Global Politics in the 1580s: One Canal, Twenty Thousand Cannibals, and an Ottoman Plot to Rule the World*

GIANCARLO CASALE

University of Minnesota–Twin Cities

Politics might fairly be called the final frontier of the world historian. Over the past several decades, no one would deny that truly impressive advances have been made in our ability to trace the growth of global interconnectedness over time. But most would also agree—with a few notable exceptions—that these advances have been achieved through the study of migration, long-distance trade, biological exchange, technology transfer, and other such phenomena that operate on a plane largely independent of superficial political developments. “International history” in the political sense has remained very much the domain of specialists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while, at least for many, the study of political history in earlier periods still smacks of old-fashioned Eurocentric empiricism.

At least on the surface, the limitations of political history appear particularly daunting for scholars of the sixteenth century: the first historical period in which the intercontinental reach of European maritime powers becomes impossible to ignore, but seems to have no obvious corollary in any contemporary non-Western state. And yet, if told from only a slightly different perspective, the history of sixteenth-

---

* I would like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Research Institute in Turkey for jointly funding a one-year post-doctoral fellowship that made research for this article possible. All maps were skillfully prepared by Gabriele Casale.
century political relations can become infinitely richer than the simple (and tired) narrative of contacts with, or resistance to, Europeans. During these years, in fact, alongside the self-consciously global maritime states of Portugal and Spain, imperial competitors such as the Ottomans and Mughals also began to think in global terms and to formulate political ideologies and practical strategies on a similarly vast world stage. And over time, the rivalry between all of these competing imperial centers in turn drew a constantly expanding network of smaller polities, both voluntarily and involuntarily, into their widening political orbits. In this sense, it is precisely during the sixteenth century that political history first becomes “world history.”

In the following pages, we will examine one example of this process at work, involving a little-known Ottoman naval expedition to the Swahili Coast in the late 1580s. This expedition, led by the elusive Ottoman corsair Mir Ali Beg, has until now failed to attract serious attention from historians, to whom it has seemed little more than a case of single-handed adventurism by an opportunistic soldier of fortune. But, as we shall see, Mir Ali was hardly the rogue buccaneer he is often made out to be. Instead, his campaign was the result of a carefully orchestrated plan by a group of higher-ups in the Ottoman administration, who were eager to use it as a stepping stone for further expansion in the Indian Ocean. Even more importantly, their strategy was based on a complex political calculus with origins dating back to the late 1570s, when a series of nearly simultaneous events at opposite ends of the world upset the international balance of power from the North Atlantic to Southeast Asia.

Here, however, we risk getting ahead of ourselves. Before moving on to a discussion of such larger issues, let us take a few moments to recount the actual events as they unfolded off the coast of East Africa between 1588 and 1589.

The Events

In the late fall of 1588, the corsair Mir Ali Beg set sail from his home base of Mocha in the Ottoman province of Yemen and headed for East

---

Africa’s Swahili coast. His ultimate goal, according to contemporary Portuguese accounts, was an ambitious one: “to expel the Portuguese from the entire coast, even as far as Mozambique and the mines of Cuamã,” and to extend the protection of the Ottoman sultan to all of the region’s numerous Muslims. To accomplish this, however, the corsair had under his command only a small squadron of five lightly armed galleots, or downsized versions of Ottoman war galleys, and a contingent of no more than three hundred fighting men. This left him vastly outnumbered by a huge Portuguese armada that was already on its way from India, having received advanced warning of Mir Ali’s plans from a network of Portuguese spies in the Horn of Africa.

In partial compensation for this numerical disadvantage at sea, the corsair also had at his disposal a large number of artillery pieces suitable for operation on land. With these, he hoped to establish a defensive position on the island of Mombasa, where on a previous visit (in 1586) he had been promised generous support from the local population in any confrontation with the Portuguese. True to their word, the Mombasans welcomed Mir Ali and his men upon their arrival, and with their help he managed in just a few weeks to prepare an impressive series of maritime fortifications. These included a stone tower with artillery mounts commanding the entrance to Mombasa’s harbor, as well as an amphibious defensive line in front of the town composed of his own five war galleys.

---

2 The story of Mir Ali’s expedition has been told and retold many times, albeit in a strictly cursory fashion. See for example Charles R. Boxer and Carlos de Azevedo, Fort Jesus and the Portuguese in Mombasa 1593–1729 (London: Hollis & Carter, 1960), pp. 16–23; and Michael N. Pearson, Port Cities and Intruders: The Swahili Coast, India, and Portugal in the Early Modern Era (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 46–47. Like these works, the present reconstruction is based primarily on the early seventeenth-century chronicle of João dos Santos, Etiópia Oriental, ed. Luis de Albequerque, 2 vols. (Lisbon: Alfa, 1989). In addition, the tenth decade of the contemporary historian Diogo do Couto’s multi-volume Da Ásia (1786; repr., Lisbon, 1974), has a very detailed original account of an earlier expedition of Mir Ali’s from 1585 to 1586, although the account of his second expedition in 1588–1589 in the uncompleted eleventh decade is copied directly from dos Santos. There is also another version of events in the later chronicle of Manuel de Faria y Souza, but it is based for the most part on these earlier sources. Here I have used the Portuguese translation of the Spanish original, Manuel de Faria e Sousa, Ásia Portuguesa, trans. Maria Vitória Garcia Santos Ferreira, 6 vols. (Lisbon, 1945); Ottoman chronicles, for reasons that will be discussed below, make no mention of either Mir Ali Beg or his expeditions.

3 According to Couto, already in 1585 Mir Ali had been sent to the Swahili Coast at the instruction of the Ottoman Governor of the Yemen, Hasan Pasha, who gave him orders “que fosse notar os sitios e portos de toda a costa de Melinde, e que para melhora das minas de Cuamã.” Couto, Da Ásia, vol. 10, book 7, chap. 8.
Once these preparations were complete, the stage was set for a classic showdown between Ottoman artillery and Portuguese sea power—with the odds hardly favoring the Portuguese, despite the numerical superiority of their fleet. As both sides knew from long years of experience, Mir Ali’s combination of a well-defended harbor, powerful artillery, and a few heavily armed galleys could give even a greatly outnumbered defensive force a deadly advantage over its adversaries. Indeed, as early as 1517 the Ottoman admiral Selman Reis had used similar tactics to repel an attack against the naval base of Jiddah, handing the Portuguese such a resounding defeat that they did not attempt another direct strike against an Ottoman position for nearly twenty-five years.\(^4\) And according to the findings of John Guilmartin, whose groundbreaking technical analysis of sixteenth-century galley warfare included a study of this earlier encounter, the combination of good local logistical support and a coastal fortress defended by war galleys and heavy artillery—precisely the array Mir Ali had at his disposal—could provide “a virtually unbeatable” defensive position, vulnerable only to an attack of truly overwhelming force.\(^5\) Thus, in a sense, both Mir Ali and his Portuguese adversaries had good reason to approach the coming battle with confidence: one side taking comfort in a secure position and the power of its artillery, the other finding strength in numbers and the superiority of its navy.

But in the end, and seemingly to the surprise of both parties in equal measure, neither Ottoman artillery nor Portuguese seapower was destined to carry the day. Instead, at least if we are to believe contemporary Portuguese accounts, the “overwhelming force” that Mir Ali feared was to emerge from an entirely different, indeed unimaginable direction: a ravenous horde of some twenty thousand Zimba cannibals who amassed across the estuary from Mombasa only days before the arrival of the Portuguese armada.\(^6\) In the face of such a threat, the corsair had no choice but to reallocate his best artillery, two of his war galleys, and the greater part of his fighting men to the defense of the island from an attack by land, while leaving only a skeleton crew in the fortified tower and in his three remaining ships to guard Mombasa’s harbor.

