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A Critical but Missing Piece: Educating Our Professional Military on the History of Islam

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COMMENTARY

# A CRITICAL BUT MISSING PIECE

## EDUCATING OUR PROFESSIONAL MILITARY ON THE HISTORY OF ISLAM



Adm. Michael G. Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, addresses faculty and students at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth.

By Adam Oler

## INTRODUCTION

To someone familiar with the history of ancient Greece, the story will seem at first quite recognizable. In a bipolar world, the two great superpowers of the day wage a decades-long struggle to establish complete hegemony over the other. The conflict ebbs and flows for years, with one side occasionally gaining the upper hand, only to relinquish it later. The belligerents include allies beholden to one superpower or the other, and a great amphibious expedition helps determine the war's outcome. When the fighting finally ends, both superpowers are so depleted by battlefield losses, plague, and spent treasure that neither is prepared to confront a burgeoning superpower emerging on its periphery. This new force quickly expands across thousands of miles, creating a colossal empire and bringing with it sweeping cultural changes that still profoundly shape the world today.

Perhaps surprisingly, this is not the tale of the Peloponnesian War and the ensuing rise of Macedon. Rather, it is the story of the last great war of antiquity, the late sixth and early seventh century struggle between the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires.<sup>1</sup> More notably, it is the story of the great Arab conquests that followed in that war's aftermath and the remarkable creation of an Islamic empire that soon stretched from the Atlantic coast to the Chinese frontier. Thucydides' celebrated history and Alexander's epochal expansion of the Hellenic world certainly merit the close study they receive.<sup>2</sup> Because of its pertinence to our own time, the early history of Islam deserves equal, if not more, attention, ideally in our nation's high schools and colleges. A more acute problem—and one that could be readily tackled—is the absence of this immensely important period from the war colleges' syllabi. If the United States is to ensure its future policymakers and senior joint force leaders are adequately prepared to perform their duties effectively, joint professional military education needs to incorporate an objectively focused block of instruction on the formative

period in Islamic history, beginning with the birth of the Prophet Muhammad in 570 CE, and ending with collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate in 1258. In advocating for this course, it is first helpful to recall the exacting price too often paid when strategists fail to consider—or understand—historical matters of context in their planning. A brief assessment of what the proposed block of instruction ought to include demonstrates how this record of past failures can be improved. Understanding Islam's early history is an essential foundation for anyone confronting the Middle East's most enduring challenges, such as the Sunni-Shi'ite struggle, the future of the Saudi regime, and the dispute over Jerusalem. A review of the proposed curricula also helps explain how a proper appreciation of Islam's first centuries helps undercut essentialist, anti-Muslim narratives, thereby inhibiting misguided assumptions. Of course, teaching Islamic history could invite controversy; indeed there is an intense debate among academics about how to approach the subject. Nonetheless, the potential for disagreement cannot become an excuse for avoiding it, even if it does call for an important note of caution.

## WE KNOW WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW

Justifiably, Americans are often criticized for their short memories,<sup>3</sup> and their regrettable indifference toward the subject of history.<sup>4</sup> In the field of foreign affairs, the failure of U.S. leaders to sufficiently appreciate the history of other nations is an all too common lament.<sup>5</sup> An appalling misconstruction of Vietnam's history—in particular its ancient, troubled affiliation with China—helped cause the United States to approach that war with an unwinnable strategy.<sup>6</sup> When the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration used the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to overthrow Iran's government in 1953, it gave no heed to that country's proud past and planted the seed for the “first wave” of Islamic revolutions twenty-five years later.<sup>7</sup> In part because they lacked a most basic understanding of the distinction between Shi'ites and Sunnis, the entire American intelligence apparatus in 1979

If you would  
understand anything,  
observe its beginning  
and its development.

—Aristotle



Mark A. Wilson, Professor, Department of Geology, College of Wooster

failed to realize that the so-called Siege of Mecca that year marked the birth of radical Sunni terrorism.<sup>8</sup> As a result, Washington went blindly forward, arming the same Arab Mujahideen who metastasized into al-Qaeda.<sup>9</sup> Astonishingly, some American officials still refer to the attack as “the Shiite assault on the sacred Ka’ba.”<sup>10</sup> More recently, the failure of American planners to grasp the history of Iraq led to major planning mistakes,<sup>11</sup> errors so egregious that by 2005, the United States was on the verge of losing the Iraq war.<sup>12</sup> Then there is the unending war in Afghanistan. Like the Soviets twenty-two years earlier, the United States seemingly entered this conflict without due consideration of the fact that no external power has ever departed in victory.<sup>13</sup> In matters related to

the Middle East in particular, Americans behave like “serial amnesiacs.”<sup>14</sup>

