

IDEAS & ISSUES (CULTURE)

Cultural Intelligence

To the Shores of Tripoli: a case study

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Preface

On 7 April 1805, William Eaton, one midshipman, and eight United States Marines under the command of Presley O'Bannon stood at the Egyptian frontier and looked up towards the hills that would take them into hostile territory.¹ Accompanying them was a collection of several hundred mercenaries and followers of the exiled ruler of the Barbary State of Tripoli, Hamet Qaramanli. Having crossed 280 miles of desert, the war party still had to advance 180 miles into Tripoli to capture the port city of Derne, the capital of Cyrenaica. In the weeks that followed, Eaton would succeed beyond expectations, earning his place in history. While much has been written about the Barbary Wars—including the Derne victory—discussions on the social dynamics at work in Tripoli largely have been missing. Yet those dynamics, which may be described as “cultural intelligence,” played an important role.² Failing to understand that is to fail to fully understand the war itself. This article is an attempt to introduce that history as an argument for a greater focus on cultural intelligence in military planning.

“A Country Not Your Own”³

For four years, the United States waged desultory naval combat with Tripoli after its leader, Bey Yusef Qaramanli, declared war on 14 May 1801. The conflict stemmed from a refusal to offer tribute, a dubious scheme where America paid not to have their ships robbed or seized by the Bey's pirates. In June 1803, a frustrated President Thomas Jefferson authorized a land attack and appointed Eaton, an experienced North African diplomat, as commander (Naval Agent for the Barbary Regencies). As Washington never contemplated sending an army abroad and the few Marines proved inadequate, the need for local

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Lieutenant O'Bannon and Marines advancing toward Tripoli. (Image from Merrill L. Bartlett and Jack Sweetman, *The U.S. Marine Corps: An Illustrated History*, (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD: 2001), 30–31.)

forces became critical and the ability to rally fighters to oppose his brother Yusef made Hamet indispensable. Under Eaton, Hamet's “army” would conduct the first land campaign led by the young United States on a foreign shore.⁴

On 27 April 1805, some 400 soldiers under Eaton assaulted Derne, defended by twice their number. A charge by a handful proved decisive: the Marines and midshipmen, a company of 26 Greek mercenaries and 24 artillerymen. The fight was a short, if bloody, affair; Eaton suffered a shattered wrist from a musket ball, and two Marines died with another wounded while Hamet emerged unscathed during the subsequent capture of the Governor's

palace. Within three hours, Derne fell and the Stars and Stripes waved for the first time over a distant battlefield. Why was a mixed and meager force under American generalship able to defeat a superior force located deep within their homeland?⁵ The courage of Eaton and his men won out, but a number of social factors worked to their advantage. Tripoli was riddled with social fissures stemming from the nature of the Barbary States and the local political situation in Tripoli.

In 1805, Ottoman Barbary consisted of the provinces (eyalats) of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. Barbary came from the Arab barbar (Berber), describing North Africa's inhabitants. The term

became misleading after the 11th century as the Arabian Banu Hilal tribes migrated across North Africa, halting only at Morocco's border. Over the course of their migration, they swept away much of the Berber farming population, something that had two lasting effects. The Arabs and the Berbers formed a mixed race and two societies were created, one sedentary, clustered around the remaining coastal cities and farmlands and the other consisting of semi-nomadic Bedouin tribes. This also divided economic life between inland pastoralism with the caravan trade and littoral agriculture linked to sea commerce. The society fractured further with the rise of the Barbary States in the 1500s.⁶

Around 1505, Hayreddin Barbarossa moved his pirate fleet from the Aegean to Algeria and began raiding European shipping. In the process, he made a great fortune and his forces grew in strength. Simultaneously, the Spanish Reconquista spread into the Maghreb. In 1517, Barbarossa traded submission to Ottoman authority for military aid and Sultan Selim I obliged by sending forces while elevating Barbarossa to beylerbey. In 1551, the Ottomans recaptured Tripoli from the Maltese Knights of Saint John and the Spanish were driven from Tunis in 1574.⁷

