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Original Article

## The *Ulama* and *Jihad*: Examining Ibn ‘Asakir’s Role in the Narrative of Bayt al-Maqdis’ Liberation During Nur al-Din Mahmud Zanki’s Era

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### ABSTRACT

The fall of Bayt al-Maqdis to the Franks in 1099 CE during the First Crusade was a significant setback for the Islamic world, exacerbated by political fragmentation and sectarian divisions, particularly between *Sunni* and *Shi’a* factions. In response, several Muslim leaders rose to reclaim the city, culminating in its liberation by Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi in 1187 CE. However, this success was not solely due to military leadership, it was a collective effort involving various groups, including religious scholars (*ulama*), whose contributions are often overlooked. This study examines the crucial role of Ibn ‘Asakir (d. 1176 CE), a distinguished scholar and historian from Damascus, in shaping the narrative of Bayt al-Maqdis’s liberation. Through his works, including *Ta’rikh Dimashq* (History of Damascus) and his sermons, he reinforced the legitimacy of *jihad* against the Crusaders. His teachings on *hadith*, *Sunni* unity, and religious duty helped frame *jihad* as a collective obligation under the leadership of Nur al-Din Mahmud Zanki. Using a historical research framework, this study analyses relevant sources thematically. The findings indicate that Ibn ‘Asakir’s efforts to counter *Shi’a* influence and uphold *Sunni* orthodoxy were strategic moves to ensure political and military solidarity. By integrating theology, history, and political advocacy, he positioned the liberation of Bayt al-Maqdis not just as a military goal but as a religious obligation linked to *Sunni* identity and spiritual salvation.

**Keywords:** Ibn ‘Asakir, Ulama, Jihad, Nur al-Din Mahmud Zanki & Bayt al-Maqdis.

### Introduction

The liberation of *Bayt al-Maqdis* in the twelfth century CE by Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi represents one of the most significant triumphs in Islamic history, distinguished by intense military campaigns and profound religious mobilization. This undertaking was not solely a military expedition, rather it was driven by a coordinated intellectual and spiritual movement led by religious scholars (*ulama*) dating back to the reign of Nur al-Din Mahmud Zanki, aiming to

shape public sentiment and legitimize the struggle against the Crusaders.<sup>1</sup> The medieval Islamic world, fraught with sectarian divisions and political rivalries, fostered a climate of disunity in the face of the Crusader onslaught in 1096 CE. Recognizing the imperative for Muslim unity, the *ulama* rose to the challenge by advocating *jihad*, both through religious discourse and by supporting military campaigns.

Among these scholars, Ibn 'Asakir (d. 571 AH/1176 CE), a renowned historian, theologian, and champion of *Sunni* orthodoxy from Damascus, emerged as a figure of profound significance. His influence transcended the academic sphere, shaping the ideological and political narratives of his era, particularly under Nur al-Din's leadership. Modern scholarship has increasingly recognized the critical role of the *ulama* in these efforts. Notably, Lindsay and Mourad have examined how figures like Ibn 'Asakir mobilized religious thought to promote *Sunni* unity and the concept of legitimate *jihad*.<sup>2</sup> Lindsay and Mourad's analysis emphasizes Ibn 'Asakir's biographical works (*Tarikh Madinat Dimashq*) as tools for reinforcing *Sunni* orthodoxy and social cohesion, while they also explore how such scholarship contributed to the formation of collective memory and resistance narratives during the Crusader period. However, the existing literature tends to treat Ibn 'Asakir's contributions in a fragmented manner, without fully integrating his intellectual efforts into the broader political and military strategies of Nur al-Din and Salah al-Din.

This article seeks to address that gap by examining Ibn 'Asakir's role in constructing the *jihad* narrative as a means of unifying Muslims and facilitating the liberation of *Bayt al-Maqdis*. The study employs a historical-analytical method, drawing on primary sources including Ibn 'Asakir's *Tarikh Madinat Dimashq* and contemporary chronicles, alongside secondary analyses by Lindsay, Mourad, and other modern historians. By contextualizing Ibn 'Asakir's religious scholarship within the socio-political dynamics of the twelfth-century Levant, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how religious scholars shaped both ideological discourse and practical political agendas in the medieval Islamic world.

### **Ibn 'Asakir as A Scholar and Islamic Historian**

Abu al-Qasim 'Ali b. al-Hasan, famously known as Ibn 'Asakir, was born in Damascus in 499 AH/1105 CE. His family background is obscure, with little known about the name 'Asakir or its origin. Ibn 'Asakir preferred to be called Abu al-Qasim rather than Ibn 'Asakir. His father, Abu Muhammad al-Hasan, was a notary in Damascus and had an interest in *Hadith* scholarship but did not excel in it.<sup>3</sup> His mother, known as Umm al-Qasim, was connected to the prestigious

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<sup>1</sup> Abd al-Fatḥ al-Awaisi, "Perjalanan Panjang Melahirkan dan Memperkenalkan Bidang Studi Tentang Baitul Maqdis 1994-2024," in *Buku Emas Baitul Maqdis: Makalah-makalah Pilihan Menuju Pembebasan Tanah Suci*, Vol. 1, (ISA:Institut Al-Aqsa, 2021), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Suleiman A. Mourad and James E. Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in The Crusader Period*. (Brill, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Ali bin al-Hasan bin Hibah Allah bin 'Abd Allah bin al-Husayn bin 'Asakir. *Tabyin Kadhib al-Muftari fima Nusiba ila al-Imam Abi al-Hasan al-Ash'ari*. (Dimashq: Maṭba'ah al-Tawfīk, 1929), 11.

