

# Gozo since the Great Calamity: Resilience, Affluenza, Vulnerability

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30<sup>th</sup> July 1551. The Citadel, Gozo

The ‘Drawn Sword of Islam’ Admiral Turgut Reis relished the juicy grapes washed in the clear water of Ghajn Abdul as he oversaw the capitulation of the island. After a one week siege, the citadel surrendered and all the inhabitants were taken to the galleys at Mgarr ix-Xini to be transported to the slave market in Tarhuna, North Africa. The town, villages and hamlets were ransacked and burned. The 40 inhabitants allowed to remain on the island were old and sterile, ensuring that life will not survive. Redemption from slavery was remote for



The ‘Drawn Sword of Islam’ Admiral Turgut Reis, also known as Dragut, who watched over the capitulation of Gozo in 1551. [Photo courtesy: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragut>].

the 5000 destitute inhabitants. The day of retribution had finally arrived and the death sentence had been executed. The bastion walls where Turgut’s brother had been burnt were now a gaping hole. His tormented spirit could now rest in peace and enjoy eternal bliss surrounded by beautiful maidens, precious stones, delicious food, and ever flowing water. Bismi-llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm.<sup>1</sup>

Turgut did not realise, however, that 300 Gozitans had climbed down the citadel walls and hid in the countryside during the siege. These carried the genes of the most resourceful and resilient inhabitants. Nor did he take into account that many of those who crossed over from Malta to repopulate the island after the siege, were driven by a spirit of entrepreneurship and a determination to start a new prosperous life. In less than 150 years the population of the island had reached the pre 1551 levels; in less than 500 years it had multiplied more than six times over. Life in Gozo today is marked by a relatively high level of per capita income, a high employment rate, a booming tourism industry, and GDP growth rate higher than those in most European island regions.

This positive growth and development over the last five centuries may be attributed to various factors, including macro level processes such as political, social and economic policies (though at times these were marked by neglect and marginalisation), the fertile land fed by the water springs found in every corner of the island (Gozo was highly dependent on agriculture in the past), and more recently the exploitation of the island’s natural beauty and historical heritage through tourism. A key micro level factor in this development, however, has been the resilience of the inhabitants themselves, their ability not only to survive the odds, but to keep growing and thriving despite disadvantage such as insularity, poor accessibility and lack of resources.

<sup>1</sup>Translate to, “In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful”.

One of the most marked characteristics of the islanders is the hard work ethic coupled with resourcefulness and ingenuity in overcoming adversity, making use of all available physical and human resources while avoiding waste and overindulgence. This practical ‘wisdom’ of make maximum use of one’s strengths and resources, had particular survival value in the many personal and collective adversities and calamities the islanders faced over the centuries. It provided also a degree of autonomy and independence, in turn leading to a sense of self determination which become more ingrained with time in the Gozitan psyche and identity.

Another protective factor in the island’s resilience pathway has been the strong religious belief of the inhabitants, characterised by the innumerable religious buildings and artefacts found all over the island and the religious calendar which determined the inhabitants’ way of life up to some decades ago. The traditions and legends found in every nook and corner of the island reflect such collective values as hope, justice, compassion, redemption through suffering, triumph of good over evil, and ultimate salvation. While blind faith may be tantamount to insularity and resistance to change and progress, the deep rooted religious beliefs served the islanders very well over the centuries, providing stability

and sense of meaning, giving them the strength they needed to cope in difficult times and the hope that times will get better, with eventual divine intervention to lift epidemics, relieve suffering, rectify injustice and provide good weather for the crops.

The sense of community found in the little villages, hamlets and neighbourhoods also bound the islanders together, serving not only as social capital for the families and communities, but strengthening their resolve to keep improving their and their villages’ lot. For many centuries the island operated as a series of self-reliant, semi-autonomous agricultural communities with limited communication with the outside world. Though such communities may have sometimes operated as oppressive systems, with little breathing space for difference and diversity, they provided safety, physical and social support, and sense of community which ensured the survival and wellbeing of their inhabitants.

The hard work ethic, deep religious faith, social connectedness, ability in making use of own strengths and the resources around them, and the skill in steering clear of unnecessary battles, served the Gozitans very well over the five centuries since the great catastrophe of 1551. It lead to a ‘steeling’ (hardiness) process which ensured not



An aerial view of the Gozo Citadel [Photo courtesy: <http://www.guidememalta.com>].



Would Gozitans be tempted by the grand plan to physically link Gozo to the mainland and sign the death sentence of the island as they know it? Photo courtesy of [www.timesofmalta.com](http://www.timesofmalta.com) accessed on January 2018.

only their survival but their continued growth and development, contributing to their present prosperity and relative affluence.

Affluenza, however, may be as much a risk factor in the island's development as deprivation and poverty. It might lead to unbridled development resulting in the destruction of fertile land, town and village centres, landscapes and coastline. The resilience processes driving the Gozitan way of life protected the inhabitants and their land against adversity, turning their island into a thriving, prosperous community built on hard work and self-reliance balanced with connectedness and collaboration. The challenge today is whether these qualities will also serve the islanders in times of relative affluence as well as they did in times of adversity and deprivation.

Would they be able to resist lucrative offers of short term financial benefits and comforts but the long term destruction of their hills and valleys, villages and towns? Would their reputed astuteness and practical wisdom let them see through such schemes fuelled by unscrupulous speculators leading to the eventual destruction of the natural beauty and ecology of the island, its healthy environment, and

its booming tourism industry which contributes to half of its GDP? Would they realise that their long-standing skill of accommodation may not be adaptive when the livelihood and wellbeing of their own children and grandchildren may be at stake in the long term? Would they be tempted by the grand plan to physically link Gozo to the mainland and sign the death sentence of the island as they know it? (digital technology is making such an apparent necessity increasingly obsolete). Would they let others, including those from their own, do what Turgut failed to do 500 years ago? Would they fall back on their traditional 'steeling' to protect their island? Would they be as resilient in the face of affluenza as they have been in adversity and deprivation?

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