

A Brief Analysis on the Military Acumen in the Eras of Muslim Zenith

Muhammad Irfan¹

Abstract

The military acumen of Muslims is explained in all its forms that the prestigious generals had demonstrated. The Quranic commandment inspires the peacetime preparation for war and accentuates it as the comprehensive pre-requisite of deterrence. The maneuvers in regard of direct and indirect military strategies along with the traditional and non-traditional methodologies used during the said Muslim eras in the military art-ship, which define them to be prominent, have been discussed. I have included only those eras in study when Muslims had predominant position in the world. The descriptive methodology has been used in it. Both the libraries such as QAU Central Library and the internet based sources have been used as a source of data-collection.

Keywords: Military Acumen, Sustainability, Containment, Adversary, Triumph

1.1 Introduction

The military acumen endorsed by the robust military might is an essential tool of the power and rule. The art of warfare remains under the frequent renovations throughout the history and witnesses the changes. However, the usage of men both commanders and troops have remained the same. In fact, the military acumen of a commander together with the unbeaten valor of a soldier is the prime assets of any military campaign.

In the eras of Muslim zenith, the aforementioned both dimensions (generals' acumen and soldiers' valor) have widely been observed.

¹ The author is an M.Sc & M.Phil. He has participated in various international conferences as a paper-presenter. He is a researcher and freelance columnist. Presently, he works on a book and also pursues Ph.D. he has affiliation with DAWN MEDIA GROUP.

Actually, the Muslims are prompted by the divinely commandments in relation with the war preparation, the concrete base for the military strategy aimed at the deterrence and stability.

Thus, the Holy Quran describes, " *Make preparation to confront them, in accordance with what you can sustain, in form of numerical strength (Quwat) and the military systems (Ribat-il-kheyl) so that you may create fear (by making military build-ups) in the mind of Allah's (S.W.T) enemy, your enemy and the enemy other than these two whom you do not know but Allah (S.W.T) Knows them well.*" 8:60 (Al-Anfaal)

This divinely principle is the hallmark of the cemented defense in wake of the rationally devised military strategy and the military acumen of the commander. Acumen refers to set of mental behaviors promptly demonstrated for the desired outcome in any sphere of human life.

The Princeton Review defines acumen as, "Keeness of judgment and mental sharpness."² In the military sphere, it evolves all decisions and actions, undertaken by the responsible military leader, employing the relevant as well as comparatively fewer resources and numerical strength in pursuit of opted objective with a considerable impact in both battlefield and warfare. The military acumen of the Muslims is prominent in the history of warfare.

It is equally significant to define the military strategy as well as objectives behind it so that the foundations can be led for the observation of the Muslim military acumen in a broader view. The national military objectives refer to, "The objectives that serve as links between military activities and those of other government agencies in pursuit of national goals."³ Similarly, the definition of national military strategy in accordance with free dictionary is, "The art and science of employing the armed forces of a nation to secure the objectives of a national policy by the application of force or the threat of force."⁴

² Jeff Soloway, *The Princeton Review, Word Smart*, (Newyork: Princeton Review Publishing, 2001), p.48.

³ The national military strategy of the United states of America, (Washington D.C: Headquarter CJCS, 2004), p.1. available at <http://www.defense.gov/news/mar2005/d20050318nms.pdf>, (Accessed on January 11, 2014).

⁴Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, US Department of Defense (2005), available at <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/military+strategy> (Accessed on March 06, 2013).

Accordingly, the military forces are mobilized in an attempt to achieve the objectives that the political government desires to achieve.

This paper is aimed at exploring the military acumen the Muslim military leaders demonstrated in the military expeditions. I attempt to search the pathways, sought by the generals in combining all kinds of sources for achieving the political goals. The maritime aspect of the military acumen has also been added. The usage of the natural barriers as part of the defense against the invading armies has been studied.

The paper is divided into three sub-sections; the prophetic Era, the Arab era and the Turkish Era. The research statement on which the paper is based includes, "The military acumen is prominent in the adventures of Muslim military leader."

1.2 Prophetic Era

This era includes the period of prophet-hood and the four righteous caliphs. The acumen, demonstrated in this span can be taken into account as following.

