

"Frontier Defense Strategies Against External Attacks in the Sinai Peninsula During the Mamluk Era."

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Abstract

This study examines the strategic importance of the Sinai Peninsula during the Mamluk era (1250–1517 CE) as a pivotal military and geopolitical frontier between Egypt and the Levant. Through a chronological analysis spanning the reigns of prominent Mamluk sultans—from Shajar al-Durr and Baybars to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī—the research examines how successive Mamluk rulers fortified and militarized Sinai in response to external threats, including Crusader invasions, Mongol incursions, and Ottoman expansion. The study also highlights the internal political turmoil that shaped Mamluk defense policies and the rise of the Burji Mamluk dynasty, whose rulers, such as Barqūq and al-Muʿayyad Shaykh, continued to utilize Sinai as a strategic corridor for military expeditions. Drawing upon a wide range of classical Arabic sources and modern historiography, this paper argues that the Mamluks' investment in the defense of Sinai not only preserved Egypt's sovereignty but also shaped the broader balance of power in the medieval Islamic world. The fall of Acre, the battles of ʿAyn Jālūt and Marj Dābiq, and the repeated campaigns through Sinai underscore the region's enduring role as a defensive bulwark and a staging ground for imperial ambitions.

Keywords: Mamluk Sultanate, Sinai Peninsula, Military Strategy, Crusades.

Introduction

"The Ayyubids in the Levant did not accept Shajar al-Durr's ascension to the throne in Egypt and the beginning of the Mamluk's era. Following her marriage to al-Muʿizz Aybak and the appointment of a young Ayyubid prince, the son of al-Ashraf Musa, as co-ruler, the Ayyubids prepared to invade Egypt. However, they were swiftly defeated by the Bahri Mamluks at the region of al-ʿAbbasiyya in al-Sharqiyya province in the year 648 AH / 1251 CE. Encouraged by this victory, Sultan Aybak launched a military campaign led by Amir Faris al-Din Aktay, who crossed the Sinai after suppressing some Ayyubid revolts and proceeded to advance towards Gaza, ultimately seizing control of the city."

"These Mamluks were generally affiliated with their masters, those who had purchased them from the markets and supervised their discipline and training. Thus, the Zāhiriyya Mamluks were attributed to Sultan al-Zāhir Baybars, while the Ashrafiyya were linked to Sultan al-Ashraf Khalil, and so on. In other cases, a Mamluk might be named after the merchant who brought him, such as

the 'Uthmāniyya Mamluks' named after Khawāja 'Uthmān, one of the most prominent Mamluk traders, renowned for the quality of his acquisitions. Association with him became a matter of pride and honor, which in turn increased the price of the Mamluks he sold. One of the most notable examples is Qalāwūn al-Alfī, who was purchased for a thousand gold dinars."

"When Sultan Quṭuz assumed power in Egypt, the Mongols had already reached the land of Gaza. Sultan Quṭuz dispatched Amir Baybars at the head of a military unit to gather intelligence on their movements. After the Mongols withdrew from Gaza, the Mamluks entered the city, and shortly afterward, Quṭuz himself arrived at the head of his army and defeated the Mongols. On the return journey—as previously mentioned—Baybars seized the opportunity and assassinated Sultan Quṭuz before his arrival in Cairo."

"The true beginnings of the Mamluk state can be traced back to the assassination of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustaʿsim bi-llāh, the fall of Baghdad, and the consequent collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate, which had endured for over five centuries. This left the Islamic world without a caliph. Following these events, Sultan Quṭuz rose to power within the Mamluk realm to confront the looming Mongol threat."

"As the Mongols advanced toward Gaza, Hulagu sent a menacing letter to Quṭuz demanding submission. A summary of the letter reads:

'From the King of Kings of the East and West, the Great Khan In the name of the Almighty, Creator of Earth and Raiser of the Sky To the Victorious King Quṭuz, who is of Mamluk origin and who fled our swords to this region, and to all the princes of his state in the Egyptian lands and its surroundings:

We are the army of God on His earth, created from His wrath and unleashed upon those who have incurred His anger.