All of these disheartening examples reflect what American leaders have known for over a generation; the United States’ approach to teaching history is not working.<sup>15</sup> Although at least one late-night talk show host routinely jokes about the country’s ignorance of the past, scholarship dating back to the 1980s demonstrates—empirically—that the country’s lack of historical education is also dangerous.<sup>16</sup> Even where military institutions are concerned, the just-cited miscalculations in strategic planning support a belief that history is “treated as a marginal embellishment instead of a core of military education.”<sup>17</sup> The importance of the Middle East to American security is enduring. Therefore, until the

United States’ secondary and collegiate educational systems are fixed, the nation’s future policymakers and senior joint force leaders need to receive appropriate instruction about the region’s history elsewhere. This obligation should be fulfilled by the country’s war colleges, lest it not otherwise occur. Fortunately, envisioning what the requisite block of instruction would entail is quite practicable.

### THE PROPOSED COURSE — ONE VISION

Although the proposed course should address a significant period of time—roughly seven hundred years—instruction can be efficiently covered in four sections. They include the life of the Prophet Muhammad; the almost



Muslims everywhere.<sup>27</sup> These are just two of the reasons Jerusalem is such a contentious issue in the Middle East. They help explain—for example—the significance of Iran’s decision to name one of its most elite military units the “*al Quds Force*,”<sup>28</sup> and why some Palestinian militants branded their organization the “*Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade*.”<sup>29</sup>

Consider also that by studying the Prophet’s life, students will attain a fundamentally better understanding of Islam’s holiest sites in Saudi Arabia.<sup>30</sup> Although students will doubtless already know that Mecca and Medina are important, the proposed course would explain why. For example, the shrouded black edifice at the center of Mecca’s Great Mosque, known as the Ka’ba, is the most revered site in Islam.<sup>31</sup> In pre-Islamic, Arab historical tradition, Adam originally built the Ka’ba and his son Seth subsequently rebuilt it. Later, Abraham and his son Ismail rebuilt it again.<sup>32</sup> The Ka’ba thus played a major role in the lives of Arabs even before the Prophet’s birth, and an annual festive pilgrimage (the *Hajj*) to Mecca predated the Prophet by several centuries.<sup>33</sup> Nearby, in 610, the Prophet received his first message from God, delivered by an angel who told him to “recite”; the Arabic word for “recitation” being “*Qur’an*.”<sup>34</sup> Originally, Muhammad directed his followers to pray toward the *al Aqsa* Mosque in Jerusalem; only later in his ministry did he direct they face the Ka’ba and Mecca, a highly symbolic decision reflecting Islam’s break from Judaism and Christianity—and one of the most pivotal moments in Islam’s historic development.<sup>35</sup> Later, when Muhammad cleared the Ka’ba of its pagan idols, it represented his final triumph in securing Islam’s dominance in Arabia.<sup>36</sup> Today, when millions of Muslims visit Mecca during the *Hajj*, they are marking these seminal events in their shared history.<sup>37</sup>

There is equal value in examining the history of Medina, even if only briefly. For instance, U.S. policymakers ought to know that twelve years after receiving his first revelations, Muhammad hastily emigrated north from Mecca to a town called Yathrib.<sup>38</sup> This event is known as the *Hijra*, and the year it occurred (622) marks the start of the Muslim calendar.<sup>39</sup> In

hammad’s life and accomplishments, beginning with his birth in Mecca around 570 CE, are the foundation of the entire Muslim epoch.<sup>19</sup> His experiences and achievements shape the “spiritual, political and ethical vision of Muslims” today,<sup>20</sup> and constitute a “metaphor illuminating the meaning of existence itself.”<sup>21</sup> More than any other facet of Muslim history, the specific events and circumstances of the Prophet’s life merit attention, making the late sixth century the appropriate point of departure for the projected block of instruction. Indeed, the Prophet’s sixty-two-year life presents an excellent initial framework for understanding today’s Middle East in a historical context, to include the reasons behind many of its toughest challenges.