(i) In a war, the surveillance is considered as the inevitable tactics and can never be ignored. Accordingly, the veterans of war at any level and era used to be innovative in order to give surprise and pelt the enemy with new war strategies and tactics. Similarly, the holy prophet PBUH whose Excellency remains matchless in the subject of wisdom such as the other spheres of life, managed to make the rivals surprised with military tactics never pursued earlier.

This could be possible only when the holy Prophet PBUH asserted to be updated with the tactics of non-believers maneuverability and their deployment as well. According to a source, it is commented, "One of the praiseworthy policies adopted by the holy prophet (PBUH) in all the battles was that he used to collect the information about the strength and location of enemies."⁵

⁵ Major Amir Afzal Khan, *The Military Analysis on the Holy Prophet's (PBUH) Military Planning and Strategies*, (Islamabad: Qauid-i-Azam University Library, 1981), p.65.

Thus, the information about the adversary's strength and location causes bi-fold boons. (a) The composition and force concentration can be organized in accordance with the adversary strength in the battlefield. (b) The familiarity with enemy's location is also a factor that provides an opportunity to mend the weaknesses and make the suitable deployment accordingly.

(ii) Prior to the battle started, the Muslims avowed to the holy Prophet PBUH to render their lives for the cause of Islam. They also knew that to be surviving, they had to make immense efforts, demonstrate the real valor, passion and faith to ensure deterrence against the adversary's aggressive forces. That is why the companions of the holy prophet PBUH proved a hallmark of sincerity to Islam and set examples of being altruistic for the divinely cause.

That is how the Muslims under the premiership of The Holy Prophet PBUH emerged as a significant power in the region after the Battle of Badr. It is believed, "This battle laid the foundation of the Islamic state and made out of the Muslims a force to be reckoned with by the dwellers of the Arabian Peninsula."⁶

Therefore, the commitment to the prime objective, the survival and sincerity to the cause for sake of Islam enabled them not only to survive but also empowered them to wield the control within the Arabian peninsula, guaranteeing their worth-mentioning politico-military position.

(iii) The division of forces according to the requirements and making the wise deployment require a competent military leadership. The advantages and disadvantages in war against enemy mainly depend on the military generals' brilliance in the respective professionalism regarding the military strategies and tactics. The said perspective is highly observed when the matter of the holy prophet's (PBUH) true wisdom in the military warfare is described, particularly when his Excellency is endowed a guidance by Allah SWT for undertaking any kind of mission.

It is observed, "The Holy Prophet (PBUH) ordered his fifty archers led by Abdullah Bin Jubair to remain on the top of the mountain in order to guard the back of the Muslims."⁷

⁶ Ibid., p.62.

⁷ Muhammad Karam Shah, *Zia-Ul-Nabi, Volume.3*, (Lahore: Zia-ul-Quran Publicashions, 1985), p.255

In this maneuver, the Prophet PBUH accrued three military advantages over the rivals and also set lessons for the military strategists. First, the back of the Islamic army was acutely safeguarded. Second, making sure the defense where offence is not expected is significant. Third, the relevance of weapons, which are usable and launchable from distance against adversary, is highly accentuated.

(iv) In a military organization, the discipline is a rule that can never be discarded. In actuality, fighting gallantly owes to the disciplinary order within a force. It is assessed whether the troops are willing to follow what the commander demands. It shows the fighting spirit of a military organization.

The more fighting spirit is imbibed into a force, the greater chances of victory can be expected. For the purpose, the commander has to examine deeply and investigate the level of troop's tendencies to follow him in the battlefield. For that reason, The Holy Prophet (PBUH) tested his followers' passion. They replied, " If He (The Holy Prophet PBUH) Jumped from a mountain-top, they would."⁸

It shows how the companions of the Holy Prophet PBUH were ready to accept death on cost of Islam. The battle of Badr (Al-Furqan) is evidence in the said context.

(v) In a security competition, the foremost objective that an adversary seeks to achieve vis-a-vis enemy is to ensure its capability for survival. Thence, the maneuvers are pursued not only to boost up armies capability but also it is required to subdue that of the enemy. For the purpose, the enemy's sustainability is sought to be tormented. This can only be possible when the rival's economic power is crippled. Likewise, the Holy Prophet PBUH pursued variety of schemes to make the enemy less-sustainable.

