

The Missing Piece: Islamic Imperialism

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In discussions of the modern Middle East, the notions of ‘empire’, ‘imperialism’, and ‘colonialism’ are categories that apply exclusively to the European powers and, more recently, to the United States. In this view of things, the Middle East is merely an object—the long-suffering victim of the aggressive encroachments of others. Lacking an internal, autonomous dynamic of its own, its history is rather a function of its unhappy interaction with the West. Some date this interaction back to the crusades. Others consider it a corollary of the steep rise in Western imperial power and expansionism during the long nineteenth century (1789–1923). All agree that Western imperialism bears the main responsibility for the endemic malaise plaguing the Middle East to date, as implied by the title of a recent book by a veteran observer of the region: *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Muslim Response*.¹

In fact, it is the Middle East where the institution of empire not only originated (for example, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Iran, and so on) but where its spirit has also outlived its European counterpart. From the prophet Muhammad to the Ottomans, the story of Islam has been the story of the rise and the fall of an often astonishing imperial aggressiveness and, no less important, of never quiescent imperial dreams. Politics during this lengthy period was characterized by a constant struggle for regional, if not world, mastery in which the dominant power sought to subdue, and preferably to eliminate, all potential challengers. Such imperialist ambitions often remained largely unsatisfied, for the determined pursuit of absolutism was matched both by the equally formidable forces of fragmentation and degeneration and by powerful external rivals. This wide gap between delusions of grandeur and the centrifugal forces of parochialism and local nationalisms gained rapid momentum during the last phases of the Ottoman Empire, culminating in its disastrous decision to enter World War I on the losing side, as well as in the creation

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of an imperialist dream that would survive the Ottoman era to haunt Islamic and Middle Eastern politics to the present day.

It is true that this pattern of historical development is not uniquely Middle Eastern or Islamic. Other parts of the world, Europe in particular, have had their share of imperial powers and imperialist expansion, and Christianity's universal vision is no less sweeping than that of Islam. The worlds of Christianity and Islam, however, have developed differently in one fundamental respect. The Christian faith won over an existing empire in an extremely slow and painful process and its universalism was originally conceived in purely spiritual terms that made a clear distinction between God and Caesar. By the time it was embraced by the Byzantine emperors as a tool for buttressing their imperial claims, three centuries after its foundation, Christianity had in place a countervailing ecclesiastical institution with an abiding authority over the wills and actions of all believers. The birth of Islam, by contrast, was inextricably linked with the creation of a world empire and its universalism was inherently imperialist. It did not distinguish between temporal and religious powers, which were combined in the person of Muhammad, who derived his authority directly from Allah and acted at one and the same time as head of the state and head of the church. This allowed the prophet to cloak his political ambitions with a religious aura and to channel Islam's energies into 'its instrument of aggressive expansion, there [being] no internal organism of equal force to counterbalance it'.²

'I was ordered to fight all men until they say, "There is no god but Allah".'³ With these farewell words, the prophet Muhammad summed up the international vision of the faith he brought to the world. As a universal religion, Islam envisages a global political order in which all humankind will live under Muslim rule as either believers or subject communities. In order to achieve this goal, it is incumbent on all free, male, adult Muslims to carry out an uncompromising 'struggle in the path of Allah', or jihad. As the fourteenth-century historian and philosopher Abdel Rahman ibn Khaldun wrote, 'In the Muslim community, the jihad is a religious duty because of the universalism of the Islamic mission and the obligation [to convert] everybody to Islam either by persuasion or by force'.⁴

Having fled from his hometown of Mecca to Medina in 622 CE to become a political and military leader rather than a private preacher, Muhammad spent the last ten years of his life fighting to unify Arabia under his rule. Indeed, he devised the concept of jihad shortly after his migration to Medina as a means of enticing his local followers to raid Meccan caravans. Had it not been for his sudden death, he probably would have expanded his reign well beyond the peninsula.