For example, the Muslim world’s great attachment to Jerusalem stems from events that occurred when Muhammad was about fifty. Those shaping U.S.–Middle East policy should be aware that Jerusalem’s famous golden “Dome of the Rock” stands atop the site where Muslims historically believe that, in 621, Muhammad experienced his “Night Journey” where he traveled to Jerusalem and stood on top of the Rock of Abraham.<sup>22</sup> From there, he ascended to heaven, received some of Islam’s most formative revelations, and returned to Mecca.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Jerusalem—known in Arabic as *al Quds*, “the Holy”—has significance for Muslims surpassed only by Mecca and Medina.<sup>24</sup> In a more secular sense, Jerusalem is historically critical for Muslims because the famous golden dome atop the Temple Mount was Islam’s first great edifice, and the dome is the physical manifestation of Muslim society’s initial “emergence as a new polity.”<sup>25</sup> Of almost equal importance is the mosque adjacent to the Dome of the Rock, which was known in Muhammad’s time as “the farthest mosque”—in Arabic “*al Aqsa Masjid*.”<sup>26</sup> During his early life, the *al Aqsa* mosque played a deeply symbolic role for Muhammad’s first followers, and the site remains highly revered by

equally formative forty-year period that followed; the early empire period; and the “Golden Age.” Several books, some of them quite recent, cover these periods succinctly but effectively, demonstrating that constrained classroom time need not be a limiting factor.<sup>18</sup> In addition, examining several of the possible themes each section might cover provides a preliminary framework for developing the proposed course, while further emphasizing the relevance of Islam’s early history to current and future American strategists.

### THE LIFE OF PROPHET MUHAMMAD — MECCA, MEDINA, AND JERUSALEM

Both Christian and Muslim historians agree that the Prophet Mu-



Courtesy of Zenodor Verlagsgesellschaft mbH

Yathrib, Muhammad established a mosque (*masjid*) and built a model society to be emulated by Muslims from then on.<sup>40</sup> As a result, Yathrib's name was eventually changed to Medina, the Arabic word for "city," and historically all Muslims "regard Medina as the model of Islamic perfection."<sup>41</sup> Muhammad is buried there, helping to make Medina Islam's second holiest site after Mecca. Together, Mecca and Medina are so historically significant that the Saudi monarch's official title is neither "King" nor "Sultan," but "Keeper of the Two Mosques."<sup>42</sup>

As these short examples illustrate, policymakers versed on the basic historic events of the Prophet Muhammad's life will be better equipped to develop Middle East strategy than would otherwise be the case.

### LESSONS OF THE GREAT ARAB CONQUESTS

An adequate understanding of the region's historical context cannot end with the Prophet's death in 632

because the next forty years are of near-equal importance.<sup>43</sup> Sunni Muslims, who make up the vast majority of the faith,<sup>44</sup> know the Prophet's four successors—*khalifa* in Arabic—as "the Rightly Guided Ones."<sup>45</sup> Together, they comprise the *Rashidun* who, along with the Prophet, form the core of Islam's founding movement.<sup>46</sup> Their experiences and achievements between 632 and 661 were recorded contemporaneously,<sup>47</sup> meaning the *Rashidun* exist squarely within the realm of history, not legend.

As significant as the *Rashidun* are within the Muslim sphere of influence, their accomplishments continue to have a tremendous impact on much of the rest of the world as well. Because the great Arab conquests occurred under their rule, it is here that the proposed course can deliver some of its most valuable lessons. Between 630 and 750, Muslim generals conducted brilliant military campaigns, capturing territory extending seven thousand kilometers.<sup>48</sup> Just as Alexander spread

Hellenism to the known world in the fourth century BCE,<sup>49</sup> Muslim conquerors extended Arab culture a thousand years later.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the parallels between Alexander's accomplishments and those of the early Muslims merit study. The Arabs' two enemies, the Byzantines and Sassanids, had just exhausted themselves in what was referred to earlier as "the last great war of antiquity."<sup>51</sup> Indeed, their fatigue proved to be "the essential prerequisite for success of Muslim arms."<sup>52</sup> In the decades just prior to Muhammad's death in 632, the Sassanids had conquered most of the Levant, only to have it retaken by the great Byzantine general, Heraclius. Heraclius saved Byzantium from total defeat by conducting a well-conceived invasion behind Sassanid lines, cutting the Persian heartland off from its army.<sup>53</sup> In their famous collective work on military history, the Dupuys go so far as to write that Heraclius is worthy of being ranked in military history alongside "Alexander, Hannibal, and

Battle between Heraclious' army and Persians under Khosrau II. Fresco by Piero della Francesca, c. 1452



Caesar.<sup>54</sup> Thanks to Heraclious, the two superpowers' borders returned to the status quo ante, but when the great Islamic conquests began, the Muslims found themselves filling a power vacuum much like the Macedonians did after the Peloponnesian War.<sup>55</sup> In this regard, the story of the early Muslim victories can be used to reinforce some of the key lessons about war and statecraft traditionally taught through the study of Sparta and Athens.

