

The Longevity of the North African Corsairs:
How the European Political Climate Led to the Lasting Success of the Corsairs

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HIS 479

9 December 2022

The Barbary Corsairs of Northern Africa maintained a unique position of autonomy and influence over the Mediterranean Sea between the late 15th and early 19th centuries. Their ability to avoid conquest and subjugation provides an important insight into the political climate surrounding piracy and trade in the Mediterranean and beyond during this time. Despite not being recognized as formal authorities by many contemporaneous states, the North African corsair states of “Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli” acted in diplomatic ways and communicated with foreign powers as if they were considered equals.¹ The corsairs’ constant raiding of Christian vessels angered many sailors and their respective nation states. These constant attacks led to disdain and often violent retribution upon the Barbary States. However, in many cases, the corsairs were able to defend themselves or avoid retribution due to their own strength and the diplomatic relationships which they had formed with other powers of the time. Therefore, the most important factor in the longevity of the Barbary Corsairs was their ability to use the political climate of the time to establish beneficial diplomatic relationships.

One of the most important aspects of corsair longevity was reputation building. A key part of this reputation included the development of the label of corsair. A corsair was similar to other pirates in that they raided opposing ships for goods, however, their main defining feature was the reason for which they raided. The term corsair stems from the Latin word *corse* which means “sea voyage;” the corse represented the sea-based raids between the Christian and Islamic domains of the time. During a corse raid, the perpetrators aimed to exclusively raid members of the opposing party or, in this case, religion.² This religious based distinction separated “the corse from privateering.”³ Therefore, corsairing “was more elevated than mere piracy precisely” due

¹Martin N. Murphy, “The Barbary Pirates.” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (2013), 27.

² Martin N. Murphy, “The Barbary Pirates,” 23.

³ Ibid, 23.

to the “permanent war in the Mediterranean between Christianity and Islam.”⁴ For the sake of simplicity, any further reference in this essay to corsairs, unless otherwise noted, will pertain to the Barbary Corsairs which operated from the shores of Northern Africa. Due to this “religious coloration,” the effects of corsair raids were minimized due to the presence of the constant religious war.⁵ However, without the backing of a recognized authority, the corsairs lacked an important piece of legitimacy in the eyes of the Europeans, notably the aspect of a letter of marque which recognized raiding pirates as official state-sponsored entities. This weakness left them open for constant attack and opposition. Therefore, the corsairs began to seek security and legitimacy through the creation of alliances with foreign powers.

The first step in the corsairs’ quest to seek greater legitimacy was to contact the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans were a rising and expanding power in the late 15th and early 16th century. The corsairs and the Ottomans also happened to be of the same faith. With a shared Islamic faith, the corsairs viewed Ottoman cooperation as an acceptable and necessary tool. Envoys of representatives from Tunis began official meetings with the Ottomans in the early 16th century. The first of which occurred in 1514 when “the first ambassador Oruc” was “sent from Tunis to Istanbul.”⁶ Following these initial meetings, two more envoys occurred: the second “in Egypt in 1517” and the third in 1519.⁷ These envoys beseeched the Sultan “offering the submission of the corsairs and the Algerian nobles to the sultan” asking only in return for the appointment of the prominent corsair, Hayreddin, as leader “of the province of Algeria.”⁸ The

⁴ Martin N. Murphy, “The Barbary Pirates,” 23.

⁵ Ibid, 24.

⁶ Emrah Safa Gürkan, “The Centre and the Frontier: Ottoman Cooperation with the North African Corsairs in the Sixteenth Century.” *Turkish Historical Review* 1, no. 2 (2010), 130.

⁷ Emrah Safa Gürkan, “The Centre and the Frontier: Ottoman Cooperation with the North African Corsairs in the Sixteenth Century,” 130.

⁸ Ibid, 130.

willingness of the Ottomans to communicate openly with the corsairs shows their mutual desire to create a working relationship.

