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The Evolution of Arab Conceptions of the Crusades

Strategic Insights, Volume VI, Issue 2 (March 2007)

by CAPT John "Garick" Chamberlin

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One of the most common rhetorical strategies used by Islamic extremists to attack the West is to rally the "Arab street" against "the Crusaders." Today's Arab Muslims are frequently considered to be still bitter about the Crusades, the reference to which makes them "relive the barbaric encounters of those times."^[1] In just one recent example of extremist use of this rhetoric, the Zarqawi network's statement about their November 9, 2005 attacks on Jordanian hotels announced their action as attacking "a back yard for the enemies of Islam, such as the Jews and Crusaders."^[2]

The Crusades are an extremely emotional issue among Muslims today. Bitterness about the Crusades shows up in some very anti-Western, and sometimes very violent, contexts. Libyan propaganda in the early 1980s attempted to mobilize its population against America, which was presented as having launched "the offensive of the Cross against Islam."^[3] Mehmet Ali Agha, before his attempted assassination of the Pope in 1981, wrote in a letter "I have decided to kill John Paul II, the supreme commander of the Crusades."^[4] The most famous of these uses of anti-Crusader rhetoric is Usama Bin-Laden's *fatwa* of 1998, in which he called for the killing of Americans. It was titled "Text of World Islamic Front's Statement Urging Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders."^[5] What is not so clear is that this is a case of *still* being bitter, rather than new bitterness. This article shows the process of the re-telling the Arab history of the Crusades based on different historians' current contexts.

A review of the pertinent primary medieval Arab histories does not reveal the outrage expressed by modern sources. Neither at the time of the invasion itself, nor for much of the time of the Western Christian "Crusader States" in the Levant, were the Crusades seen as a unified issue or a momentous problem for the local polities. Instead, the invaders were seen as just one more in a series of actors in the region. The presumptive ideological motives that give "the Crusades" their historical unity in the West was not apparent to the other side. Muslim chroniclers of the time were unconcerned with this Western concept and simply saw what we think of as "the Crusades" as more in a series of conflicts involving various enemies. They are certainly chronicled, not as a distinct event, but as multiple events within a chronological framework.

The majority of the primary sources agree that the initial reaction to the Frankish presence in the Middle East was one of limited interest. Religious and cultural outrage was very hard to find, even among those city-states with new Frankish neighbors. Only the dispossessed attempted to urge a general *jihad*, and these attempts fell mostly on deaf ears, especially in far off Baghdad. This was seen initially as simply a provincial Syrian problem. This lack of concern is particularly surprising as the first wave of the Crusades included the most egregious atrocities and the loss of the holy places of Jerusalem.^[6] A swelling of anti-Frankish *jihad* rhetoric and feeling began in earnest

after a decade of Frankish occupation, but that the feeling never fully took priority over local rivalries and other political considerations. Even at its height, during Saladin's control over Egypt and Syria, more military effort was spent on fellow Muslims than upon Crusader armies and holdings.

While modern literature attempting to evoke Arab bitterness over this era points to many sources of ill-will based on Frankish action, it does not explain the "second priority status" of anti-Frankish *jihad*, nor the many examples of Frankish cooperation with various Muslim factions throughout the era. How, then, did we get from the general Muslim apathy of the First Crusade and the moderate enmity that led to "on-again-off-again" attempts to expel the Franks culminating in the Muslim victory of 1291, and then to the bitterness and "lasting psychological scars"^[7] of today? It is clear that this historical viewpoint is invented, or is at least, re-interpreted. An examination of the process of historical re-working offers valuable insight into how current context influences the telling of history.

