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Algerian Maritime Activity Between Maritime Jihad and Privateering: Multidimensional Impacts During the 17th and 18th Centuries

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Abstract

The strategic geographic positioning of the Algerian coastline along the Western Mediterranean basin was an essential catalyst for the rise and institutionalization of the Algerian naval fleet, particularly following Algeria's formal integration into the Ottoman Empire and its active adoption of the imperial mission to defend Islamic domains. Maritime Jihad (*al-Jihad al-Bahri*) constituted the foundational military and ideological cornerstone for safeguarding Muslim territories, providing refuge to displaced Moriscos, and expanding the frontiers of the Islamic realm under Ottoman suzerainty. Amid structural geopolitics and naval confrontations in the Mediterranean, this maritime mobilization evolved from irregular coastal defense into a highly organized, state-sanctioned enterprise governed by the *Taifat al-Ra'is* (the Guild of Sea Captains). Over time, however, the original religious objectives frequently intersected with—and occasionally yielded to—commercial imperatives, systemic prize captures, and privateering ventures that enriched state coffers and naval elites. This study conducts a critical historiographical and contextual analysis of Algerian maritime warfare during the 17th and 18th centuries. It deconstructs the conceptual tensions between Islamic *Jihad* and Western notions of piracy, examines the socio-economic and geopolitical drivers of naval operations, and evaluates the reciprocal impacts of these naval engagements on Mediterranean state relations.

Keywords: Algerian Navy; Maritime Jihad; Privateering; Piracy; Regency of Algiers; Mediterranean History; Ottoman Empire; *Corso*.

Introduction

Throughout the early modern period, the polities of North Africa were deeply embedded in Mediterranean maritime warfare to such an extent that naval activity became a defining determinant of their overarching macroeconomic trajectories and foreign policies (Sayoud, 2011). The relationship between the Maghreb and the Mediterranean was pivotal; the sea represented both a strategic frontier and the central axis around which political sovereignty and economic exchanges revolved. Historicizing maritime confrontation along the coasts of the Islamic West reveals that naval expeditions emerged concurrently as a grass-roots mode of popular defense and an official political repudiation of European imperial expansion amid asymmetric balances of power. Crucially, this phenomenon cannot be evaluated in isolation from European corsairing. Christian maritime predation was neither solely a consequence of the Age of Discovery nor merely an immediate reaction to the expulsion of Andalusian Muslims; rather, it represented the continuation of a long-standing civilizational and military confrontation rooted in the medieval Crusades. Religious ideology functioned as an enduring catalyst that impelled both shores of the Mediterranean toward violent encounter, retaining structural potency well into the early decades of the nineteenth century (Ghefiri, 2012).

This historical intersection prompts fundamental scholarly questions: Does the divergence between Maritime Jihad and piracy reside merely in ideological nomenclature and historiographical bias, or does it reflect an operational transition from ideological territorial defense toward state-sanctioned naval prize acquisition integral to the political economy of the Regency of Algiers?

1. The Jihad Dimension of Algerian Maritime Activity and Catalysts of Expansion

1.1 The Jihad Dimension: Scriptural and Jurisprudential Foundations

The concept of Maritime Jihad occupies sharply divergent conceptual spaces in historical records. Islamic historiography frames it within lawful defense and sacred endeavor, whereas Christian European accounts traditionally cast it as piracy, predation, or barbarism—discrepancies shaped by sectarian antagonism, temporal imperatives, and political rivalries (Mubarak, 1998; Sayoud, 2009/2010).

In the Islamic tradition, naval warfare derives theoretical legitimacy from the Qur'an, Prophetic Sunnah, instructions of early Caliphs, and consensus-based jurisprudence (*Fiqh*). Qur'anic passages celebrate maritime navigation and commercial seafaring, emphasizing divine favor: *"It is Allah who subjected to you the sea so that ships may sail upon it by His command and that you may seek of His bounty; and perhaps you will be grateful"* (Qur'an 45:12). Furthermore, military mobilization is commanded in broader scriptural directives: *"And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy"* (Qur'an 8:60). Commenting on this injunction, the prominent Algerian scholar Muhammad ibn al-Annabi (1983) explained that the divine command obligates believers to marshal comprehensive defensive readiness, encompassing organized military units, terrestrial and naval vessels, fortifications, trenches, and weaponry.

