

The Western Encounter with Islam

by Jeremy Black

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Using historical evidence to provide rapid support for policy advice is all too easy in a crisis, yet it is valuable to offer a historical resonance to current problems. This has certainly been the case over the last two years, which have seen a flood of histories of terrorism, Afghanistan, Iraq, and relations between Islam and the West. Some of the work has been of high quality, but much has been superficial and plagued by serious analytical problems, as commercial opportunity plays a major role.

One of the most important problems relates to the need to distinguish between long-term perceptions of Islamic power and more short-term (but still pressing) developments. In particular, there has been a tendency to exaggerate the centrality of relations with the Western world in Islamic history and to focus too narrowly on conflict in these relations. This is at the expense of three different themes: first, the need for Islam to confront other societies; second, the importance of divisions within the Islamic world itself (with the equivalent obviously being true for the Western world); and, third, the variety of links between Islam and the West. The last point can be related, more generally, to modern revisionism on the multiple nature of Western imperialism.

Islam's Interfaces

Throughout its history, Islam has interacted not only with Christendom but also with other cultural areas. The West's primary concern with the relationship between Christendom and Islam appears to be underlined by the traditional world map, with its depiction of an Islamic world stretching into the Balkans and the Western Mediterranean. However, if the conventional map—an equal-area cartogram—is replaced by an equal-population cartogram, then

a very different perception of Islam emerges. It becomes a religion not primarily of the Arab world but of South Asia: Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, and Iran. In some respects there is a parallel with Christendom, which is now more prominent in the Americas and (increasingly) Africa than in Europe.

The range of Islam in South Asia reflected the extent to which the Muslim advance helped to mold the modern world. It was a cultural as much as a military advance, and, in that, can be compared to Classical Rome's conquest of much (but by no means all) of its empire. Some Muslim lands would pass under non-Muslim control, especially under that of European colonial rulers from the mid-nineteenth century, but Islamization was reversed in only a relatively few areas, principally Iberia, Sicily, Israel, and the Volga valley. Instead, as the post-Soviet history of Central Asia from the 1990s indicates, the extent of control won by the Arabs in the seventh and eighth centuries established an important and lasting cultural realm.

Reconceptualizing the geography of Islam permits us to focus on different challenges than those presented by Christianity. In particular, the clash between Islam and Hinduism proved a major aspect of political tension in South Asia, and more pronouncedly so after the end of British imperial rule in 1947. Thus, Kashmir is a major fault-line for many Muslims, and there is considerable concern about increasing Hindu militancy in India after the difficulties the Congress Party that ruled for half a century encountered in maintaining a secular approach. (The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in 1996, and now leads the National Democratic Alliance that has ruled since 1999.)

In parts of Central Asia, the challenge to Islam historically came as much from Chinese as from Russian expansion. In 751, near Atlatk on the Talas River near Lake Balkhash, an Arab army defeated the Chinese, helping to ensure that the expansion of the Tang dynasty into western Turkestan was halted and, instead, driving forward a process of Islamicization in Central Asia. This was contested by the expansion of Manchu China in 1755–57 into Xinjiang when the Dzhungar empire was overthrown. In addition, Manchu forces overran East Turkestan in 1758–59, capturing Kashgar in 1759. Tensions continue to this day in Xinjiang. Furthermore, like Christianity in Amazonia, for example, Islam competes with (and has to adapt to) tribal beliefs, particularly in Indonesia. The importance of the eastern world of Islam is such that areas of conflict with the West, at least in the shape of Christendom, include the Philippines and Timor.