The Qur'anic revelations during Muhammad's Medina years abound with verses extolling the virtues of jihad, as do the countless sayings and traditions (*hadith*) attributed to the prophet. Those who participate in this

holy pursuit are to be generously rewarded, both in this life and in the afterworld, where they will reside in shaded and ever-green gardens, indulged by pure women. Accordingly, those killed while waging jihad should not be mourned: 'Allah has bought from the believers their soul and their possessions against the gift of Paradise; they fight in the path of Allah; they kill and are killed. ... So rejoice in the bargain you have made with Him; that is the mighty triumph.'⁵

But the doctrine's appeal was not just otherworldly. By forbidding fighting and raiding within the community of believers (the *umma*), Muhammad had deprived the Arabian tribes of a traditional source of livelihood. For a time, the prophet could rely on booty from non-Muslims as a substitute for the lost war spoils, which is why he never went out of his way to convert all of the tribes seeking a place in his Pax Islamica. Yet given his belief in the supremacy of Islam and his relentless commitment to its widest possible dissemination, he could hardly deny conversion to those wishing to undertake it. Once the whole of Arabia had become Muslim, a new source of wealth and an alternative outlet would have to be found for the aggressive energies of the Arabian tribes, and it was, in the Fertile Crescent and the Levant.

Within twelve years of Muhammad's death, a Middle Eastern empire, stretching from Iran to Egypt and from Yemen to northern Syria, had come into being under the banner of Islam. By the early eighth century, the Muslims had hugely extended their grip to Central Asia and much of the Indian subcontinent, had laid siege to the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, and had overrun North Africa and Spain. Had they not been contained in 732 at the famous battle of Poitiers in west-central France, they might well have swept deep into northern Europe.

Though sectarianism and civil war divided the Muslim world in the generations after Muhammad, the basic dynamic of Islam remained expansionist. The short-lived Umayyad dynasty (661–750 CE) gave way to the ostensibly more pious Abbasid caliphs, whose readiness to accept non-Arabs solidified Islam's hold on its far-flung possessions. From their imperial capital of Baghdad, the Abbasids ruled, with waning authority, until the Mongol invasion of 1258. The most powerful of their successors would emerge in Anatolia, among the Ottoman Turks who invaded Europe in the mid-fourteenth century and would conquer Constantinople in 1453, destroying the Byzantine Empire and laying claim to virtually all of the Balkan Peninsula and the eastern Mediterranean.

Like their Arab predecessors, the Ottomans were energetic empire-builders in the name of jihad. By the early sixteenth century, they had conquered Syria and Egypt from the Mamluks, the formidable slave soldiers who had contained the Mongols and destroyed the Crusader kingdoms. By the middle of the seventeenth century they seemed poised to overrun Christian Europe, only to be turned back in fierce fighting at the

gates of Vienna in 1683—on 11 September, of all dates. Though already on the defensive by the early eighteenth century, the Ottoman Empire—the proverbial ‘sick man of Europe’—would endure another 200 years. Its demise at the hands of the victorious European powers of World War I, to say nothing of the work of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the father of modern Turkish nationalism, finally brought an end both to the Ottoman caliphate itself and to Islam’s centuries-long imperial reach.

To Islamic historians, the chronicles of Muslim empire represent a model of shining religious zeal and selfless exertion in the cause of Allah. Many Western historians, for their part, have been inclined to marvel at the perceived sophistication and tolerance of Islamic rule, praising the caliphs’ cultivation of the arts and sciences and their apparent willingness to accommodate ethnic and religious minorities. There is some truth in both views, but neither captures the deeper and often more callous impulses at work in the expanding *umma* set in motion by Muhammad. For successive generations of Islamic rulers, imperial dominion was dictated not by universalistic religious principles but by their prophet’s vision of conquest and his summons to fight and subjugate unbelievers.

That the worldly aims of Islam might conflict with its moral and spiritual demands was evident from the start of the caliphate. Though the Umayyad monarchs portrayed their constant wars of expansion as ‘jihad in the path of Allah’, this was largely a façade, concealing an increasingly secular and absolutist rule. Lax in their attitude toward Islamic practices and mores, they were said to have set aside special days for drinking alcohol—specifically forbidden by the prophet—and showed little inhibition about appearing nude before their boon companions and female singers.

The coup staged by the Abbasids in 747–749 CE was intended to restore Islam’s true ways and undo the godless practices of their predecessors; but they too, like the Umayyads, were first and foremost imperial monarchs. For the Abbasids, Islam was a means to consolidating their jurisdiction and enjoying the fruits of conquest. They complied with the stipulations of the nascent religious law (*shari’a*) only to the extent that it served their needs, and indulged in the same vices—wine, singing girls, and sexual license—that had ruined the reputation of the Umayyads.