Let the fate of other nations be a lesson to you. Submit to us before the veil is lifted, and you regret your errors.

We show no mercy to those who weep, nor do we soften at the cries of the afflicted. You have heard of our conquests, how we have cleansed lands of corruption, slain multitudes, and purified the earth.

Flee if you can, and we shall pursue. What land will shelter you? What path will save you? What place will protect you?

There is no escape from our swords, no refuge from our might. Our horses are swift, our arrows pierce, our swords strike like lightning, and our hearts are like mountains. Our numbers are as vast as the sands.

Your fortresses cannot protect you; your armies are no match for us, and your prayers go unheard. You have consumed the unlawful, betrayed oaths, and spread disobedience and sin among yourselves. Rejoice, then, in disgrace and humiliation:

“This day you shall be recompensed with a humiliating torment, for that you were arrogant on the earth without right, and because you were defiantly disobedient.”

“And those who have wronged are going to know to what [kind of] return they will be returned.”
Whoever wages war against us regrets it, and whoever seeks our protection is safe.

If you submit to our conditions and obey our commands, you shall be treated as equals. But if you oppose us, you shall perish.

Do not destroy yourselves with your own hands. You have been warned. It is proven that we are the unbelievers, and it is known to us that you are the wicked.

We have been granted rule by divine decree. Your may is few in our eyes, and your noble ones are worthless to us.

Do not prolong your reply. Respond swiftly before war engulfs you and your land becomes desolate.

We have been just warning you and merciful in alerting you. You are our final target. Peace be upon us and upon you, and upon those who follow guidance, fear the consequences of ruin, and obey the Highest King.'

"Sultan Qutuz set out with a large army toward Palestine, crossing the Sinai after having fortified it. He achieved a decisive victory at the Battle of 'Ayn Jālūt on 25th Ramaḍān 658 AH / September 1260 CE against the Mongols, whose commander, Kitbuqa, was killed in battle. This victory led to the liberation of the Levant and the reunification of the Syrian and Egyptian territories once again. However, as a result of internal power struggles, Baybars assassinated Sultan Qutuz and ascended to the throne."

"Such powerful words illustrate the extent of the imminent danger that the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt faced from Hulegu following the devastating Mongol defeat at the Battle of 'Ayn Jālūt and the death of his favored commander and son-in-law, Kitbuqa. This threat intensified when the Mongol menace became intertwined with that of the Crusaders, who sought to forge an alliance with the Mongols in hopes of spreading Christianity among them and enlisting their support in launching an invasion of Egypt and the broader Islamic territories."

"After Baybars had dealt with his rivals who refused to acknowledge his authority as Sultan—such as Emir 'Alam al-Dīn Sanjar, the governor of Damascus, and Emir Shams al-Dīn Aqūsh, who had seized control of Aleppo and intended to march on Egypt to challenge his rule—al-Zāhir (Baybars) dispatched a military campaign that defeated Aqūsh's forces."

"Sultan al-Zāhir Baybars commenced his military campaigns against the Crusaders in 661 AH / 1263 CE, beginning with a campaign toward Nazareth. He personally traveled to the Sinai Peninsula, then proceeded toward Acre, though he failed to capture it. In 663 AH / 1265 CE, Baybars successfully seized Caesarea, 'Atlit, and Arsuf. In the following year, he captured Şafad, Ramla, and Tibnin. By 665 AH, he sent a large army under the command of Emir Qalāwūn to retaliate against the Kingdom of Lesser Armenia and the Crusader principalities of Antioch and Tripoli, due to..."

"Their alliance with the Mongols against the Muslims prompted Baybars to capture several ports and fortresses north of Tripoli. In 1268 CE, Antioch was seized, and in 669 AH / 1271 CE, Baybars captured Ḥiṣn al-Akrād (Krak des Chevaliers), Acre, and al-Qurayn. Throughout his campaigns against the Crusaders, Baybars also fought against the Mongols of Persia, repelling their threat from the frontiers of Egypt and the Levant and securing the Sinai Peninsula from all directions."