With the crisis averted, the Porte dismissed the beylerbey and divided its holdings into the three eyalats, each ruled by a commander (bey) appointed by the Sultan and, if successful, promoted to pasha. Together with the bey and a Turkish administrative staff, Janissaries were dispatched along with a naval contingent. The three capital ports were turned into fortified bases. Ideally, the eyalats should have been divided into sanjaks (districts headed by sanjak-beys) to solidify control, but Ottoman rule was too tenuous to expand inland. This created additional societal strains as the Turks, Janissaries, and sailors disturbed the status quo. The Ottoman legal tradition also created friction; it followed the Hanafi Sharia while most peoples of the Maghreb adhered to the more conservative Maliki school. Acknowledging the limits of its authority, the Porte never forced the Hanafi system

on the local population, but the result heightened the barrier between the governed and those that governed.⁸

The Janissaries—lifelong soldiers—were also a breed apart. Most had been taken as boys as a “blood tax” on Christians dwelling in Ottoman Europe. Moved to Anatolia, they were reared as soldiers and volunteered or coerced to convert to Islam. Despite these hardships, Janissaries were well paid, held a respected position in society, and were free to elect their own leaders, the deys. Finally, sailors, the most alien and profitable contingent, were able seamen recruited from anywhere and, if not Muslim, became converts. Motivated by the promise of privateering spoils, they were singularly mercenary and of limited loyalty but brought much needed cash to the States. Pirate rule soon reigned.⁹

The Ottoman conquest ended in the imposition of an alien government that never fully integrated with the people. Tripoli suffered most from these internal differences. Because of geography, it had only two enclaves able to support agriculture: the plateau south of the port of Tripoli and the ancient Pentapolis in Cyrenaica with Derne on the eastern extreme. The Bedouin tribes were economically self-sufficient and dominated the rest of the country, allowing them to stand apart from the Bey. This made rule tenuous in the best of times and the war with America did not come during the best of times.¹⁰

Tripoli was ostensibly part of the Ottoman Empire, but the power yielded was far from that of the 16th century. When Tripoli was recaptured, the Sublime Porte installed Aga Murad as bey and as an indication of the importance of Tripoli as a naval base, named Admiral (Reis) Turgut the second bey in 1553. For the next half century, Tripoli was ruled directly by the Porte. In 1609, the local Janissaries selected Suleiman Safar as dey who overthrew Bey Ahmad Pasha, and the Porte subsequently acceded to the elected deys as rulers. In late 1709, Bey Halil Pasha died without a successor and over the next two years, Tripoli witnessed five different self-professed governors attempting to take and keep power.¹¹

During this crisis, the Janissaries chose as dey the capable sipahi (cavalry) leader Ahmed Qaramanli. Qaramanli was not a pure-blooded Janissary but a khouloughli (children of soldiers), the descendants of earlier Janissaries who had married into the local elite in Tripoli. In July 1711, Ahmed seized control and the Sublime Porte recognized him as bey and awarded him the rank of pasha. Although he continued to refer to himself as Dey, Ahmed ended the dey elections and the Qaramanli became hereditary leaders. The Qaramanli were able to expand their control into the Fezzan to the south and Cyrenaica to the east. A succession of Qaramanlis ruled effectively for most of the 18th century until the physical decline of the long serving Ali Pasha in the 1790s set in motion an internecine power struggle. The troubles began when Ali designated his eldest son, Hassan, as his successor in 1790.¹²

In August, Yusef, the youngest son, lured Hassan into the Bey's harem under the ruse of reconciling their differences. The harem was a refuge whose protections exceeded that of a mosque. Once there, Hassan disarmed as required and greeted his mother. A hiding Yusef then cut him down. Hassan was able to recover his saber and slightly wound Yusef before dying. This murderous outrage threw the country's leadership into turmoil. Bey Ali refused to recognize Yusef as regent and a civil war erupted with Yusef besieging Ali in the Tripoli fortress during the spring and summer of 1793.¹³

In early July, Ali died after naming Hamet, the middle son, as bey. Amidst this chaos, the Turks acted. On 29 July 1793, an Ottoman fleet under Ali Benghul arrived in the harbor. He declared himself ruler and both Hamet and Yusef fled to Tunis. Benghul's rule ended in failure when the brothers, with the assistance of the Dey of Tunis, regained power in 1795. Yusef then pushed aside Hamet, sending him to Derne as Governor of Cyrenaica—an internal exile. Yusef also took Hamet's family hostage. In fear for his life, Hamet fled first to Tunis and then to Egypt. Yusef sat uneasily on the throne, knowing that the Porte and his brother awaited an

opportunity to overthrow him. Those were not his only problems.¹⁴

Tripoli was the poorest of the Barbary States and the government's survival had become dependent on extortion, namely the tribute and wartime privateering policy. Even Yusef acknowledged that reality, stating in 1797 that his aim was to declare war on one nation as soon as he made peace with another. Internal conflicts made matters all the worse. When Americans had paid tribute to avoid trouble, the Barbary silver piaster was interchangeable with the U.S. dollar, except in the case of Tripoli. Yusef had so badly bankrupted Tripoli's finances that its piaster had been reduced to a small copper coin. By the outbreak of war, one U.S. dollar was trading for 800 Tripolitanian piasters.¹⁵

