

## North to Palestine: Napoleon Marches Against the Turks

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On July 1, 1798 Napoleon and 30,000 troops landed in Egypt. One month later the fleet that had brought him lay at the bottom of Aboukir Bay. Nelson had destroyed Napoleon's fleet and, with one stroke, deprived him of communications and supply lines to France. Alger said that at this point Napoleon's expedition was doomed to failure. [1] Yet he remained in the Middle East until August 22, 1799. These fourteen months have been considered the most romantic of his romantic life. [2]

Bonaparte's interest in the east began as early as 1788, when he applied for a commission in the Russian army. This was not to be. The Russians offered him a post inferior to the one that he held in France. When he refused to fight in La Vendée, he was stricken from the army list. He asked the Committee of Public Safety to post him to Turkey. They agreed but Barras ordered him to put down the Vendémiaire uprising. On August 16, 1797 Napoleon wrote to the Directory, "The time is not distant when we shall perceive that really to destroy England we must seize on Egypt." [3]

There are many reasons given for Napoleon's invasion of the Turkish province of Palestine-Syria. According to General Berthier, Bonaparte's loyal chief of staff, Napoleon had demonstrated his friendship for Turkey on several levels. When he conquered Malta, on his way to Egypt, he freed the Turks that had been enslaved, along with the Jews, and sent them home. The Sultan's flag flew alongside the Tri-colours in Egypt and Napoleon treated the agents and ships of the Grand Seignor courteously. However, Napoleon admired Alexander and would have loved to conquer Alexander's world from Egypt to India, and Turkey was right in the middle. He began to develop hostility toward the Sultan's Pasha in Acre, Achmet Dgezzar. Dgezzar translates to Butcher in English. Achmet the Butcher boasted about having given refuge to the Mamelukes of Egypt who had fled the French army. The Mamelukes were the cruel descendants of Circassian and Georgian Christians who had been bought and converted to Islam. The word Mameluke means "bought man."

After Nelson's victory at the Battle of the Nile (Aboukir Bay), the Turks no longer feared the French. The Sultan thought it wise to ward off French designs on his eastern provinces by destroying Napoleon's army. He declared war on France [4] and Napoleon welcomed the news. [5]



Bonaparte in Egypte

Reports reached Bonaparte that the Turks were assembling two armies to attack him. One Turkish army was being formed in Rhodes and the other at El-Arish in the Sinai desert. Napoleon knew that he had very little time to strike a mortal blow at the Turks. With his fleet gone he knew that he would be unable to evacuate his troops and if he waited for summer, it would be impossible for a European army to cross the desert. [6]

The beginning of the Palestine campaign was well recorded by De Bourienne, Napoleon's private secretary. [7] De Bourienne had been at Brieenne with Bonaparte, where De Bourienne's aristocratic family background elevated him well above the petty aristocratic Bonaparte clan. He repressed his jealousy of his master and served him well until Napoleon, as consul, cashiered him for dipping too deeply into the cash box of the First Consul. [8] However, during the Egyptian-Palestine adventure, he served Napoleon devotedly.

Durant records the following conversation between the erstwhile classmates, "Ah! Bourienne, you also will be immortal. How General?" Napoleon replied, "Are you not my secretary?" Bourienne shot back, "Tell me the name of Alexander's." [9] Metternich thought that Bourienne's memoirs were, "...the only authentic memoirs of Napoleon which have yet appeared... The style is not brilliant but that only makes them more trustworthy." [10]

When Napoleon set his army in motion, Bourienne recorded,

On the morning of the 28th we crossed the Red Sea dry shod...Near the port the Red Sea is not above 1,500 meters wide, and is always fordable at low water...at high tide the water rises five or six feet at Suez, and when the wind blows fresh it often rises nine or ten feet. [11]

Napoleon was almost drowned in the rising tide.

General Bon, with two cannons and 1,500 men, captured Suez on December 7. Napoleon learned that Dgezzar was marching on El Arish. He quickly returned to Cairo and issued marching orders to the rest of his army. Berthier recalled,

In the evening they entered Suez, but it was highwater; they then ascended to the point of the Red Sea; but the guide lost himself in the marshes, from which he extricated himself with great difficulty, being up to the middle in the water. This guide must have been a descendant of the one who conducted Pharaoh. [12]



March through the Egyptian desert

Food and drink were scarce as they continued the march across the Sinai desert toward El Arish. They were reduced to eating dogs, monkeys and camels. The only water that they had was brackish. According to Kobler, Napoleon had the Bible read in his tent, In Bonaparte's Campagnes d'Egypte et de Syrie, he noted that "...some of the older soldiers were chanting psalms and Jeremiah's Lamentations." [13]

