

CHAPTER 67 : THE RESURGENCE OF ISLAM IN THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND BEYOND

Islam is the largest religion after Christianity. It is also currently one of the fastest growing religions. Throughout its history, Islam has been God's scourge against a corrupted and adulterous Christian church. It may well be that the Muslim rod is described in these words from Revelation 9:

"And the sixth angel sounded, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, Saying to the sixth angel which had the trumpet, Loose the four angels which are bound in the great river Euphrates. And the four angels were loosed, which were prepared for an hour, and a day, and a month, and a year, for to slay the third part of men. And the number of the army of the horsemen [were] two hundred thousand thousand: and I heard the number of them. And thus I saw the horses in the vision, and them that sat on them, having breastplates of fire, and of jacinth, and brimstone: and the heads of the horses [were] as the heads of lions; and out of their mouths issued fire and smoke and brimstone. By these three was the third part of men killed, by the fire, and by the smoke, and by the brimstone, which issued out of their mouths. For their power is in their mouth, and in their tails: for their tails [were] like unto serpents, and had heads, and with them they do hurt. And the rest of the men which were not killed by these plagues yet repented not of the works of their hands, that they should not worship devils, and idols of gold, and silver, and brass, and stone, and of wood: which neither can see, nor hear, nor walk: Neither repented they of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts."

Islam arose in the Arabian Peninsula, and rapidly conquered areas formerly dominated by the Eastern churches, which had corrupted themselves by killing the iconoclasts. Muslims occupied Palestine in 636 AD, Mesopotamia in 637 AD, Syria and Egypt in 640 AD, and Persia in 642 AD. The Byzantines only could delay the Muslim advance. The majority of the population in the areas conquered by the Arab Muslims converted to Islam within two generations, creating a permanent cultural frontier between Europe and the Muslim world. They even penetrated into Catholic Europe, conquering most of Spain, having conquered all of northern Africa.

Although the united caliphate created by the first wave of Arab conquests broke up into a series of smaller caliphates and emirates by the late 9th century, the Arabs remained unchallenged in the zone between the Nile and the Tigris, as well as in North Africa and most of Spain, for more than 400 years.

To the east, Persia soon reasserted its independence, and furthermore adopted a form of Islam, Shi'ism, which the Sunni Muslim Arabs saw as heretical. This created a permanent eastern border to the Arab-Islamic world, although Islam continued to spread to the east, into India and Indonesia. Thus Islam traced the path where the Apostle

Thomas and other Christian missionaries had brought the gospel early in the Christian era.

During the era of Protestant Reformation, God again raised up the Muslim rod to weaken corrupted Romish Christianity, so the Protestant church could grow, while Romanist forces were distracted. This new power – the Ottoman Turks - arose in the early 15th century. In 1453 they captured Constantinople (now called Istanbul in Turkey) and made themselves sultans. The Ottomans conquered Greece, the Balkans and most of Hungary, setting the new frontier between east and west far to the north of the Danube. Significant Roman Catholic resources were expended to stem this Muslim advance. And thus strong Protestant states were able to rise up.

By the end of the 17th century the Muslim advance had been stopped, and it was the Protestant Christian nations which were advancing worldwide. We have already reviewed how the Protestant nations became dominant in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Even the Balkans, where the Ottomans ruled for centuries, were never culturally absorbed into the Muslim world. From 1700 to 1918 the Ottomans steadily retreated, and the Muslim Middle East fell further and further behind Europe, becoming increasingly inward-looking and defensive. During the 19th century Greece, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria asserted their independence, and in the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 the Ottomans were driven out of Europe altogether, except for the city of Constantinople and its hinterland. By the 19th century the Ottoman Empire was called the "sick man of Europe," increasingly under the financial control of the European powers, to whom she was deeply in debt.