In this environment, the American blockade worked exceptionally well as it affected little outside the Port of Tripoli. There was no hardship in the agricultural regions, a reality equally true for the pastoral tribes and their caravan trade. For the United States, the war became a conflict limited to Yusef and his followers, and the blockade cost Yusef his primary source of income, forcing him to raise taxes, an act that alienated the population under his control. As if the economic and political difficulties were not enough, Yusef could not count on his military for much help as the situation within the ranks of Janissaries and amongst the ships' crews was nothing short of dire.¹⁶

Tripoli was a feeble military power in the early 1800s. When Yusef declared war on the United States, his navy had seven ocean-going corsairs: 2 frigates, one of 32 and one of 28 guns, plus 5 barks or sloops of 10–18 guns each. The only bright spot was the fleet commander, Admiral Murad, a competent commander who sailed on the seized American vessel *Betsy*. This compared with 13 corsairs held by Tunis and 18 by Algiers. By the time of the Eaton Expedition, Murad's diminished fleet was trapped in port and the U.S. Navy's Mediterranean Squadron under Commodore Samuel Barron containing 6 frigates (220 guns total), 2 brigantines (16 guns each), 3 schooners (12 guns each) and the 10-gun sloop *Hornet*, sailed offshore.¹⁷

The exact size of Tripoli's Janissary-khouloughli corps during the war is not known. Given its poorness and the fact that Tunis had an army of 6,800 badly trained and equipped soldiers, Tripoli may have been able to field half that force. Further, because Yusef had alienated himself from the Porte, he could not count on Turkish reinforcements. This limited his ability to defend the country from a land attack. By the spring of 1805, excluding fortress cannoners, the port of Tripoli garrison was approximately 900 sipahi Janissaries



Lt Presley O'Bannon. (Image from Bartlett and Sweetman.)

with another 90 each at Misurata and Benghazi. Derne had an estimated 800 defenders, both Janissary and untrained local Arab levées.¹⁸

Derne was an enclave on a coastal plain and passage into town followed the Roman road that was used by Hadj pilgrims traveling to and from Mecca, providing a source of income and information. The Mediterranean coast ran before Derne roughly from east to west with a sloping point jutting slightly into the sea to the northwest and the sheltered port just to the east. To either side of the open shore that abutted the Derne plain, the beaches were shallow and pinned between sea and rocky cliffs.

Rising hills surrounded the plain, starting approximately one and a half miles inland from the coast. In the 1800s, the wadi system that had formed the plain consisted of a seasonally dry riverbed that passed Derne to the southeast and emptied into the port along with the main wadi that passed west of town en route to the sea. It contained an aqueduct system that provided water to Derne and the surrounding fields. By 1805, Derne was known as a fertile region, rich in fruits and grains as well as wax, honey, and butter.¹⁹

The population was approximately 7,000 people and represented the social upheavals of the Mediterranean world. Originally a 7th century B.C. Greek settlement, it fared well during Roman times, becoming a bishopric by the 5th century. Following the 7th century Arab conquest, Derne fell into decline and its people were swept up in the Banu Hilal migration during the 11th century. Refugees from Moorish Spain, the moriscos, resettled the abandoned city in the 15th century. As sedentary settlers, communal ties, not Bedouin bloodlines, formed the basis of morisco society. Communities were tied to the farmland, the town, and as it grew, by its quarters that formed de facto sub-tribes. The Bedouins regarded the inhabitants of Derne as outsiders, a people without a tribe, well into the 20th century.²⁰

The Bedouin tribal leaders were more opportunists than adherents of the Qaramanli regime. Their focus was on herding and trading with Derne and the caravans that operated far from the court intrigues in the Port of Tripoli. They acknowledged the Dey's authority but were disinterested in politics so long as it did not interfere in their livelihoods. The relationship between the town's community and the Bedouins was one of uneasy tension. This made Derne's population dependent on the protection of the Dey, to feel the hand of his rule or misrule, and by 1805, their loyalties were divided between the competing Qaramanli heirs.²¹