The persistence of conflict with non-Christian peoples has been a prominent theme throughout much of Islamic history. It is all too easy to present the medieval period in terms of the Christian Crusades¹ and to suggest (as some Islamic polemicists have done) that modern Western

¹ Richard Fletcher, *The Cross and the Crescent: Christianity and Islam from Muhammad to the Reformation* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

pressures sit in this tradition. In fact, the Crusades were also directed against “heathens” (in Eastern Europe, for example Lithuanians), heretical Christians (such as Albigensians and Hussites), and opponents of the Papacy. In 2003, when Saddam Hussein wished to emphasize the idea of a terrible foreign threat to Baghdad, he referred not to earlier Christian attacks on Islam (including the British, who seized the city in both world wars) but to the Mongols. Indeed, when Baghdad fell in 1258, to a Mongol army under Hulegu, reputedly hundreds of thousands were slaughtered. The Mongols were far more important to the history of the thirteenth-century Islamic world than the Crusaders. Persia and Anatolia had already been overrun by the Mongols, and in 1260 Hulegu captured Damascus, as the Crusaders had failed to do in 1148. Thereafter, however, the Mongols were to be stopped in the Near East by the Islamic, Egyptian-based Mamluks.

The sweeping initial successes of the Mongols demonstrated another point that is important to bear in mind when considering military relations between Christendom and the West, namely, the danger of assuming that a Western model of warfare in the shape of Western forces (and, later, infantry focused on volley firepower) was dominant. In many respects, this is an anachronistic projection. South Asia provides a good example of this. The emphasis in Western works is on how Europeans sailed around Africa, arrived in Indian waters at the start of the sixteenth century, and then used infantry firepower to subjugate opponents (both Muslim and non-Muslim), with the British victory under Robert Clive over the Nawab of Bengal at Plassey in 1757 taking pride of place. The arrival of, first, the Portuguese, and then other Europeans, in the Indian Ocean and linked waters (especially the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf) indeed greatly expanded the extent of contact between Christendom and Islam, but the extent of the challenge should not be exaggerated. The Islamic world was able to mount a robust response: the Portuguese were repelled from the Red Sea and Aden in the early sixteenth century and driven from Muscat (1650) and Mombassa (1698) by the Omani Arabs. In India itself, assaults from across Afghanistan—particularly the Mughal conquest of the Sultanate of Delhi in the 1520s, the Persian invasion in the 1730s (at the expense of the Mughal empire) and that of the Afghans in the 1750s, culminating in the victory over the (Hindu) Marathas at the third battle of Panipat in 1761—were long more important than European moves to military history and political developments.

The third battle of Panipat looked back to a long series of conflicts between cavalry armies that had a crucial impact on the Islamic world: for example, the campaigns of Timur the Lame, which included the capture of Delhi (1398), Damascus (1401), and Baghdad (1401), and the defeat of the Ottoman Turks at Ankara (1402). This was a politics of force: Timur was brutal towards those who resisted, most vividly by erecting pyramids from the skulls of the slaughtered, possibly 70,000 when an uprising at Isfahan was suppressed in 1388. Again, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the

crucial fault-lines in the Islamic world divided the Ottomans from the Safavids of Persia and the latter from the Mughals of India. These struggles were more important than those with Christendom. Thus, the Safavids were more concerned about Ottomans, Mughals, and Uzbeks than they were about the Portuguese, who were driven from Hormuz in 1622. The Safavids finally succumbed, in 1722, to Afghan attack, not to the contemporaneous advance by Peter the Great of Russia. Even along the traditional frontier with Christendom, there was little sign of Islamic failure until the loss of Hungary to the Austrian Habsburgs in the 1680s and 1690s. Thus, the Portuguese challenge in Morocco was crushed at Alcazarquivir in 1578, and European pressure there did not become serious again until the French advanced in 1844 from their new base in Algeria.

The view of a historical clash of civilizations fails to account for the complexity of events and should be revised. It tells us more about rhetoric, past and present, than about the range of relationships that played a role in the Western encounter with Islam. Furthermore, relations between Europe and Islam are only part of the relations between Islam and the wider world. This is something that tends to be overlooked or underrated and is linked to the diversity of the Islamic world. Secondly, thinking of relationships largely in terms of the presence or absence of conflict is in some ways rather simplistic. The relations between any two cultures are along a continuum that encompasses conflict and the opposite. In the case of the latter, it is important not to underrate the extent of syncretism.

