
OTTOMAN EXPANSIONIST POLICY IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY MEDITERRANEAN

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THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY Mediterranean has often been described as ‘a battleground’ between the two great empires of Catholic Spain in the West and the Muslim Ottomans in the East. It was a century during which the two great empires gave evidence of their formidable might.

Before the rise of the Habsburg kings, Charles V and Philip II, the Catholic Kings of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella, who were responsible for the unification of Spain, played as vital a part in creating the Spanish Empire as did the Ottoman sultans before the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

The Political Scene in the Early Sixteenth Century Mediterranean

The union of the Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, and the conquest of Granada in 1492 - the last Muslim stronghold on mainland Spain - did more than just unify Spain. It led to the creation of a union of two strong kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula which, apart from helping to generate a religious revival throughout the peninsula, also boosted exploratory navigation that led to a surge of colonisation that helped to transform Spain into a global empire. On the one hand, the Castilians were mainly centred on the Americas. Colonization and territorial expansion was coupled with an economic policy meant to exploit to the maximum the commercial value of the newly-conquered lands. On the other hand, Aragon centred on the Mediterranean. It had long been acquainted with the sea through her shipping. Aragon possessed islands like the Balearics, Sardinia and Sicily, and was committed to checking the

advance of Islam in the Western Mediterranean. This old policy induced King Ferdinand to occupy and hold on to strategic points along the Northern African coast. So, through the union of the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, the Spaniards were able to precede the Ottomans in the Maghreb. However, this occupation was precarious as the Spaniards were surrounded by Muslim inhabitants with thinly-veiled hostile intentions. In the vacuum created by the fall of native dynasties, there emerged the various hordes of Muslim corsairs, the most fearsome of which, sprung up in Algiers.

Although the Ottoman Empire had at hand all the necessary resources to become a naval power, it lacked the requisite organization and leadership structure which the Barbary corsairs enjoyed. Therefore the alliance of the Ottomans and the Barbary corsairs was not only a logical political step but also a practical proposition. When, in 1534 Hayreddin Barbarossa, the chieftain of the Algiers corsairs and an intrepid seaman, submitted himself to the Sultan and accepted the suzerainty of the Sublime Porte, the Ottoman navy was suddenly transformed into one of the great forces of the sixteenth century Mediterranean scene. The acquisition of Algiers thus extended the Ottoman power into the Western Mediterranean and also led to an unavoidable clash with Spain.¹

Meanwhile, the giant tussle between Spain and France had not abated - their favourite fighting grounds being Flanders and North Italy. The Republic of Genoa, which kept one of the best fleets of the Mediterranean, had originally sided with France, enabling the latter to challenge the Spanish fleet in the Western Mediterranean. But in 1528, Genoa switched over to the Imperial side, thus becoming a close ally of Spain. This move was destined to have far-reaching repercussions on Mediterranean affairs. This was because ever since 1536 the Sultan had come to an understanding with the kings of France that, whenever possible, they would jointly attack the Habsburgs. Indeed, in 1543 the Ottoman fleet had even wintered in the ports of southern France.² The Franco-Ottoman alliance, also termed as 'the impious alliance', caused much scandal in Christian Europe. It was an opportunity for both rulers to fight against the rule of the Habsburg Emperor and his allies.³

In September 1534, the Genoese admiral Andrea Doria led a coalition of Spanish, Papal and Venetian navies - assisted by the galleys of the Order of St John - in an attack on Coron in the south western Peloponnese. It was a move intended to assist the hard-pressed Venetians. But the success was short-lived for, by April

1 C. Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650: The Structure of Power*, (Basingstoke and New York, 2002), p. 288.

2 F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Eng. transl. 2 vols (Glasgow, 1973), II, p.994; P. Earle, *Corsairs of Malta and Barbary*, (London, 1970), p.55; Kenneth M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant: 1204-1571*, 4 vols (Philadelphia, 1984), III. *The Sixteenth Century to the Reign of Julius III*, p. 472; M. Fonteney & A. Tenenti, 'Course et piraterie méditerranéenne de la fin du moyen-âge au début du XIXème siècle', in *Course et piraterie: XV^e Colloque internationale d'histoire maritime, San Francisco, 1975* (Paris, 1975), p. 86; J.H. Pryor, *Geography, Technology and War. Studies in the Maritime History of the Mediterranean: 649-1571*, (Cambridge, 1988), p. 195; G. Parker, 'The Dutch Revolt and the polarization of international Politics', in *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. by Geoffrey Parker and L.M. Smith (London, 1985), p. 59.

