

# *Islamic Imperialism: A History*

by Efraim Karsh, Yale University Press, 2006, 276 pp.

## Evan Daniel

In the Summer of 1993 Samuel Huntington published his influential essay ‘*Clash of Civilizations?*’ in the journal *Foreign Affairs*. A book followed, minus the question mark, in 1996. His central thesis: many contemporary conflicts are expressions of an underlying clash of competing civilisations – in particular a clash between the West and the Islamic world. This was vehemently rejected on the radical left for whom George W. Bush’s ‘War on Terrorism’ is merely a ruse to control Middle-Eastern oil, and Islamists are not reactionary aggressors but revolutionary victims of transnational capitalism.

But what if neither view is correct? What if the present conflict is best viewed as a straightforward contest between rival political aspirations? So argues Efraim Karsh, historian at King’s College and director of its Mediterranean Studies program, in *Islamic Imperialism: A History*. Contentious imperialisms, he suggests, ‘should not be misconstrued for a civilisational struggle between the worlds of Islam and Christendom.’ Karsh is no stranger to controversy. Two of his previous works, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery of the Middle East, 1789-1923* (1999), and *Fabricating Israeli History: The New Israeli Historians* (2000), came under attack in *The British Journal of Middle East Studies*, *The International Journal of Middle East Studies*, and *Journal of Palestine Studies*.

## Re-reading Islamism

*Islamic Imperialism: A History* is a refutation of the commonly held notion that Islamism developed as a reaction to Western historical imperialism. In a recent Commentary article (‘Islam’s Imperial Dreams,’ April 2006) Karsh contends,

To intellectuals, foreign-policy experts, and politicians alike, ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’ are categories that apply exclusively to European powers and, more recently, to the United States. In this view of things, Muslims, whether in the Middle East or elsewhere, are merely objects – the long-suffering victims of the aggressive encroachments of others ... This perspective dominated the widespread explanation of the 9/11 attacks as only a response to America’s

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(allegedly) arrogant and self-serving foreign policy, particularly with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Karsh seeks the ‘internal, autonomous dynamics’ of Islamism. Muhammad’s impetus for seeking imperial expansion from Arabia, in Karsh’s telling, was material as much as ideological. First, the creation of the Muslim religious community (*umma*) created a sharp dichotomy between Muslims and ‘infidels’ and presupposed a permanent state of war between them. But from this militant doctrine followed an important material interest. ‘By forbidding fighting and raiding within the *umma*, Muhammad deprived the Arabian tribes of a traditional source of livelihood and drove them inexorably toward imperial expansion’ (p. 19). The early Muslim empire was not unique in its quest for booty. History is littered with examples of imperial expansion fuelled by the quest for material wealth. At first, spoils from non-Muslims served as a substitute for lost war spoils. Karsh explains that this is why Muhammad did not promote large-scale conversion among all tribes in the region, preferring their attachment as tributaries. As all of Arabia became Muslim, an alternative source of wealth was found north of the peninsula, in the Fertile Crescent and Levant.

In Karsh’s narrative, Islamic civilisation emerged as an amalgamation of the cultural diversity and scientific advances of Greece and Persia with Arabian traditions. The increasing number and size of the early conquests, coupled with Arab bureaucratic and administrative inexperience, led the victorious forces to rely on Byzantine and Iranian institutions for the maintenance of their fledgling empire. Over time, Arabs began intermarrying with the indigenous populations and adopting Iranian clothing, cuisine and manners. Arabic evolved into an official imperial language by the beginning of the eighth century. ‘[B]y adopting the Arabic language, the conquered peoples – Iranians, Syrians, Greeks, Copts, Berbers, Jews and Christians – placed their abundant talents and learning at the service of their conquerors, thus leading to the development of a distinct Islamic civilisation.’ With the gradual Arabisation of the imperial administration, distinctions between the Arab imperial elite and indigenous non-Arab peoples became less clear. As Karsh tells it, this culminated in ‘the development of a new Arabic-speaking imperial persona, a reincarnation of sorts of the old Roman subject’ (p. 27).

