

## Sultan Muhammad al-Fatih: Ottoman's Great Strategic Planner

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**Abstract:** This study discusses the war strategies of Sultan Muhammad al-Fatih throughout his rule from the year 1451 until 1481. Al-Fatih was an Ottoman leadership figure who was characterized as wise, of great fame and a leader to be reckoned with. His figure, leadership and wisdom can be seen in his successful war strategies against enemies in each and every military expedition. The objective of this article is to analyze war strategic planning undertaken by Sultan Muhammad al-Fatih in a series of wars and the opening of territories which led to Ottoman's victories and success. This study employed a qualitative method via historical research and content analyzes of primary and secondary sources in the studies of the Ottomans. This study argues that Sultan Muhammad al-Fatih's war strategies were formulated at two stages, namely war strategies formulated before the war and war strategies sketched while the war was on-going. The former was the 'grand strategy' involving political, economic and military manouvres while the latter were planned during war cabinet meetings in the battlefields.

**Key words:** Muhammad al-Fatih • War Strategy • Ottoman Military History • 15<sup>th</sup> Century AD

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### INTRODUCTION

Strategy is an important element in ensuring a successful outcome of any activity. Failure to achieve a goal or an objective is normally attributed to the absence of an accurate and systematic strategic planning. For instance, if one is to achieve excellence in a specific field, any activity towards achieving excellence must be executed according to a detailed and wise planning which include any contingency plans should the activity fail. The same goes without saying in any war. War strategy is among the important factors which influence the victory of any war beside other factors such as logistics, military hardwares and the strength of the army. Without a precise strategy, war defeat is almost guaranteed. This shows that strategic planning is most crucial in facing any war or battle.

When discussing the aspects of war strategies, the name Sultan Muhammad al-Fatih (from this point onward will be referred as al-Fatih, or more famously known in the West as Mehmed II) is not unfamiliar to the tactical and technical aspects of a war. This is so as al-Fatih was the only Sultan cum army chief who managed to defeat Constantine IX, penetrating the defence line of the Crusaders and conquering Constantinople, a feat which neither previous Sultans nor Islamic army general had been able to achieve. Raby [1] highlighted that al-Fatih laid down the foundations for Istanbul's demographic, topographic and architectural future including establishing Istanbul's military sites. Murphey [2] affirmed that al-Fatih "...was after all a very successful commander and clearly took pride in his achievements in the military sphere and it is this pride in his record of military success that provides the clue to how we should

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interpret the pattern and underlying purpose of his various military undertakings". While Ali [3] also reaffirmed the above statement, proposing that studies should be carried out to uncover the secrets of and discover the factors contributing to al-Fatih's success in conquering Constantinople and opening certain European regions. Therefore, the following will discuss and analyze war strategies adopted by al-Fatih in his series of military expeditions.

The objective of this article is to analyze the outlay of al-Fatih's war strategies in wars and opening of territories which led to the triumph and success of the Ottoman Caliphate.

**War Strategy:** Rahman [4] stated that the word 'strategy' as defined in military context is "...the practical utilisation of all available resources of a country in achieving its objective or objectives by military means". Meanwhile, Clausewitz [5] defined strategy as "...the use of an engagement for the purpose of the war". Sun Tzu [6] on the other hand defined strategy as "the art of making war upon a map". Based on those definitions, Dolman [7] concluded that strategy is "a plan for continuing advantage". Therefore, strategy means a planning effort done before any war by utilizing all available resources for the purpose of the war in continuing the advantage in the war.

In the series of wars which occurred in the era of al-Fatih's rule, there exists a certain pattern which is recognizable in his arrangement of war strategies. Even though the wars occurred in different situation, the arrangement of his war strategies follow a similar pattern. Based on analyzes of the wars, the war strategies which were formulated and executed can be divided into two stages, which are the pre-war strategies and those while the war was on-going. The formulation and execution of war strategies which were found in the wars led by al-Fatih were not only premeditated before the war happened, but also continued and perfected while the war was happening in tandem with cabinet ministers' opinions.

**Pre-War Strategies:** The pattern of pre-war strategies adopted by al-Fatih is of the type 'grand strategy'. According to Dolman [7], 'grand strategy' is "the process by which all the means available to the state are considered in pursuit of a continuing political influence". According to him also, a 'grand strategy' involves planning in terms of diplomacy, information, military and economic power. Based on analyzes done onto wars during al-Fatih's rule, it was found that the pre-war strategies were planned and executed in the spheres of politics, economy and military. It can be summarized that

al-Fatih's pre-war strategies were of the 'grand strategy' type, involving all aspects of politics, economy and the military as can be seen in the following sections.