3 R. B. Merriman, *Suleiman the Magnificent, 1520-1566*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1944), p. 133.

1535, the Ottomans recovered Coron. The difficulties encountered by the Ottoman force in mounting the naval side of the operation, induced the Sultan to appoint Hayreddin as his Kapudhan Paşa (Admiral).⁴ No sooner in command, than the new Admiral gave the Christian powers a foretaste of things to come when in a lightning attack he captured Tunis from the Spaniards in September 1534.

Charles V undertook to build the nearby fortress of La Goulette in order to recover Tunis - which he recovered in July 1535. The offensive, however, remained largely with the Muslim side. Indeed, during the summer of 1537, a large Ottoman force overcame Otranto in South Italy and moved to the Venetian-held island of Corfu. The Ottomans had intended to go across the Adriatic but a full attack was called off, as the fortifications were deemed too daunting. Meanwhile, a hastily-arranged Christian alliance of Venetian and Imperial navies, together with their usual allies - that included the galleys of the Knights of Malta - confronted an Ottoman fleet under Hayreddin off Prevesa (1538). The attack proved to be a resounding debacle for the Christian navies, for which Doria is generally blamed. The Christian alliance retreated, leaving the field clear for the Ottoman fleet to range all over the Mediterranean.⁵

Ottoman Domination in the Mid-Sixteenth Century Mediterranean

The psychological effect of the Prevesa debacle was tremendous; indeed it marks the beginning of complete ascendancy by the Ottoman navy over the eastern Mediterranean – a situation that was to remain unchallenged until the battle of Lepanto of 1571. The intervening period between 1538 and 1571 represents a new tense phase in the struggle between the Ottoman East and the Spanish West with the latter being completely on the defensive. The frontier of this giant conflict shifted to the central Mediterranean - that is, to Tripoli, La Goulette, Malta, Sicily and South Italy - all held by Spain and its allies, the Knights of St John.

In crude terms the struggle was being waged for the control of the western Mediterranean. In practical terms, however, a viable balance of power could only be affected along cultural grounds. The Spaniards were beyond doubt imperialist intruders in North Africa very much in the same way as the Ottoman presence in the Balkans was felt by the numerous nationalities of the region. It was a long time before some semblance of justice would be accomplished in the Balkans. But the score on North Africa was to be settled soon.

A sequence of historical events made matters easier for the Ottomans. In October 1540, Venice concluded peace with the Sublime Porte – an uneasy and

4 Suleiman appointed Hayreddin *Kapudan-i Derya* (Grand Admiral) of the Ottoman Navy and *Beylerbey* (Chief Governor) of North Africa. Barbarossa was also given the government of the *Sanjak* ("province") of Rhodes, Euboea and Chios in the Aegean Sea.

5 'Venice lost more than any other state [Christian allies in the war of 1537-1539] and ... no longer could mobilize a convincing military presence in the eastern Mediterranean'. D. Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge, 2002), pp.148-149.

delusive *modus vivendi* that yet suited Venetian mercantile interests. Precisely at this juncture, the French king Francis I, followed later by Henry III, established a close understanding with the Sultan. This enabled the Ottoman fleet, under Hayreddin, to irrupt into the western Mediterranean and operate jointly with the French fleet against Spain. This was an insidious thrust at Spanish and Imperial interests especially since the latter had failed miserably in attempting to expunge the corsair nest at Algiers in the autumn 1541. It was in this latter operation that Turgut Reis - better known as Dragut - distinguished himself. He was not as brilliant a strategist as Hayreddin was, but he possessed a certain craftiness which served him well in his turbulent career.