"The Crusades" in Medieval Arab Chronicles

The arrival of the Franks in the Holy Land was not seen as a momentous event by Muslim chroniclers of the era, and certainly not as the opening round in an epic religious struggle. The concept of a "Crusade," was not yet current even among the participants, but even the notion of an armed pilgrimage, dedicated to "liberating" Christian holy places, so current among the Frankish forces themselves, is not reflected by the Arab chronicles. Many of the chroniclers, such as Ibn al-Jawzi and Ibn al-Qalanisi, spend no time on Frankish motivations whatsoever, simply noting their presence by means of what cities they besieged. Ibn al-Athir gives the most reflection on the matter, and offers the explanation closest to Christian zeal for the holy land. Even he, however, offers it as one alternative explanation, and if true the result not of papal exhortation, but of political maneuvering on the part of Roger of Sicily.^[8] Ibn al-Athir's alternate explanation is even more one of power politics than religion, that the Fatamid rulers of Egypt invited the Franks to establish a buffer state between themselves and the Seljuk Turks who had recently conquered Syria.^[9]

The dominant expression of Muslim opinion of the Franks both prior to and following the fall of Jerusalem was centered not on their religion, but on their personal habits. According to these views "The Franks did not follow civilized pursuits. They were filthy in their personal habits, lacking in sexual morality and proper marital jealousy, but courageous and redoubtable in war."^[10] While barbaric, they were martially respected, and even useful. They were not seen as a natural religious enemy who must be forced from the Muslim lands at all costs. Only later would *jihad* rhetoric begin to call in earnest for their expulsion, and even with that the famous commanders of the "Counter-Crusade" spent more time fighting other Muslims than they did the Franks.

The Concept of the Crusades Enters Arab Discourse

While military campaigns that would later be known as part of the Crusades continued to be chronicled in Arabic sources for hundreds of years after the Crusading era ended, the Crusades as a unified historical occurrence remained foreign to Arab conceptions of history until the modern era. In the mid-nineteenth century, increasing ties between France, which had declared itself protector of Catholics within the Ottoman empire as early as 1638, and Arab Christians, particularly Maronites, in the Levant, brought the concept of the Crusades into Arabic historical discourse.

The first Arab history, though written in French and predominantly to influence a French audience, to include the concept of the Crusades was the Maronite Bishop Murad's 1844 work *Notice historique sur l'origine de la nation Maronite et sur ses rapports avec la France, sur la nation*

Druze et sur les diverses populations du Mont Liban. This work sought to create a shared identity with its “guardian angel,” France, in whose language the book was written and to whose king it was addressed,^[11] and to create legitimacy for Maronite claims over Mount Lebanon . According to Ussama Makdisi:

Loyal to France and to the Crusaders, loyal to the idea and existence of Christianity in the Orient, and on the front line between Christendom and barbarism, Murad's Maronites urgently needed French assistance in the troubled postrestoration times. “ Lebanon,” he wrote, is “like another French land,” and France was the “*seconde patrie des Maronites*.”^[12]

Why did Bishop Murad choose the Crusades to show the Maronites in good light to the French? The answer is that in the mid-nineteenth century, the notion of a crusade resonated favorably with its intended audience. This was the era of European romantic re-interpretation of the Crusades, which were seen almost universally favorably. In an era of dynamic expansion and "civilizing missions," the Crusades were presented in Europe as an early example of selfless devotion to combating evil at the cost of great hardship.

Within fifteen years, Bishop Murad's concepts made their way into a Maronite work in the Arabic language. In 1859, Tanyus Shidyaq, a Maronite of the Hadduth clan, published *Kitab Akhbar al-ayan fi Jabal Lubnan (History of the Great Families of Mount Lebanon)*, which contains what was apparently the first documented use of the term "Crusades" (*al-hurub as-selibiyah*) in Arabic, though it is only a fleeting reference in the introduction. Shidyaq's work is a family history of each of the notable families of Lebanon. While he does not use the term "Crusades" again in his work, he does reference the Maronites, and especially the Murad family, as ardent supporters of their brother Christian Franks from 1099 through their expulsion in 1291.

Within a decade, the first Arabic language history of the Crusades was published, also under Arab Christian auspices, a posthumously published translation of a little known French account of the Crusades by Maximus III Mazlum, Melkite Patriarch of Jerusalem from 1833 through 1855.^[13]

The Crusades then were not remembered bitterly by Arabs for centuries, but rather brought to Arab attention by the combined efforts of European contact and Arab Christians. This introduction led to Hariri's 1899 attempt to explain what these references were all about, but for the most part the concept was non-resonant, and almost meaningless among Arab Muslims until the twentieth century.

