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Violence, jihad, policy and legitimacy: al-Mansur's career (976-1002) and the war against Christendom

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In spite of undeniable advances and a true breakthrough in research and scholarship in the fields of knowledge related to the history and culture of the High Middle Ages in the Iberian Peninsula, which have known an unprecedented development from the late seventies of the last century, the inability to understand the Islamic past and the lack of an integrated approach to al-Andalus history remain deeply rooted in the work of journalists, politicians, scholars, historians, churchmen, and mass media gurus. As late as 2018, seven years after the thirteenth centennial of the Islamic conquest of al-Andalus, held in 2011, some scholars are casting unwarranted and unfounded doubts about the conquest of Tariq ibn Ziyad and Musà ibn Nusayr between 711 and 713. This abhorrent situation should not come as a surprise if we read the statement of a Spanish politician, the former Prime Minister José María Aznar, in his inaugural address as Distinguished Scholar in the Practice of Global Leadership, given at Georgetown University at 2004. At least, he did acknowledge the reality of the Islamic conquest of al-Andalus, but in a rather distorted way. “The problem Spain has with Al Qaeda and Islamic terrorism did not begin with the Iraq Crisis. In fact, it has nothing to do with government decisions. You must go back no less than 1,300 years, to the early eighth century, when a Spain recently invaded by the Moors refused to become just another piece in the Islamic world and began a long battle to recover its identity. This Reconquista process was very long, lasting some 800 years. However, it ended successfully.”

This huge and blatant amount of nonsense and wild ignorance, as well as other pieces of infamous speech, is founded upon a misunderstanding of al-Andalus and Islamic history and the goal of this paper is to analyse the paramount instance of a successful Andalusí Islamic political career, that of al-Mansur ibn Abi ‘Amir (976-1002 AD), a man of the pen mostly known in Spain as an invincible warrior and a champion of jihad. From this vantage point, that is, the biography and deeds of a man bound to campaign against Christendom, we will offer an appraisal of how violence was channelled through the practice of jihad as a duty and as a legitimacy tool and how al-Mansur's career, unparalleled in Andalusí history, cannot be understood neither in the framework of Reconquista nor in the framework of nation building.