Lessons for Today from Umayyad Invasion of Gaul

by CPT Thomas W. Doherty

As military officers we were taught the fundamentals of the offense and defense. However, as an instructor, it has surprised me that my students do not understand that the fundamentals of offense are applicable during defense and, of course, vice versa. This article gives a historical example of the symbiotic relationship between the offense and defense. In this example, the rulers of Gaul were on the strategic and operational defensive. Given this, they used tactical-level offenses to achieve victory.

Historical background

The Umayyad invasions north of the Pyrenees Mountains during the first half of the 8th Century were critical in deciding the future social structures in all of Europe. There is some histotrophic debate on the purpose of the Muslim excursions into what is modern-day France (then known as Gaul) and if Christianity would have survived if the Christian armies had not defeated the Muslim attacks. The Umayyad Caliphate did invade to conquer, and although Christianity may have survived, a successful conquest of Gaul would have drastically changed the social structure of Europe by changing the dominant religion.

During the early 8th Century, the Umayyad Caliphate conquered most of the Iberian Peninsula and most of Septimania. However, it did not control Septimania north of the Pyrenees Mountains. The Umayyad Caliphate still maintained the goal of extending the caliphate to include the lands to the north of the Pyrenees Mountains.[1] With this in mind, Muslim armies began a campaign to subdue Gaul that would last for decades.

Figure 1. Pivotal battle sites between Umayyad army forces and Europeans.

Some historians credit two pivotal battles for turning back the tide of Muslim expansion in Europe. These were the Battle of Toulouse in 721 AD and the Battle of Tours-Poitiers in either 732 or 733 AD.[2] These two battles tend to

attract most of the attention due to propaganda put forward by the Christian rulers; however, they were not the only battles. For example, the caliphate sent even larger armies north of the Pyrenees after the Battle of Tours.[3]

In 721 AD, the Umayyad Caliphate launched an invasion led by the governor of al-Andalus (modern-day Spain), al-Samh.[4] Al-Samh's goals included the subjugation of the cities of Narbonne and Toulouse in an attempt to conquer Aquitania.[5] Al-Samh easily took Narbonne and then laid siege to Toulouse, capital of Aquitania.[6]

Duke Odo, ruler of Aquitaina, was unsuccessful in preventing the siege on his capital. However, he ensured he was not in Toulouse when it was besieged. This allowed Duke Odo time to strengthen his army with Aquitanians and Gascons.[7] Duke Odo then returned and attacked al-Samh's army from behind and from within the city simultaneously. During the fighting, al-Samh was killed and his army fled the battlefield, returning to Narbonne.

Some saw this as a victory of Christianity over Islam, stemming the tide of Islamist expansion.[8] However, the Umayyad Caliphate was not finished with its plans for the north and retained the city of Narbonne. Al-Samh was an efficient governor, and his death set back the caliphate about 10 years.[9] Infighting disrupted further offensive operations from 725 AD to 730 AD.[10] However, Toulouse only marked the beginning of multiple invasions. After a period of recovery, the Umayyad Caliphate again marched on Gaul.

In either 732 AD or 733 AD, a large caliphate army of Berbers and Saracens led by Abd ar-Rahman began plundering across southern Gaul, destroying everything, including churches.[11] The desecration of churches facilitated Charles Martel's narrative that this invasion was an attack on Christianity. Eventually the Muslim army gathered a vast treasure, and it began to lose the will to keep fighting.[12] Martel, who was campaigning to the north, turned his army south to meet the caliphate invasion. The armies met somewhere between the cities of Poitiers and Tours.

For the first few days, the battle consisted of skirmishes of varying degrees of intensity. Near the end, the main armies met with the Franks under Martel, forming a wall with infantry. After letting the caliphate army batter itself against the wall, an opening appeared for Martel, and Duke Odo conducted a raid on the caliphate army's camp. Large portions of ar-Rahman's army broke ranks to protect their loot and family members. It was at this point that Martel switched his army to the offensive and assaulted the caliphate army with infantry and cavalry. In the fighting that followed, an arrow killed ar-Rahman as he attempted to reform his lines.

Seeing their leader killed, the caliphate army fell apart. The next day, Martel's army moved forward to engage the enemy. Instead, his army found the enemy camp abandoned with the tents still standing – the enemy had been so eager to escape that they did not take the time to break camp properly.[13]

After the Battle of Tours, the caliphate's army retreated in defeat to rebuild. Two years later, another large caliphate army led by Emir Abd al-Malik crossed the Pyrenees Mountains.[14] In what would prove to be his last major battle, Duke Odo defeated al-Malik's army decisively. This caused the leaders of the Umayyad Caliphate to recall al-Malik to Damascus in disgrace.[15] The Umayyad Caliphate continued to order more invasions in an attempt to increase tax revenue and to eliminate the Franks.[16] Incursions into Gaul with even larger armies continued for another decade and placed extreme pressure on the Frankish armies.[17]

Historiographic debate

After the Battle of Toulouse, there is a greater histotrophic argument about the purpose of the Umayyad Caliphate incursions into Gaul. Tolan, Laurens and Veinstein argue in ***Europe and the Islamic World: A History*** that the Muslims were simply raiding. Coppee argues there was a definitive Islamic-expansion motivation in ***History of the Conquest of Spain***, and Lewis in ***God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe*** argues that the goal of the attacks was to gain new taxable lands for the caliphate. Watson in ***The Battle of Tours Revisited*** argues that the 732 AD expedition was an attempt to kill Duke Odo. Historians may disagree on why the caliphate kept sending armies into Gaul, but not that they did.