The collaboration of the French with the Ottomans rendered the European coasts of the western Mediterranean exceedingly vulnerable. During the calamitous years of 1543 and 1544, Reggio di Calabria was ransacked and burnt, and the same fate overtook Nice, Elba and the island of Lipari, the Sicilian town of Patti, and the Marian sanctuary of Tindari. It is worth mentioning, however, that the two fleets only cooperated once, at the siege of Nice in 1543.⁶ A brief respite followed when Hayreddin died in the summer of 1546, at which point he was succeeded by Turgut. While Ottoman incursions in the western Mediterranean grew less frequent, pressure on Christian positions in the central Mediterranean became more and more intense. There can be no doubt that the man who ably orchestrated this shift in Ottoman strategy was none other but Turgut. Turgut's ambition was to have his own corsairing base. He had set his heart on acquiring the port of Tripoli whose splendid harbour could be transformed into the most secure corsair haven on the coast of North Africa. So he craftily manipulated Ottoman muscle to wrest it.

Turgut's plans ran parallel with the interests of the Ottomans - namely, the capitulation of the Christian outposts in the central Mediterranean, and the wresting of the remaining Spanish outposts in North Africa. Clearly Tripoli, Tunis, La Goulette (along with other smaller Spanish enclaves in Tunisia), Malta and Sicily were in the eye of the storm that was to rage for a full quarter of a century (1550-1575).

Although Ottoman power made itself felt in other areas of the Mediterranean as well, yet its main thrust was now directed at hammering the Spanish hold on the approaches to the western Mediterranean. The nadir of Christian fortune was reached in the decade 1550-1560. The reduction of the Spanish fortress at Djerba in July 1560, and the loss of a good section of the Spanish fleet under the Duke of Medina Celi, allowed Turgut and the Ottomans a free run of the central Mediterranean. Indeed this was a period of crises that was only checked as a result of the outcome of 1565 Siege of Malta.⁷

6 When the Franco-Spanish peace was signed in 1559, the Sultan could no longer use the alliance as an instrument of aggression, and Ottoman influence in the western Mediterranean receded.

7 Goffman (p. 151) argues that 'just as the conquest of Vienna... might have opened central Europe to the Ottomans, so the conquest of Malta, where a substantial host could have wintered, might have exposed Italy and even Iberia to their armies'.

Turgut's plan came near to succeeding – incredibly near – and in point of fact some of the component objective, were duly attained. But ultimately his strategy failed to dominate the central Mediterranean. Tripoli was liberated in 1551; Tunis and La Goulette were finally freed in 1574; while Malta and Sicily remained firmly in Christian hands denying the Ottomans ease of access to the western basin of the Mediterranean.

One is struck by a kind of inevitability of this outcome. All the great events that unfolded between 1550 and 1575 – in particular the 1565 siege of Malta – were perfectly predictable, one might even say inevitable, considering the logic of historical circumstances of the time in that particular region. When so much was at stake, it comes as no surprise that there were strategists of acumen and insight – like the Grand Master de Valette – who foresaw the development of the situation and exerted themselves to forestall the worse consequences.

The main arbiter of these events was Turgut, backed by the full might of the Ottoman Empire. The pivot point came when he persuaded the Sultan to man an armada which he would conduct against the more exposed Christian positions in the central Mediterranean. The year 1551 opened a fateful period of bitter fighting. The Ottoman Empire mounted three major campaigns – in 1551, 1560 and 1565 - during the course of which it came within an inch of achieving its objective of establishing its military hegemony over the central Mediterranean.

The Ottoman Empire: 1565- 1571

The Siege of Malta had been a near thing, but it was the turning point in the war for the Mediterranean. Ottoman frustration at the failure of capturing Malta, and suspicions that the Genoese had passed intelligence to the Knights of Malta, induced Suleiman the Magnificent to order his Kapudhan Paşa, Piyale, to invade and conquer the Genoese island of Chios in the Aegean. Chios was conquered almost without bloodshed.⁸ It has been suggested that the conquest of Chios was a sort of compensation for the defeat in the siege of Malta. Whatever the case it seems justified to assume that the capture of Chios 'marked the end of Ottoman maritime expansion towards the West'.⁹ Indeed, it may be argued that the Ottomans had lost their fight for the control of the Central Mediterranean.¹⁰ But this was not immediately clear. In fact up to 1580 the Ottoman Empire retained immense offensive potential, and although the Ottoman defeat in seizing Malta destroyed any chances of dominating the Central Mediterranean, the situation in the region was far from stable. The Spanish military hegemony over northern Tunisia clashed with Muslim aspirations

8 Goffman, pp.152-153.

9 Imber, p.60.

10 H.G. Koenigsberger, 'West Europe and the Power of Spain', in *The Habsburgs and Europe 1516-1660* (Ithaca, 1971), p. 252. The Order celebrated in Malta the first and second centenary of the Siege. See N[atational] L[ibrary of] M[alta], A[rchives of the] O[rder of] M[alta] 261, ff. 24v, 26; AOM 272, ff. 34v-35.

to occupy the same territory and it came to represent an imperialist imposition that continued to annoy the Muslims. In consequence, political equilibrium took a long time to be established.