Modern Arab Conceptions of the Crusades

The early twentieth century was an era in which Arab authors spent little time on the Crusades. This is surprising, as it was this era that included the British formalization of their colonial status in Egypt, Allied Powers' war against the Ottoman Empire, and thus the technical Caliph, and France's 1920 invasion of Syria and deposition of King Faisal, assumption of mandate control, and creation of the independent and majority Christian state of Lebanon. As much as these actions may seem likely candidates for analysis as parallel to the Crusades, however the crusade “concept” was not yet well enough established in the Arab world to resonate. Instead, the parallels came from the colonial powers, which spread Crusade allusions widely.

Among the most widely reported of these allusions, the two best known are those of General Allenby's capture of Jerusalem in 1917 and General Gouraud's capture of Damascus in 1920. It is almost certainly apocryphal that Allenby remarked on his entry to Jerusalem that "today the Crusades are over." Certainly his memoirs contain no such quote, nor do any press reports at the time. There is more evidence for the tale of General Gouraud's conquest of Damascus, after which he was said to have visited Saladin's tomb, kicked it and declared "Awake Saladin, we

have returned," though the exact words are not recorded. Neither of these incidents drew widespread comment from the Arab Muslim population at the time, for whom the Crusades were a relatively obscure concept. With a few decades of colonial rule to absorb the new vision of history, and then the sudden prospect of the creation of the state of Israel to draw new parallels, Arab histories of the Crusades proliferated, and colonial and Zionist parallels became the dominant interpretation.

The study of the Crusades became an important part of Arab academic writing after World War II, and continues to be a popular subject to this day. The dominant viewpoint has been through the lens of Arab nationalism and several themes have predominated in interpreting the Crusades. The most ubiquitous of these themes is the drawing of parallels between the Crusades and colonialism and/or the establishment of Israel. Also common to these works is the issue of Arab unity. In earlier works, the Crusades are seen both as a symptom of lack of unity, and as a triumph for "regained" unity. This offers a clear road map to victory for Arabs of the day. Thus, in Hasan Habashi's view in his 1947 work *Nur ad-Din and the Crusaders: The Islamic Revival and Convergence Movement in the Sixth Century Hijri*,^[14] success came for the Arabs after Nur ad-Din unified Syria, Egypt, and northern Iraq under one polity, forming an example of how "the occurrences of the Middle Ages in the near east show how these countries were able to defend themselves against the dangers of the Crusader forces."^[15] As the dream of Arab Unity drifted away, the dark lessons of disunity continued to be emphasized, but the triumphant power of unity was less often invoked as the notion of Arab defeat of Israel became, perhaps, less realistic. The imagined consequences of the Crusades play a large role throughout the literature, that similarly seems more one sided as the hoped for reversal of relative power for the Arabs fails to materialize. The modern Arab historiography of the Crusades is both consciously and subconsciously contemporary in nature. Not only do the authors explicitly draw parallels and lessons about current affairs, but the image of the current state of affairs influences the lens of implicit interpretation.

Post World War II and Suez Crisis: Golden Age Interpretation

Habashi's 1947 study of Nur ad-Din was written before the partition of Palestine, and thus rather than looking at a specific contemporary problem, he concentrates his interpretation on the virtues of the "unified Islamic front,"^[16] which is implicitly Arab. The fact that his Golden Age hero, Nur ad-Din, is a Seljuk Turk is glossed over. He is more interested in how he is presented by history. In Habashi's view, Muslim chroniclers of the era over-emphasized Nur ad-Din's religious side, spending too much of their chronicles discussing his efforts to solve and mediate religious issues within his territory, which makes it seem as though he did not have much concern over "the violent struggle between East and West, the appearance of the Latin principalities in the East, and the Muslim's efforts to extirpate these principalities."^[17] The Christian authors, by contrast, had it right when they presented Nur ad-Din as an epic enemy, though being on the wrong side, they tended to demonize him. Habashi is particularly concerned here with getting the "right blend" that shows Nur ad-Din as both a pious leader of the community, and a heroic unifier and enemy of the Crusaders.

