

*Violence, Identity, and Connection: the Taifa of Denia and the Medieval Mediterranean*

Chapter 1: Violence

Abstract

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea defines piracy as “any illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends [...]” This draws on millennia of jurisprudence and political philosophy that used maritime violence as a marker for sovereignty. As the state carved a place for itself with law and rhetoric, authors tautologically wove together notions of legality with legitimate sovereignty, excluding violence that was not public or from the state. This led eventually to the Weberian definition of the state as an entity that holds the monopoly over violence within its territory, and the UN definition above that extends beyond that territory. These claims required normalized criteria for what was legal or illegal and what was public or private. They required normative texts that established those criteria, which Mediterranean scholars and jurists readily provided and refined. The West’s abject deference to normative texts means that we often confuse the prescriptive for the descriptive and relevant. And yet, just as legal and political authors have used maritime violence to better define and extend the reach of the state, those who practice maritime violence have defied the easy classifications of legal and illegal and public or private. In this paper, the first chapter of my current monograph project, I examine the tensions between normative texts on maritime violence and the actors who carried out violence on the Mediterranean between the eighth and eleventh centuries. In this context, the actions and experiences of Muslim raiders belied the claimed relevance of normative texts while also highlighting the blurred lines between public and private.