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The Strategic Significance of the Mediterranean Basin in International Relations and the Revival of Algerian Maritime Activity During the Early Modern Era

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Abstract

This study examines the strategic significance of the Mediterranean Basin within international relations during the early modern era. It analyzes inter-littoral dynamics across the northern and southern shores toward the close of the sixteenth century from strategic, historical, and economic standpoints, contextualizing the heightened Islamic-Christian confrontation in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, the paper investigates the geopolitical importance of North Africa's central littoral, tracing the decline of medieval polities, the Spanish imperial encroachments along the Maghrebi coast, and the subsequent emergence of the Ottoman Regency of Algiers. Through formal alignment with the Ottoman Empire under the leadership of the Barbarossa brothers, Algiers experienced a major revival of its maritime capabilities. This maritime revitalization allowed Algiers to establish a fortified naval presence in the western Mediterranean, safeguarding regional Muslim communities, defending Islamic frontiers, and actively reshaping the balance of naval power in the Mediterranean theater.

Keywords: *Mediterranean Sea, Islamic-Christian Rivalry, Ottoman Regency of Algiers, Maritime Activity, Naval Jihād, Privateering, Early Modern Maghrib.*



1. Introduction

The Mediterranean Sea constitutes one of the world's most vital inland seas, interconnecting Africa, Europe, and Asia. As the cradle of numerous ancient and medieval civilizations, its littoral zones established extensive networks of trade, cultural exchange, and geopolitical rivalry. Control over these maritime corridors emerged as a cornerstone for regional hegemony and naval projection.

From the dawn of the sixteenth century, global transformations reshaped maritime geopolitics following European oceanic navigation to the New World and shifting balances between the Ottoman East and the Christian West. Within this environment, naval capability became a prerequisite for geopolitical survival and imperial prestige.

With the Ottoman expansion into the western Mediterranean and the formal incorporation of Algiers in the early sixteenth century, Islamic naval power witnessed a profound resurgence. By declaring allegiance to the Sublime Porte, the Regency of Algiers consolidated fragmented domestic territories, established recognized territorial and maritime frontiers, and erected a formidable naval fleet that played a decisive role in regional Mediterranean diplomacy and warfare.

2. International Relations Between the Mediterranean Shores at the End of the Sixteenth Century

Human civilizational development has been inextricably linked to marine environments. Beyond serving as geographic frontiers, seas have historically functioned as instruments of mutual acquaintance, trade, and strategic communication (al-Dughaym, 1994, p. 10; al-Tazi, 1995, p. 83). As Archibald Lewis observed, maritime corridors have consistently united disparate cultures whenever nations possessed the nautical technology and naval resolve to navigate them (Lewis, n.d., p. 14).

2.1. Strategic and Historical Dimensions of the Mediterranean Basin

Etymologically derived from the Latin terms 'Medius' (middle) and 'Terra' (land), the Mediterranean represents a unique geopolitical crossroads uniting three continents (Rifaat, 1959, p. 19; Bouaziz, 2009, p. 9). Its shores nurtured flourishing Berber, Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Arab-Islamic civilizations (Hassan, 1999, pp. 28–50).

Strategically, the basin controls critical maritime choke points, primarily the Strait of Gibraltar in the west and trade arteries extending toward the Levant, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean (Al-Aoudi, 1997, p. 109). Throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages, maritime dominance transitioned from Phoenician maritime networks to Roman hegemony—exemplified by the concept of 'Mare Nostrum' after the fall of Carthage in 146 B.C. (Sa'iyud, 2010, p. 97).

The early Islamic conquests and the naval ascendancy of the Aghlabids (800–909 CE) established Muslim naval preeminence across the western basin (Lewis, n.d., p. 78; Sa'iyud, 2010, p. 99). However, regional fragmentation during the eleventh and twelfth centuries facilitated a resurgence of Christian naval influence (Ibn Khaldun, 2004, p. 201). As Fernand Braudel highlighted in his seminal thesis, the Mediterranean constitutes a distinct 'world-system' whose historical and economic dynamics fundamentally shaped global history (Braudel, 1966, Vol. 1–2).

