa al-Miṣriyya al-ʻĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 1996), vol. 4, 2179.

[23] *Alf layla wa layla* [The Thousand and One Nights] (Al-Qāhira: Muʼassasat hindāwī, 2022), vol. 1, 422.

[24] *Zunnār*-belt, a belt of a certain colour that *dhimmis* – Christians and Jews in the Muslim regions – were required to wear.

[25] *Sīrat ʻAntara ibn Shaddād* [Life of ʻAntara ibn Shaddād] (Al-Qāhira: Maktabat al-Jumhūriyya al-ʻArabiyya, [s.d.]), vol. 4, 211.

> misfortunes, and the crosses were on the heads of their kings and lords, and their [ranks] were filled with monks reciting the Gospel and worshipping the crosses).

As for Muslims, the same as in the case of Christians, we find an active demonstration of the symbols and attributes of the holy war. This circumstance is exemplified by the character from *The Thousand and One Nights* calling on his brothers-in-arms during the battle against Christians: "Fa irfa' al-'alam al-akhḍar wa ṣiḥ qā'ilan Allāh akbar[26] (So raise the green banner and shout: 'God is the Greatest')."

The main characters of most Arabic folk epics also have a well-known reputation as holy warriors, such as Abū Muḥammad al-Baṭṭāl, the character of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, feared by "all who bear the cross":

> Fa kull man 'alā wajh al-arḍ min rūmī wa ifranjī wa armanī wa kull man yaḥmilu al-ṣalīb wa yarkabu al-khayl wa yaḍribu wa yaṭ'anu bi al-rumḥ al-kull yakhāfūna minka wa yahībūka ḥattā inna al-ṣaghīr idhā kāna fī hajr ummihi wa 'ayyaṭa taqūlu lahu uskut wa illā yajīka Abā[27] Muḥammad al-Baṭṭāl[28] (And everyone on the face of Earth from Byzantines and Franks and Armenians and everyone who wears a cross and rides a horse and strikes and pierces with spear, everyone are afraid of you and tremble before you, so the child if he is in the care of his mother and he cries, she says to him: 'Hush, otherwise Abū Muḥammad al-Baṭṭāl will come for you').

In this fragment, it is also important to pay attention to the description of the key features of the image of the Christian as an enemy: the one who wears a cross, rides on horseback and strikes with a spear, which paints an undisguised picture of a crusader knight.

The use of terms of the holy war we see in another example, derived from *The Thousand and One Nights*. The ship of the daughter of the Frankish king, heading on a pilgrimage to a monastery located on a remote island, is attacked by Muslims who went to sea not just to plunder, but to wage a holy war:

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[26] *Alf layla wa layla* [The Thousand and One Nights] (Al-Qāhira: Mu'assasat hindāwī, 2022), vol. 1, 434.

[27] From the point of view of the grammar of the literary language, there should be a form "abū".

[28] *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* [Life of Dhāt al-Himma] (Bayrūt: al-Maktaba al-Sha'biyya, 1980–1981), vol. 1, 754.

> Fa lammā qarubat min al-dayr kharaja markab min marākib al-muslimīn al-mujāhidīn fī sabīl Allāh[29] (And when they approached the monastery, a boat of Muslims fighting for the sake of God appeared).

No less noteworthy are other contexts from this monument concerning *jihād*. For instance, in one of the episodes of the war against *rūm* and *ifranj*, the vizier tells Sharkān, the son of 'Umar ibn al-Nu'mān, and his brother, that God granted them victory over the Christians because they entrusted their souls to him and left their families and their homeland for the sake of the holy war:

> I'lamā ayyuhā al-malikān anna Allāh naṣarnā ḥaythu wahabnā anfusanā Allāh 'azza wa jalla wa hajarnā al-ahl wa al-awṭān[30] (Know, O two kings, that God helped us as we gave ourselves to God Almighty and left our families and homelands).

Next, I will focus on the concept of martyrdom as an important attribute of the image of Muslim holy warriors in the folk narratives, which deserves special attention.

Niall Christie notes that Arabic Folk tales present Franks "as suitable villains of the stories that are told about them; thus they are worthy opponents for the Muslim heroes, and victories over them are both clearly justified and reassurances of the power of good to defeat evil".[31] Although from an ontological point of view, Christie's interpretation of the main conflict in Arab folk narratives as a confrontation between good and evil is undoubtedly correct, what is also important is the presentation of this struggle in the narratives as a holy war for both sides of the conflict and, essentially, the prevalence of the idea of martyrdom, which has not been analysed so far in the sources of this type.