Conflict within the Islamic World

In every century of its history, more people have been killed in the Islamic world in conflicts among Islamic powers than in conflicts between Islam and the West. We tend to think that the major external problem has always been Western power. But from an extraordinarily early stage, Islam fractured between a large number of polities, some of which were linked to religious and/or ethnic divides. These divisions were much more important in many senses than what took place on the margins. To take the sixteenth century, most commentators looking at world history and talking about Islam might refer to the advance of the Ottoman Turks in Europe under Suleyman the Magnificent, ruler from 1520 to 1566. The Ottomans seized Belgrade in 1521, smashed the Hungarians at the battle of Mohacs in 1526, besieged Vienna in 1529, and attacked Malta in 1565 and Cyprus in 1570. There was also a dramatic battle at Lepanto in 1571. To look at the discussion of the sixteenth-century Islamic world in most Western or world civilization books in the United States or UK is to read about the Ottoman impact on Europe, but in fact the Ottomans spent much more of their time fighting non-Christian powers.

The usual map of Europe concentrates on Ottoman expansion, but a map focusing on the sweep of Eurasia provides other insights. There were two other very important areas for Ottoman expansion in the early sixteenth century: the first into Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Egypt, and the second eastward against Persia. Suleyman the Magnificent's father, Selim I (Selim the Grim), who ruled from 1512–20 and was one of the most successful military figures of the sixteenth century, overcame the Mamluk empire. He first conquered Syria and Palestine as a result of his victory at Marj Dabiq in 1516. His second victory, at al-Rayda in 1517, led to the conquest of Egypt. Earlier, in 1514, Selim had turned east against Persia, as the new dynasty there, the Safavids, were pressing on the power of the Ottoman Turks in Anatolia and challenging their influence. Selim won the battle of Chaldiran, a victory followed by the capture of the Safavids' capital, Tabriz. However, war is not about beating your opponent. In the sixteenth century as today, war is about enforcing your will on your opponent. While the Safavids were beaten in battle, they simply would not give in, but continued resisting. Thereafter, for most of the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century, conflict between the Ottomans and the Safavids was at a much higher, more intense, and more continual level than conflict on the European margin. In the 1530s, major operations by Suleyman the Magnificent led to the conquest of Iraq, which (particularly the major bases at Mosul and Baghdad) became, as it were, the frontline between these two rival empires. This rivalry continued into the early eighteenth century, when the Safavids and the Ottomans competed in the Caucasus. After the Safavid Empire collapsed in the 1720s, the successor regimes also competed with the Ottomans, right through into the nineteenth century: thus there were wars between the two powers in 1774–79 and in 1820–23.

This competition between Islamic states is just one example of a much wider process. The Safavid dynasty of Persia did not fall to a Western power. The Westerners had a presence in the region: there were Western commercial interests and military bases in the Persian Gulf area from the early sixteenth century on, and the Portuguese established bases at Hormuz and Muscat. However, there was no parallel to the way the Spaniards had brought down the Incas and the Aztecs in the New World in the early sixteenth century. Instead, in military terms, the European impact on the Asiatic world was minimal throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries. It was Afghan invaders who finally brought down the Safavids. Similarly, in the late-sixteenth century, the only major opponent of the Safavids, other than the Turks, were Uzbeks. Indeed, there was only one major military clash between the Portuguese and the Persians, when the Persians under Abbas I besieged and captured Hormuz in 1622. Abbas evidently had not read some of the literature on military revolution and did not know that European artillery forces were supposed to prevail with some sort of technological superiority over non-Europeans, because he captured it.