The attack on El Arish was swift. Two thousand of the Butcher's men had occupied it. Napoleon ordered Regnier's division to move against the Turks on the right and General Lagrange, with three battalions and two cannons attacked on the left. Berthier reports,

General Lagrange advanced with rapidity over the sand-hills which command El Arisch [sic], where he took a position, and planted his artillery. General Lagrange caused the charge to be beat, when the advanced guard threw themselves...from the right and left on the village, which he attacked in front ...Notwithstanding the most obstinate resistance, and a violent fire, the village was carried by the bayonet. [14]

The village fell but the fortress held out until Napoleon arrived and breached one of the fort's towers with the artillery. He summoned the Arabs to surrender and promptly paroled 1,600 of them. They agreed not to take up arms against the French for one year.



General Kléber

General Kléber with his division and the cavalry continued towards Khan Yunis, the first city in the Gaza strip. The French army had now entered Palestine.

Napoleon arrived in Khan Yunis ahead of Kléber, who had gotten lost in the desert. When the Commander-in-Chief found himself in Khan Yunis with only his escort, he fell back on Santon. Santon, as described in contemporary accounts, was three leagues from Khan Yunis. The accepted measure of a league is three miles.

Not only Kléber was lost but Bon's division, too, had wandered astray in the desert. Lannes followed Bon. Thus all three divisions were lost. They finally united with Napoleon in Santon where they were joined by the cavalry. [15]

As the united French army approached Khan Yunis, the Mamelukes fell back on Gaza. Napoleon sighted enemy cavalry in front of Gaza. He formed his divisions into three squares and advanced with fixed bayonets. The Mameluke army faded away. The French seized a large quantity of arms, food and supplies. Two days later Napoleon resumed his march northward toward Jaffa. Berthier reports that Bonaparte's troops

encamped in "Esdodes." [16] This was undoubtedly Ashdod, like Gaza, a Philistine city of the Pentapolis, consisting of Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron. The French army passed Ramle and Ledda [Lydda].

When he arrived at Jaffa, Napoleon ordered Kléber's division and the cavalry to take up a position six miles north of the city, to cover his investiture of Jaffa. [17] Bon's and Lannes' divisions laid siege to the heavily fortified port. Two days of bombardment opened a breach. Napoleon poured grape-shot into the city and ordered a general assault. [18] After Jaffa fell to the French, the first of the two charges of cruelty were leveled at Napoleon. Reports appeared that told of the shooting of Mameluke prisoners of war. Unlike the later charge of poisoning sick French soldiers, this charge was true. Napoleon himself acknowledged that it had taken place. In his memoirs he wrote,

Amongst the garrison of Jaffa, a number of Turkish troops were discovered, whom I had taken a short time before at El Arish, and sent to Bagdat [sic] upon their parole not to serve again, or to be found in arms against me for a year. I had caused them to be escorted twelve leagues [36 miles] on their way to Bagdat, by a division of my army. But these Turks instead of proceeding to Bagdat, threw themselves into Jaffa, defended it to the last, and cost me a number of brave men to take it, whose lives would have been spared if the others had not reinforced the garrison of Jaffa. Moreover before I attacked the town, I sent there a flag of truce. Immediately afterwards we saw the head of the bearer elevated on a pole over the walls. Now if I had spared them again, and sent them away on their parole, they would directly have gone to St. Jean d'Acre, where they would have played over again the same scene that they have done at Jaffa. In justice to the lives of my soldiers...I could not allow this. To leave as a guard a portion of my army, already small and reduced in number, in consequence of the breach of faith of these wretches; it was impossible. Indeed, to have acted otherwise than as I did, would probably have caused the destruction of my whole army. I therefore, availing myself of the rights of war, which authorize the putting to death prisoners taken under such circumstances; independent of the right given to me by having taken the city by assault, and that retaliation taken on the Turks ordered that the prisoners taken at El Arish, who in defiance of their capitulation, had been found bearing arms against me, should be selected out and shot. The rest, amounting to a considerable number, were spared. I would...do the same thing again tomorrow, and so would Wellington, or any general commanding an army under similar circumstances. [19]



Kléber, Bon and Lannes marched to Acre. Blocking their route was Abdullah Pasha with 1,000 cavalry and 50,000 foot from the east. Berthier called them Naplousians (Nablusians). Lannes cut them off from the cavalry and drove them into the eastern mountains.

Napoleon reached the foot of the Carmel range, where the prophet Elijah had defeated the priests of Baal. There the plain of Acre lay before him. He dispatched Kléber to seize Haifa, which had been evacuated by the Turks.

