Christophe Picard, a specialist in medieval Islamic history at the Sorbonne, has written a comprehensive account of the various ways that medieval Islam's highest political authorities—its caliphs, whether Sunni or Shi'ite—used naval warfare on the Mediterranean Sea to defend and expand the borders of their territories. Jihad is thus the central focus of the book, but Picard's historiographical target is not the debate about the meaning of jihad. Rather, he is interested in the practice and purpose of it as it pertains to the domain of the Mediterranean Sea. He is here responding to a tradition within Islamic studies that has maintained that the concepts and legal definitions of jihad were developed along frontiers in the inland, particularly the Syrian border region, and that the Mediterranean Sea was peripheral to these developments. To the contrary, Picard argues, the sea was central to both the conceptions and the strategies of jihad, the creation and maintenance of borders, and the contests between the caliphates and their neighboring states as well as the contests among rival caliphates.

The first section deals with how the Mediterranean, along with caliphal policies related to maritime activity, was represented in Arabic texts across a long span of time. Picard traces the development of the concept of jihad through juristic texts, geographies, chronicles, travel accounts and itineraries, hagiographies, poetry, Geniza letters, the archaeology of coastal fortresses, and more, marshalling an impressively wide array of sources to support his argument and to show the continuing centrality of naval warfare and defense to the Islamic states across the early medieval period. By the tenth century, the Mediterranean took on even greater importance as western caliphates were vying for control of the Mediterranean Sea, each seeking to demonstrate their supremacy over their rivals and to defend their shores from Viking and Christian attackers. The Umayyad caliphs in al-Andalus specifically sought naval dominance in order to extend their control eastward. The Fatimids were, if possible, even more concerned with maritime activity, using their fleet as an essential tool for the spreading of the Ismaili doctrine and for demonstrating caliphal infallibility and military might. Even after the collapse of the two western caliphates, Picard argues, the Mediterranean remained important to the Islamic successor states, such as the maritime ta'ifa of Denia. Later, the Almohads made particularly active use of the sea and “put the maritime space at the center of the empire” (p. 170).

The focus of Islamic naval warfare throughout this period was not only offensive but also defens-
ive. Picard presents records that show the building and maintaining of ribats (coastal fortifications) as well as dockyards, ports, and fleets. This kind of construction activity also shows how the caliphs’ efforts at demonstrating naval superiority over their rivals likewise transformed coastal cities and shaped the landscape. Trade via sea lanes was also a very common use of the Mediterranean by Islamic powers in the medieval period, but this aspect of maritime activity is less of a focus in section 1 than is the building and maintaining of fleets for naval warfare. However, Picard is careful to note throughout the inextricability of warfare and financial enrichment; the material and spiritual rewards of conquest were linked in both motivation and execution of naval activity.

The second section of the book restarts the chronology from the seventh century and turns to caliphal strategies for first conquering and then controlling the Mediterranean. What Picard shows clearly is that the early Islamic approaches to the Mediterranean (such as taking over preexisting Byzantine fleets, conquering islands, and aiming for Constantinople) were not accidental or opportunistic (i.e., not piratical) but were intentional aspects of a range of offensive strategies directed by and on behalf of the caliphs in the Medinan and Umayyad periods. The Abbasids, on the other hand, were forced to focus on defensive strategies on both land and sea frontiers. The earlier caliphal objective of conquering Constantinople by sea was abandoned, and the focus shifted to defensive fortifications rather than continuing to further build up caliphal fleets. At the same time, however, their fundamental approach to jihad and to the sea was unchanged. Picard argues that this period was characterized not by a strategic shift or a revolution in the use of jihad but primarily by a changed set of circumstances to which the caliphs had to respond.

In the Abbasid period, too, we see that caliphs also used the sea for both diplomatic and commercial purposes. Indeed, Picard shows the inextricability of warfare with opportunities for economic gain. From the ninth century, the western Mediterranean was an especially vibrant space for all of these aspects of Islamic maritime activity as it was transformed from a space of jihad against Christian territories to one in which Muslim powers prevailed on many of the islands and shorelines of the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean then shifted to an arena of contest between competing caliphates. From the late tenth century, maritime commerce emerged as one of the most important tools in the caliphs’ arsenal. Finally, the Almohads dominated the western Mediterranean in the twelfth century, becoming wealthy and powerful, only to find their supremacy undermined in the thirteenth century as Italian merchants and Latinate kings gained the upper hand. Thus, both sections of the book effectively argue that the Islamic Mediterranean began as a sea of war and became a sea of commerce.

The narrative aspect of the book is complex and multifaceted, but one constant through line is the intentionality of Muslim maritime activity in the Mediterranean. That is, Picard argues strenuously against the oft-repeated notion that most medieval Muslim naval efforts were undertaken by pirates or privateers. Rather, he asserts, it was the highest levels of political authority—caliphs and emirs—that directed naval warfare efforts, determined strategies, poured in resources, built up defensive structures and fleets, and encouraged commerce. And, what is more, his evidence shows that the Mediterranean was a central aspect of caliphal strategies and self-definitions, no matter which caliph or caliphate we are taking about. Whether the Mediterranean Sea was being employed as a frontier region for facing infidels, as the heart of an empire, as a zone of contestation between claimants to the true successorship to the Prophet, as an arena of enrichment, as a site of defense, or as a space for nostalgic efforts at reclamation, Picard shows that it was, from the sev-
enth to the early thirteenth century, a primary and essential stage on which Islamic caliphs operated.

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