In Egypt, Eaton formed an "army" after the Ottoman Viceroy provided a letter of amnesty on 17 December 1804. The letter granted permission for Hamet and Easton to pass the Turk-

ish garrison without interference during what was in essence an invasion of Tripoli. This was blow to Yusef who had sent an envoy to the Viceroy with the aim of keeping Hamet in Egypt. The envoy returned to Tripoli and upon hearing of Hamet's plan, Yusef ordered the dispatch of a Derne relief column, a decision that stretched his army to its limit, leaving only 600 sa-pahis at the port fortress. The column was augmented by Bedouin horsemen and untrained soldiers from tribes of questionable loyalty and, as Derne was on the pilgrimage route to Mecca, Yusef could not keep the movement secret.²²

In February 1805, several hundred Hamet loyalists assembled in the Egyptian desert nearly 300 miles from the frontier. To transport the necessary supplies and weapons, Eaton was forced to hire some 200 camels with drivers from a venal and troublesome Bedouin sheik named Tayyb, who would bring several dozen armed horsemen for protection. This allowed the expedition to travel relatively unmolested and trade with the local tribes for food from the time it departed on 6 March until the 21 April Battle of Derne. The American victory had an immediate and profound impact on the course of the war.²³

Yusef immediately sued for peace. The demand for tribute and a \$200,000 ransom proposed ironically on 21 April was withdrawn for a new one with three conditions: first, a \$60,000 payment; second, the ending of aid to Hamet; and third, the evacuation of Derne. Tribute would end and Yusef also agreed to the release of Hamet's family upon the return of Derne, but there was a secret provision that allowed him to keep Hamet's family hostage for four years even if Hamet quit Derne. The American negotiator, Tobias Lear, agreed and the treaty was signed on 4 June and the secret provision, the day following. The war was over.²⁴

The expedition was a marked military success. While achieved by the heroics of those who fought there, it was made possible by Tripoli's social fissures. Culturally, the bifurcation of the society in the 11th century created the caravan system and made the expedition logistically viable, and the Turkish insertion of foreign coastal colonies deepened

fault lines and formed a Bedouin society that would indifferently accept outsiders like Hamet and Eaton. Militarily, Tripoli's poorness and the limits of the Janissary-khouloughli system put Yusef at a disadvantage. Divided loyalties at Derne also meant that Eaton would be sufficiently strong in relative terms. Victory was not certain but not by the risky

By themselves, none of these factors ensured success, but together they leveled the battlefield.

undertaking indicated by Eaton's small numbers. Politically, had Yusef not risen bloodily to power or had Hamet not escaped, the entire enterprise would not have been possible. Yusef's illegitimate rule in the eyes of the Porte also helped, as demonstrated by the lack of aid for Yusef coupled with the Viceroy's support of Hamet.²⁵

By themselves, none of these factors ensured success, but together they leveled the battlefield. It was equally true that, had any factorial combination been different, victory at Derne may have proven impossible. The point for military planners is that cultural intelligence or regional knowledge and experience can prove invaluable, and formally integrating cultural intelligence into the planning process can make a difference between success and failure.

Notes

1. The Ottoman's named provinces for their capital, to avoid confusion; this article uses "Tripoli" to denote the Barbary State of Tripoli. The capital will be referred to as the Port of Tripoli.

2. The author first heard the term "cultural intelligence" in 1993 during a lecture by Gen Anthony Zinni on his experiences during Operation Restore Hope in Somalia.

3. William S. Shaw, *The Life of the Late General Eaton*, (Brookfield, MA: E. Merriam, 1813), 315.

4. Shaw, Eaton, 256; *United States Department of the Navy, Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers: Naval Operations including Diplomatic Background, 1785-1807*, 450.

5. Shaw, Eaton, 306, 338-340. The ships were the brigantine *Argus*, schooner *Nautilus*, and sloop *Hornet*. Derne was the name used at the time of the battle. Other versions include Darnis (the name given by its Greek founders) and Darnah. Today's name, Derna, dates from the Roman Era. Its name in Arabic is virtually identical: Darnah.

6. Ramzi Rouhifi, "The Berbers of the Arabs," *Studia Islamica*, new series, 1, (2011): 81; Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (New York: MJF Books, 1991), 103-104.

