



CONSTRUCTIONS OF NORTH AFRICAN CORSAIRS IN EARLY AND POST-9/11 AMERICAN ORIENTALIST DISCOURSE

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Abstract:

The capture and enslavement of American sailors at the hands of North African corsairs, notoriously known as Barbary pirates, on the Mediterranean coasts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, coupled with the so-called Barbary Wars between the newly-independent United States and the-then branded the Barbary States of North Africa, gave rise to the “*the first significant group of U.S. Orientalist works*” (Schueller 45). Following the tragic events of September 11 and the ensuing “*War on Terror*”, many of the negative images perpetuated in these early American Orientalist writings have been revived in post-9/11 American historiography and media accounts of Barbary Wars which both advocate that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century North African corsairs were the first “*Islamic terrorists*” whom the United States had ever faced. Scholarship on early American Orientalism has demonstrated how representations of the early North African ‘Mahometan’ as despotic, antichristian, and decadent were employed to shape American national identity. Yet, little, if no, scholarly attention has been paid to how both early and post-9/11 American writings on Barbary North Africa have invested in stereotypical depictions of barbarism, savagery, monstrosity, cannibalism, demonization, and, more recently, terrorism and Jihadism to create the misguided and mistaken cultural assumption that monstrosity and violence are inherent qualities of Muslims and Arabs. In tracing and identifying these misassumptions, this article endeavors to prove that the stereotyping of Muslims and Arabs was has been a prevalent phenomenon in American culture. It, too, seeks to unveil how Americans, both in early America and the post-9/11 era, have tried, through narrative, to appropriate and construct and reconstruct the North African ‘Mahometans’, and Muslims and Arabs in general, as the inhumane monster and the arch-enemy who should be fought wherever s/he is found.

Keywords: Barbary Wars, North African corsairs, pirates, United States of America, barbarism, early American Orientalism, terrorists, September 11

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1. Inhumane Monsters: North African Corsairs in Early American Orientalism

“To the 18th Century American mind, Muslim became synonymous with Pirate much as it would become interchangeable with Terrorist two centuries later.” (Naylor 98)

The epigraph above perfectly encapsulates the story of two-century American stereotyping of Islam and Muslims. The notion of *“Islamic Otherness”* that post-9/11 American historiography on Barbary Wars have perpetuated is not a novelty in American Orientalist discourse, which dates back long before the tragic events of September 11 and the ensuing *“War on Terror.”* Building upon the European Orientalist legacy, which holds the North African *“Other”* as religiously, politically and culturally inferior, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century American writings on North Africa and its people followed suit and reproduced the same constructs. As an example of European Orientalism’s impact on early Americans’ understanding of Islam, Thomas Kidd cites the English churchman and Orientalist Humphrey Prideaux’s biography *The True Nature of Imposture fully displayed in the Life of Mahomet* (1697), which also appeared in American editions in the early decades of the eighteenth century, as *“the most notable and influential treatment of Islam which Anglo-Americans read”* (6). Among Prideaux biography’s major influences, Kidd illustrates, is the designation of the prophet Muhammad as an *“impostor;”* an epithet which gained wide currency among learned American Protestants (6). One of whom is the Bostonian Pastor Cotton Mather who claims in a sermon entitled *The Glory of Goodness* (1703) and preached upon colonials who endured slavery:

“Oh: Let us admire Sovereign Grace, and shout, Grace! Grace! Upon it, that though these our Friends, were covered with the shadow of Death, yet they did not Forget the Name of our God, into which they had been Baptised, nor deal falsely in their Baptismal Covenant; nor stretch out their Hands unto the Impostor Mahomet, and his accursed Alcoran!” (Baepler 64, the last italics added)

Thomas Wells Bray, pastor at Guilford, Connecticut, falls in line with the generally negative view towards Islam held by Prideaux and Mather among many others. Explaining the reasons behind the expansion of Islam, he states in *A Dissertation on the Sixth Vial* (1780): *“By cruel tyranny and over-bearing power, did that vile impostor Mahomet set up and propagate a false religion, which has been one of the greatest plagues to the Christian religion, and filled the entire eastern world with terror and thick darkness, like the smoke of a bottomless pit”* (29, italics added). Such distorted knowledge of Islam can be attributed to the fact that the early American Protestants were actually ill-informed about Islam. Kidd concedes in this regard that *“one should hesitate to describe early Americans as conversant with Islam [though] they certainly conversed about Islam regularly”* (1). This fact is fully evident in labeling Islam before the twentieth century as *“Mohametanism”* or *“Mohammedanism”* or *“the Religion of Mahomet,”* which according to Timothy Marr, is *“itself an orientalist designation that gave undue centrality to the place of Messenger Muhammad in the faith of Islam”* (6). The defamation of Islam and its messenger perpetuated by American Protestants like Mather and Bray was later replicated by both former American captives in North Africa and the founding fathers. Setting the values of Christianity against those

