FIRST THINGS

HOLY WARRIORS

A REVIEW OF *IN GOD'S PATH: THE ARAB CONQUESTS AND THE CREATION OF AN ISLAMIC EMPIRE*

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In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire

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A medieval Islamic tradition recounts that the Prophet Muhammad once told his companions after they returned from a battle: "You have come from the Lesser Jihad to the Greater Jihad—the striving of a servant [of God] against his desires." The idea of a "Greater Jihad" which involves a spiritual struggle against one's carnal desires is widespread in contemporary discussions of Islam. Scholars of Islam often make the point that *jhd*, the Arabic root of *jihad*, is related generally to "struggle" and not specifically to warfare.

Some argue that the tradition of the "Greater Jihad" shows that Islam at its origins was a peaceful movement. Karen Armstrong, in her book *Muhammad*, quotes the tradition of the "Greater Jihad" and insists that fighting was "only a minor part of the whole jihad or struggle." Armstrong and others often argue that any connection between Islam and violence is only the work of later, medieval Muslims who corrupted its message and of Westerners who caricature Islam.

The problem with this argument is that the tradition of a "Greater Jihad" appears to be a late fabrication. It is not found in the early tradition. Indeed, of the six valid early

collections of traditions (or *hadith*) recognized by Sunni Islam, none includes a single mention of a "Greater Jihad," although they treat jihad as holy war at length.

None of this should be a surprise. As Robert Hoyland, a historian of the Middle East at New York University, shows in his masterly work *In God's Path*, the story of the rise of Islam is in large part a story of military conquests. From its very origins in the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the experience of the Islamic community was linked to its military campaigns against non-Muslims. These campaigns began in the Arabian Peninsula but continued throughout North Africa, the Middle East, Iran, and Central Asia. The success of the early conquests fueled further conquests, and Muslim leaders were judged by their commitment to, and success in, this never-ending struggle against non-Muslim forces.

The centrality of war to the early Islamic community is reflected in early Islamic literature. The earliest Muslim historical treatments of the life of Muhammad are known simply as "The Book of Raids" (*Kitab al-maghazi*) and many of the histories of the later period are known as "The Conquests" (*futuh*). Never do these historians utter a word of regret for those conquests. Islam's victories on the battlefield, its triumphs over infidels, are all signs of divine favor. The only regrets are for those (relatively rare) occasions when Islamic forces were defeated.

Indeed, the reader of *In God's Path* cannot avoid an impression of the overall aggressiveness of the conquests. In every direction the conquerors were ceaselessly, relentlessly looking for new peoples to attack and subjugate. The greatest prize was of course Constantinople. In 674–78 and again in 717–18, massive campaigns were organized by the Umayyad rulers to conquer the capital of the Byzantine Empire. These campaigns

ended in failure. (Muslims would have to wait until 1453, when the Ottoman Turks would

take the city.) Nevertheless, they reflect an ideology of conquest that was at the very heart of early Islamic society.

Yet Hoyland makes it clear that there is nothing particularly remarkable about this ideology. The militancy of early Islamic society was like that of other societies. Moreover, the Arab armies as a rule were not intent on bloodshed. They often relied on strategic negotiations to win the submission of cities without a fight. When their opponents resisted, however, they were ready to act without mercy. Hoyland tells the story of the seven thousand Byzantines killed by the caliph Muawiya in Caesarea in 641 and of the forty thousand inhabitants of the Iranian cities of Jur and Istakhr massacred in the early 650s. He describes the mass executions that accompanied the Islamic conquest of Spain (about which a Christian chronicler laments that a Muslim ruler "condemned lords and powerful men to the cross and butchered youths and infants with the sword"). Thus what set apart the conquests of the Arabs from the conquests of others was not morality but rather success. The Arabs were wildly successful in defeating their enemies. They also managed to build a lasting civilization, marked by stable institutions and profound piety.