2.2. Economic Importance and Commercial Networks

The economic vitality of the Mediterranean was underpinned by a vast network of commercial ports and coastal emporia that facilitated transcontinental trade (Coutau-Bégarie, 2000, p. 205). Commercial hegemony in the basin was rarely dictated merely by territorial conquest; rather, it was determined by the maritime power capable of enforcing navigational security, regulating trade laws, and commanding exchange systems (Braudel, 1990, p. 125).

The Islamic expansion reinvigorated urban economies and trans-Mediterranean commercial cycles, fueling the prosperity of major hubs such as Kairouan, Fez, Seville, Cordoba, and Palermo (Amara, 2008, pp. 137–140). By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, these commercial networks grew increasingly sophisticated, governed by bilateral treaties and formal capitulations.

2.3. The Islamic-Christian Confrontation in the Sixteenth Century

The late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries witnessed an escalation of religious and geopolitical rivalry across the Mediterranean, driven by the culmination of the Spanish Reconquista, the fall of Granada in 1492, and the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 (Hlaïli, 2010, p. 115; Haimar, 2007). The unification of Castile and Aragon under Ferdinand and Isabella inaugurated aggressive expansionist policies targeting North African coastal enclaves (De Mas Latrie, 1866, p. 341; Al-Tamimi, 1975, p. 37).

Within the Iberian Peninsula, Andalusian Muslims were subjected to forced baptism, cultural suppression, property confiscation, and severe inquisitorial persecution (Anan, 1966, pp. 353–

354). Those coerced into outward Christian conversion became historically known as Moriscos (Hammadi, 2011, pp. 51–52). Tens of thousands of Andalusian refugees migrated to North African coastal towns—such as Ténès, Béjaïa, Algiers, and Oran—and inland urban centers like Blida, Médéa, Constantine, and Tlemcen, revitalizing the demographic, agricultural, and architectural landscape of the Central Maghrib (Al-Ghubrini, 1981, p. 287; Derradj, 2012, p. 67).

In response to the Iberian advance, the Ottoman Empire established naval outposts across strategic Mediterranean hubs, including Rhodes, Djerba, Tripoli, and Tunis (Ben Sahraoui, 2014, pp. 573–575). Under the naval leadership of Khayr al-Dīn Barbarossa, appointed Beylerbey of Algiers following the formal appeal to Sultan Selim I in 1519, Algerian sailors executed over 33 coordinated maritime rescue operations between 1528 and 1584, evacuating countless Andalusian families while repelling Spanish naval incursions (Tamimi, 1979, pp. 116–120; Saidouni & Bouabdelli, 1984, p. 44).

3. Geopolitical Fragmentation of the Central Maghrib and Spanish Coastal Encroachment

Following the collapse of the Almohad Caliphate, the Maghrib fragmented into three regional dynasties: the Hafsids in Ifriqiya (Tunis), the Marinid-Wattasids in the Far Maghrib (Morocco), and the Zayyanids (Abd al-Wadids) in the Central Maghrib, centered at Tlemcen (Al-Madani, 2007, p. 83; Derradj, 2012, p. 84).

The Zayyanid Kingdom, established in 1235 by Yaghmurasan ibn Zayyan, occupied a pivotal commercial position mediating trans-Saharan and Mediterranean trade (Woolf, 2009, p. 22; Ibn Khaldun, 2000, Vol. 7, p. 4). However, its exposed geographical position trapped it between aggressive Marinid incursions from the west and Hafsid pressure from the east, inducing chronic internal instability (Ibn al-Ahmar, 2001, p. 39; Saidouni, 2003, p. 339; Bouaziz, 2009, p. 81; Al-Ghunaymi, 1994, pp. 141–143).