of Islam, Robbins Archbald, an American sailor onboard the ship *Commerce* which ran ashore in Cape Bojador, Morocco, in 1815, made use of the epithet "*Impostor*." The quotation may seem long, but it is worth citing in full:

"It is almost impossible in this place, to avoid remarking upon the different effect that the two systems introduced into our world by our divine Redeemer, and the impostor Mahommed, has upon the professors of these different systems. The religion introduced by the one teaches Peace on earth, and good will to men. To do to others as you would have others do to you. It teaches men to check the operations of passion, and depraved nature, and to become pure in heart. That of the other promises the full gratification of every propensity. His paradise is a region of gluttony, drunkenness, and debauchery. The one teaches men to love their enemies — the other to destroy them." (81-82, italics added)

Not only does Robbins paint a distorted picture of Islam and the Prophet, but also suggests that it incites its followers to violence against Christians. Robbins' portrayal of Islam as a religion of violence and cruelty, a correlation that is established even in today's accounts on Islam, appears to be common knowledge among Americans who were held captives in Barbary North Africa. Years before Robbins's account, John Foss, an American sailor who was captured on the coast of North Africa and sold into slavery in Algiers in 1793, and whom Lotfi Ben Rajeb accuses of plagiarizing the British author Simon Ockley's *An Account of South-West Barbary: Fez and Morocco* (1713), doubts if Islam is a religion:

"The tears of sympathy will flow from the humane and feeling, at the tale of the hardships and suffering of their unfortunate countrymen, who had the misfortune to fall into the hands of the Algerines — whose tenderest mercies towards Christian captives, are the most extreme cruelties; and who are taught by the Religion of Mahomet (if that can be called a Religion which leads men to commission such horrid and bloody deeds) to persecute all its opposers." (Baepler 73)

Associating the professed hardships and cruelties that Foss suffered with Islam aims to validate Bray's and Robbins' claims that Islam is a religion of cruelty. It also resonates with the accusation that "*Mahomet their great Prophet possessing them with a Belief, that if he kills any one, he merits Heaven by so doing,*" made by Francis Brooks, a British native who was held captive in Morocco during the reign of Mully Ishmael (qtd. in Kidd 17). The tendency to decry Islam and the prophet was not peculiar to pastors and captives; even polemicists used Islamic labels to revile one other when debating controversial issues. Benjamin Franklin, for example, used the epithet "Mahomet" as a rhetorical tool to discredit his opponents, wondering if "*is it worse to follow Mahomet than the Devil?*" (qtd. in Kidd 17). In actuality, the stereotyping views of Islam as a doctrine of barbarism, anti-Christianity, inhumanity and terror tell much more about the early American imagery, whose products and patterns can be easily detected in present-day American discourse on Islam, than they do about the truth of that religion. The following remark in *Horrors of Slavery* by William Ray, an American sailor who was captured in Tripoli in 1803, on the sympathy of a Mahometan saint who "*offered me a piece of bread in the name of the prophet, pitied my situation, and really appeared to possess philanthropy,*" may question the early Americans' views

on Islam and Muslims (67). Unsurprisingly, the aforesaid stereotypical constructions of Islam nurtured the early American portrayals of the Barbary character as savage, monstrous, demonic and cannibal "Other."