"It is evident that the Mamluks found both justification and public support for their seizure of power through their military success in defeating King Louis IX (1226–1270 CE) and his army near Suez. This victory strengthened their political legitimacy and required the Mamluk sultans to exert continuous efforts to repel threats—not only to Sinai and Egypt—but to the entirety of the

Muslim world. The two greatest dangers that confronted the Muslims in the Near East at the rise of the Mamluk state were the Crusader threat and the Mongol threat. Sultan Baybars and his successors demonstrated exceptional valor in confronting these perils."

"To this end, Sultan Baybars, while confronting the combined dangers of the Crusaders and the Mongols, sought alliances with external powers who were also hostile to these common enemies. He concluded a defensive alliance in 660 AH / 1262 CE with Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos, recognizing that the Byzantine Empire had long been an adversary of the Crusaders in the Levant. Likewise, Baybars allied with the Qipchaq Tatars (the Golden Horde) near the Caspian Sea—who had embraced Islam and had grown increasingly hostile toward the pagan Mongols of Persia. Baybars thus hoped not only for their military assistance but at the very least to ensure their neutrality and eliminate them as a potential threat."

"Baybars' wars against the Crusaders were long and fierce, consistently marked by his strategic superiority and repeated victories. Not a single year passed during the decade between 659–669 AH / 1261–1271 CE without Baybars launching a campaign against the Crusaders in the Levant, with each expedition starting from the Sinai. In nearly every instance, Baybars secured a victory, capturing various fortresses, ports, and strongholds from the Crusaders. Despite truces that were occasionally signed during this period, Baybars would swiftly resume his offensives across Sinai toward the Levant."

"Baybars' campaigns against the Crusaders began in 661 AH / 1263 CE, when his forces attacked the city of Nazareth. He again launched an assault on Acre, having secured his army's rear flank by fortifying the Sinai Peninsula, although he was unsuccessful in capturing the city. However, full-scale warfare did not commence until 663 AH / 1265 CE, when Baybars captured Caesarea, Jaffa, 'Atlit (in the Jaffa district), and Arsuf (also in the Jaffa district). In the following year, he took Şafad, then Ḥunayn (in the Şafad district), Tibnīn (near Şūr), and Ramla."

"Sultan Baybars was deeply committed to securing an adequate supply of suitable timber for shipbuilding. To this end, he prohibited the general population from purchasing such wood. According to historical accounts by scholars such as al-As'ad ibn Mamāī (d. 1309 CE), 'Uthmān al-Nābulusī (d. 1258 CE), and Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442 CE), the ḥarāj (reserves) of sant trees—whose wood was essential for ship construction—had once been abundant in the southern Delta, Upper Egypt, and the Sinai Peninsula during the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods. However, from the late Ayyubid era onwards, these woodlands gradually declined. Both commoners and elites had begun harvesting them to meet the growing demands of water wheels (sawāqī) and olive presses (ma'āşir), and by the end of the 13th century, the woodlands of the Delta and Giza had all but vanished, giving way to agricultural land."

"Thus, by the time al-Zāhir Baybars came to power in the 13th century, Egypt possessed only remnants of sant reserves in Upper Egypt and around the town of Suez in the Sinai. Even these were insufficient to meet the state's needs. Consequently, Baybars implemented a policy of monopolizing these timbers to support the construction of a naval fleet capable of defending Egypt's frontiers."

"Baybars also focused on strengthening the Mamluk state's military capacity to confront its enemies and safeguard its borders. To achieve this, he formed an army composed predominantly

of mamluks and significantly increased their acquisition. Egypt soon became densely populated with these slave-soldiers. Their primary sources were the Qipchaq steppe, as well as the white slave markets of Asia Minor and the shores of the Black Sea. The Qipchaq lands were particularly renowned as a prime source of mamluks due to several factors:

1. The inhabitants of these regions led a nomadic and primitive lifestyle, constantly migrating in search of water and pasture.
2. They endured harsh living conditions, marked by scarcity of grazing lands and a severe climate.
3. As a result, it was not uncommon for families to sell their children or barter them for grain and other necessities to survive.

"The Qipchaq peoples frequently raided their neighbors—the Circassians, Russians, Hungarians, and Slavs—taking captives who were subsequently sold in the white slave markets.

