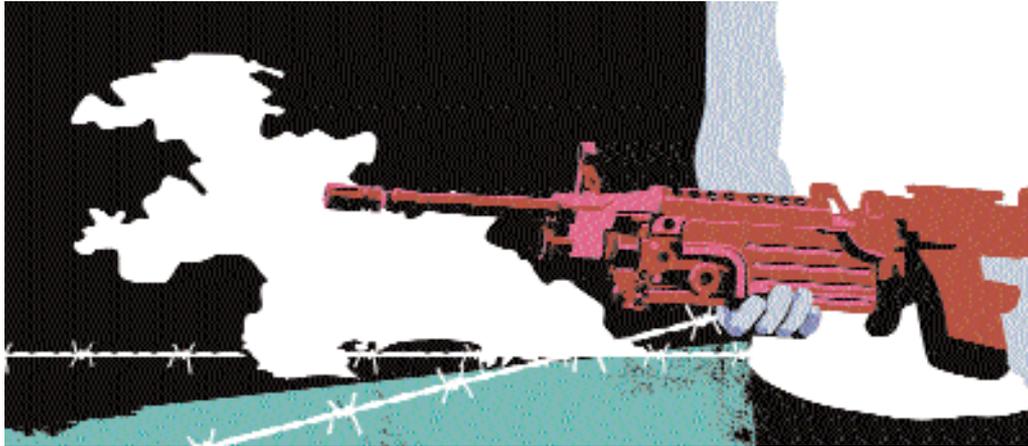


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Born in blood

How intimations from the past help explain the spread of the ISIS

The stunning march of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or the ISIS, since June through parts of those two countries, and its growing threat to Jordan and Lebanon as it seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate in the old unified Mesopotamia, brings to mind another electrifying campaign in the seventh century AD that destroyed the classical world of antiquity and created a new world order in western Eurasia. This was the Arab conquest under the banner of Islam. It was a totally unexpected development, and the factors behind this reordering of the world are still in dispute. But as this century was in many ways an important hinge of history, in this column I summarise what is now known, and to see if these intimations from the past provide any prognosis for the current battle for West Asia.

The history of this pivotal century has been contested by three sets of historians. The first are those who accept the picture painted by Muslim sources, and largely accepted by Western scholars, such as Ernest Renan in 1883 and more recently by Maxime Rodinson (*Mohammed*, Pelican Books, London, 1973). These sources (including the *Quran* and the *Hadiths*), which can date some two centuries after the events they describe, have been questioned by historians like John Wansbrough (*The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, Oxford, 1978), who using the method of textual analysis developed by biblical scholars to determine the authenticity of these classical sources provide a different timeline and location for the events they describe. A popular and controversial account of this revisionist history is provided in Tom Holland's *In the Shadow of the Sword* (Little, Brown, London, 2012). The third account is by my old friend (since we were young lecturers together at Christ Church, Oxford) the scholar of Byzantium, James Howard-Johnston. In his important book *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford, 2010), he builds on the pioneering work of the Princeton histo-

rians Patricia Crone and Michael Cook (*Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge, 1977) and their students by a scholarly and persuasive vetting of the Muslim and non-Muslim historians and histories of the seventh century. Briefly, the story he tells is as follows.

Around 600 AD, two long-established great empires dominated western Eurasia — the truncated and Christian Roman Empire centred on Constantinople, and the neo-Zoroastrian Persian Empire reconstituted by the Sasanian dynasty in the third century. Both could mobilise vast resources for war: the Romans those of North Africa and much of Italy, the Balkans and the near West Asia; the Persians, from the fertile lands of Mesopotamia and highland Iran. Their territories abutted, and they competed for influence over the peoples of the north Caucasus and the Bedouin tribes of Arabia, with whom both had established patron-client relationships to guard their respective desert frontiers. They were commercial rivals, competing for the lucrative overland trade from China and the seaborne trade across the Indian Ocean from India and Southeast Asia.

