

**The Role of the Islamic Navy in Bolstering the Presence of
Muslims in the Eastern Basin of the Mediterranean Sea (28-99
AH / 648-718 AD)**

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Abstract

The study aimed to analyze the role of the Islamic navy in establishing an Islamic presence in the eastern Mediterranean during the early Islamic era. The Muslims developed a naval force to confront Byzantine threats and launch offensives, most notably capturing Cyprus and other Byzantine islands. However, the Islamic navy was weakened by the end of the Umayyad Caliphate following the failed siege of Constantinople.

The study employed both historical and descriptive-analytical methodologies. It concluded that Mu'āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān successfully established a naval force, commonly known as the maritime arsenal, achieving significant objectives, such as expelling Byzantine influence from the Islamic coasts and capturing strategic islands that served as supply bases for Byzantine fleets. Furthermore, the study highlighted that Mu'awiyah's strategic vision played a pivotal role in strengthening Islamic naval capabilities and realizing his maritime ambitions.

Keywords: Islamic navy, Mediterranean Sea, Egypt, Byzantine islands, Constantinople.

Preface:

- **Significance of the study**

This study highlights the pivotal role of naval power in medieval conflicts and the influence of the Islamic navy in weakening Byzantine dominance in the Mediterranean. It offers a unique perspective to both Arab and global academic literature.

- **Study problem**

The role of the early Islamic navy in reshaping the Eastern Mediterranean's balance of power is a critical yet understudied facet of maritime history. While Byzantine naval dominance was long-established, the fleet assembled under Mu'āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān presented a formidable challenge. Despite notable successes—such as the conquest of Cyprus and other strategic islands—the navy's power waned, particularly following the failed siege of Constantinople. This study analyzes the factors behind the rise and decline of the Islamic navy and assesses its impact on the region's political and military dynamics.

The study explores the following query: How did the Islamic navy contribute to the expansion of Muslim influence in the Eastern Mediterranean between (28-99 AH / 648-718 AD)?

- **Objectives**

The study aimed to clarify the following points:

1. Assess the strategic importance of the conquest of Cyprus.
2. Analyze the impact of the Battle of Dhāt al-Şawārī on the Islamic presence in the Mediterranean.
3. Highlight the significance of capturing key Byzantine islands.
4. Investigate Umayyad efforts to conquer Constantinople.

- **Methodology**

The study employs:

1. The Historical Method to gather foundational information.
2. The Descriptive-Analytical Approach to interpret the evolution and significance of the Islamic navy.
3. Role Theory to analyze states' political behavior and roles on the international stage.

Introduction:

The Byzantine fleet maintained undisputed dominance over the Mediterranean Sea until the advent of the Islamic conquests. During this period, Byzantine maritime supremacy was reinforced through economic policies aimed at undermining the Persian Empire's commercial influence—particularly by disrupting its profits from the spice and silk trades. As a result, Constantinople solidified its position as the most significant city in the East during the sixth and seventh centuries AD. (**Benabdallah, Summer 1997: 1199-1200**)

The pivotal event that marked the beginning of the Muslim conquest of the Levant and Egypt, followed by the conquest of the **al-Maghrib/Morocco**, is widely regarded as the Battle of al-Yarmūk in 13 AH / 634 AD. In this battle, the Muslims defeated the Byzantines, leading to the disintegration of Byzantine forces and the separation of the Levant from the Byzantine Empire. Following this victory, the Muslims initiated their conquest of Levantine cities (**Salem; Al-Abadi, 1981: 13**). Emperor Heraclius witnessed the failure of his efforts as the Islamic onslaught rapidly advanced, exerting increasing pressure on his empire. (**Al-Baladhuri, 1987: 186; Lewis, 1960: 78**)

First: The Strategic Significance of Cyprus and Its Muslim Conquest

A. The Initial Conquest of Cyprus (28 AH / 648 AD)

The first Muslim conquest of Cyprus occurred in 28 AH / 649 AD. The early Islamic administration recognized the strategic necessity of naval power to secure newly acquired territories such as Iraq, the Levant (Belad Al-Sham), and Egypt. Following the conquest of Egypt in 20 AH / 641 AD, Muslim forces gained control over vital eastern Mediterranean coastlines, fundamentally altering the region's maritime dynamics. These developments underscored the imperative for a coherent maritime strategy to counter persistent Byzantine naval threats. (**Salem; Al-Abadi, 1969: 14**).

In response to the Byzantine menace, Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (13-23 AH / 634-644 AD) implemented a defensive naval policy, focusing on land-based defenses, such as fortifications, watchtowers, and coastal outposts, and stationing soldiers to protect the newly acquired lands. While Mu'āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān (21-41 AH / 641- 661 AD), the governor of Syria, advocated for naval raids, 'Umar prohibited such actions. However, when 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān (24-35 AH / 644-656 AD) became caliph, he permitted naval

expeditions under specific conditions. Mu'āwiyah , now with the approval of 'Uthmān, set out to conquer Cyprus. The Islamic fleet, assembled at the port of Acre in 28 AH / 648 AD, included approximately 1,700 ships equipped with provisions and armaments. The campaign also saw the participation of notable companions, including Mu'āwiyah's wife Fākhtah bint Qardah, and 'Ubbādah ibn al-Ṣāmit's wife, Umm Ḥarām bint Malhān, who was martyred during the expedition. (**Al-Tabari, vol. 4, 1977: 260; Al-Baladhuri, 1987: 208; Al-Adawi, 1953: 80**)