Domination soon turned to outright conquest. The French annexed Algeria in 1830 and Tunisia in 1878. The British occupied Egypt in 1882, though it remained under nominal Ottoman sovereignty. The British also established effective control of the Persian Gulf, and the French extended their influence into Lebanon and Syria. In 1912 the Italians seized Libya and the Dodecanese islands, just off the coast of the Ottoman heartland of Anatolia. The Ottomans turned to Germany to protect them from the western powers, but the result was increasing financial and military dependence on Germany.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Middle Eastern rulers tried to modernize their states to compete more effectively with the Western powers. This began the trend of seeking to emulate the secularist West, and in essence to expunge that which was Islamic. Reforming rulers such as Muhammad Ali in Egypt, the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II and the authors of the 1906 revolution in Persia all sought to import versions of the western model of constitutional government, civil law, secular education and industrial development into their countries. Across the region railways and telegraphs lines were built, schools and universities were opened, and a new class of army officers, lawyers, teachers and administrators emerged, challenging the traditional leadership of Islamic scholars.

In all these cases the money to pay for the reforms was borrowed from the West, and the crippling debt this entailed led to bankruptcy and even greater western domination, which tended to discredit the reformers. Egypt, for example, fell under British control

because the ambitious projects of Muhammad Ali and his successors bankrupted the state. Additionally, the westernisation of the Islamic world created more professional armies, led by officers who were both willing and able to seize power for themselves - a problem which has plagued the Middle East ever since. There was also the problem that affects all reforming absolute rulers: they are prepared to consider all reforms except giving up their own power. Abdul Hamid, for example, grew ever more autocratic as he tried to impose reforms on his reluctant empire. Reforming ministers in Persia also tried to impose modernization on their subjects, provoking sharp resistance.

The most ambitious reformers were the Young Turks, who seized power in the Ottoman Empire in 1908. Led by an ambitious pair of army officers, Ismail Enver (Enver Pasha) and Ahmed Djemal (Djemal Pasha), and a radical lawyer, Mehmed Talaat (Taalat Pasha), the Young Turks initially established a constitutional monarchy, but soon became a ruling junta, with Talaat as Grand Vizier and Enver as War Minister, which tried to force a radical modernization program onto the Ottoman Empire.

The plan had several flaws. First it entailed imposing the Turkish language and centralized government on what had hitherto been a multi-lingual and loosely-governed empire, which alienated the Arabic-speaking regions of the empire and caused an upsurge in Arab nationalism. Secondly it drove the empire ever deeper into debt. And thirdly, when Enver Bey formed an alliance with Germany, which he saw as the most advanced military power in Europe, it cost the empire the support of Britain, which had protected the Ottomans against Russian encroachment all through the 19th century.

In 1914 this alliance led the Young Turks into the fatal error of joining Germany and Austria-Hungary in their war against Britain and France. The British saw the Ottomans as the weak link in the enemy alliance, and concentrated on knocking them out of the war. When a direct assault failed at Gallipoli in 1915, they turned to fomenting revolution in the Ottoman domains, exploiting the awakening force of Arab nationalism. The Arabs had lived more or less happily under Ottoman rule for 400 years, until the Young Turks had tried to "Turkicise" them and change their traditional system of government. The British found an ally in Hussein, the hereditary ruler of Mecca, and believed by Muslims to be a descendent of the family of the Prophet Muhammed, who led an Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule, having received a promise of Arab independence in exchange.

But when the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1918, the Arabs found they had been betrayed, indeed doubly betrayed. For not only had the British and the French concluded a secret treaty to partition the Middle East between them, but the British had also promised the international Zionist movement their support in creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine, which was the site of the ancient Kingdom of Israel, but had a largely Arab population for over a thousand years. When the Ottomans departed, the Arabs proclaimed an independent state in Damascus, but were too weak, militarily and economically, to resist the European powers for long, and Britain and France soon established control and re-arranged the Middle East to suit themselves.

Syria became a French protectorate (thinly disguised as a League of Nations Mandate), with the Christian coastal areas split off to become Lebanon. Iraq and Palestine became British mandated territories, with one of Sherif Hussein's sons, Faisal, installed as King of Iraq. Palestine was split in half, with the eastern half becoming Transjordan to provide a throne for another of Hussein's sons, Abdullah. The western half of Palestine was placed under direct British administration, and the already substantial Jewish population was allowed to increase, initially under British protection. Most of the Arabian peninsula fell to another British ally, Ibn Saud, who created the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1922.