Due to the prevalence of warfare and ongoing raids, waves of Qipchaq Mongols migrated to Egypt between 660–661 AH / 1262–1263 CE, seeking protection and asylum. This group numbered approximately 1,500 cavalymen, accompanied by their families, and was followed by additional contingents in 662 AH / 1264 CE. These battle-hardened warriors joined the Mamluk army and came to be known as the *Wāfidiyya* or 'the Tatar Asylees.'"

"Given the diversity of backgrounds within the Mamluk army, Baybars organized the military units into three main categories, all composed exclusively of Mamluks:

1. **The Sultani Mamluks** (*al-mamālīk al-sultāniyya*): This group included two types:
 - The mamluks of former sultans, referred to as *qarāniṣa* or *qarāṣina* (a term used for veteran or senior mamluks).
 - The *khāṣṣakiyya* or *aḥdāth*, who were the personal mamluks of the reigning sultan before his ascension to the throne. These individuals were trained, raised, and manumitted by the sultan himself and often accompanied him in his private quarters.

In general, the mamluks of the reigning sultan were known as *Mamālīk al-ṭibāq* or *al-kuttābiyya*, of their residence in the upper chambers (*ṭibāq*) of the citadel. These Sultani Mamluks enjoyed a privileged social status, surpassing that of ordinary slaves, even though they remained legally equal in terms of their juridical standing. Their elevated status was a result of their proximity to the sultan, who would grant them *iqṭā'āt* (land holdings) and military commands.

"2. *Jund al-Ḥalqa* (The Regular Troops): This corps consisted of professional soldiers drawn from the sons of mamluks, also known as *Awlād al-Nās* ('Sons of Nobles'). They formed the standing, permanent segment of the Mamluk army, remaining in service regardless of changes in leadership. These troops constituted the backbone of the army during battle. In times of peace, they often engaged in crafts and skilled trades. Each group of a thousand men was overseen by military emirs; for every hundred, there was a *naqīb* (officer) and a *bāsh*, and for every forty, a *muqaddam* (commander). Their salaries were administered by the *Dīwān al-Jund* (Bureau of the Army)."

"3. *Mamluks of the Emirs*: This category resembled the *Sultani Mamluks*, but its members belonged to and were trained by their respective emirs. These mamluks formed the private military units that accompanied their patrons into battle."

"Upon ascending to power in 1279 CE, al-Manṣūr Sayf al-Dīn Qalāwūn (r. 1279–1290 CE) initiated a series of military and administrative reforms. While some historians have criticized his penchant for wealth accumulation—highlighting his extensive taxation policies—it is evident that the funds he collected were reinvested into strengthening the Mamluk state. Qalāwūn utilized these revenues to fortify strategic vulnerabilities, restore several fortresses, and equip military campaigns against both Crusader and Mongol forces."

"After neutralizing the internal threats, he faced early in his reign, Qalāwūn redirected his focus toward external dangers—namely the Crusaders and Mongols—who began threatening Egypt's northern frontiers, particularly via the Sinai Peninsula. The situation became more precarious when Emir Sunqur al-Ashqar seized several key fortresses in the Levant, most notably Ṣahyūn Castle, from where he reached out to both the Mongols and Crusaders for support."

"The Mongols of Persia, seizing the opportunity, dispatched a force under Abgha in 679 AH / 1280 CE, which managed to occupy several fortresses in the Levant. However, this advance was short-lived, as the Mongol forces soon withdrew. Nevertheless, the Mongol incursion into Syria that year served as a critical warning to Qalāwūn regarding the existential threat posed not just to Sinai but to all Egyptian territories. This threat was intensified by the convergence of three hostile forces: the Mongols, the Crusaders, and the rebellious Sunqur al-Ashqar."

"In February 1289 CE, Sultan Qalāwūn led his army in a campaign to seize Tripoli, which he successfully captured in April 1289 CE / 688 AH. In November 1290 CE / 689 AH, as he was preparing to march toward Acre via the Sinai gateway, he unexpectedly passed away."

