

The Truth about Islamic Crusades and Imperialism By James Arlandson

Historical facts say that Islam has been imperialistic—and would still like to be, if only for religious reasons. Many Muslim clerics, scholars, and activists, for example, would like to impose Islamic law around the world. Historical facts say that Islam, including Muhammad, launched their own Crusades against Christianity long before the European Crusades.

Today, Muslim polemicists and missionaries, who believe that Islam is the best religion in the world, claim that the West has stolen Islamic lands and that the West (alone) is imperialistic. One hardline Muslim emailer to me said about the developed West and the undeveloped Islamic countries: 'You stole our lands' and then he held his finger on the exclamation key to produce a long string of them.

Thus imperialism, a word that has reached metaphysical levels and that is supposed to stop all debates and answer all questions, explains why Islamic countries have not kept up with the West. The emailer did not look inwardly, as if his own culture and religion may play a role. Instead, it is always the West's fault.

Westerners—even academics—accept the notion that the West alone was aggressive. It seems that Islam is always innocent and passive. It is difficult to uncover the source of this Western self-loathing. It is, however, a pathology that seems to strike Westerners more than other people around the globe. This anti-West pathology shows up in Westerners' hatred for the European Crusades in the Medieval Age.

It must be admitted that there is much to dislike about the European Crusades. If they are contrasted with the mission and ministry of Jesus and the first generations of Christians, then the Crusades do not look so good. But did the Europeans launch the first Crusade in a mindless, bloodthirsty and irrational way, or were there more pressing reasons? Were they the only ones to be militant?

The purpose of this article is not to justify or defend European Crusades, but to explain them, in part—though scholarship can go a long way to defend and justify them

In this article, the word 'crusade' (derived from the Latin word for 'cross') in an Islamic context means a holy war or jihad. It is used as a counterweight to the Muslim accusation that only the Europeans launched crusades. Muslims seem to forget that they had their own, for several centuries before the Europeans launched theirs as a defense against the Islamic expansion.

We will employ a partial timeline spanning up to the first European response to Islamic imperialism, when Pope Urban II launched his own Crusade in 1095. The timeline mostly stays within the parameters of the Greater Middle East. The data in bold print are of special interest for revealing early Islamic atrocities, their belief in heroism in warfare, or politics today.

The Islamic Crusades were very successful. The Byzantines and Persian Empires had worn themselves out with fighting, so a power vacuum existed. Into this vacuum stormed Islam.

After the timeline, two questions are posed, which are answered at length

The Timeline

630 Two years before Muhammad's death of a fever, he launches the Tabuk Crusades, in which he led 30,000 jihadists against the Byzantine Christians. He had heard a report that a huge army had amassed to attack Arabia, but the report turned out to be a false rumor. The Byzantine army never materialized. He turned around and went home, but not before extracting 'agreements' from northern tribes. They could enjoy the 'privilege' of living under Islamic 'protection' (read: not be attacked by Islam), if they paid a tax (jizya).

This tax sets the stage for Muhammad's and the later Caliphs' policies. If the attacked city or region did not want to convert to Islam, then they paid a jizya tax. If they converted, then they paid a zakat tax. Either way, money flowed back to the Islamic treasury in Arabia or to the local Muslim governor.

632—634 Under the Caliphate of Abu Bakr the Muslim Crusaders reconquer and sometimes conquer for the first time the polytheists of Arabia. These Arab polytheists had to convert to Islam or die. They did not have the choice of remaining in their faith and paying a tax. Islam does not allow for religious freedom.

633 The Muslim Crusaders, led by Khalid al—Walid, a superior but bloodthirsty military commander, whom Muhammad nicknamed the Sword of Allah for his ferocity in battle (Tabari, 8:158 / 1616—17), conquer the city of Ullays along the Euphrates River (in today's Iraq). Khalid captures and beheads so many that a nearby canal, into which the blood flowed, was called Blood Canal (Tabari 11:24 / 2034—35).

