



Research Paper

Of Crusaders, War, and Radical Islamism: the Relationship Between Islam and anti-imperialism

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ABSTRACT: *The progression of Islam as a religious and political entity has undoubtedly been intertwined with the diametrically-opposing concepts of imperialism and anti-imperialism. From the time of the Crusades in the Middle-Ages, which was a titanic battle between Christendom and Islam, to the European colonization of the Middle East and North Africa from the 17th to the 20th century, and finally Cold War-era Western quasi-imperialism, imperialism has had a distinctive impact on Islam. The discussion and analysis of this raises a few critical questions that will also be addressed: in situations where Islamic opposition pushed back against imperial entities, was religion the sole reason? Was Islamism a window-dressing for any ulterior motives when either promoting or resisting imperialism? Did different factors trigger religious rhetoric to counter imperialism?*

KEYWORDS: *International Politics, History, Historiography, Islam, Middle-Eastern Politics, MENA, Pan-Arabism*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Imperialism. A historically controversial, yet significant concept in the progression of World History. Derived from the Latin term imperium, it gained currency in 1870s Britain, with public criticisms of Benjamin Disraeli's (1874-80) commitment to expand the British Empire, and is now widely recognized as the policy or act of extending a country's authority into other territories, often involving control of its economics, politics, and social institutions. Religion is a key factor that emerges when analyzing its historical progression and subsequent regression, be it the prevalence of Christianity in the imperialist doctrine of European powers in Africa or the 'surrogate colonialism' of the British separating Jews and Arabs in Palestine. Anti-imperialism therefore appeared as a concept in international relations and history directly in opposition to imperialism. The variety of historical literature and perceptions of anti-imperialism, however, makes it difficult to specifically define. The Marxist-Leninist perspective, derived from Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism, brands anti-imperialism as a theory that opposes capitalism as a whole; on the other hand, anti-imperialism could also be construed as the political movement against European and American colonialism in the late-19th and 20th centuries. Overall, this essay will therefore simply define anti-imperialism as any form of hostility or defiance towards imperialism.

The ensuing essay thereby delves into three different types of relationships between Islam and anti-imperialism: a strong relationship, a non-existent one, and finally, a "weak" relationship, which this essay assumes is a strong relationship between Islam and imperialism. The time period through which the nature of this relationship has been examined is from the early ages, i.e. the Spread of Islam, to modern-day politics.

II. AN ANALYSIS OF A 'STRONG' HISTORICAL INTER-RELATIONSHIP: THE HOLY WARS

When first examining the historical chronology of the relationship between Islam and imperialism, an analysis of the Islamic Empires, ranging from Prophet Muhammad's Arab-Islamic expansionism to the Ottoman Empire, reveals a strong relationship between Islam and imperialism – directly in contrast with the relationship between Islam and anti-Imperialism. Islam's conquest of the ancient world, which included Prophet Muhammad's territorial victories against Arabian and Jewish tribes, paved the way for his colonization of the Arabian Peninsula. This in turn set the foundation for future caliphates to facilitate the spread of Islam; this was

over a period of approximately 1400 years, and took place in Arabia, Central Asia, Turkey, the Indian Subcontinent, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and Northern Africa. The “end” of Islamic imperialism came with the decline of the Ottoman Empire by 1922-24. The Muslims also were also no doubt imperialist: the only difference was it that this imperialism is not as well-documented and recognized as the imperialism of the West; as noted British-American historian Bernard Lewis stated in *The Atlantic* in 1990, “term "imperialist" is given a distinctly religious significance, being used in association, and sometimes interchangeably, with "missionary," further reinforcing the fact that a significant proportion of the historical literature and discourse examining the relationship between Islam and imperialism/anti-imperialism lends focus primarily on Western imperialism. But during this period of Islamic expansionism, were those that were colonized anti-imperialist to some degree?