"Upon the accession of his son, al-Ashraf Khalīl (r. 1290–1293 CE), preparations began for a massive expedition to the Levant. His forces departed from Gaza and arrived at Acre in April 1291 CE / 690 AH, capturing the city a month later."

"Faced with the overwhelming military successes of al-Ashraf Khalīl, the Crusaders—realizing his intent to capture Acre, one of their most strategic strongholds—sent a diplomatic delegation to seek peace and forgiveness. However, the Sultan refused their plea and proceeded to storm Acre, capturing it in 690 AH / 1291 CE. The fall of Acre marked a decisive and devastating blow to the Crusader presence in the Levant. What remained were only a few minor outposts, such as Ṣaydā, Ṣūr (Tyre), and 'Atlit, which quickly fell one after another. Thus, al-Ashraf Khalīl ibn Qalāwūn became the hero of the final chapter of the Crusades in the Levant."

"During the reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn (first reign: 1293–1294 CE), Mongol forces advanced into the Levant, inflicted a crushing defeat on the Mamluk armies, and entered Damascus in 697 AH / 1298 CE. At this point, the Sinai Peninsula became the critical buffer zone separating the Mongol forces in the Levant from the Mamluk forces in Egypt. In response to this threat, al-Nāṣir personally led his army through the Sinai into the Levant in 698 AH / 1299 CE and succeeded in liberating Damascus."

"However, internal disputes erupted among the Mamluk emirs during the final days of Sultan Lājīn, who had usurped power from al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. Some emirs sought refuge with the Mongol khan, Ghāzān Maḥmūd ibn Arghūn, who had converted to Islam under the Shi‘i doctrine. They described to him the deteriorating conditions in Egypt and the Levant, urging him to invade. Ghāzān was enticed by the prospect of fulfilling the Mongol ambition of toppling the Mamluk state and advancing into Egypt."

"Accordingly, Ghāzān crossed the Euphrates and marched toward Syria. Al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, having returned to power in his second reign following Lājīn’s assassination, departed from Egypt through Sinai to confront the Mongols. The two forces clashed at the Battle of Wādī al-Khazindār, located between Ḥamāh and Ḥimṣ, in September 1299 CE / 698 AH. The Mamluk army suffered a crushing defeat, with most of its forces fleeing back to Sinai to regroup. The young sultan remained on the battlefield in tears, reportedly spared only because the Mongols, wary of a potential ambush, ceased their pursuit of the retreating troops."

"Ghāzān proceeded to establish control over the entirety of the Levant, including Damascus, and posed a direct threat to Egypt through the Sinai frontier."

"The Mamluk emirs did not yield to the defeat they had suffered. Instead, they regrouped and departed from Sinai, heading toward Cairo to reorganize their forces and prepare for retaliation against the Mongols. Once the Mamluk army reached Sinai, the Mongols immediately withdrew from Damascus, leaving the city in the custody of the local emirs who had previously aligned with them. The Mongols had hoped that such a maneuver would divide the Mamluks into opposing factions. However, contrary to Ghāzān’s expectations, the Mamluks reunited and joined forces with their arriving comrades. Thus, Mongol control over the frontiers of Egypt and the Levant came to an end, and unity between Egypt and Syria was restored under the rule of Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad."

"In 702 AH / 1303 CE, Ghāzān dispatched his forces once more, this time under the command of his general Qutlūshāh. Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad led his army across the Sinai to confront them. The two armies clashed at *Marj al-Ṣuffar*, south of Damascus, during the month of Ramaḍān. The Mamluks achieved a decisive and final victory, with the Mongol forces retreating toward the Euphrates after losing nearly 10,000 men, either killed or captured."

"This last victory marked the final major engagement in the long-standing conflict between the Mongol Ilkhanate and the Mamluk Sultanate. From that point onward, relations between the two states gradually improved. A peace treaty was concluded between Sultan

al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and Abū Saʿīd, the Ilkhan of Persia, and Islam began to spread among members of the Ilkhanid elite. The Mongol threat to Egypt's eastern frontier effectively disappeared until the early 15th century, when it briefly re-emerged with the rise of the formidable military leader Tīmūr (Tamerlane)."