Earlier I briefly touched upon this topic and gave some examples,[32] and now I will give more, since they are in abundance in the folk narratives under consideration.

For example, we see typical cases of the implementation of the martyrdom pattern in *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars*:

[29] *Alf layla wa layla*, vol. 6, 31.
[30] Ibidem, vol. 1, 444.
[31] N. Christie. "Exploring Europe through Medieval Islamic Folk Literature," 518.
[32] O. Sokolov, "Vanquishers of the Crusaders: Mujāhidūn Characters in Arabic Folk Epics," 1042.

> Fa naẓara al-muqaddam Ismāʻīl ilā hadhihi al-fiʻāl fa qāla tawakkaltu ʻalā al-karīm dhū al-jalāl Allāh al-kabīr al-mutaʻāl bi annihā fī sabīl Allāh yā kilāb al-mushrikīn in ʻishtu aʻīshu saʻīdan wa in muttu amūtu shahīdan[33] (And the commander Ismāʻīl looked at that and said: 'I yielded myself to God The Noble The Lord of Majesty The Most High submitting it in the way of God, o, heathen dogs, if I live, I will live happy, and if I die I will die as a martyr').

Or in another episode: "Anta takūnu min al-mujāhidīn fī ṭāʻat Allāh wa lā tamūtu illā shahīd al-jihād[34] (You will be a *mujāhid* in obedience to God, and you will not die except as a martyr of *jihād*)."

We see similar situations in which heroes demonstrate a readiness for self-sacrifice in the war for faith in the case of Muslim heroes of *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*:

> Lā akhāfu min qudūm al-mawt baʻda iẓhār kalimat al-tawḥīd wa yakūnu sababan li naṣrat Allāh al-malik al-majīd fa immā an ablugha mā urīdu wa immā an uqtala fa amūtu shahīd[35] (I am not afraid of the coming of death after the revealing of the word of monotheism, so it will be a cause of the victory of God The All-Glorious King, and I am going to get what I want, that is to be killed and die as a martyr).

Or as in another context of the same work: "In ʻishtu ʻishtu saʻīd wa in muttu muttu shahīd[36] (If I live, I would live happily, and if I die, I would die a martyr)."

Examples from *The Thousand and One Nights* are also of significant interest. For instance, before one of the battles against Christians, the herald addresses the Muslim army before the fight with the words:

> ʻAlaykum bi aʻdāʼ al-dīn ya muḥibbī al-nabī al-mukhtār hādhā waqt irḍāʼ al-karīm al-ghaffār yā rājī al-najāt fī al-yawm al-mukhawwif inna al-janna taḥta ẓilāl al-suyūf[37] (Turn on the enemies of religion, o those who love the Chosen Prophet, this is the time to please The Generous and Forgiving, o you who hope for salvation in the fearful day, Paradise lies under the shades of the swords).

[33] *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars*, vol. 3, 1829.
[34] Ibidem, vol. 4, 2575.
[35] *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, vol. 1, 370-371.
[36] Ibidem, vol. 1, 689.
[37] *Alf layla wa layla*, vol. 1, 435.

Here, the quotation from the Islamic sacred text, namely the famous hadith (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* 2818), is important.

In another episode, the sorceress Dhat ad-Dawāhī uses magic to take on the image of a Muslim ascetic in order to gain the trust of the Muslim protagonists. Talking about her fictitious captivity in *rūm*'s fortress, she says that she wanted to return to her country to die in *jihād*:

> Li ajl an amūta taḥta ḥawāfir khayl al-mujāhidīn allādhīna hum ba'da al-qatl aḥyā' ghayr al-amwāt[38] (In order to die under the hooves of the *mujāhidīn*'s horses, who after being killed are alive and not dead).

In this case, it is crucial that what she says is within the horizon of expectation of the Muslim characters, and they completely trust her, seeing the piety of the ascetic. Later in the same story, King Sharkān and his brother want to meet with the "pious hermit" before going to besiege Constantinople in order to receive his blessing to participate in the holy war, from which Sharkān does not plan to return:

> Wa anā al-akhar ashtahī an arā hādhā al-zāhid la'allahu yad'ū lī bi qaḍā' naḥbī fī al-jihād wa liqā' rabbī fa innī zahadtu al-dunyā[39] (And the last [thing] I desire is to see this ascetic, perhaps he will pray for me to end my life in *jihād* and to meet my Lord, for I am fatigued of this world).

