

Was Saladin a Kurd?

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Saladin was born Salah al-Din Yusuf Ibn Najim al-Din Ayyub. On the night of his birth in 1138 in Tikrit, central Iraq, his father, Ayyub and uncle Asad al-Dīn Shīrkūh gathered the family and fled and sought shelter under the ruler of Mosul 'Imad al-Dīn Zangī, a Turkoman of the Seljuks who ruled Mesopotamia from 1055 to 1135 before the Abbasid Dynasty under Caliph al-Muqtafi took control of Mesopotamia for the second time. The Abbasids ruled until the fall of the empire in 1258 with the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols. At any rate, in 1154, the Ayyub family entered in the service of emir Nūr al-Dīn of Damascus, another Turkoman, member of the Zengid dynasty.

The progenitor of the Ayyubid dynasty was Najm al-Din Ayyub bin Shadhi whose ancestors settled in the town of Dvin, in northern Armenia. He belonged to the tribe of Rawadiya, itself a branch of the Hadhabani tribe. The Rawadids were originally from Arab ancestry (Azd tribe), and arrived in the region in 758 CE, but they had become Kurdicized by the early 10th century and began to use Kurdish forms like Mamlan for Muhammad and Ahmadil for Ahmad as their names.¹

The oldest reference to Saladin appears in *The Divine Comedy*, an Italian narrative poem by Dante Alighieri (composed between 1308 and 1321).² We must understand that by this time, Islam had spread completely into Persia and the nomads of the Zagros Mountains have been identified by the Sassanids (3rd-7th centuries) with the Middle Persian term Kwrt, which meant tent-dweller nomads.³ This meant that to the Persians, all the various Iranian tribes of the Zagros Mountains were known as Kwrt. Soon, this term Kurd (plural Akrad) was used by the Arabs who conquered Persia and spread Islam among these tent-dwelling people of the Zagros Mountains. By the 10th -12th centuries, this term Kurd evolved into an ethnic designation as the Kurdish by the Arabs.

Interestingly, we also have the work of Sir Walter Scott's *The Talisman* (1825), which highlights Saladin's often documented nobility and generosity for a ruler of his time. Scott accentuates Saladin's Muslim identity; however, through the character of the Marquis of Montserrat, the sultan is defined as a Saracen, a term that was used to describe all the Muslims in the holy land.⁴

¹ Islamic History. Accessed June 23, 2026 <https://islamichistory.org/ayyubid-dynasty/>

² Accessed 3/16/2025 https://archive.org/details/The_Divine_Comedy/Inferno/

³ Prolegomena to the Study of the Kurds", Iran and the Caucasus Vol 13, No. 1. Yerevan State University. Brill, 2009

⁴ Accessed 3/16/2025. Orientalism during the British Romantic Era: The Representation of the Knighthood of Saladin in Sir Walter Scott's *The Talisman* (1825). Page 23.

<http://dspace1.univ-tlemcen.dz/bitstream/112/11410/1/wiam-kameche.pdf>

Considering that there never were Kurds in the Holy Land leaves us to conclude that the reference is either to Turks or Arabs.

We read that from the later 11th Century, Turkish ruling elites dominated most of the political and military matters of the Islamic Middle East. Arabs and Persians played a lesser role in the military affairs of the region; however, they continued to dominate the cultural, religious and commercial elites.⁵ The people known today as Kurds did not have any known cultural, economic and military influence in that region until the rise of Saladin, who is portrayed as a Kurd. Still, there is no proof that a large group of organized and ethnic Kurds being part of Saladin's Islamic army. However, Minorsky informs us that there was tension in the Ayyubid army between the Turks and Kurds Muslim warriors, a fact that was addressed in the AD 1192 letter to Saladin from the Governor of Jerusalem. Historical accounts are honest when they emphasize that there were many elements in the entire administration of Saladin. For example, the ruler of Arbil Abul-Hayja b. Musak whose name is often quoted in the Seljukid times was a descendant (grandson?) of the earlier Abul-Hayja. Since 539/1144 Arbil was held by the Turkman dynasty ... We also know of his trusted Turkish Mamluk warriors, his Arab counsellors (like the qadi Fadil, the historian Baha al-din, etc.) and his powerful vassals of Mosul and Upper Mesopotamia.⁶ To assume that Saladin's army was Kurdish is naïve.