To comprehend the geographic, ethnic, and cultural fault lines in today's Middle East, strategists also need to be aware of other key facets of Islam's tremendous expansion during this period.<sup>56</sup> For instance, when the Arabs successfully conquered Byzantine territory to their west, they not only expanded their faith, but the Arab language and culture as well. Therefore, Egypt and the Levant, which were Greek (or etymologically Greek) speaking areas of principally Christian faith in 632, became almost entirely "Arabized." By comparison, to

the area east of the Zagros Mountains, where the Sassanid Empire lost all of its power and most of its Zoroastrian faith to Islam, the Persian language and culture nonetheless managed to survive.<sup>57</sup> As a result, Iran never became Arab either culturally or linguistically, and Iran's frontier with the Arab world has been one of the world's great fault lines ever since. To be clear, the contemporary Persian-Arab divide that is so central to events in the region today can only be fully appreciated if the historical reasons behind it are understood.

### THE SUNNI-SHI'ITE DIVIDE

The third period meriting close examination follows the death of the last "Rightly Guided Caliph" in 661 and continues to the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate in 750. Although many key developments occurred in this era, the most acutely relevant to our own time is the Sunni-Shi'ite split.<sup>58</sup> Of course, many future policymakers have seen evidence of this sectarian division in violent form. Case in point, the well-known al-Askari shrine bombing in February 2006, a seminal event of the Iraq conflict, brought the Sunni-Shi'ite struggle to the verge of full-scale civil war.<sup>59</sup> A course on the early history of Islam is needed to explain the key seventh-century events that underlie the bloodshed.

To begin, war college graduates should be aware that today's religious discord began as an entirely political succession dispute.<sup>60</sup> When Muhammad died in 632, he left neither a male heir nor a will. Shortly before his death, he pointed to his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, and stated, "Whoever has me as a master has him as a master."<sup>61</sup> A minority of the Prophet's followers interpreted this as an anointment and declared themselves "Shi'atu Ali" or "Shi'ites," meaning Ali's partisans.<sup>62</sup> As a result, the first three *khalifa* are not recognized as "Rightly Guided"

by Shi'ites, although all Muslims do accept Ali as the legitimate fourth and final *Rashidun*.<sup>63</sup> After Ali's assassination in 661, the dispute continued, and, nineteen years later, Ali's son Hussein confronted a much larger Sunni army at Karbala in modern Iraq.<sup>64</sup> When promised reinforcements failed to arrive, the Sunni forces annihilated Hussein and most of his family.<sup>65</sup>

All Muslims consider Hussein's death a tragedy, but for Shi'ites it represents the ultimate act of martyrdom.<sup>66</sup> In their view, Hussein died in a noble effort to salvage Islam from its errant practices, making the Karbala massacre the most formative event in Shi'a history since 661.<sup>67</sup> For them, the failure of Hussein's allies to assist him was an unforgivable sin to be passed from generation to generation.<sup>68</sup> Not long after the battle, Shi'ites began mourning their perceived collective failure by worshiping Hussein and many of his descendants as saints and by participating in what eventually evolved into the highly ritualized (and occasionally brutal) festival of Ashura.<sup>69</sup> It is this religious attachment to Hussein that fundamentally separates Sunnis from Shi'ites, and the reason Sunnis see Shi'ism as a heresy.<sup>70</sup> A sizable portion of the discord and violence across the Middle East today is rooted in these transformational events. Absent an understanding of this historical backdrop, future American strategists' ability to understand current Sunni-Shi'ite hostility will be jeopardized.

### ISLAM'S GOLDEN AGE, THE MONGOL TRAGEDY, AND THE ROOTS OF ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

A fourth and final era deserving attention is the reign of the Abbasid Caliphs, which stretched from 750 to 1258. In particular, two aspects of this rarely covered period warrant instruction.<sup>71</sup> Because it represents the apogee of the Arab Empire's accomplishments, the Golden Age of Islamic civilization needs to be appreciated by American strategists.<sup>72</sup> In the words of the West's leading scholar on the Middle East, Princeton Professor Bernard Lewis,<sup>73</sup> this period marked the "apex of human achievement" to that point in history.<sup>74</sup>