634 At the Battle of Yarmuk in Syria the Muslim Crusaders defeat the Byzantines. Today Osama bin Laden draws inspiration from the defeat, and especially from an anecdote about Khalid al—Walid. An unnamed Muslim remarks: 'The Romans are so numerous and the Muslims so few.' To this Khalid retorts: 'How few are the Romans, and how many the Muslims! Armies become numerous only with victory and few only with defeat, not by the number of men. By God, I would love it . . . if the enemy were twice as many' (Tabari, 11:94 / 2095). Osama bin Ladin quotes Khalid and says that his fighters love death more than we in the West love life. This philosophy of death probably comes from a verse like Sura 2:96. Muhammad assesses the Jews: '[Prophet], you are sure to find them [the Jews] clinging to life more eagerly than any other people, even polytheists' (MAS Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, Oxford UP, 2004; first insertion in brackets is Haleem's; the second mine).

634—644 The Caliphate of Umar ibn al—Khattab, who is regarded as particularly brutal.

635 Muslim Crusaders besiege and conquer of Damascus

636 Muslim Crusaders defeat Byzantines decisively at Battle of Yarmuk.

637 Muslim Crusaders conquer Iraq at the Battle of al—Qadisiyyah (some date it in 635 or 636)

638 Muslim Crusaders conquer and annex Jerusalem, taking it from the Byzantines.

638—650 Muslim Crusaders conquer Iran, except along Caspian Sea.

639—642 Muslim Crusaders conquer Egypt.

641 Muslim Crusaders control Syria and Palestine.

643—707 Muslim Crusaders conquer North Africa.

644 Caliph Umar is assassinated by a Persian prisoner of war; Uthman ibn Affan is elected third Caliph, who is regarded by many Muslims as gentler than Umar.

644—650 Muslim Crusaders conquer Cyprus, Tripoli in North Africa, and establish Islamic rule in Iran, Afghanistan, and Sind.

656 Caliph Uthman is assassinated by disgruntled Muslim soldiers; Ali ibn Abi Talib, son—in—law and cousin to Muhammad, who married the prophet's daughter Fatima through his first wife Khadija, is set up as Caliph.

656 Battle of the Camel, in which Aisha, Muhammad's wife, leads a rebellion against Ali for not avenging Uthman's assassination. Ali's partisans win.

657 Battle of Siffin between Ali and Muslim governor of Jerusalem, arbitration goes against Ali

661 Murder of Ali by an extremist; Ali's supporters acclaim his son Hasan as next Caliph, but he comes to an agreement with Muawiyah I and retires to Medina.

661—680 the Caliphate of Muawiyah I. He founds Umayyid dynasty and moves capital from Medina to Damascus

673—678 Arabs besiege Constantinople, capital of Byzantine Empire

680 Massacre of Hussein (Muhammad's grandson), his family, and his supporters in Karbala, Iraq.

691 Dome of the Rock is completed in Jerusalem, only six decades after Muhammad's death.

705 Abd al—Malik restores Umayyad rule.

710—713 Muslim Crusaders conquer the lower Indus Valley.

711—713 Muslim Crusaders conquer Spain and impose the kingdom of Andalus. This article recounts how Muslims today still grieve over their expulsion 700 years later. They seem to believe that the land belonged to them in the first place.

719 Cordova, Spain, becomes seat of Arab governor

732 The Muslim Crusaders stopped at the Battle of Poitiers; that is, Franks (France) halt Arab advance

749 The Abbasids conquer Kufah and overthrow Umayyids

756 Foundation of Umayyid amirate in Cordova, Spain, setting up an independent kingdom from Abbasids

762 Foundation of Baghdad

785 Foundation of the Great Mosque of Cordova

789 Rise of Idrisid amirs (Muslim Crusaders) in Morocco; foundation of Fez; Christoforos, a Muslim who converted to Christianity, is executed.