In 1949, 'Abd al-Latif Hamzah published *Literature of the Crusades*.^[18] This work, published shortly after *al-nakba* ("the disaster," the contemporary Arab term for the 1948 Arab-Israeli War), shows the immediate effect this event had on interpreting the Crusades. He opens his book, from the first words, with:

In this afflicted age in our Egyptian modern history, a violent crises is passing among us, which this generation have dealt with and perhaps future generations will as well. This crises is our struggle on behalf of Palestine, hoping for its freedom from the covetousness of the Jews.^[19]

Hamzah self consciously approaches the Crusades as a representative of the Arabs and conflates the Crusades with Palestine in no uncertain terms.

This crisis has awakened the intellect to the Crusades. Cultured people in all the Arab countries have begun to want to know something about the history of this religious war, and about its Arab literature. And that is what led me to answer this desire for the entire kingdom of the Arabic language in Egypt. ...I am happy to dedicate this book to the martyrs who died on behalf of Palestine, and wrote upon its land with their blood, inscribing a page from among the pages of Arab gallantry and military honor. May God the highest grant success to the first jihad of His Majesty, King Farouk, and guide the steps of his brother Arab Kings and presidents so their jihad bears fruit and they all realize their hopes.[\[20\]](#)

These works introduce themes common to contemporary Arab conceptions of the Crusades, the concept of a "unified Arab front" and the parallels between Israel and the Crusader states. After the Franco-British-Israeli attack on Egypt in 1959, generally referred to as the "Suez Crisis," and known in Egypt as the "Tripartite Aggression," the Crusade parallels were obvious, and numerous histories of the Crusades were published. The popular Western concept that the Crusades had sparked the Renaissance in Europe while weakening the Arabs, which was suggested by Steven Runciman, found its way into the Arab discourse.

Abd al-Fattah Ashur's 1963 work *The Crusade Movement: Description of the History of the Arab Jihad in the Middle Ages*[\[21\]](#) typifies post Suez-Crisis interpretation. To Ashur, the point of studying the Crusades is to protect "the Arab's rights, and the existence of Arabness, and to guarantee our children a free and generous life in our great Arab Nation."[\[22\]](#) He presents the Crusaders as atrocity-prone invaders (quoting Western sources for the atrocities, as they were little remarked by the period Arab chroniclers) and then excuses any atrocities perpetrated by Muslim as retribution for the massacre at the taking of Jerusalem.[\[23\]](#) While the Crusades are presented as the great victory of a Golden Age, the barbarity of the invader and the unfair results of the long struggle are highlighted. In Ashur's presentation, the Crusades led to destruction and long occupation for Arab countries, whereas Europe enjoyed the Renaissance "as a result of contact with the Arab Islamic civilization."[\[24\]](#)

After the Six Day War

The crushing military defeat of the Six-Day War eliminated the use of the Crusades as a blueprint for Arab victory. In fact, the entire Arab study of the Crusades went into a long silence. Only one work was published on this topic between 1968 and 1979. When the publication of works on the Crusades reemerged in 1980, Arab conceptions of the Crusades were markedly different. In addition to the continuation of nationalist works, which we will examine below, Islamic interpretations emerge in this era as well. Works influenced by nationalist thought offer similar framework to those published previously, though the negative effects for the Arab world are magnified, and the theme of confidence in eventual victory is gone. The modern nationalist strain of Crusade history is typified by Khasih Ma'adiyah *et al.*'s 1986 work, *The History of the Arab Nation and the Crusader Invasion*.[\[25\]](#)