Prophetic traditions explicitly highlight the spiritual merits of maritime struggle. In narrations recorded by Ibn Majah and al-Tabarani on the authority of Abu Umamah, the Prophet Muhammad stated: *"The martyr of the sea is like two martyrs of the land."* In canonical collections compiled by al-Bukhari and Muslim, the Prophet observed: *"Warriors from my Ummah were presented to me fighting in the cause of Allah, embarking upon the midst of this sea like kings on thrones."*

These theological imperatives were contextualized by rigorous legal parameters established during the early Islamic expansions and elaborated by later jurists. For example, the renowned North African jurist Ahmad al-Wansharisi (d. 914 AH / 1508 CE) addressed maritime prize law and unlawful maritime robbery (*hirabah al-bahr*), issuing a definitive fatwa:

If Muslims engage in maritime campaigns and intercept a commercial vessel laden with cargo, knowing it does not belong to the belligerent enemy, it is unlawful for them to violate it in any manner. Rather, they are duty-bound to preserve it and its contents entirely until they restore it safely to its rightful owners if identified, in obedience to the Almighty's decree: "Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due." (Al-Wansharisi, 1983, Vol. 6, pp. 5–6; Qur'an 4:58)

Scriptural injunctions and jurisprudential limits shaped the collective ethos of North African societies, motivating communities to defend maritime borders and seek spiritual honor while advancing societal defense.

Reflecting on the historical arc of Mediterranean naval power, Ibn Khaldun (2004) noted that organized Muslim maritime campaigns emerged systematically during the latter half of the fourteenth century. Following periods of political fragmentation, Christian kingdoms had secured naval superiority across the Mediterranean basin:

Then the Muslims withdrew from seafaring due to the onset of political feebleness in the state and their relapse into nomadic habits... The Franks returned to their accustomed maritime dominance, gaining ascendancy over all the Mediterranean islands, partitioning its extremities and deep waters, and garrisoning its shores, leaving Muslims navigating it merely as transient crossers. (Ibn Khaldun, 2004, pp. 260–262)

Beyond theological motivations, military and strategic calculations impelled the Islamic re-entry into Mediterranean seafaring. Muslim leaders recognized that naval parity was indispensable for survival, drawing lessons from the Byzantine-Persian wars of the seventh century, in which Byzantine naval power preserved Constantinople from Persian conquest (Oman, 1957).

During the sixteenth century, maritime jihad in the Western Mediterranean proved decisive in halting the Iberian Reconquista from engulfing North Africa. Following the formal integration of Algiers under Ottoman protection in 1518 CE, the city served as the forward bastion in the Ottoman-Habsburg conflict. The naval campaigns conducted by the Barbarossa brothers—Aruj and Khayr al-Din—were explicitly framed as holy warfare against Spanish aggression (Anonymous, 1934). Khayr al-Din executed wide-ranging coastal counteroffensives, dismantled the Spanish fortress of the Peñón of Algiers in 1529 CE, and liberated Tunis in 1534 CE. These victories prompted Emperor Charles V to launch direct counter-expeditions, viewing Ottoman naval ascendancy as an existential challenge to European Christendom (Al-Tamimi, 1978; Merouche, 2007).

1.2 Catalysts for Naval Prosperity

At the close of the fifteenth century, the Islamic West experienced political fragmentation, military vulnerability, and economic decline across its constituent dynasties (Hlayli, 2010). The arrival of the Barbarossa brothers and the establishment of an Ottoman military administration transformed the Western Mediterranean into an arena of organized naval mobilization throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Ben Kharrouf, 2008). Multiple converging factors drove this expansion:

- **Ideological Motivation:** The trauma of the Spanish Reconquista, coupled with aggressive Iberian assaults against North African ports (such as Mers El Kébir, Oran, and Bougie), galvanized Maghrebi communities and Andalusian refugees to embrace maritime jihad as a defensive and retaliatory imperative (Ben Kharrouf, 2008).
- **Geographic Advantage:** Algeria's coastline, spanning over 1,200 kilometers along major Western Mediterranean shipping lanes, offered deep natural anchorages, sheltered ports, and commanding oversight of maritime trade between

Southern Europe and the Atlantic (Bouaziz, 2009).