800 Autonomous Aghlabid dynasty (Muslim Crusaders) in Tunisia

807 Caliph Harun al—Rashid orders the destruction of non—Muslim prayer houses and of the church of Mary Magdalene in Jerusalem

809 Aghlabids (Muslim Crusaders) conquer Sardinia, Italy

813 Christians in Palestine are attacked; many flee the country

831 Muslim Crusaders capture Palermo, Italy; raids in Southern Italy

850 Caliph al—Matawakkil orders the destruction of non—Muslim houses of prayer

855 Revolt of the Christians of Hims (Syria)

837—901 Aghlabids (Muslim Crusaders) conquer Sicily, raid Corsica, Italy, France

869—883 Revolt of black slaves in Iraq

909 Rise of the Fatimid Caliphate in Tunisia; these Muslim Crusaders occupy Sicily, Sardinia

928—969 Byzantine military revival, they retake old territories, such as Cyprus (964) and Tarsus (969)

937 The Ikhshid, a particularly harsh Muslim ruler, writes to Emperor Romanus, boasting of his control over the holy places

937 The Church of the Resurrection (known as Church of Holy Sepulcher in Latin West) is burned down by Muslims; more churches in Jerusalem are attacked

960 Conversion of Qarakhanid Turks to Islam

966 Anti—Christian riots in Jerusalem

969 Fatimids (Muslim Crusaders) conquer Egypt and found Cairo

c. 970 Seljuks enter conquered Islamic territories from the East

973 Israel and southern Syria are again conquered by the Fatimids

1003 First persecutions by al—Hakim; the Church of St. Mark in Fustat, Egypt, is destroyed

1009 Destruction of the Church of the Resurrection by al—Hakim (see 937)

1012 Beginning of al—Hakim's oppressive decrees against Jews and Christians

1015 Earthquake in Palestine; the dome of the Dome of the Rock collapses

1031 Collapse of Umayyid Caliphate and establishment of 15 minor independent dynasties throughout Muslim Andalus

1048 Reconstruction of the Church of the Resurrection completed

1050 Creation of Almoravid (Muslim Crusaders) movement in Mauretania; Almoravids (aka Murabitun) are coalition of western Saharan Berbers; followers of Islam, focusing on the Quran, the hadith, and Maliki law.

1055 Seljuk Prince Tughrul enters Baghdad, consolidation of the Seljuk Sultanate

1055 Confiscation of property of Church of the Resurrection

1071 Battle of Manzikert, Seljuk Turks (Muslim Crusaders) defeat Byzantines and occupy much of Anatolia

1071 Turks (Muslim Crusaders) invade Palestine

1073 Conquest of Jerusalem by Turks (Muslim Crusaders)

1075 Seljuks (Muslim Crusaders) capture Nicea (Iznik) and make it their capital in Anatolia

1076 Almoravids (Muslim Crusaders) (see 1050) conquer western Ghana

1085 Toledo is taken back by Christian armies

1086 Almoravids (Muslim Crusaders) (see 1050) send help to Andalus, Battle of Zallaca

1090—1091 Almoravids (Muslim Crusaders) occupy all of Andalus except Saragossa and Balearic Islands

1094 Byzantine emperor Alexius Comnenus I asks western Christendom for help against Seljuk invasions of his territory; Seljuks are Muslim Turkish family of eastern origins; see 970

1095 Pope Urban II preaches first Crusade; they capture Jerusalem in 1099

So it is only after all of the Islamic aggressive invasions that Western Christendom launches its first Crusades.

It could be argued that sometimes the Byzantine and Western European leaders did not behave exemplarily, so a timeline on that subject could be developed. And sometimes the Muslims behaved exemplarily. Both are true. However, the goal of this timeline is to balance out the picture more clearly. Many people regard Islam as an innocent victim, and the Byzantines and Europeans as bullies. This was not always the case.

Moreover, we should take a step back and look at the big picture. If Islam had stayed in Arabia and had not waged wars of conquest, then no troubles would have erupted. But the truth is this: Islam moved aggressively during the Caliphates of Abu Bakr and Umar in the seventh century, with other Caliphs continuing well beyond that; only then did the Western Europeans react (see 1094).

It must be noted that Islamic expansion continues until well into the seventeenth century. For example, the Muslims Crusaders conquer Constantinople in 1453 and unsuccessfully besiege Vienna for the second time in 1683 (earlier in 1529). By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Islamic Crusades receded, due to Western resistance. Since that time until the present, Islamic civilization has not advanced very far.