Meanwhile, the fall of the Ottomans had allowed Kemal Atatürk to seize power in Turkey and embark on a program of modernisation and secularisation. He abolished the caliphate, enforced western dress and the use of Turkish in place of Arabic, and abolished the jurisdiction of the Islamic courts. In effect, Turkey, having given up rule over the Arab World, now determined to secede from the Middle East and become culturally part of Europe. Ever since, Turkey has insisted that it is a European country and not part of the Middle East. It was yet another great humiliation for Islam, and a sign of just how far Islam had retreated and how far modern secularism had progressed.

Another turning point in the history of the Middle East came when oil was discovered, first in Persia in 1908 and later in Saudi Arabia in 1938 and the other Gulf states, and also in Libya and Algeria. The Middle East, it turned out, possessed the world's largest easily accessible reserves of crude oil, the most important commodity in the 20th century industrial world. Although western oil companies pumped and exported nearly all of the oil to fuel the rapidly expanding automobile industry and other western industrial developments, the kings and emirs of the oil states became immensely rich, enabling them to consolidate their hold on power and giving them a stake in preserving western hegemony over the region. Oil wealth also had the effect of stultifying whatever movement towards economic, political or social reform might have emerged in the Arab world under the influence of the Kemalist revolution in Turkey.

During the 1920s and '30s Iraq, Syria and Egypt moved towards independence, although the British and French did not formally depart the region until they were forced to do so after World War II. But in Palestine the conflicting forces of Arab nationalism and Zionist colonisation created a situation which the British could neither resolve nor extricate themselves. The rise to power of Hitler in Germany created a new urgency in the Zionist quest to create a Jewish state in Palestine, and the evident intentions of the Zionists provoked increasingly fierce Arab resistance.

This struggle culminated in the 1947 United Nations plan to partition Palestine (which had already been partitioned once to create Jordan), to create a Jewish state and a Palestinian state in the narrow space between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. The Palestinians rejected this plan, the Zionist settlers declared the State of Israel in 1948, the Arab states intervened, and the Arabs were defeated in the resulting war. About 800,000 Palestinians fled from areas annexed by Israel and became refugees in neighboring countries, thus creating the "Palestinian problem" which has bedevilled the region ever since.

The establishment of Israel, the departure of the European powers from direct control of the region, the increasing importance of the oil industry, and, most importantly, the growing presence and domination of the United States in Middle East (and worldwide) affairs, marked the creation of the modern Middle East. The U.S. was Israel's principal ally and protector, the ultimate guarantor of the stability of the region, and the dominant force in the oil industry. When republican revolutions brought radical anti-western regimes to power in Egypt in 1954, in Syria in 1963, in Iraq in 1968 and in Libya in 1969, the Soviet Union, seeking to open a new arena of the Cold War in the Middle East, allied itself with Arab rulers such as Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and Saddam Hussein of Iraq. These regimes gained support through their promises to destroy Israel, defeat the U.S. and other "western imperialists," and to bring prosperity to the Arab masses, usually by means of some form of socialism. When they failed to do any of these things, they became increasingly despotic.

In response to this challenge to its interests in the region, the U.S. defended its remaining allies, the conservative monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iran and the Gulf emirates, whose methods of rule were quite despotic.

The successive defeats of the Arab armies at the hands of the Israelis in 1948, 1967 and 1973 persuaded the exiled Palestinians, and many other Arabs, that the Arab regimes could not defeat this new western intrusion into the region. The Israeli occupation of the remaining Palestinian territories in 1967 turned out to be permanent, creating an even more intractable Palestinian problem, made worse by systematic Israeli settlement in the territories. Although Arabs often recalled their successful eviction of the Crusaders in the 12th and 13th centuries, Israel's military prowess, and its continuing support from the United States, meant that no modern-day Saladin could hope to destroy it by conventional military means.

Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, a dramatic shift began to occur away from secularism towards Islamism, in the Middle East. It was perhaps first violently manifested in the Islamic revolution in Iran, which overthrew the secularist monarchy of Iran. This secularist monarchy had been a key US ally. The revolution led by the Muslim Shi'a clergy overthrew the monarchy in 1979 and established a theocratic regime which was even more anti-western than the secularist regimes in Iraq or Syria.