With regard to the same time period, though, some evidence indicates yes. This likely stemmed from the fact that the caliphates and the Ottoman Empire itself had a track-record of being notoriously oppressive and exploitative to non-Muslim subjects, engendering a sense of defiance and dissent. In the Umayyad Dynasty, for instance, the Persians themselves “noted the corruption and oppression of the Umayyads.” A host of other issues manifesting itself across these caliphates also led to ethnic conflicts and widespread societal and sociocultural instability; these included the schism of Islam itself, making the caliphates tough to govern, the weakness of the monarchical caliphs themselves, and an undue focus on what historian Ahmad LameiGiv terms “forbidden pleasures” as opposed to the “glaring problems of the country.” Therefore, an interesting aspect of the spread of Islam was that the Muslims themselves fostered anti-imperialist sentiments in the populations of the regions they had imperialistic designs in, thus portraying a relationship wherein they were not victims of anti-imperialism, but rather motivating factors behind it.

III. 19TH CENTURY MIDDLE-EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

A driving force behind Islamic anti-imperialism was the fact that colonialists upheaved Islamic foundations, stemming from the fact that European colonialists replaced traditional educational, legal, social, religious, and governmental institutions with Western ones; this aggravated Islamic reformists, who set the tone for what would come to be the first vestiges of anti-imperialism. Colonial education policies are remarkable evidence of this. In late 19th-century West Africa, for instance, the French colonial government under general Louis Léon César Faidherbe implemented legal decrees and educational policies intended to neutralize the influence of Islamic education in the Qur’anic schools of the Senegambia Region. These schools had been key to the region for around 900 years. Another relevant example is that of the French appropriation of Muslim Algerian educational institutions. Pre-colonial Algeria had substantially relied on religious schools to propagate religious teachings and writings; the French severed crucial sources of income and allocated little money for the maintenance of schools and mosques: by 1892 expenditure into the education of the Europeans was 5 times more than that of Muslims. Additionally, even state-operated Madrassas were staffed with French faculty members. Policies such as these had a host of implications, planting the seeds of reformism and hence anti-imperialism. Perhaps the most notable of these outcomes was the fact that the autonomy and regional influence of these schools considerably diminished, dramatically altering precolonial knowledge systems. Moreover, a newer generation of Muslim elites sympathetic to the colonialists was forcibly established. This was rooted in a perspicuous sense of defeatism. As philosopher Ibn Khaldun put it, “the conquered imitate those who conquer them...occurs because the conquered are either impressed by the conqueror or erroneously attribute their own subservience to the perfection of the conqueror.” This idolization of the West, which had provided the foundation for the consolidation of western education systems, was subverted by educational reformists. These included Ali Mubarak and Rifa’a Al-Tahtawi, Egyptian academics and political theorists who aimed to orchestrated a more Islam-centric education system, reversing the knowledge systems imposed on them by the Western colonialists. Colonialists were also notorious for forcibly replacing fundamentally Islamic systems of governance with Western ones, such as in West Africa, Indian princely states, and British-mandated Iraq, leading to legal systems that were largely unjust for the Muslim populations, and those that were fundamentally biased towards the colonial diaspora. Additionally, the Europeans significantly downgraded the religious ethos of the colonized Islamic nations, forcing their materialistic and secular culture on them; this in turn resulted in growing rifts and divisions in the Muslim community as a whole. All in all, this resulted in independence movements in various Muslim nations - a symbol of anti-imperialism induced by Western imperialism. However, as a counter-argument, there is evidence to support the fact that the west and Islamism did not always fundamentally differ: research by professors at the University of Jakarta revealed that the colonialists and the Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia shared collective goals of modernization.