It is important to note that although we observe an active circulation of jihadist rhetoric in the "crusader" tales in *The Thousand and One Nights*, and specifically the implementation of the concept of martyrdom, the discourse of holy war in this collection was not considered as part of the global narratives about it in the medieval Islamic tradition. In particular, the monograph *The Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights* does not analyse this factor, although it looks highly important for studying the Islamic context of the monument[40]. The authors of *The Arabian Nights: An Encyclopedia* note only that "Christian-Muslim relations are described as being governed by religious rivalry and war, as in the tales of 'Umar ibn al-Nu'mān or 'Alī Nūr al-Dīn and Maryam the Girdle-girl".[41]

[38] Ibidem, vol. 1, 447.

[39] Ibidem, vol. 1, 448.

[40] M. al-Musawi, *The Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[41] U. Marzolph and R. Van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLI, 2004), 523.

Similarly, the irreconcilable hostility between Christians and Muslims here is noted by Nabil Matar.[42] The concept of martyrdom in the *Nights*, however, is not touched upon in the above-mentioned studies. In this case, it is important that self-sacrifice and martyrdom are more complex and deep concepts than simple religious enmity or the struggle between good and evil, which are usually discussed in the studies of the Arabic folk epics.

In the key works on the concept of martyrdom in the Islamic tradition, Arab folk narratives are not considered as a material for studying the mass perception of this phenomenon, although this is a relevant source, on the one hand, reflecting, on the other hand, shaping popular ideas about it. David Cook does not delve into the discourse of religious martyrdom on the path of *jihād* in folk narratives, and notes that "[the Epic of] Baybars lack any obvious martyrdom themes,"[43] although, as we have seen above, this epic contains episodes about self-sacrifice on the path of the holy war. At the same time, he marks the presence of the motif of martyrdom in the episode of the death of Sharkān in *The Thousand and One Nights*, but does not consider a much wider context of the use of this theme in this tale. This type of source is also neglected by the more recent collection of articles on martyrdom in Islam.[44]

It should also be noted that in most cases the idea of self-sacrifice remains declarative, since the main characters, rushing into battle with superior enemy forces, almost always survive. There are, however, examples of Muslim protagonists dying on this path, such as the case of Sharkān in *The Thousand and One Nights*. Going to war with the infidels, he said that he was "tired of this world," and indeed found death in *jihād*.

It is also important to note that Christians in Arab folk narratives do not share the concept of martyrdom.

II. Ethnicity in Medieval Arab Folk Narratives of Holy War

Another important aspect that needs to be discussed in the case of holy war narratives in medieval Arab folk culture is the interactions of the various ethnic groups of the warring parties.

One of the most common plots is the gathering of various ethnic groups of Christians throughout the land for the cause of holy war. This is well illustrated

[42] N. Matar, "Christians in The Arabian Nights," in *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context: Between East and West*, eds. Saree Makdisi and Felicity Nussbaum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 145.

[43] D. Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 106.

[44] M. Hatina and M. Litvak (eds.), *Martyrdom and Sacrifice in Islam Theological, Political and Social Contexts* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

by an episode from *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars*, in which the antagonist Juwān persuades one of the Christian kings to attack the Muslims:

> Wa anā ʻalā an ajmaʻa laka al-umarāʼ wa al-mulūk wa al-qirānāt min al-ifranj wa al-rūm kulluhum yusāʻidūnaka thumma inna al-malʻūn Juwān qaʻada yaktubu wa Martīn al-Abrash yakhtimu ʻalā al-kutub wa yursiluhā Juwān ilā mulūk al-naṣārā fa kull man atāhu al-ʻāqil yaḥfaẓu al-kitāb ʻindahu wa yaqʻudu fī baladihi wa al-jāhil yajmaʻu ʻaskarahu wa yatawajjahu ilā barshinūna fa yalqāhu Juwān wa yugharrihi ʻalā al-kufr wa al-ṭughyān[45] ('I am on to gather for you lords and kings and peers of Franks and Byzantines, all of them will help you', and then damned Juwān sat to write and Martīn the Spotted was putting stamps on the letters and Juwān was sending them to the kings of Christians, and all of them who received letters, the smart ones kept the letters to themselves and stayed in their countries, and the ignorant ones gathered their troops and marched to Barcelona, and Juwān was meeting them and inciting to arbitrariness and infidelity).