B. Strategic significance of Cyprus

Cyprus was strategically important for Mu'āwiyah due to its geostrategic location, which could control access to the Levant. Positioned in the eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus was a critical naval station for the Byzantines, serving as a base for their fleet. In anticipation of the Islamic assault, the Byzantines sent a fleet led by Koubikoularios Kakourizo to defend the island (**Ibn Hawqal, 1965: 164; Abu al-Nasr, 1963: 126**)

Upon their arrival, the Muslims assured the Cypriots that they had come to safeguard their land and offer an invitation to Islam rather than seeking to seize the island. However, the Cypriots refused to negotiate and fortified their cities, forcing the Muslims to advance toward Constantinople (ancient Salamis). They captured the city, and the governor agreed to a treaty with the Muslims, including the payment of an annual tribute of 7,200 dinars. The treaty also stipulated that the Cypriots could not ally with the Byzantines against the Muslims (**Al-Baladhuri, 1987: 208; Al-Tabari, vol. 4, 1977: 262; Al-Salabi, 2002: 190**)

This treaty marked a significant victory for Mu'āwiyah and sent a message to Byzantium, discouraging future attacks on Islamic territories. The Muslims' morale was boosted, and their navy's confidence grew, encouraging further naval campaigns (**Al-Adawi, 1985: 46**). The conquest of Cyprus acted as a catalyst for the resumption of Muslim naval operations, including attacks on the coasts of Asia Minor. A Byzantine fleet intercepted these forces off the coast of Lycia, prompting a Byzantine counterattack on Alexandria. This led to a rebellion by the Greek population in Alexandria, who unsuccessfully attempted to assist the Byzantine campaign. (**Cosentino, 2006: 583; Whittow, August 1996: 40-41**)

C. The Second Islamic Conquest of Cyprus in 33 AH / 654 AD

Mu‘āwiyah remained cautious about the Cypriots’ loyalty, monitoring their actions to ensure they adhered to the peace treaty. In 32 AH / 653 AD, he discovered that the Cypriots had supported the Byzantines by providing ships, thus violating the treaty. In response, he launched a second naval campaign in 33 AH / 654 AD with approximately 500 ships. This campaign resulted in the complete conquest of Cyprus and the destruction of the port of Constantinople. The Cypriots then agreed to a truce. Mu‘āwiyah, not content with simply capturing the island, sought to strengthen his influence by sending 12,000 settlers to Arabize Cyprus, including Lebanese from Ba‘labak, who built mosques on the island’s northern coast (**Al-Baladhuri, 1987: 209 / Lewis, 1960: 91**).

These successes bolstered Muslim morale at sea, further fueling their ambitions for naval dominance in the Mediterranean. Cyprus served as a launchpad for further campaigns across the Mediterranean, including attacks on additional islands and even attempts to approach the Byzantine capital, Constantinople. In January 2004, historians Shawn O’Sullivan and Isao Kobayashi explored the possibility of an Islamic assault on Constantinople in 33 AH / 654 AD (**O’Sullivan, Jan 2004: 71; Kobayashi, 2015: 147**). However, Shan Carlson expressed skepticism regarding the scale of this threat (**Carlson, 2016: 12**).

By 33 AH/ 654 AD, the inhabitants of Asia Minor had largely submitted to the Islamic conquest, suggesting a specific strategy for the first siege of Constantinople. The Muslims understood the importance of securing the Levant before launching a full-scale military operation in Asia Minor, which prevented them from mounting a comprehensive siege on Constantinople at that time. Instead, they conducted raids along Asia Minor’s coast until internal conflicts within the Muslim ranks delayed their naval operations. Nevertheless, their victory in Cyprus remained a crucial factor in their determination to dominate the eastern Mediterranean, as demonstrated by the Battle of Dhāt al-Şawārī , which would shape future naval events.

Secondly, the significance of the Battle of the Masts (Dhāt al-Şawārī) in strengthening the Islamic presence in the Mediterranean

The Battle of Dhāt al-Şawārī 35 AH / 656 AD holds significant importance in strengthening the Islamic presence in the Mediterranean, not only because of its immediate military outcomes but also due to its long-term strategic and cultural implications.

A. The battle's events and motivations

The Muslim settlement in Cyprus was not the end of their naval ambitions. Rather, it marked the beginning of bolder plans, including an intended assault on Constantinople just a year after taking control of Cyprus. At this early stage, Mu'āwiyah, the governor of the Levant, faced considerable obstacles in executing such an ambitious plan. However, the collaboration between the Levant and Egypt became clear when the governor of Egypt, 'Abd Allāh ibn Sa'd ibn Abī al-Sarḥ (27-35 AH / 647-656 AD), constructed an Egyptian fleet. **(Salem; Al-Abadi, 1969: 18)**

Byzantium closely monitored these preparations, and Emperor Constantine II grew increasingly concerned about the expanding Islamic naval capabilities. Mu'āwiyah's objective was not only to conquer Constantinople by sea but also to launch a simultaneous land-based attack. Although Byzantine forces managed to repel an Islamic raid at the walls of Constantinople, their failure to decisively halt the Muslims emboldened Constantine II to confront them directly at sea, hoping to neutralize the growing threat before they could reach his capital. **(O'Sullivan, Jan 2004: 71)**

The Battle of Dhāt al-Ṣawārī was initiated for several reasons, including:

1. Byzantium's efforts to counter the expanding Islamic naval power, which were accelerated by the Muslim conquest of Cyprus. This development rekindled Byzantine naval ambitions, particularly following their failed campaign to recapture Alexandria in 25 AH / 645 AD. **(Lewis, 1960: 91)**
2. Byzantine anxiety over the growing Islamic naval presence, fearing that Mu'āwiyah might make his first significant attempt to attack Constantinople as his fleet passed through Cappadocia. **(Theophanes, 1982: 45)**
3. Byzantium's attempt to reclaim Egypt and avenge previous defeats at the hands of the Muslims in the al-Maghrib. **(Al-Tabari, Vol. 4, 1977: 240)**