\(^6\) On the veracity of reports of Zimba cannibalism, see the extended discussion in the following section.
This was the situation when, on 5 March 1589, the Portuguese Commander Tomé de Sousa Coutinho reached Mombasa at the head of his powerful Portuguese fleet. As Coutinho charged into the harbor, Mir Ali and his men set off a barrage of artillery fire, still hopeful of sinking at least some of the enemy vessels as they passed. But in the event, all of the Portuguese ships avoided a direct hit, and a lucky shot from their own guns silenced the Ottomans’ main cannon in the fortress tower. With no more to fear from Ottoman defensive fire, the Portuguese were able to charge the three beached galleys and easily overwhelm them, putting their crews to flight and capturing the stragglers.

This accomplished, Tomé de Sousa Coutinho then sent a contingent of ships around to the estuary dividing the island from the mainland, where his men found the rest of the Ottoman troops fully engaged with the Zimba and still trying to prevent them from crossing over to Mombasa. Once again, the Portuguese easily overran the Ottoman positions, after some intense hand-to-hand combat that forced several desperate Ottoman crewmen to jump ship and attempt to swim to safety on the mainland. These unfortunates the Zimba hacked down to the
last man and carted off before their companions’ eyes, prompting the rest of the Ottoman defenders to surrender en masse to the Portuguese commander. In all, nearly a hundred of their number had been killed in the fray or had fallen to the Zimba. Another seventy were taken prisoner by the Portuguese, along with both vessels, twenty-three fine bronze artillery pieces, and six more large iron guns.

His galleys and artillery lost, Mir Ali and the remainder of his men took refuge with the Mombasans in the interior of the island. And since the Portuguese were still reluctant to leave their ships and face the corsair on land, a few days of inconclusive negotiations followed. But interestingly, these continued only until Tomé de Sousa Coutinho was approached by an envoy from the Zimba chief, who declared common cause with the Portuguese and requested permission to cross over to the island himself and confront the Ottomans and Mombasans directly. The unscrupulous Portuguese commander, recognizing an opportunity to flush out Mir Ali without putting his own men at risk, immediately acquiesced. However, he simultaneously ordered the launches from his own ships to be sent to shore so they could pick up the Ottomans and their Mombasan allies as the approaching Zimba forced them out.

Soon enough, the Portuguese oarsmen who dutifully assumed positions along the shore were met with an almost indescribable spectacle as throngs of terrorized islanders came running from the interior, calling desperately for help and making for the shore with the Zimba close at their heels. Panic ensued as the small boats were quickly filled to beyond their capacity, and began pulling away from the shoreline to avoid being overwhelmed and capsized. Then, just as the very last of these launches was about to depart, Mir Ali appeared on horseback with the Zimba in close pursuit and a rain of poison darts cascading around him. Galloping at full speed, he charged headlong into the sea, flung himself toward the Portuguese boats and was pulled to safety at the last possible moment. Thirty of his companions were similarly saved by the boats, along with around two hundred Mombasans. A great many more, however, were left behind. From the safety of their launches, the Portuguese rowers watched as dozens of women and children hurled themselves into the waves in despair, preferring to drown than to face death at the hands of the Zimba. Others, less fortunate, were dragged back into the brush and butchered.

Having nearly suffered the same fate himself, Mir Ali showed visible relief at his own narrow escape once he was safely aboard the Portuguese flagship. He congratulated de Sousa Coutinho on his victory, declaring: “I do not lament my adverse fortune, for such is the nature of war, and I would much rather be a captive of the Christians, as I was once before
in Spain, than food for the barbarous and inhuman Zimba.”  

Pleased, the captain in turn did his best to reassure Mir Ali and to lift his spirits, telling him he had made the right choice in deciding to surrender. Subsequently, the corsair was sent to India and then to Portugal, where he converted to Christianity, “and with this act restored for his soul all of the losses and injuries sustained by his body.”

Unfortunately, Mir Ali’s subordinates and his local Swahili collaborators were not nearly as lucky. The several dozen Ottoman captives (excepting only Mir Ali himself) were condemned to slavery in the galleys of the Estado da Índia. The ringleaders from among their local supporters, including the king of Lamo and some notables from Pate who had traveled as envoys to the Yemen, were rounded up and publicly executed. The Swahili town of Mandra was sacked in punishment for siding with the corsair. And Mombasa, once the Zimba had retreated to the mainland, was handed over to the control of its archrival Malindi, the only Swahili city-state that had remained staunchly loyal to the Portuguese throughout the encounter. Never again would an armed Ottoman fleet visit the coast of Portuguese East Africa.

The Text

The preceding account is an abridged but faithful rendering of Mir Ali’s expedition as described in the main available Portuguese source: the colorful Etiópia Oriental of the early seventeenth-century chronicler João dos Santos. Not surprisingly, modern scholars have shown a considerable reluctance to accept Etiópia Oriental as a reliable record of events, largely because of its sensationalistic description of the “Zimba cannibals” and the prominent role given to them in its narrative. The distinguished Africanist Joe Miller, for example, has argued that dos Santos’s story was just one in a series of accounts of African cannibalism to emerge in the late sixteenth century, all of which were written down long after the fact and in the total absence of corroboration by eyewitnesses. In a comparable episode involving the “Jaga,” another force of Zimba-like marauders alleged to have overrun the Kingdom

---

7 “Não me espanto de minha adversa fortuna, porque são sucessos de guerra, e mais quero ser cativo de cristãos, de quem já outra vez fui em Espanha, que ser comido dos Zimbas bárbaros e desumanos.” Dos Santos, Etiópia Oriental, 1:37.

8 “Mirale Beque foi mandado para Portugal, onde se converteu e se fez cristão, no que restaurou para a sua alma todas as perdas e quebras que tinha recebido no corpo.” Dos Santos, Etiópia Oriental, 1:242.
of Congo only a few decades earlier, Miller has shown quite convincingly that such a people “existed only in the imaginations of missionaries, slave dealers, and government officials who created these mythical cannibals in order to justify or conceal their own activities in Africa.”

By analogy, Miller goes on to argue that the Zimba too were most likely the product of European fabrications, emphasizing that “Zimba” was something of a catch-all term applied by the Portuguese to many different bellicose groups. Other scholars, working on similar lines, have gone even further, suggesting that virtually all reports of cannibalism in the early modern world are little more than figments of the European imagination.