At the same time, *ifranj* often fights against *rūm*, who, in their opinion, show insufficient zeal in the war against Muslims. In particular, *ifranj* often encroach on the lands of *rūm*, and in some cases even vow to wage war against their coreligionists. In the following example from *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, the king of the Franks wants to seize the lands of the *rūm*, particularly Constantinople, and "attach them to the lands of the Franks":

> Malik al-Burghul qad nazala ʻalā bāb al-dhahab wa qad ḥalafa bi al-masīḥ wa al-ṣulbān wa al-ḥawāriyyīn wa al-maṭrān bi annahu lā budda lahu an yamlika bilād al-rūm bi kull makān wa yuḍīfahā ilā bilād al-ifranj wa al-yūnān[46] (King Burghul landed near the Golden gates, and he had sworn by Christ and the crosses and the Apostles and the Archbishop, that he must take possession of all the places of the lands of Byzantines and attach them to the lands of Franks and Greece).

Moreover, although the main mission of the Franks is precisely the capture of the Holy Land, on the way to this goal they are ready to subjugate the Byzantines. For example, in *Sīrat ʻAntara ibn Shaddād*, Khalijān, the King of the

[45] *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars*, vol. 3, 1806.
[46] *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, vol. 1, 654.

Franks, claims that the Byzantine emperor is too frightened to wage war against the infidels, as he is not ready to dedicate his life to this, therefore he must die:

> ʻAwwaltu an […] wa aʻūda ilā dhālika al-malik al-khāmil allādhī ishtaghala ʻan ākhiratihi bi-dunyāhu wa lā azāla kadhālika ḥattā uʻajjila qatlahu wa amlika baʻdahu bilād al-masīḥ wa uẓhira fīhā al-ʻadl al-ṣaḥīḥ[47] (I decided […] 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).

As for the Muslim side, I have previously noted the eternal and global nature of *jihād* in Medieval Arab folk narratives, since the war against *rūm* and *ifranj* has been going on since pre-Islamic times, where the Franks were opposed by ʻAntara, and the fact that it covers a large part of the Mediterranean and other regions known to medieval Muslims.[48]

It is important, however, to pay attention to the peculiarity of the depiction of *jihād* and its warriors, which lies in the fact that although the Islamic pathos predominates in the narratives under consideration, it is the Arab origin and Arabness[49] of the holy warriors that is actively emphasised. This circumstance seems substantial for the study of the Muslim narratives of holy war in the Middle Ages.

For instance, in *Sīrat ʻAntara ibn Shaddād*, the Byzantine emperor explains to the Frankish king that it was because of the bravery of the Hijaz Arabs, allies of the Persians, that he maintained peace with the latter:

> Wa qāla malik al-rūm qayṣar li Khalijān mā sāʼnā siwā qallat al-tadbīr fa natadāraku qaḍiyyatnā maʻa haʼulāʼi al-andhāl wa illā khasirnā wa ṭāla ʻalaynā al-miṭāl wa inkasarnā li annanī aʻrifu shajāʻat shayāṭīn al-ḥijāz wa qad raʼaytu fiʻālahum fī al-maʻāmiʻ wa fī al-birāz wa min ajlihim kuntu uhādī al-malik Kisrā wa al-Nuʻmān[50] (And the king of Byzantines Caesar said to Khalijān: ʻNothing harms us, but [our] weak coordination, so we [should] solve the problem with those cowards, otherwise we will lose, and

[47] *Sīrat ʻAntara ibn Shaddād*, vol. 4, 238.

[48] O. Sokolov, "Vanquishers of the Crusaders: Mujāhidūn Characters in Arabic Folk Epics," 1042.

[49] It is important that in the Arabic language the lexeme *ʻarab* denotes not only Arabs, but also Bedouins.

[50] *Sīrat ʻAntara ibn Shaddād*, vol. 4, 237.

> the deal will last for too long, and we will suffer a defeat, because I know the bravery of the Hijazi devils, I saw their deeds in battles and duels, and because of them I was keeping peace with Khosrow and al-Nu'mān').