Similarly, Muscat, now the capital of Oman, had been a Portuguese commercial base from the beginning of the sixteenth century, but in 1650, the Sultan of Muscat took it, again a major artillery fortress falling to Muslim power, never to be regained by the Europeans. From Muscat, the Omani Arabs became an important naval force in this area, principally prevailing and operating against other Islamic powers. In short, for the majority of Muslim powers, fighting Europeans was of limited importance.

This is instructive because, until the beginning of the sixteenth century, the actual fault-line between Islam and the Christian West had been much more geographically limited than it was to become. In the twelfth through fifteenth centuries, that geographic fault-line was only a small part of the world. It essentially ran right through the Mediterranean, and, depending on the advance of the Ottoman Turks, through the Balkans, and then to the north of the Black Sea along the frontier between the Islamic khanates and the Grand Duchy of Muscovy. In the sixteenth century, the frontline, or the contact zone, between Christendom and Islam dramatically increased, with Europeans sailing around southern Africa and arriving in the Indian Ocean at the cusp of the sixteenth century: the first European ships showed up off Calicut in 1498. (Obviously, there were important developments offstage in the Americas, but only a minority of the world's population lived there; most people lived in Asia.)

As a result of the Europeans' arrival, suddenly there were many more contact zones between Islam and Christendom, including in India, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia, where there was a major Islamic sultanate at Aceh, in Sumatra. There were also contact zones in what we would call the Horn of Africa where, in support of the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia, the Portuguese fought the sultanate of Adal in the 1540s. In other words, compared to the Middle Ages, there was a far greater range of contact zones between Christendom and Islam across which all sorts of relationships occurred: sometimes conflicts, sometimes trade. We are still today in this period of contact between Islam and the West across the entire range, as opposed to only a portion, of Islamic activity.

Yet, even in the sixteenth century, the majority of conflicts involving Islamic peoples were among themselves, one of the crucial ones being between Persia and the Ottomans. Furthermore, to consider only external commitments, the Christians were only one of a number of external forces that had to be confronted. For example, for the early sixteenth century, it is a very Eurocentric view of the world that argues that the major expansion of Islam is the one that takes the Ottoman Turks a bit farther forward in the Balkans. After all, they had already advanced there in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; to go forward to Vienna was dramatic in terms of European history, but not crucial to the rest of the world.

In contrast, in South Asia, there was a major eruption of the Mughals into, first, northern India, where the Lodi Sultanate of Delhi, another Muslim

polity, was destroyed in 1526 at the First Battle of Panipat, and, second, down into areas of India that had been under the political dominance of Hindus. In many senses, that was a much more dramatic example of the bringing of non-Muslims under Muslim authority than developments in Europe. For Islam, India was one of the crucial contact zones, and, again, one that involved a wide range of relations. There were Europeans on the coast of India, but they did not worry the Mughals greatly, for they were simply delivering goods. The Europeans had a few fortified coastal positions by permission, such as Goa, the main Portuguese base. Every so often, the Mughals became irritated, as with the English East India Company in 1686, when Emperor Aurangzeb besieged Bombay, one of the major British settlements, and the East India Company sued for peace. The Mughals certainly were not reading out of some script that talked about the triumph of the West. By the 1680s, and even more so the 1690s, when Peter the Great captured Azov, Russian pressure was a major factor to the north of the Black Sea, but, farther south and east, there was no comparable challenge to Muslim powers from any Christian force.

To turn to the western end of the contact line between the Europeans and Islam, the Moors had penetrated up to just below the Loire, fighting (and losing) the Battle of Poitiers, in 732. Most of Spain below Cantabria had been Moorish from that period, and the Moors maintained a presence until they were pushed out of the kingdom of Granada in southern Spain in 1492. (They had essentially been confined to Granada from the late thirteenth century: Cordova had fallen to Castile in 1236, Seville in 1248, and Cadiz in 1262.) This sounds like an indication of Western dominance, but that was not true in the early modern period. Spain and Portugal had tried to expand Western power into northwest Africa, and with considerable success, capturing a whole series of bases along the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. It all went wrong in 1578, when King Sebastian of Portugal invaded Morocco. His army was destroyed by the Moroccans at Alcazarquivir, one of those many battles which, because they were not Western triumphs, tend to be ignored. The Portuguese army was crushed, the king killed, and Portuguese bases captured. No other European military force successfully operated in Morocco until 1844, when there was a French invasion from Algeria.