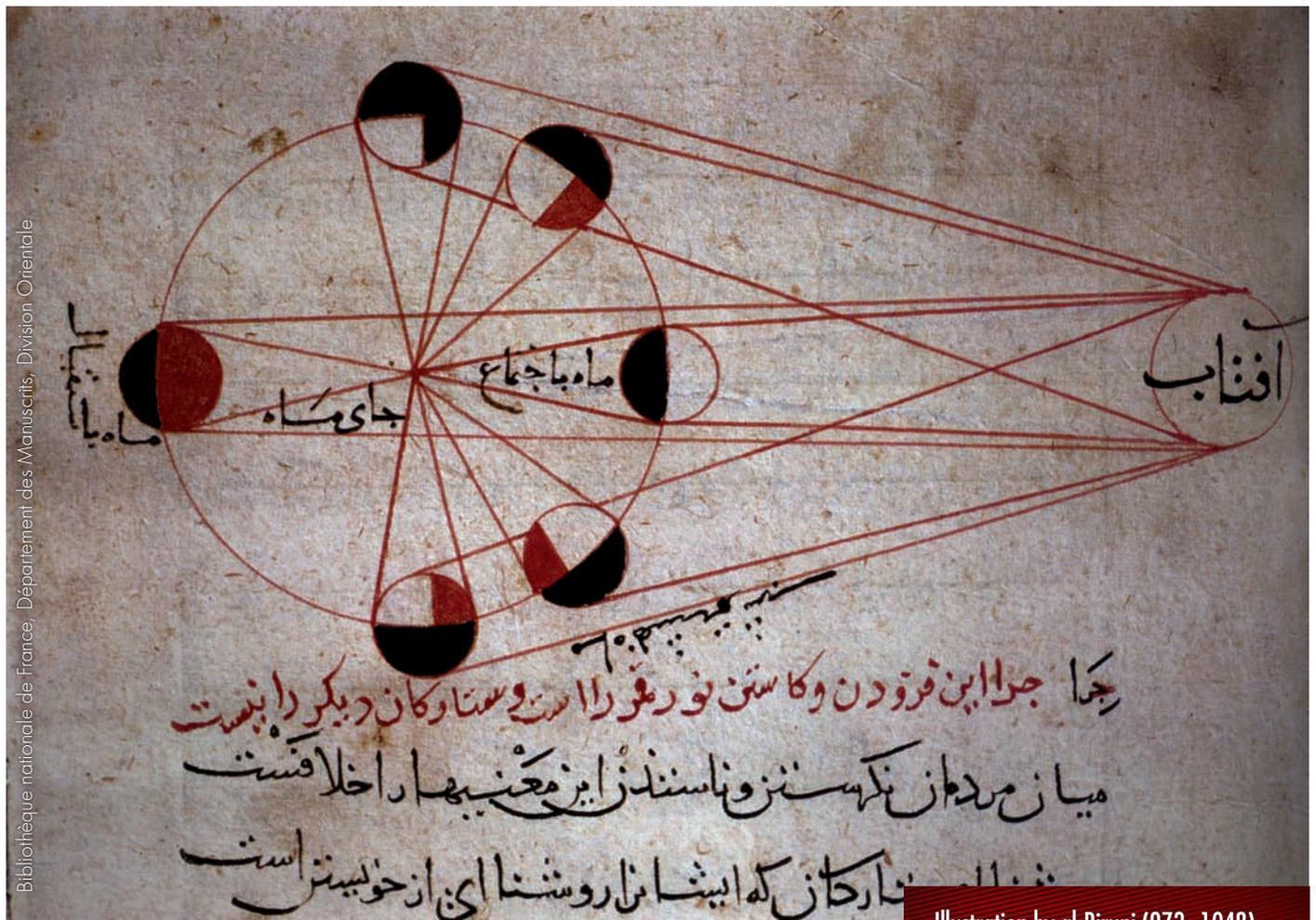


Illustration by al-Biruni (973–1048) showing the different phases of the moon

Under Abbasid patronage, Muslims of the Golden Age invented the algorithm and algebra and created the science of chemistry, musical notation, and the fundamentals of astronomy.<sup>75</sup> Through their work as translators, Muslims produced the “entire corpus” of the “recovered ancient learning” of Greek antiquity that humanity possesses today.<sup>76</sup> It is little wonder that President Barack Obama remarked during his June 2009 speech in Cairo that “It was Islam . . . that carried the light of learning through so many centuries, paving the way for Europe’s Renaissance.”<sup>77</sup> For purposes of public diplomacy, senior policymakers should be able to speak intelligently about the myriad Muslim contributions to human society this great age produced. This is especially so when U.S. officials engage with their Muslim counterparts.