Saladin career began when he joined the staff of his uncle Shīrkūh, a military commander under the Turkoman emir Nūr al-Dīn, who was the son and successor of 'Imad al-Din Zangī. Together they were part of an expedition to Egypt to fight against both Amalric I, the king of Jerusalem and Shāwar, the powerful vizier of the Egyptian Fāṭimid caliph. Shāwar was assassinated and with the death of his uncle Shīrkūh, Saladin, in 1169 succeeded him as the commander of Nur al-Din's forces in Egypt and a wazir to the Shia Fatimid caliph. In 1171, the Fatimid Dynasty collapsed because of the weak and unpopular Shia Fāṭimids and the Sunni Islam leadership returned to Egypt under emir Nūr al-Dīn represented by Saladin and his family from 1171 to 1260. With the death of emir Nūr al-Dīn in 1174, Saladin launched a campaign to take control of the lands Nūr al-Dīn had ruled and to claim the regency on behalf of the young son of his former leader, but soon he abandoned this claim. However, he did capture Damascus, Aleppo, and Mosul from other Muslim rulers after marrying Nūr al-Dīn's widow, Ismat, who was also the daughter of the late Unur, the ruler of Damascus. This helped Saladin gain legitimacy through association with two other ruling families.

Saladin continued the war campaign. He captured Urfa in 1182 after a siege and appointed Muzaffar al-Din Gökböri as governor of Urfa (ancient Assyrian Urhay) and Harran (Ancient Assyrian Harranu). Gökböri was also a Turkoman whose name is old Turkic that meant "Blue-wolf". He was the son of Zain al-Din Ali Kutcek, the Seljuk Turkic emir of Erbil (ancient Assyrian city of Arbela). In 1187 Saladin won the battle of Hattin near Tiberias in northern Palestine against the Crusaders and captured Jerusalem. But in 1189 he failed to capture Tyre, an almost impregnable coastal fortress. When all was said and done in October 1192, King Richard

⁵ David Nicolle. Saladin. Osprey Publishing; 1st edition. 2011

⁶ Minorsky, Vladimir. "Studies in Caucasian History." Cambridge, 1953.

left the Middle East and Saladin withdrew to Damascus where he died in 1193. Succeeding Gökböri, the Urfa-Harran region was held by Saladin's brother al-'Adil (later the Ayyubid sultan). Al-'Adil was an officer in the army of the Turkoman emir Nūr al-Dīn Zengi as well.

The above is history that is widely accepted. However, the critical questions we must ask are:

First. Why did Saladin's father and uncle escape from Tikrit and seek protection in Mosul under a Turkoman leader if Kurds, as some claim, had strong presence in northern Mesopotamia (historic Assyria) or the region? It is obvious that in the 12th century Kurds did not have any real power that could have made Saladin's father seek shelter with or joined fellow Kurdish countrymen. Consider how Kurdish historians have taken advantage of Internet sites, such as Wikipedia, and have filled it with outrageous claims about so-called Kurdish dynasties ruling in different eras, some ruling for less than a year while others a millennia.⁷

Second. After conquering Urfa and Harran, why did Saladin appoint a Turkoman governor there and not a fellow Kurd? This leads us to conclude that either there were no suitable Kurds to appoint or Saladin never considered himself part of a "Kurdish community" with any obligation to it or possibly Saladin did not have the real authority to appoint officials. The reality is that even after his death and the distribution of the vassal regions he ruled among his family members, the Ayyubids became a decentralized semi feudal family enterprise. The Frankish-Ayyubid relations were relaxed under the reigns of al-'Adil (an officer under Nūr al-Dīn Zengi) and al-Kāmil, Saladin's brother and nephew, but with the death of al-Kāmil in 1238 old family disputes were revived, further weakening the family/dynasty. Some might argue that during this period, national sentiments did not exist. That is true. But, what are the chances that a powerful military leader would ignore completely to think about his tribe, countrymen, village, etc. to the degree that he never even cared to really show that he was part of.

Third. We cannot assert that Saladin's uncle Shīrkūh was a Kurd. The name could be Persian or any of the other old Iranian tribes that existed in and around the Zagros Mountains for centuries.

Fourth. The Family of Ayyub, amazingly portrayed as a dynasty, ruled about 90 years in Egypt. It was natural that they did not establish any institutions. How reasonable is it to call a family that was part of wars a dynasty? How reasonable is to rule less than a century, have major problems and controversies, yet be categorized as a dynasty. This was true in Syria as well where the family existed for a relatively short period of time. Consider the fact agreed upon by historians that literary life under the Ayyubid family was relatively poor compared to previous dynasties. Being simple and tribal led to this lack of literature among Kurds in general. This is a fact since we know that the oldest Kurdish document was the 1597 Sharaf Namah by Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi. The interesting part is that Sharaf Namah was written in Persian and not Kurdish.