Savagery, monstrosity, demonization and cannibalism are stereotypical characterizations which early Americans ascribed to the North African "Other", for "*depictions of Africans as noble or exemplary are infrequent, indeed rare*" (Beapler 38). Commenting on Algerian wedding ceremonies, Foss, for example, stereotypes Algerians as a whole as "*those savage tribes of Barbary*" (83). Two pages later, Foss, providing a detailed description of the Algerian geography, reminds his American readers that the Algerians' hostility exceeds that of their wild animals: "*Indeed a considerable part of the back country is a savage desert, abounding by with Lions, Tigers, Leopards, Jackalls, Buffaloes, Porcupines, &. And it must be acknowledged, that these animals are not the least amiable inhabitants of this country*" (46). To further debase, actually dehumanize, the Algerian "Other," Foss perverts Turks, a portion of the Algerian population then, into monsters: "*Turks are well built robust people, their complexion not unlike Americans, tho' somewhat larger, but their dress, and long beards, make them appear more like monsters than human beings*" (74). Somehow like the twentieth-century American Orientalist Morroe Berger, of whom Edward Said writes that instead of trying "*first to master the esoteric languages of the Orient; he begins as a trained social scientist and "applies" his science to the Orient*" (290), so too, Foss, although he did not intend to study the Orient at the first place as Berger, comments on Algerian people and culture as the agent of the new empire, but his preconceived notions of the region obscure the reality before his eyes. As to Judah Paddock, a captain of the 1800-wrecked *Oswego*, even the knowledge he had acquired from travel accounts did little to prepare him for his first contact with Africans, suggesting that his Arab captors' savagery surpasses expectation: "*Their [wild Arabs] figure, and ferocious look, to say nothing of their behavior, were as savage, and even exceeded in savageness, anything that I ever have read in narratives of voyages ... Before I proceed further, I will describe, as well as I can, these monsters*" (72-73). Like Paddock's "*wild Arabs*", the captain of 1815-wrecked *Commerce* James Riley's "*wandering Arabs*" are primitive, subhuman, merciless, cruel, thieving, greedy, savage and barbarous monsters and even malignant demons. In his "*Authentic narrative*," Riley, while describing his sufferings, states that:

"I have drank deep of the bitter cup of sufferings and wo [woe]; have been dragged down to the lowest depths of human degradation and wretchedness; my naked frame exposed without shelter to the scorching skies and chilling night winds of the desert [desert], enduring the most excruciating torments, and groaning, a wretched slave, under the stripes inflicted by the hands of barbarous monsters, bearing indeed the human form, but unfeeling, merciless, and malignant as demons." (445)

Riley is not unique in depicting his "*wandering Arabs*" as demons. Archibald Robbins, who was on the same ship as Riley and who wonders if Arabs could "*be called human*" since "*their appearance is nothing but a slander upon our species*," describes them as "*demons, whose diabolical ferocity would have added a laurel to the escutcheon of Satan himself*" (25-27). These animalistic and satanic characteristics (savagery, monstrosity, demonization, etc.) seem to be inherent characteristics of North Africans; a fact which calls their humanity into question. After

Foss, Paddock and Robbins credit Algerians and Moroccans with such negative qualities, Mary Velnet, an Italian pseudo-captive who was captured in Tripoli in 1797 and whose account Paul Baepler categorizes as fictitious and full of plagiarism, also imputes savagery and monstrosity to Tripolitans. Recounting the execution of a Frenchman captive who tried to escape Tripoli, she writes: “*When those savage monsters had sufficiently glutted themselves with the blood of this innocent but unfortunate captive, orders were given for the re-forming of the procession*” (Bekkaoui 173). This scene is reproduced verbatim in Maria Martin’s narrative *History of the Captivity and Sufferings of Mrs. Maria Martin*, except that it took place in Algiers.

Eliza Bradley, an English pseudo-captive who was captured in Morocco in 1818 and who plagiarized Riley, according to Baepler, echoes her predecessors and promotes an image of Arabs as “*monster[s] in human shape*” (Baepler 156). As if attributes of savageness, monstrosity and demonization are not enough to construct the Barbary people as less, if not, human, some American captives likened them to cannibals. After voicing his initial fears that the Arab he first encountered was a cannibal since his “*well set teeth were sharpened for the purpose of devouring human flesh*” (33), Riley reported another incident in which he claims to rescue a four-year boy from two Arabs who “*were about dashing his brain with a stone, for the purpose of devouring his flesh*” (95). Such fears of Arabs’ cannibalism are confirmed by Robbins who pretends that the merchant ship *Commerce’s* crew was in a “*momentary danger of being devoured by demons*” (25). Whereas Robbins articulates an implicit likening of Arabs to cannibals, Bradley makes it explicit when she recalls that Arabs “*seized us with all the ferocity of cannibals [and] in an instance stripped us almost naked*” (Baepler 255, italics added). Mirroring Bradley’s experience in Morocco, Viletta Laranda, a Neapolitan pseudo-captive who was seized in Algiers and whose narrative Baepler deems untrue, builds up a similar image of Algerian “*Bedowens, who were esteemed the worst class of Arabs, and from whom we had no reason to expect much mercy [and] by them we were all (twelve in number) seized with all the ferocity of cannibals*” (Bekkaoui 245). By constructing North Africans as despots, anti-Christians, barbarians, savages, monsters, demons and cannibals, lying in the lowest position on the human racial spectrum, Foss and his American fellow captives negotiate their distinct identities by distancing themselves from and asserting their moral, religious, political and racial superiority over the North African “*Other.*” In so doing, they culturally distance the West from the East, or, say civilization from barbarism. In short, these early misconstructions of the North African “*Other*” constitute, to use Edward Said’s expression, the first American “*imaginative investment*” in the Muslim Orient and the beginning of American “*Orientalism in its new eastward direction*” (Sha’ban 81). Quite surprisingly, many of the above-mentioned stereotypical images still persist up to our own day.