When Mu'āwiyah completed his preparations, two Christian brothers, envious of the Muslim successes, broke open a prison door in Tripoli, releasing detained Byzantines. They then murdered the city's governor, destroyed the ships and weaponry, and fled (Ali, Vol. 1, 1925: 142; Bury, Vol. II, 1889: 290). The Byzantines quickly seized this opportunity to advance their

strategy and, after executing their plan, withdrew. This incident led Mu‘āwiyah to reassess his alliances, shifting his reliance from the Byzantines to the Arabs, who were more skilled in shipbuilding. (**Abu Al-Nasr, 1963: 120**)

In 34 AH / 655 AD, the Islamic fleet, under the command of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Sa‘d ibn Abī al-Sarḥ, set sail for Asia Minor, while Mu‘āwiyah led a ground army toward Caesarea in Cappadocia. The fleet anchored at Phonix, near Lycia. (**Brockelmann, Vol. 1, 1947: 150; Lewis, 1960: 91; Bury, Vol. II, 1889: 290**)

Emperor Constans II, determined to safeguard his empire, mobilized his forces to confront a formidable Muslim fleet. Byzantine sources offer conflicting accounts regarding the size of the fleets: some report a Byzantine force of 700 ships, while others claim it reached 1,000. In contrast, most sources indicate that the Islamic fleet comprised approximately 200 vessels. The engagement came to be known as "Dhat al-Sawari" (the Battle of the Masts) due to the dense concentration of ship masts observed during the confrontation (**Al-Kindi, 1908: 13; Ibn Abd Al-Hakam, Vol. 1, 1961: 256**). Foreign sources refer to it as the Battle of Phoenix, named after the location (**Treadgold, 1997: 313-314**). The Muslims, despite being outnumbered, were intimidated by the scale of the Byzantine fleet.

As the battle intensified, casualties mounted on both sides. Constans II, noticing the Muslims' superiority, attempted to sow discord by ordering his troops to board Ibn Abī al-Sarḥ's vessel. They managed to seize it, but just as victory seemed imminent for the Byzantines, fate intervened. ‘Uqaymah ibn Yazīd al-Ghuṭayfi severed the chain linking the ship, preventing the Byzantine forces from capturing Ibn Abī al-Sarḥ (**Ibn Abd Al-Hakam, Vol. 1, 1961: 257; Von Kremer, 1920: 358**). Constans II narrowly avoided capture when Muslim forces seized his ship, escaping only by disguising himself as the son of a drummer and fleeing to Sicily. In doing so, he abandoned his army to inevitable defeat. Despite achieving victory, Ibn Abī al-Sarḥ ultimately withdrew his forces after an extended engagement. (**Ibn Al-Athir, Vol. 3, 1987: 14; Bury, Vol. II, 1889: 290-291; Theophanes, 1982: 45**)

The reasons for the Byzantines' shift from naval conflict to land war remain uncertain. Two possibilities emerge: First, the Muslims successfully employed a military strategy suited to their capabilities in open terrain. Second, despite being in a relatively secure position, the Byzantines were

forced to concede to the Muslims' strategies due to the effectiveness of their tactics. Both scenarios seem valid, as the Byzantine emperor and his army were unable to withstand the Islamic fleet's attack on their territory.

In the broader context of Muslim-Byzantine conflicts, the Battle of Dhāt al-Şawārī stands out as one of the most significant naval engagements, marking a turning point in Mediterranean history (**Ramadan, 1967: 9**). The battle is often compared to the Battle of al-Yarmūk, as it shifted naval dominance from Byzantium to the Muslims, ending Byzantine control over the Mediterranean (**Majid, 1966: 85**). With their land defeat and the loss of naval power, Byzantium was forced to adopt a defensive posture, especially in defense of Constantinople.

The battle's location along the Anatolian coast held strategic importance due to its extensive cedar forests, which were vital for shipbuilding. Following their victory, the Muslims expanded their timber sources beyond Lebanon to bolster their naval capacity, signaling ambitions that extended beyond the capture of Constantinople to achieving broader maritime supremacy. By securing these resources and launching assaults on Constantinople, they aimed to dismantle Byzantine hegemony in the region. The triumph at Dhāt al-Şawārī marked a turning point in Mediterranean history, paving the way for deeper incursions into Byzantine territory and ensuring the security of Islamic coastlines against future threats.

B. The outcomes of the Battle of Dhāt al-Şawārī

The victory at Dhāt al-Şawārī was a turning point that transformed the Eastern Mediterranean and allowed the Islamic expansion to continue unimpeded. The Arabs, once inexperienced in naval warfare, became proficient through successive naval campaigns. The major outcomes of this battle include:

1. **Strengthened Islamic Sovereignty:** The victory reinforced Islamic control over the Mediterranean coasts, particularly protecting them from Byzantine naval assaults (**Ramadan, 1967: 14**)
2. **A Historic Turning Point:** The Battle of Dhāt al-Şawārī is often compared to the Battle of Actium (31 BC) in its significance, marking the transition of the Mediterranean from a Roman-controlled sea to a Muslim-controlled one (**Al-Adawi, 1985: 51**)
3. **Byzantine Disarray:** The defeat shattered Byzantine morale and stability. (**Carlson, 2016: 14**)