Even more critically, future strategists need to acquire some understanding of the thirteenth-century cataclysm that destroyed vast swaths of the Muslim

world. Though often overlooked, in every sense these invasions constituted a “holocaust.”<sup>78</sup> In 1258, Mongol armies razed Baghdad, destroying virtually every building in the city and killing between 800,000 and 2 million inhabitants.<sup>79</sup> The Mongols also permanently devastated countless other cities and may have murdered as many as 18 million people across the region.<sup>80</sup> The city of Merv in Khorasan, Iran, suffered between 700,000 and 1.3 million deaths,<sup>81</sup> while similarly horrific massacres occurred in Naishapur (1.74 million killed), and Herat (1.6 to 2.4 million killed).<sup>82</sup> As one historian noted, the region around the central lands of Islam “never recovered from the Mongols. Never.”<sup>83</sup> Because of its continuing impact on the world view of Middle East peoples today, this piece of Islamic history needs to be considered when formulating strategic approaches to the region. This is especially so with regard to Iran, where the Mongol invasions “planted in the collective

memory of Iranians an abiding fear of foreign invasion . . . effects [that] linger to this day.”<sup>84</sup>

The historical and philosophical roots of twenty-first-century Islamist terrorism are also directly traceable to the devastation that accompanied the Mongol hordes. The ubiquitously recognized “Godfather of Islamic Terrorism,”<sup>85</sup> Ahmad ibn Taymiyya, lived in the immediate aftermath of the conquests, and the Mongol occupation profoundly shaped his philosophical tenets.<sup>86</sup> Taymiyya is credited with turning the concept of jihad from its traditionally defensive posture into an offensive weapon and devising the theory of Salafism.<sup>87</sup> He thus remains the principal guiding philosopher of the globalized, violent jihadist movements of the last twenty years.<sup>88</sup> Policymakers confronting Islamic extremism must be versed

in this period of history because, in the words of one Muslim writer, “it all started here, in the shadow of the Mongol holocaust.”<sup>89</sup>

## ANTI-MUSLIM NARRATIVES

In addition to providing an essential historic framework, an instruction block on Islam’s first seven centuries will shed much-needed light on a particularly dark aspect of American political discourse. In the decades following World War II, Americans tended to look at Arabs as a “backwards” people, though they did so without much animus.<sup>90</sup> After 11 September 2001, however, a battery of American pundits, high-profile Evangelicals among them, started promoting a virulently anti-Islamic narrative that often cited supposedly historic examples in support of their arguments.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, one of the best-selling books on Islam in the United States, Robert Spencer’s *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)*,<sup>92</sup> maintains that Islam is a religion of war that sanctions lying, theft, and killing.<sup>93</sup> These sources present a starkly “essentialist”<sup>94</sup> view of Islam, one that lacks genuine scholarship. Because such arguments place ideology ahead of history, they risk spreading a “pathology” of false assumptions.<sup>95</sup> Teaching future policymakers about the Golden Age of Islam in particular will help prospective strategists recognize and counter assumptions that are rooted in anti-Muslim rhetoric, instead of historical fact.