For the record, our purpose here is not to directly engage this larger debate about the identity of the Zimba or their ostensible cannibalism. On the contrary, it would appear that the question of whether or not the Zimba were really cannibals (or for that matter, whether or not the Zimba were really “Zimba”) threatens to distract us from the fact that somebody did show up on the Swahili Coast in very large numbers in the spring of 1589—and in so doing decisively tipped the balance of power away from the Ottomans and in favor of the Portuguese. To argue otherwise, and consequently to write the Zimba out of history as nothing more than a fanciful literary trope, one would first have to provide a Portugese motive for making them up in the first place. But unlike in the case of the Jaga (where, thanks to Miller’s scholarship, such motivations seem clear), we are here dealing not only with “Zimba” but with indisputably real Ottoman Turks, the adversaries par excellence of any sixteenth-century Portuguese fidalgo worth his salt. This is a distinction of considerable importance, for the Portuguese of the Estado da Índia were always sensitive to charges that their derring-do in the Indian Ocean somehow failed to measure up to the knock-down, drag-out galley warfare of the contemporary Mediterranean. As a result, any encounter of their own with the “Terrible Turk” provided the Portuguese with a prime opportunity to establish credentials as champions of the faith on par with other Europeans. If anything, Portuguese chroni-

---

clers were therefore prone to exaggerate the role of their countrymen in confronting the Ottoman menace, not diminish it.\textsuperscript{12}

So why, in describing one of the most important encounters between Ottomans and Portuguese of the entire sixteenth century, would an author such as dos Santos choose to introduce twenty thousand fictional Zimba at such a critical moment, when by doing so he effectively deprives the Portuguese of the credit for what might otherwise have gone down as a brilliant and unadulterated victory? Tempting as it may be to search for an alternate explanation, the most obvious and certainly the most credible one is that dos Santos’s account of the Zimba is essentially reliable, at least in terms of its chronology and final outcome. While the nicely rounded figure of “twenty thousand” is almost certainly an exaggeration, and while “Zimba” as an ethnonym may well be a misnomer, it still seems clear that a very large mainland African force of some kind did play a role in determining the outcome of the encounter at Mombasa in 1589.\textsuperscript{13}

But if the “Zimba” are indeed real, can we say the same of the swashbuckling figure of Mir Ali himself? Considering the leading role he occupies in dos Santos’s chronicle, one might reasonably expect to find corroborating evidence of Mir Ali’s actions in contemporary Ottoman sources. Yet mysteriously, the corsair’s name stubbornly fails to appear in any known Ottoman document from the period. Could this be a sign that dos Santos, rather than fabricating twenty-thousand “Zimba,” instead chose to compensate for their unpalatable presence in his narrative by inventing a more worthy and “civilized” adversary for Tomé de Sousa Coutinho?

Once again, the answer appears to be no. While the reticence of the Ottoman sources with regard to Mir Ali is certainly disconcerting, the delicate internal politics of the contemporary Ottoman empire can provide, as we shall see in due course, us with at least a partial explanation for their silence. And at the same time, there is at least some corroborating evidence of Mir Ali’s existence to be found in later records.

\textsuperscript{12} See, for example, the almost embarrassed tone of Francisco de Monteclaro in describing the armaments of the Portuguese during their first expedition to Monomotapa: “Here the men landed well-appointed and in readiness, more inclined to fight against the Turks and other worthy people than against the Kaffirs.” A. da Silva Rego and T. W. Baxter, eds., Documentos sobre os portugueses em Moçambique e na Africa central, 1497–1840 (Lisbon, 1962–1989), 8:371.

\textsuperscript{13} In a slightly different context, relating to his description of Portuguese encounters with the Zimba along the Zambezi, Matthew Schoffeleers has also used evidence from local oral histories to verify certain aspects of dos Santos’s chronicle. See “The Zimba and the Lundu State in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries,” Journal of African History 28, no. 3 (1987): 345–351.
from the Portuguese state archives. Specifically, a Portuguese document from 1608 makes reference to a certain Muslim convert to Christianity by the name of Francisco Julião, who is described as having formerly been “commander of the Turkish galleys off Malindi.”¹⁴ This document indicates that “Julião” was at this late date (nearly two decades after his capture) still imprisoned in the castle of S. Julião da Barra, thus raising doubts about the chivalrous treatment that, according to dos Santos, Mir Ali received at the hands of his magnanimous Portuguese captors. But even so, the document appears to confirm both Mir Ali’s identity and the story of his surrender and conversion, thereby providing yet more support for the basic reliability of dos Santos’s narrative.

The Context

Accepting then, with certain qualifications, that the account of Mir Ali’s expedition in the Etiópia Oriental is at some level a credible record of actual events, how are we to make sense of it? What historical circumstances brought together Ottomans, Portuguese, Mombasans, and “Zimba” off the Swahili Coast in 1589? And what can they tell us about the developing political economy of the late sixteenth-century world?

In terms of the wider political context of the events that dos Santos describes, it should be noted first of all that the appearance of Ottoman ships off the coast of Portuguese East Africa was not an occurrence without precedent in the decades prior to the 1580s. As early as 1542 the Portuguese captain of Mozambique, João de Sepulveda, had been forced to undertake a punitive expedition up the coast as far as Mogadishu following reports that the Ottomans had sent galleys to the region and that, without a show of force, “all the said coast would have risen in their favour.”¹⁵ Later, in the 1550s and 1560s, the corsair Sefer Reis also visited the area on several occasions, prompting incessant fretting in the Estado da Índia about the potentially dire threat this presented to long-term Portuguese hegemony in the region.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the circumstances surrounding Mir Ali’s expedition of 1588–1589 made it qualitatively different from previous Ottoman


¹⁵ “Minha yda foy forçada porquee se o nom fyzera toda a dicta costa se levantara por eles.” Da Silva Rego and Baxter, Documentos sobre os portugueses, 7:132.

¹⁶ See, for example, Corpo Diplomatico Portuguez (Paris, 1846), 9:111.
advances beyond the Horn of Africa. This was because in earlier decades—and particularly during the lengthy grand vizierate of Sokollu Mehmed Pasha in the 1560s and 1570s—the Ottomans had pursued what we might define today as a policy of “soft empire” in the Indian Ocean. Under Sokollu Mehmed’s direction, this involved a strategy to expand Ottoman influence not through direct military intervention, but rather through the development of ideological, commercial, and diplomatic ties with the various Muslim communities of the region. Only in a few instances (most notably in the case of the Muslim principality of Aceh in western Indonesia), did Istanbul provide direct military assistance in exchange for a formal recognition of Ottoman suzerainty. Elsewhere, a much more informal relationship was the rule, even in places like Gujarat and Calicut, where elites enjoyed extremely close commercial, professional, and sometimes familial relations with Istanbul. Despite this high level of contact, tributary relationships or other direct political ties between local states and the Ottoman empire were not normally encouraged.

In the absence of a formal imperial infrastructure, however, Sokollu Mehmed took steps to align the interests of these disparate Muslim communities with those of the Ottoman state in other ways. Evidence suggests, for example, that he established a network of imperial commercial factors throughout the region who bought and sold merchandise for the sultan’s treasury. And at the same time, the grand vizier also began financing pro-Ottoman religious organizations overseas, especially those in predominantly non-Muslim states with influential Muslim trading elites, such as Calicut and Ceylon. In exchange for annual shipments of gold currency from the Ottoman treasury, local preachers in such overseas mosques agreed to read the Friday call to prayer in the name of the Ottoman sultan, and in so doing acknowledg-
edged him, if not as their immediate overlord, as a kind of religiously sanctioned “meta-sovereign” over the entire Indian Ocean trading sphere. As “Caliph” and “Protector of the Holy Cities,” the Ottoman sultan thus acted as guarantor of the safety and security of the maritime trade and pilgrimage routes to and from Mecca and Medina, and in exchange could demand a certain measure of allegiance from Muslims throughout the region.

As “Caliph” and “Protector of the Holy Cities,” the Ottoman sultan thus acted as guarantor of the safety and security of the maritime trade and pilgrimage routes to and from Mecca and Medina, and in exchange could demand a certain measure of allegiance from Muslims throughout the region.