The successes of the early Islamic empire were not strictly military. Muhammad and several of his early companions were merchants and the new religion had a favourable attitude to trade from its inception. The early Islamic empire willingly

interacted with 'infidels' from East Asia to Africa and lands between. Africa is widely acknowledged as the most lucrative branch of this foreign trade although trade networks were established with Byzantium and the pagan peoples to its North. As Karsh notes, 'The magnitude of this trade is evidenced by the huge quantities of Islamic coins (dating from the end of the seventh to the beginning of the eleventh century) discovered in different parts of Russia, Finland, Sweden, and Norway, and it comprised a wide range of commodities including furs, skins, amber, timber, cattle and weapons.' Karsh also notes that, 'The primary commodity by far was slaves...' (p. 64-5).

Karsh contends that Muslim trade with Europe at this time somewhat resembled the relations of imperial trade that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, except that in this case the positions were reversed. Europe functioned as a peripheral colony for the Muslim core, exporting slaves and raw materials for finished goods. These trade relations were not the result of a clash of civilisations but of the integration of markets between an economically inferior Western Europe and a rapidly developing Islamic empire.

Contrary to most explanations popular in Middle Eastern Studies, then, Karsh does not see Islamism as a response to the domination of European imperialism or to the growing embrace of Western ideals and practices by Muslim societies. Rather, the early Muslim Brotherhood traced the societal breakdown in the Islamic world 'to the disintegration of the first umma and the creation of the Umayyad and Abbasid empires, where the notion of Allah's universal sovereignty succumbed to the reality of human kingship and hereditary rule in the most decadent and un-Islamic forms' (p. 110). Thus, just as the first umma included an enormously diverse number of peoples, the Islamists' 'vision of peace and harmony under the banner of Islam was a worldwide, transnational order' (p. 212). As the first umma was produced by Muhammad's military triumphs, so this new transnational Islamic order would be ushered in by politically motivated violence.

### **Re-reading Israel, re-reading Hamas**

In Karsh's reading, far from the establishment of the state of Israel being a manifestation of European imperialism and colonialism, it is the Arab states that come off as plotting the division and conquest of Palestine. King Faisal I of Syria had sought to expropriate Palestine, as did King Abdallah of Transjordan who wanted an empire encompassing Palestine and Syria. The Arab League rejected

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Abdallah's personal ambitions for the partition of Palestine and attempted to block the incorporation of Palestine into his kingdom. In recognition that the territory would either be controlled by the Zionists or divided amongst the various Arab regimes, a pan-Arab war was waged against the fledgling state of Israel in May 1948. In Karsh's assessment, 'this amounted to a "scramble for Palestine" in the classic imperialist tradition ...for the simple reason that none of the region's Arab regimes viewed Palestine as a distinct entity and most of them had their own designs on this territory' (p. 139).

After independence, and amid increasing terrorism from secular nationalist and Marxist organisations, including Fattah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, successive Israeli governments ignored the danger posed by the Islamists of Hamas in the hope that they would pull support from the other radical groups. This proved disastrous. As Hamas' militancy earned it increased support during the First Intifada of the 1980s, the organisation's grip in the Occupied Territories deepened due to the corruption of the Palestinian Authority. However, the nature of Hamas is often misunderstood. Unlike the Palestine Liberation Organisation, Hamas is neither the embodiment of pan-Arab aspirations nor of Palestinian self-determination. It is not a political movement for national liberation that contains an armed wing. Hamas has articulated the far broader goal of establishing a global Islamist empire. This is in line with its ideological parent organisation, 'which viewed its violent opposition to Zionism from the 1930s and 1940s as an integral part of the Manichean struggle for the creation of a worldwide caliphate rather than the defence of the Palestinian Arabs' national rights' (p. 213-14). According to Karsh, for Hamas, the issue of Palestine is 'neither an ordinary territorial dispute between two national movements nor a struggle by an indigenous population against a foreign occupier. It is a holy war by the worldwide Islamic umma to present the loss of a part of the House of Islam to the infidels' (p. 214).

Beyond its historical merits, this latest work is a solid and studious refutation of the commonly held notion that the rise of Islamism is an historical reaction to European imperialism or that U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East led to the terrorist attacks in New York City on September 11, 2001. As Karsh writes, 'Arab and Muslim anti-Americanism, have little to do with U.S. international behaviour or its Middle Eastern policy. America's position as the pre-eminent world power blocks Arab and Islamic imperialist aspirations. As such, it is a natural target for aggression. Osama bin Laden's ... war is not against America per se, but is rather the

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most recent manifestation of the millenarian jihad for a universal Islamic empire (or umma)' (p. 234).

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