"After the death of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, Egypt descended into political instability under his successors. The absence of a strong leader at the head of the Mamluk state caused a decline in its prestige and influence, both domestically and abroad. In the absence of al-Nāṣir's authority, Egypt became increasingly vulnerable, and its enemies began to view the Mamluk state with contempt. This emboldened foreign powers, who launched an invasion in 767 AH / 1365 CE, attacking Egypt from its northern and northeastern frontiers via Sinai and Damietta."

"It is well established that the Crusades in the East did not fully come to an end with the fall of Acre and the expulsion of the Crusaders from their final strongholds. Rather, the threat persisted until the end of the 9th century AH / 15th century CE. This new phase of danger originated from the Kingdom of Cyprus, ruled by the Lusignan dynasty, which had turned the island into a strategic base for launching attacks on Muslim ports, particularly targeting the Sinai Peninsula. Many of the Crusader remnants expelled from the Levantine coast in the late 13th century had settled in Cyprus, making it a forward base and enhancing the Lusignans' strength and desire for vengeance following their earlier defeats in the Levant."

"Indeed, King Peter I of Lusignan gathered his forces on the island of Rhodes, where plans were made to attack the northern frontiers of the Mamluk Sultanate, beginning with Alexandria and proceeding through Sinai. The objective was to sever the Levant from Egypt after the Mamluks had successfully unified the two regions. These attacks also aimed to exact revenge for the Crusaders' expulsion and to exploit the strategic and commercial importance of these ports. This campaign came in the context of increasing disorder within the Mamluk state during the reign of the descendants of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, as many cities and ports were left without adequate defenses."

"Despite receiving advance warning of the impending Crusader assault on Sinai and Egypt's coastal cities, 'the state paid no heed,' as al-Maqrīzī records. At the time, the ruling sultan was al-Ashraf Shaʿbān, the young grandson of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, who was only eleven years old. Real power lay in the hands of Emir Yalbughā al-Khāṣṣakī, known for his tyranny and brutality. When he was informed of King Peter's intentions to attack Egypt's borders, he dismissed the threat, reportedly saying: *'The Cypriot is too weak and lowly to even approach Alexandria.'*"

"Nevertheless, the Crusader forces landed in Alexandria on 23 Muḥarram 767 AH / 10 October 1365 CE and launched an immediate assault on the city, encountering virtually no resistance. The Arab tribesmen brought from the Beḥeira region to defend the coast fled at the onset of the attack, and the city fell into Crusader hands without a fight."

"King Peter of Lusignan initially intended to retain control of Alexandria and use it as a base for further operations, advancing eastward to garrison the Sinai Peninsula in order to cut off any reinforcements from the Levant. However, his senior commanders convinced him of the dangers of such a move, leading the Crusaders to withdraw from Egypt on 28 Muḥarram 767 AH / 16 October 1365 CE, having loaded their ships with thousands of captives and vast quantities of loot."

"Emir Yalbughā arrived at the Egyptian ports only after the Crusaders had already departed. He then ordered the burial of the dead and the restoration of what had been burned and destroyed."

The Mamluk sultans were unable to retaliate against the Crusader campaign due to the prevailing state of disorder and weakness within the sultanate. It was not until the advent of the Burji (Circassian) Mamluk period that serious efforts at retaliation and border security could be undertaken. The Bahri Mamluk state had been plagued by numerous external and internal challenges, including Crusader and Mongol threats, internal revolts, power struggles, and severe economic crises. With the fall of the Bahri regime, it was succeeded by the second Mamluk dynasty: the Circassian or Burji Mamluks (784–922 AH / 1382–1517 CE)."

"When power transitioned to the Circassian Mamluks, al-Zāhir Sayf al-Dīn Barqūq (r. 1382–1389 CE) ascended to the throne. His reign was marked by continuous conspiracies, culminating in a large-scale rebellion in the Levant. The rebels marched through the Sinai, causing widespread devastation, and eventually reached Cairo, where they captured the sultan and exiled him to al-Karak in 791 AH / 1389 CE. Barqūq managed to escape the following year, reassembled his forces, and successfully reclaimed the throne."