Despite several handicaps, Ottoman galley fleets were very successful between 1538 and 1571 and the Ottoman Empire was believed to be the greatest single naval power in the Mediterranean. The Spaniards were concerned with the Ottoman presence particularly as they had problems with the descendants of the Moriscos at home. The frequency of corsair raids and, above all, the growing danger from the presence of the Ottoman fleet in the Western Mediterranean, made Granada, particularly vulnerable. There was good reason to fear a Morisco rising orchestrated in conjunction with an Ottoman attack for indeed, in 1565, three Morisco spies who had been arrested, revealed a plot for the seizure of the Granada coast in the event of an Ottoman success in the siege of Malta. Unless something was done, Granada could easily become another battlefield in the war with the Ottomans. The hard-fought Reconquista would be undone and the conflict would spread to the heart of Spain. Only with the decisive defeat of the Ottoman fleet at the battle of Lepanto in 1571 did Spain manage to contain such fears.

In a recent study on the impact which the defeat at Lepanto had on the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish historian Onur Yilidirim argues that the battle's major toll on Ottoman naval capacity, and the disastrous effects on the socio-political framework of the empire, had consequences similar to the early Ottoman defeat at the hands of the Mongols at the Battle of Ankara in 1402.¹¹ He further suggests that the defeat, after a long series of victories both before and after that event, made Lepanto 'look like an anomaly'. This may explain why the event did not receive the attention it deserved by Ottoman historiography.¹² A proper understanding of the Ottoman perspective of the period is therefore essential.

Several factors contributed to the Ottoman military success in the sixteenth century. High on the list is an abundant supply of men and military equipment which was unmatched by any other military power at the time. The Sultan's government had a permanent supply of troops at its disposal. There was also a small standing army of men that not only had skilled fighters' techniques but, as they lived and fought together, they had acquired an esprit de corps which provided a stable core to the Ottoman military system. All troops had a contractual obligation to serve the Sultan who could mobilize any number of disciplined troops whenever he wished. Finally the Ottomans were adept in developing weapons and were quick to improve their military tactics by learning from their enemies and

11 Lepanto had originally been conquered by the Ottomans, from the Venetians, in 1499 and from the start served as a maritime district of the empire as it constantly furnished the imperial navy with oarsmen and warriors. See, for example, O. Yilidirim, 'The Battle of Lepanto and its impact on Ottoman history and historiography', in *Mediterraneo in Armi*, ed. by R. Cancila (Palermo, 2007), p.535.

12 Yilidirim, pp.534-535. The author points out that so far the only specific treatment of the defeat at Lepanto is the paper by Andrew Hess, 'The Battle of Lepanto and its Place in Mediterranean History', in *Past and Present*, 57 (1972), pp. 53-73.



Fig. 1: Portrait of Suleiman II the Magnificent, from *Ottomanorum Principum Effigies ab Ottomano ad Regnantem Achmatem III* (Rome, 1699)

National Library of Malta Collection

from their own mistakes.¹³ Unfortunately for the Ottomans, there were no strong sultans after the demise of Suleiman the Magnificent in 1566.

Suleiman the Magnificent (1522-1566), was succeeded by Selim II (1566-1574), his only surviving son. The latter had a peaceful disposition and ruled thanks to the exceptional abilities of his Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Paşa. But, it so happened that on his accession to the throne, Selim was faced with an on-going war in Hungary; a revolt in Yemen which led to the collapse of Ottoman authority in that province; and an Arab revolt in the marshes to the north of Basra in modern Iraq.¹⁴

13 Details of the institutional functions of the Ottoman system and how it was geared to serve the Ottoman military system has induced many authors to write about the subject including Virginia Askan, Linda T. Darling, Caroline Finkel, Mehmet Genç, Colin Imber, Halil Inalcik, Şevket Pamuk and Stanford J. Shaw to mention a few of the more important writers. Thomas Scheben has written a detailed account based largely on very reliable secondary sources entitled, 'A State with an Army – An Army with a State? - The Ottoman Power Machine', in *The 1565 Ottoman Malta Campaign Register*, ed. and trans. by Arnold Cassola with the collaboration of Idris Bostan and Thomas Scheben (Malta, 1998), pp.13-81.