Qurashi family, which traced its lineage to the Umayyad dynasty. This connection facilitated Ibn 'Asakir and his siblings' access to scholarly elites and social prominence. Ibn 'Asakir had two brothers and a sister. His elder brother, Hibat Allah, was a scholar of law, *Hadith*, and *Qur'an*.<sup>4</sup> He studied extensively in Damascus, Iraq, and the eastern Muslim world, eventually teaching at prominent institutions such as the Madrasah of Aminiyya and the Zawiya of al-Ghazali.<sup>5</sup> Despite declining prestigious positions, he was nicknamed *Sa'in al-din* for his dedication to learning and teaching. He died in 563 AH/1168 CE after a fall.<sup>6</sup> The younger brother, Muhammad, became a judge in Damascus but did not achieve significant scholarly prominence. However, his descendants continued the family's scholarly legacy in Syria and Egypt. Ibn 'Asakir's sister married into the notable Sulami family, further enhancing the family's social and professional networks. These connections played a crucial role in securing educational and career opportunities in Damascus during a period when the scholarly community was relatively small.<sup>7</sup>

### Educational Journey of Ibn 'Asakir

Ibn 'Asakir began his religious studies at a young age, inspired by his brother, Hibat Allah. By the age of six, he had already studied hadith with renowned scholars in Damascus, such as Abu al-Wahsh Subay'b al-Musallam and Abu Turab Haydara al-Ansari, obtaining certifications (*ijazah*) in major Islamic texts, including Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*). His early education encompassed Quranic sciences, Shafi'i jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and Arabic language, taught by figures such as his grandfather, Abu al-Mufaddal Yahya, and leading scholars like Abu al-Hasan al-Sulami. Ibn 'Asakir further expanded his studies by examining the works of great scholars such as al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, Ibn Makula, and Abu Zur'a al-Razi. He also delved into the history of Syria and Bayt al-Maqdis, studying books on the virtues of these places and their conquests. His interest in historical and biographical works led him to obtain certifications in various texts, such as *Kitab Futuh al-Sham* and *Kitab al-Maghazi*.<sup>8</sup>

Through connections arranged by his brother, Ibn 'Asakir received certifications from scholars in cities such as Baghdad and Isfahan, enabling him to transmit essential works, including *Mu'jam al-Kabir* by al-Tabarani, along with other texts related to hadith and Islamic history. This comprehensive education, covering hadith, law, history, and literature, laid the foundation for his eminence as an authoritative scholar. In 520H/1126CE, Ibn 'Asakir embarked on his first journey for knowledge to Baghdad, where he studied at the madrasah of Nizamiyyah.<sup>9</sup> Over five years, he deepened his understanding of Hanbali jurisprudence, *Hadith*, and Islamic history, receiving certifications for texts from some of the leading scholars of the

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<sup>4</sup> Shams al-Din Muhammad bin Ahmad bin 'Uthman Al-Dhahabi. *Siyar 'Alam al-Nubala'*. (Beirut: Mu'assah al-Risalah, 1985), 20: 555.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn 'Asakir, *Tabyin Kadhib al-Muftari fima Nusiba ila al-Imam Abi al-Hasan al-Ash'ari*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Suleiman A. Mourad, *Ibn 'Asakir of Damascus Champion of Sunni Islam in the Time of the Crusades*. (London: Oneworld Academic, 2021), 27.

<sup>7</sup> Mourad, *Ibn 'Asakir of Damascus Champion of Sunni Islam in the Time of the Crusades*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Mourad, *Ibn 'Asakir of Damascus Champion of Sunni Islam in the Time of the Crusades*, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Joan Elizabeth Gilbert. *The Ulama of Medieval Damascus and the International World of Islamic Scholarship*. (Berkeley: University of California, PhD. Disertation, 1977). 22.

time. He also visited other cities in Iraq, performed his first Hajj in 521H/1127CE, and returned to Damascus in 525H/1131CE as a distinguished *Hadith* scholar.<sup>10</sup>

In 529H/1134CE, he undertook a second scholarly journey lasting for four years. His travels to Nishapur, Isfahan, and other cities further solidified his mastery of *Hadith*, including the collections of al-Bukhari and Muslim. In Nishapur, his association with Abu Sa'd al-Sam'ani reflected his diligence and influence as a student.<sup>11</sup> He also obtained certifications for essential texts such as *Ma'rifat al-Sahaba*. This second journey marked a decisive shift in Ibn 'Asakir's academic focus toward *Hadith* scholarship.<sup>12</sup> By the end of his travels in 533H/1139CE, he had achieved unmatched expertise in hadith, firmly establishing himself as a leading scholar in Damascus and beyond. Upon his return to Damascus, Ibn 'Asakir became a prominent scholar, earning the titles *al-Hafiz* and *Nasir al-Sunna*. He brought back a collection of rare books, enriching Damascus's intellectual tradition.<sup>13</sup> Despite facing challenges in retrieving copies of the books he had studied, he ultimately solidified his status as a preeminent scholar, granting certifications to students and contributing to the Islamic intellectual heritage. Ibn 'Asakir's scholarly journey, which involved learning from over 1,700 male teachers and 80 female teachers, demonstrated his dedication and perseverance, cementing his position as one of the greatest scholars in Islamic history.

#### The Teaching Sessions and Character of Ibn 'Asakir

Upon returning to Damascus in 533 AH/1139 CE, Ibn 'Asakir began teaching Hadith at the Umayyad Mosque, a prestigious opportunity facilitated by his maternal grandfather, Abu al-Mufaddal Yahya. This marked the start of his distinguished teaching career. He conducted over 408 weekly seminars (*majlis*), focusing on various *Hadith*-related topics. Some of these seminars, such as *Fi dhamm al-malahi* (On Censuring Amusement) and *Fi fadl 'Abd Allah Ibn Mas'ud* (On the Virtues of 'Abd Allah Ibn Mas'ud), were repeated multiple times over the years, with extant manuscripts attesting to their delivery.<sup>14</sup>

Ibn 'Asakir's prominence as a scholar grew, and he was eventually honored with the privilege of teaching under the Eagle's Dome (*Qubbat al-Nisr*) in the Umayyad Mosque, one of the highest distinctions for a scholar in Damascus. Later, he also taught at the *Dar al-Hadith al-Nuriyya* (Nur al-Din's College of *Hadith*), which was built specifically for him by Nur al-Din as recognition of his scholarly excellence and contributions to the Nur al-Din's *jihād* campaign efforts.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Al-Dhahabi. *Siyar 'Alam al-Nubala'*, 20: 556.