It is remarkable that in the same story the Frankish leader himself notes that it is the Arabs who are his principal opponents: "'Awwaltu an aḥmila bi-'asākirī 'alā hawlā'i wa ajtahida an aksira haʾulāʾ al-ru'āt fī aqṭār al-fulāt[51] (I decided to attack those with my forces and to strive to smash those cattlemen in the desert lands)."

In *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* we find a description of the strife between the "King of the Arabs" and the "King of the Franks." In this episode, the Frankish king, having smeared himself with the excrement of the patriarch and received his blessing, tries to attack first the right and then the left flank of the Muslim army:

> Fa mā makkanahu malik al-'arab bal ta'arraḍa lahu bi kull sabab wa arāda an yusqīhi ka's al-'aṭab fa raja'a 'alā 'aqbihi min al-maydān wa kharaja al-tarjumān wa nādā bi lisān al-'arabiyya wa qāla yā ahl millat al-islām i'alamū anna hādhā al-malik 'Imlāq wa huwa malik al-ifranjiyya wa ayḍan innahu nā'ib al-sayyid al-masīḥ 'alā jamī' al-naṣrāniyya[52] (But the king of Arabs did not let him [do so], and he confronted him with all the cause and wanted to make him drink a chalice of doom, and he [the Frankish king] withdrew from the field, and the interpreter stepped forward and declared in Arabic, saying 'Oh, people of Islam, know that this is the king Giant, he is the king of the Franks, and he is also the vicar of Lord Jesus for all Christians').

In another episode of the same Epic, one of the main characters, 'Abd al-Wahhāb says that he is ready to defeat all the Byzantines and Franks with the Arabs:

> Wa jā'at arba'īn alf min banī kilāb aṣḥāb al-ṭi'ān wa al-ḍirāb ṭā'atan li al-amīr 'abd al-wahhāb fa lammā naẓara 'Abd al-Wahhāb ilā dhalika qāla wa dhimmat al-'arab innanī aqdiru bi idhn Allāh ta'ālā ulqī bi ha'ulā'i al-'arab kull rūmī wa ifranjī sharqan wa gharban[53] (And forty thousand of Banū kilāb came [who were] masters of tilts and strikes under command of 'Abd al-Wahhāb, and when he

[51] Ibidem, vol. 4, 238.
[52] *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, vol. 1, 396.
[53] Ibidem, vol. 1, 918-919.

> looked at that, he said: '[I swear] by the integrity of the Arabs, by the will of God Almighty, with these Arabs I can vanquish all Byzantines and Franks to the East and to the West').

Also, in the epics under consideration one can find numerous descriptions of direct clashes between the Franks and the Arabs on the battlefield, such as the following:

> Wa ḥamala malik ifranja fī mi'at alf khalanjiyya wa istaqbalathum al-'arab bi al-rimāḥ al-khaṭṭiyya wa ḍāqat al-falawāt wa kathurat al-za'aqāt wa irtafa'at al-aṣwāt wa zādat al-ḍajjāt[54] (And the king of the Franks charged with hundred thousand knights and the Arabs met them with the long spears and the wilderness grew narrow and the cries intensified and the voices raised and the noises got louder).

In this case, the description of the Frankish cavalry attack probably paints a picture of the standard tactics of the Crusader knights. In the scene from *Sīrat 'Antara ibn Shaddād* we also see a case of hand-to-hand combat between the same opponents:

> Wa ṣadamat al-rijāl wa lama'at burūq al-niṣāl wa jā' al-ḥaqq wa zahaqa al-miḥāl wa qātalat al-ifranj ay qitāl wa abṣarat al-'arab minhā al-ahwāl[55] (And the men clashed, and the lightings of the blades flashed, and the truth came, and the plots faded, and the Franks were fighting by all means of fighting, and the Arabs witnessed fears from them).

Further, it is necessary to emphasise another important circumstance in the depiction of holy war in the Medieval Arab folk narratives. It is salient that it is the Arabs who are fighting the Byzantines and the Franks, and they are only helped by the Turks, Kurds and Persians, who, with rare exceptions, are presented not as equal allies, but as subordinates, staying under the overall command of the Arab rulers and warlords.

In *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* we see, for example, the following passage, in which the Turks and Kurds are subjected to the Arab commander:

[54] Ibidem, vol. 1, 395.