- **The Ascendancy of the *Taifat al-Ra'is*:** The guild of naval captains constituted the military and political vanguard of the Regency of Algiers. Their mastery of naval tactics, navigational charts, and vessel maneuvering propelled the fleet to prominence in the late sixteenth century, securing tactical victories and immense prize cargoes (Al-Tamimi, 1975).
- **Integration of Andalusian Moriscos:** The systematic expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain provided Algiers with a continuous influx of skilled human capital. Possessing sophisticated knowledge of naval architecture, shipbuilding, cartography, and European languages, the Moriscos fortified naval yards, financed expeditions, managed captive redemptions, and channeled their collective grievances into state-directed naval defense (Ben Kharrouf, 2008; Wolf, 2009).

2. The Historiography of Piracy, Privateering, and the Algerian Navy

The terminology applied to early modern Mediterranean naval warfare reflects deep ideological contestation. Whereas Islamic records classified these campaigns as lawful *Jihad* or maritime expeditions (*Ghazw al-Bahr*), Western Christian records categorized them uniformly as piracy or corsairing (*Course*). European scholarship was long influenced by crusading legacies and polemical hostility (Attili, 2011/2012; Sayoud, 2009/2010). Concurrently, naval captures formed a lucrative economic pillar for Algiers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries via prizes, custom duties, and captive ransoms, functioning as an instrument of sovereign warfare against hostile European crowns.

2.1 Conceptual Delimitations: Piracy, Privateering, and the *Corso*

Historical precision requires unpacking the etymological and legal distinctions governing maritime violence across the Mediterranean:

- **Saracen (*Sarassin*):** In European medieval chronicles, Muslim mariners were pejoratively designated as *Saraceni*, derived through Latin from Greek roots denoting nomadic desert rovers or raiders (Reynaud, 1984).
- ***Corso* and Corsair:** The term *corsair* originates from the Italian *corsa* (race or course), describing authorized pursuit. Entering French by the sixteenth century, *corsaire* designated armed private vessels commissioned by a sovereign state through letters of marque to disrupt enemy commerce during wartime (*Dictionnaire Robert*, 2005; Nour Eddine, 2006). This distinguished the corsair from the outlaw pirate.
- **Piracy (*Piraterie*):** In international maritime law, piracy denotes unauthorized robbery, violence, or plunder committed on the high seas for personal gain by non-state actors operating outside sovereign jurisdiction (Al-Saleh, 1986; Wolf, 1987).

Writing in the fourteenth century prior to the formal adoption of these European loanwords, Ibn Khaldun described naval campaigns organized from ports such as Béjaïa (Bougie) as state-supported maritime expeditions (*Ghazw*), wherein volunteers mobilized under naval commanders to intercept enemy armadas along the European littoral (Ibn Khaldun, 2004). Algerian historian Abdelhamid Benachenhouch (n.d.) observed that the Arabic loanword *qursan* was adopted during the ninth century AH from Mediterranean vernaculars to translate European maritime terminology, though early chroniclers consistently employed terms such as *Ghuzat al-Bahr* (maritime warriors).