<sup>11</sup> Gilbert, *The Ulama of Medieval Damascus*, 24.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Dhahabi. *Siyar 'Alam al-Nubala'*, 20: 557.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn 'Asakir, *Tabyin Kadhib al-Muftari fima Nusiba ila al-Imam Abi al-Hasan al-Ash'ari*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> James Earl Lindsay. *Professors, prophets and politicians: 'Ali Ibn 'Asakir's "Ta'rikh madinat Dimashq.* (The University of Wisconsin, PhD. Dissertation, 1994). 13.

<sup>15</sup> Mourad, *Ibn 'Asakir of Damascus Champion of Sunni Islam in the Time of the Crusades*, 40.

As for his character, Ibn 'Asakir was both admired and criticized. While respected for his intellectual achievements, he was also noted for his arrogance. Contemporary accounts, such as those of al-Dhahabi, mention his haughty demeanor, suggesting he viewed himself as unparalleled among his peers. Others, like 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani, contrasted his arrogance with the amiable nature of his brother, Hibat Allah. Despite these personality critiques, Ibn 'Asakir's scholarly contributions solidified his legacy as one of Damascus's most influential Islamic scholars.<sup>16</sup>

### **Writings and Legacy of Ibn 'Asakir**

Ibn 'Asakir authored over 100 works, ranging from multi-volume encyclopedias to short treatises, many of which focus on *Hadith*. His most significant contributions include *Ta'rikh Dimashq* (History of Damascus). Joan Elizabeth argues that *Ta'rikh Dimashq* is a monumental biographical encyclopedia containing around 15,000 prophetic *Hadiths*, interwoven with biographies of transmitters and other notable figures. It remains a critical resource for Islamic history and *Hadith* studies.<sup>17</sup> Second, *Tabyin Kadhīb al-Muftari* (Exposing the Slanderer's Mendacity). A treatise defending the *Sunni* doctrine and refuting accusations against key Islamic scholars and thereby demonstrating his commitment to preserving orthodoxy. While Al-Dhahabi listed 52 works attributed to Ibn 'Asakir, these include planned or incomplete works. Ibn 'Asakir's son, al-Qasim, compiled two lists: one of confirmed works and another of incomplete projects.<sup>18</sup> Most of Ibn 'Asakir's works integrate *Hadith* as the foundation of religious and historical knowledge, emphasizing the transmission of prophetic traditions as a key religious virtue. His writings on Damascus's landmarks and religious sites also reflect his use of *Hadith* to enhance the spiritual significance of these locations.

Ibn 'Asakir passed away on Sunday evening, 11 Rajab 571 AH/25 January 1176 CE, in Damascus. His funeral was a grand event, attended by a vast crowd, including Salah al-Din and the chief judge of Damascus, Qutb al-Din al-Naysaburi (d. 578 AH/ 1182 AD), who led the burial prayer. The ceremony was held in the open field of Midan al-Hasa, and he was interred in the cemetery of Bab al-Saghir, alongside his family and near the grave of his maternal ancestor, the Umayyad Caliph Mu'awiya.<sup>19</sup> It is reported that despite a dry winter, heavy rain fell during the funeral procession, symbolizing the heavens mourning the loss of this great scholar. His death marked the end of a life devoted to *Hadith*, scholarship, and the preservation of Islamic tradition.

### **Ibn 'Asakir's Relationship with Nur al-Din Mahmud Zanki**

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<sup>16</sup> Mourad, *Ibn 'Asakir of Damascus Champion of Sunni Islam in the Time of the Crusades*, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert, *The Ulama of Medieval Damascus*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Dhahabi. *Siyar 'Alam al-Nubala'*, 20: 555-560.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Dhahabi. *Siyar 'Alam al-Nubala'*, 20: 570.

According to 'Abbas Hasan Diyab, the environment and atmosphere in which both figures were raised greatly influenced their alignment in direction and goals.<sup>20</sup> On one hand, Ibn 'Asakir was raised in a household that placed great emphasis on knowledge and scholars. He deeply valued knowledge and the scholars, actively pursuing the study of hadith from a young age. He travelled to various places, studied under many prominent scholars, received certifications from them and listened to *Hadith* from numerous sources, eventually attaining an esteemed *isnad* (chain of transmission). His deep interest in *jihad* was also evident, as he frequently narrated hadiths related to *jihad* and its virtues. All of this had a profound impact on his perception of the realities facing the Muslim community during his time.

On the other hand, Nur al-Din Zanki was raised in an environment that combined religious devotion and leadership. As the son of 'Imad al-Din Zanki, he received religious education on one side, and military training and chivalry on the other. This combination shaped him into a leader who was not only skilled in military strategy but also deeply grounded in religious knowledge. Thus, their goals eventually converged in a shared spirit. Nur al-Din needed the support of scholars to unite the Muslims under the *Sunni* banner and to resist both the influence of the *Shi'a* (such as the Fatimids) and the threat of the Crusader armies. Moreover, Nur al-Din was renowned as a ruler who held scholars in high esteem and frequently consulted them on matters of governance and *jihad*.

On April 28, 1154, CE (25 Rabi' al-Thani 549 AH), Nur al-Din Mahmud Zanki successfully seized Damascus without bloodshed, thereby ending the Burid Dynasty's rule and establishing the city as the new administrative center of the Zankid realm. Prior to its fall, Damascus was governed by Mujir al-Din Abaq, a ruler perceived as weak, who relied extensively on treaties with the Crusaders to maintain his authority. This situation led to growing discontent among the Damascene populace and the local *ulama*, who eventually shifted their allegiance to Nur al-Din.<sup>21</sup> The political climate further deteriorated following the death of Mu'in al-Din Unur in 1149 CE, who had previously maintained amicable relations with both parties, effectively curbing the expansion of Zankid power. Bereft of any substantial opposition, the inhabitants of Damascus opened the city's gates to Nur al-Din, resulting in a peaceful takeover. This achievement had a profound impact on consolidating Islamic territories across Bilad al-Sham. With Damascus now under Zankid control, the city became the principal capital, serving as a strategic center for orchestrating *jihad* against the Crusaders.