Far from it being the Moroccans' central concern to fight the Christians, in 1590, they set out to do something that in its own way was as dramatic and bold as the Europeans' sailing across the oceans. A Moroccan army crossed the Sahara (only about half of the 5,000 men sent across the desert survived), captured Timbuktu, and smashed the Songhay empire at the Battle of Tondibi, in 1591. They then set up a state based on Timbuktu. In 1684, Moroccan pressure also forced the English to abandon Tangier: English colonists and forces could defeat Native Americans and, eventually, the French in North America, but they could not hold Tangier against the Moroccans.

For the eighteenth and nineteenth century, it is possible to point to Christian advances, especially by the Russians in the Balkans and Central Asia, but it is necessary not to predate these. The Russians under Peter the Great took advantage of Persian weaknesses to establish a presence on the southwestern and southern shores of the Caspian, but, their garrisons badly affected by disease, they returned their gains to Persia in 1732 and 1735. Peter had also been defeated by the Ottomans at the Battle of the Pruth in 1711. In contrast, Nadir Shah, who came to power in Persia in 1729 by defeating the Afghans, was able to defeat the Ottomans in a long war and to campaign widely—from Khiva, captured in 1740, to Muscat and Daghestan to Delhi, which he took in 1739. The empire split apart after Nadir was assassinated in 1747 by Persian officers concerned about his favoring Afghans and Uzbeks.

If the French conquered Algeria from 1830, the Spaniards had failed at Algiers in 1775 and 1784. If the British conquered Egypt in 1882, they had failed there in 1807. In contrast, Egypt meanwhile was a dynamic power, expanding into Arabia, the Near East, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa. Mehmet Ali, Viceroy of Egypt from 1805 to 1848, organized an impressive military system that included a staff college, established in 1825, and the introduction of conscription in the 1820s, which enabled him to create an army 130,000 strong. A ministry of war was the first permanent department of state he instituted. In 1813, Mecca and Medina were retaken from the Wahhabis—an orthodox Muslim sect that energized much of Arabia—after the ambush of an Egyptian expedition launched in 1811. However, a fresh rebellion led to initial disaster for the Egyptians until, in 1814, the Wahhabi forces were defeated. In 1816, the Egyptians resumed the offensive into the deserts of Arabia and seized the Wahhabi strongholds, culminating with the capture of their capital, Dariyya, in 1818 after a six-month siege. The Wahhabis demonstrated their resilience, however, by their continued opposition, and, in 1824, they founded a second Saudi-Wahhabi state in the interior. This illustrated that the regular forces of settled societies could achieve only so much, prefiguring both Egypt's problems when it intervened in the civil war in Yemen in 1962–67 and the current problems in the Middle East.²

Egypt occupied Massawa and Suakin, to the south of Egypt on the Red Sea, in 1818 and Nubia (northern Sudan) in 1820. In Yemen, the Egyptians made major gains over the Asir tribes in 1833–38, and, when Mehmet Ali turned on his Ottoman overlord, he won major victories at Koniya in 1832 and Nezib in 1839. Egyptian forces also took Equatoria (southern Sudan) in 1871, and Darfur (western Sudan), and Harrar (later British Somaliland), both in 1874.