Among those prominent strategies, the war-booty was considered as the pivotal tool for the vested gains. Thus, the holy prophet (PBUH) used it as an instrument to thwart the adversary's capability for war and to make them economical crippled so that they may not be able again to launch aggression against Islam.

⁸ Moin-ul-Din, *The History of Islam, Volume.1*, (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1972), p.41.

According to encyclopedia of Islam, "the paltry war booty was taken after fight that demanded abandonment."⁹

Here, abandonment refers to the economic termination, aimed at deterrent against the hostile forces. That is why the strategies adopted by the Holy Prophet PBUH are praise-worthy.

(vi) Every state is supposed to undertake solid decisions regarding the security and the national interest. At cost of national interests, the relations with other states and even with the non-state actors can never be established. The attainable prime objective is to ensure the states survival and protect the relevant national interests. The national unity guarantees this survival.

Thus, the element, which threatens the national integrity and unity, are to be eradicated. The holy Prophet PBUH was expected to undertake the rational decisions in subject of dealing with the trouble-making communities such Banu Qainqah.

Banu Qainqah, a Jewish tribe to whom the Holy Prophet (PBUH) made a truce, violently asserted to disunite the Muslims by provoking their past adversarial sentiments. At this spot, fearing the dangers of secret plots by the Jews against Muslims, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) withdrew from truce, conveyed a message to the tribe for severe consequences, and harassed them within their forts. "Within fifteen days of Prophet's siege of their invincible forts, they lost heart and applied for peace."¹⁰

Accordingly, the Holy Prophet PBUH withdrew from the concluded armistice when his Excellency found them subversive and averse to the Muslim's security. If they were let to accomplish the evil designs, the Muslims could have confronted an irreparable loss. Nonetheless they were not allowed to fulfill what they sneakily desired, adjusting a reasoned example of decision-making. Therefore, the seditious tribe was strictly coped by concentrated harassment until they gave up to the terms the Muslims required.

⁹ Ibid. Muhammad Karam Shah, *Zia-Ul-Nabi, Volume.3.*, p.277.

¹⁰ Ibid., Moin-ul-Din, *The History of Islam, Volume.1*, p.51.

(vii) The natural terrains serve importantly for a solid defense. These terrains can be utilized as barricades in front of the expected aggression. Even in the modern era when the state of the art technology is being inducted all over the world, the relevance of natural barriers can never be denied.

Ironically, the artificial ways are to be formulated where the natural barricades are not usable for defense. For the purpose, the trenches, canals and even the thick walls are constructed to make defense. Likewise, the City-state of Medina in some parts lacked in these barriers during the battle of UHD.

Therefore, "The Holy Prophet (PBUH) decided to belt the city with trenches from the sides where there were no forests, mountains and human settlements."¹¹

Thus, the trench was used as an instrument for sake of averting the intense cavalry attack of Qureish, accentuating the significant of trench strategy that the holy Prophet PBUH practiced.

(viii) A state whose fortune is directed by the wise and foresighted leaders can boost up politically, militarily and economically. Keeping the inevitable national goals in mind, a leader should emphasize on the achievement of these political objectives. During the era of the second righteous Caliph of Islam, the examples of keen military acumen and taking right decisions on right time regarding state's foremost security policies had been set.

Accordingly, Maghreb throws light on the Muslim conquest of Egypt as an exact decision on exact time to cope with the threats likely to be posed by the Roman against the Islamic state. He states, "Omar Bin Khattab (MBPH) made a right decision to approve the conquest of Egypt so as to secure the conquered lands of al-Shaam and shield it against any potential threats by the Romans from North, South or from the West through the Mediterranean Sea."¹²

This decision harmonizes with the contemporary strategy of preemption where a state undertakes a plan in pursuit of eradicating the potential threat.

¹¹ Abdul Rehman Ibne Khuldon, *Tarekhe Islam, Volume. 2*, (Karachi: Nafees Academy Urdu Bazar, 2003), p.99.