Of particular importance to the Abbasids was material splendour. On the occasion of his nephew’s coronation as the first Abbasid caliph, Dawud ibn Ali had proclaimed, ‘We did not rebel in order to grow rich in silver and in gold.’⁶ Yet it was precisely the ever-increasing pomp of the royal court that would underpin Abbasid prestige. The gem-studded dishes of the caliph’s table, the gilded curtains of the palace, the golden tree and ruby-eyed golden elephant that adorned the royal courtyard were a few of the opulent possessions that bore witness to this extravagance.

The riches of the empire, moreover, were concentrated in the hands of the few at the expense of the many. Although the caliph might bestow thousands of dirhams on a favourite poet for reciting a few lines, ordinary labourers in Baghdad carried home a dirham or two a month. As for the empire's more distant subjects, the caliphs showed little interest in their conversion to the faith, preferring instead to colonize their lands and expropriate their wealth and labour. Not until the third Islamic century did the bulk of these populations embrace the religion of their imperial masters, and this was a process emanating from below—an effort by non-Arabs to escape paying tribute and to remove social barriers to their advancement. To make matters worse, the metropolis plundered the resources of the provinces, a practice inaugurated at the time of Muhammad and reaching its apogee under the Abbasids. Combined with the government's weakening control of the periphery, this shameless exploitation triggered numerous rebellions throughout the empire.

Tension between the centre and the periphery was, indeed, to become the hallmark of Islam's imperial experience. Even in its early days, under the Umayyads, the empire was hopelessly overextended, largely because of inadequate means of communication and control. Under the Abbasids, a growing number of provinces fell under the sway of local dynasties. With no effective metropolis, the empire was reduced to an agglomeration of entities united only by the overarching factors of language and religion. Though the Ottomans temporarily reversed the trend, their own imperial ambitions were likewise eventually thwarted by internal fragmentation.

In the long history of Islamic empire, the wide gap between delusions of grandeur and the centrifugal forces of localism would be bridged time and again by force of arms, making violence a key element of Islamic political culture. No sooner had Muhammad died than his successor, Abu Bakr, had to suppress a widespread revolt among the Arabian tribes. Twenty-three years later, the head of the *umma*, the caliph Uthman ibn Affan, was murdered by disgruntled rebels; his successor, Ali ibn Abi Talib, was confronted for most of his reign with armed insurrections, most notably by the governor of Syria, Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufian, who went on to establish the Umayyad dynasty after Ali's assassination. Mu'awiya's successors managed to hang on to power mainly by relying on physical force, and were consumed for most of their reign with preventing or quelling revolts in the diverse corners of their empire. The same was true for the Abbasids during the long centuries of their sovereignty.

Western academics often hold up the Ottoman Empire as an exception to this earlier pattern. In fact the Ottomans did deal relatively gently with their vast non-Muslim subject populations—provided that they acquiesced in their legal and institutional inferiority in the Islamic order of things. When these groups dared to question their subordinate status, however, let alone attempt to break free from the Ottoman yoke, they were viciously

put down. In the century or so between Napoleon's conquests in the Middle East and World War I, the Ottomans embarked on an orgy of bloodletting in response to the nationalist aspirations of their European subjects. The Greek war of independence of the 1820s, the Danubian uprisings of 1848 and the attendant Crimean war, the Balkan explosion of the 1870s, the Greco-Ottoman war of 1897—all were painful reminders of the costs of resisting Islamic imperial rule.

Nor was such violence confined to Ottoman Europe. Turkey's Afro-Asiatic provinces, though far less infected with the nationalist virus, were also scenes of mayhem and destruction. The Ottoman army or its surrogates brought force to bear against Wahhabi uprisings in Mesopotamia and the Levant in the early nineteenth century, against civil strife in Lebanon in the 1840s (culminating in the 1860 massacres in Mount Lebanon and Damascus), and against a string of Kurdish rebellions. In response to the national awakening of the Armenians in the 1890s, Constantinople killed tens of thousands—a taste of the horrors that lay ahead for the Armenians during World War I.

The legacy of this imperial experience is not difficult to discern in today's Islamic world. Physical force has remained the main if not the sole instrument of political discourse in the Middle East. Throughout the region, absolute leaders still supersede political institutions, and citizenship is largely synonymous with submission; power is often concentrated in the hands of small, oppressive minorities; religious, ethnic, and tribal conflicts abound; and the overriding preoccupation of sovereigns is with their own survival.