For Ibn 'Asakir, Nur al-Din Mahmud Zanki's arrival in Damascus signaled not merely a political shift, but a significant blessing for the Muslim community. In his writings, Ibn 'Asakir depicts Nur al-Din as a just, pious leader committed to the cause of *jihad*, consistent with the *Sunni* ideals he espoused. Ibn 'Asakir perceived Nur al-Din as a ruler destined to restore Islamic splendor and protect al-Sham from the threats posed by the Crusaders and *Shi'i* factions. This

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<sup>20</sup> Abbas Hasan Diyab, *Al-Hafiz Ibn 'Asakir Wa al-Sultan Nur al-Din Wa Atharu Ta'awuhuma fi Tahrir Bayt al-Maqqdis*. (University of Mardin Artuklu, Master Dissertation 2024). 90

<sup>21</sup> 'Ali Muhammad al-Salabi, *al-Dawlah al-Zankiyyah*. (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'Asriyyah, 2010), 350.

perspective is evident in his work, *Arba'un*, where he extols Nur al-Din as “the just, ascetic king, a *mujahid* and *murabit*,” and prays for divine aid in securing his victory and success.<sup>22</sup> By disseminating *hadith* and Islamic learning in Damascus, Ibn ‘Asakir further supported Nur al-Din’s efforts to promote *Sunni* teachings, thereby reinforcing the city’s position as a major centre of Islamic scholarship. Beyond that, Ibn ‘Asakir regarded Nur al-Din’s conquest of Damascus as the beginning of an Islamic resurgence against external threats. He viewed Nur al-Din not merely as a ruler, but as a *mujahid* striving in the path of God, seeking to unify the Muslims of Bilad al-Sham and liberate Bayt al-Maqdis. Capitalizing on his role as a *hadith* scholar and historian, Ibn ‘Asakir played a vital part in constructing a *jihad* narrative that bolstered Nur al-Din’s political and religious vision.

### The Role of Ibn ‘Asakir in Inspiring *Jihad*

Although there is no specific record of Ibn ‘Asakir’s direct involvement in Nur al-Din’s military operations, Al-Salabi argues that Ibn ‘Asakir clearly played a significant role in shaping the narrative and ideological framework of *jihad* for Muslims of his time, particularly in confronting the Franks and the Shi’a.<sup>23</sup> From another perspective, Mourad and Lindsay regard Ibn ‘Asakir as one of the principal figures in the twelfth-century revival of *jihad* in al-Sham, often depicting him as if he were Nur al-Din’s chief ideologue since 549H/1154CE.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, several researchers, such as Burhan Che Daud and El-Awaisi, assert that Nur al-Din’s greatest mission was the conquest of Bayt al-Maqdis thus, it is unsurprising that his administrative policies centered on strengthening the concept of *jihad* among the populace, particularly the military, with the objective of liberating the sacred city.<sup>25</sup>

According to Zayde Antrim, Ibn ‘Asakir’s early writings on al-Sham were initially vague, reflecting the lack of a stable political entity capable of unifying the Muslim territories.<sup>26</sup> However, the arrival of Nur al-Din was viewed by Ibn ‘Asakir and his contemporaries as the emergence of a patron with the potential to unite al-Sham in that era. Consequently, Ibn ‘Asakir produced several works aimed at articulating his religious perspectives in support of Nur al-Din’s reform efforts and *jihad* campaigns. Mourad and Lindsay conclude that three main themes dominate Ibn ‘Asakir’s writings, some of which were composed specifically to define and shape Nur al-Din Zanki’s religious and political agenda: (1) the promotion of Islam against external enemies, namely the Christian Crusaders; (2) the promotion of Sunnism against internal enemies, particularly the Shi’i Fatimid regime in Egypt and its supporters in Syria and (3) the promotion of Ash’ari theology in contrast to the Hanbali school (the principal Sunni theological

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<sup>22</sup> Maktabah ‘Ain al-Jami’ah, “al-Arba’un hadithan fi al-hathth ‘ala al-jihad” (Access 3 December 2024).

<sup>23</sup> Al-Salabi, *al-Dawlah al-Zankiyyah*, 353.

<sup>24</sup> Suleiman A. Mourad & James E. Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in The Crusader Period* (Brill, 2013), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Burhan Che Daud, Abdal-fattah El-Awaisi - Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor. “Historical and geopolitical analysis of Nūr Al-Dīn Mahmūd Zankī’s Plan for liberating Bayt Al-Maqdis”, *Journal of Islamicjerusalem Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018), 6.

<sup>26</sup> Zayde Antrim. “Ibn Asakir's Representations of Syria and Damascus in the Introduction to the Tarikh Madinat Dimashq.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38/ 1 (2006), 112.

divide in Damascus at the time).<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Nur al-Din appeared to focus primarily on the first two themes in his endeavor to institutionalize education and cultivate a generation committed to jihad.

Several major works demonstrate Ibn 'Asakir's efforts to mold and define Nur al-Din Zanki's religious policy, including the awareness of *jihad*. These efforts not only supported Nur al-Din's reform agenda but also reflected Ibn 'Asakir's own personality and his understanding of how the unique circumstances of his era should influence the future direction of Islamic history and teachings. Among these works are: (1) *Ta'rikh Madinat Dimashq* (History of Damascus), (2) *Fadha'il Al-Quds* (The Merits of Jerusalem), (3) *Fadha'il 'Asqalan* (The Merits of Ascalon), (4) *Fadha'il Al-Mudun Al-Islamiyyah* (The Merits of Islamic Cities) and (5) *Az-Zuhadah fi Badzl Al-Syahadah* (Asceticism in Striving for Martyrdom).<sup>28</sup> From these writings, it is evident that Ibn 'Asakir not only aspired to educate the next generation about *jihad* and various religious issues but also believed he bore a responsibility to compose works that were better suited to the exigencies of his time and reflected his vision for Islamic history and instruction.<sup>29</sup>

Al-Salabi similarly explains that Ibn 'Asakir focused on shaping thought by writing about major Islamic cities, a strategy intended to remind Muslims of these cities' importance and the need to defend them from falling into the hands of Islam's enemies. Nur al-Din's political and religious ambitions drew the attention of Ibn 'Asakir and a large portion of the Sunni ulama in Syria, who regarded him as an ideal leader to deliver them from Crusader aggression and to reunite Syria after centuries of internal division and conflict among Muslims.<sup>30</sup> Nur al-Din's political acumen was evident in his success at forging alliances between Muslim politicians and religious scholars under the banner of jihad and the Sunni revival in Syria and Egypt. He employed numerous scholars and preachers in his army to indoctrinate and motivate the troops for *jihad* against the Crusaders and the Fatimids.