As long as it lasted, this strategy of “soft empire” seems to have worked remarkably well. During Sokollu Mehmed’s term in office (1565–1579), trade through the Red Sea and Persian Gulf flourished as never before, until by the 1570s the Portuguese gave up their efforts to maintain a naval blockade between the Indian Ocean and the markets of the Ottoman Empire. Additionally, the concept of the Ottoman sultan as “universal sovereign” became ever more widely recognized, such that the Sultan’s name was read in the Friday call to prayer of mosques from the Maldives to Ceylon, and from Calicut to Sumatra. Even in the powerful and rapidly expanding Mughal empire, whose Sunni Muslim dynasty was the only one that could legitimately compete with the Ottomans in terms of imperial grandeur, a certain amount of deference toward Istanbul appears to have been the rule.

But then, in 1579—perhaps the single most pivotal year in the political history of the early modern world—a series of cataclysmic and nearly simultaneous international events conspired to undermine this carefully constructed system from almost every conceivable direction. Most obviously, Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, the grand architect of the Ottomans’ “soft empire,” was unexpectedly struck down by an assassin’s blade while receiving petitions at his private court in Istanbul. At

---

20 See for example Istanbul, Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivi, Mühimmé Defterleri 28, no. 331, p. 139.
23 Casale, “His Majesty’s Servant Lutfi,” pp. 55–61
24 The emperor Humayun, for example, at one point sent a letter to Suleyman the Magnificent in which he openly addressed him with the lofty titles of “Padishah” and “Caliph of the World.” See Naimur Rahman Farooqi, Mughal-Ottoman Relations: A Study of Political and Diplomatic Relations between Mughal India and the Ottoman Empire 1556–1749 (Delhi, 1989), p. 17.
almost exactly the same time, in distant Sumatra, the Acehnese sultan ‘Ala ad-Din Ri’ayat Syah also died, ushering in an extended period of political and social turmoil that would deprive the Ottomans of their closest ally in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, in Iberia, the Ottoman sultan’s archrival King Philip II of Spain was preparing to annex Portugal and all of her overseas possessions, following the sudden death of the heirless Dom Sebastião on the Moroccan battlefield of al-Kasr al-Kabir. And in the highlands of Abyssinia, again at almost exactly the same time, Christian forces handed the Ottomans a crushing and unexpected defeat at the battle of Addi Qarro, after which they captured the strategic port of Arkiko, reestablished direct contact with the Portuguese, and threatened Ottoman control of the Red Sea for the first time in more than two decades. All of these events, despite the vast physical distances that separated them, impinged directly on the Ottomans’ ability to maintain “soft power” in the Indian Ocean. Even more ominously, they all took place alongside yet another emerging menace from Mughal India, where the young and ambitious Emperor Akbar had begun to openly challenge the very basis of Ottoman “soft power” by advancing his own rival claim to universal sovereignty over the Islamic world.

Of all these newly emerging threats, the Mughal challenge was in many ways the most potentially disturbing. Unlike the others, it was also a challenge mounted incrementally, and as a result became gradually apparent only over the course of several years. In fact, it may have begun as early as 1573, the year Akbar seized the Gujarati port of Surat and thus gained control of a major outlet onto the Indian Ocean for the first time. Less than two years later, he sent several ladies of his court, including his wife and his paternal aunt, on an extended pilgrimage to Mecca, where they settled and began to distribute alms regularly in the emperor’s name. Concurrently, Akbar became involved in organizing and financing the hajj for Muslim travelers of more modest means as well: appointing an imperial official in charge of the pilgrimage, setting aside funds to pay the travel expenses of all pilgrims from India wishing to make the trip, and arranging for a special royal ship to sail to Jiddah every year for their passage. Moreover, by means of this ship Akbar

---

29 Farooqi, Mughal-Ottoman Relations, pp. 18–21.
began sending enormous quantities of gold to be distributed in alms for the poor of Mecca and Medina, along with sumptuous gifts and honorary vestments for the important dignitaries of the holy cities. In the first year alone, these gifts and donations amounted to more than 600,000 rupees and 12,000 robes of honor; in the next year, they included an additional 100,000 rupees as a personal gift for the Sharif of Mecca. Similar shipments continued annually until the early 1580s.\textsuperscript{30}

To be sure, none of this ostensibly pious activity was threatening to the Ottomans in and of itself. Under different circumstances, the Ottoman authorities may even have viewed largesse of this kind as a sign of loyalty, or as a normal and innocuous component of the public religious obligations of a ruler of Akbar’s stature. But in 1579, in the midst of the complex interplay of other world events already described above, it acquired a dangerous and overtly political significance—particularly because it coincided with Akbar’s promulgation of the so-called “infallibility decree” in September of that year. In the months that followed, Akbar’s courtiers began, at his urging, to experiment with an increasingly syncretic, messianic, and Akbar-centric interpretation of Islam known as the the din-i ilahi.\textsuperscript{31} And Akbar himself, buttressed by this

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., pp. 114–116.

new theology of his own creation, soon began to openly mimic the
Ottoman sultans’ posturing as universal sovereigns, by assuming titles
such as Bādishāh-i Islām and Imām-i ‘Ādil that paralleled almost exactly
the Ottomans’ own dynastic claims.32

Against this incendiary backdrop, Akbar’s endowments in Mecca
and his generous support for the hajj thus became potent ideological
weapons rather than simple markers of piety—weapons that threat-
ened to destabilize Ottoman leadership of the Islamic world by allow-
ing Akbar to usurp the sultan’s prestigious role as “Protector of the
Holy Cities.”33 Justifiably alarmed, the Porte responded by forbidding
the distribution of alms in Akbar’s name in Mecca (it was neverthe-
less continued in secret for several more years), and by ordering the
entourage of ladies from Akbar’s court to return to India with the next
sailing season.34 These, however, were stopgap measures at best. In the
longer term, it was clear that a more serious reorientation of Ottoman
policy was in order if the empire was to effectively respond to Akbar’s
gambit.

Thus, by the end of 1579, a perfect storm of political events in
Istanbul, the Western Mediterranean, Ethiopia, Southeast Asia, and
Mughal India had all conspired to bring an end to the existing Otto-
man system of “soft empire” in the Indian Ocean. As a result, the
Ottoman leadership was faced with a stark choice: to do nothing, and
allow its prestige and influence in the region to fade into irrelevance;
or instead, through aggressive military expansion, to attempt to con-
vert this soft empire into a more concrete system of direct imperial
rule. Because of an ongoing war with Iran, and because the 1580s were
in general a period of political retrenchment and economic crisis in
the Empire, many in Istanbul seem to have resigned themselves to the
former option as the only feasible alternative. But opposing such pes-
simists was a cohesive group of high-ranking officials who instead lob-
bied vigorously for a massive increase in the empire’s investment in the
Indian Ocean. As we shall see, Mir Ali’s subsequent expedition to the
Swahili Coast was the culmination of this group’s plan to convince the

33 There is anecdotal evidence in Mughal literary sources alluding to doubts among
orthodox Muslims at Akbar’s own court about the direction of his policies, and particularly
about the response his dīn-i ilahi might provoke from Istanbul. See Harbans Mukhia, The
34 For a translation of the main Ottoman archival sources surrounding this incident, see
Naimur Rahman Farooqi, “Six Ottoman Documents on Mughal-Ottoman Relations during
Sultan of the worth of their cause, and usher in a new era of Ottoman global dominance.