4. **A Decade of Stalemate:** The internal crises in both the Islamic and Byzantine empires led to more than ten years of maritime inactivity between the two powers. During this period, Mu'āwiyah focused on internal matters, particularly his dispute over the caliphate, while the Byzantines dealt with unrest in the Balkans and other territories.
5. **Byzantine Naval Revival:** The Byzantines, despite their temporary retreat, used this period of calm to rebuild their naval strength, focusing on fortifying their defenses and securing their positions in the West. (Al-Adawi, 1951: 55; Salem, 1982: 109)
6. **Continued Byzantine Interest in the East:** Despite his attention to the West, Constantine II remained focused on regaining Egypt and the Levant. In 46 AH / 666 AD, after stabilizing his position, he launched a successful campaign to reach Palestine. (Lewis, 1960: 95)
7. **Mu'āwiyah's Ascendancy:** Mu'āwiyah emerged as a dominant figure in the Mediterranean, not only bolstering Muslim control over the region but also strengthening the Levant's northern borders to protect against Byzantine threats. (Al-Adawi, 1953: 99)
8. **Al-Maghrib Conquest:** The vulnerability of the Byzantine navy led to increased Islamic activity in al-Maghrib, supporting the defense against Byzantine advances and ensuring the stability of the Islamic territories.

Thirdly: The significance of the Muslims' acquisition of strategic Byzantine islands in the Eastern Mediterranean

Following their decisive victory at the Battle of Dhāt al-Ṣawārī, the Muslims established a formidable naval presence that forced the Byzantines to retreat defensively into their heartlands. This power shift, however, proved temporary. The Byzantines skillfully exploited the internal conflict (the First Fitna) between Mu'āwiyah and 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (35-40 AH / 656-660 AD), leveraging the Muslim political divisions to their advantage. Consequently, by 38 AH / 659 AD, Mu'āwiyah was compelled to negotiate a truce and agree to pay tribute to the Byzantine Empire. (Theophanes, 1982: 46; Treadgold, 1997: 315)

The Byzantines provided support to the Mardaites in their raids against Islamic territories in the Levant, seeking to destabilize Muslim authority. The Byzantine emperor's decision to endorse this campaign was motivated by the progressive fortification of Islamic coastal defenses. With Mardaites' assistance, Byzantine forces successfully launched a major assault in 46 AH / 666 AD (Al-Adawi, 1953: 110; Ali, Vol. 1, 1925: 149). Mu'āwiyah's (41-60 AH / 661-680 AD) decision to establish a shipyard in Acre, rather than relying

solely on the Egyptian shipyard for ship imports, was a direct response to this aggression. (Salem, 1982: 109; Lewis, 1960: 95)

A. The Conquest of Rhodes and the expedition to Sicily

Mu'āwiyah ibn Abi Sufyan is considered the first Islamic governor to pursue a systematic expansionist strategy in the Mediterranean. His objective was to subdue Byzantine strongholds in the region as a preparatory step for a more ambitious undertaking: the capture of Constantinople and a decisive victory over the Byzantine Empire.

In 32 AH / 652 AD, the Muslims initiated their first attempt to invade Byzantine territory by landing a small fleet on the coast of Sicily. However, they were unable to breach the island's formidable fortifications (Vasiliev, n.d.: 63). This expedition, led by Mu'āwiyah ibn Ḥudayj Al-Kindī and involving only a limited number of ships, was not regarded as significant by contemporary Muslim sources (Al-Baladhuri, 1987: 329). It functioned more as a reconnaissance mission to assess Sicilian defenses, as Muslim strategic attention remained firmly fixed on Constantinople—the political and military center of the Byzantine Empire. (Lewis, 1960: 96)

The Muslim naval threat to Byzantium intensified with the establishment of a shipyard at Acre. Following the assassination of Emperor Constans II in Syracuse in 48 AH / 668 AD, an Islamic fleet of two hundred ships, under the command of 'Abd Allāh ibn Qays, set sail from Alexandria toward the island. (Al-Adawi, 1953: 63)

The Muslims extended their ambitions beyond Sicily, targeting additional islands as a strategic maneuver to advance toward Constantinople. In 47 AH / 667–668 AD, Mu'āwiyah dispatched the governor of Egypt, 'Uqbah ibn 'Āmir al-Juhānī (governed 44–47 AH / 664–667 AD), to subdue the island of Rhodes. However, 'Uqbah's campaign ultimately failed, a circumstance some sources link to Mu'āwiyah's alleged prior intention to appoint Muslimah ibn Mukhlid (as his successor in Egypt) (47–62 AH / 667–682 AD) as the new governor. This led to 'Uqbah's question, "Are we to be exiled and stripped of our positions?" after his dismissal. (Al-Kindi, 1908: 37; Ibn Taghribirdi, Vol. 1, 1963, 127)

Despite this setback, the Muslims resumed their efforts to incorporate Rhodes into their possessions, capturing it in 33 AH / 654 AD under Junādah ibn Umayyah al-Azdī (Al-Adawi, 1953: 91). A Byzantine fleet, led by

Constans, was sent to challenge the Muslim fleet en route to Constantinople but was defeated, forcing Constans to return to his capital to reorganize his defenses (**Cosentino, 2006: 592**). In 52 AH / 672 AD, Junādah recaptured Rhodes, established a camp, and settled a group of Muslims there. Mu'āwiyah provided them with stipends, but upon his death, his son Yazīd (60-64 AH / 680-683 AD) ordered their return. (**Ibn Taghribirdi, vol. 1, 1963: 144**)

B. The occupation of the islands of Arwad (Kyzikos) and Crete

The leadership in Damascus was not satisfied with the conquest of Rhodes alone; they sought to expand further to disrupt the Byzantine navy's operations. The Islamic navy in the eastern Mediterranean was significantly bolstered by the acquisition of Cyprus and Rhodes, which served as bases for launching raids on Byzantine territories. In 54 AH / 674 AD, during the siege of Constantinople, Mu'āwiyah sent his commander Junādah ibn Umayyah al-Azdī to conquer the island of Arwad (Cyzicus), located nearby. He aimed to establish Muslim authority over the island, which would later serve as a vital supply station and a defensive position for the Muslim forces during the winter. The loss of Arwad exposed Byzantium's capital to the besieging Islamic forces.