Hoyland's perspective on how and why the conquests began is something of a corrective to recent studies that insist that the motives of the first Muslims were more spiritual than material. For centuries—so goes the narrative—the Arabs were divided into scores of more or less insignificant tribes that accomplished very little beyond capturing one another's camels. It was only the religious fervor ignited by the Prophet Muhammad that united these tribes and inspired them to attack the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires for the glory of God. This narrative is something of an adaptation of the narrative told by the Islamic sources (which date from about two centuries after the death of Muhammad).

Hoyland argues that a responsible account of the conquests must begin instead with an appreciation of non-Islamic witnesses to them. We have a wide range of

early sources—mostly Christian—in Syriac, Greek, Latin, Armenian, and other languages (Hoyland provides a helpful description of them in an appendix) that refer to the Arab conquests long before Islamic sources appear. These non-Islamic sources (not without their own bias, of course) considerably change the picture of the conquests we see in Islamic sources.

First, the Islamic sources suggest that the Arabs suddenly joined together under the banner of Islam and launched a dramatic military campaign. However, earlier non-Islamic sources suggest that Arab tribes, along with other peoples, such as Turks and Avars, had already begun raiding both the Byzantine Empire and the Sassanid Persian Empire before Islam: "The Arab conquests were not initiated by Muhammad alone, but had begun before him."

Second, when an appreciation of the non-Islamic sources is joined with an examination of material evidence in the form of inscriptions and coins, one gets the impression that Islam was not fully formed at the time of the first conquests. In fact, Hoyland notes that there is "no evidence for the public display of Islam" before the reign of Abd al-Malik (685–705).

Hoyland does not deny that religion was important to the Arabs. He notes that Christianity was spreading among them at the dawn of Islam. To this effect, he discusses a Arabic-Greek inscription dated to a.d. 567 in southern Syria on a chapel dedicated to a Christian martyr. The bilingual inscription, Hoyland explains, shows that Arabic was becoming a Christian language. (Although many Arabs had already converted to Christianity before this, they had relied largely on Syriac, Greek, and other languages for religious purposes.) This was the perfect cultural situation for the rise of a prophet who

claimed that he was receiving God's word in Arabic from an angel and not simply translating it from the Bible. Nevertheless, Hoyland argues convincingly that Islamic doctrines, including Islamic doctrines on jihad, were shaped and canonized only in a later

doctrines, including Islamic doctrines on jihad, were shaped and canonized only in a later period.

In the earliest period, the conquests were "Arab" and not yet "Islamic." For this reason the Arab conquerors generally settled in garrison cities and avoided mixing with the conquered populations. For a long time, those who wanted to convert to Islam needed to associate themselves with an Arab family first. When Islam did develop into a fully formed religion in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, warfare was naturally treated as a central element of the faith. The development of Islam, then, involved the incorporation of a militant culture of conquest. As the tradition of the "Greater Jihad" shows, some later mystics (but not all—some mystics were themselves jihadis) downplayed the centrality of holy war. Even then, this ambivalence in regard to war remained a minority view until very recent times. This does not mean, of course, that there is anything illegitimate about the view that Islam is a religion of peace. There is, after all, much in the Qurʾan and Islamic tradition that lends itself to building a culture of peace.

Nevertheless, it is telling that in most Islamic countries today the Islamic conquests are celebrated and not lamented. Lessons on early Islamic history in the Islamic world, as a rule, do not note with remorse the killings and enslavements that went hand in hand with the conquests. The great warriors of the conquests who defeated infidels and conquered cities are held up as heroes of Islam. The leaders of these conquests—the first four "rightly guided" caliphs—are cherished as holy figures, at least by Sunni Islam. (Shia revere only Ali, the fourth caliph.) Thus the conquests are often remembered as a glorious achievement of Islam. Yet Hoyland shows us that the Arab conquests involved an immense amount of human suffering. When the story of the conquests is told from the perspective of the conquered, they appear rather less than glorious. Hoyland comments: "The old idea, still commonly encountered in modern scholarly literature, that the native

population welcomed the conquerors, is wrong."

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