IV. THE RISING GEOPOLITICAL SPECTER OF PAN-ISLAMISM AND ITS FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

The Pan-Islamist movement was perhaps the most striking evidence of Islamic anti-imperialism. This ideology was centered around the unification of the ummah or the Muslim community owing to their collective identity, and was interlaced with anti-imperialist sentiments. Pan-Islamism picked up speed from the late-19th Century onwards, as a force against European imperialism; Ottoman sultans implemented it from the 1860s, with sultan Abdul Aziz aiming to brand himself as the caliph of all Muslims, and a flag-bearer of the Muslim faith. This rhetoric was used as a political propaganda tool to legitimize the Ottoman leadership at the height of their decline in power. The ‘Sick Man of Europe,’ whose educational, social, and governmental reforms were too little and too late to be implemented, was highly susceptible to the usurping of new concepts like nationalism; this made pan-Islamist propaganda a method to re-establish their control over their Muslim subjects. A key concept that emerges upon further analysis of pan-Islamism is that of the apparent geopolitical superiority of the Muslims when collectivized into a single supranational community. This perspective is largely reflected by ideological views on pan-Islamism: Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, for instance, was of the belief that nationalism would actually divide the Muslim world, whereas Muslim unity would strongly counter foreign occupation of Muslim lands. Contemporary sources, such as the Iranian journal *Hablul Matin*, reflect the pan-Islamist propaganda intended to create a heightened perception of Islam as a whole. This could be seen, for instance, from the 20th April 1906 edition, “when certain goods are procurable from the Muslims, it is advisable, in the interests of Islam, that such goods should be bought from them and not from non-muslims” as well as “In the cases mentioned purchase of goods from foreigners is haram (forbidden), as it is calculated to increase the power of the enemies of Islam.” Both statements highlight the fact that even the purchase of foreign goods was considered illegal by religious leaders, and that doing so would actually bolster the power of the colonialists. Analyzing the origin of the source itself, it is a primary perspective from a contemporary political magazine, making it valuable as it provides an authentic perspective into the propaganda provided to the masses; the content of the source also provides an insight into the somewhat protectionist and isolationist economic stance of the colonized Muslims, who fear benefitting the colonizers’ economies at the cost of theirs. That being said, some meaning in this source could have been lost through translation, and whether or not people actually followed this doctrine is unknown.

Wartime pan-Islamism was likely the peak of the movement. The German-Ottoman Alliance against the Allied Powers involved the use of not only propaganda pamphlets and publications translated into different languages and sent to Muslims during the war, but also intricate plans to orchestrate anti-imperialist insurgencies in North Africa, India, Iran, Turkestan, and Afghanistan. However, it must be noted that irredentist policies to take back lost territory in Egypt and Transcaucasia made Pan-Islamism also imperialist in nature, somewhat underscoring the weaker form of the Islam and anti-imperialist relationship. Pan-Islamist views also manifested themselves in militarism: the Ottoman Army, for instance, radicalized their army through their discourse, training, and recruitment, with both Shias and Sunnis encouraged to form paramilitary units in Anatolia. This led to the formation of identity politics at the time, which in turn led to the persecution of colonial leaders as well as Ottoman non-Muslims, who were perceived to be “threats to Muslim empires and nations.” We see these themes in contemporary sources and works of art such as John Muchan’s *Greenmantle*, published 1916, and ideologue Ziya Gökalp’s Muslim-nationalist war poems. All in all, the extent to which the Pan-Islamist movement gained traction preceding, during, and even following World War I is a testament to the strength of the relationship between Islam and anti-imperialism, a relationship built on the extremely principle that Islam was self-sufficient and militarily, socially, and politically superior to the colonialists.

V. THE MODERN RELATIONSHIP AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS

Additionally, from a more modern 20th-century context, the quasi-imperialism of the United States (hereinafter referred to as the US) resulted in a new tide of anti-imperialism. Although there is no doubt that the US has never colonized a Muslim nation, American vested interests in the Middle East following World War II – ranging from its ceaseless support of authoritarian regimes in Petrostates, anti-communist doctrines, and support for Israel – have portrayed it to be a quasi-imperialist power. An excellent case-study when examining this is the US’s ultimately fruitless intervention in the Arab-Israel Conflict. The US’s attempt at a balancing act in the region – trying to support Israel while yet aiming for a peaceful resolution to the conflict – has largely been futile, instead aggravating conflict in the region. While this obviously resulted in widespread resentment on the part of those directly impacted by the conflict, there is evidence to substantiate the fact that the American population itself was against the US’s interventionism in the region: a University of California survey conducted in 1981 revealed that 60% of Americans disapproved of the US “having direct diplomatic or military relations with the middle east.” While this source provides a wealth of statistical and analytic evidence to underscore the American populations’ views of their quasi-imperialism, the somewhat limited sample size of ~1,600 respondents could limit the reliability of the results. The Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 is another striking and