14 Imber, p.61; cf J. Richard Blackburn, 'The collapse of Ottoman authority in Yemen 968/1560-976/1568', in *Die I/Velz' dex Islams*, n.s.19/1-4 (1980), pp. 119-176.

By 1569, however, the Sultan turned his attention towards the expansion the Ottoman Empire in the eastern Mediterranean, as well as Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean at the expense of the Portuguese. For this reason it was felt necessary for the Sultan to launch a major campaign against the nearby Venetian island of Cyprus that

...lay across the vital sea-route from Constantinople to Alexandria, and whose conquest was seen as the essential prelude to an Ottoman thrust towards the south.

Furthermore,

*Cyprus surely presented an easier and more vulnerable target than Spain.*¹⁵

Cyprus had been under Venetian control since 1489 and had managed to avert an Ottoman attack thanks to Venetian skilful diplomacy and to the help which they got from France - the traditional allies of the Ottomans in the West.¹⁶ In 1569 Venice suffered two severe blows when the arsenal of Venice blew up and when Spain, heavily preoccupied with the revolt in Granada, was not in a position to offer assistance. The time seemed ripe for the Sultan to invade Cyprus. On their part the Latin West never expected the island to be invaded mainly because the Ottomans had signed a treaty which at the time of the invasion had not yet expired.¹⁷

The invasion of Cyprus appears to have been the personal wish of the Sultan and was strongly supported by two influential viziers Piyale Paşa and Lala Mustafa Paşa who came to command the Ottoman navy and the land forces respectively. The Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Paşa saw things differently. He believed that the invasion would result in an alliance between Venice, Spain, the Pope and their minor allies including the Knights of Malta. He therefore opposed the war.¹⁸ The latter was proved right when Nicosia was taken on 9 September 1570. As the Venetians became increasingly more desperate, the Most Serene Republic entered into an agreement with Philip II of Spain to launch a Christian naval offensive against the Ottoman Empire. This alliance, which became known as the Holy League, was joined by other Christian powers that included the Knights of Malta.

The creation of a Holy League between Spain, Venice, and the Holy See was well founded. The situation appeared so menacing that Philip II went so far as to order the evacuation of the Balearic Islands. This unexpected order, which elicited heated protests from the city of Barcelona, was not carried out in the end.

15 Elliott, *Europe Divided: 1159-1598* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2 edn, 2000), p. 190.

16 An anonymous report prepared for Emperor Charles V in 1556 asserts that Cyprus was the jewel of the crown of the Venetian Republic. At the time Venice received the equivalent of a hundred thousand ducats per year in merchandize and another hundred thousand ducats were sent home by soldiers stationed there and through other means. It is then pointed out that the other Greek islands like Candia (Crete), Zante (Zakinthos), Cephalonia, Corfu, and other territories in their possession in the Levant, were valued more for the prestige of keeping them than for gain. *Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Vittorio Emmanuele (Rome), Fondo Gesuitico*, MS 398 f. 204.

17 Imber, p. 62.

18 Imber, p. 63.

The fleet of the Holy League was finally assembled at Messina in September 1571 under the command of Don Juan of Austria, fresh from his triumph in Granada, and immediately sailed into the Greek waters.

The Ottomans learnt of the preparations for a Christian armada in the early months of 1571 from reliable sources in Bosnia and Delvina (Southern Albania). The news caused great concern in Constantinople and the Divan (Council of State) took drastic measures to meet the imminent dangers. The Ottomans believed that the Christian fleet was being assembled in order to stop the on-going siege on Famagusta in Cyprus. Moreover, the setting up of a Christian armada was, for them, tantamount to a confrontation between Christianity and Islam. But the Ottoman fleet had no clear idea where the Christian allies would attack and wandered between Crete and the Ottoman possessions in the Adriatic in the hope that it would finally meet the Christians. It seems though that, during this futile exercise, many Ottoman soldiers began to abandon the fleet never to return. At the same time, the Ottoman leaders did nothing to stop the troops from leaving largely because winter was approaching and also because they began to think that the Christians lacked the courage to fight the formidable Ottomans.¹⁹