Islam does have a voluntary form of jihad for conquest called Dar al-Harb (House of War).[18] Though voluntary like the later Christian Crusades, this form of jihad was a way to make religious amends. Today's historian may look back and think the caliphate had reached its limits, but the caliphate was still expanding and had no reason to believe it could not conquer Gaul. Also, the Umayyad armies laid siege to cities and overran Narbonne, which they held for 40 years.

When the caliphate armies raided to disrupt possible enemies or to gather loot, they traveled light and quickly. They were in the greatest danger on the way home with baggage trains of loot and prisoners. Therefore, if the Umayyad Caliphate's armies had been intent on just raiding, they would not have conducted prolonged sieges like the one conducted by al-Samh at Toulouse. Laying siege to and garrisoning cities clearly indicated the caliphate was on a campaign of conquest and not just raiding for loot. Another key indicator that the caliphate intended to conquer Europe was its boasting about how it would make Europe worship Allah and his prophet.[19]

Meaning for today

There are some key takeaways the modern warfighter can learn from the Umayyad Caliphate's campaign to conquer Gaul. The Franks were strategically on the defense – however, their greatest victories came as a result of properly using the fundamentals of offense. Strategically, the best defense the Franks had was a good offense.

Duke Odo and Martel used three of the four characteristics of the offense. In both battles, they used surprise by hitting the caliphate armies in a time and manner that was not anticipated. They concentrated the effects of their armies both times, allowing them to severely degrade the enemy's mission-command warfighting function. Audacious plans by the Franks won both battles by throwing the caliphate armies off balance.

The Franks used two forms of maneuver to achieve victory. Duke Odo first used an enveloping attack at the Battle of Toulouse. His coordinated, simultaneous attack from besieged Toulouse and his unbesieged army allowed him to destroy the caliphate army in its position. This caused the survivors to flee Aquitania. During the Battle of Tours-Poitiers, the Franks used a turning movement. Even though the army under Martel was in a defensive position, it had effectively fixed the caliphate army. Duke Odo's attack on the caliphate army's camp caused them to turn from their positions to meet the new perceived threat. It was when the caliphate army started to turn from its position that Martel switched to an offensive posture and routed it.

3 types of offense

The Franks used three of the four types of offensive operations. Even though the Battle of Toulouse turned into a siege, each battle started with a movement-to-contact. During both battles, the Frankish armies conducted an attack to defeat the caliphate armies. Martel conducted a non-kinetic form of exploitation attack using what we today call information operations (IO). He used the caliphate armies' plundering to enrage passion to resist the caliphate invasions. He was also able to use IO to paint himself as the hero, setting the stage for the rise of Charlemagne (Martel's grandson).

The Franks used two forms of special-purpose attacks to achieve victory. At Toulouse, Duke Odo used a counterattack after the caliphate forces had surrounded his capital. At the Battle of Tours-Poitiers, Martel also conducted a counterattack. However, his counterattack was in coordination with a raid conducted by Duke Odo on the caliphate army's camp. Both times it was special-purpose attacks that defeated the caliphate armies.

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Notes

[1] Henry Coppee, ***History of the Conquest of Spain by the Arab-Moors with a Sketch of the Civilization Which They Achieved and Imparted to Europe***, Volume I, Boston, Little Brown and Company, 1892.

[2] G.R. Hawting, ***The First Dynasty of Islam: The Ummayyad Caliphate AD 661-750***, 2 ed., New York, Routledge, 2000, and William E. Watson, "The Battle of Tours-Poitiers Revisited," ***Providence: Studies in Western Civilization,*** 1993.

[3] David Levering Lewis, ***God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570-1215***, New York: W.W. Norton, 2008.

[4] Depending on the reference, al-Samh ibn Malik al-Khawlānī or al-Samh was also known as Assamah. This is most likely a difference in opinion on inserting letters to create a phonetic transliteration of the name. Al-Samh is used to prevent confusion.

[5] Coppee.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid. and Lewis.

[10] Watson.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Coppee.

[13] Lewis.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] John Tolan, Gilles Veinstein and Henry Laurens, ***Europe and the Islamic World: a History,*** translated by Jane Marie Todd, Princeton University Press, 2013.

[19] Coppee.

Acronym Quick-Scan

IO – information operations
LRS – long-range surveillance
MOS – military-occupational specialty