2. America’s Earliest Terrorists: North African Corsairs in Post-9/11 American Orientalist Discourse

Since the turn of the new millennium, particularly after the 9/11 era, the Barbary Wars episode and Islam have started gaining widespread currency among some American scholars, military commentators and journalists, who have tried to establish what Jacob Rama Berman calls a “*historical continuum*” between the first U.S. conflicts against the North African States of the Mediterranean Coast, labeled in the post-9/11 narrative as “*states-sponsored international*

terrorism" (Turner 121), and the current U.S. war on "*terrorism*" (220). Instead of rising above the triumphalist discourse prevailing in the American traditional historiography on the Barbary Wars, we find such accounts on the North African corsairs like Joseph Wheelan's *Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror, 1801-1805* (2003), Joshua E. London's both "*America's Earliest Terrorists: Lessons from America's first War against Islamic Terror*" (2005) and *Victory in Tripoli: How America's War with the Barbary Pirates Established the U.S. Navy and Built a Nation* (2005) and Frederick C. Leiner's *The End of Barbary Terror: America's 1815 War Against the Pirates of North Africa* (2006), actively engaged in drafting a new chapter of American Orientalism, where the North African "*Other*" is reinvented and reconstructed as the modern-day proto-terrorist. Trying to revive early American stereotyped images of North African corsairs, Wheelan, for example, writes that "*literature and the Redemptionist religious orders commonly depicted the Moslems as heartless, barbaric captors*" (21). "*True some corsair captains made a practice of slicing off and collecting the noses and ears of their galley slaves*" (21), Wheelan asserts. This "*barbaric and heartless*" corsair would be depicted as the proto-modern terrorist in the Orientalist language of Muslims in the American post-9/11 reinvention of the Barbary Wars. Since the 9/11 events, misinformed parallels have been drawn between Barbary Wars and the so-called "*War on Terror*"; both Barbary corsairs and "*Islamic terrorists*" have been portrayed as fanatical jihadists who now, as then, share congenital propensity to perpetrate acts of terror such as September 11 bloodbath. Seeking to make a seemingly plausible analogy, Wheelan claims that:

"Their [North African corsairs, notoriously known as the Barbary pirates] depredations did not occur in New York or Washington, but in the Mediterranean and eastern Atlantic, against "infidel" civilian contractors transporting goods on sailing ships. Yet, it was terror nonetheless, prosecuted cynically in the name of Islamic "jihad," Al-Qaeda's pretext for hijacking jetliners and crashing them into highly visible symbols of U.S. power." (xxii)

Stressing the religious factor, namely jihad, as the shared ideology that drives both post-9/11 "*Muslim terrorists*" and their ancestors Barbary corsairs to perpetrate acts of terror, London, in a resonant manner with Wheelan's, maintains that:

"Just as the concept of jihad is invoked by Muslim terrorists today to legitimize suicide bombings of noncombatants for political gain, so too al-jihad fil-bahr, the holy war at sea, served as the cornerstone of the Barbary states' interaction with Christendom." (9)