The Strategy

In the final months before his assassination, Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha seems to have emerged as the natural leader of this group and made no secret of his opinion that the Ottomans’ relationship with the Indian Ocean was on the verge of a major transformation. This attitude is evident in the dispatches of the Habsburg negotiator Giovanni Margliani, who in 1579 met frequently with the Grand Vizier during the final phase of talks aimed at an Ottoman-Habsburg armistice. As these negotiations unfolded, a major sticking point to reaching an agreement became Sokollu Mehmed’s adamant refusal to include Portugal and its overseas possessions in the provisions of any treaty—even after it had become clear that Portugal’s annexation by Spain was all but unavoidable. When pressed by Margliani as to the reason for this intransigence, Sokollu insisted that under no circumstances did he intend to send a fleet through the straits of Gibraltar or to otherwise threaten Portugal directly. But as for the Indian Ocean, the Pasha could offer no such guarantee, declaring openly to Margliani: “God alone knows what will happen there.”

And revealingly, this barely veiled threat came alongside attempts by the Grand Vizier to contact several indigenous communities in East Africa, where, according to Portuguese observers, he hoped to secure supplies of lumber for the construction of a new Indian Ocean fleet.

Although these preparations were cut short by Sokollu’s assassination, at least a certain measure of continuity with his policies was ensured by the rise of his close associate and former protégé, Koja Sinan Pasha. An experienced statesman in his own right, Koja Sinan had served as the governor of both Egypt and the Yemen during Sokollu’s lifetime, and between 1580 and 1582 was able to follow in his former patron’s footsteps by winning his own brief term (the first of five) as the Ottoman grand vizier. During this intensive two-year period, he did everything possible to establishing a permanent framework for newly aggressive and expansionist Ottoman presence in the Indian Ocean.


On the military front, in 1580 Koja Sinan assembled a relief force in the Yemen and ordered the reconquest of the stretches of Eritrean coast that had been lost to Christian forces from Abyssinia in the previous year. To ensure the area’s future security, he also had money and supplies sent from Egypt for the construction of a chain of seven new fortresses along the Red Sea coast from Suakin to Massava. Then, in the summer of 1581, he broadened this offensive by sending Mir Ali Beg on a tip-and-run raid against the strategic Portuguese fortress of Muscat. This attack, which appears to have been the first major expedition ever led by Mir Ali, was so successful that according to one Portuguese chronicler “in the opening and closing of an eye he entered the town a pauper and came out again a rich man.”

Around the same time, Koja Sinan also dispatched a secretive embassy to India, headed by a delegation of renegade Ottoman Jews originally from Portuguese Asia. This delegation’s primary mission was to open a dialogue with certain Portuguese in the Estado da Índia who were rumored to be disillusioned with their country’s recent annexation by Spain, and who might be coaxed into an alliance with Koja Sinan as a means of maintaining their independence. According to a dispatch by Germigny, the French ambassador in Istanbul, dated 30 September 1581, these envoys carried an open invitation to the Portuguese of India “to come from the East Indies, from the Kingdom of Hormuz, from the islands and ports of the Orient belonging to the Kingdom of Portugal, and trade in the ports and weigh stations of His Majesty [the Sultan] in Egypt and Syria,” where they were promised “guarantees of good treatment and every comfort and convenience.” In addition, after discretely delivering this message in Goa, the same envoys apparently continued on to the Mughal court in Agra, where they privately

---

37 Orhonlu, Habeş Eyaleti, pp. 61–63.
38 On the construction of these forts, see Mühimme Defterleri 43, no. 339, p. 186.
40 “Quasi num abrir e fechar de olhos entrou arrebetado e saiu rico.” Faria e Sousa, Ásia Portuguesa, 4:204.
urged Akbar to renounce his hostility toward Istanbul and join the Sultan in a holy war against the Habsburgs. In the end, neither of these proposals found much favor with their intended audiences. In Portuguese India, despite widespread anti-Spanish sentiment, the authorities chose to remain loyal to Dom Francisco Mascarenhas, the new Habsburg-appointed viceroy, rather than taking the drastic step of siding with the Ottomans. And once Mascarenhas had a firm hold on power, he in turn was able to reach an accommodation with the Mughals, by reconfirming Akbar’s right to send two pilgrimage ships annually to the Red Sea. Still, Koja Sinan’s embassy should not be considered a failure, for it does appear to have encouraged several less prominent would-be allies to make common cause with the Ottomans. Muhammad Kilij Khan, for one, who was the Mughal governor of the port city of Surat and a regular attendee at Akbar’s court, responded to the Ottoman call for an alliance in a most public fashion: when Akbar’s trading passes, or cartazes, arrived from the Portuguese in Goa, Muhammad Kilij brazenly declared an intention to send a ship of his own to the Red Sea as well—but insisted that, unlike Akbar, his cartaz would be “the handle of the dagger in his belt.” Accordingly, he ordered the construction of a mighty ship in Surat, obliging the Portuguese to blockade Surat’s harbor for most of the winter in order to prevent his departure.

News of this challenge to Portuguese authority quickly spread across the sea lanes, provoking unrest from Ceylon to the Swahili Coast. By the following summer, an Acehnese fleet sailed strong (including a sizeable contingent of Ottoman mercenaries) even threatened the Portuguese fortress in distant Malacca. And in the fall of 1582, encouraged by such developments and anticipating more concrete success in the future, Koja Sinan began trade talks with the duke of Brabant, hoping to establish at Antwerp a great entrepôt for merchandise from India once the power of Lisbon and the Habsburgs had been permanently eclipsed.

Finally, Koja Sinan matched this careful overseas diplomacy with an equally intensive campaign of domestic propaganda, intended to

43 Farooqi, Mughal-Ottoman Relations, p. 21.
44 Pearson, Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat, p. 57.
46 Couto, Da Ásia, vol. 10, book 3, chap. 3.
convince wavering members of the Ottoman establishment (including the sultan himself) that further investment in the Indian Ocean was, after all, justified. His most visible efforts in this regard centered on an ambitious plan—which eerily foreshadowed the designs of empire-builders in later centuries—to cut a channel across the Egyptian desert from the Mediterranean coast to Suez. Such a canal, in addition to facilitating trade, would allow the easy transfer of warships and men from the empire’s Mediterranean centers of supply to the Red Sea, the Yemen, and beyond. In so doing, it would also solve the single most imposing geographic obstacle to further Ottoman expansion in the Indian Ocean: the chronic lack of timber in the forestless expanses of Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula, which rendered the construction of ships in Yemen and the Red Sea both time consuming and prohibitively expensive.

In truth, the idea of building a Suez canal was not an entirely new one. Ottoman policy makers of previous generations had toyed with the concept as early as the 1520s, and Koja Sinan himself, while charged with the task of suppressing a violent rebellion in the Yemen in the late 1560s, had collaborated with Sokollu Mehmed in an ineffective attempt to promote the idea. On that occasion, the two had been thwarted by their political rival Lala Mustafa Pasha, who was governor of Egypt at the time and had used this position to stifle the project. This time around, in order to improve his chances of success, Koja Sinan thus resolved to make a delicate but impassioned appeal directly to Sultan Murad III.