### **Leveraging the Narrative of al-Sham's Merits to Motivate Jihad**

Ibn 'Asakir's work, *Ta'rikh Madinat Dimashq* (The History of the City of Damascus, or simply the History of Damascus), stands as the most extensive biographical compendium produced by a medieval Muslim scholar. Initially conceived around 1134 CE, two decades before Nur al-Din's conquest of Damascus, the History of Damascus began as a somewhat nebulous project but eventually expanded into its present voluminous format, enjoying significant success under Nur al-Din Zanki's patronage.<sup>31</sup> The work's focus centers on highlighting the

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<sup>27</sup> Mourad and Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in The Crusader Period*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Salabi, *al-Dawlah al-Zankiyyah*, 349. Sadia Gul. "Historians'interest in Interpretation and Quranic Sciences (Ibn Asakir as A Model)." *Journal of Religion and Society* 3, no. 01 (2025): 209.

<sup>29</sup> Mourad and Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in The Crusader Period*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Salabi, *al-Dawlah al-Zankiyyah*, 349.

<sup>31</sup> Mourad and Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in The Crusader Period*, 5.

distinctiveness of al-Sham itself, with Damascus as its hub. In it, Ibn 'Asakir documents the lives and achievements of key individual religious figures, political leaders, scholars, poets, and others who resided in or merely passed through this region, from the era of prominent scriptural figures up to Ibn 'Asakir's own time.

This monumental endeavor represents one of the most valuable repositories of medieval Islamic historiography, preserving extensive excerpts from hundreds of earlier works now lost by historians and Islamic scholars predating Ibn 'Asakir. Accordingly, it remains an immensely important resource for understanding medieval Syria and Islamic history. Lindsay contends that Ibn 'Asakir highlighted al-Sham's sanctity in the introduction by praising its spiritual virtues.<sup>32</sup> Emphasizing the region's sacredness through relevant *Hadith*, he underscores the imperative of defending al-Sham from external threats, including the Franks, in tandem with bolstering the *Sunni* cause.

When addressing the biographies of Muslim leaders such as Yazid ibn Mu'awiya, al-Ma'mun, and Nur al-Din, Ibn 'Asakir underscores their roles in *jihad* defending al-Sham. He also devotes attention to pre-Islamic holy figures, Abraham (Ibrahim), David (Dawud), and Jesus ('Isa) making his work unique by including such biographies beyond the conventional *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiya'* genre.<sup>33</sup> Ibn 'Asakir thus links historical chronology to al-Sham's merits, demonstrating how these eminent figures not only blessed the land but also defended it. His portrayal of Jesus ('Isa) reflects this vision, depicting him as the *Mahdi* who will return before the end of times to lead Muslims against their enemies and secure an Islamic triumph.<sup>34</sup> In the introduction to this work, Ibn 'Asakir writes:

"The collection of reports I have compiled has reached His Highness the King, the generous ruler, the absolute sovereign, the just, ascetic fighter in God's cause, the staunch defender of the homeland and the freedom of the *ummah*, Abu al-Qasim Mahmud bin Zanki bin Aq Sunqur, Defender of the Imam (Nashir al-Imam). ... It was conveyed to me that he desired to have it completed and perfected. Since he wished to examine certain parts more easily, I revisited my undertaking, hoping the result would be truly accomplished. I have exerted all my ability, expressing my gratitude for the high esteem and concern shown by His Highness the King."<sup>35</sup>

This passage illustrates that Nūr al-Din maintained a positive rapport with the "*ulama*", particularly Ibn 'Asakir, by encouraging him to finalize the work he had begun. From another

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<sup>32</sup> James E. Lindsay "Ibn 'Asakir (1105–1176): Muslim Historian and Advocate of Jihad against Christian Crusaders and Shi 'ite Muslims." *Middlebury College, Rohatyn Center for International Affairs, Working Paper Series* 11, (2003): 11.

<sup>33</sup> Lindsay, "Ibn 'Asakir (1105–1176): Muslim Historian and Advocate of Jihad against Christian Crusaders and Shi 'ite Muslims." 21.

<sup>34</sup> Zayde Antrim. "Ibn Asakir's Representations of Syria and Damascus in the Introduction to the *Tarikh Madinat Dimashq*." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38/ 1 (2006), 115.

<sup>35</sup> Ibn 'Asakir, *Tarikh Madinat Dimashq*, 1: 4.

perspective, the strong support Nur al-Din gave Ibn 'Asakir indirectly reveals his broader endeavor to tap into the richness of Islamic thought as a means to motivate society, fostering unity against the perils surrounding the Islamic world.<sup>36</sup> Adopting the model of *Ta'rikh Baghdad* by al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d. 463 AH/1071 AD), Ibn 'Asakir successfully produced a comprehensive reference that immortalized Damascus's intellectual and religious heritage, attesting to the city's crucial role in Islamic civilization. It is recorded that *Ta'rikh Dimashq* was completed in early Rabi' al-Thani 559 AH, corresponding to late February 1164 CE.