Two days later Napoleon resumed his march to Acre. He assumed personal command and ordered his men to drive the enemy into the fortress of St. Jean d'Acre. He then ordered units to Safed and Nazareth to clear the debauches that could be used by troops from Damascus. [20]

Lannes

Sorties by the Turks and Arabs, supported by English ships were driven back into Acre. Bonaparte's troops were horrified when the Butcher displayed the heads of decapitated French dead and wounded. Several days later

Napoleon's troops found bags strewn on the beach. When opened, they gazed upon bodies of their comrades who had been captured by the enemy, tied in pairs and cast into the sea.

Napoleon was informed by Christians in Damascus that a large body of Mameluke and Janissaries was about to cross the Jordan. His outposts at Safed and Nazareth confirmed the passage of two columns of Arabs heading for Tabor and Jenin. Bonaparte dispatched General Junot with 300 infantrymen and 160 cavalry to reconnoiter the mountains around Nazareth. As Junot turned Mt. Loubi "...he found himself surrounded by 4,000 horsemen..." [21] He fought bravely and with well trained coolness. His small detachment more than decimated the enemy who left 500-600 dead on the field. The French lost 60. Carrying the five stands of colors that he captured, Junot continued on to Nazareth, the city that had seen the birth of Christianity.

When Napoleon heard the news of Junot's engagement, he ordered Kléber to march to his aid with the balance of his command. Kléber camped at Sepphoris overnight and then continued on to Nazareth for badly needed provisions.



General Kléber

The next day Kléber's refreshed troops moved to join Junot. When he was within one-half mile of effecting a juncture, the enemy poured down from the heights with 600 foot and 4,000 horse. As the horde of Turks and Arabs prepared to attack, Kléber charged them and scattered them. The enemy withdrew to Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, where they re-grouped and marched to form a junction with "Naplousians." Kléber notified Napoleon that he now faced 15,000 to 18,000 men with reports that another 30,000 Turkish, Syrian and Mameluke troops were on the way to attack him. [22] Kléber, outnumbered ten to one, went over to the attack.

Meanwhile Napoleon realized that he would have to fight a major battle and thought it imprudent to await the enemy on the plain of Acre. He moved to join Kléber at once and ordered General of Brigade Murat to march northeastward with 1,000 infantry and a regiment of horse. His instructions to Murat were to attack the rear of the Turkish army that was besieging

Safed and then to join Kléber. [23] Kléber notified Napoleon that he was on his way to "Fouli," modern Afula. At Fouli he planned to turn the enemy's position and place himself between them and Tiberias.

The General-in-Chief left Regnier's and Samuel's divisions to keep the Turks and English bottled up in Acre and, with eight pieces of artillery, the division of General Bon and the rest of the cavalry, he marched to join Kléber.

After a night's rest at Sepphoris, Napoleon reached Mt. Tabor, the site of the Biblical battle fought 2,900 years before. Napoleon knew his Bible well and planned to destroy the Turks as Deborah and Barak had destroyed the army of King Jabin of Hazor.

When he was in sight of Mt. Tabor he saw that Kléber, with 2,000 troops was already engaged with 20,000 cavalry. Berthier reported that Napoleon fired an eight pounder to signal his arrival to Kléber. Kléber, upon hearing the signal, launched an attack on Afula, carrying it with the bayonet.

In Napoleon's report to the Directory he noted that

...the enemy moved from the right of General Kléber, and advanced to the plain of Esdradon [Biblical Jezreel] in order to form a junction with the Naplousians. General Kléber pushed forward between the river Jordan and the enemy, turned Mt. Tabor, and marched the whole night...for the purpose of taking the enemy by surprise. [24]

Kléber arrived in the presence of the enemy after day-break. He immediately formed his division into a square. The infantry hollow square which had been developed by Marlborough eighty-five years before Napoleon's campaign, was still the best defense against cavalry. [25] Jomini wrote, "Squares are good in plains and to oppose an enemy who had a superiority in cavalry...all the orders of battle may be formed of squares as well as with deployed lines." [26] The square presented a wall of bayonets against the onslaught of horsemen. No horse, no matter how well trained or how excited he might be in his charge, will throw his breast onto a phalanx of bayonets.

Napoleon's account of the Battle of Mt. Tabor continues:

...a cloud of enemies surrounded him [Kléber] on every side. He had to encounter, through the whole day, repeated charges of cavalry; but they were all repulsed with the greatest bravery.