The Islamist movement extended to the majority Islamic Sunni population as well, especially via the powerful Wahhabist sect of Saudi Arabia. Many of the militant Islamists gained military training while fighting against the forces of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Secularist communism was eventually overthrown in Afghanistan, and replaced by a Sunni theocracy, the Taliban regime.

The costly war in Afghanistan, among other factors, precipitated the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism in the early 1990s. It had several consequences for the Middle East. It allowed large numbers of Jews to emigrate from Russia and Ukraine to Israel, further strengthening the Jewish state. It cut off the easiest source of credit, armaments and diplomatic support to the anti-western Arab regimes, weakening

their position. It opened up the prospect of cheap oil from Russia, driving down the price of oil and reducing the west's dependence on oil from the Arab states. And it discredited the communist model of development through authoritarian state socialism which Egypt (under Nasser), Algeria, Syria and Iraq had been following since the 1960s. This was yet another blow to secularism in the Middle East. It made Islamism all the more appealing as an alternative in the Arab Middle East.

One of the leading Islamists was a wealthy Saudi Arabian, Osama bin Laden. After fighting against the Soviets in Afghanistan, he formed the al-Qaida organization, which is held responsible for the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings, the USS Cole bombing and the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. An affiliated group, Jemaah Islamiya, carried out the October 2002 Bali terrorist bombing in Indonesia, killing another 200. There were Islamist terrorist attacks subsequent to these in various places around the world.

Again in history, God had released the Muslim scourge against corrupted Western Christianity, this time fallen into secularism. As the chief secularist model and world superpower, the US is the special object for attack by Islamic forces. In response, the US has thus far launched invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq as part of its global "War on Terrorism."

At the beginning of this chapter we had noted how the sixth blast of the trumpet, chronicled in Revelation 9, may well refer to the release of the Muslim scourge on the the corrupt Christian world of the Middle Ages. Among the plagues of Revelation 16 is one which harkens back to the sixth blast of the trumpet in Revelation: the sixth plague. Of it we read:

"And the sixth angel poured out his vial upon the great river Euphrates; and the water thereof was dried up, that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared."

Both the sixth trumpet and the sixth plague refer to the Euphrates, and there is good reason to believe both judgments of God refer to the release of the Muslim scourge, albeit at different times in church history. The sixth plague is released against the modern "Babylon", which has enchanted the nations by its wealth, and impressed them by its greatness. The kings of the east, literally in *Greek*, "the kings who are from the rising of the sun", may well have special reference to the Muslim nations to the East of Israel. This term alludes back to such passages as Joshua 12, where we read:

"Now these [are] the kings of the land, which the children of Israel smote, and possessed their land on the other side Jordan toward the rising of the sun, from the river Arnon unto mount Hermon, and all the plain on the east: Sihon king of the Amorites, who dwelt in Heshbon, [and] ruled from Aroer, which [is] upon the bank of the river Arnon, and from the middle of the river, and from half Gilead, even unto the river Jabbok, [which is] the border of the children of Ammon; and from the plain to the sea of Chinneroth on the east, and unto the sea of the plain, [even] the salt sea on the east, the way to Bethjeshimoth; and from the south, under Ashdothpisgah: And the coast of Og king of Bashan, [which was] of the remnant of the giants, that dwelt at Ashtaroth and at

Edrei, And reigned in mount Hermon, and in Salcah, and in all Bashan, unto the border of the Geshurites and the Maachathites, and half Gilead, the border of Sihon king of Heshbon.”

It is the Muslim nations of the East which are most seriously challenging secular humanist domination and America’s superpower status. They have been re-invigorated to wage this war against the West. We are in all likelihood witnessing again the Muslim scourge against corrupted Christianity- in the modern era that of Western secularism – in fulfillment again of divine prophecy.

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Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA, 1997). (see electronic version at <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/About.htm>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Sabbath Bible Survey Tests and Assignments* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Let My People Go* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

The on-line resources of Historicism Research Foundation at <http://www.historicism.net/> also proved invaluable for my understanding of Biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy concerning Christian church history, especially as revealed in the book of Revelation, serves as the foundation upon which all church histories should be based.

Other references especially consulted for this chapter include:

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