### Strengthening the Legitimacy of Jihad through Hadith

Ibn 'Asakir also compiled works related to holy lands and *jihad*, such as *Fadl 'Asqalan* (The Merits of Ascalon) and *al-Arba'un hadithan fi al-Hathth 'ala al-jihad* (Forty Hadiths for Encouraging Jihad). *Fadl 'Asqalan* is a collection of hadiths extolling the sanctity of Ascalon and highlighting prominent Muslim figures who lived or died there. Composed in response to the city's fall to the Franks in 1153 CE, it served as an appeal for Muslims to reclaim it. Unfortunately, the work itself has been lost, thus obscuring the precise message it conveyed and the religious impact it had on Ibn 'Asakir and his fellow scholars regarding Ascalon's capture. Nevertheless, Mourad and Lindsay maintain that short excerpts of this work are quoted in Ibn 'Asakir's *Ta'rikh madinat Dimashq*, providing clues as to how the religious institution drew from earlier traditions emphasizing Ascalon's sanctity to galvanize Muslims to liberate it in the twelfth century CE.<sup>37</sup>

Ibn 'Asakir's second relevant work, *al-Arba'un Hadithan fi al-Hathth 'ala al-jihad* (Forty Hadiths for Encouraging Jihad), is a collection of forty prophetic hadiths stressing the obligation and responsibility to carry out *jihad*. Ibn 'Asakir composed this text at the request of his patron, Nur al-Din. Given that it was written at Nur al-Din's behest, its date of authorship likely falls between 1154 and 1170 CE, the year when the earliest colophon of the extant manuscript records a public teaching session attended by Ibn 'Asakir himself.<sup>38</sup> The first reading, out of eleven *sama'at* (audible recitations) included in the manuscript, indicates that the work was read for the first time in March 565 AH/1170 CE. This reading was documented by one of Ibn 'Asakir's nephews, al-Hasan ibn Muhammad, who noted that the session took place outside Damascus in a private orchard owned by two of his nephews in the village of al-Mizza. Based on this evidence, the date of authorship can be placed between 549 AH/1154 CE and 565 AH/1170 CE, most likely toward the latter part of that span, as it is difficult to imagine a long gap between the work's completion and its first reading. A second reading, also led by Ibn 'Asakir, took place at the Umayyad Mosque in 569 AH/1174 CE.

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<sup>36</sup> Al-Salabi, *al-Dawlah al-Zankiyyah*, 349.

<sup>37</sup> Lindsay, "Professors, prophets and politicians: 'Ali Ibn 'Asakir's "Ta'rikh madinat dimashq"," 17.

<sup>38</sup> Mourad - Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in The Crusader Period*, 85-93.

Ibn 'Asakir's third work on jihad is *Faḍa'il al-Quds*, which was reportedly first read in Damascus around 555 AH/1160 CE.<sup>39</sup> Carole Hillenbrand argues that *Fadl al-Quds* aligns with the rising popularity of the *Fada'il al-Quds* genre in the latter half of the twelfth century, traditionally attributed to Nur al-Din's emphasis on recapturing Bayt al-Maqdis.<sup>40</sup> As a renowned *Sunni* scholar, Ibn 'Asakir ardently practiced jihad through writing, while also supporting the broader vision of *jihad* by the sword. Although details concerning his involvement in the military dimension of *jihad* or whether he directly preached to the army remain unknown, his role as a member of the scholarly elite was crucial to Nur al-Din's success. Indeed, Mourad and Lindsay refer to Ibn 'Asakir as Nur al-Din's "minister of propaganda."<sup>41</sup> Sivan similarly describes Ibn 'Asakir as "propagandiste de la sainteté de Jerusalem et de la Terre Sainte" ("propagandist for the sanctity of Jerusalem and the Holy Land").<sup>42</sup> Consequently, Ibn 'Asakir's compilation of forty hadiths should be viewed as one among many texts produced as part of his mission to safeguard orthodox religion and promote jihad under the patronage of Nur al-Din.

In the introduction to *al-Arba'un hadithan fi al-Hathth 'ala al-jihad*, Ibn 'Asakir offers valuable insights for understanding religious propaganda and the interconnection between political opportunism and religious discourse under Nur al-Din's rule. He states that Nur al-Din was:

"A just, ascetic king, a jihad fighter and a hero devoted to (defending) fortified positions may God grant him success in that which is right, assist him in fulfilling what is best for the people, endow him with superiority over the obstinate, exalt him in victory alongside his army, and support him with divine help who expressed his desire that I collect for him forty *hadiths* on jihad, with clear texts and sound, uninterrupted chains of transmission. In doing so, (these *hadiths*) might inspire the brave jihad warriors those who are spirited and strong-armed, wielding sharp swords and penetrating spears stirring them to fight in earnest when they face the enemy on the battlefield, and inciting them to uproot unbelievers and tyrants who, through their unbelief, have sown fear across the land and spread oppression and corruption. May God inflict upon them all forms of punishment, for He is All-Seeing. So, I hastened to fulfil his wish and collected for him what would benefit those of knowledge and seekers of knowledge. I also expended great

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<sup>39</sup> Emmanuel Sivan, *L'Islam Et La Croisade: Ideologie et Propagande dans les Reactions Musulmanes aux Croisades* (Paris: Rue Saint-Sulpice, 1968), 62-65.

<sup>40</sup> Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades Islamic Perspectives*, 164-165.

<sup>41</sup> Mourad - Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in The Crusader Period*, 54.

<sup>42</sup> Sivan, *L'Islam Et La Croisade: Ideologie et Propagande dans les Reactions Musulmanes aux Croisades*, 64.

effort in assembling it, hoping for a divine reward (from God) for providing guidance and enlightenment.”<sup>43</sup>

From one perspective, when Ibn ‘Asakir refers to those who “sowed fear across the land and spread oppression and corruption,” it is likely that he is alluding not only to the Franks but also to certain Muslim military leaders be they *Sunni* or *Shi’i*, whom he held responsible for the fragmentation, turmoil, and weakness of the Muslim community in Bilad al-Sham. Mourad and Lindsay argue that if this assumption is correct, it would explain why he refrains from naming them explicitly.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, Nur al-Din clearly deemed Ibn ‘Asakir’s work essential for boosting the Muslim spirit of *jihad* at that time. These *hadith* were meant to be read to the army and the wider public, urging them to undertake this highly valued religious duty of *jihad* correctly. The *hadith* included in Ibn ‘Asakir’s work were drawn from the knowledge he acquired from the scholars he had encountered in his intellectual journeys.