"During Barqūq's reign, a powerful Mongol figure emerged—Tamerlane (Tīmūr Lang, 1370–1405 CE)—who harbored ambitions of advancing into Egypt via the Sinai Peninsula. In response, Barqūq took the initiative in 797 AH / 1395 CE and marched eastward to confront him. However, upon learning that Tamerlane had withdrawn to his homeland, the sultan returned to Cairo."

"Barqūq was succeeded by his eldest son, al-Nāṣir Faraj (r. 1399–1405 CE). When he heard of Tamerlane's return and his invasion of Aleppo, he quickly mobilized a large army and crossed the Sinai in 803 AH / 1400 CE. However, upon witnessing the vast size of the Mongol forces, he retreated in haste to Cairo, leaving his army behind to suffer defeat and devastation."

"Sinai suffered greatly following the death of Sultan al-Nāṣir Faraj ibn Barqūq. A fierce power struggle erupted between Emirs Shaykh and Nawrūz in 815 AH / 1412 CE, resulting in the victory of al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh, who killed Nawrūz after suppressing his rebellion. During his reign (1412–1421 CE), Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Abū al-Naṣr Shaykh made significant efforts to fortify the borders of the Mamluk state. In pursuit of this goal, he led two military

campaigns toward the northern frontiers via the Sinai after erecting fortifications along the route."

"In these expeditions, he aimed to assert Mamluk dominance over the Turkmen principalities. He personally led the first campaign in 821 AH / 1418 CE and dispatched his son Ibrāhīm at the head of the second campaign in 822 AH / 1419 CE."

"During the reign of Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī (1500–1516 CE), the rise of Ottoman power became increasingly evident, while the Mamluk Sultanate witnessed a notable decline due to the intensifying internal struggles for authority. The Ottomans' provocations grew more frequent, prompting al-Ghawrī to undertake a series of military operations in the Sinai Peninsula. Indeed, he is rightly considered the Mamluk sultan with the most enduring impact on the region of Sinai. In May 1516 CE / 922 AH, al-Ghawrī led his army toward the Levant, where a decisive battle took place at Marj Dābiq near the city of Aleppo. The Mamluks suffered a devastating defeat, and Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī—the last of the Mamluk sultans—was killed in battle."

Conclusion

The Sinai Peninsula has long served as a geopolitical and cultural land bridge to Asia and a vital link between the continents of Asia and Africa, situated at the heart of the ancient and medieval world. Its strategic geographic position made it the foremost land route through which external threats—particularly from the Levant—approached Egypt. As such, Sinai represented the soft underbelly between two closely connected strategic regions: Egypt and Greater Syria. Historically, it became a primary theater of military movement, traversed by armies for millennia, making it arguably the most critical and vulnerable gateway to Egypt throughout all periods of its history.

Sinai's strategic and military importance was revitalized with the arrival of Sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī, who began his reign by granting protection to the Christian monks of St. Catherine's Monastery and safeguarding the rights and properties of non-Muslims. During his rule, mosques and fortifications proliferated in the Sinai region, particularly in Ṭūr, al-ʿArīsh, and al-Faramā.

The traditional Egyptian pilgrimage route to Mecca once passed through ʿAydḥāb and the eastern desert, but this shifted when Sultan Baybars recaptured the city of Aylah (modern-day Aqaba) from the Crusaders. He subsequently inaugurated a new pilgrimage route through Suez and Sinai, a route that remained in use until 1885 CE.

Sinai played a crucial political and military role during the Crusades, which lasted nearly two centuries—beginning in the late Fāṭimid period and continuing through the Ayyūbid and early Mamluk periods. Throughout this time, rulers invested heavily in military fortifications across the peninsula, particularly during the Ayyūbid era, which witnessed some of the most intense clashes with Crusader forces.

This attention to Sinai continued under Sultan Qalāwūn, who actively promoted Egypt as a commercial hub for Eastern and Western traders and reinforced its image as a secure and prosperous realm. Even in the final years of the Mamluk Sultanate, under Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī, Sinai retained its strategic significance. Despite the political decline of the state, al-Ghawrī carried out extensive military and civil construction projects across the peninsula. Although the Mamluks were ultimately defeated by the Ottomans at the Battle of Marj Dābiq, Sinai remained a region of great importance under the Ottomans, as evidenced by continued fortification efforts and renovations in the area.