However, the Ottoman's need for the Barbary Corsairs ebbed and flowed in the early stages of their relationship. The "integration [of] the province of Algiers" into the Ottoman empire took place "formally" in 1519.⁹ However, initially, this alliance was of little consequence to the Ottomans. According to Gürkan, there is little recorded information regarding communication between the new capital of Algiers and the Ottoman state between the years of 1519 and 1533.¹⁰ This lack of communication was due to complicating factors on both sides of the relationship. Firstly, the corsairs faced several difficulties during this fourteen-year period, particularly their "loss and then re-conquest of Algiers" against Christendom which concluded in 1529 and was led by Hayreddin. Due to the shortcomings of the corsairs, the Ottomans became uninterested in the region due to the instability and possible burden of having to bail them out of their problems. Secondly, the "corsairs could offer little to the Ottomans" who were more interested in securing "communications between Istanbul and the newly conquered provinces of Syria and Egypt."¹¹ At this point, the Ottomans did not require the corsairs nor were they interested in controlling a region which was far away from Istanbul and was considered unstable.

Nonetheless, when the Ottomans started to have issues with a growing rival empire in the beginning of the 1530s, the Sultan began to rethink his country's relationship with the corsairs. The Habsburg Empire was growing in strength and influence, and the Ottoman Empire was struggling to combat them. The Ottomans had reached a "stalemate" in central Europe following

⁹ Emrah Safa Gürkan, "The Centre and the Frontier: Ottoman Cooperation with the North African Corsairs in the Sixteenth Century," 129.

¹⁰ Ibid, 130.

¹¹ Ibid, 132.

“the campaigns of 1529 and 1532.”¹² Moreover, “the Habsburg navy” was reinforced by the “*volte-face*” of France in 1528. These reinforcements from the French made Ottoman movements in the Mediterranean Sea more difficult. Thus, the Ottomans began to seek help from the corsairs so that they could expand their influence into the western Mediterranean.

The Ottomans had no issue with hiring pirates to help in their affairs. For example, they had worked with “Levantine corsairs” such as “Kemal Reis and Burak Reis” to assist in the “Ottoman-Venetian war of 1499-1503.”¹³ Therefore, the Ottomans often made deals with pirates and corsairs to facilitate their goals. However, the case of the Barbary States is unique because three city states were seeking integration into the empire. Thus, integration into the empire became a far more complicated process. A partnership with the corsairs meant that the Ottomans were accepting responsibility for corsair action on the sea while also guaranteeing the defense of their land. Therefore, the Ottoman Empire, essentially, made a deal that allowed them control over foreign lands with the hope of gaining greater control over the sea.

Despite the gravity of this agreement, the corsairs maintained a unique relationship with the Ottomans throughout the history of their relationship. Unlike other states which the Ottomans conquered, the Barbary States were able to operate with “considerable independence.”¹⁴ This leniency allowed the corsairs to often defy the Ottomans’ requests in favor of their own goals. Although the Ottomans threatened punishment, the corsairs were often let ‘off the hook’ without any serious consequences. Despite the Ottoman’s desire to enact

¹² Emrah Safa Gürkan, “The Centre and the Frontier: Ottoman Cooperation with the North African Corsairs in the Sixteenth Century,” 132.

¹³ Ibid, 128.

¹⁴ Joachim Östlund. “Sweden, Barbary Corsairs, and the Hostis Humani Generis: Justifying Piracy in European Political Thought.” *Piracy in World History* (2021), 235.

control, they “lacked the means, rather than the intention to punish these corsairs.”¹⁵ The corsairs were powerful and influential masters of the sea and businessmen. Knowing their own limitations, the Ottomans were “extremely reluctant to consolidate their power further” in fear that they would alienate “these cliques.”¹⁶ Indeed, the Ottomans were dependent on the corsairs to expand their power further into the Mediterranean. For example, the Ottomans “supported the corsairs in the Adriatic Sea” simply because their “naval power had always been fragile” in that region.¹⁷ The corsairs understood Ottoman dependency, and they used it to their advantage.

The corsairs were influential figures in the Mediterranean Sea, and they used their naval prowess to develop their relationship with the Ottoman Empire. The “expertise” of the corsairs provided the Ottomans with “something that the *enderun* education of Istanbul,” which “concentrated on land warfare,” could not.¹⁸ One of the most important things which the corsairs provided the Ottomans was information. Although the Barbary States were largely considered an Islamic power, and “professed Islam,” a large number of corsair sailors were “European Christians.”¹⁹ Indeed, many of them were “renegades of every nation” and thus could provide insight into their perspective homelands.²⁰ One of the most notable of these renegade groups was the Moors who had recently been expelled from the Iberian peninsula by Christian forces. The “exiled Moors’ knowledge of the Iberian coasts” was “crucial for the Ottomans”²¹ Therefore, the corsairs not only provided help in the form of numbers and manpower but, they also provided

¹⁵ Emrah Safa Gürkan, “The Centre and the Frontier: Ottoman Cooperation with the North African Corsairs in the Sixteenth Century,” 152.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 156.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 154.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 139.