Unlike the more extensive *Kitab al-Jihad* by al-Sulami (d. 412 AH/ 1021 AD) or earlier works of the same title by Ibn al-Mubarak (d. 797 AD), Ibn ‘Asakir did not intend to produce a comprehensive treatise on *jihad*. *al-Arba’un Hadithan fi al-Hathth ‘ala al-jihad* is a brief compilation consisting of forty *hadith*. Notably, he does not begin his collection with any Qur’anic passages, a feature commonly found at the start of works on *jihad*. Nevertheless, some of the *hadith* he cites refer to specific Qur’anic verses, presumably well known to the general audience.<sup>45</sup> Ibn ‘Asakir, however, offers no detailed commentary on these *hadith* apart from occasional notes on their authenticity or clarifications of specific terms. In other words, he merely responded to Nur al-Din’s request. According to Mourad and Lindsay, Ibn ‘Asakir’s work can be characterized by four primary themes: (1) the importance of *jihad* relative to other religious obligations, (2) the punishment awaiting those who neglect the duty of *jihad*, (3) the rewards awaiting those who fulfil *jihad*, and (4) the conditions required of *jihad* fighters before launching a campaign.<sup>46</sup>

### **Establishing the Dar al-Hadith and Institutionalizing Hadith Studies**

Nur al-Din’s focus on *hadith* scholarship was manifested in two primary ways, the founding of the Dar al-Hadith institution and the encouragement of scholars to compile and study *hadith* pertaining to specific fields or themes. The Dar al-Hadith was among the most prominent reforms implemented under Nur al-Din, in addition to the network of madrasas he established in the major cities of al-Sham. Its purpose was to investigate the *hadith* of the Prophet, covering their transmission, the continuity of their chains (*sanad*), the trustworthiness

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<sup>43</sup> Maktabah ‘Ain al-Jami’ah, “al-Arba’un hadithan fi al-hathth ‘ala al-jihad” (Access 3 December 2024).

<sup>44</sup> Mourad - Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in The Crusader Period*, 54.

<sup>45</sup> Mourad - Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in The Crusader Period*, 66.

<sup>46</sup> Mourad - Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in The Crusader Period*, 69.

of their transmitters, their meanings, and more.<sup>47</sup> Notably, this was the first such *hadith* institution in Islamic history, and Nur al-Din's initiative was later emulated by subsequent Muslim leaders who founded Dar al-Hadith colleges throughout the Islamic world. This undertaking attests to Nur al-Din's awareness of the dual threat posed by *Shi'i* missionary activities and the Crusaders. The institutions he founded were designed not only to train scholars or government officials, but also to produce cadres of *jihad* to confront the enemies of Islam. This development likewise spurred the appearance of works dedicated to the merits of *jihad* and the exhortation to undertake it.<sup>48</sup>

According to al-Salabi, Nur al-Din recognized that *Shi'i* adherents, who did not acknowledge the authenticity of *hadith* except those transmitted through the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*), represented a pressing issue, particularly in Aleppo. The establishment of the Dar al-Hadith, therefore, aimed to restore the community's adherence to authoritative and genuine *hadith*.<sup>49</sup> Hasan al-Sayed likewise explains that the Dar al-Hadith did not merely function to uphold the *Sunnah* and disseminate its teachings; it actively promoted right conduct and forbade wrongdoing, guided and advised Muslims, weakened their enemies, and fostered commendable morals in society.<sup>50</sup>

Between 559 H/1164 CE and 566 H/1171 CE, Nur al-Din ordered the construction of the first *hadith* college in Damascus. He appointed Ibn 'Asakir as its inaugural professor, a position he held until his death. This professorship remained in Ibn 'Asakir's family, on and off, until the late seventh/thirteenth century. Initially, Ibn 'Asakir's son, al-Qasim, inherited the position, followed in 600 H/1203 CE by his own son 'Ali (d. 616 H/1219 CE), named after his grandfather. It was then held by Ibn 'Asakir's nephew, al-Hasan ibn Muḥammad (d. 627 H/1230 CE), followed by his son, 'Abd al-Wahhab ibn al-Hasan (d. 660 H/1262 CE). Thereafter, it was passed on to other major *hadith* scholars in Damascus and Syria, including Jamal al-Din Ibn al-Sabuni (d. 680 H/1282 CE) and Taj al-Din al-Firkah (d. 690 H/1291 CE).

Ibn 'Asakir composed a treatise to persuade Nur al-Din to construct this college, entitled *Taqwiyat al-munna 'ala insha' dar al-sunnah* (Strengthening the Resolve to Establish the College of the Sunnah), but unfortunately this work has not survived. The founding of the college reflects the close relationship between the scholar and the Nur al-Din. In addition to specific commissioned works at Nur al-Din's request such as *al-Arba'un hadith fi al-hathth 'ala al-jihad* and completing the *Ta'rikh Dimashq*, Ibn 'Asakir also volunteered to write other treatises dedicated to the Nur al-Din on special occasions. According to Ibn al-Athir, the first Dar al-Hadith

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<sup>47</sup> 'Al-Salabi, *al-Dawlah al-Zankiyyah*, 307.

<sup>48</sup> Ibrahim bin Muhammad al-Hamd al-Muzayni, *al-Hayat al-'Ilmiyyah fi al-'Ahd al-Zanki* (Riyahd: Maktabah al-Malk Fahd al-Wataniyyah Asna al-Nashru, 2003), 133.

<sup>49</sup> Al-Salabi, *al-Dawlah al-Zankiyyah*, 215-216.