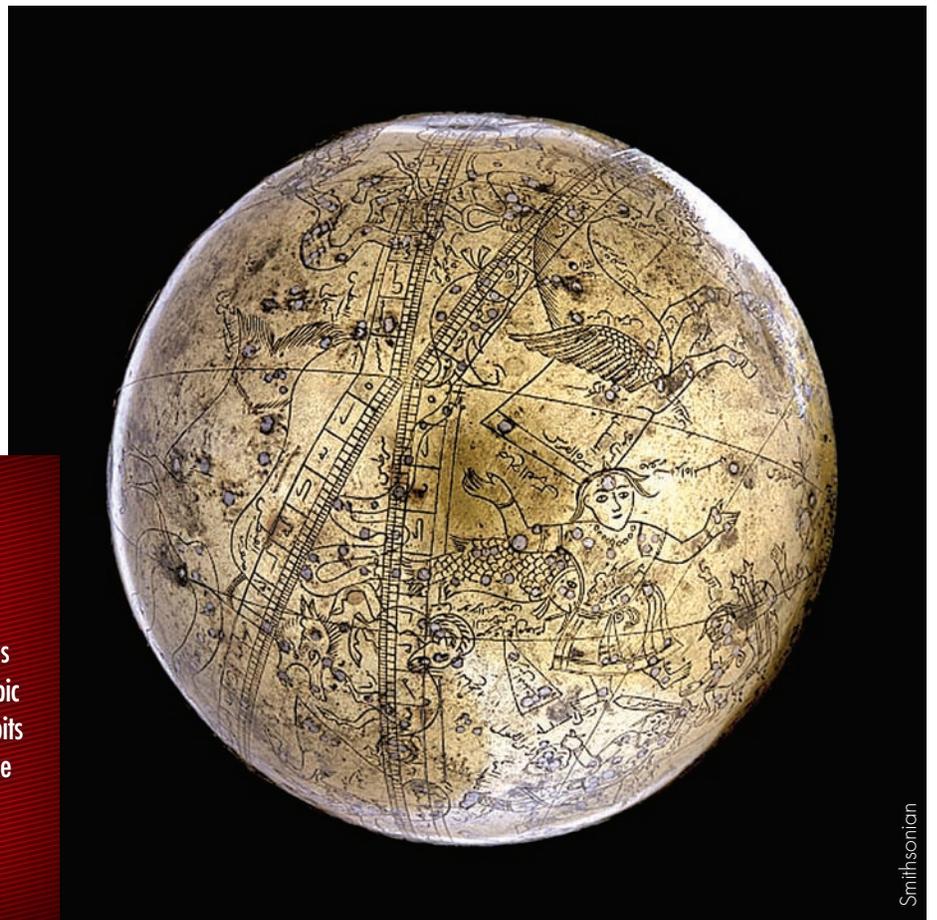
Recognizing the reasons underlying the sustained success of Arab armies

during the great conquests would similarly help refute anti-Muslim polemicists. For instance, the Arabs’ achievements largely stemmed from their ability to operate at night, with no supply line, under commanders appointed on merit.<sup>96</sup> They left local governing institutions in place, avoided quartering their forces among the local populace, and did not forcibly convert local populations to Islam.<sup>97</sup> The conquered peoples had to recognize Arab control, but the latest research strongly suggests this was accepted by many local inhabitants anxious to escape oppressive Byzantine rule.<sup>98</sup> Conquered populations paid a poll tax (*jizya*) in exchange for protection from outside threats (so-called *dhimmi* status) but were exempted from military service.<sup>99</sup> Ultimately, the Arabs’ success stemmed from their relatively benign treatment of newly conquered populaces as much as anything else. Evidence of this approach is readily seen, for example, in the Arabs’ decision to let Jews and Christians maintain their synagogues

and churches.<sup>100</sup> In short, teaching the history of the great Arab conquests would refute counterproductive and misleading arguments that Islam is a religion premised on forced conversion, brutality, and violence.

## AN IMPORTANT CAUTION

Establishing a course on Islam’s early history requires consideration of the topic’s controversial historiography. Beginning about thirty years ago, an often acrimonious debate emerged over the treatment of Islam’s past by European and American scholars.<sup>101</sup> The first protagonist in this dispute was the late Edward Said who, in his famous work *Orientalism*, argued that Western historians generally harbored a cultural bias impairing their empiricism irrevocably.<sup>102</sup> One of his chief targets was Bernard Lewis, who responded several years later by refuting Said’s arguments rather effectively.<sup>103</sup> However, as the post-11 September 2001 anti-Muslim narra-



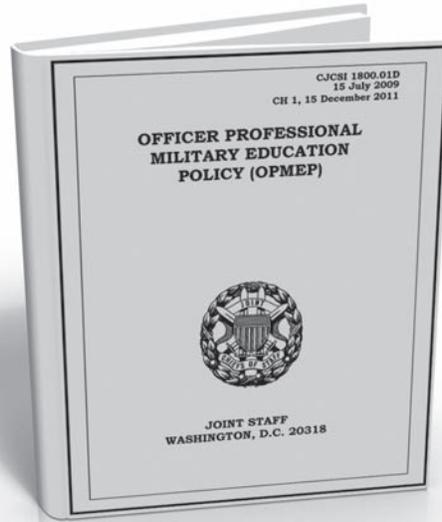
**Islamic Celestial Globe, 1630 CE.** This brass globe served both as a map of the heavens, as viewed from outside the starry sphere, and as a precision tool for making astronomical calculations. Engraved on its surface are various coordinate lines, constellation figures, and Arabic inscriptions. The stars are made of embedded bits of silver. The globe is hollow and was cast in one seamless piece. It was originally set in a cradle of rings, which depicted the horizon and other astronomical circles.