¹² Op.cit., Moin-ul-Din, *The History of Islam, Volume.1*, p.194.

1.3 Arab Era

This evolves the Umayyad Empire, the Abbasid Empire and the Andalusia Caliphate, centered in the modern Spain. Thus, the following study shows the prominent military acumen that the Muslim military leaders and the generals followed in the period.

(i) A victory depends on the acumen plans, a military general pursues in face of a battle against enemy. Therefore, a general should be strategist who knows exactly where to exploit the adversary's weaknesses. The history of Islamic military is teemed with the events during fighting where the enemy was completely defeated because of the wise tricks.

The Battle of Talas, fought between the Muslim Arab Army and the Chinese Army on May 751 was the by-product of the keen strategies, pursued and formulated by the Muslim General. Accordingly, it is stated, "the battle was won by the strategic acumen of Ziyad ibn Salih."¹³

Prominently, the Muslims strategists on a parallel hand remain acute in planting the alternative armies within the enemy's territory, which had been giving surprise to the combating hostile forces. Barry maintains, "Qarluqs were allied with the Arabs from the beginning and probably attacked the Chinese from the rear as a part of carefully prearranged plan, formulated by Ziyad ibn Salih."¹⁴

Thus, there are two important military lessons for the military leaders of the coming eras. First, the wisely strategy formulation is a prominent factor that ensured the Muslims dominance which was the outcome of the intelligent Muslim generals. Second, a war within the enemy was the first example of the indirect military strategy that the Muslims commanders pursued. Like mentioned above, the tribe of Qarluqs was the part of the Chinese national integrity, which was keenly planted as the second lane defense of the Muslim army and a fifth-column within the enemy's society.

¹³ Barry Hoberman, The Battle of Talas, *ARAMCO World Magazine*, Volume 33, No.5, September/October 1982, available at <http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/198205/the.battle.of.talas.htm>, (accessed on November 5, 2013).

¹⁴ Ibid.

(ii) The Just ad-belum, a cause to go for war, plays a substantial role in boosting up the Morales of the armies. The more high cause an army has, the hardest battle it would fight. It is important to note that in a war scenario, the most harmful havoc a soldier can face is the death.

Surprisingly, if the troops dare to lay their lives, the outcome of a battle would ultimately be achievable as desired.

Islam tutors the philosophy of martyrdom for a soldier fighting for the cause of Allah SWT on premise that the dying one would be conferred upon the consent of Allah SWT as well as uncountable blessings. The said concept is adequate to make the Muslim soldiers free of any lose and cost. Therefore, they have been fighting valiantly throughout the Islamic history.

Qutaiba in 715/ 96 AH decided to extend the frontiers of Islamic empire beyond the Merv in Khurassan and annex the Chinese empire in it. He then sent a deputation to the court of Chinese emperor in pursuit of conveying an absolute determination that Qutaiba had undertaken for conquering China.

After the delegation reached at the court palace of Chinese King, the leader was threatened by the Chinese of grave consequences and that, the Muslim general including his massive army would be put to death if he fought against the Chinese fighters. The leader of the Muslim delegation replied, "As to your threatening us with death, we have our fates; if the end of our lives comes, the most honored we shall feel if we are killed. We neither hate nor are afraid of to die."¹⁵

The absolute determination altered the Chinese course of action and made them seek shelter in surrender and accepting the terms that Qutaiba demanded. Rhetorically, the philosophy of martyrdom bestows Muslim soldier distinguished fighting spirits and makes his strategic culture incomparable.

(iii) In a hostile environment particular when the armies engage in fierce fighting, the public will of power (WOP) remains significant. It is instrumental for sustaining the war against the powerful adversary.

¹⁵ Ibid., Early History of Islam, p.24.

Parallely, the adversary's will of power as a strategic tool is broken. For the purpose, certain tactics are utilized. In the modern era, this concept is widely known as the psychological warfare.

In the said field, the Muslim military leaders remained much creative and were able to make the enemy stunned with the renovated tactics. The Muslims on the Liberian peninsula had exercised weakening of enemy's will power. Tariq bin Ziyad attacked Liberian peninsula in Ramazan 711 and finally occupied it. He attempted to win war before the battlefield.