Fifth. Regardless to what Saladin is claimed to be by others, his family logically was an isolated Zagrosian Kwr family with no real knowledge to when the family's forefathers migrated west from the Zagros Mountains. But, it is more likely that the family did after the 7th Century

⁷ Accessed 3/18/2025 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Kurdish_dynasties_and_countries

conquest of Islam as these Zagrosian nomads began to mix (or remixed) with the Arabs and were Arabized. The use of the Arabic names of Yusuf, Ayyub, al-‘Adil and al-Kāmil by Saladin’s family is a strong indication. This makes sense because in his book titled *The Meadows of Gold*, the 9th century al-Masūdī (896–956), an early Arab historian, geographer, and who was regarded as the Herodotus of the Arabs, reported that there is no agreement (among the people of his day) surrounding the origins of the Kurds. One tradition dictates, explains al-Masūdī, is that they (the Kurds) may have separated from the Arabs earlier and then migrated and settled into the mountains of Persia and among other foreign nations. It is very reasonable to assume that the family of Saladin lived in the Zagros Mountains, converted to Islam, became Arabized and moved west to central modern Iraq. Also, Dr. Khazal al-Majidi, an expert on civilizations and religions, said that certain genetic studies founded that forty-six percent of the Kurds were Arabs.⁸

Sixth. We read that historical personalities who are generally described as Kurds and whose main field of activity was outside the proper homeland are excluded from the general narrative in certain cases. Saladin, for instance, is generally not mentioned as Kurdish in many publications. In a series on ‘Historical Kurdish Personalities’ he is not given a full entry, but is only referred to in a half- sentence. In an isolated article on Saladin the Ayyubid confederation is not labelled as a Kurdish state or integrated into a Kurdish national history.⁹

Seventh. While many historians continue to struggle to prove beyond any doubt who Saladin was: A Persian, Arab, Turk, or Kurd, however, the undisputed facts are:

- a) Saladin never claimed to be a Kurd.
- b) Saladin is not known to have spoken Kurdish.
- c) Saladin never fought for a Kurdish cause, but Arab Islamic cause.
- d) Saladin’s name is purely Arabic.
- e) Finally, the Ayyubid short-lived so-called dynasty was never associated with Kurds in any way or shape; it was always an Islamic family enterprise.

An interesting note, we read from the Chronicles of Michael the Great that in 1498 of the Syrian Era [A.D. 1187], Saladin massed all those obedient to him—Egyptians, Assyrians, and Mesopotamians, Egyptians, inner Libyans, Bedouins, Assyrians, and Mesopotamians—into a large and formidable army, having weapons and [siege] machines without number. Then they went against the Franks near Tiberias to avenge the defeat and losses [Saladin] had borne from them before when he had emerged from Egypt with 32,000 troops whose loss had weakened him. This second Jeroboam, Solomon's rival, came and encamped near Tiberias. The Franks and the king of Jerusalem went against them...¹⁰

⁸ Accessed 3/18/2025 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErvqimZa4qQ> fast forward to 11:30th minute.

⁹ İlhami Yazgan, ‘Kürt orijinli İslam Sultanı’ (The Islamic Sultan of Kurdish origins’). 1997, p.9. In Hirschler, Konrad. “Defining the Nation: Kurdish Historiography in Turkey in the 1990s”. 2001.

¹⁰ Chronicle of Michael the Great, Patriarch of the Syrians. By Michael the Syrian; Robert Bedrosian, translator. Uploaded 2013. P. n218.

<https://archive.org/details/ChronicleOfMichaelTheGreatPatriarchOfTheSyrians/page/n371/mode/2up?q=people>

Finally, it is stated that memory is a highly important tool in political struggles. Since popular media shapes popular memory, and thus knowledge of past struggles, popular film and television are useful in the dynamics of history making.

Egyptian director Youssef Chahine did not claim that his popular movie “The Victorious Saladin” was historically authentic. He was not shy to make this statement later in life. He employed the historical epic style as a lens on the present. This was hardly a unique phenomenon. Analysts assert that “in Egyptian cinema the appropriation and interpretation of history became far more politically purposeful during the post-colonial era than it was during the 1930s and 1940s” (“Arab Cinema” 169). The Victorious Saladin is historically inaccurate, as neither the Kurdish origin of Saladin is mentioned, nor his predisposition to violence. On the contrary, he is cast in a purely positive light, in line with the Nasserist portrayal of the eponymous leader, and as such, Saladin was a pan Arab national hero who defeated the Crusaders not only by his military prowess, but also by his wisdom, righteousness, and dignity.
