

Religion Today
June 3-9, 2007
America among Muslims and Christians: After 1776
Paul V.M. Flesher

When America was a colony, it was heavily involved in shipping and foreign trade. Britain garnered the lion's share of American goods, but today every school child learns about the slave-sugar-rum triangle with the Caribbean and Africa. It is less well-known that a significant number of American merchants plied the waters of the Mediterranean, trading with many nations and cities on that sea.

The declaration of independence in 1776 brought home an overlooked truth. When America was a British Colony, its shipping trade had been protected by the might of the British Navy, which dominated the seas at that time. Now that it was independent, America had no such protection -- it had no navy at all. This fact was not lost on the Barbary Pirates of the North African coast. They preyed on American shipping with impunity, taking captives, demanding ransom, and stealing American goods. They even sailed into the Atlantic Ocean and interfered with American trade with Western Europe.

Problems arose from the religio-political situation of the Muslim Ottoman Empire. The empire was based in Istanbul, in modern-day Turkey, and nominally controlled the countries along the northeastern, eastern, and southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, from Greece clockwise around to Algiers.

Unfortunately, the Ottoman Empire was already decaying and several leaders in North Africa had carved out independent states under the Ottoman umbrella. Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli were ruled by pashas who had created their kingdoms by force, and they continued to use force, piracy to be specific, as a tool of state to earn their countries revenue.

Although the Barbary kingdoms targeted Americans, the Ottomans themselves held America in great esteem. At a time when the British, Russians and Austrians were pressuring the empire, and Napoleon even had the temerity to invade Egypt and Syria, Sultan Selim III was impressed when the ship George Washington sailed into Istanbul harbor in 1800, a representative of the world's only nation that had thrown off European over-lordship.

If the divisions in the Muslim Mediterranean caused America's pirate problem, then divisions in Christian Europe hindered the solution. France had just sided with America against Britain in the War of Independence, as had the Netherlands and Spain. But their alliance with the nascent America did not lead to alliances at home. Rather than confront the Barbary Pirates, each nation paid them an annual tribute to leave their ships alone.

The problem was that this did not work for America. When it offered tribute or tried to ransom a captured ship, Algiers or Tripoli would simply seize another ship and demand another, higher ransom. Since America had no navy, it could not enforce ransom or tribute agreements.

The European nations all had navies. Even though some were small, they were large enough to keep tribute and ransom demands in check and could, in theory at least, launch an attack on Tunis or Tripoli if ship attacks got out of hand. Since America had no navy, it was at the mercy of the Barbary kingdoms.

At first, America tried diplomacy. In the 1780s, they suggested an alliance with the French, the Dutch, and other nations with smaller navies to create a force to rid the Mediterranean of the pirates. Although some thought this was a good idea, no nation volunteered the use of its ships.

In the end, it took the Constitutional Convention of 1787, which formally created the United States of America, to lay the conditions for the creation of the U.S. Navy. And it was not until the end of the second war against the British, the War of 1812, that American naval power was sufficient to put down the state-sponsored activities of the Barbary Pirates. In June 1815, 10 American warships entered the Algerian harbor. The Pasha appealed to the British, who gave him no help. The Pasha then accepted the terms of Adm. Stephen Decatur, which included payment of compensation to the United States. Tunis and Tripoli followed suit.

America solved its pirate problem. American merchants were once again free to trade on the open seas. And the nation had created a navy. Although Americans today think that involvement with Islamic countries is new, it is as old as the nation itself.