¹⁹ Joachim Östlund. “Sweden, Barbary Corsairs, and the Hostis Humani Generis: Justifying Piracy in European Political Thought,” 229.

²⁰ Lane, Kris E., and Arne Bialuschewski. “Section III: Pirates of the Mediterranean.” Essay. In *Piracy in the Early Modern Era: An Anthology of Sources*, 39.

²¹ Emrah Safa Gürkan, “The Centre and the Frontier: Ottoman Cooperation with the North African Corsairs in the Sixteenth Century,” 134.

intelligence information. In this way, “the corsairs proved their worth, especially as spies.”²²

Their knowledge of foreign lands combined with their expertise on the sea allowed them to be a formidable force in the Mediterranean.

Playing on the needs of the Ottomans, the corsairs received a great deal of advantages in return. The Ottomans provided further “economic opportunities” including employment, such as clientship under the Ottoman navy, materials, and expanded “opportunities of plunder.”²³ These additional opportunities for plunder were important to the corsairs because many did not have “any salary or means of gain beyond what they can steal.”²⁴ The additional ships from the Ottoman fleet helped to bolster any weaknesses in the corsair arsenal and increase their chances for successful raids. The corsairs also received materials and goods through trade with the Ottomans. For example, the corsairs “procured from the Ottomans certain raw materials, necessary for shipbuilding” and “munitions and weapons which the meagre weapons industry in North Africa could not produce.”²⁵ With the help of the Ottoman Empire, the “sea booty increased” and the North African provinces experienced market expansion.²⁶ This increased economic growth led to the improvement of living standards for those living within the Barbary States. According to Matar, within the province of Tunis, “many parts of the city were built up” and “charitable foundations” were created to help “support the muezzins, readers, and servants.”²⁷ Therefore, the Ottoman-corsair relationship proved to have advantages for both sides following corsair integration into the empire.

²² Emrah Safa Gürkan, “The Centre and the Frontier: Ottoman Cooperation with the North African Corsairs in the Sixteenth Century,” 155.

²³ Ibid, 145.

²⁴ Lane, Kris E., and Arne Bialuschewski. “Section III: Pirates of the Mediterranean.” Essay. In *Piracy in the Early Modern Era: An Anthology of Sources*, 40.

²⁵ Emrah Safa Gürkan, “The Centre and the Frontier: Ottoman Cooperation with the North African Corsairs in the Sixteenth Century,” 144.

²⁶ Matar, Nabil I. *Europe through Arab Eyes: 1578-1727*. Columbia University Press, 2009, 218.

²⁷ Ibid, 220.

More often than not, foreign entities do not willingly choose to fall under the control of a foreign power. However, in the case of the corsairs, they sought out Ottoman cooperation, support, and, in the end, integration into the empire. Thus, the corsairs seemed to have understood that the Ottomans would have been unable to pacify them forcefully. For this reason, the corsairs were willing to cooperate with certain Ottoman commands such as the payment of tribute.²⁸ The corsairs also understood that from an international viewpoint any wrongdoing committed by them would reflect more on the Ottomans than themselves. For example, the corsairs not only attacked “Habsburg lands and ships” but they also raided ships from “France, England, and Venice.”²⁹ The “Ottomans received complaints” from these countries because the Ottomans were not currently at war with them.³⁰ Under the system of the “letter of marque,” nations could hire pirates as privateers “under sovereign warrant” to attack and raid ships of nations of which they were currently at war.³¹ However, the Ottomans were not at war with any of those three nation states; thus, the corsairs’ raiding of English, Venetian, and French ships could be taken as an action or even a declaration of war.

The “corsairs’ repeated violation” of this system “caused trouble for and undermined the prestige of the Ottomans in the international arena.”³² However, these violations were of little concern to the corsairs since the “omnipotent presence of the Ottoman capital was not directly felt.”³³ To mitigate their damaged reputation, the Ottomans tried to express the unruly nature of the Barbary states and the difficulty of controlling them. However, as Gürkan states, the

²⁸ Emrah Safa Gürkan, “The Centre and the Frontier: Ottoman Cooperation with the North African Corsairs in the Sixteenth Century,” 141.