The division of General Bon left the camp before Acre at noon on the 25th [April 14], and on the 27th at nine o'clock in the morning, he found himself on the rear of the enemy, who occupied an immense plain. We never saw such a number of cavalry, wheeling, charging and maneuvering in every direction. We did not make our appearance at all, our cavalry carried the camp of the enemy, which was distant two leagues from the field of battle. We took upwards of 400 camels and all the baggage...The Generals Vial and Rampon, at the head of their troops, formed into square battalions, marched in different directions, in such a manner as to form with the division of Kléber the three angles of an equilateral triangle extending about 2,000 toises [4,000 yards] on each side, of which the enemy formed the center. In the twinkling of an eye, this immense cloud of horsemen was scattered in disorder, and reached the banks of the Jordan.... [27]



Murat

Meanwhile Murat, having raised the siege of Safed, drove a massive, polyglot army across the Jordan, "...after having left an immense quantity of dead on the ground." [28]

According to Kobler 30,000 Turks attacked the French. Napoleon accepted their attack and destroyed them with 4,500 men.

Back at Acre the slow moving siege was getting nowhere. A few minor breaches were made with the 24 pounders, but never large enough to pour troops into Acre. Several sallies were mounted by the Turks and were beaten back. So the siege continued. Since England ruled the sea, as many as thirty ships at a time could bring supplies right into the harbor of Acre.

It was during the siege of Acre that Napoleon recommended Lannes for a promotion to General of Division. Lannes had served Napoleon well and would continue to do so as he rose to be a Marshal of France and Le Duc de Montebello, after his great victory at the Battle of Montebello.

Napoleon, in his report to the Directory dated 8 Prairial, corresponding to May 27, 1799, discussed the appearance of the plague in Acre,

The opportunity appeared to be favorable for carrying the place; but our spies, the deserters, and the prisoners all agreed in stating that the plague was then making the most terrible ravages in the town of Acre; that more than sixty persons died of it every day; and that the symptoms of it were dreadful, those who were seized with it dying in thirty-six hours, and in convulsions similar to the paroxysms of madness. Had we entered the town, it would have been impossible to prevent the soldiers from pillage; and thus, in

the evening, they would have brought into the camp the seeds of that dreadful disease more formidable than all the armies in the world. [29]



Berthier

According to Berthier 700 men had already died of the plague. In addition Napoleon received news that a combined force of British and Turkish armies were being formed for a descent upon Egypt. These reports of an impending invasion to the south, the increasing ravages of the plague and the growing futility of the investment of Acre, combined to convince Bonaparte to break off the siege and return to Egypt.

Berthier reports,

...at nine in the evening of the 1st of Prairial, the drums were beat to march, and the siege which lasted sixty one days after the opening of the trenches, was raised.... The division of General Lannes began their march for Cantoura; they were followed by the army and park equipage, and by General Bon's division. The division of General Kléber, and the cavalry, took their respective positions, the infantry behind the dam of trenches, the cavalry in front of the river of Acre.... General Kléber sent information to

General Regnier, whose division was in the trenches, that he had taken his positions. The latter immediately made his corps file off in the greatest silence...The army conducted the march with the greatest order. On the 2nd we arrived at Cantoura (Tantura, Tel Dor). [30]

It was at Tantura that Napoleon decided that he had to abandon half of his artillery, since he only had enough horses to draw twenty cannons. As Berthier wrote, "He caused twenty to be thrown into the sea, and burnt the carriages and caissons on the harbour of Cantoura." [31] De Bourienne recorded that the 24 pounders "were buried in the sands of the beach [and]... the soldiers seemed to forget their own sufferings, plunged in grief at the loss of their bronze guns; often the instruments of their triumphs, and which made Europe tremble." [23]

Tantoura is on the site of the great Biblical city of Dor, [33] one of the confederates of King Jabin of Hazor, who led the coalition of Canaanites against Joshua and was not conquered until 1,000 BCE by King David.

Napoleon ordered that all remaining horses be put at the disposal of the wounded and the sick. He set the example by giving up his own mount to a wounded man. Emil Ludwig says that of the 8,000 troops that remained 2,000 were sick and wounded and when the horses had all been allocated, four healthy soldiers carried one wounded or sick one. [34]

For years Israeli archaeologists had been retrieving muskets and cannon balls from the sea around Tantoura. Most scholars assumed that the ordnance had found its way to the seabed by shipwreck. Two archaeologists, Wachsmann and Rayeh researched the Atlas of Jacotin, which had been published in



1820, and portrayed the regions through which Napoleon's troops had marched, a scant 19 years before the drawing of the maps. [35] Wachsmann recorded,

Slowly opening the great book, which is the size of a small kitchen table...we turned to the beautifully etched map of the Carmel coast. Our fingers traced the coastline down to the regions of Dor/Tantura. There, slightly inland, but not far from where we were coming up with the weaponry in the sea was a crossed musket and saber which marked the spot where Napoleon camped on the 21st of May 1799! [36]

He speculated that the 24 pounders might have been too heavy for the men to carry out to sea in small boats.