Prominent historian Mahfoud Kaddache (1977) emphasized that early modern Mediterranean naval warfare was reciprocal rather than unilateral:

This phenomenon was shared by all littoral nations across the Mediterranean; it was by no means unique to Algiers. Maritime combat was an accepted form of warfare recognized and practiced concurrently by Muslims and Christians. Although ethically lamentable, this structural confrontation frequently devolved into systemic raiding and plunder. (Kaddache, 1977, p. 12)

To clarify this typology, Algerian historian Lemnour Merouche (2007) categorizes early modern maritime violence into three structural forms:

1. **Privateering War (*Guerre de Course*):** Formal maritime warfare authorized by sovereign decree, governed by legal prize courts, and financed jointly by state institutions and private shipowners who shared in prizes and risks.
2. **Maritime Banditry / Piracy (*Piraterie Pure*):** Unregulated, lawless predation executed on the high seas without sovereign commission, legal boundaries, or ideological justification, universally condemned by Islamic jurisprudence and European maritime law.
3. **The Mediterranean *Corso*:** A localized Mediterranean institution recognized and observed reciprocally by Christian states (e.g., the Knights of Malta, the Order of Saint Stephen) and Muslim Regencies. Operating under the banner of holy warfare, the *corso* followed established norms of combat, ransom, and prize adjudications.

3. Mediterranean Dynamics and European Corsairing Entanglements

In his seminal work on the Mediterranean, Fernand Braudel (1990) underscored that Mediterranean corsairing differed from Atlantic maritime raiding through its institutionalized customs, legal conventions, and diplomatic aftermaths:

Corsairing is an ancient Mediterranean phenomenon, yet it differed from Atlantic piracy in possessing established conventions, codes, and traditions followed by diplomatic negotiations between the warring polities... It was a recognized

instrument of statecraft and corporate enterprise in which cities and crowns actively participated, reflecting the core historical characteristics of the era. (Braudel, 1990, Vol. 1, pp. 151–152)

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, European corsairs expanded their operations across the Mediterranean basin. When King James I of England prohibited domestic privateering in 1603, numerous English and Dutch mariners relocated their operations to Mediterranean anchorages, often collaborating with North African ports including Algiers, Tunis, and Salé to market seized Iberian merchandise (Sayoud, 2009/2010). An official English maritime deposition dated July 14, 1611, documented this presence:

Among this fleet of warships, there are forty vessels manned by two thousand mariners, all English, whose primary rendezvous is Northwest Africa. There, numerous European merchants trade with them in all varieties of goods—principally shipments originating from Livorno—and traffic extensively in captives. (Cited in Sayoud, 2009/2010, p. 114)

European privateers frequently operated with exceptional aggression against North African shipping. Historical records document that European vessels raided Maghrebi vessels on high-seas routes, capturing Muslim passengers and crew for sale into Iberian and Italian galley slavery, as exemplified by Captain Thomas Maddock's 1631 capture and sale of an Algerian merchant crew (Sayoud, 2009/2010).

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars heightened European corsairing in the Mediterranean. Bound by bilateral treaties with European powers, the Regency of Algiers faced difficult diplomatic dilemmas, required to accommodate foreign privateers in its ports while insulating its own commerce from international conflict (Kaddache, 1977; Kanan, 2007).

Conclusion

The historical analysis of Algerian maritime activity during the 17th and 18th centuries demonstrates the following conclusions:

1. **Convergence of Ideology and Strategy:** Algerian naval mobilization functioned concurrently as lawful *Maritime Jihad* aimed at containing Iberian expansion and protecting Islamic frontiers, and as a strategic state-sanctioned enterprise that consolidated the fiscal and political autonomy of the Regency of Algiers within the Ottoman orbit.
2. **Historiographical Asymmetry:** The classification of Algerian naval operations as "piracy" represents a Eurocentric historiographical framing that overlooks the sovereign, treaty-bound status of the Regency of Algiers and obscures the parallel, highly aggressive privateering operations waged by European Christian naval orders across the Mediterranean.
3. **Institutionalization of the Mediterranean Corso:** Far from random outlawry, maritime confrontations across the Mediterranean basin conformed to the shared, rule-bound framework of the *corso*. Both Christian and Muslim polities recognized clear distinctions between state-authorized privateering (*guerre de course*) and rogue piracy (*piraterie*).
4. **Economic and Geopolitical Transformations:** While maritime prize captures provided significant wealth, captive labor, and political leverage during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the systemic reliance on prize economics exposed Algiers to escalating naval blockades, punitive European bombardments, and treaty constraints throughout the eighteenth century.

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