[55] *Sīrat 'Antara ibn Shaddād*, vol. 4, 202-203.

> Fa mā qawlikum yā ikhwān fī mi'at alf 'anān min al-ifranj ḥamalat bi al-qinṭāriyāt al-khalanjiyyāt ḥamlatan wāḥidatan fa ṣārū ka annahum sadd min ḥadīd wa naẓara al-amīr 'Āmir ilā fi'alihim fa qaddama al-atrāk bayna yadayhi wa ja'ala al-akrād maymana wa maysara wa al-'arab fī al-maysara thumma baraza bi nafsihi yaṭlubu yaksiruhum 'an al-ḥamla[56] ('What would you say, brothers, about a swarm of a hundred thousand Franks [who] attacked at once with spears, emerging as an iron wall?', and prince 'Āmir looked at what that they were doing, and put the Turks forward in front of him, and placed the Kurds on the right and left [flanks], and the Arabs on the left [flank], and then he rushed forward himself to break their [Franks] charge).

Likewise, in *The Thousand and One Nights*, the Turks and Daylamites are also commanded by the Arab kings:

> Ra'ū Bahrām muqaddam al-daylam wa rustam muqaddam al-atrāk wa ma'hum 'ishrūn alf fāris muqbilīn 'alayhim ka al-luyūth al-'awābis[57] (They saw Bahrām the commander of the Daylamites and Rustam the commander of the Turks and with them twenty thousand riders coming at them as grim lions).

In *Sīrat 'Antara ibn Shaddād*, the Arabs even save the Persians from the Franks. Moreover, although various Arab tribes and alliances fight against each other during the storyline, the main positive characters and, first of all, 'Antara himself and the Hijaz Arabs in alliance with the Persians fight against the Franks, Byzantines and Ghassanids (Christian Arabs). In the end, it turns out that the initiators of the war were the Franks, who put pressure on the Byzantines.[58] In another case the monotheist sage 'Amr at the court of Khosrow, who foretells the coming of Muḥammad, supports the alliance of Arabs and Persians against external enemies[59].

III. Conclusions

Thus, the confrontation depicted in the Medieval Arab folk narratives can be described as a holy war, and it is such for both parties of the conflict, while each

[56] *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, vol. 1, 855-856.
[57] *Alf layla wa layla*, vol. 1, 461.
[58] *Sīrat 'Antara ibn Shaddād*, vol. 4, 202-241.
[59] Ibidem, vol. 1, 258-260.

of them understands that there is a religiously motivated enemy on the opposite side.

An important pattern is the readiness of Muslim warriors for self-sacrifice, and they in some cases even desire death in *jihād*, which is the highest level of dedication to the holy war. There are a lot of examples of martyrdom discourse in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars* and in the "crusader" tales of *The Thousand and One Nights*, but it is not present in *Sīrat 'Antara ibn Shaddād*. It is also necessary to emphasise that Christians, despite all the descriptions of their religious motivation, do not share this concept in the considered narratives.

Regarding the interethnic interactions of holy warriors, one should note that the Franks in many stories put pressure on the Byzantines, accusing them of insufficient religious zeal in conducting military operations against the infidels. As for the Muslim side, it has been demonstrated, that two parallel processes took place in Arab folk narratives. On the one hand it is the Islamization of the Arab past, primarily tribal narratives, especially pre-Islamic ones, by placing the struggle of the monotheist heroes with the religiously motivated Franks in pre-Islamic times (or placing the Frankish invasions into early Islamic times). On the other hand, we witness the Arabization of the very fighting against Christians, Franks and Byzantines, by emphasizing the role of Arabs and reducing the role of Turks, Kurds and Persians and subordinating representatives of these ethnic groups to Arabs in the narratives under consideration. Although *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars* equally celebrates the contributions of Arabs, Turks and Kurds to *jihād*, in *Sīrat 'Antara ibn Shaddād*, *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* and *The Thousand and One Nights* we see a strong emphasis on the role of the Arabs. This circumstance may be explained by the fact that *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars* is the newest of the narratives that emerged in the multi-ethnic environment of Mamluk Cairo.

It is also important that the Arabic folk epics are practically not utilised to study the history of Arabness and the origins of the concept of Arab nationalism, however, as has been demonstrated, they are undoubtedly of particular interest as sources for the study of these concepts.

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