THE WAR ON TERRORISM: A Crusade?

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16 June 2004

The battle of ideas is a major front in the war on terrorism. Images on Arab satellite television news vie with the sound-bites on US cable news. But at a deeper level, the battle being waged is also over history.

Addressing US Air Force graduates on 2 June 2004, US President George Bush recalled a historic message received by Allied soldiers during the Second World War. US General Dwight Eisenhower's "Great Crusade" speech had rallied Allied forces to the liberation of Europe. Although President Bush quoted Eisenhower's D-Day address, he diplomatically omitted his phrase "Great Crusade". These words would only have played into the hands of militant Islamists. After all, Osama bin Laden's preferred title for *Al Qaida* is the "World Islamic Front for Holy war against Jews and Crusaders".

How and why has an episode in medieval history become so important in today's war on terrorism? For elements of the *ummah,* the worldwide community of Muslims, Europe's Crusade to the Middle East 900 years ago remains an open wound. Launched by Pope Urban II in a speech in 1095, the Crusades marked the West's first invasion of the Islamic heartlands. Stretching over two centuries, the Crusades shaped relations between Islam and the West. And it continues to do so, far beyond its original boundaries.

Soon after 11 September, Osama bin Laden extended the term Crusaders to include Australians in East Timor. His rhetoric distorted history and geography. But it struck a chord with Southeast Asian Islamists. Imam Samudra, the operational chief of the October 2002 Bali bombings screamed out "Crusaders!" when confronted by his victims' relatives.

Ironically, modern Muslim perceptions of the Crusades were shaped by Western history books. 19th century Syrian Christian intellectuals translated these books and produced the Arabic terms *al-hurub al-salibiyya* (Crusader wars) or *al-salibiyyun* (Crusaders).

Another pivotal moment in the process was when the 19th century Ottoman Sultan and Sunni Caliph Abdulhamid II called his territory's seizure by western powers a "new Crusade". The Ottoman Empire's collapse and the subsequent carve-up of the Middle East fuelled Muslim fears of total Western domination.

The rise of political Islam and the establishment of Israel stoked the historical analogies. Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian Islamist ideologue, reinforced the modern militant view of the Crusades. Writing of "the Crusader spirit that runs in the blood of all Occidentals", Qutb tied it to the "financial influence of the Jews of the United States", "English ambition" and "Anglo-Saxon guile".

After Sayyid Qutb's execution by Egyptian authorities, his equally radical brother, Muhammad Qutb, fleshed out this radical application of crusading history. Exiled from his native Egypt, Muhammad Qutb worked as a university professor in Jiddah, counting Osama bin Laden as one of his students.

Even relatively moderate writers and historians recognised the polemical value of the Crusades for mobilizing Muslim consciousness. During the First Gulf War, an Egyptian hero of the 1973 war with Israel wrote a best-seller calling the conflict the "Eighth Christian Crusade". And during the Balkan wars in the 1990s, Orthodox Christian Serbs announced a crusade against Islam in Europe. Predictably, this played into the hands of radical Islamists. But it did not hurt the militant cause that mainstream Saudi schoolbooks had described a new *sulubbiya* (crusaderism) a generation before Osama bin Laden used the term.

As recently as 1994, a Saudi geography textbook for 14 year olds stated that: "a malicious Crusader-Jewish alliance seeks to eliminate Islam from all the continents. Those massacres that were directed against Muslim people of Bosnia Herzegovina, the Muslims of Burma and the Philippines and Africa, are the greatest proof of the malice and hatred harboured by the enemies of the Islamic religion."

Some of these textbooks have since been corrected. But by 1998, Osama Bin Laden readily played up the clash between the Cross and the Crescent. He described US President George W. Bush as fighting under the "sign of the cross" while his own 1998 merger with Egypt's Islamic Jihad formed the "World Islamic Front for Holy war against Jews and Crusaders".

11 September 2001 helped the radicals to prove that the war between the Crusading west and Islam was still a living conflict. Islamists seized on President Bush's remark on 16 September 2001 that "this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while." The White House later clarified that the President regretted any offence caused by the use of the term.

But throughout 2003, a common theme in Palestinian mosque sermons was the US crusader war against the Arabs. With the start of the war in Iraq, bin Laden spoke about the occupation of Baghdad as a threat to the entire *ummah*: "The Zionist-Crusader campaign on the nation today is the most dangerous and rabid ever, since it threatens the entire nation, its religion, and presence. Did Bush not say that it is a Crusader war?" To defend the *ummah,* he suggested drawing out lessons from the history of the Crusades.

In 2003, Montasser al-Zayat, an Egyptian Islamist, wrote in his critical biography of Usama bin Laden's associate, Ayman al-Zawahiri, that: "It is … hard to believe that George Bush's use of the word 'crusade' regarding the American war on Afghanistan was merely a slip of the tongue. The word revealed his deeper intentions, and revealed that the war that was in the works was indeed a crusade." al-Zawahiri's best-seller attributed the same phrase to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, lamenting the threat to the fragmented *ummah* by a "ruthless crusade".

This proliferation of the militant, Islamist view of the Crusades serves only to deepen the fault-lines between Islam and the West. Both the West and the Muslim world must step up to clear the air over the understanding of the Crusades. Baby steps have been taken. In March 2003, the highest-ranking cleric in Sunni Islam, Muhammad Sayyed Tantawi, the rector of Al-Azhar University, announced that he did not support the term "Crusader war." Meeting with a senior Anglican Church official, Sheikh Tantawi declared that he was "opposed to the words 'Crusader invasion' because it had racist connotations and was against Islam and Christianity."

Contemporary reappraisals of the Crusades period have trickled out. Twenty years ago, the Lebanese novelist Amin Malouf produced "The Crusades through Arab Eyes". A sober reassessment of the significance of the Crusades for the Muslim world, his book unfortunately is hardly a best-seller among the *ummah*. Instead, the crusades through Arab eyes are all too often viewed as a modern-day land-grab and an effort at humiliating the *ummah*.

The deliberate simplification of the meaning of the crusades for political purposes has distorted the historical realities of the period. The heritage of medieval Muslim memory tells a different story. For example, a 12th century Syrian prince named Osama bin Munqidh faithfully recorded Muslim perceptions of the first crusaders in his autobiography. Even as he fought them, Osama bin Munqidh developed relations with the Western Christians. He admired aspects of Western governance, and scrutinized their strengths and weaknesses.

In contrast, the ideologically-driven, Islamist memory of the Crusades comprehensively demonizes their historic adversary. The challenge for moderate Islam is to connect with the tradition of Osama bin Munqidh, instead of Osama bin Laden. The battle over history in the war on terrorism hangs in the balance.

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