**Politics:** The Ottoman Caliphate territories lay partially in Asia and the rest in Europe. The geographical position of the Ottoman Empire which was surrounded by Christian kingdoms made it exposed to threats of the Crusader armies which persistently looked for opportunities to attack and destroy the Islamic army. As soon as al-Fatih rose to the throne of the Islamic Caliphate in the year 1451, he inherited his father's enemies who ruled in the nearby kingdoms [8]. In order to deter his enemies from uniting and went against him, al-Fatih employed a political strategy onto the neighbouring states which were feared to be able to disturb his war affairs.

The political strategy being mentioned is sealing a diplomatic or peace treaties with several states which could potentially disrupt the war efforts by lending assistance to another enemy state. This was proven in the peace treaties signed between the Caliphate and a state or several states before the war occurred. For example, before he attacked Constantinople, he signed peace agreements with three states; namely Serbia, Bulgaria and Hungary. In addition to this, on his way to taking over Trebizond, he managed to seal another peace treaty, this time with Uzun Hasan who was represented by his mother, Sara Hatun. Stipulated in these treaties are the duties of the states to uphold ceasefire with the Ottomans and not to meddle into any war affairs that the Ottomans have with any other states [9, 10].

**Economy:** War does not only involve time and efforts but also requires a high cost in expenditure. This is because the cost of preparing war machineries such as armament, protection equipment and military transportation is high. Besides, war activities also incur huge expenses as the army personnels need to be remunerated monetarily as a reward for their duties. Hence, a country needs to prepare itself economically to face a war.

In order to increase the state revenue to cover the war expenses, al-Fatih took actions to create and accumulate a special fund before the war was waged. Among the actions taken were to increase the already existing taxes and impose new taxes. For instance, as soon as the Rumeli Hisar Fort was built, he directed his army to patrol the fort and collect taxes from ships which came close to its vicinity. In addition to that, he also increased the *ufti* (protection money) from states which were under Ottoman's protection. As a result, al-Fatih succeeded in increasing the state treasury in preparation for any war.

Beside those, al-Fatih also introduced economic policies which were meant to take control of certain products in the trading sector. The method to implement this was to rule that any individual was prevented from controlling the trade of essentials such as salt, soaps and candles. Meaning, individual freedom to control or monopolise certain products was abolished and replaced with the state control/nationalisation of the products. The products were then sold to individual traders at a high price. This measure by the Ottoman government has indirectly reduced the personal incomes of those involved in the specific trade, but it successfully enlarge the state treasury and increase its liquidity in the form of cash [11].

Ali [3] opined that such measures in carrying out the economic policies were effective methods in increasing the state revenue. The revenue in turn could be used to support and sustain the expenditures of the state which was ever involved in wars. In order to realize the economic policy, al-Fatih enacted laws which punish those who broke such trade rules [12].

**Military:** The military plays an important role in any war. Without it, any war strategy would be futile and this would prevent from achieving the war objective which was essentially a victory. Among the objectives of a war is to destroy the enemy's strength and this could be achieved by having a huge number of the army. Hence, in all of his military expeditions, al-Fatih would accumulate a huge army. This can be seen in the amount of army he could summon before the start of any war during his rule [7].

As an evidence, in the opening of Constantinople (1453), al-Fatih rounded up armies from all over the regions under his rule and positioned them in Thrace. The accumulated army amounted to 100,000. In the Ottoman-Hungary War (1456), he rounded up 150,000 standing army who put a blockade on Belgrade. Meanwhile, in the conquest of Trebizond (1461), al-Fatih succeeded in bringing 200,000 military personnels even though in that war there was virtually no bloodshed [9, 13].

The accumulated army of al-Fatih consisted of foot soldiers and cavalymen. According to Agoston [14], al-Fatih not only managed to summon foot soldiers and cavalymen, but he also brought in an army of archers, gunners, 'armorers', 'gun-carriage drivers' and 'bombardiers'. Agoston [14] added that these armies became an important part of the Ottoman military during the era of al-Fatih's rule. This showed an increase in capability and the existence of militaric transformation in the Ottoman military might.

Besides calling up a huge land army, al-Fatih also formed a formidable naval armada. For example, there were 145 warships of different class-type to block the enemy ships movement in the Conquest of Constantinople (1453). In the Siege of Belgrade (1456), an armada of 200 ships equipped with weapons, shields and crewmen was used. In the conquest of Trebizond (1461), al-Fatih readied 300 warships in the Black Sea heading to Trebizond [9, 14].