Jeffry narrates, "Tariq reached in the province of Al-Jazira and sent out the survivors to spread the news of his fearsome army and all they had done."¹⁶

Due to this maneuver, the Spanish forces remained failed to show the true fighting spirit against the invading Muslim forces.

(vi) After a land is conquered, the foremost responsibility the military leader has to fulfill is to organize the management of the said area. He is also required to make the conquered peoples settle under his premiership. The more people are willing to come immediately under working order, the greater charismatic attributes the leader possesses. However, this needs a sort of particular characteristics that the leader has to demonstrate in his kind, generous and fair behavior towards the conquered masses.

If the ruler is fair and kind in his domestic decrees and the subsequent implementations, the masses would follow him, otherwise they would appear rebel whenever the suitable moments come. Alike other Muslim conquerors, Muhammad Bin Qasim (MBQ) is widely known for his unprecedented social justice and his kind behaviors. Accordingly, Moin agrees, "The Arab are known of not attacking the peaceful people. They fulfill what they promise. They are kind ruler in their behavior."¹⁷

¹⁶ Jeffry R. Halverson, Tariq-bin-Ziyad The Master Narrative, *Consortium for Strategic Communication, Arizona State University*, Report # 1101, July 7, 2011, P.4.

¹⁷ Op.cit, Moin ul din, *The History of Islam, volum.2*, p.141.

This was the outcome of generosity, modesty and equality of MBQ that the masses in Sindh considered him as a true rescuer and was worshipped even by the Hindu populace as an idol after he withdrew from Sindh.

(v) In a military organization, the troops and officers remain of significant worth yet the military strategists have to work sometimes unusually. It is important to note that strategist acts like a captain who channelizes ships in high seas and oceanic waters. In this effort, he has to make the soldiers ready for a cause at any cost. He has to educate them for observing patience. The sincerity is another factor that enables soldiers to accept death.

In human military history, an unprecedented example has been made in an effort to make soldiers ready for fighting till death by the barbarian Muslims when they landed at Liberian peninsula under Tariq bin Ziad. According to one account, "Tariq burned the ships used for the crossing and stirred his troops with the words: "O People! There is nowhere to run away! The sea is behind you, and the enemy is before you. I swear to God, you have only sincerity and patience." ¹⁸

Hence, the soldiers fought valiantly until they met with a considerable victory. Actually, they fought for victory as the sole way to find safety, which paved the way for their triumph.

1.4 Turkish Era

The Turkish people emerged as the worth-remembering legends in term of military acumen in the history of Islam when the Timor like conqueror and the Ottoman Empire like systematic state prominently dominated the entire known world. The significant maritime as well as land-based military acumen of this period can be observed as following.

(i) The seas and the large bodies of the waters have played an instrumental role in boosting up the trade activities and played a pivotal role in the east-west interaction throughout the human history. Having the glance on the Arab's mainland in the Middle East, one can easily understand the importance of the Arabian Peninsula in subject of the geo-strategic location.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.153.

It remains at the heart of the universal location and settlement. Furthermore, the Indian Ocean and its tributaries such as the red sea, and Mediterranean seas particularly enhance its importance vis-à-vis strategic connections with the rest of the world.

David believes, "Saladin's own interest in the Red Sea was highly lucrative trade route and Saladin's decision to conquer Yemen was primarily to ensure Egyptian domination over the sea route to the Indian Ocean."¹⁹

Accordingly, the Egyptian Muslim rulers were quite aware of the pertinence of the sea-trade as well as the important choke points of the maritime trade.

(ii) In the entire human politico-military history, only those remained the most glorious who promptly and cunningly managed the conquered lands and successfully brought the masses to the working order. It is rationale to maintain that conquering the people's hearts and minds is more important than the lands engulfed. During the Ottoman era, these preferences were emphasized and the diplomatic tools were used in the efforts to congeal the occupation. Gabor maintains:

There were three important methods of conquest. The first method was the dynastic marriages concluded with Christian and Muslim lords of the Balkan and Anatolian Turcoman Principalities by which the ottomans acquired new territories and military assistance. The second method was the spontaneous migration. The third method was granting ottoman military fiefs to the members of Christian nobility in the Balkan in return for their acceptance of the ottoman suzerainty. By this method, the ottomans gained supporters and the collaborators.²⁰

The Ottomans controlled the seas in the surrounding areas of the Middle East which was aimed at monopoly over the sea based as well as land based commercial activities. Through these efforts, the Ottoman built up the most prosperous economy and shared subsequently the reigns of global power.

