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ISLAMIC IMPERIALISM: A HISTORY

by Efraim Karsh

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Reviewed by SADANAND DHUME

TWO EXPLANATIONS FOR Muslim violence have emerged since Sept. 11. The first, identified most closely with the Princeton historian Bernard Lewis, traces it to Islam's decline and its consequent eclipse by the West, to the rage of a once great people who now lag in virtually every sphere of human achievement. The other, popular both in Western academe and the Muslim world, places the blame on Western governments and their policies. The problem, we are told, lies less with Osama bin Laden, the Taliban and al Qaeda than with the United States, the United Kingdom and, of course, Israel. Or, to collapse them into a familiar bogeyman, with Western imperialism.

Efraim Karsh, a historian at King's College in London, makes a compelling case for a third option. Abandoning the shopworn narrative of European aggressors and Muslim victims, he points out that Islam itself is no stranger to the imperialist impulse. From its inception, the faith was as much a political project as a spiritual one, an effort not to create a Kingdom of God, but to use God's name to build an earthly kingdom.

"I was ordered to fight all men until they say, 'There is no God but Allah,'" declared the prophet Muhammad in his farewell address to his followers. As if on cue, within 100 years of the prophet's death in 632 A.D., Muslim armies had subdued the Persian

Sassanids, wrested Egypt and Syria from the Byzantines, overrun North Africa and Spain and planted their banner in India. They would go on to capture Constantinople and, over the course of centuries, lay repeated siege to Vienna.

Traditionally, Islam recognizes no national boundaries. Over 13 centuries, until Kemal Ataturk's formal dissolution of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, most Muslims lived—in theory if not usually in practice—as a community of believers, the *ummah*, united under a spiritual and political leader. If bin Laden's communiqués and the popularity of pan-Islamic organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizbut Tahrir are anything to go by, then this idea retains a powerful grip on the Muslim imagination.

Moreover, in contrast to postnational and secular Europe, where the imperial past is often as much an embarrassment as a source of pride, Muslims see little to apologize for. As Mr. Karsh points out: "To this day many Arabs and Muslims unabashedly pine for the restoration of Spain and consider their 1492 expulsion from the country a grave historical injustice, as if they were Spain's rightful owners."

Though Mr. Karsh trawls through 1,300 years of Middle Eastern history to make his point, it is the chapters on the relatively recent past that carry the most urgency. He traces the ancient quest for global dominance to the influential ideas of the last century's three leading Islamists: Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian literary critic and Muslim Brotherhood ideologue, the Pakistani Abul Ala Maududi, founder of the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami, and their Shia contemporary, Ayatollah Khomeini.

Qutb famously equated democracy—rule by man's law rather than God's—with *jahili-*

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yya, the term used by Muslims to describe the morally bankrupt state of pre-Islamic Arabia. Maududi, one of the few non-Arabs widely read in the Arab world, detailed the universal Islamist state where “every sphere of activity is coexistent with the whole of human life.” Iran’s Khomeini inspired an entire generation by upgrading Islamism—albeit a Shia variant privileging clerics—from theory to practice. The ideological imprint of one or more of this troika lives on in every Islamist movement in the world, from Hamas and Hezbollah in the Middle East, to al Qaeda’s loosely knit global franchise, to the largely nonviolent yet equally uncompromising cadres of the Jamaat in Pakistan and the Justice and Prosperity Party in Indonesia.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Karsh’s analysis throws up intriguing implications for policy makers. If Islam’s bloody borders have less to do with specific political demands than with a larger failure to bury the imperial impulse, then the prospect of taming Islamists through purely political means appears dim.

For Islamists, traditional concessions of land or political autonomy are as likely to be seen as signs of weakness as of goodwill. Democracy is merely a means to an end—Shariah as the basis for both state and society—rather than an end in itself. Modern notions of women’s rights, freedom of conscience and the equality of all faiths before the law go against the grain of Islamist belief and practice. Against this backdrop, the so-called pothole theory of democracy, which maintains that power will moderate Islamists, ignores the reality that for many the only potholes worth fixing are those on the path to heaven.

On the face of it, this leaves few easy options for Asian governments battling Islam-tinged insurgencies in Kashmir, Mindanao and southern Thailand; and fewer still for Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia and Pakistan that, fearing a backlash

from their own citizens, have done little to combat Islamism. Ruling elites in both Pakistan and Indonesia have attempted to fob off their Islamists with an ever-expanding list of concessions—a ban on alcohol here, scrapping the state lottery there, turning a blind eye to mob violence against non-Muslims, and the persecution of those, such as the Ahmadis, deemed heretical.

In both countries Islamists have only used the space ceded by secularists to expand their influence. They emphasize education, propaganda, and proselytization, secure in the knowledge that a fundamentalist population is the surest route to a fundamentalist state. A similar process has been underway in Malaysia, though disguised from the casual visitor by a large and prosperous Chinese minority.

Yet, bleak though the outlook appears, the battle is far from over. In a far-reaching rhetorical shift, over the past year both George W. Bush and Tony Blair have taken to describing the threat as an ideology and not merely a tactic. The “war on terror” was akin to the war on drugs, essentially a law and order approach to the problem. The “war on Islamofascism” brings to mind the struggle against communism.

This emphasis on ideas rather than tactics is welcome. But for it to mean anything it must be accompanied by a stepped-up effort to identify and support genuine Muslim moderates, those who see Islamists as agents of retardation not progress. The soft bigotry that judges Muslims by lower standards when it comes to the rights of women and minorities must also end. The ultimate goal should be to foster conditions where Muslims enjoy the spirit of free inquiry and skepticism about faith that is taken for granted in advanced societies—an intellectual and moral climate where burning down an embassy over a cartoon is unthinkable. Only then will Islam, like Europe and Japan before it, finally put its imperialist demons to rest.