The unique vehicle he chose for this purpose was a book, the Tarih-i hind-i garbi or “History of the West Indies,” which was composed sometime between 1580 and 1581 and personally dedicated to Sultan Murad. Today, the Tarih-i hind-i garbi is known as the first historical work in Ottoman Turkish about the Spanish exploration and conquest of the New World—a topic in itself rich with rhetorical implications for the imperial designs of Koja Sinan. More specifically relevant to the question of building a Suez canal, however, is the content of the work’s introductory section, which deals not with the New World but

---

48 Mükимme Defterleri 7, no. 721, p. 258.
50 For a modern translation and critical analysis of this text, see Thomas Goodrich, The Ottoman Turks and the New World: A Study of Tarih-i Hind-i Garbi and Sixteenth Century Ottoman Americana (Wiesbaden, 1990).
instead with the contemporary Indian Ocean. In it, the text’s anonymous author (who was likely one of Koja Sinan’s personal clients) argues openly for a canal with the following words:

Thanks to God, the [Ottoman] Sultan of fortune, of majestic power and force and pomp and majesty, is stronger than the kings of the past, and he has in his retinue many wise leaders. . . . So even if only a drop was to be expended from the sea of power of the Sultan, in the shortest time it would be possible to join the two seas [the Mediterranean and the Red Sea] . . . thenceforth, from Well-Protected Constantinople, the place of prosperity and the abode of the throne of the Sultans, ships and their crews would be organized and sent to the Red Sea and would have the power to protect the shores of the Holy Places. And in a short time, by an excellent plan, they would seize and subjugate most of the seaports of Sind and Hind and would drive away and expel from that region the evil unbelievers, and it would be possible for the exquisite things of Sind and Hind and the rarities of Ethiopia and the Sudan, and the usual items of the Hijaz and the Yemen and the pearls of Bahrain and Aden, all to reach the capital with only a trifling effort.

This, in so many words, was the political manifesto of Koja Sinan Pasha and his supporters, who hoped to use the construction of a Suez canal to jump-start a new and unprecedented phase of Ottoman expansion in the Indian Ocean. Unfortunately, the turbulent Ottoman political climate of early 1580s made any such scheme perilously difficult to implement, and Koja Sinan’s own staying power soon proved inadequate for the task. At the end of 1582, personal rivalries and intrigues at court pushed him out of office, leaving the remaining members of his faction without a leader, and obliged to seriously reevaluate their strategy.

The Conspiracy

With Koja Sinan out of power, we can identify three remaining members of his coalition who continued to occupy positions of influence within the Ottoman hierarchy: Hasan Pasha, the governor-general of the Yemen; Kilich Ali Pasha, the grand admiral of the Ottoman fleet, and Hazinedar Sinan Pasha, the head of the Egyptian treasury. Of these three, Hasan Pasha—who as governor of the Yemen was also the corsair Mir Ali’s immediate superior—quickly emerged as the group’s new

51 Goodrich, Tarih-i Hind-i Garbi, p. 100.
leader. To his detriment, Hasan Pasha was not, as Koja Sinan had been, a member of the Divan or Ottoman Imperial Council. From his remote position in the Yemen, he thus had little chance to sway opinion at court by means of direct persuasion. On the other hand, Hasan’s distance from the capital did offer the advantage of giving him more leeway to act independently than he otherwise could have. And, crucially, his sensitive posting at the mouth of the Red Sea also gave him nearly complete control over the central government’s access to information about events in the Indian Ocean region.

Banking on these advantages, Hasan Pasha appears to have hatched a complicated plot—first on his own and later in collaboration with Kilich Ali and Hazinedar Sinan—to advance the cause of Ottoman maritime expansion in a singularly underhanded fashion. Through regular dispatches sent back to the capital, he began a calculated campaign of misinformation in which he intentionally exaggerated the threat posed by the Portuguese at sea in order to secure resources and financing from Istanbul. Meanwhile, apparently without informing anyone in Istanbul of his intentions, he sent Mir Ali on a reconnaissance expedition to the Swahili Coast to establish preliminary contact with local Muslim leaders and pave the way for a future mission of conquest.

We are today able to reconstruct these efforts mainly thanks to documents preserved in the Ottoman State Archives’ Mühimme Defterleri, or “Registries of Important Affairs,” in which copies of the sultans’ cor-
respondence with provincial officials were regularly recorded. The first hints these registers contain about Hasan Pasha’s propaganda campaign date from 1583, when the fortuitous arrest of two Spanish spies in the Red Sea provided him with a perfect pretext to begin making special demands of the sultan. In his report to Istanbul about these spies’ activities, Hasan Pasha included dire warnings about the unpreparedness of Ottoman defenses in the midst of Spain’s takeover of the Estado da Índia, writing: “Once the accursed Spanish seize the strongholds in the lands of India and send their fleet to [the Indian] ocean, they are capable of causing [us] great harm, since none of the fortresses in any of [our] ports, from Habesh, Yemen and the Hicaz all the way to Suez, are strong [enough to resist them].” 52 In response, the sultan promptly ordered two galleots to be prepared in the arsenal of Suez and had them sent to the Yemen. But Hasan, rather than using these reinforcements to shore up local defenses as he had proposed, instead appears to have sent them with Mir Ali on his preliminary reconnaissance mission to the Swahili Coast in late 1585. 53

Around this same time, the authorities in Goa provided Hasan Pasha with yet more grist for his propaganda mill by sending a fleet of their own to the Red Sea just as Mir Ali was setting sail on his exploratory mission to the south. This fleet, commanded by Ruy Gonsalves da Camera, carried orders to attack Muslim shipping along the coast of Arabia and to block commercial passage to and from the Red Sea, although it turned out to be singularly unsuccessful in accomplishing either objective. Despite the large size of da Camera’s armada (which numbered more than twenty vessels in all), he failed to catch any Muslim ships, and even lost one of his own vessels in an Ottoman coastal ambush near Aden. 54 Yet rather than faithfully reporting these events to his superiors, Hasan Pasha instead appears to have deftly spun them to his own advantage, by circulating rumors that the botched Portuguese attack had in fact been a success. In June 1586, for example, France’s ambassador in Venice forwarded a report from the Yemen that da Camera had not only entered the Red Sea, but had looted and pillaged the entire coast as far north as Tor, and intended to return in the following year to land troops and build a fortress near Aden. 55

Suspiciously, it was in the midst of this rumor-induced hysteria that Hasan’s ally Hazinedar Sinan Pasha was promoted to governor-general

52 Mühimme Defterleri 48, no. 877, p. 333.
53 Ibid., 49, no. 86, p. 23, and 52, no. 461, p. 181.
of Egypt to handle the nonexistent “crisis.” Even more suspiciously, in Hazinedar Sinan’s first official dispatch he confirmed Istanbul’s worst fears, writing that the Portuguese had indeed cut off all trade to the Red Sea, were building a permanent base on the island of Socotra, and were in the final stages of planning a direct naval assault on Jiddah and the Holy Cities. As governor of Egypt, Hazinedar Sinan must have known this to be patently untrue, particularly since his report makes clear that he had recently met with Hasan Pasha in person and had discussed with him the situation in the Yemen. His written confirmation of these spurious reports thus indicates that he was not only a direct beneficiary of Hasan’s campaign of misinformation, but also an active collaborator.

Indeed, in the interest of further advancing their cause, the two pashas seem to have been willing even to suppress information about Mir Ali’s safe return from his first, remarkably successful mission to the Swahili Coast in the spring of 1586. During his time abroad, which coincided with Ruy Gonsalves da Camera’s failed expedition to the Red Sea, Mir Ali had surpassed every expectation for what had been intended as a simple mission of reconnaissance: in just a few months of campaigning, he had managed to secure the allegiance of every major Swahili port town except Malindi, to capture three fully laden Portuguese vessels, and to return safely to Mocha with some 150,000 cruzados of booty and nearly sixty Portuguese prisoners. Such portentous news would normally have been communicated to Istanbul posthaste and with pride, especially by those responsible for organizing the mission in the first place. But fearing, perhaps, that the ease and extent of Mir Ali’s accomplishments would undermine their claims about a mounting Portuguese threat, neither Hasan Pasha nor Hazinedar Sinan seems to have mentioned him in any of their subsequent dispatches. Instead, they falsely presented the ships and booty Mir Ali had captured on the Swahili Coast (and duly forwarded on to Hazinedar Sinan in Egypt) as war materiel recovered from da Camera’s fleet in the Red Sea—thereby producing material evidence for a military encounter that had never actually taken place!