Smithsonian

tive demonstrates, Said's premise still holds merit. In recent years, pundits and new historians have continued the debate,<sup>104</sup> and collectively they provide an important caution about the need to pursue objectivity with determined vigilance. While almost any course benefits from a dialectic approach, course directors and instructors should take care to avoid three areas of prospective contention.

First, the proposed block of instruction needs to focus on Islam in a strictly historical context and should not devolve into a class on comparative religion. Although the "religious" aspect of the Middle East may be of cultural interest and have a contextual role in planning, it should not be allowed to undermine the course's historical agenda. Regrettably, religious comparisons can lead to unhelpful, essentialist "anti-other" narratives like those fostered by Spencer and his supporters.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, religion's traditionally presumptive role as the primary cause of friction in the Middle East is actually starting to come into question. For instance, Graham E. Fuller, a former Vice-Chair of the National Intelligence Council and a senior Middle East expert at the RAND Corporation,<sup>106</sup> recently wrote that Islam, as a faith, matters so little to events in the region that American strategists should "act as if Islam did not exist in formulating policies in the Middle East."<sup>107</sup> This may be an overstatement, but it nonetheless supports the rationality of keeping the course's focus exclusively on matters of historical import.

Second, events of the last nine years demonstrate why the subject of cultural anthropology should also be carefully avoided. In this regard, Raphael Patai's *The Arab Mind* serves as a valuable warning.<sup>108</sup> For years after its publication in 1973, Patai's book received favorable treatment. In the 1990s, a CIA review even described it as a "significant scholarly contribution" to "social science research involving the topics of 'national character' or 'personality and culture.'"<sup>109</sup> Ostensibly, the twin purposes of such research were "(1) the prediction of the type of character that a given society is likely to produce, based upon



the sum total of its culture and social structure and (2) the demonstration of how character or personality, in turn, impacts upon the very culture and social structure which has shaped it."<sup>110</sup>

The positive reviews came to an abrupt halt shortly after the Abu Ghraib scandal broke. Investigative journalists uncovered that U.S. personnel developed the harsh interrogation techniques employed at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, by relying on Patai's book and its cultural/anthropological conclusions.<sup>111</sup> The press revelations spurred significant soul-searching in the American anthropologist community and caused one leading academic to note, "It is high time we ask ourselves searching questions. Although Patai's book may not have been used as a torture 'handbook' at Abu Ghraib, it evidently provided an important component in the necessary stereotyping and distancing that underlies this 'culture of abuse.'"<sup>112</sup>

Although perhaps not as perilous as Patai's cultural determinism, matters touching on the subject of epistemology should also be left out of the curriculum. A recent book by former Voice of America Director Robert R. Reilly argues that many of the problems in Muslim society today stem from the historic suppression of Hellenic, rationalist thought by Muslim traditionalists and dogmatists.<sup>113</sup> The argument has merit but would invite a level of controversy potentially counterproductive to the proposed

course's goal of providing students with a useful historical framework for the Middle East.

Fortunately, avoiding all of these distractions is eminently achievable. So long as the assigned readings and lecture presentations remain focused on the region's historical context, the subject of Islam's early history can be imparted in a clear, empirical, and uncontroversial manner. That said, instructors can no doubt still look forward to lively student debate.

## CONCLUSION

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1800.01D mandates that professional military education build officers who understand the strategic implications of their decisions, while the nation's war colleges in particular are charged with ensuring America's future leaders possess the skills they need to assume positions of strategic leadership across the interagency.<sup>114</sup> To meet these requirements, the war colleges' curricula must be enhanced. No senior leader in the U.S. national security establishment shaping strategy in the Middle East should lack a basic understanding of the key events that form the historical narrative of early Islam. When Muslims are asked what the West should do to improve relations, one of their top suggestions is to exhibit a better understanding of Islam.<sup>115</sup> America's war colleges should oblige; ignorance of the region's past is a poor and dangerous alternative to expending the time necessary to teach the history of Islam's first seven centuries. A block of instruction covering the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his four successors, the key events of the early Arab conquests, the original sources of the Sunni-Shi'ite divide, and both the Golden Age of Islam and the reasons for its brutal demise should be a prerequisite for anyone who may someday help craft American foreign policy. Once equipped with this historic framework, American strategists will be far more capable of assessing the innumerable Middle East challenges that are certain to emerge in the coming years, whether political, economic, social, or military. Indeed, those challenges will

only be resolved if they are carefully and meaningfully analyzed through the lens of history.

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