



The Crusades History and Its Reflections on the Modern Political and Cultural Discourse

Abbas Khalid Abbas Ali*¹, Wasna Mohammed Jaafer Sadeq²

¹University of Samarra, College of Education,
Department of Geography

²Al-Farahidi University, Technical Medical College,
Department of Medical Devices

*Corresponding Author: abbas.kh.ab@uosamarra.edu.iq

Abstract—A chain of religious wars that took place between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries and were known as the Crusades have had an unparalleled impact on the history of the collective memory of the Western and Middle East societies. This review article looks at how the memory of Crusades has been produced, recreated and used in modern political and cultural discourse. This paper uses the theory of collective memory as developed by Maurice Halbwachs to examine how the narratives of the Crusades have evolved since medieval historiography to the current age of political rhetoric with specific reference to the post 9/11 age. The review delves into the three themes, which are interrelated, as well as, the theoretical underpinnings of collective memory as used in the context of the Crusades, the metamorphosis of Crusade memory in Arab nationalist and Islamist discourse, and the usage of Crusade rhetoric in Western politics. According to this analysis, collective memory of the Crusades is an effective tool in the terms of identity formation, legitimizing political activity, and framing present-day conflicts in historical terms.

Keywords: Crusades, collective memory, political discourse, Arab nationalism, Islamism, historiography, identity politics.

I. Introduction

The Crusades are one of the most disputed and symbolically loaded moments of the common history of the Christian Europe and Islamic world. Though the historical record of the military, political, and economic aspects behind these medieval conquests has been widely documented, the issue of Crusades memory and how the same influences modern discourse has become a distinct area of scholarly interest [1]. The memory of the Crusades goes way beyond the historiography of academia; it can be found in the political rhetoric, cultural production, and even in interfaith relationships and it is still active in contemporary global politics in the twenty-first century [2].

This review essay discusses the overlap between collective memory research and Crusade studies, how the events of the Middle Ages have been recreated and utilized in contemporary political and cultural agendas. The analysis is based on three decades of interdisciplinary studies in the field of medieval history, memory studies, political science, as well as Middle Eastern studies. In the process of synthesizing these various scholarly works, it is the hope of this review to shed light on how historical memory can be turned into a political resource, and how the Crusades, in its specific instance, have been put to contemporary ideological use [3].



It is on these grounds that this paper will seek to take a clear and detailed examination of the collective memory of the crusades. Section II will be a discussion on the concept of the collective memory theory. The third section of the paper (III) will focus on the metamorphosis of Crusade memory in the Arab-Islamic world. Part IV and part V will examine the Crusade memory within the discourse of Islamists and the discourse of Western politics respectively. Our Conclusion (Section VI) will be the final part of this paper summarizing the ideas discussed in this writing.

II. Grounded on the theoretical framework, collective memory and historical consciousness are structured on the concept of collective memory and historical consciousness.

The theoretical basis of the explanation of the processes of how societies commemorate the Crusades is based, first and foremost, on the work created by Maurice Halbwachs who made collective memory an independent area of sociological study. Halbwachs believed that human memory is functioning in the context of collective, and that various social groups will have their own collective memory which dictates their behaviour and their perception of the world [4]. Halbwachs suggests that memory is selective by its very nature; it is reconstructed every time in the social interaction and conditioned by current issues instead of its being a recollection of the past as it happened [5].

Later researchers have developed the structure by Halbwachs to differentiate between communicative and cultural memory which is maintained by intergenerational transmission of information and by institutional practices, monuments, and texts respectively [6]. The cultural memory developed by Jan Assmann has been exceptionally relevant to the study of the Crusades being remembered over the centuries since this type of memory spans across generations and imprints itself onto material and symbolic culture [7].

As Cassidy-Welch and Lester have shown, the concept of incorporating memory into Crusade scholarship presents new ways to comprehend the postwar situation, the way in which cultural memory is built and how families pass on Crusade traditions [8]. Their analysis indicates that Crusading families were busy to create and sustain memory of their ancestors involvement in holy war, which developed identity and inspired the next generation to take the cross [9]. This understanding that collective memory is created and intentional would be a pivotal point of examination of the modern-day applications of Crusade rhetoric.

III. The transformation of the memory of Crusade in the Arab-Islamic world

The Crusades were not, as many might think, at the heart of Islamic historical consciousness until the modern period. Hillenbrand has reported that Muslim historians throughout centuries since the fall of Acre in 1291 have been treating the Crusades as a comparatively minor occurrence, being lost amid much more important events like the invasions by the Mongols [10]. In the modern Islamic narratives, there was no single religious reason why the Crusader expeditions occurred; instead, the Franks were considered as coming into foreign lands, and then disrupting the population of Muslims [11].

Crusade memory in the Arab world started being transformed in the nineteenth century, with European colonialism and the intellectual trends of the Arab Renaissance (al-Nahda) sparking the change. Historians have followed the development of parallelism that was made by Arab thinkers in this age between medieval Crusader states and modern European colonial ventures [12]. It was also during the end of the nineteenth century that a few Arab authors started to refer to the medieval



Crusader states as being colonial in nature, and this would create a conceptual framework that would be active in the decades that followed [13].