We had somewhat unwittingly fallen upon a nearly forgotten footnote of history...Could the muskets that we had raised once have belonged to Napoleon's soldiers? Where had they buried the 24's; and were they still there? Where had they jettisoned the other cannons in the sea. [37]

The archaeologists thought that a map of the burial of the 24's might exist since Bourienne had noted the men's affection for the guns. They contacted Colonel Paul Willing who was the head curator of the Hotel national des Invalides in Paris. Colonel Willing replied that he knew of no map, but from the line drawings and photos that Wachsmann had sent him he was able to identify the four flintlock muskets that the Israelis had recovered. They were French service muskets of 1777 model. "This model, with several changes, continued in service until 1840. The muskets must have belonged to Bonaparte's soldiery." [38]

In addition to the guns, they had dug up a concretion that contained the impression of a scabbard and a few small pieces of wood. The archaeologists made a mold out of the impression and recast the scabbard, which they forwarded to Colonel Willing. He identified it as an infantry grenadier's scabbard that had been in use from 1789-1800.

Next they located a bronze cannon on the seabed, which they floated to the top with air-filled float bags. As they cleared the cannon, they discovered the Turkish crescent and star on the muzzle and a Tugra, the symbol of the Sultan. They were disappointed until they turned to Berthier and found the citation mentioned above in which he describes abandoning captured Turkish cannon in the Mediterranean. They checked the description with Lieutenant-General (Ret.) Behaddin Alpskan at the Turkish Military Museum. He replied that it was very similar to a cannon that had been dated to the reign of Sultan Selim III, who reigned from 1789-1808.

The discovery of the Turkish cannon was followed by that of a Spanish mortar that bore part of an inscription containing part of the name of Carlos IV, who ruled from 1788 to 1808.

After disposing of the artillery and other encumbrances, the French troops resumed their march to Jaffa, where the story of the poisoning of sick soldiers began. The tale that has circulated for two centuries alleged that Napoleon had his medics administer over-doses of opium to some of his plague-ridden troops. The story explained that he did not want to have them fall into the hands of the Turks, who would torture them.

Las Cases listed five statements that he said proved the falsehood of the poisoning story:

1st that the invalids in question, who were infected with the plague amounted [...only to seven in number [not 60]. 2nd that it was not the General-in-Chief but a professional man, who,...proposed the administering of opium. 3rd that opium was not administered to a single individual. 4th that the retreat having been effected slowly, a rear-guard was left behind in Jaffa for three days. 5th that on the departure of the rear-guard, the invalids were all dead, except one or two who must have fallen into the hands of the English. [39]

Even Bourienne, who disliked and was jealous of Napoleon, did not give credence to the alleged poisoning. He cited the memoirs of the Duc de Rovigo. The Duc said that if it were true, which it was not, nobody could be found to force open the mouths of the dying plague victims to force them to swallow the opium. He thought that if there were any truth to the tale, opium would have been left within reach of the men to help them end their wretched lives before the Turks could torture them. [40]

Las Cases recalled a very strange tale. The apothecary-in-chief was, according to Las Cases, a scoundrel who profited throughout the campaign. Napoleon had condemned him to be shot, but relented when the other members of the medical staff pleaded for him. Later, when he was captured by the English in Cairo, Las Cases said that the apothecary fabricated the entire story of the poisoning. [41]

Napoleon told O'Meara that there was no truth to the story. He said that if he had thought to poison the men, "...he would have called a council of war, ...and published it in the order of the day. It should have been no secret..." [42] "I ordered four or 500 cavalry to remain behind and not to quit the place until all were dead." [43]

Napoleon left Jaffa after three days of burning the surrounding hostile towns. He levied a "contribution" on the merchants of 150,000 livres and carried off all of the corn and cattle that he could. With Regnier's, Bon's and Lannes' divisions he resumed his march southward toward Egypt. Kléber's division remained behind for 24 hours to guard the army's rear. They marched through Khan Yunis and Gaza and continued through El Arish.

As he approached Cairo, General Bonaparte drew up his army in parade order. He issued a victory palm frond to each man to be proudly worn in his hat. With drums beating and all flags flying Napoleon marched into Cairo.

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## Notes

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