pertinent historical example of American interventionism in the Islamic World culminating in anti-imperialism. American avarice through their desire for control over the oil led to their establishment Western-influenced puppet rule under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi ('The Shah' of Iran) from 1941 onwards. The rule of the Shah was viewed upon negatively by traditional, orthodox Muslims, who believed the modernization and influx of Western ideals were decadent and thus unacceptable under Sharia Law; this apparent loss of Iranian traditionalist culture and identity owing to western domination was referred to by the Persian term *Gharbzadegi*. This dissent came to a head with the Iranian Revolution, when religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini (who had largely Pan-Islamic beliefs) orchestrated an overthrow of the incumbent government. Thus, American quasi-imperialism was a source of anti-imperialism in the Middle East. However, this argument could plausibly not be airtight: could religious degradation alone have been used by Khomeini to orchestrate the revolution? Evidence suggests that the Shah's regime was also publicly notorious for the oppression and brutality intended to weed out any semblance of political opposition, as well as the many administrative and economic failures of the regime. These economic issues culminated in bottlenecks, supply-shortages, and widespread inflation (skyrocketing to 16% in 1974); the implications of these for the masses were deleterious, such as unemployment and a dramatic reduction in purchasing and consumption power. Consequently, one could also make the argument that anti-imperialism was not 100% linked to Islam; although Khomeini and those that orchestrated the coup used *Gharbzadegi* as the main factor behind the revolution, sociopolitical and economic causes were also no less important.

Accepting imperialism as a source for Islam's problems may also be fundamentally problematic, a conclusion drawn from an analysis of the nations and regions that Muslim hatred and resentment is primarily directed toward. As the introduction established, we can simply define imperialism as the political invasion and domination of one region by another – so why is it that most of Muslim resentment is towards Western Europe and the US? This disillusionment is interestingly not directed towards Russia, which still has an iron grip over ~15 million Muslims and ancient Muslim regions. In the 1990s as well, the forceful suppression of Muslim revolts in the Central Asian USSR Republics flew under the radar, whereas the US's quasi-imperialism – though still significant – still is lamented in a modern context even though, barring a brief rule of the Philippines, the US never directly ruled any Muslim populations. The burning of the Islamabad US Embassy in Pakistan in November 1979, which was attributed to the seizure of the Great Mosque in Mecca, was factually inaccurate owing to the lack of any American involvement whatsoever in the event. The attack on the USIS Center in Islamabad barely 10 years later owing to the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* was also unfounded – the book had been published 5 months earlier in the United Kingdom (Rushdie is a British citizen) but the protesters were criticizing the book's publication in the US. Parsing this rather peculiar phenomenon reveals that that this could stem from the fact that even today, Islamic extremist thinkers yet resent their historical religious insecurity dating back to the time of the Crusades in the Middle-Ages. One could also make the argument that radical Islam's animosity to the West and not nations like Russia gives them a way to critique the US – the heir of European civilization and the indomitable leader of the West - and its institutions, who they still see as imperialist owing to their ceaseless involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore, in conclusion, Islamic anti-imperialism in a modern context stems from an inherent distaste of Western institutions.

VI. CONCLUSION

All in all, to conclude, the relationship between Islam and anti-imperialism is one that has taken many forms. On the one hand, one could argue that the Spread of Islam itself weakens that relationship, with the Muslims being largely imperialist in nature themselves. There have also undeniably been instances wherein the relationship has been non-existent and based on unsound principles, such as the use of religion as a window-dressing for criticisms of the West. The relationship between the true has also been strong, as seen through the fundamental upheaval of pre-colonial Islamic institutions, and Western quasi-imperialism in the modern context. This historical area of knowledge is one that largely depended on the context of the times, making it one that is largely multifaceted, and quintessentially dynamic.

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