Two questions are posed and then answered at length.

Besides following Muhammad, why else did the Muslims launch their Crusades out of Arabia in the first place?

It is only natural to ask why Islam launched its own Crusades long before Christendom did.

In the complicated Muslim Crusades that lasted several centuries before the European Crusades, it is difficult to come up with a grand single theory as to what launched these Crusades. Because of this difficulty, we let three scholars and two eyewitness participants analyze the motives of the early Islamic Crusades.

1. World religious conquest

Muslim polemicists like Sayyid Qutb assert that Islam's mission is to correct the injustices of the world. What he has in mind is that if Islam does not control a society, then injustice dominates it, ipso facto. But if Islam dominates it, then justice rules it (In the Shade of the Qur'an, vol. 7, pp. 8—15). Islam is expansionist and must conquer the whole world to express Allah's perfect will on this planet, so Qutb and other Muslims believe.

2. 'Unruly' energies in Arabia?

Karen Armstrong, a former nun and well-spoken, prolific author and apologist for Islam, comes up short of a satisfactory justification for the Muslim Crusades:

Once [Abu Bakr] crushed the rebellion [against Islamic rule within Arabia], Abu Bakr may well have decided to alleviate internal tensions by employing the unruly energies within the ummah [Muslim community] against external foes. Whatever the case, in 633 Muslim armies began a new series of campaigns in Persia, Syria and Iraq. (Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths, New York: Ballantine, 1997, p. 226).

Armstrong also notes that the 'external foes' to Islam in Arabia in 633 are the Persians and the Byzantines, but they are too exhausted after years of fighting each other to pose a serious threat to Islam. Therefore, it moved into a 'power vacuum,' unprovoked (Armstrong p. 227). She simply does not know with certainty why Muslims marched northward out of Arabia.

3. Religion, economy, and political control

Fred M. Donner, the dean of historians specializing in the early Islamic conquests, cites three large factors for the Islamic Crusades. First, the ideological message of Islam itself triggered the Muslim ruling elite simply to follow Muhammad and his conquests; Islam had a divinely ordained mission to conquer in the name of Allah. (*The Early Islamic Conquests*, Princeton UP, 1981, p. 270). The second factor is economic. The ruling elite 'wanted to expand the political boundaries of the new state in order to secure even more fully than before the trans—Arab commerce they had plied for a century or more' (p. 270). The final factor is political control. The rulers wanted to maintain their top place in the new political hierarchy by having aggressive Arab tribes migrate into newly conquered territories (p. 271).

Thus, these reasons they have nothing to do with just wars of self—defense. Early Islam was merely being aggressive without sufficient provocation from the surrounding Byzantine and Persian Empires.

4. Sheer thrill of conquest and martyrdom

Khalid al—Walid (d. 642), a bloodthirsty but superior commander of the Muslim armies at the time, also answers the question as to why the Muslims stormed out of Arabia, in his terms of surrender set down to the governor of al—Hirah, a city along the Euphrates River in Iraq. He is sent to call people to Islam or pay a 'protection' tax for the 'privilege' of living under Islamic rule (read: not to be attacked again) as dhimmis or second—class citizens. Says Khalid:

'I call you to God and to Islam. If you respond to the call, you are Muslims: You obtain the benefits they enjoy and take up the responsibilities they bear. If you refuse, then [you must pay] the jizyah. If you refuse the jizyah, I will bring against you tribes of people who are more eager for death than you are for life. We will fight you until God decides between us and you.' (Tabari, *The Challenge to the Empires*, trans. Khalid Yahya Blankinship, NY: SUNYP, 1993, vol. 11, p. 4; Arabic page 2017)

Thus, according to Khalid, religion is early Islam's primary motive (though not the only one) of conquering people.

In a short sermon, Abu Bakr says:

. . . Indeed, the reward in God's book for jihad in God's path is something for which a Muslim should love to be singled out, by which God saved [people] from humiliation, and through which He has bestowed nobility in this world and the next. (Tabari 11:80 / 2083—84)

Thus, the Caliph repeats the Quran's trade of this life for the next, in an economic bargain and in the context of jihad (cf. Suras 4:74; 9:111 and 61:10—13). This offer of martyrdom, agreeing with Donner's first factor, religious motivation, is enough to get young Muslims to sign up for and to launch their Crusades out of Arabia in the seventh century.