It has been well known that the Ottoman seapower lasted for centuries even in the Indian Ocean [15]. The era of naval military might of the Ottoman started as a result of the growth in the ship-building industry. Under al-Fatih's commands, the ship-building industry of the Ottomans underwent a transformation whereby the access to Mediterranean ship-building technology using 'oared galley' was gained. According to Agoston [14], during the following Ottoman leaders' rule, the Ottoman navy was not only used for the purpose of war, but also used to patrol maritime trade routes. The fact of the matter is that al-Fatih always readied a huge size of the army before the war was waged. This is among the strategies he took to avoid personnel shortage during war which could lead to a defeat in a battle. Besides, this strategy was mentioned as one of the war principles by Dolman [7], which is "use great effort (utmost energy) in war to make the result unambiguous and to sustain/gain public support".

To ensure victory, al-Fatih equipped his army with the latest warfare. For example, in the Conquest of Constantinople, a new artillery technology which had not been owned by any other country was bought from a Hungarian engineer. The technology was giant cannons which were capable of tearing down the wall of the fortresses surrounding Constantinople [16]. In the war of Belgrade, meanwhile, al-Fatih decided to use mortars which was capable of shooting huge boulders of rock to demolish the fortress of Belgrade. Al-Fatih had always a keen interest in and took great consideration for the latest technology in weaponry. He was always either in possession of or receiving information on the up-to-date armaments and was more than willing to ready them for his army's use [13, 17].

As a preparation for war, al-Fatih also ordered the building of fortresses close to the region about to be attacked. The function of this is clear: to station the army and at the same time provide for logistical sites for uninterrupted war supplies. Among the fortresses which were built under al-Fatih's orders were the 'Rumeli Hisar'

Fortress at the forefront of Constantinople, Fort 'Kale Sultanieh' and Fort 'Kilitbahir' both of which were built at the entry of Dardanell waters between the Aegean dan Marmara Seas. The fort of 'Rumeli Hisar' was built in preparation of the Conquest of Constantinople, while the forts of 'Kale Sultanieh' and 'Kilitbahir' were built as a barricade to the attacks from the Crusaders in the War of Venice (1463) [10].

Al-Fatih did not stop at preparing the army physically only. He also prepared his army mentally and psychologically. In one instance before the Conquest of Constantinople, al-Fatih disguised as one of the soldiers to enter the army tents and gave speech to them with words of courage, high spirits and motivation in order to boost the morale of the soldiers.

The preparation of the army which al-Fatih included not only physical and emotional preparation, but also the tactical strategy. As coined by Sun Tzu [6] in his definition of 'strategy', which is "the art of making war upon a map", al-Fatih sketched his strategies on maps with great care. This fact is based on statements by Ottoman scholars in which it was said that, in planning war tactics, al-Fatih usually took several days to complete his plan. This statement was also supported by Babinger [10] who emphasised that al-Fatih stayed up all night to analyze each and every one of his war tactics to allow zero-tolerance on mistakes and weaknesses in his planning of war strategies.

To strengthen his own war tactics, al-Fatih learnt and analyzed previous war histories to look into the tactical strategies adopted by previous army generals. This is obvious in his way of handling the Constantinople Conquest. Since Constantinople was famed with its fortresses which had repeatedly successfully defended itself from the attacks by previous Sultans and Islamic rulers, al-Fatih studied in detail all aspects of the wars including the weakness in the war tactics previously employed and used them to perfect his own war tactics.

Apart from studying previous war tactics through reading and analyzes, al-Fatih also sent reconnaissance and spy missions to gain information and real situation of the enemy's fortress. This actions were taken to establish the facts on the ground as well as getting the information about the actual position and condition of the enemy behind the fortress' walls. The latest information were then used in drawing up new tactics and strategies which previous army chiefs were not able to come up with.

This new strategy in question was the strategy of attacking Constantinople from two fronts. One front was the attack from the land while another was from the sea. This idea emerged as a result of contemplating the failure of previous attempts to capture Constantinople. All of the attempts involved one attack from one front only; namely an attacks from the land. These attacks virtually had no adverse effects to the states within the Byzantine kingdom as all the states used sea routes for trades and war supplies. Therefore, war aids and assistance were channeled to the Christian states via the sea routes. To tackle this issue, al-Fatih positioned his foot and cavalry soldiers on the land, while his navalmen were stationed at the entrance of the sea ways to barricade the ships carrying aids and war supplies to the Christians from harboring at the ports.

Moreover, al-Fatih chose to use the longest and the hardest route to the enemy territory. This is evident in the Conquest of Trebizond. He and his army left for Sinop and then took the route to Erzurum as if they were heading for Uzun Hasan's place and not to attack Trebizond. However, as soon as a peace treaty was signed with the Akkonyulu territory, he headed for Trebizond.