At the domestic level, these circumstances have resulted in the world's most illiberal polities. Political dissent is dealt with by repression, and ethnic and religious differences are settled by internecine strife and murder. One need only mention, among many instances, Syria's massacre of 20,000 of its Muslim activists in the early 1980s, or the brutal treatment of Iraq's Shiite and Kurdish communities until the 2003 war, or the genocidal campaign now being conducted in Darfur by the government of Sudan and its allied militias. As for foreign policy in the Middle East, it too has been pursued by means of crude force, ranging from terrorism and subversion to outright aggression, with examples too numerous and familiar to cite.

Just as Christendom was slower than Islam in marrying religious universalism with political imperialism, so it was faster in shedding both notions. By the eighteenth century the West had lost its religious messianism. Apart from in the Third Reich, it had lost its imperial ambitions by the mid-twentieth century.⁷ Islam has retained its imperialist ambition to this day.

The last great Muslim empire may have been destroyed and the caliphate left vacant, but the dream of regional and world domination has remained very much alive. The eminent Dutch historian Johannes Kramers

(d. 1951) once commented that in medieval Islam there were never real states but only empires more or less extensive, and that the only political unity was the ideological but powerful concept of the House of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*), the common ‘homeland’ of all Muslims.⁸ This observation can also be applied to the post-World War I era, where the two contending doctrines of pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism have sought to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire by advocating the substitution of a unified regional order for the contemporary Middle Eastern system based on territorial states. Yet although pan-Islamism views this development as a prelude to the creation of a Muslim-dominated world order, pan-Arabists content themselves with a more ‘modest’ empire comprising the entire Middle East or most of it (the associated ideology of Greater Syria, or *Surya al-Kubra*, for example, stresses the territorial and historical indivisibility of most of the Fertile Crescent).

The empires of the European powers of old were by and large overseas entities that drew a clear dividing line between master and subject.⁹ The Islamic empires, by contrast, were land-based systems in which the distinction between the ruling and the ruled classes became increasingly blurred through extensive colonization and assimilation. With the demise of the European empires, there was a clear break with the past. Formerly subject peoples developed their distinct brands of state nationalism, whether Indian, Pakistani, Nigerian, Argentinean, and so on. Conversely, the Arabic-speaking populations of the Middle East were indoctrinated for most of the twentieth century to consider themselves members of ‘One Arab Nation’ or a universal ‘Islamic *umma*’ rather than patriots of their specific nation-states.

The term ‘Arab Nationalism’ (*qawmiya*) is a misnomer. It does not represent a genuine national movement or ideal but is rather a euphemism for raw imperialism. There had been no sense of ‘Arabism’ among the Arabic-speaking populations of the Middle East prior to the 1920s and 1930s, when Arabs began to be inculcated with the notion that they constituted one nation. They viewed themselves as subjects of the Ottoman sultan-caliph, in his capacity as the religious and temporal head of the worldwide Muslim community, ignored the nationalistic message of the tiny secret Arab societies, and fought to the bitter end for their suzerain during World War I.

If a nation is a group of people sharing such attributes as common descent, language, culture, tradition, and history, then nationalism is the desire of such a group for self-determination in a specific territory that they consider to be their patrimony. The only common denominators among the widely diverse Arabic-speaking populations of the Middle East—the broad sharing of language and religion—are consequences of the early Islamic imperial epoch. But these common factors have generated no general sense of Arab solidarity, not to speak of deeply rooted sentiments of shared

history, destiny, or attachment to an ancestral homeland. Even under universal Islamic empires from the Umayyad to the Ottoman, the Middle East's Arabic-speaking populations did not unify or come to regard themselves as a single nation: the various kingdoms and empires competed for regional mastery or developed in parallel with other cultures formally under the same imperial aegis. In the words of the American scholar Hisham Sharabi, 'The Arab world has not constituted a single political entity since the brief period of Islam's expansion and consolidation into a Muslim empire during the seventh and eighth centuries.'¹⁰

This makes the ostensibly secular doctrine of pan-Arabism effectively Islamic in its ethos, worldview, and (albeit more limited) imperialist vision. So much so that the avowedly secularist Ba'th Party introduced religious provisions into the Syrian and Iraqi constitutions, notably that the head of state should be a Muslim. For their part the Ba'thist Syrian and Iraqi presidents, Hafiz Assad (1970–2000) and Saddam Hussein (1979–2003), went out of their way to brandish their religious credentials, among other things by inscribing the battle cry of Islam, 'Allahu Akbar', on the Iraqi flag. As Nuri Said (d. 1958), long-time prime minister of Iraq and a prominent early champion of the pan-Arab doctrine, put it: 'Although Arabs are naturally attached to their native land, their nationalism is not confined by boundaries. It is an aspiration to restore the great tolerant civilization of the early caliphate.'¹¹