²⁹ Ibid, 151.

³⁰ Ibid, 151.

³¹ Joachim Östlund. “Sweden, Barbary Corsairs, and the Hostis Humani Generis: Justifying Piracy in European Political Thought,” 228.

³² Emrah Safa Gürkan, “The Centre and the Frontier: Ottoman Cooperation with the North African Corsairs in the Sixteenth Century,” 151.

³³ Ibid, 126.

Ottomans may have “dragged its feet” in punishing the corsairs because corsair raids were seen as part of the “Holy War against Christians.”³⁴ Therefore, the Ottomans were able to indiscreetly place blows upon Christian nations without having to face many consequences. By writing off the Barbary states as an unruly den of thieves, the Ottomans hoped that it might convince foreign nations of the difficulty of controlling the corsairs. Therefore, the corsairs were able to continue their indiscriminate raiding against Christendom. Since the corsairs never seemingly tried to target any specific nation, except those instructed by the Ottomans, the corsairs were able to avoid the wrath of any particular nation state.

Therefore, the corsairs were also able to avoid subjugation because they operated within the unstable nature of European politics at the time. According to Östlund, many European states “wavered on the issue of whether the Barbary Corsairs were pirates or barely reputable privateers.”³⁵ Therefore, European states couldn’t technically suppress the corsairs since they “were nominally subject to the Ottoman sultan.”³⁶ Furthermore, during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, “competition within Europe” left the continent incredibly divided and almost constantly at war.³⁷ These divisions left European states unable to agree on the issue of the corsairs and thus nothing was done to stop their raids. The corsairs indirectly used this to their advantage since they understood that “Europeans had not collaborated in a united attack” because their divisions made them weak.³⁸ Thus, the corsairs were able to expertly balance the

³⁴ Emrah Safa Gürkan, “The Centre and the Frontier: Ottoman Cooperation with the North African Corsairs in the Sixteenth Century,” 152.

³⁵ Joachim Östlund. “Sweden, Barbary Corsairs, and the Hostis Humani Generis: Justifying Piracy in European Political Thought,” 229.

³⁶ Ibid, 229.

³⁷ Ibid, 236.

³⁸ Ibid, 236.

political climate of Europe by using both the system of privateering and European states' own weakness against them.

Furthermore, some of the more powerful nations in Europe were "pleased to see other European states and traders suffer from the uncertainty of piracy."³⁹ For these powerful nations, such as England and France, corsair raids were more of a pesky nuisance than any real threat. Thus, these nations could sustain the losses from corsair raids while the smaller and weaker states could not. For example, according to Harding, "the consequences" of corsair raids "were modest for the economies of both Britain and Hanover."⁴⁰ In the case of France in the late 16th century, "the French and the corsairs were natural allies" because they "both had a vested interest in convincing the Ottomans to challenge the Habsburgs in the western Mediterranean."⁴¹ Thus, despite occasional corsairs raids upon their ships, the French still maintained an open relationship with both the corsairs and, in extension, the Ottoman Empire. French and corsair relations improved such that the "French established a separate embassy in Algiers in 1580" after the corsairs had "requested the over-lordship and protection of the French king" even at the risk of "the displeasure of Istanbul."⁴² Therefore, the corsairs continued to build additional diplomatic relations which expanded their influence and helped to maintain their independent nature.

However, in the case of the smaller states, corsair raids were devastating to their trade networks and, in return, their economies. For example, for a nation such as Sweden whose "state

³⁹ Joachim Östlund. "Sweden, Barbary Corsairs, and the Hostis Humani Generis: Justifying Piracy in European Political Thought," 236.

⁴⁰ Harding, Nicholas B. "North African Piracy, the Hanoverian Carrying Trade, and the British State, 1728–1828." *The Historical Journal* 43, no. 1 (March 2000), 28.

⁴¹ Emrah Safa Gürkan, "The Centre and the Frontier: Ottoman Cooperation with the North African Corsairs in the Sixteenth Century," 138.

⁴² *Ibid*, 137.

finances were in ruin” and their “navy decayed,” pirate raids were quite devastating.⁴³ In fact, in 1667, “Swedish losses were considered so serious” that they sought “to negotiate peace with the most powerful North African State, Algiers.”⁴⁴ At this point, Ottoman control over the Barbary States had decayed to a point that European states no longer trusted the Ottoman’s ability to properly enforce control over Northern Africa. Therefore, European powers increasingly began to engage with the Barbary States as if they were independent state powers.

