

Setting the record straight

Efraim Karsh's new book serves as a corrective to the popular narrative that all the ills of the Middle East can be traced to the perfidy of the Zionists and Western imperialists **By Tibor Krausz**

I'VE LOST count of the times I've heard and read that if not for Israel's brutal treatment of Palestinians and the theft of "indigenous" Arab land in "Palestine" by European Jews, peace and prosperity would long ago have dawned upon the long-suffering peoples of the Middle East. As for a century of violent Arab rejectionism, ruthless irredentism, unceasing terrorism, and vicious sectarianism – it's as if they've never existed.

How about the equally oft-stated notion that until Israel came into being in 1948, everything had been hunky-dory between Arab and Jew? Yes, but what of the centuries of oppression, persecution and murder of Jews by Arabs and Muslims? Bah, they never happened, either.

Then there is another commonly held view: All the murder and mayhem in today's self-imploding Middle East is the fault of Western imperialism. But isn't that nonsense too?

Efraim Karsh thinks so. An Israeli historian who is professor of political studies at Bar-Ilan University and professor emeritus of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean studies at King's College London, Karsh is an expert on Ottoman imperialism and Islamic jihadism – two subjects he tackled with aplomb in, respectively, "Empires of the Sand" (1999) and "Islamic Imperialism" (2006). In both books Karsh argues that jihadist violence has been much less a reaction to Western injustice than an animating feature of Islamic societies from the time of Muhammad, and that the plight of Middle Eastern societies has been largely self-inflicted.

In "The Tail Wags the Dog," the scholar expounds on this latter theme. Karsh wastes no time disposing of the popular view that it was incessant meddling by Britain and France in the early 20th century that forced local Arabs into volatile national arrangements in violation of their true national aspirations, sowing the seeds of today's brutal and seismic ethnocentric realignments. In reality, Karsh points out, it was largely the imperialistic ambitions of Hussein ibn Ali al-Hashimi, the Sharif of Mecca, and his Machiavellian sons Faisal and Abdullah (soon to become the kings of Iraq/Syria and Jordan respectively) that would bedevil the lives of later generations.

The Arabs have always wanted a Palestinian state a lot less than they've wanted to destroy Israel

The Hashemites did rely on foreign help to create facts on the ground, but in the historian's view Britain and France weren't so much scheming puppet masters as willing accomplices to well-connected and ambitious Arab machinators, who wanted to profit from the territorial spoils of the unraveling Ottoman Empire. The empire's demise itself was the result of its calculated attempt to regain some of its former glory

by entering World War I (despite being entreated by Britain and France not to do so) on what proved to be the losing side.

The much-maligned Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 between Britain and France, which sought to carve out their respective spheres of influence across the region, wasn't meant by its creators to divvy up the Middle East into a fissiparous hotch-potch of ad hoc states at the mercy of their foreign overlords (as many critics, writing on its 100th anniversary, would have it), but to unite its peoples in an autonomous confederation of self-governing Arab states. To be sure, Britain and France did act out of self-interest by seeking to protect their geopolitical interests, yet they wanted not to divide and conquer the Arabs but to win them over to their side, even if they went about that in a rather haphazard and at times criminally negligent fashion.

Nothing better demonstrates that fact than Britain's gradual withdrawal of support for a viable Jewish state in the years after the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Far from being the neocolonialist love child of Western imperialism, as today's "anti-Zionist" demagogues insist, Israel was born of authentic Jewish national aspirations. The Zionist project had predated the war and would survive, through sheer grit, repeated efforts to smother it in its cradle by British double-dealing, implacable Arab hostility, and Western indifference.

The modern Middle East, Karsh insists, arose not out of some grand Western master plan but out of the confluences and clashes

King Faisal I of Iraq leads a delegation at Versailles, during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919; on his right is Britain's T. E. Lawrence



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of rival visions, misguided interventions, battlefield victories, epochal blunders, grandiose designs gone awry, and ephemeral political alignments with lasting consequences. “The Hashemite dream of succeeding the Ottoman Empire, the French ambitions in the Levant, the Jewish quest for a homeland in Palestine, and Britain’s regional desiderata” were just some of the currents that would shape the geographic and political landscape.