Echoing Wheelan's and London's views, Liener also asserts that "*slave-taking was jihad, and the tactics employed by the corsairs were a form of terrorism, a method of seaborne violence meant to intimidate the peoples of Europe*" (4). This gross exaggeration of jihad aims to prove the false assertion that just as Islam is the reason for the "*Islamic terror*," so too Islam was the cause behind the Barbary corsairs' ship-plundering and slave-taking, acts of early "*Islamic terrorism*" in the eyes of Wheelan, London and Liener. As a matter of fact, the emphasis that is overlaid on religion overlooks the plain fact that "*the Barbary Wars were primarily about trade, not theology, and rather than being holy wars, they were an extension of America's War of Independence*" (Lambert 8). This religious rhetoric that is inherent in the pirate-terrorist analogy was no less pronounced by

media and military pundits. In fact, the reading of Barbary Wars as the first anti-terror war was first suggested by some journalists and military pundits in the aftermath of 9/11 events bearing the appellation of the "*Barbary Analogy*." Since Captain Glenn Voelz, a history professor, made a parallel between the U.S military interventions in Tripoli and Afghanistan in October 2001; "*Barbary Analogy*," which views the Barbary corsairs as the direct antecedents of the contemporary "*Islamic terrorists*," has been sought by media and military buffs to extract lessons for the "*war on terror*," or, say American interventions in the Muslim world (Policante 151). After charging the dehumanized and murderous "*Barbary pirates*" with "*atrocious acts against civilians*," the *Washington Post* Journalist Richard Leiby, reporting during the American invasion of Afghanistan, concludes that "*one of the enduring lessons of the Barbary North Africa campaigns was to never give in to outlaws, whether you call them pirates or terrorists*" (2001), notwithstanding the fact that the story of Barbary Wars is too extensive to be retold in a newspaper article.

Similarly, Thomas Jewett in *Terrorism in Early America* remarks that America's attack against Tripoli two centuries ago is "*eerily similar to contemporary times*," in reference to circumstances surrounding contemporary America's "*war on terror*" (2002). For London, who thinks that the real lesson from the Barbary Wars has not been fully learned yet, the answer is an all-out war rather than hunting down individuals since "*Islamic militants*" in Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya and Gaza Strip, all "*claim to be acting in the name of Islam*" (2005). Again, the early U.S.-North African conflicts of the early nineteenth century were brought up to the fore as *The New York Times* journalist Jeffery Gettleman cites the supposed suppression of the "*Barbary piracy*" as an example to deal with the Somali pirates who captured the Captain Richard Philips in *Maersk Alabama* ship's incident in the Indian Ocean in 2009 and advises to "*pound the bravado out of [the Somali] pirates by taking the battle to them where it hurts most — on shore*" (2009). Analogies with the Barbary conflict are still drawn even today since the enemy is the Muslim "Other." This is evident in an article in *The Washington Times* in which Thomas Stewart, a former naval officer, announces "*the return of the Barbary pirates*" (2015) with regard to the story of the 21 Coptic hostages who were supposedly kidnapped and beheaded by ISIS militants in Libya.

When read in order, the aforementioned popular books and media accounts share a number of striking characteristics. First, by echoing each other, they reflect a hostile, if not racial, attitude towards the Muslim "*other*" and his culture. The depiction of Barbary as a deserted land of piracy and slavery, and Barbary people as savage, barbaric, despotic and piratical "*Others*" are widespread. Second, they put much emphasis on Islam as the rationale behind the Barbary corsairs' and the so-called Muslim terrorists' involvement in armed Jihad against non-combatant Christians. Now, as then, Muslims are considered lawless and fanatical jihadists who should be fought wherever they are found since "*there is but one language which can be held to these people, and that is terror*," as William Eaton, Consul General to Tunis (1797-1803), recommended two hundred years ago (qtd. in Wheelan 78). Third, their narrative of the Barbary Wars is based on a deliberate historical selection that reflects a careful choice of events, characters and scenes which serve the historical determinism's argument, holding that because the United States fought its war with the Barbary powers, the ensuing 9/11 "*war on terror*" is inevitable. Fourth, their oversimplified reading of Barbary Wars, which is apparent in the lessons learned from the Barbary North Africa experience, signifies the neglect, if not ignorance, of historical specificity and context of this episode of the encounter between the United States and the Muslim world.

Fifth, most of the negative stereotypes they promote are not unsupported by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century American writings on Muslim North Africa. Sixth, and most importantly, they attest to the fact that American Orientalism is still alive and well.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author of this research paper, Prof. Mohamed Saidi, has no conflict of interest with anyone or any researcher/s.

About the Author

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