Ma'adiyah *et al.*'s work seems, both from its multiple authors and from its presentation, to have been written for use as a textbook, most likely in Syria. The book contains two themes. First, it shows how three major leaders, Zengi, Nur ad-Din, and Saladin (all claimed as Syrian), were able to form a unified internal front to meet the invaders. The book's second goal is to show how the nation, under these leaders, faced the "attacks of the Crusaders that were aimed at the land and people, and at controlling Syria and exterminating the existence of Islam."[\[26\]](#) The theme of the importance of unity is still paramount, and modern parallels are still emphasized, but the negative effects of the Crusades for the Arabs are now more central to the depiction. The introduction

states that "the Arab nation is still suffering until today from colonial and Zionist attacks which take the place of the Crusaders in weakening the Arabs and bringing about the continuation of the occupation of Palestine."[\[27\]](#) There is no talk here of lessons to be learned and a triumph over Israel similar to that over the Crusaders. There is instead a note of despondency over weakness in statements as "many of the situations and happenings of the Crusades resemble those of the current situation of we, the victims, in numerous ways."[\[28\]](#)

Ma'adiyah *et al* spend ten pages on the positive results of the Crusades for Europe, giving almost exclusive credit to the Crusades for the European Renaissance. In their view, Europe benefited socially, culturally and economically from the Crusades,[\[29\]](#) while for the Arab world, we see the now familiar Runciman thesis of the Crusades paving the way for Mongol conquest.

The narrative of the Crusades among mainstream post-World War II Arab historians is one of Western attack on a splintered Arab world. While some cite atrocities, the main concern is not the physical acts of the invaders, but the imposition of a foreign state in the "heart of the Arab Nation." The parallel to Israel is not only implicit, it is declared, as is the parallel to colonialism on the part of the European powers. The "Counter-Crusade" is presented as a unified and continuous Arab effort, more or less triumphant depending on the viewpoint of the author and the modern lens through which he looks. Finally, the Crusades brought positive results to Europe, whereas they weakened the Arab world and explained later defeats. This is not a narrative that came naturally from ancient Arab histories which still impact people to this day; it is the result of the re-interpretation of history throughout the last fifty years.

What Bin Laden Means: The Islamic Fundamentalist View of the Crusades

Islamic Fundamentalist conceptions of the Crusades are broader than those of the Nationalism-inspired histories examined above, but similar enough to resonate. For Fundamentalist thinkers, starting with Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb, the concept of the "Arab Nation" was valueless, and the Crusades are presented not as attacks on Arabs, but as attacks on the religion of Islam itself. Qutb offers the Crusades, which he interprets as all Christian attacks on Islam, from Byzantine response to the original Muslim conquest of Syria to twentieth century colonial dispossession of Muslims in Zanzibar, as one of the two great struggles between Islam and polytheism.[\[30\]](#) In his estimation, "the Crusades" are the polytheist response to the original Islamic conquest and represent a counter-attack aimed against the spirit of Islam. With this wide description of the Crusades, and with the close association with Zionism, almost any hostility not internal to Islam can be denounced as a Crusade.

With the spread of Islamic Fundamentalist thought and its occasional merger with Wahabism in Saudi Arabia, this vision of the Crusades spread widely. As one example, the 1983 eleventh grade history text in Saudi Arabia describes colonialism as "Crusader imperialism":

This text bases its entire discussion upon Islamic religious concepts. 'The main goal of Crusade imperialism behind imposing its authority on Muslims all over the world was to humiliate them and exploit their wealth, civilization, and heritage.'[\[31\]](#)

In 1986, Dr. Ahmad Shalabi published *The Crusades: Their beginning with the Emergence of Islam and their Continuity until Today: Description of the Western Crusade Military and Ideological Attacks on the Islamic World across the Ages*.[\[32\]](#) This work, as the title indicates, accepts Qutb's expanded definition of Crusade, and expands upon Qutb's rhetorical framework to produce an entire tome. Many of the themes (Israel, colonialism, etc.) are familiar from mainstream histories, but the concept of a "viscious attack on Islam" is highlighted:

The Crusades are against all Muslims.