So would Palestinian Arab leaders’ realization, from the early 1920s onward, that violence paid political dividends. The more violently opposed Arabs in Palestine became to the very idea of Jewish nationhood, the more Britain tried to placate them through further and further concessions. Simultaneously, Britain kept walking back promises to the Zionists through a series of punitive measures and ever more stringent White Papers before finally turning virulently against Zionism in the aftermath of World War II.

Today, violent Arab intransigence remains unabated, and Israelis still get routinely blamed for it, not least by British politicians and intellectuals, as exemplified by the recent scandal over widespread casual anti-Semitism within the ranks of the Labour Party. “The fact of the matter is that from the very beginning the Arabs’ primary instrument for opposing Jewish national aspirations was violence, and no amount of foreign interference has been able to change this reality,” Karsh writes.

However, homicidal irredentism ultimate-

ly backfired, he argues. “It put Palestinian Arabs on a collision course with their Jewish compatriots against the wishes of ordinary Palestinians who would rather have coexisted with their neighbors yet paid the ultimate price for their leaders’ folly: homelessness and statelessness,” he observes.

This view borders on portraying “ordinary” Arabs as being hapless bystanders during wide-scale anti-Jewish violence, yet Karsh is right to point out that their leaders’ uncompromising stance ultimately hurt Palestinian Arabs the most. It’s not the Jews who disenfranchised Palestinians; it’s the latter who disenfranchised themselves through their leaders’ unyielding all-or-nothing approach, which was routinely backed by popular support.

In 1948 the Arabs chose war, which they then lost. They would choose war and violence repeatedly in subsequent decades, no matter what overtures and concessions Israelis might offer them. “The Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity,” Foreign Minister Abba Eban famously quipped in 1973, when, true to form, Arab leaders missed yet another opportunity to make peace with Israel and create a Palestinian state. They blew another chance at Camp David in 2000 in favor of renewed violence with ceaseless suicide bombings and other deadly attacks.

Yet the prevalent view in the West on the Israeli-Arab conflict invariably boils down to the same old pabulum: it’s all about Israelis’ brutal oppression of powerless Palestinians. Rare is the commentator who is

aware of history, or else has the chutzpa to counter the emotive and fact-free pro-Palestinian advocacy that passes for the only acceptable opinion these days in the West.

That’s why “The Tail Wags the Dog” is a welcome book. A well-argued work of scholarship, it’s designed to serve as a corrective to the popular mainstream narrative that all the ills of the Middle East can be traced to the perfidy of the Zionists and Western imperialists. This dominant view essentially reduces Arabs to the status of perennial victims and implicitly absolves them of moral agency by forever shifting the blame for their societies’ failings onto Israel and the West.

Karsh will have none of it. “Contrary to the common perception of regional affairs as an offshoot of global power politics,” the scholar writes, “modern Middle Eastern history has been the culmination of long-existing indigenous trends, passions and patterns of behavior; contrary to their treatment as hapless objects lacking an internal, autonomous dynamic of their own, Middle Easterners have been active and enterprising free agents doggedly pursuing their national interests... often in disregard of great-power wishes.”

That’s not to say the West does not have its own share of blame for the sorry state of affairs in the world’s most volatile and violent region. The ill-advised invasion of Iraq has proven to be a colossal mistake, yet even that was done with good intentions in mind – good intentions wedded to a criminal lack of foresight and a great deal of

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wishful thinking. By unseating the tyrant Saddam Hussein, US President George W. Bush hoped to lay the ground for the spread of liberal democracy across the region, perhaps à la the Velvet Revolution of 1989 in Eastern Europe.

Instead, he unwittingly opened up a Pandora's box of deep-seated sectarian hatreds, hitherto simmering beneath the surface and kept in check by a brutal dictatorship. A similar scenario would play out with the Arab Spring a few years later.