¹⁹ David Nicolle, *The Third Crusader 1191*; Richard, *Saladin and the Struggle for Jerusalem*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2006), p.11.

²⁰ Gabor Agoston, *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, (New York: Augustan and Bruce Masters, 2009), p. 397.

Brummett believes that the Ottoman development of sea power was crucial for commercial hegemony from Genoa and Venice to the Indian Ocean, enabling the Ottomans to subordinate both Venice and Mamluk Kingdoms to dependency relationship."²¹

She also upholds, "The Ottoman Empire's expansion eastward was in context of claims to universal sovereignty, Levantine power politics, and the struggle for control of the oriental trade."²²

Therefore, the Sultan pursued the both offensive and defensive strategies to consolidate the sea as well as land-based trade and commercial activities.

Jakub also explains the Ottoman military strategy, "There were two main vectors of Ottoman maritime expansion; the Mediterranean and the Red Sea/Indian Ocean. The former was dictated by a strategy of defense and consolidation while the latter was characterized by offensive aimed at recapturing connection between Asia."²³

(iii) The formulation of the sound naval strategies by the Ottoman admirals was the most preeminent military skill and no one was able to claim parity with the Ottoman in this sphere. It is maintained in the Muhafiz Editorial, "In the Battle of Tabkhier, the composition of forces and the naval strategies pursued by Admiral Khairuldin Bar Barossa proved as a paragon of future naval strategy due to their importance. Accordingly, the British admiral Nelson, studying and applying the Bar Barossa's naval strategy, pursued in the Tabkhier Battle, defeated Napoleon."²⁴ That is why it is rationale to believe that the Ottoman admirals were outstanding in devising the profoundly investigated naval strategies.

²¹ Palmira Brummett, *Ottoman Sea-power and Levantine Diplomacy in the Age of Discovery*, (Sunny Press, 1993), available at <http://www.sunypress.edu/p-1732-ottoman-seapower-and-levantine-.aspx>, (Accessed on November 20, 2013).

²² Ibid.

²³ Jakub Greigel, The Rise of Ottoman Sea power-chapter in Andrew Ericson, *China Goes to Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective*, (Annapolis: MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009), p.2.

²⁴ Editorial Analysis, The Admiral Khair ul Din Barbarossa, *The Muhafiz Magazine*, October 2011, p.15.

Conclusion

The above-cited investigation reveals the fact that the Muslims remained quite enlightened in the subject of the military acumen. In fact, the use of men in wars like all other spheres of life is very important to achieve certain politico-military goals and ends. The Muslims during the period of zenith won laurels of astutely deploying men and tactics for achieving the strategic objectives. In this course of human usage in war, the Muslims military generals and strategists throughout the history stand as distinguished.

The Muslims remained outstanding in the following aspects: (a) They were skillful in using men in war. (b) The Muslims also excelled in inventing the advanced means of war. (c) They were match-less in the military planning. (d) They proved their artfulness in managing the strategy of containment, aimed at weakening the enemy internally. (e) Exploitation of adversary's weaknesses was incomparable acumen that Muslim generals showed. (f) The usage of natural barriers and seas for politic-military purposes was greatly exercised.

That is why it is recommendable that the lessons of the military acumen shown by the said military leaders in the significant campaigns versus larger hostile forces should be taught to the young military officers in the prestigious army and navy institutes across the world. These evidences of proved military acumen are of significant importance in the both peacetime war preparation and formulation of the long-term strategies.

In the contemporary era, only the means of wars and equipment has undergone a major change otherwise the usage of men and mind in the medieval Muslim eras is unprecedented. Therefore, these are worth mentioning lessons likely to be taught to the armed forces in the military institutes.

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