

Islamic Imperialism – A History by Efraim Karsh.
Yale University Press 2007

In this updated version, Efraim Karsh, Professor and head of the Mediterranean Studies Programme at King's College London, retells the history of Islam in a manner which goes far beyond the factual retelling that is typical of so many other books of this kind.

Karsh takes the view, as the title of the book heavily hints, that Islam has been an imperial and imperialistic religion almost from its inception, and that the twists and turns of Islamic history, its enormous, world-enhancing achievements and equally influential disasters and self-inflicted wounds, can only truly be understood when seen in this light.

Whether focussing on the various caliphates, or the Ottoman Empire, or even the murderous acts inspired by Osama bin Laden, Karsh convincingly details how the aspirations for and never-buried pretensions of empire have influenced successive Muslim generations, and continue to bedevil the Islamic world today.

The polemic inherent in Efraim Karsh's approach is intellectually fully justified, as is his underlying imperial thesis, and while this book is unlikely to have won him any new friends in the Muslim world it is a welcome and valuable addition to the growing cascade of books that have been published on every facet of Islam since 9/11. While the quality of these books is as variable as their chosen subject, Islamic Imperialism is one of the best.

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