

The Court of the Caliphs – The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty
by Hugh Kennedy. Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2004.

The restoration of the Caliphate, which at its height stretched from beyond Samarkand in the East to Egypt in the West, is often held up by such Islamists as Osama bin Laden as a key goal of his terrorist campaign against the West. Indeed the Caliphate of the Abbasids casts such a giant shadow over the rest of Islamic history that it comes as a shock to realise that it barely lasted 250 years.

During those two and a half centuries the Caliphs ruled over a vast area and a huge number of people, the ups and downs of the dynasty having a huge effect on many other lives than their own.

Hugh Kennedy, who lectures in the department of medieval history at St Andrews and is also an Islamic scholar, apologizes to his readers – and probably his academic colleagues – for taking a somewhat racy and popular approach to this subject, and acknowledges that he does not treat the Caliphs with great reverence! In this reader's opinion no such apology is necessary because the lives of the Caliphs were by and large dissipated, corrupt and bloody and to sanitize them would be to betray the truth rather than portray it.

Kennedy traces the Abbasid caliphate from its humble beginnings in the Jordanian settlement of Humayma to its catastrophic ending in Samarra, taking in, along the way the lives and loves of the various Caliphs, most notably Harun al-Rashid, their wives, 'concubines' and courtiers, and focussing on the culture of the caliphate, its architecture and its literature.

This is a rich history of a period replete with individual and incident, and anyone intrigued to learn precisely what it is that Mr Bin Laden wishes to restore should read this book to discover why, in the unlikely event of history repeating itself, we in the West have nothing much to fear.

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