Likewise Arabic, like other imperial languages such as English, Spanish, and French, has been widely assimilated by former subject populations who had little else in common. As T.E. Lawrence ('Lawrence of Arabia'), perhaps the most influential Western champion of the pan-Arab cause during the twentieth century, admitted in his later years: 'Arab unity is a madman's notion—for this century or next, probably. English-speaking unity is a fair parallel.'¹²

Neither did the Arabic-speaking provinces of the Ottoman Empire undergo a process of secularization similar to that which triggered the development of modern Western nationalism in the late eighteenth century. When the old European empires collapsed a century and a half later, after World War I, individual nation-states were able to step into the breach. By contrast, when the Ottoman Empire fell, its components still thought only in the old binary terms—on the one hand, the intricate webs of local loyalties to clan, tribe, village, town, religious sect, or ethnic minority; and, on the other, submission to the distant Ottoman sultan-caliph in his capacity as the temporal and religious head of the world Muslim community, a post that now stood empty.

Into this welter of parochial allegiances stepped ambitious leaders hoping to create new regional empires out of the diverse, fragmented tribes of the Arabic-speaking world, and wielding new Western rhetoric about 'Arab nationalism'. The problem with this state of affairs was that the

extreme diversity and fragmentation of the Arabic-speaking world had made its disparate societies more disposed to local patriotism than to a unified regional order. But rather than allow this disposition to run its natural course and develop into modern-day state nationalism, Arab rulers and Islamist ideologues systematically convinced their peoples to think that the independent existence of their respective states was a temporary aberration that would be rectified in the short term.

The result has been a violent dissonance that has haunted the Middle East and the Islamic world into the twenty-first century, between the reality of state nationalism and the dream of an empire packaged as a unified 'Arab nation' or the worldwide 'Islamic *umma*'.

NOTES

1. Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Muslim Responses*, New York, 2001. Written a few years before 9/11 but published in its immediate wake, the book failed to anticipate the attacks, or for that matter any anti-Western terror offensive, yet somehow came to be seen as explaining the general social and cultural background of this momentous event. Lewis amplified this reactive perception of Middle Eastern history in a later article: 'Freedom and Justice in the Modern Middle East', *Foreign Affairs* (May–June 2005), pp. 36–51. For this standard version see also: George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, London, 1938; Arnold Toynbee, 'The Present Situation in Palestine', *International Affairs* (January 1931), p. 40; George Kirk, *A Short History of the Middle East: From the Rise of Islam to Modern Times*, New York, 1963, chapter 5; Roger Owen, *State, Power, and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, London, 1992, especially chapters 1, 4; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London, 1995.
2. Hamilton A.R. Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, London, 1962, pp. 38–39.
3. Muhammad ibn Umar al-Waqidi, *Kitab al-Maghazi*, London, 1966, Vol. 3, p. 1113.
4. Abdel Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-Ibar wa-Diwan al-Mubtada wa-l-Khabar*, Beirut, 1961, Vol. 1, p. 408.
5. Sura 9.111. See also sura 2.154, 195, 218; 3.157–3.158, 169; 4.56–4.57, 74–77, 94–95; 8.72; 9.14, 36, 68, 72–73, 83–84, 88–89; 19.72–19.74.
6. Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-Rusul wa-l-Muluk*, Cairo, 1966, Vol. 7, p. 426.
7. From the reign of Peter the Great (1672–1725) to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Russia considered itself a European great power and played a key role in Europe's interactions with the Ottoman Empire. During the communist era (1917–1991), especially the Cold War years, the Soviet Union was removed from the West by an unbridgeable ideological opposition and hence is not treated here as part of 'Western imperialism'.
8. Gibb, *Studies*, p. 22.
9. The only partial exceptions to this rule were the Russian and the Austro-Hungarian empires.
10. Hisham Sharabi, *Nationalism and Revolution in the Arab World*, New York, 1966, p. 7.
11. General Nuri Said, *Arab Independence and Unity: A Note on the Arab Cause with Particular Reference to Palestine, and Suggestions for a Permanent Settlement to which are attached Texts of all the Relevant Documents*, Baghdad, 1943, p. 8.
12. T.E. Laurence to His Biographers Robert Graves and Liddell Hart, London, 1963, p. 101.