

Title—Islamic Imperialism: A History

Author—Efraim Karsh

Year—2006

Categories: Islam, Religion, Imperialism, Politics

Place: The World

Time: 500-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Karsh's book aims to demonstrate the deep-seated, virtually irrepressible expansionist impulse of Islam that have existed since the genesis of the religion. He argues that the tension between the center and the periphery is the hallmark of Islam's imperial experience. From its beginning, the story of Islam has been the story of the rise and the fall of universal empires. In his words: "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 to date." (6) Unlike Christianity, Islam did not distinguish between religious and temporal powers—both were combined in the person of Muhammad. Overall, Karsh attempts to prove that imperialism is baked into the ideology of Islam and continues to inform the political culture of Islam around the world.

Karsh highlights how Islamic rhetoric has a millennial warrant and taps into a deep imperialist undercurrent that has characterized the political culture of Islam from the beginning. The birth of Islam was inextricably linked with the creation of a world empire and its universalism was inherently imperialist. The link between politics, religion, and society is very active in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Karsh underscores the violent dissonance in the modern Middle East between the reality of state nationalism and the dream of an empire packaged as a unified 'Arab nation' or worldwide 'Islamic umma.' However, there is no general sense of Arab solidarity—the consequences of the early Islamic epoch have ensured that there is not, and never has been, an 'Arab nation.'

Karsh argues that from its birth Muslim leaders have been avowedly imperialist, however they tend to be driven more by personal ambitions and self-aggrandizement rather than any deep-seated religious commitment. One of Karsh's overarching claims is that the Arab-Muslim world is just as imperial as the West. He urges that the imperialist vision should not be misconstrued as a civilizational struggle between the worlds of Islam and Christendom. Karsh discusses the prevalent doctrine of a 'clash of civilizations' that has dominated rhetoric around Islam and the West. He posits that the millenarian confrontation between the worlds of Islam and Christendom has been a clash of imperialisms more so than a clash of civilizations. Expanding on this, Karsh claims that if America is reviled in the Muslim world it is not because of specific policies, but rather because of the US's position as the preeminent world power—America blocks the final realization of the dream of regaining the lost glory of the caliphate. He argues that Al Qaeda simply represents the latest in a long line of Muslim groups seeking world domination.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The reluctance within the Middle East and the Muslim world to recognize the reality of state nationalism
- From its birth, Muslim leaders have sought nothing less than world domination
- There is not, and never has been, an Arab nation: its invocation has largely represented a clever ploy to rally popular support behind individual quests for regional mastery