The same strategy was applied in the war in Bosnia. To cloud the enemy's vision, al-Fatih used the longest and most difficult route to reach Bosnia so as not to alert the Bosnians that they were about to be attacked. The route was heading to Skoplje, crossing the Sitnica River and then to Mitovica. From there, he proceeded to the north of Bosnia. When al-Fatih arrived in Drina, the famous army commander Tvrtko Kovacevic and his army was not ready for a war situation. The commander then had to surrender without a fight and this shows that the strategy planned and taken by al-Fatih was successful.

In conclusion, the pre-war strategies adopted by al-Fatih were of 'grand strategy' encompassing the strategic planning in politics, economy and the military. As an additional information, 'grand strategy' is a strategy of the highest level which can only be formulated by the ruler of the state. Al-Fatih, as both Head of the State and Army Chief, was rightful and had executed this capably [18].

**Strategies During War:** The purpose of planning is to make decisions and planning is strategy. At the battlefields, the situation can be different from what has been planned. As stated by Dolman [7], "decision is the act of making meaningful choices where uncertainty

exist”, thus several decisions need to be made at the battlefields to complete the existing war strategies. A change in the situation on the ground would require a change in the war tactics and strategies while the war was ongoing. Realizing this, al-Fatih was ever aware of the needs to adapt to changing situation. Among the important decisions he made demonstrating this was when his naval armada failed to get close to the forts of Constantinople. In the strategy planned by al-Fatih, his navy ought to be able to get to the Golden Horn waters as it was the key to launching an assault on the walls of Constantinople.

As seen in the Conquest of Constantinople, al-Fatih decided to use land route to move the warships from Bosphorus to the Golden Horn, a bold decision which was extraordinary, unconventional and unthinkable at that time. The decision, however, led to his triumphant opening of Constantinople.

The situation was different in the case of the Siege of Belgrade (1456). In that war, when there was confusion when al-Fatih’s soldiers fell into the trap set by Hunyadi, his army had to retreat from the frontline until the Sultan’s tent was reached. In this case, al-Fatih made a grave error by deciding to proceed with the war which consequently led to his own injury as mentioned by Kemal Pasha and quoted by Inalcik [19]. Such decision was made in anger without rational deliberation which in the end resulted in al-Fatih admission of defeat in humiliation as portrayed by Babinger [10].

Based on both situations, it can be understood that decisions made on the battlefield must be based on rational thinking and made with a clear thought and a peaceful mind to avoid making wrongful decisions. This is entirely different from pre-war strategies which allow lengthy time to think, plan and improve the war strategies. Strategies planned during war are made in a crucial time. If an emotional influence exists, the decisions made were clouded by such influence which may bring about an adverse impact in the war [18]. In general, al-Fatih took a holistic strategy by the consolidation of political stability, the expansion of territorial control specifically over the surrounding region of Istanbul and the *jihad* expedition into the targeted strategic position, similar to the strategy taken by previous Muslim powers including the Abbasids in Baghdad, the Nasrids in al-Andalus and the Marinids in al-Maghrib [20-24].

## CONCLUSION

In this discourse, it is clear that Sultan Muhammad al-Fatih was indeed a great Ottoman war strategist. This is because, in planning his war strategies. Al-Fatih took

great care of winning and used a two-stage strategy planning. The first stage is pre-war strategies and the later stage is the during-the-war strategies. The pre-war strategies were planned way before the war actually occurred involving the world of politics, economy and military. According to Dolman [7], al-Fatih’s pre-war strategies can be classified as “grand strategy” as it is “the process by which all the means available to the state are considered in pursuit of a continuing political influence”. Among the examples of al-Fatih’s ‘grand strategy’ implemented by al-Fatih before the war commenced are: (1) establishing diplomatic relations and signing peace treaties with the enemy’s neighbouring states; (2) accumulating war funds via tax collection and strengthening the Ottoman army by upgrading and equipping the army with the latest warfare technology; (3) amassing a huge army; and (4) testing the effectiveness of the impending war tactics by comparing them with previous army chiefs’ tactics.

In the real war situation, there is probability that the formulated war tactics and strategies may not applied according to plan. Therefore, contingency plans must be readied and executed. These ad-hoc contingency plans were evident in the second stage of al-Fatih’s war strategy planning. The planning of such strategies was made with his cabinet ministers while the war was on-going, after it appeared that the pre-war strategies could not be achieved or were no longer suitable. This is evident in the events leading up to the Conquest of Constantinople (1453) whereby al-Fatih’s navy could not enter the Golden Horn waters. Constructing a contingency plan in support of the planned pre-war strategies ensured al-Fatih’s victory in many of his battles. Hence, without a doubt, al-Fatih was indeed a great war strategist of the Ottomans. However, further studies need to be done to analyze the factors which influenced the effectiveness of al-Fatih’s war tactics and strategies. This should be done in order to analyze the defeat suffered by al-Fatih in his Siege of Belgrade (1456) for the benefit of future war strategy planners.

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