In 55 AH / 675 AD, Junādah expanded his campaign by invading the island of Crete, an affluent island with numerous ports and a political dependency of the Byzantines. The Byzantines exerted every effort to prevent the island from falling into Muslim hands, as it was considered the second most important strategic location after Sicily. Although Junādah launched an assault, he was unable to capture the island due to its size and fortifications. His main objective, the conquest of Constantinople, would have been greatly facilitated had he succeeded. The Muslims continued to face obstacles on Crete until Caliph Al-Walīd ibn 'Abd al-Malik (86-96 AH / 705-715 AD) was able to conquer a portion of it, which he deemed satisfactory. (**Al-Baladhuri, 1987: 330; Majid, 1966: 88**)

In 51 AH / 671 AD, the Muslims captured Pantelleria, an island located approximately sixty miles from Sicily and forty miles from Tunisia, during the caliphate of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (65-86 AH / 685-705 AD) (**Vasiliev, n.d.: 63**). Archibald Lewis contends that the Muslims' acquisition of these islands was primarily for defensive purposes, as Tarsus and Cyprus protected the Levantine shores, while Crete safeguarded Egypt (**Lewis, 1960: 249**). However, the Muslims' ultimate goal was not purely defensive. They sought to challenge the Byzantine naval power and prevent Byzantium from

extending its influence beyond its capital. By seizing these islands, Mu'āwiyah aimed to thwart any surprise Byzantine attack on the coasts of Syria and Egypt, while depriving Byzantium of its strategic assets in the Mediterranean.

Fourth: The Umayyads' attempts to seize the city of Constantinople

It appears that Mu'āwiyah ibn Abi Sufyan was convinced that he was the individual prophesied by the Prophet Muhammad to conquer Constantinople. Consequently, the idea of capturing the city remained a central focus of his aspirations. Mu'āwiyah worked relentlessly to turn this vision into reality through his political and military efforts, which demonstrated his strategic prowess. He undertook numerous military initiatives, influenced by the tactical conditions of the time. When the moment arrived, the execution of his plan was relatively smooth and required minimal effort.

Had Constantinople fallen to Muslim forces, Byzantine resistance would have collapsed, its territories would have been absorbed into new spheres of influence, and the Muslim conquerors would have reaped immense rewards. The victorious commander would have attained unparalleled prestige—a crowning achievement for any Muslim ruler—while the Byzantine Empire, the Umayyad Caliphate's foremost rival, would have been decisively neutralized. Furthermore, such a conquest would have significantly strengthened the legitimacy of Umayyad rule, which had been contested following the assassination of Caliph 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān (**Humphreys, 2006: 105-106**). After assuming the caliphate, Mu'āwiyah achieved significant successes in Armenia, a region historically under Byzantine influence. By 29 AH / 649–650 CE, all of Emperor Constans II's gains in the Caucasus had been reversed, as regions such as Albania and Media submitted to Mu'āwiyah's authority. (**Kobayashi, 2015: 149**)

A. Attempts to occupy Constantinople during the reign of Mu'āwiyah ibn Abi Sufyan

Mu'āwiyah launched two unsuccessful attempts to conquer Constantinople, largely due to the inadequacy of his military and logistical resources against the city's formidable defenses. The Muslim military strategy during this period was shaped by two key factors. First, Mu'āwiyah had to undertake a comprehensive reconstruction of the fleet in the 660s CE, following its severe damage in a storm in 33 AH / 653–654 CE and its subsequent losses at the Battle of Dhāt al-Ṣawārī (**Hoyland, 2011: 141**). Internal strife prevented the

Muslims from maintaining their naval fleet, and after Mu‘āwiyah’s victory over Caliph ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib, he was forced to rebuild it (**Howard-Johnston**, 2010: 489). During the lengthy rebuilding process, the Muslims attacked and destroyed many cities, fortresses, and rural areas in western Asia Minor, capturing numerous inhabitants. The Slavs, relocated by Constantine II from the Balkans to Asia Minor, established themselves in the Apamea region. The western regions of Asia Minor were of significant economic value to Byzantium. (**Hoyland**, 2011: 152-153)

1. The First Attempt (49-50 AH / 669-670 AD)

Mu‘āwiyah began preparations for confronting the growing Byzantine threat only after stabilizing his rule and eliminating his opponents. In 50 AH / 670 AD, he sent one of his commanders, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Qays, on a naval mission (**Salem; Al-Abadi**, 1981: 23). Prior attempts included Busr ibn Arṭā’ah’s 43 AH / 663 AD conquest and Mālik ibn Ḥubayrah’s and ‘Uqbah ibn ‘Āmir al-Juhānī’s conquests in 48 AH / 668 AD (**Al-Ya’qubi**, vol. 2, 1995: 239-240; **Ibn Khaldun**, vol. 3, 2000: 11). In 47 AH / 667 AD, a rebel in Armenia (Saborius) invited the Muslims to enter the region. However, by the time the Muslim forces arrived near Melitene, the Byzantine Emperor had already suppressed the rebellion. Despite this, the Muslims continued their advance, reaching as far as Chalcedon. The opportunity for Mu‘āwiyah to execute his strategic plan arose following the assassination of Constans II in Sicily in 48 AH / 668 AD. The imperial throne passed to his young son, Constantine IV, creating a moment of vulnerability in the Byzantine Empire. (**Brockelmann**, Vol. 1, 1948: 151; **Kobayashi**, 2015: 149)