57 Dos Santos, 1:221–222; Couto, Da Ásia, vol. 10, book 7, chap. 16; Faria e Sousa, Ásia Portuguesa, 5:64–66.
58 Mühimme Defterleri 61, no. 239, p. 99, and no. 240, pp. 99–100; the Portuguese captives were subsequently handed over to the custody of Kilich Ali Pasha, who also seems to have been an accomplice in this affair. See Selaniki, Tarih-i Selanikî, 1:185.
Dishonest as this tactic may have been, as a ploy to swing opinion at court in the two pashas’ favor it proved brilliantly effective, even to the point of reviving talk in Istanbul of Koja Sinan’s pet project to build a Suez canal. By the end of the summer of 1586, the Venetian bailo in Istanbul reported growing public criticism of Sultan Murad III “for attending to the Persian war and thus allowing Spain to reach such a pitch of power.” He added that Hasan Pasha, in order to argue the case for building a Suez canal, had been recalled from the Yemen and had appeared in person before the Imperial Council.59 After his audience, Hasan was subsequently dispatched to Egypt to oversee a preliminary survey for the project.60

By September, Grand Admiral Kilich Ali Pasha was leaking specifics about the canal’s construction to the resident French ambassador Savary de Lanscome.61 According to Lanscome, the admiral boasted that Sultan Murad was now resolutely determined to open a channel to Suez and to send a fleet through it to eliminate the Habsburg presence in Asia once and for all. Moreover, he claimed that serious quantities of men, money, and resources had already been allocated for the project, including 25 galleys, 100,000 workmen, 40,000 mules, 12,000 camels, and the entire revenue of Egypt for a year (totaling some 600,000 ducats). Lanscome added as a postscript:

This grand scheme of theirs has so inflamed their already habitual arrogance, and sparked their greed and ambition to such an extent, that it appears to them as if all the treasures and precious gems of India are already in their hands, and Persia ensnared in their net as well. They hold the Spanish of no account whatsoever, since they say that [in all of India] they have no more than four thousand men. And if truth be told, should their aspirations be fulfilled to build this canal, and they do send two hundred armed galleys [to India] as they say they will, then since they are already masters of Arabia they will make rapid progress.

59 See the report of Lorenzo Bernardo, dated 23 July 1586 in Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts Relating to English Affairs Existing in the Archives and Collections of Venice, and in Other Libraries of Northern Italy (Great Britain, 1939–1947), vol. 8, no. 385.
with no one to stop them, and will shut the door [to India] on Lisbon and Spain.\textsuperscript{62}

Ultimately, of course, nothing resembling an operation of this scale was actually carried out. Within only a few weeks, the same Lanscime was reporting that the canal project had been abandoned and that the Ottomans were contenting themselves with scaled-back plans to construct a fleet of galleys in the arsenal of Suez.\textsuperscript{63} But, undaunted, Hasan Pasha and Hazinedar Sinan continued their propaganda offensive. Hasan returned to the Yemen, and by the end of 1586 was sending renewed warnings that the arrival of the enemy in even greater strength was a near certainty. In light of the danger, he asked that five galleys be sent from Suez as quickly as possible for the defense of the coasts.\textsuperscript{64}

This request prompted another rapid response from Istanbul, authorizing delivery of all five of the desired vessels.\textsuperscript{65} Encouraged by this success, in the following year Hasan Pasha once more upped the ante, arguing that “twenty or thirty more galleys” would be the minimum required “to strike out at the infidels from the sea.”\textsuperscript{66} And along with this petition, he and Hazinedar Sinan forwarded a highly suspect intelligence report from “spies” recently returned from India, who alleged that Akbar and the Portuguese had concluded a formal alliance, and were now preparing for a joint invasion of the Yemen.\textsuperscript{67} This terrifying prospect, which played on the most deeply rooted fears of Istanbul’s leadership, was probably the only imaginable scenario that could seem more immediately threatening to the empire than its ongoing war with Iran. But, revealingly, neither Portuguese nor Mughal sources make any mention of such an arrangement.\textsuperscript{68} The alleged spy report thus appears

\textsuperscript{62} “Le beau dessein leur a déjà tellement enflé leur vanité accoutumée, et attisé leur ambition et avarice, qu’il leur semble qu’ils ont déjà les trésors et pierreries de l’Inde, et qu’ils ont mis dans un rets le Perzien; il ne mettent en aucun compte l’Espagnol, car ils disent qu’ils n’y a que 4,000 hommes. A la vérité, si leur désir et espérance réunissait à faire ce canal, y mettant deux cent galères armées, qu’ils disent, ayant l’Arabie comme ils ont e y tournant la tête sans être empêchés d’ailleurs, ils fermeront la porte à Lisbonne et Espagne de ce côté, e seront pour agrandir et enrichir grandement cet empire.” Charles-Roux, “L’isthme du Suez,” pp. 176–177.

\textsuperscript{63} Charles-Roux, “L’isthme du Suez,” p. 181. This is confirmed by Ottoman archival documents. See Mühimme Defterleri 60, no. 363, p. 165.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 61, no. 239, p. 99, and no. 240, pp. 99–100.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 62, no. 304, p. 137.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 62, no. 393, p. 177.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 62, no. 457, p. 205.

\textsuperscript{68} The report’s only possible basis was Akbar’s establishment of a permanent embassy in Goa in 1584. Farooqi, Mughal-Ottoman Relations, p. 22.
to have been yet another of Hasan Pasha and Hazinedar Sinan’s willful deceptions, specifically designed to make their plea for more ships appear as pressing as possible. As a testament to the efficacy of this strategy, in January 1588 the Sultan ordered construction of fifteen additional galleys in Suez, and five more in the arsenal of Basra.\(^6^9\)

In the end, however, despite the best-laid plans of Hasan Pasha and Hazinedar Sinan, none of these promised reinforcements could be provided in time for Mir Ali’s second departure for the Swahili Coast in late 1588. The inherent fragility of the two pashas’ position, based as it was on false intelligence and spin rather than genuine support from above, simply proved too delicate to sustain. The earliest indications of this came in late 1587, when the aged grand admiral Kilich Ali—the only member of Hasan Pasha’s faction who was actually in Istanbul—passed away. Then, in the spring of 1588, Hazinedar Sinan’s term as governor-general of Egypt expired, and he was replaced by Kara Uveys Pasha, an administrator less friendly to Hasan Pasha and skeptical about the sincerity of his claims. Over the course of the next year, it seems that Kara Uveys intentionally delayed the construction of Hasan’s additional ships in the arsenal of Suez, while sending letters of his own back to Istanbul denying that the Yemen or the Red Sea were in any immediate danger.\(^7^0\)

Finally, in the midst of these protracted delays, alarmed Swahili envoys began arriving in the Yemen with news of a destructive attack by the Portuguese commander Martim Afonso de Melo, who had sailed to East Africa in 1587 and viciously pillaged the port cities of Ampaza and Mombasa.\(^7^1\) Because these attacks had come in direct retaliation for the Swahilis’ friendliness toward Mir Ali during his visit the previous year, the envoys begged Hasan Pasha to take immediate action in their defense before the Portuguese returned a second time.\(^7^2\) But Hasan Pasha, who had concealed Mir Ali’s earlier expedition from Istanbul and now had dwindling reserves of credibility left at court, found himself no longer in a position to appeal for more help from the sultan. His only option was thus to send Mir Ali with the five ships he had available, and hope that additional reinforcements could be sent in due course. After Mir Ali’s defeat and capture at Mombasa in the

\(^{69}\) Mühimme Defterleri 62, no. 393, p. 177, and no. 457, p. 205.