In a series of related essays, Karsh travels far and wide around the modern Middle East's political landscape over the past century, but his theme remains rooted in a single premise: Westerners have misread the popular moods and political trends of the region's societies. Right up to Iran's Islamic Revolution in February 1979, he points out, both the US State Department and the CIA blithely assumed that the pro-Western Shah Mohammad Reza Pavlavi "remains in firm control."

Even after the shah was ousted, analysts assumed the new regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini – whom the US's ambassador to the UN, Andrew Young, declared to be a would-be "saint" and Tehran's US ambassador William Sullivan bizarrely labeled a "Gandhi-like" figure – would likely be moderate.

In another chapter, the author dismantles the conventional wisdom that the onus is on Israel to make peace with Palestinians and that it is within its power to do so in the first place. Karsh reminds us of the long annals of Palestinian intransigence in response to historic Israeli concessions with neither Yasser Arafat nor his successor Mahmoud Abbas even so much as recognizing the Jewish state's right to sovereignty, a refusal that the historian deems the real "root cause" of the conflict. It certainly isn't hard to demonstrate that the Arabs have always wanted a Palestinian state a lot less than they've wanted to destroy Israel.

In a chapter titled "Clueless in Arabia," Karsh takes aim at US President Barack Obama and other Western leaders for insisting, against all reason, that Islamic terrorism and terrorist groups like the Is-

lamic State have nothing to do with Islam. Tellingly, few Islamic religious authorities make that claim themselves, but Western decision makers remain wedded to the notion that the savagery of Islamic terrorism the world over is driven by legitimate political grievances, remediable socioeconomic factors and historical injustices, not by religious ideology.

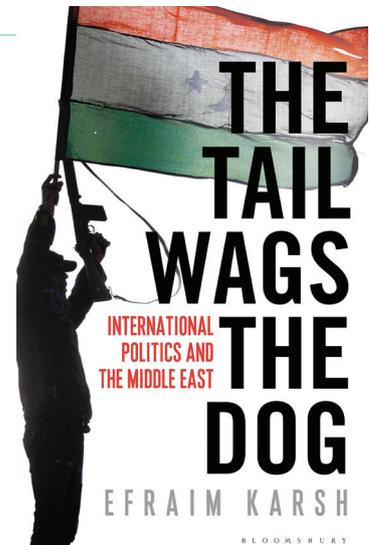
Karsh pooh-poohs that idea. "Far from a function of its unhappy interaction with the West," he cautions, "the story of Islam has been the story of the rise and fall of an often astonishing imperial aggressiveness and, no less important, of never quiescent imperialist dreams that have survived the fall of the Ottoman Empire to haunt Islamic and Middle Eastern politics into the twenty-first century."

To numerous Arabs and Muslims pining for a bygone era of Islamic supremacy, Karsh points out, Osama bin Laden "is not a 'mass murderer' but the new incarnation of Saladin, defeater of the Crusaders and conqueror of Jerusalem – a true believer who courageously stood up to today's neo-Crusaders." Doesn't that sound like "Islamophobic" bigotry? It shouldn't. Recent Pew polls show that a fifth of Egyptians and a third of Palestinians have had consistently favorable views of bin Laden. Even if such figures indicate only minority support for the late terrorist leader, they translate into millions upon millions of people, especially when combined with support for the likes of the Islamic State, Hamas and Hezbollah.

There's no denying that in many ways the modern Middle East remains hopelessly mired in religious atavism, virulent jihadism and age-old sectarianism. Yet most Westerners are ill-equipped – emotionally and culturally – to understand, or credit, any of it.

Rather than take the region's peoples on their own terms and at their own word, they continue to approach the Middle East with preconceived notions that frequently have little bearing on reality and fly in the face of history. It's a deeply paternalistic attitude, a form of intellectual colonialism. It does seem like the tail is wagging the dog. ■

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The Tail Wags the Dog: International Politics and the Middle East

Efraim Karsh
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