It turned out that the Ottomans had grossly miscalculated. On 7 October 1571 the combined Christian fleet managed to defeat the Ottoman fleet in the Bay of Lepanto, the last Venetian stronghold in Cyprus - although the Ottomans were still able to retain Famagusta. Yet this naval defeat dealt a huge blow to the Ottoman naval power in the Mediterranean. Sokollu was therefore proved right. Of the Ottoman commanders at Lepanto only Uluç Ali Paşa, the Governor-General of Algiers, survived the battle and he later managed to reach Istanbul, with the remaining vessels.

This was the first major Ottoman naval defeat. On their part, despite the success at the battle of Lepanto, the Christians failed to achieve any other strategic gains because winter was fast approaching so the fleet made haste to return to its bases.²⁰

It is difficult to assess the real impact which the defeat at Lepanto had in the war for the Mediterranean. It has often been suggested that the Ottomans held sway over the Mediterranean ever since the Prevesa debacle way back in 1538 and that the battle of Lepanto of 1571 had brought an end to this. However one needs to keep in mind that the Ottoman imperial fleet never really gained control of the Adriatic or the western Mediterranean, while their failure at the siege of Malta put an end to Ottoman ambitions against Christian-held enclaves.²¹

At the same time the spectacular victory of the Christian forces at Lepanto was to epitomize for contemporaries all that was most glorious in the crusade against Islam. It was an eternal source of pride to those who, like Miguel de Cervantes,

19 Yilidirim, pp. 541-542.

20 Imber, p. 63.

21 Imber, 'The navy of Süleyman the Magnificent', in *Archivum Ottomanicum* 6 (1980), p. 224.

had fought in the battle. Millions of people in western Christendom saw in it a divine deliverance from the power of the oppressor. But in actual fact, Lepanto proved curiously a deceptive triumph, and the attempt to follow it up was peculiarly unsuccessful. Furthermore the Christian lands remained largely open to Ottoman incursions and razzias for almost two centuries after Lepanto.²² However the general political situation of the Mediterranean saw several other dramatic events before a certain kind of equilibrium was reached during the 1580s.

On their part, under the wise direction of Sokollu Mehmed Paşa, the Ottoman arsenals immediately began to construct a new fleet, which by the summer of 1572 emerged under the command of Uluç Ali Paşa, a survivor of Lepanto, who became Kapudhan Paşa.²³ However this enormous war effort was carried out via a harsh policy of taxation from the provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The war only came to an end in 1573 when Cyprus was formally ceded to the Ottomans.²⁴ As Ronald Jennings rightly remarks:

*...none of the parties which emerged victorious out of Lepanto occupied any territories, won any strategic advantages, or were able to follow up that single isolated success. The Ottomans not only stripped Venice of its richest and wealthiest possession, that is Cyprus, and its most important naval bases but also deprived Latin Christian pirates of their most important base.*²⁵

When, in the following year, the Venetian Republic concluded a separate peace with the Sublime Porte, Spain and the Ottomans were forced to face each other. The Spaniards, under Don Juan of Austria, struck the first blow and were able to re-take Tunis in October 1573.²⁶ Yet, Christian victory was to prove short-lived.

The Ottomans in the late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries

The Ottomans continued to terrify the minds and hearts of those living on the shores and coasts of the Latin Mediterranean. The successful conquests in North Africa, the potential to conquer Christian occupied lands, and make successful incursions, all testify to the rapid recovery of the Ottoman sea power from the disaster at Lepanto. In short,

22 Galasso, 'Il mediterraneo di Filippo II', *Mediterranea. Ricerche storiche*. anno i (2004), pp. 9-18 esp. p. 11.

23 'Of all the Mediterranean powers, the Ottoman Empire possessed the most abundant resources for shipbuilding. Timber, in particular, was available from the dense woodlands of north-western Anatolia, near to the arsenals at Istanbul, Gallipoli and Izmit, and from the forested slopes of the mountains along the southern shore of the Black Sea. The supply was the envy of foreign observers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and did not show signs of exhaustion until the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.' Imber, *The Ottoman Empire*, pp. 294-295.

