

Tales from Arabia

by [Nikos Akritas](#) (May 2024)



Après la pluie, au Liban –by Mahmoud Saïd, 1954

...the greatest war was to be made on their own past, and everything that linked them to their own earth.

To the convert his land is of no religious or historical importance; its relics are of no account; only the sands of Arabia are sacred.—V. S. Naipul, Beyond Belief

In the 7th century, Arab armies burst out of Arabia, swiftly conquering large areas of the East Roman (Byzantine) and Persian Empires. Within seventy years Arab armies held sway from the Atlantic to Central Asia. According to the Muslim narrative, such an amazing feat proves theirs is the true religion; their conquests can only be explained by divine favour, to spread the faith amongst the infidels. But this meteoric rise can be explained by more mundane—social and political—factors than God's wish to spread his message by the sword.

Rome and Persia had, for centuries, been superpowers vying for power in the Middle East. By the 6th century, both were employing Arab mercenaries in their armies and had formed alliances with Arab tribes in the Arabian Peninsula. By the mid-6th century, a devastating plague swept through both the Roman and Persian worlds, decimating their populations, but this did not put an end to their apocalyptic struggle, which continued throughout the sixth to early seventh centuries. By 632, Rome had triumphed but it was a Pyrrhic victory.

The Persian polity had been destroyed and East Rome severely weakened, just before the onset of the Arab invasions. Within a decade, Arab armies, including troops previously fighting for the Persians and Romans (and therefore familiar with their respective methods of waging war, as well as their political and geopolitical concerns), had taken full advantage of the power vacuum resulting from the mutually destructive Romano-Persian wars.

The Arabs conquered lands comprising peoples professing Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and a host of other, minor, religions within just seventy years. Religious assertion aside, the condition of the Romano-Persian world, devastated through plague, continuous warfare and the financial ruin, civil unrest and alienation of most people

from the ruling classes largely explain why this was possible.

The territories lost by East Rome are most instructive. The populations of north Africa and the Middle East professed versions of Christianity deemed heretical by the Church of New Rome (Constantinople) and, as a result, were periodically persecuted; burdensome taxes and incessant wars only served to strengthen their alienation. Hence, when another heretical Christian sect (this is what many early Christians believed Islam to be) managed to oust the imperial armies, the local populations would not necessarily have viewed this as negative.

The early Muslim invaders did not insist on the conversion of conquered peoples, this would have resulted in a reduction of revenues from the lucrative jizya, and kept themselves separate from them. Indeed, when these non-Arab populations began converting to Islam they were viewed with suspicion. As long as the conquered populations complied with any political demands and paid their taxes, the Arabs were happy to let them continue living as they always had.

This goes some way to explaining the Golden Age of Islam. Islamic scholars, who are often cited as proof that Islam is compatible with rationality and scientific progress, were converts amongst the conquered peoples continuing the Greco-Roman and Persian traditions in a now more stable environment (resulting in increased trade, wealth and intellectual accomplishment). None of these scholars were from the Arabian Peninsula and, religion aside, centres of learning were markedly absent in that part of the world.

Over time, the conquered peoples adopted the language and religion of the conquerors. They were now Muslims and everyone else an infidel. In parts of the 'Islamic' world this process had still not been completed by the 20th century; there were still many peoples who had not converted to the conquerors' religion. Whilst Muslim empires were powerful entities this

dichotomy sufficed. But in the era of nationalism, with a disintegrating Ottoman Empire, homogenizing these areas meant non-Muslim populations had to go.

Starting with the genocide of Armenian, Assyrian and Greek Christians of Anatolia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, then the ethnic cleansing of Jews from Muslim lands and continuing into the latter part of the 20th century with the reduction of Lebanese and Syrian Christians populations, the process continues today. It affects not just the Coptic Christians of Egypt but the Yazidi, Druze and other peoples across the Muslim World. For all its claims to be a beacon of democracy and liberalism in the region Turkey's non-Muslim population is less than 1% (down from around 20-25% just a century ago) and Jews, who it claims have always been a protected minority in former Ottoman lands, have emigrated in record numbers of late. The praying for Hitler's soul, expressed by a member of President Erdogan's AKP party, Suleyman Sezen, in the wake of the Hamas attack on 7th October 2023 requires no further comment.

According to the 'Arab'-Muslim myth, today's Arabic speaking lands were not just conquered by Arab armies but populated by peoples from the Arabian Peninsula. If this were the case, the genocide required would have been on an enormous scale—with the disappearance of peoples in relatively heavily populated lands stretching from the Atlantic to Iraq. On the surface, this may all seem purely academic. Regardless of how change came about, ethnic identity is subjective and if one regards oneself Arab this is a personal choice. But this ignores any attempt to understand how societies change over time, which leads to a reactionary politics and wanting, if any, social policy afflicting most Arabic speaking countries today. Historical processes are not important unless they can be referred to in order to claim victimhood.

For Muslims, everything that happened before Muhammad's message reached their ancestors was part of the age of

ignorance (*jahiliyya*), which is a convenient way of precluding any consideration of historical change. But when the Muslim world cries victim of an imperialist West, the convenience of not casting a critical eye over 'Muslim' lands in previous centuries is very expedient indeed.

Many Western Christians are unaware of the history of Eastern Christendom—an area far larger than western Europe in which most people professed the Christian faith in its Orthodox, Nestorian, Coptic and other forms. These peoples were the majority population in lands stretching from Morocco to the borders of Iran. Through centuries of persecution, it became clear they would be better off converting to Islam—they would not be subjected to the blood tax (where their children would be taken to be brought up Muslim) and could seek redress in law courts for assault, rape and robbery, which they could not, as Christians, if the perpetrators were Muslims.

Such discrimination is sanctioned by the Muslim faith. The mentality it engenders is not, unlike Christian chauvinism, a thing of the past; no Western government today is driven by religious purpose. This is not the case in the Islamic world. Non-Muslims are inferior; they are sources of disdain and ridicule and to consider them equals, offensive. Non-Muslim outsiders, treated as welcome guests, provide evidence to the contrary. Not viewed as threatening, their experiences are individual and anecdotal. But consider the treatment of indigenous groups within these societies who do not adhere to the Muslim faith. If they still exist, they are a constant reminder of a pre-Islamic past as well as being unbelievers; testament to how Islam spread to those lands through violence and victims of continuing bigotry.

The creation of Israel is the insult par excellence. An inferior people taking 'Arab land' is unforgivable. It is an insult to Islam and to Arab identity. Similar fury resulted in the Armenian genocide and permanent incorporation of the Armenian vilayets of the Ottoman Empire into Turkey—here the

double insult (of an inferior people claiming self-determination) was to Islam and Turkish nationalism.

When Muslim Arabs put forward a historical claim to any land, outside of the Arabian Peninsula which lands were not Arabised by conquest and violence? The most successful imperialism is the conquest of the mind. Arab imperialism lives on in the Muslim religion and the sense of identity and entitlement it has bequeathed; an entitlement which paints Muslims as a superior caste who have been hard done by. For all the intellectual acrobatics of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and how the West continues to be influenced by racist concepts of the *other*, a closer scrutiny of myths of Arab identity and consideration of historical change in the region shed light on a social phenomenon far deeper and all-encompassing on the victims: religious conversion, resulting in identifying with the aggressor and sustaining the imperialism begun a millennium and a half ago.

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