In 49 AH / 669 AD, Mu‘āwiyah sent Fudālah ibn ‘Ubayd al-Anṣārī to lead an army against Constantinople. Mu‘āwiyah also provided his son, Yazīd , with a land force (**Al-Ya’qubi**, Vol. 2, 1995: 240; **Al-Adawi**, 1953: 155). Historian Marek Jankowiak confirms that a siege took place, likely between 47-49 AH / 667-669 AD, with the most intense attack occurring in the spring of 48 AH / 668 AD (**Jankowiak**, 2013: 237-320). The campaign was framed as a Jihād, with several companions accompanying Yazīd’s army (**Abu Al-Fida**, Vol. 1, n.d.: 186; **Hassan**, Vol. 1, 1996: 229). Once the preparations were complete, Yazīd’s forces crossed the Bosphorus from Chalcedon to the European side and began battering Constantinople’s walls. The siege was arduous, with many Muslim casualties, including the companion ‘Abū ‘Ayyūb ‘al-Anṣārī, who was buried near the city wall. The Muslims struggled to breach the city's defenses and eventually withdrew, gaining valuable experience in siege warfare.

In 51 AH / 671 AD, during Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān’s reign, the Muslims captured Pantelleria, a key island in the Mediterranean (**Vasiliev, n.d.: 63**). The Muslims' acquisition of islands like Tarsus, Cyprus, and Crete was part of a defensive strategy to hinder Byzantine naval power (**Lewis, 1960: 249**), as well as to prevent Byzantium from extending its reach and launching unexpected attacks on the Muslim coasts. (**Treadgold, 1997: 325**)

2. The second campaign (54-60 AH / 673-679 AD)

In 54 AH / 673 AD, Mu‘āwiyah launched a second land campaign against Constantinople, led by ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Khālid, supported by a naval fleet. The forces made initial advances, capturing cities like Izmir and Rhodes, and coordinating well between the land and naval units. The fleet, which successfully crossed the Dardanelles Strait, captured Arwad, a strategic island close to Constantinople. This island became their base for launching further attacks, encircling the city, and tightening the siege. However, winter conditions forced a temporary suspension of the siege.

Skirmishes between the two sides continued throughout the siege, with the Muslims imposing significant pressure. However, natural factors, including the winter weather and the Byzantine use of chemical weapons like Greek fire, significantly hampered the Muslim forces (**Salem; Al-Abadi, 1981: 33**).

Several factors prevented the Muslims from achieving their objective in these severely cold and frost-prone regions, which can be summarized as follows:

- 1. The city was fully stocked with supplies and provisions.** Emperor Constantine IV replenished its storerooms with all necessary provisions and equipment, enabling it to withstand any land or naval attack. Supplies continued to arrive from neighboring regions (**Al-Adwi, 1951: 56; Lewis, 1960: 96**).
- 2. The city walls were repaired and restored shortly before the Muslim offensive began (Al-Adwi, 1953: 165).** The emperor undertook these repairs as a precautionary measure, recognizing the danger of leaving the walls vulnerable.
- 3. Greek fire was the primary factor that dismantled the Muslim forces** at the city's walls. This weapon posed a major obstacle to the Muslim armies, who besieged the city multiple times. The Muslims had never encountered such a weapon until this campaign, leading them to disperse toward the Aegean Sea. The name derives from its use against

- ships at sea and soldiers on land. The Muslims were unable to extinguish it with water, as water only intensified its flames (**Al-Adwi, 1951: 58; Lewis, 1960: 97**).
4. **The Muslims' inability to cross the Black Sea** prevented them from imposing an additional blockade to complement the one in the Sea of Marmara.
 5. **Natural factors significantly reduced the effectiveness of the siege.** The blockade was lifted during winter, allowing the city to easily replenish supplies and prepare for the next phase of the siege.
 6. **Mu'āwiyah , sensing his impending death**, summoned his heir-apparent, Yazīd, who was participating in the siege, to return to Syria (**Al-Adwi, 1953: 166**). The situation required the presence of the heir in the capital to manage state affairs.

This siege is considered one of the longest in Constantinople's history, lasting seven years. Yet, Byzantium managed to resist, saving Europe (**Ludwig, 1952: 422**) from the Islamic advance, which, had it succeeded, would have altered the world's landscape. Thus, while Greek fire was not the sole reason for the Muslims' failure to breach Constantinople's walls—though its demoralizing impact on the besieging troops cannot be overlooked—it played a significant role. Scholars John Pryor and Elizabeth Jeffreys note that Greek fire had limitations: it could only be deployed when winds were favorable and the sea was calm; otherwise, users risked setting their own or allied ships ablaze (**Pryor & Jeffreys, 2006: 621**). This weapon functionally resembled modern napalm, designed to incinerate enemy personnel and disrupt formations. Nevertheless, other critical factors contributed to the outcome. The Muslim leadership failed to adapt and overcome persistent challenges throughout the prolonged siege. In essence, they did not learn from their mistakes, which ultimately led to the campaign's failure. Furthermore, the strategies and means Mu'āwiyah employed to capture the city proved inadequate, falling short of the full resources at his disposal.

As the nerve center of Byzantium, the fall of Constantinople would have destabilized the remaining provinces, rendering them easy prey for the Muslims. Simultaneously, the failure of the Muslim assault on Constantinople was a critical event, marking the culmination of Mu'āwiyah 's campaign of attrition that began in 41 AH / 661 AD. This campaign involved the investment of vast resources, including the creation of a massive fleet. Its failure had significant repercussions, dealing a severe blow Mu'āwiyah 's prestige.