By the late fifteenth century, central authority in the Central Maghrib had deteriorated into a fractured political mosaic (Julien, 1978, p. 250):

- **Autonomous Coastal Cities:** Governed under local oligarchies or tribal leaders—such as Salim al-Tumi of the Tha'aliba tribe in Algiers (al-Wazzan, 1983, p. 316).
- **Mountainous Emirates:** Controlled by independent principalities like the Banu 'Abbas and Koukou Emirates (Ben Khrouf, 1983, p. 20; Omrani, 2003, pp. 17–19).
- **Southern Oasis Networks:** Governed by hereditary dynastic families such as the Banu Jallab in Touggourt and the 'Alahim in Ouargla (Ghanabzia, 2001, p. 15).

Lacking a unified naval fleet, the weakened coastal polities were unable to prevent the Spanish Empire from capturing primary maritime strongholds, including Mers al-Kabir (1505), Oran (1509), and Béjaïa (1510), alongside the construction of the fortified Peñón fortress overlooking the harbor of Algiers (Primaudaie, 1876, pp. 128–132). This military vulnerability culminated in the humiliating submission treaty of 1512, which subordinated Zayyanid coastal sovereignty to the Spanish Crown (Fellali, 2007, pp. 75–76).

4. Emergence of the Ottoman Regency of Algiers and the Rebirth of Maritime Power

To counter Iberian naval hegemony and bypass European encirclement, the Ottoman Empire deployed naval commanders Kemal Reis, Aruj Barbarossa, and Khayr al-Dīn Barbarossa to the western Mediterranean (Saadallah, 2009, pp. 186–187). Collaborating with the local population and notables of Algiers, the Barbarossa brothers expelled the Spanish garrisons, neutralized the threat of the Peñón fortress, and unified the disjointed provinces of the Central Maghrib under a single centralized administration (Raymond, 1991, p. 21; Saadallah, 2005, pp. 481–482; Taqoush, 2013, p. 11).

As recorded in Ibn al-Mufti's historical chronicle 'Taqyidat', formal Ottoman military support was inaugurated around 925 AH / 1519 CE under Sultan Bayezid II / Selim I, establishing the permanent military institution of the Odjak and regular Janissary garrisons (Ibn al-Mufti, 2009, p. 80; Taqoush, 2013, pp. 219–220).

Algiers—historically designated in Islamic archival records as 'Dar al-Jihad' (the Abode of Naval Struggle) and 'Al-Jaza'ir al-Mahrusa' (The Guarded Algiers)—was rapidly transformed into a heavily fortified naval citadel. Its amphitheater-like urban topology faced the sea, surrounded by defensive bastions and artillery batteries (Ben Hammouch, 2000, p. 22; Valensi, 1962, p. 62).

The development of an indigenous naval shipyard and a highly disciplined privateering fleet (the *Ta'ifa* of the *Ra'is*) institutionalized state-sanctioned maritime warfare (naval *jihād* / privateering) (Hess, 1978, p. 36; Amili, 1999, pp. 109–119). This fleet secured maritime borders, countered Christian naval coalitions, protected merchant vessels, and generated revenues through prize-taking and international consular treaties. Algiers thus emerged as a premier naval power in the early modern Mediterranean.

5. Conclusion

The trajectory of the Mediterranean Basin in the early modern era demonstrates that this body of water was far more than a physical barrier; it operated as a dynamic theater of civilizational interaction, commercial rivalry, and military confrontation. The geopolitical shifts of the

sixteenth century—accelerated by transatlantic exploration and the intensification of Islamic-Christian antagonism—redefined regional Mediterranean alliances.

Within this transformative landscape, the integration of Algiers into the Ottoman orbit fundamentally restored the geopolitical equilibrium of the western Mediterranean. By revitalizing its maritime infrastructure, building an agile naval fleet, and consolidating a previously fragmented hinterland, the Regency of Algiers established itself as the forward bulwark of Islamic naval defense. Algiers successfully curbed European expansionism, provided safe haven for dispossessed Andalusian populations, and solidified its status as an autonomous maritime power whose diplomatic and naval influence shaped Mediterranean history for over three centuries.

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