7. Hourani, 215. Beyerbey means "commander of commanders."

8. Hourani, 228; Rifaat Abou-El-Haj, "An Agenda for Research in History: The History of Libya between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, No. 3 (August 1983), 306-307. "Pa-sha," pronounced "bashaw" in North Africa, came from the Persian "padishah" roughly meaning "master king." Within the Sublime Porte, it was a rank superior to Bey, but in the Barbary States, the local title of Dey or Bey was often retained.

9. Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History* (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 45-46. The Turks referred to the "blood tax" process as *devserme* or collection.

10. Chai-lin Pan, "The Population of Libya," *Population Studies* 3, no. 1 (June 1949), 101; K.S. McLachlan, "Tripoli and Tripolitania: Conflicts and Cohesion during the Period of the Barbary Corsairs (1551-1850)," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series 3, no. 3, Settlement and Conflict in the Mediterranean World (1978), 287.

11. Navy, *Documents*, Volume 1, 207; see World Statesmen-Libya at <http://www.worldstatesmen.org> (accessed 29 January 2012).

12. Helen Chapin Metz, editor, *Libya: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1987). See "Karamanlis," paragraph 1. Available at <http://countrystudies.us/libya> (accessed 15 January 2012). Ahmed Qaramanli was of Albanian descent.

13. Shaw, Eaton, 339; Richard Tully, *A Narrative of a Ten Year Residence in Tripoli in Africa*

(London: Henry Colburn, 1817), 231–233, passim, 329. Accessed at <http://books.google.com>, 1 February 2012.

14. Tully, 336–337; Chapin, Libya, see “Karamanlis,” paragraph 2; Richard Zacks, *The Pirate Coast: Thomas Jefferson, the First Marines, and the Secret Mission of 1805* (New York: Hyperion, 2005), 110–111.

15. Navy, *Documents*, Volume 1, 217, 333; McLachlan, “Tripoli and Tripolitania,” 290.

16. Shaw, Eaton, 342–343.

17. Navy, *Documents*, Volume 1, 300, 315, 368; Louis B. Wright and Julia H. Macleod, *The First Americans in North Africa: William Eaton's Struggle for a Vigorous Policy Against the Barbary Pirates, 1799–1805* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1945), 89; Joshua E. London, *Victory in Tripoli: How America's War with the Barbary Pirates Established the U.S. Navy and Shaped a Nation*, (Hoboken: Wiley, 2005), 191. Murad, a convert to Islam, had been born as Peter Lisle in Scotland. The USS *Enterprise* took the 14-gun corsair Tripoli out of action on 1 August 1801.

18. Shaw, Eaton, 98, 330, 335–336, 348. Misrata is also known as Misrata or Misratah. The composition of the Derne forces was not cited. To crush a similar rebellion by his son in 1817, Yusef deployed fewer than 500 Janissaries (See Della Cella's Narrative, 8).

19. Hourani, 480–481; Shaw, Eaton, 306; Paola Della Cella, *Narrative of an Expedition from Tripoli in Barbary to the Western Frontiers of Egypt in 1817*, translated by Anthony Aufrere (London: John & Arthur Arch, 1822), 176, available at <http://books.google.com> (accessed 28 January 2012); John W. Norie, *New Piloting Directions for the Mediterranean Sea* (London: J. W. Norie, 1831), 338. Accessed at <http://books.google.com/books> (accessed 23 January 2012).

20. Della Cella, 177; R.G. Goodchild, “Mapping Roman Libya,” *The Geographical Journal*, Volume 118, No. 2 (June 1952), 143, 150; Hourani, 106; Vladimir Peniakoff, *Popski's Private Army: A Legendary Commander's True Story of World War II Commando Combat* (New York: Bantam Books, 1950), 106.

21. McLachlan, 292; Shaw, Eaton, 337, 348, 358.

22. Shaw, Eaton, 283, 293; Joseph Wheelan, *Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror, 1801–1805* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 267; Shaw, Eaton, 306, 348, 358.

23. Shaw, Eaton, 311, 316–317, 326–327, 336; Navy, *Documents*, Volume 5; for examples of difficulties associated with Tayyib, see 405, 456, and 470–472.

24. Navy, *Documents*, Volume 6, 1, 81–82. The ransom was for the safe return of the crew of the USS *Philadelphia* that had been taken prisoner after the ship ran aground on a reef off the port of Tripoli on 31 October 1803.

25. Shaw, Eaton, 315, 337.

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