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 64, no. 499, p. 195.

\(^{71}\) Dos Santos, 1:222–228; Couto, Da Ásia, vol. 10, book 9, chap. 1.

\(^{72}\) Couto, Da Ásia, vol. 10, book 9, chap. 2.
following spring, however, the whole plan for occupying the Swahili Coast was scrapped, and the remaining vessels were never completed.

The Significance

The limited resources that were made available to Mir Ali, combined with the fact that neither he nor his Swahili campaigns were ever mentioned explicitly in any contemporary Ottoman source, have suggested to some modern historians that his expeditions were nothing more than a privateering adventure writ large, with little relevance to the political history of either the Ottoman empire or the contemporary Indian Ocean. An examination of the wider political context in which they took place, however, suggests quite the opposite. Although ultimately unsuccessful, Mir Ali’s expeditions were conceived as only the first step in an extended effort to create a centralized Ottoman imperial infrastructure throughout the Indian Ocean—an undertaking with potentially serious consequences not only for the Portuguese of the time, but indeed for the entire course of world history in the early modern period.

Most basically, Mir Ali’s East African campaign provoked a marked expansion in the dimensions and complexity of the Indian Ocean’s political landscape. In the Swahili Coast, where internecine rivalry between small coastal polities such as Mombasa and Malindi had been endemic for generations—and had allowed the Portuguese to dominate the region for decades with relatively little investment in manpower and weapons—the coming of the Ottomans enabled these city-states to reformulate their age-old local rivalries as part of a larger struggle between two expansive global powers. And, importantly, the Swahili coast was by no means unique in this respect, for the same dynamic is apparent in locales throughout the region: in Southeast Asia, where states such as Aceh and Java allied with the Ottomans against local tributaries of the Portuguese in Malacca; along the Malabar coast of India, where the Mappilla corsairs of Calicut similarly sided with the

---

73 See, for example, Subrahmanyam, “A Matter of Alignment,” p. 476.
Ottomans against the Portuguese and their local allies, and even in the highlands of Abyssinia, where the emperor of Ethiopia repeatedly appealed to the Portuguese crown for help against the Ottoman-supported Muslim tribes of the lowlands. Across an enormous region of the globe that stretched from East Africa to Indonesia and from Mozambique to Muscat, political protagonists in even the most localized of conflicts now began to understand their actions as potentially significant on a much larger scale. Such local political actors began to “think globally” in a very real sense, by revising their ambitions (and devising new strategies for achieving them) that accounted not only for local conditions, but likewise for the political leanings of imperial capitals halfway around the globe.

For these distant imperial powers, meanwhile, the events of 1589 were to have their own equally important consequences. For the Ottomans, Mir Ali’s defeat represented their very last attempt to intervene militarily in the affairs of the Indian Ocean; in the following decades, the empire’s influence gradually receded, until in 1633 it lost control of the Yemen and disappeared entirely as a political force in the region. Conversely, the Portuguese—who were initially caught completely off guard by the extent of Mir Ali’s early success—became alarmed enough at the prospect of further Swahili unrest that they began to invest heavily in the defense of the Swahili coast. Prior to the Ottoman attacks, they had ruled the area only indirectly: through an alliance with Malindi, a system of tributary relationships with other local rulers; and a small annual patrol directed from their base in Mozambique. In the 1590s, however, in the aftermath of Mir Ali’s defeat, they began to construct the imposing walls of a new fortress in Mombasa and took a much more direct interest in controlling local affairs. Portuguese rule was thereby solidified up and down the African coast, setting the stage for their penetration of the interior of the continent in later decades.

Yet, significantly, none of this was a foregone conclusion before the battle for Mombasa in March 1589. On the contrary, although the Ottoman central government’s failure to provide Mir Ali with adequate support did leave him seriously outnumbered by the Portuguese

76 Orhonlu, Habeş Eyaleti, pp. 15–82.
77 For the subsequent history of Portuguese involvement in the Swahili Coast, see Pearson, Port Cities and Intruders.
fleet, his forces nevertheless enjoyed a number of important and potentially decisive tactical advantages. As Portuguese sources themselves make clear, Mir Ali may very well have carried the day against Tomé de Sousa Coutinho had it not been for the timely and overpowering intervention of the mainland “Zimba.”

We can only speculate about what such an alternative outcome might have meant over the longue durée. Had the Ottomans successfully defended Mombasa, it is not inconceivable that they could have forced the surrender of Malindi as well, and eventually taken possession of the entire Swahili Coast. With such a firm foothold in the Indian Ocean, the position of Hasan Pasha, Hazinedar Sinan, and other members of their faction would have been strengthened, perhaps enabling them to permanently redirect Ottoman resources toward further expansion in that part of the world. Meanwhile, the Portuguese—weakened from this loss of territory and even more so by the enormous blow to their prestige—would have been much harder pressed to face the coming challenge from the Dutch in the following century. In short, had the Ottomans prevailed at Mombasa, it quite possibly could have spelled the premature demise of Portuguese Asia.

This possibility brings us to the last and most singular aspect of the events of 1588–1589, with perhaps the deepest implications for our understanding of politics in the early modern world. Accustomed as we are to seeing centralized mercantile empires as the principal political actors in the history of overseas expansion, it deserves emphasis that in this case the decisive intervention was provided by neither the Portuguese, nor the Ottomans, nor even the local Swahili city-states, but instead by none other than the ferocious yet historically elusive “Zimba.” As a mainland force from the interior of Africa, armed with nothing more than iron-tipped spears and poison darts, the “Zimba” were nevertheless able to decide the outcome of a confrontation between two technologically advanced, centralized, and expansive colonial powers. How and why this came about, and what circumstances prompted them to intervene in such a way, we are unfortunately not yet able to say. But looking past the sensationalistic accounts of Zimba bloodlust, it seems incredible to suggest that their forceful appearance at such a delicate historical moment was in the end entirely fortuitous.

Who were the “Zimba”? A mercenary army from the Zambezi river, perhaps brought north by a disaffected, rival faction of Mombasans unhappy with the prospect of Ottoman rule? Or a migrating band of Maravi warriors, displaced from their southern homeland by the interference of coastal Muslims on the economy of the interior? Or were
they possibly a mainland force of more local origin, content enough with the status quo of Portuguese rule to take unilateral action against the Ottomans on their behalf? In the complex and interconnected world of the late sixteenth century, any of these formations could potentially be drawn into the nexus of international power politics, and move as willful actors on the world stage. By the 1580s, even for a group like the “Zimba” all politics was global.

All of these possibilities have been speculated upon by modern scholars, although not always with explicit reference to the appearance of the “Zimba” at Mombasa. On the Zimba as a mercenary army from the Zambezi region, see Schoffeleers, “The Zimba and the Lundu State,” pp. 337–355; on the identification of the “Zimba” as a band of Maravi warriors, see M. D. D. Newitt, “The Early History of the Maravi,” The Journal of African History 23, no. 2 (1982): 145–162; and for a more local interpretation of events, based on the historical pattern of relations between Mombasan and other Swahili factions and the mainland polities of the immediate hinterland, see Philip Curtin, Steven Feierman, Leonard Thompson, and Jan Vansina, African History (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1978), pp. 176–178.