

**Sword of Islam: Muslim Extremism from the Arab
Conquest to the Attack on America**

John F. Murphy Jr.

Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2002. 424 pages.

This book presents itself as an academic work, with 14 pages of endnotes, a 12-page bibliography, and a detailed 18-page index. While pretending to distinguish between Islam as a religion and Muslims on the one hand, and Islamic extremism on the other, these elements are mixed up throughout the book. In addition, every instance of Arab or Muslim resistance to occupation or oppression is put under the global category of “Muslim extremism,” a term that has already acquired a connotation of violence due to the book’s title.

The book is a collection of anecdotal evidence, personal opinions, hearsay, and interviews and quotes from “anonymous sources” that are pre-

sumably available to the author, who is engaged in intelligence work. Although filled with details about political violence and terrorism (without distinguishing between the two terms) that can be found in the popular press, it is, however, full of gross mistakes and errors. Thus, the information found in it is unreliable. Moreover, the overall interpretation of events reflects a deep ignorance of the meanings of historical events for the people concerned. Some quotations will illustrate this brief assessment.

On the question of the author's proclaimed intention, the back cover states: "This book is not an indictment of Islam, one of the three beautiful religions which bloomed in this desert land. It is an indictment of those who took from Islam its most uncompromising tenets, forgetting the message of love that accompanies them ...". The author even denounces the stereotyped image of Arabs and Muslims that dominate the American scene, and the reader can find such passages as the one given below:

Another factor which inflames Arab opinion – among Christian Arabs and Muslims (yes, there are Christian Arabs, not only in Syria and Lebanon but in Egypt as well) is the defamatory image of Arabs which continually appears in American books, newspapers, on television, and in the movies. [...] The thoughtless stereotyping of Arabs in motion pictures as rabid religious fanatics, caring nothing for human lives, has angered and humiliated Arabs both here and abroad. Anyone seeing such films could easily believe that Islam gives its blessings to the acts of the terrorists who act in its name!' (p. 361)

So, the book is not problematic at the level of intention and is not overtly antagonistic to Islam, as the work of, say, a Daniel Pipes would be. Rather, it is deficient at the level of factual information, a defect that calls Murphy's knowledge, understanding, and interpretation of facts into severe question.

To illustrate this assessment, consider the following: On page 360, the author explains the term *mujahidin* as "soldiers of the faith" and goes on to explain that the suffix *-din* means "faith." Besides ignoring that this suffix simply indicates the plural of *mujahid*, the definition reduces the term to only one of its dimensions. On two occasions (pages 22 and 25), the author confuses North and South Yemen, asserting that North Yemen, instead of South Yemen, was a Marxist state. Referring to the 1956 war against Egypt, the author forgets that France was an active participant, along with Britain and Israel (p. 23). On page 28, he translates the term "Al Qaeda" as "the Center" instead of "the Base."

One finds such errors or inaccuracies on almost every page. In fact, I finally stopped making a systematic list of such errors, as they were too numerous. Even in the glossary, Murphy gets mixed up between *taqiyah* and *batiniyah*. The effect of these errors is so great that the reader cannot rely on any piece of information. Thus, because the general reader cannot determine which events and terms are correctly reported and which are not, the book is useless as a source of knowledge.

The cumulative effect of the author's misinterpretation of these details is reflected in his lack of understanding of more general political events. Indeed, Murphy has simply adopted the Israeli narrative as is, uncritically, to describe and understand events. Consider the following statement:

However, the violence in the occupied territories continued, again carried out by the population itself, not by the hitmen of the PLO. Fighting civilians was something that the citizen soldiers of the IDF had not been trained to do, and the day-to-day hostilities were taking a toll of them. (p. 59)

In other words, an army of occupation, one that is heavily armed and one of the strongest in the world, which is in the occupied territories precisely to subdue a civilian population (there is no Palestinian army...) and control the land for the benefit of Jewish Israelis is not carrying out violent repression itself. Rather, it is being victimized by the local unarmed population. This sentence probably says it all, as it is symptomatic of the whole book.

The reader who ignores these irritants and continues reading will find a great amount of details about the movements of a suspected terrorist or about the contacts or cooperation between such "terrorists." But without an overall structure to give some meaning to this collection of empirical facts, and without the assurance that they are correctly reported, how is this information to be processed? Not having the patience to do it, I skipped many pages of such details and thus failed to identify more factual mistakes.

In short, this book is totally useless and maybe even harmful in its overall effect, as it reinforces the Orientalist paradigm: Extremism and violence are constant features of Islam, and the Arab conquests to the attacks on America are all part of one and the same phenomenon. In spite of Murphy's verbal precautions, the book will probably be understood by its readers as an overall indictment of Islam, based on gross factual errors and a total lack of understanding of the phenomenon of political violence. Fortunately, the

author does not have the credentials needed to market this book as an academic piece of work, and it is hoped that the book will simply be ignored.

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