These dates indicate the brevity of the period of Western dominance and its relatively recent beginning: Aden was occupied by the British in 1839

²D. M. Witty, "A Regular Army in Counterinsurgency Operations: Egypt in North Yemen, 1962–1967," *Journal of Military History*, 65 (2001), pp. 401–39.

and abandoned in 1967; Egypt was conquered in 1882, but the last British military presence, in the Suez Canal Zone, ended in 1954; and Sudan was only conquered by the British in the late 1890s (the crucial battle being fought at Omdurman in 1898) and was granted independence in 1956. The continued importance of Ottoman-Persian rivalry into the nineteenth century also requires attention. In short, the notion of modernity as in some way coming in the early-sixteenth century, with a world dominated by the Western powers, in which their pressure on Islam is an aspect of their greater world presence, is inappropriate. It is true only in parts of the world. Just as European pressure only became acute for the Chinese in the nineteenth century, with the Opium War of 1839–42, so it is also for the Islamic world. The modern world in terms of international relations does not really begin until then, and, partly because of this, the attempt to internationalize Western norms of state sovereignty and intrastate conduct have only limited support elsewhere.

Thus, the political, as much as the religious, tensions *within* the Islamic world can be discussed as much more historically significant to Muslims themselves than the relatively recent Western ascendancy, providing both opportunities and problems for Western powers that wish to play an interventionist role. Even in the heyday of Western imperialism, this ascendancy had serious limits. In the interwar period, the British were able to suppress the Arab rising in Palestine, but ambitions and commitments in Persia, Egypt, and Iraq all had to be abandoned, while the French position in Syria and Lebanon rested in large part on force, surveillance, and an ability to respond to divisions among their population. In the post-colonial world, divisions between Islamic rulers have reasserted themselves and, in many respects, been as, or even more, important than Western power projection: the war over the last half-century in which the most Muslims died, the Iran-Iraq war of 1980–88, was waged between Muslim powers.

Linkages

Alongside rivalries between Islamic and Western powers, there have frequently been alliances across confessional divides, anticipating the present situation in which Muslims as well as Westerners are threatened by extremist Islamic terrorism and must cooperate against the challenge. Suleyman the Magnificent cooperated with the French against the Habsburgs in the 1530s, and, when the Portuguese were driven from Hormuz, Abbas I benefited from English cooperation. As imperialists, both the British in India and Nigeria and the Russians in Central Asia cooperated with some Muslim rulers and interests even as they fought others. This cooperation was vital not only to the process of conquest, but also in the subsequent stabilization of imperial rule, a situation that repeated earlier episodes of conquest.

This is part of a more general process by which linkages—political, economic, and cultural—coexisted with rivalry.³ There is no reason why this should cease, although the nature of many Islamic societies—with rapidly growing, youthful populations centered on volatile urban communities—poses particular problems.⁴ Past experience suggests the need for political engagement in responding to the challenges likely to arise.

Turkey is a good example of an authoritarian Islamic state that moved from political rivalry to cooperation. It refused to accept a peace settlement after World War I that included Greek rule over the Aegean coast and European troops in Constantinople. Under Kemal Ataturk, the Turks were able to impose their will after defeating the Greeks in 1922 and facing down the British the same year in the Chanak crisis. This, however, was the background to a long-term improvement in relations with the Western world, which also helped to contain continued Greek-Turkish animosity, albeit with both Armenians and Kurds understandably feeling dissatisfied.

Conclusion

Today, a robust and proactive approach to terrorism is necessary, but destroying bin Laden will only profit us so much if other radical, anti-Western Islamic organizations in turn arise and flourish. Simplistic claims of immutable cultural clashes do not help us. As a defining organizational principle in history, such claims rest on a structuralist account, presenting identity and power in terms of clear-cut blocks, a dated view that corresponds to the classic age of geopolitics and crucially underrates the role of agency. The history and the reality are far more complex, and, let it be said, more hopeful.

The call to understand the challenge is sometimes dismissed as a sign of weakness or even “going native.” But the alternative, attempting to enforce supposedly universal principles in situations wrenched out of context, is a naïve response to the complexity of international relations.



³ See, e.g., Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989).

⁴ Jeremy Black, *The World in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Longman, 2000).