

= Battle of Alexandretta =

The Battle of Alexandretta was the first clash between the forces of the Byzantine Empire and the Fatimid Caliphate in Syria . It was fought in early 971 near Alexandretta , while the main Fatimid army was besieging Antioch , which the Byzantines had captured two years previously . The Byzantines , led by one of Emperor John I Tzimiskes ' household eunuchs , lured a 4 @, @ 000 @-@ strong Fatimid detachment to attack their empty encampment and then attacked them from all sides , destroying the Fatimid force . The defeat at Alexandretta , coupled with the Qarmatian invasion of southern Syria , forced the Fatimids to lift the siege and secured Byzantine control of Antioch and northern Syria .

= = Background = =

On 28 October 969 , Antioch fell to the Byzantine commander Michael Bourtzes . The fall of the great metropolis of northern Syria was soon followed by a treaty between the Byzantines and the Hamdanid Emirate of Aleppo , which made Aleppo a tributary vassal and handed over to the Byzantine Empire the entirety of the former Abbasid frontier zones (thughur) in Cilicia and Upper Mesopotamia , as well as the coastal strip of Syria between the Mediterranean Sea and the Orontes River until the environs of Tripoli , Arqa , and Shayzar . Byzantine control of this area was initially only theoretical , and the murder of the Byzantine emperor Nikephoros II Phokas in December 969 threatened to nullify Byzantine gains in the region .

Further south , the troops of the Fatimids of Ifriqiya , under the command of Jawhar al @-@ Siqilli , had just conquered Egypt from its Ikhshidid rulers . Seized with the spirit of jihad and aiming to legitimize their rule , the Fatimids used the Byzantine advance on Antioch and the " infidel " threat as a major item in their propaganda aimed towards the newly conquered region , along with promises to restore just government . The news of Antioch 's fall helped to persuade the Fatimids to allow Jawhar to send Ja 'far ibn Falah to invade Palestine . There , Ja 'far defeated the last Ikhshidid remnants under al @-@ Hasan ibn Ubayd Allah ibn Tughj and took Ramla in May 970 , before occupying Damascus in November .

= = Siege of Antioch and battle at Alexandretta = =

Almost as soon as Damascus submitted , Ja 'far ibn Falah entrusted one of his ghilman , named Futuh (" Victories ") , to carry out the promised jihad against the Byzantines , although the 15th @-@ century compilation *Uyun al @-@ Akhbar* by the Yemeni historian Imad al @-@ Din Idris ibn al @-@ Hasan also mentions a certain Abdallah ibn Ubayd Allah al @-@ Husayni Akhu Muslim as commander . Futuh assembled a large army of Kutama Berbers , strengthened with levies from Palestine and southern Syria , and moved to besiege Antioch in December 970 . The Byzantine writer Kedrenos claims that the Fatimid army numbered a clearly much exaggerated 100 @, @ 000 men , but Imad al @-@ Din records the number as 20 @, @ 000 men . The Fatimids laid siege to the city , but its inhabitants offered stiff resistance , and Ibn Falah had to send " army after army " , in the description of the 14th @-@ century historian Abu Bakr ibn al @-@ Dawadari , apparently from the levies raised in southern Syria , to its reinforcement . Following the account of the 15th @-@ century Egyptian al @-@ Maqrizi , it was with these additional troops , which he puts at 4 @, @ 000 men , that it became possible to completely halt the city 's resupply by intercepting the caravans headed towards it .

In the meantime , Nikephoros ' murderer and successor , John I Tzimiskes , was unable to intervene in person in the east due to the more menacing invasion of the Balkans by Sviatoslav I of Kiev . As a result , he sent a small force under a trusted eunuch of his household , the patrikios Nicholas , who according to the contemporary Leo the Deacon was experienced in battle , to relieve the siege . In the meantime , the siege of Antioch had continued for five months over winter and into spring , without result . At some point , a Fatimid detachment ? according to Ibn al @-@ Dawadari 4 @, @ 000 men under a Berber chieftain called Aras and a former emir of Tarsus , Ibn az @-@

Zayyat ? moved north against Alexandretta , where the Byzantine relief army had camped . Informed of their approach , the Byzantine commander vacated the camp and placed his troops in ambush . Finding the enemy encampment deserted , the Fatimid troops began to plunder it , heedless of anything else . At that moment , Nicholas launched a surprise attack from all sides and the Fatimid force disintegrated ; most of the Muslim army perished , but Aras with Ibn az @-@ Zayyat managed to escape .

The defeat at Alexandretta was a major blow to Fatimid morale . Coupled with news of an advance against Damascus of the Qarmatians , a radical Isma 'ili group originating from Eastern Arabia , Ibn Falah ordered Futuh to raise the siege of Antioch in early July 971 . The army returned to Damascus , whence the various contingents dispersed to their home districts .

= = Aftermath = =

The fist clash between the eastern Mediterranean 's two foremost powers thus ended in a Byzantine victory , which on the one hand strengthened the Byzantine position in northern Syria and on the other weakened the Fatimids , both in lives lost and in morale and reputation . As the historian Paul Walker writes , had Ibn Falah " possessed the troops and the prestige lost at Alexandretta , he might have resisted the onrush of the Qarmatians . The armies of the local districts might have aided him had they not dispersed " . In the event , Ja 'far was unable to resist the Qarmatians and their Arab Bedouin allies ; making the fatal choice of confronting them in the desert , he was defeated and killed in battle in August 971 . It was a defeat that led to the near total collapse of Fatimid control in southern Syria and Palestine , and the Qarmatian invasion of Egypt . The Fatimids were victorious before Fustat , however , and eventually managed to drive the Qarmatians out of Syria and restore their control over the restive province . The Byzantines remained quiescent until the great campaigns led by John Tzimiskes in person in 974 ? 975 . Although the emperor advanced deep in Muslim lands and even threatened to take Jerusalem , his death in January 976 lifted the Byzantine danger for the Fatimids : the Byzantines would never again try to advance far beyond their northern Syrian possessions around Antioch .