<sup>50</sup> Hasan al-Sayed Muhammad Yasin, *Al-madaris al-hadithiyyah wa-dawruha fi khidmati al-sunnah al-nabawiyyah al-mutahharah – al-madrasah al-nuriyyah namudhajan*, (Egypt: Majallah Kuliyyah al-Dirasat al-Islamiyyah, 2021), 587.

was Dar al-Hadith al-Nuriyyah in Damascus, under the tutelage and supervision of Ibn 'Asakir.<sup>51</sup> Nur al-Din Zanki's establishment of the Dar al-Hadith al-Nuriyyah in Damascus stands out as a pioneering institution in Islamic history. He allocated substantial funds for its construction.<sup>52</sup> Historical sources occasionally refer to it as Madrasah al-Nuriyyah, Dar al-Sunnah al-Nuriyyah or simply Dar al-Hadith. According to Hasan al-Sayed, in later periods it became known as Madrasah al-Sughra, distinguishing it from Madrasah al-Nuriyyah al-Kubra.<sup>53</sup>

This *Hadith* college was situated in the Hajar al-Dhahab (Gold Stone) quarter, on the left side of the route connecting the Umayyad Mosque (to the east) and the Damascus Citadel (to the west). Today, the street is known as the 'Asruniyyah Market, near the renowned Hamidiyyah Market. The building comprised a courtyard of approximately forty-nine square meters with a small central fountain, along with surrounding rooms for study and lodging. The main study hall (about forty-two square meters in area) lay on the southern side of the building. It fell into disrepair after 804 H/1400 CE following Tamerlane's attack on Damascus. Currently, only a small part of the original structure remains, having been restored in the early twentieth century by a local Damascene scholar.

The relationship between Ibn 'Asakir and Nur al-Din transcended the typical dynamic of a ruler commissioning a scholar's work or a scholar dedicating his writings to a patron. In his efforts to build rapport with the '*ulama*' particularly in Damascus and Aleppo, Nur al-Din frequently attended their lessons.<sup>54</sup> He occasionally joined Ibn 'Asakir's sessions and endeavoured to memorize several prophetic *hadith* at least forty seeking the divine rewards that Ibn 'Asakir had mentioned.

## Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that Ibn 'Asakir, a distinguished scholar from Damascus, played a major role in shaping the narrative of the liberation of Bayt al-Maqdis with the ideological and political support of Nur al-Din Mahmud Zanki. The close relationship between these two figures served as a crucial foundation for uniting the Muslim community and strengthening the agenda of *jihad* against the Crusaders in the twelfth century. Through scholarly influence and strategic collaboration with Nur al-Din, Ibn 'Asakir successfully galvanized both the religious and political enthusiasm of Muslims to free the holy land. Ibn 'Asakir's education and scholarship allowed him to function not only within the intellectual sphere but also as an architect of political narratives. His studies in *hadith*, history, and Islamic jurisprudence provided him with the means to connect religious principles to contemporary political concerns. Ibn 'Asakir underscored *jihad* as a legitimate religious duty and provided

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<sup>51</sup> 'Ali bin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Karim bin 'Abd al-Shaibani Ibn al-Athir, *Al-Tarikh al-Bahir fi al-Daulah al-Atabakiyyah bi al-Mausul*, (Kaherah: Dar al-Kitab al-Hadithah, 1963), 172.

<sup>52</sup> Shihab al-Din 'Abd al-Rahman bin Isma'il bin Ibrahim Abu Shamah. *Kitab al-Rawdatayn fi Akhbar al-Dawlatayn al-Nuriyyah wa al-Salihiyyah*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Ilmiyyah, 2003), 1: 107.

<sup>53</sup> Yasin, *Al-madaris al-hadithiyyah wa-dawruha fi khidmati al-sunnah al-nabawiyyah al-mutahharah*, 617.

<sup>54</sup> Lindsay, "Ibn 'Asakir (1105–1176): Muslim Historian and Advocate of Jihad against Christian Crusaders and Shi'ite Muslims.", 10.

theological legitimacy for Nur al-Din's efforts to reclaim Bayt al-Maqdis. By referencing Prophetic traditions, he linked the struggle to ultimate spiritual concerns of Muslims, framing it as both a political objective and a religious obligation.

Ibn 'Asakir's support for Nur al-Din is clear in the narratives he constructed, in which he endorsed Nur al-Din's Sunni revivalist agenda. Aware of the importance of ulama in mobilizing society, Nur al-Din offered Ibn 'Asakir, as a leading intellectual figure, a platform to disseminate ideas that promoted Sunni unity and jihad against the Crusaders. Additionally, Ibn 'Asakir engaged in countering Shi'i influence, viewed by Nur al-Din as a threat to political stability and the unity of the Muslim community. By supporting Nur al-Din's vision, Ibn 'Asakir helped construct a narrative portraying jihad not merely as a collective duty but also as a symbol of Sunni unity. This collaborative relationship is further reflected in Nur al-Din's direct support of education and scholarly institutions. Nur al-Din was both a patron of the ulama and a leader who recognized the importance of learning in societal development. He sponsored the establishment of madrasas and other educational institutions, including in Damascus, which became a centre of learning for Ibn 'Asakir. Such support enabled Ibn 'Asakir to expand his influence and propagate ideas aligned with Nur al-Din's political and religious aspirations.

Through sermons and writings, including the monumental work *Ta'rikh Dimashq* (History of Damascus), Ibn 'Asakir reinforced the narrative of jihad and instilled a spirit of struggle among Muslims. He frequently referenced the successes of earlier Islamic leaders in liberating holy lands, linking their achievements to Nur al-Din's endeavors as a continuation of this noble history. This approach not only provided moral justification for Nur al-Din's cause but also motivated society to unite under his leadership. In conclusion, Ibn 'Asakir's role in constructing the narrative of Bayt al-Maqdis's liberation cannot be separated from his close ties with Nur al-Din. Their collaboration demonstrates that the fusion of scholarship and political leadership constitutes a key element in successful jihad campaigns. Ibn 'Asakir not only contributed to forming a religious narrative but also supported Nur al-Din's political agenda, making the liberation of Bayt al-Maqdis a shared objective backed by religious imperatives and political authority. His role went beyond that of an ordinary scholar, epitomizing how knowledge and leadership can converge to achieve the unity of the Muslim community and success in facing global challenges.

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