There is another mistake related to that error which is far more dangerous, for many researchers and cultured people fall into the trap when they follow the West in saying that the Crusades were against the Arabs and that their goal was recovering Jerusalem, for the truth is that the goal was deeper than that and more dangerous. The Crusader movement was against all Muslims, and not against the Arabs alone, and their goal was to humiliate the Muslims and bring down damage upon them. ...This can also be seen in the numerous strikes launched by Christians to attempt to colonize the entire Islamic world, Arab and non-Arab, and by creating Israel in this place so that this country may play its role at the Crusader direction, and it can also be seen in the strikes on Iraq and Tunis and the threats against Pakistan, and, similarly, the destructive Russian advance on Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Current Arab conceptions of the Crusades are not simply a memory that continues from that era until today. They are the result of a complex pattern of interpretation, carried out for the most part over the course of the last century. It took time during the Crusades for Muslims to develop a sense of outrage over the Frankish presence in the Middle East. It also took many centuries before Arabs developed a view of the Crusades as a unified historical event with important economic, social and political connotations. Only with the coming of the European powers and their strong and romantic attachment to the Crusades did the concept gain any notoriety within the Muslim world.

The early connections between Europe, especially France, and local Christians overtly seeking their patronage led to the insertion of the Crusades into the Arabic discourse. Only repeated European references and activities drawing parallels to the Crusades would bring them relevance to a modern audience. The putative Crusade references of Generals Allenby and Gourad during their respective triumphal entries into Arab cities may have brought little reaction at the time, but modern realities made them loom large in later years. In 1988, HAMAS included both incidents in Article 15 of their charter as examples of Western Imperialism and of ties between the Crusades and colonial occupation.

The partition of Palestine brought particular resonance to the study of the Crusades, and the vast majority of Arab histories of the Crusades follow the announcement of the partition. The issue of Israel looms largest in the re-imaging of the Crusades. Almost all examined sources have drawn that parallel. Pre-1967 Arab histories of the Crusades draw a narrative of a European invasion of a divided land, followed by an heroic Arab unification and eventual triumph. After the disaster of the Six Day War, the narrative remained similar, but the depth of loss became highlighted, as did the assumption of unequal results from the Crusades that led Europe to world domination, while the Arab world, weakened by the Crusades, fell to the Mongols, the Ottomans, and the Europeans in succession.

Islamic fundamentalists developed a parallel interpretation of the Crusades. While similar in many ways, the Crusades, in their presentation, were aimed not at "the heart of the Arab nation," but at Islam as a whole. It is this vision that Usama bin Laden invokes in his Crusade references, such as his famed 1998 *fatwa* in which he said:

Despite the great devastation inflicted on the Iraqi people by the Crusader-Zionist alliance, and despite the huge number of those killed, which has exceeded one million. ...Despite all this, the Americans are once again trying to repeat the horrific massacres, as though they are not content with the protracted blockade imposed after a ferocious war, or the fragmentation and devastation.

So here they come to annihilate what is left of this people and to humiliate their Muslim neighbors.[33]

While bin Laden's maximalist interpretation of the Crusades may resonate strongly only among fundamentalists, other interpretations, borrowing from both traditions and aimed at more common parallels, seem to resonate well even with what the West refers to as "moderate Arabs." In the view of many Arabs, HAMAS is fighting a war of liberation, and mixed nationalist and religious Crusade references such as those found in the HAMAS charter, if not how they would put it, are nonetheless perfectly legitimate.

Modern Arab conceptions of the Crusades are not entirely about loss, but the current balance of relative power does lend an air of discouragement. The current experience is imagined as the end result of the experience of the Crusades. Despite the eventual expulsion of the Crusaders, it is this notion of "unequal results that explain current realities" that makes the Crusades a defeat. From the fundamentalist viewpoint, the great discouragement of the modern era is that the Muslims are still removed from the Islam of the *rashidun*. To the nationalists, it is that the Arab world has been unable to achieve a common front against the invader. Either way, the current situation resembles that of the era of Crusader victories after the invasion, not that of the heady days of the Crusader expulsion. Thus the Crusades are imagined as today as a disheartening defeat.

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