24 G. Hill, *A History of Cyprus* vol.iii. The Frankish period, (Cambridge, 1948), pp. 950-1040. A worthy successor to Turgut, the dour Uluç Ali Paşa – another redoubtable corsair chief – made himself felt. He was often to make his adversaries quake for the two decades after the 1565 Siege of Malta. He had succeeded Hasan Paşa as 'king' of Algiers and in January 1570, he unexpectedly marched overland from his base and captured Tunis from the Spaniards, but was unable to reduce the naval base at La Goulette.

25 R. C. Jennings, *Christians and Muslims in Ottoman Cyprus and the Mediterranean World, 1571-1640*, (New York, 1993), p. 5.

26 Dal Pozzo, *Historia della sacra religione militare di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano, detta di Malta, 2 vols* (Verona, 1703), I, 62-64.



Fig. 2: 'Giannizzero andando alla guerra', from Nicolo de Nicolai, *Le Navigazioni et viaggi nella Turchia* (Antwerp, 1576).

National Library of Malta Collection

the Ottomans showed no signs of exhaustion. Much of the Ottoman strength lay in the fact that all the resources needed for shipbuilding were available in the Empire.²⁷ The success of the Tunis campaign can be considered as testimony of the quick recovery of the Ottoman Imperial fleet from the disastrous naval defeat at Lepanto and the re-establishment of Ottoman hegemony over the Eastern Mediterranean.

Yet despite the great show of force, the Ottoman-Spanish struggle had entered a stage of stalemate. It was practically the end of the struggle that had started three-quarters of a century earlier, although the contemporaries were as yet unaware of it. Thus soon after the naval battle of Lepanto, the Ottoman Empire began gradually to mount a counter-offensive. Already by 1572 it was becoming questionable whether Spain could afford an all-out struggle in the Mediterranean, largely because the revolt of the Netherlands was far from crushed. Fortunately for Spain and her Christian allies however, the Ottomans also had preoccupations of their own. Slowly the two empires, locked in combat for half a century, disengaged their forces. The Ottomans deployed them eastwards against their Persian enemies, the Spaniards westwards towards the new Atlantic battlefield.

By the time the Spanish had vanquished their last adversary in 1574, the Ottoman commander Sinan Paşa, had completed the reversal of the Ottoman's military and political standing in the Maghreb. In solid possession of most of North Africa, the Sultan could turn his attention to the task of extending his authority to Morocco. Since the early sixteenth century the Saadi dynasty had set up a regime in Morocco which was completely independent of Ottoman influence. So, in 1576 the Sultan ordered the governor of Algeria to support the Ottoman candidate for the throne of Morocco 'Abd al-Malik who subsequently invaded Morocco with the help of Algerian troops and conquered it. 'Abd al-Malik thus became the new Sultan of Morocco thanks to Ottoman support.

On his part, though, 'Abd al-Malik sought to ensure that his kingdom would remain independent from Ottoman hegemony. The immediate exterior threat to 'Abd al-Malik did not come from the Ottomans, whose power to impose their will in the western part of North Africa remained rather limited. It came instead from the young king of Portugal, Don Sebastião, who was determined to continue the crusade against the Moors, as well as to protect Portuguese interests in the Atlantic from the thrust of Ottoman imperialism.²⁸ The young king briefly managed to revive the notion of Portuguese overland conquest and in 1578 he led a military campaign into Morocco. He was however defeated and his body was never found after the battle of Alcázar Quibir. The battle brought the epoch of large-scale warfare along the coast of the Maghreb to an end.²⁹ From then on the military activities of the western Mediterranean during the 1580s were mostly of the naval type dominated

27 Imber, 'The navy of Süleyman', p. 220.

28 Hess, 66-68.

29 J. Myhill, *Language, Religion and National Identity in Europe and the Middle East: A Historical Study*, (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2006), p. 66.

by corsairing activities between two hostile civilizations – Christianity in the north and Islam in the south. What followed was a century of equilibrium, with neither side strong enough to proclaim the Mediterranean *mare nostrum*.³⁰

The Maghreb was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire largely thanks to cooperation between the Ottomans and the North African Muslim corsairs who operated in the central and western Mediterranean. Yet, despite the central role played by the Maghreb states in Ottoman naval warfare, Ottoman administrative presence in the area was weak with the result that it remained ‘a terra incognita of Ottoman administrative historiography’ rightly described by Andrew C. Hess as ‘the forgotten frontier’.³¹ The link between the Ottoman imperial administration and North Africa was mainly maintained through the corsairing activities which were undertaken at the expense of Christian lands and shipping.