Why was Constantinople specifically the primary target of a seasoned politician like Mu'āwiyah? Did he genuinely intend to capture it outright? In reality, this goal could only be achieved using ships, especially after the internal strife Muslims faced following the assassination of Caliph Uthman. Thus, Mu'āwiyah opted for a less costly strategy, attempting to capture the city through what is known as a war of attrition. Devastating raids were launched against Anatolia in both summer and winter, crippling its economy and weakening Byzantine defenses. At the same time, the Egyptian and Syrian fleets swept across the northern Mediterranean and raided the Aegean Sea. These raids continued for a decade, peaking in 53 AH / 673 AD when the Islamic fleet captured several strategic islands in the eastern Mediterranean Basin, such as Rhodes and Crete, which were essential for blockading Constantinople (Carlson, 2016: 16–17).

Mu'āwiyah was fully aware that capturing a geostrategic city like Constantinople, with its unique defensive advantages, defied conventional military logic. Therefore, he relied on a tactic based on a strategy aimed at dispersing Byzantine forces, both on land and at sea, to exhaust them and apply what is militarily known as a pincer movement, poised to close in on the Byzantine capital.

B. Efforts to annex Constantinople during the reign of Suleiman ibn Abdul-Malik (96-99 AH / 715-717 AD)

Mu'āwiyah failed to achieve the dream he had hoped for, and his son Yazīd did not attempt any significant naval actions against Byzantium afterward. This allowed Byzantium to benefit from Yazīd's naval inactivity and reemerge in the eastern Mediterranean Basin. In fact, Byzantium forced him to withdraw the Islamic garrison from Cyprus after thirty years of Islamic control (Lewis, 1960: 97). Later, Byzantium exploited the internal Umayyad conflicts that emerged after Yazīd's death and his son Mu'āwiyah II's abdication of power, as well as the turmoil that plagued the Umayyad Caliphate until the Marwanid branch managed to seize power and restore rule to the broader Umayyad house. During the period when the caliphs who succeeded Yazīd were preoccupied with quelling revolts and unrest, the Byzantines took advantage of the situation. Constantine IV launched attacks on Syria, carried out by the Mardaites/Jarajima in northern Syria, who persistently caused trouble for the Muslims until Caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān finally eliminated them (Al-Adwi, 1951: 58). Subsequently, preparations began for major conquest campaigns in Asia and the al-Maghrib, which were primarily

organized under Caliph al-Walīd ibn ʿAbd al-Malik, leading from one conquest to another.

When Islamic expansion reached a phase of significant territorial growth, al-Walīd began preparing to invade the Byzantines, whose power had become increasingly formidable. This endeavor required him to attempt to storm Constantinople for the third time, following earlier attempts by Caliph Muʿāwiyah. His first steps involved strengthening the Islamic fleet, coordinating cooperation between naval and land forces, and creating favorable conditions for military operations against Byzantium. He then proceeded with conquests deep into Anatolia, continuing what his father ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān had started, aiming to capture Byzantine strongholds on the route to Constantinople. Al-Walīd was not content with these conquests alone; he prepared for a major attack while Emperor Justinian II was aware of the chaos prevailing in the Anatolian provinces and their lack of competent leaders. In contrast, the Muslims possessed a series of strong commanders. It appears that Justinian lacked wisdom when he breached the truce signed with the Muslims (**Salem; Al-Abadi, 1981: 34; Al-Adwi, 1953: 181–182**).

Al-Walīd exploited these difficulties faced by his enemies to achieve his goals, but he died before launching the siege of Constantinople in 96 AH / 714 AD. He was succeeded by his brother Sulaymān, who adopted his unfulfilled project. Sulaymān began preparations for invading the city and undertook preliminary attempts to secure the conventional land route for Islamic armies by sending ʿUmar ibn Ḥubayrah on a naval expedition against the Byzantines in 97 AH / 715 AD. Then, news reached Sulaymān that the Byzantines had attacked the coast of Homs, capturing a woman and several inhabitants. Sulaymān resolved to either capture Constantinople or die in the attempt, and this attack reinforced his determination to invade their territory. He sent his son Dāwūd on a summer campaign, resulting in the conquest of the "Women's Fortress" in the same year (**Ibn Al-Athir, Vol. 4, 1987: 303; Ibn Khaldun, Vol. 3, 2000: 71**).

Sulaymān established a large military camp at Marj Dabiq in northern Syria to serve as the headquarters for managing military operations against Constantinople. Meanwhile, the Islamic armies, led by his brother Muslamah, set out in 98 AH / 717 AD. They were accompanied by forces from Syria, al-Jazīrah, and Mosul, totaling around 120,000 troops, while the fleets from Egypt and the al-Maghrib sailed with a navy comprising 1,000 ships. Archibald Lewis notes that the number of Islamic ships reached 1,800 (**Lewis, 1960: 104**). The Islamic expedition headed toward the Byzantine capital,

capitalizing on the turmoil within the empire and the dispute over the throne following the death of Emperor Justinian II. Sulaymān instructed Muslamah to remain at Constantinople until he could conquer it. During his advance, Muslamah managed to win over a Byzantine commander named Leo, who originated from the Isaurian region, earning him the name Leo the Isaurian. Leo was aware of the Muslims' ambition to reach the capital and convinced them to let him accompany them; while secretly plotting a plan, he disclosed to no one. He opposed the rule of the new Emperor Theodosius III (**Al-Adwi, 1953: 182–183, 186–187**) and aspired to become emperor himself. Thus, Muslamah and Leo marched together toward Constantinople, each harboring contradictory goals.