The increasing risk and devastating effects of piracy led many Europeans to question the legitimacy and effectiveness of the policies surrounding piracy and privateering of the time. As the “organised business of piracy” became increasingly effective, many Europeans began to develop a new understanding of piracy and, in extension, the practice of the *corse*.⁴⁵ For example, one Swedish student’s dissertation, Magnus Thelaus, which was written in 1716, “pivoted his argument” towards pleading his fellow Europeans to take “a more careful moral evaluation of piracy.”⁴⁶ According to Östlund, “Thelaus’ rhetorical strategy...was to emphasize the unnaturalness of human unsociability” by comparing it to “beasts who were better exemplars of natural fellow feeling.”⁴⁷ In the end, Thelaus “framed piracy as a crime against natural law, human nature, and international law.”⁴⁸ Therefore, Thelaus argued that piracy was an unnatural practice and was harmful to all of humanity. This shift in the understanding of piracy changed the political climate of Europe and its response to the corsairs.

⁴³ Joachim Östlund. “Sweden, Barbary Corsairs, and the Hostis Humani Generis: Justifying Piracy in European Political Thought,” 227.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 229.

⁴⁵ J. E. G. de Montmorency, “The Barbary States in International Law.” *Transactions of the Grotius Society* 4 (1918), 87.

⁴⁶ Joachim Östlund. “Sweden, Barbary Corsairs, and the Hostis Humani Generis: Justifying Piracy in European Political Thought,” 233.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 231.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 231.

With this shift in the understanding of piracy, smaller powers began to respond forcefully to the North African Corsairs. For a new republic such as the United States of America in the early 19th century, the constant corsair raids in the Mediterranean Sea became destructive to their trade networks. As late as 1783, “American merchant traffic in the Mediterranean had been protected under the British flag.”⁴⁹ However, following independence, America could no longer reap the benefits of the British crown and thus could no longer sail safely in the Mediterranean. Contrastingly, “England and France, which maintained consulates in North Africa, exploited these political dynamics to their advantage.”⁵⁰ Therefore, America sought to provide its own protections by forcefully subduing the Barbary Corsairs, something which had been inconceivable or had failed miserably in the past. In order to secure “the nation’s trade routes,” President Jefferson “went so far as to deploy American naval power in the Mediterranean to repel attacks on American trade.”⁵¹ Following these attacks on the corsair states, which came to be known as the Barbary Wars of 1801-1805, the corsairs began to lose their ability to play the European political system.

The development of the concept of “hostis humani generis,” or enemy of mankind, came to be one of the biggest factors in the undoing of the corsairs.⁵² This concept dismantled the legitimacy of the practice of privateering, and in extension, corsairing. Without the legitimacy of the concept of privateering, the corsairs were no longer able to balance European politics as they had for the past few centuries. Furthermore, the corsairs were no longer able to hide behind their

⁴⁹ James R. Sofka, “The Jeffersonian Idea of National Security: Commerce, the Atlantic Balance of Power, and the Barbary War, 1786-1805.” *Diplomatic History* 21, no. 4 (1997), 531.

⁵⁰ James R. Sofka, “The Jeffersonian Idea of National Security: Commerce, the Atlantic Balance of Power, and the Barbary War, 1786-1805,” 531.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 519.

⁵² J. E. G. de Montmorency, “The Barbary States in International Law.” *Transactions of the Grotius Society* 4 (1918), 88.

holy war against Christendom. As mercantilism rose in Europe and beyond, the importance of protecting one's trade routes became increasingly valuable. Thus, the corsairs lost their ability to make effective diplomatic relations because the goals of nation states had shifted from hiring privateers to protecting economic interests at sea.

Therefore, the Barbary Corsairs were masters at utilizing the European political climate of the 16th, 17th, and 18th century to further their goals in the Mediterranean Sea. Initially, the corsairs sought the assistance of the Ottoman Empire which proved to be their most valuable ally. However, the corsairs expanded their web of diplomatic allies to include Christian nations such as France and England. By aligning the most powerful nations to their defense, the corsairs were able to practice the *corse* for centuries. In doing so, the corsairs became one of the most organized and effective pirates in the Mediterranean Sea.

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