

# The Siege of Diu

The Siege of Diu was a protracted four-month siege in which the Sultan of Gujarat, with support from the Ottoman Empire, attempted to capture the Portuguese-held city of Diu in 1538. The siege ended in a Portuguese victory.

This article will further highlight the background and events of the siege of Diu within the context of the IAS Exam.

## Events before the Siege of Diu

Ever since Vasco da Gama reached India first after a circumnavigation of Africa in 1498, Portuguese reach and power had been growing rapidly in the Indian Ocean. In 1500, the same Portuguese Armada made another expedition, bombarding the Samoothiri (Zamorin) kingdom of Calicut and establishing its factory in Cochin.

By 1504 Portuguese ships were plundering Arab shipping near the Red Sea, earning the ire of the Mamluk Sultanate and their trading partner, the Republic of Venice. Despite Venetian encouragement and the promise by the Ottoman Empire to provide materialistic support for a coalition against Portugal, little resistance was forthcoming against Portuguese piracy.

The political fragmentation of Western India in the 16th century allowed the Portuguese to find ready allies despite their hostile bearing and enmity between the various sultanates and city-states.

After a decisive victory at the Battle of Diu in 1509 (fought on February 3) against the Mamluks, Zamorins and the Ottomans, Portuguese sea power was left unchecked for almost three decades.

Central to the naval campaigns was Alfonso de Albuquerque, a masterful admiral and statesman. Acting with considerable autonomy in waters far from his distant homelands, he had already seized Muscat and Hormuz before the battle at Diu and was elevated to become the governor of Portuguese India. By the time of his death in 1515, Alfonso had established a network of ports and bases which would allow the Portuguese navy to fight on even terms a world away from their home shores.

For the Mamluks, on the other hand, the loss of Indian trade was devastating. The vibrant port of Alexandria fell into stagnation, with Indian spices now flowing into Lisbon. In an attempt to remedy the situation, Mamluks resorted to heavy taxation which caused instability and revolts in the kingdom. This was taken advantage of by the Ottoman Sultan, Selim I, who launched an

invasion of the Mamluk Empire in 1516. By 1517 Ottoman flags flew over the Mamluk Capital of Cairo.

But the Ottomans quickly had found that they had inherited their predecessor's piracy crisis. Although no outright hostilities would take place during the reign of Selim I, it was a foregone conclusion that war was inevitable as both the Turks and the Portuguese sought to gain allies and influence in India to strengthen their maritime trade.

## Ottoman Alliance with Gujarat Sultanate

In its search for allies in the Indian Ocean, the Ottoman Empire found common cause with the Sultanate of Gujarat. The Gujarat Sultanate was a powerful city-state in its heyday before the Mughal Empire's incursion by land and Portuguese sea power left it diminished and weakened, forced into a tributary status to powerful empires in order to retain its autonomy. After being on the losing side of the battle of Diu, Gujarat would turn to the Ottomans for aid in maintaining control of its trade, but the aid would be late in coming as the Ottomans were preoccupied with the Balkan wars.

The first serious threat to Portuguese naval power came after the Ottoman victory at Jeddah in 1517. The victory prompted many sultanates of the western coast including Gujarat to turn towards the Ottoman Empire as their suzerain. In the following years, Ottoman soldiers and military experts would be sent to the courts of Gujarat and the Zamorins at Calicut, simultaneously strengthening the defences of port cities and increasing the influence of the Sultan abroad.

Under the command of Governor Nuno da Cunha, the Portuguese had attempted to capture Diu by force in February 1531, unsuccessfully. Thereafter, the Portuguese waged war on Gujarat, devastating its shores and several cities like Surat.

Soon after however, the Sultan of Gujarat, Bahadur Shah, who was under threat from the Mughal emperor Humayun, made an agreement with the Portuguese, granting them Diu in exchange for Portuguese assistance against the Mughals and protection should the realm fall.

The Portuguese seized the stronghold of Gogala near the city and built the Diu Fort. Once the threat from Humayun was removed, Bahadur tried to negotiate the withdrawal of the Portuguese, but on 13 February 1537, he died drowning during the negotiations on board of a Portuguese ship in unclear circumstances, both sides blaming the other for the tragedy.

Using the death of Bahadur as *casus belli* for war the Ottoman Empire sent a fleet under Hadım Suleiman Pasha in 1538 laying siege to the very city they had defended 7 years earlier.

## Events during the siege at Diu

Although a naval engagement would generally favour the Portuguese, they had been caught by surprise by the Ottoman armada. Upon landing in September, the 6000 Ottoman soldiers disembarked to join the Gujarat forces of 16000 under the command of Khadjar Safar, which had been besieging the forces for the last 2 months with little success due to lack of ships and cannon. With only 3000 Portuguese under António da Silveira, the odds looked insurmountable in the face of the combined Ottoman and Gujarati forces

But the Portuguese had a number of advantages:

1. The Fort they had built was newly built along European lines, greatly superior to the other medieval bastions it had replaced. It allowed them to draw chains across the Diu channels to block the Ottoman navy
2. The alliance between Ottomans and the Gujarati forces was weak. Further when the city of Diu was abandoned by the Portuguese were when they retreated to the fort, it was ransacked by a force of Ottoman troops anyway. The senseless destruction of their city caused outrage among the nobles of Gujarat. It would affect the siege in an unprecedented way.
3. The Ottomans were unwilling to risk a battle so far from their home shores, under pressure to capture the fort quickly before Portuguese reinforcements would arrive from Goa.

Despite these disadvantages, the Ottomans made steady progress, building siegeworks from which they could bombard the fort at ease. Yet, steady Portuguese fire and the strength of the fort ensured that every attack by the Gujarati and Ottoman forces would be bloodily repulsed in the coming months.

The only Ottoman/Gujarati victory was the taking of the fort named *Vila dos Rumes* across the Diu channel on the mainland shore. Suleiman Pasha forced the commander of the fort to write a letter to the forces at Diu to surrender but they were rejected. Food for the besiegers began to run low as Gujarati nobility refused to supply anymore to a siege which they saw was going nowhere.

On October 31, Suleiman Pasha mounted a final assault on the Diu fort which almost brought them to victory but friendly fire from their own artillery broke up the assault. Plus another sortie by the defender gave the impression that the fort was still defended by the Portuguese despite having only 40 soldiers left, the rest of them comprised civilians from the city. A sighting of a few Portuguese supply ships on November 5 gave the impression that it was the vanguard of the powerful Goa fleet. This prompted Suleiman Pasha to abandon the siege on November 6th, embarking for Yemen leaving 1,200 dead and 500 wounded behind. Khadjar Safar then set fire to his encampment and abandoned the island with his forces shortly after.

## The aftermath of the Siege of Diu

The failure to capture Diu was a major loss for the Ottomans, weakening their influence in India, straining their critical alliance with Gujarat in particular. Spice would continue to work its way

around the Cape of Good Hope, with the Venetians at times forced to purchase it from their Portuguese rivals.

Without a suitable base or allies, failure at Diu meant the Ottomans were unable to proceed with their campaign in India, leaving the Portuguese uncontested in the western Indian coast. Never again would the Ottoman Turks ever send so large an armada to India.