Sixteen days after Muslamah arrived at the city walls, a large Islamic fleet entered the waters of the Bosphorus in 98 AH / 717 AD. They organized their land and naval forces to achieve cooperation and complete the encirclement of the capital (**Al-Adwi, 1953: 189**). This fleet began its operations by capturing islands in the Aegean Sea and the Dardanelles Strait, positioning both the army and the fleet at the Golden Horn (**Lewis, 1960: 104**). At this point, Byzantium realized the danger surrounding them from all sides, prompting the Byzantines to offer Muslamah a payment of one dinar per head, but he refused this offer (**Ibn Al-Athir, Vol. 4, 1987: 304**).

Muslamah continued the siege of Constantinople by land and sea, blocking the passages and waterways on which the city relied for supplies and provisions. Meanwhile, Leo seized power and became the Byzantine emperor under the name Leo III, reneging on his promise to assist the Muslims in entering the city (**Al-Adwi, 1953: 189; Ibn Al-Athir, Vol. 4, 1987: 304; Bury, Vol. II, 1889: 383**). The Muslims took a decisive strategic step by cutting off maritime communications between Constantinople and the Black Sea to the north, and between the city and the Sea of Marmara and the Aegean Sea to the south. They successfully closed the southern entrance but failed to block the northern entrance. Access to the southern route was easier for them to control, while reaching the Black Sea was nearly impossible for two reasons: first, the strong water current flowing from the Black Sea through the Bosphorus into the Sea of Marmara; and second, Constantinople's openness to the Black Sea and its reliance on it for supplies, meaning any Muslim attempt to reach this sea would inevitably confront the Byzantine forces stationed there (**Al-Adwi, 1951: 60; Ramadan, 1967: 17; Pryor, 1988: 13**).

As the Muslims advanced toward the Black Sea, their fleet encountered a severe storm that destroyed a significant number of ships, disrupting their

progress. The Byzantines seized this opportunity and launched Greek fire at the Muslim ships, burning many of them while the siege of the city continued. During the siege of Constantinople, the Muslims used petroleum and a form of artillery in their siege operations (**Al-Adwi, 1953: 190; Bury, Vol. II, 1889, p. 402; Christides, 2002: 88**).

The Muslims' siege strategy changed after Leo negotiated with the Bulgars, who had a deep-seated enmity with Byzantium due to ongoing raids on Byzantine territories. This agreement led to a Bulgar attack on the besieging Muslims from the European side, forcing them to retreat from the capital (**Lewis, 1960: 104**). Following Sulaymān's death and the succession of 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz (99-101 AH / 717-720 AD) to the caliphate, the situation deteriorated, and the campaign began to suffer from a lack of support. The new caliph sent a commander named 'Umar ibn Qays on a summer campaign, providing him with clothing, food, and payments for the Muslims with Muslamah, and ordering him to lift the siege of Constantinople and return to Syria (**Al-Ya'qubi, Vol. 2, 1995: 302; Shalabi, Vol. 2, 1984: 119**). Another secondary reason for the campaign's failure was the defection of Christian sailors working within the Islamic fleet to the Byzantines (**Lewis, 1960: 104; Theophanes, 1982: 89**), which tipped the balance in favor of the Byzantines over the Muslims, in addition to the Greek fire that burned the majority of the Islamic ships.

It can be said that between 28–98 AH / 648–717 AD, the Byzantines and Muslims engaged in a conflict using opposing strategies. Due to the lack of professionalism and skill in naval maneuvers on both sides, this initial phase of the conflict ended in a stalemate.

Conclusion:

Upon concluding the investigation, several noteworthy discoveries can be highlighted, including:

1. **Mu'āwiyah ibn 'Abī Sufyān's Strategic Naval Initiative:** Mu'āwiyah ibn 'Abī Sufyān succeeded in realizing his aspirations by establishing a powerful Islamic naval force, referred to as a naval arsenal. This force aimed to weaken Byzantine influence on the Islamic coasts and seize their islands, which served as vital supply stations for Byzantine fleets. Beyond fulfilling his personal ambitions, Mu'āwiyah's initiative marked the beginning of a new phase of

- modernization for the Arabs, transitioning them from a nomadic existence to direct naval confrontations with their adversaries.
2. **The Fleet's Strategic Objectives:** The fleet's initial goal was not to conquer the island of Cyprus. Its primary mission during the early phase was to defend the Islamic coasts, preparing to repel any potential attacks. In the later phase, the fleet would be employed to launch attacks on Byzantine territories, beginning with Cyprus, which served as a key strategic center and monitoring point for Byzantine surveillance of Muslim movements.
 3. **The Battle of Dhāt al-Şawārī 's Significance:** The Battle of Dhāt al-Şawārī is seen as a turning point, signaling the maturity of the Islamic fleet and the decline of the Byzantine fleet. This victory eliminated the fear that had previously prevented the Arab Muslims from sailing in the Mediterranean.
 4. **Muslim Motivation Post-Battle of Dhāt al-Şawārī :** The Islamic victory at the Battle of Dhāt al-Şawārī galvanized Muslims to persist in their efforts to surprise the Byzantine Empire in the eastern Mediterranean basin. Their goal was to acquire Byzantine strategic islands that were obstructing their path to Constantinople.
 5. Mu'āwiyah's aspirations to conquer Constantinople were dashed when he passed **Mu'āwiyah's Unfulfilled Ambition:** Mu'āwiyah's aspirations to conquer Constantinople were ultimately unfulfilled, as he passed away before achieving this goal. The city of Constantinople continued to resist subsequent Islamic campaigns.
 6. **The Decline of the Umayyad Caliphate:** The Umayyad Caliphate entered a period of decline after Caliph Suleiman ibn Abdul-Malik failed to breach the city of Constantinople. During this time, Byzantium temporarily regained its naval power, which it had lost to the Muslims.

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