Khalid also says that if some do not convert or pay the tax, then they must fight an army that loves death as other people love life (see 634).

5. Improvement of life over that in Arabia

But improvement of life materially must be included in this not—so—holy call. When Khalid perceived that his Muslim Crusaders desired to return to Arabia, he pointed out how luscious the land of the Persians was:

'Do you not regard [your] food like a dusty gulch? By God, if struggle for God's sake and calling [people] to God were not required of us, and there were no consideration except our livelihood, the wise opinion would [still] have been to strike this countryside until we possess it'. . . . (Tabari 11:20 / 2031)

Khalid was from Mecca. At the time of this 'motivational' speech, the Empire of Persia included Iraq, and this is where Khalid is warring. Besides his religious goal of Islamizing its inhabitants by warfare, Khalid's goal is to 'possess' the land.

Like Pope Urban II in 1095 exhorting the Medieval Crusaders to war against the Muslim 'infidels' for the first time, in response to Muslim aggression that had been going on for centuries, Abu Bakr gives his own speech in 634, exhorting Muslims to war against the 'infidels,' though he is not as long—winded as the Pope.

Muslim polemicists believe that Islam spread militarily by a miracle from Allah. However, these five earth—bound reasons explain things more clearly.

Did the Islamic Crusades force conversions by the sword?

Historical facts demonstrate that most of the conquered cities and regions accepted the last of three options that were enforced by the later Muslim Crusaders: (1) fight and die, (2) convert and pay the zakat tax; (3) keep their Biblical faith and pay the jizya tax. Most preferred to remain in their own religion.

However, people eventually converted. After all, Islamic lands are called such for a reason—or many reasons. Why? Four Muslim polemicists whitewash the reasons people converted, so their scholarship is suspect.

1. The polemical answer

First, Malise Ruthven and Azim Nanji use the Quran to explain later historical facts:

'Islam expanded by conquest and conversion. Although it was sometimes said that the faith of Islam was spread by the sword, the two are not the same. The Koran states unequivocally, 'There is no compulsion in religion' (Sura 2:256).' (Historical Atlas of Islam, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 2004, 30).

According to them, the Quran says there should be no compulsion, so the historical facts conform to a sacred text. This shaky reasoning is analyzed, below.

Next, David Dakake also references Sura 2:256, and defines compulsion very narrowly. Jihad has been misrepresented as forcing Jews, Christians, and other peoples of the Middle East, Asia and Africa to convert to Islam 'on pain of death.' ('The Myth of Militant Islam,' Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition, ed. J.E.B. Lumbard, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004, p. 13). This is too

narrow a definition of compulsion, as we shall see, below.

Finally, Qutb, also citing Sura 2:256, is even more categorical:

'Never in its history did Islam compel a single human being to change his faith' (In the Shade of the Qur'an, vol. 8, p. 307).

This is absurd on its face, and it only demonstrates the tendentiousness of Islamic scholarship, which must be challenged at every turn here in the West. For more information and thorough logic, see this article.

2. The historical facts

History does not always follow Scriptures because people do not. Did the vast majority of conquered peoples make such fine distinctions, even if a general amnesty were granted to People of the Book? Maybe a few diehards did, but the majority? Most people at this time did not know how to read or could barely read, so when they saw a Muslim army outside their gates, why would they not convert, even if they waited? To Ruthven's and Nanji's credit, they come up with other reasons to convert besides the sword, such as people's fatigue with church squabbles, a few doctrinal similarities, simplicity of the conversion process, a desire to enter the ranks of the new ruling elite, and so on. But using the Quran to interpret later facts paints the history of Islam into a corner of an unrealistically high standard.

This misguided connection between Scripture and later historical facts does not hold together. Revelations or ideals should not run roughshod over later historical facts, as if all followers obey their Scriptures perfectly.