Findings

1. **Religious Significance:** Sinai holds great importance in all Abrahamic religions. It is mentioned multiple times in the Qur'an and the Old Testament, particularly as the site of Prophet Moses' crossing and the revelation of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.
2. **Prophetic Protection:** A historic covenant attributed to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, known as the *'Aḥda al-Nabawiyya*, was granted to the monks of Mount Sinai in the second year of the Hijrah, assuring their safety and the protection of Christian communities.
3. **Strategic Integration:** Islamic states recognized Sinai's strategic significance and placed it under direct military administration. Every regime that ruled both Egypt and the Levant ensured Sinai's inclusion within Egyptian jurisdiction, allowing for coordinated defense and religious pilgrimage.
4. **Ayyubid Military Architecture:** The Ayyubid dynasty (1171–1250 CE) prioritized fortifying Sinai by constructing castles and fortresses. Sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn built the fortress of al-Jundī near 'Ayn Sudr and others like Pharaoh's Castle, Taba Fortress, and al-'Arīsh Fortress.
5. **Public Health Efforts:** Sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn also showed concern for public health, combating disease and establishing medical facilities (*bīmāristāns*) throughout Sinai, which he oversaw.
6. **Mongol Threat and 'Ayn Jālūt:** Under the Mamluks (1250–1517 CE), Sinai witnessed major military mobilizations, particularly during the Mongol threat. Sultan al-Zāhir Baybars led a victorious campaign through Sinai to 'Ayn Jālūt in 1260 CE, defeating Kitbuqa and restoring Syrian Egyptian unity.
7. **Revival of Pilgrimage Route:** Baybars also reinstated the traditional pilgrimage route through Suez and Aylah after expelling the Crusaders, shifting it from the older 'Aydhāb route.
8. **Internal Rebellions:** During the Mamluk period, Sinai experienced internal unrest, including a Shi'ite uprising led by al-Kūrānī in 1260 CE and several tribal revolts, which began under al-Mu'izz Aybak and continued into the Burji era.

9. **Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī's Legacy:** Due to regional instability, Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī left a substantial legacy in Sinai, constructing key fortresses such as Nakhil, Aqaba, and Qaṭīyya, and reinforcing vital pilgrimage routes.
10. **Infrastructure and Public Services:** The Mamluk sultans prioritized public health, water security, and infrastructure along the Sinai pilgrimage routes, with Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī establishing numerous facilities.
11. **Market Oversight and Health Control:** During the Mamluk period, the role of the *muḥtasib* (market inspector) expanded to include oversight of health services, public baths, and marketplaces across Sinai, ensuring compliance with hygiene and safety regulations.

Recommendations

1. **Critical Evaluation of Historical Sources:** Scholars must exercise great caution when consulting historical sources composed during the period of the Crusades, which encompasses the Ayyubid and early Mamluk eras. Given the abundance of conflicting accounts and the politically charged nature of this period, it is essential to differentiate between reliable and biased narratives to reach accurate historical conclusions.
2. **Increased Scholarly Attention to Sinai:** There is a pressing need for more academic research focused on the Sinai Peninsula, considering its immense historical and strategic importance across different eras. Despite its pivotal role, Sinai remains underrepresented in Arabic historical literature. Researchers should adopt a multidisciplinary approach that goes beyond military and political history to encompass cultural, economic, and social aspects as well.
3. **Diversification and Objectivity in Sources:** Future studies on historical and security-related topics—such as those concerning Sinai—should utilize a broad and diverse set of sources. Researchers must commit to intellectual honesty, faithfully presenting different viewpoints and interpretations in order to produce well-balanced, rigorous scholarship free from bias or partisanship.
4. **Publication of Unpublished Theses and Dissertations:** Many valuable academic theses and dissertations on topics related to Sinai remain unpublished and inaccessible, except in rare cases through individual efforts. Institutions and scholars should work toward making these works available, thus enriching the academic discourse and helping future researchers better understand the historical significance of Sinai and its connection to present and future developments.

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