Corsairing increased with the emergence of Algiers as the corsairing centre par excellence under Hayreddin after 1534, and with the conquest of key geographical areas along the North African coast by Spain. In the end, the employment of corsairs and the incorporation of Algeria helped to change Ottoman strategy. Corsairs began to play a leading role in diplomatic relations between the Ottomans, on the one hand, and France and Morocco, on the other. The role played by Algiers in Franco-Ottoman relations became so central that by 1580 the French established an embassy there.³² Marseilles in particular gained special importance because North African corsair vessels bought raw materials, munitions, and victuals from there, and also because it served as a place from where they obtained vital information. The relationship between France and Algiers remained strong as far as both France and the corsairs perceived each other as natural allies against the Spanish Habsburgs. Algiers thus played a vital role in Franco-Ottoman relations. Similarly the Ottomans depended on Algiers to formulate their Moroccan policy.³³

Concluding Remarks

A close look at the way the Ottoman Empire functioned provides a clue to their activities in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. The era is held to be a period of transformation in Ottoman historiography largely because it was a crucial phase of changes, economic crises and social turmoil.³⁴

30 S. Bono, *Il Mediterraneo da Lepanto a Barcellona*, (Perugia, 1999), pp. 12, 34, 176. S. Soucek, ‘Tunisia in the *Kitab-i Bahriye* by Piri Reis’, *Archivum Ottomanicum*, V (1973), pp. 129-296 esp. pp. 132-133.

31 A. C. Hess, *The Forgotten Frontier*; also E.S. Gürkan, ‘The centre and the frontier: Ottoman cooperation with the North African corsairs in the sixteenth century’, in *Turkish Historical Review*, I (2010), pp. 125-126.

32 Léon Galibert, *Storia di Algeri dal primo stabilimento de' cartaginesi*, (Florence, 1847), vol.1 p. 346; see also Gürkan, pp. 125-163 esp. p. 137.

33 Gürkan, pp. 137-138.

34 H. Inalcik, ‘The Ottoman decline and its effects upon the Reaya’, in H. Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: Conquest, Organization, and Economy*, (London, 1978), pp. 338-354; and H. Inalcik, ‘Military and fiscal transformation in the Ottoman Empire, 1600-1700’ 1600-1700’, in Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire*, pp. 283-337.

The Ottomans enjoyed a long period of stability, agricultural development, and growing prosperity throughout the sixteenth century. But by 1595, things did not remain that good. When Murad III (1574-1595) was succeeded by his son Mehmed III (1595-1603), the Ottoman Empire passed through a severe crisis on the battlefield. The death of the Sultan led to widespread riot and confusion throughout the empire. A document at the Vatican Archives refers to a report of Guglielmo Silenche, Captain of a French ship, which had just arrived in Malta from Zante at the end of July with fresh information from Constantinople. The death of the Grand Turk in Adrianople (modern Edirne) had led to widespread rebellions in Greece and Transylvania. Furthermore Captain Silenche reported that an Ottoman armada of some fifty galleys was in the Gulf of Negropont, while another large squadron of some thirty galleys had gone to Alexandria for provisions. Both fleets were on the verge of mutiny.³⁵

The instability that broke out on the death of Murad III may suggest that the conquests of the late sixteenth century induced the Sublime Porte to install garrisons throughout the empire. However, despite the pragmatism, flexibility, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, the Ottoman Western provinces (Algeria, Tripolitania, Tunisia) were the most difficult to control since they were geographically distant from Constantinople. Instability, resulting from economic and political problems, combined to the rising power of the new ruling elite, became a feature of trouble in the peripheral areas of the empire - not least so in the Maghreb where a new international conjuncture strengthened the autonomy of the regencies particularly that of Algiers.

35 *Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Segreteria di Stato*, Malta, vol. 6, fol. 136. Mehmed III began his rule with severe fiscal and military difficulties coupled with rising internal conflicts that became endemic in the following century. The decline of the central political structure was accompanied by the rise of provincial elites who had greater influence on the evolution of regional economies.