To his credit, Ibn Khaldun (1332—1406), late Medieval statesman, jurist, historian, and scholar, has enough integrity and candor to balance out these four Muslim apologists, writing a history that is still admired by historians today. He states the obvious:

In the Muslim community, the holy war is a religious duty, because of the universalism of the Muslim mission and (the obligation to) convert everybody to Islam either by persuasion or by force. (The Muqaddimah: an Introduction to History (abridged), trans. Franz Rosenthal, Princeton UP, 1967, p.183)

When the Islamic Crusaders go out to conquer, carrying an Islamic banner inscribed in Arabic of the glory and the truth of their prophet, Ibn Khaldun would not deny that the army's mission, besides the material reasons of conquest, is to convert the inhabitants. Islam is a 'universalizing' religion, and if its converts enter its fold either by persuasion or force, then that is the nature of Islam.

Moreover, Ibn Khaldun explains why a dynasty rarely establishes itself firmly in lands of many different tribes and groups. But it can be done after a long time and employing the following tactics, as seen in the Maghrib (N and NW Africa) from the beginning of Islam to Ibn Khaldun's own time:

The first (Muslim) victory over them and the European Christians (in the Maghrib) was of no avail. They continued to rebel and apostatized time after time. The Muslims massacred many of them. After

the Muslim religion had been established among them, they went on revolting and seceding, and they adopted dissident religious opinions many times. They remained disobedient and unmanageable Therefore, it has taken the Arabs a long time to establish their dynasty in the . . . Maghrib. (p. 131)

Conclusion

Though European Crusaders may have been sincere, they wandered off from the origins of Christianity when they slashed and burned and forced conversions. Jesus never used violence; neither did he call his disciples to use it. Given this historical fact, it is only natural that the New Testament would never endorse violence to spread the word of the true God. Textual reality matches historical reality in the time of Jesus.

In contrast, Muslims who slashed and burned and forced conversions did not wander off from the origins of Islam, but followed it closely. It is a plain and unpleasant historical fact that in the ten years that Muhammad lived in Medina (622—632), he either sent out or went out on seventy—four raids, expeditions, or full—scale wars, which range from small assassination hit squads to the Tabuk Crusade, described above (see 630). Sometimes the expeditions did not result in violence, but a Muslim army always lurked in the background. Muhammad could exact a terrible vengeance on an individual or tribe that double—crossed him. These ten years did not know long stretches of peace.

It is only natural that the Quran would be filled with references to jihad and qital, the latter word meaning only fighting, killing, warring, and slaughtering. Textual reality matches historical reality in the time of Muhammad. And after.

But this means that the Church had to fight back or be swallowed up by an aggressive religion over the centuries. Thus, the Church did not go out and conquer in a mindless, bloodthirsty, and irrational way—though the Christian Crusades were far from perfect.

Islam was the aggressor in its own Crusades, long before the Europeans responded with their own.

James Arlandson can be reached at jamesmarlandson@hotmail.com

Supplemental Material

Please see this two—part article (here and here) for the rules of Islamic warfare. Too often they do not follow simple justice, but were barbaric and cruel, such as permitting sex with newly captured female prisoners of war.

This article goes into more detail on the motives for Islamic expansion and a comparison with Christianity. The second major section discusses the weak Islamic claim on Jerusalem.

This book by Andrew Bostom is the antidote to the false belief that life under Islam was always a bed of roses. Bostom provides many source documents, sometimes translated for the first time. Here are some online samples. This two—part article (here and here) recounts Muslim atrocities in Palestine. This two—part article (here and here) demonstrates that jihad produced the European Crusades.

References

Gil, Moshe. *A History of Palestine: 634—1099*. Cambridge UP, 1983, 1997.

Nicolle, David. *The Armies of Islam. Men—at—Arms.* Osprey, 1982.

———. *Saladin and the Saracens. Men—at Arms.* Osprey, 1986.

———. *Armies of the Muslim Conquests. Men—at—Arms.* Osprey, 1993.

———. *The Moors, the Islamic West. Men—at—Arms.* Osprey, 2001.

on "The Truth about Islamic Crusades and Imperialism"