By the second quarter of the eighth century, the Persian Sasanian Empire had been extinguished. The Roman Empire had shrunk to Byzantium, controlling only Asia Minor, the islands of the Aegean and the southern extremities of the Balkans. It was now in a mortal struggle with the new imperial power of the Bedouin Arabs, who in a short space of time since their eruption from the marginal lands beyond the zone of direct confrontation between the two existing imperial powers had defeated both imperial field armies in open battle, and soon controlled Egypt, Mesopotamia and highland Iran. The binary world order of late antiquity was replaced by the new unitary Arab power in the seventh century.

How had this astonishing new world order been established? There are two contending explanations. The first is one of circumstances, like the Roman-Persian

war lasting from 603-628 AD. The second, of ideological changes brought about in Arabia by the Prophet Mohammed. Prof Howard-Johnston argues that of these two, it is the latter that accounts for the extraordinary rise of the Arab Muslim Empire.

“The greatest appeal of Muhammad’s monotheist message,” writes Prof Howard-Johnston, “lay in its bleakness, in its clear-eyed view of a universe governed by a single divine autocrat The traditional *passive fatalism* of the Bedouin, conducting life according to a tribal code of man’s creation, was transformed by faith, which required complete submission to Allah This engendered an *active fatalism* in genuine converts, a commitment to serve God with their persons and worldly goods together with indifference to the personal cost. It maybe termed a *whole faith*, one which permeated the whole being of the believer. This in turn endowed Muslim troops with extraordinary *élan*. They were committed unto death. The armies which invaded the Roman and Persian empires were in essence ordered arrays of suicide fighters, endowed with extraordinary courage and daring (pages 450-451).” This is a description equally applicable to the warriors of the ISIS, as David Blair, who witnessed their attack on the Iraqi justice ministry in March 2013, noted.¹

There were two innovations that transformed Islam’s prospects after the Prophet’s flight to Medina. The first was to change Muslims’ direction of prayer from Jerusalem (the holiest place on earth for both the previous monotheist religions) to the Kaa’ba, the premier pagan sanctuary of Arabia. This incorporation of the Kaa’ba and its associated rites into Islam – forced though it was on the Prophet – was a political act, which once Mecca had formally submitted in 630 AD allowed Islam to draw on the developed institutional endowment, diplomatic expertise and mercantile ingenuity of this well-established trading city. Secondly, it was this Meccan statecraft that allowed the early Muslim caliphs to devise and implement a “grand strategy” of husbanding the military resources of Arabia, directing operations at a distance, establishing priorities and deploying the requisite resources at the right place to achieve their objectives.

And its success was phenomenal. By the 16th century, Christendom had begun its voyages of discovery in large part to bypass the Islamic behemoth that now bestrode the whole West Asia, denying it access to the vital Eastern spice trade. It controlled “all but the western, eastern and southern extremities of the Eurasian continent (page 516)”.

Can the ISIS repeat a similar feat? Mr Blair notes that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, its leader, is “not merely a religious fanatic, but a strategic thinker and an accomplished commander”. He has captured vital oilfields and the northern city of Mosul containing military depots stuffed with weapons and millions of dollars in the Iraqi central bank’s branch. Mr al-Baghdadi has become “the richest and best-equipped terrorist leader in modern history”, notes Mr Blair, “and the ruler of enough territory to be able to proclaim the birth of an ‘Islamic state’”. Having swiftly shown up the weakness of the Iraqi army and the Kurdish *peshmerga*, and with the leader of the remaining superpower still determined to “lead from behind”, it remains unclear whether Mr al-Baghdadi will be able to match the feats of his self-proclaimed *nom de guerre*, the Caliph Abu Bakr, or whether his Caliphate will end as it was born — in blood.



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1. “Islamic State’s cunning leader”, by David Blair, Daily Telegraph, August 14, 2014