A. Revival of Saladin as a pan-Arab Symbol.

The representation of Saladin experienced one of the most striking changes throughout the course of the time when he was virtually transformed into a historical figure of little known character and transformed into a pan-Arab icon of rebellion. Phillips and Sayfo have established that before the nineteenth century, the name of Saladin had become overshadowed by names like Baybars in the Muslim world [14]. Modern Saladin worship started with the visit of Wilhelm II, German Emperor to the tomb of Saladin in Damascus in 1898, which together with increasing anti-imperialist prevailing feelings led Arab nationalists to create a mythical image of Saladin as a hero against the aggression of the West [15].

It was during the middle of the twentieth century that the Crusade imagery of Arab nationalist discourse reached its full flowering. Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian President between 1954 and 1970, took Saladin as a representation of Arab unity against imperialism and Zionism [16]. The Eagle of Saladin was the symbol of revolutionary Egypt, and later on it was implemented by the United Arab Republic, Iraq, Palestine, and other Arab nations [17]. This nationalist usage came to a head in the 1963 film *The Victorious Saladin* by Youssef Chahine, where Saladin was a chivalrous and tolerant pan-Arab leader [18].

IV. Crusade Memory in Discourse of Islamism

With the collapse of pan-Arab nationalism in the aftermath of the Six-Day war in 1967, Islamists started to embrace Crusade imagery. Bhatia has recorded the activities of a vocal linguistic minority in the Muslim world community (ummah) that fostered the Crusades as a recurring threat with strong contemporary appeal [19]. Islamist ideologues viewed the conflict more directly in religious terms, unlike secular Arab nationalists, who underlined the Crusades as a forerunner of Western colonialism [20].

Crusade memory instrumentalization was culminated in the Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda rhetoric. Further in February 1998, bin Laden declared a fatwa titled the Declaration of the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders, which directly referenced the medieval war and as a method to justify attacking Americans and their allies [21]. The statement described the American military occupation of the Arabian Peninsula as an extension of the disastrous Crusader occupation and a call to Muslims to engage in jihad as an individual religious obligation [22].

Khan and Crawford have gone on to suggest that modern jihadist propaganda to a large extent owes its origins to other Islamist authors of the 1950s, such as Sayyid Qutb and Abul Ala Maududi, who studied in Western institutions in the 1950s and imbibed the then-dominant scholarly discourse, which depicted the Crusades as a humiliation episode of European colonialism [23]. This finding demonstrates a complicated scheme of cross-cultural impact in the shaping of the modern Crusade discourses [24].

V. CRUSADE RHETORIC: The Western politics discourse

It is also the collective memory of the Crusades that has been rallied in Western political arenas, especially following the 2001 terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The term crusade, which was used by President George W. Bush when he characterized the war on terrorism, in his speech of September 16, 2001, caused instant controversy and academic discussion [25]. Although the



administration soon rejected this language, the event highlighted that iconic force of Crusade imagery and its ability to fuel cross cultural conflicts [26].

It is also shown through Maggio analysis of post 9/11 rhetoric used by Bush, where the administration used the imagery of the religious and historical subjects to formulate a narrative of civilizational struggle [27]. The US was posed as a champion of liberty in what was presented as a divine war against evil, which reminded medieval explanations of righteous war [28]. Domke came up with the term political fundamentalism to explain this combination of evangelical religiosity with foreign policy activism [29].

These developments have aroused concern among professional historians. The metaphors of Crusade have been critiqued by Tyerman and Madden, who believe that metaphorical analogy destroys objective historical interpretation and confuses two entirely different phenomena [30]. Historical accuracy versus metaphorical memory has become a key problematic issue in the scholarship of Crusades [31].

VI. Conclusion

The Crusades still have a massive influence on the political and cultural rhetoric of the modern world through the collective memory of the events. This summary has been able to observe the Crusade memory development since medieval historiography to nationalist nationalistic to political rhetoric in the twenty-first century, which illustrates the astonishing flexibility of historical memory and its vulnerability to political maneuvering.

The scholarship analyzed in this paper demonstrates the presence of a number of noteworthy trends. To begin with, the collective memory of the Crusades is clearly built and not inherited. The transformation of Saladin as a somewhat unrecognized historical character to a pan-Arab icon of resistance exemplifies the way in which memory is actively subjected to influence in the interests of the current issues. Second, Crusade memory is an effective tool of identity construction in the Western and Middle Eastern societies. Third, the cross-cultural flow of the Crusade memory shows the very complicated patterns of influence that disbelieve in the simple histories of East-West cultural confrontations.

The knowledge of how the Crusade memory works can have significant implications on modern interfaith dialogue and conflict management. The realization that the existing tensions are not necessarily fuelled by historical events but by historical activities being created creates some possibilities to use other frames and reconciliation. The transnational circulation of the memory of the Crusades and the circumstances in which historical analogies gain or lose political currency should be explored further in the future.

References

- [1] M. Cassidy-Welch and A. Lester, "Memory and interpretation: new approaches to the study of the crusades," *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 225-236, 2014.
- [2] S. Menache, "The Crusades from a historical perspective: communication, culture, and religion," *Religions*, vol. 15, no. 1, p. 67, 2024.
- [3] N. Paul, *To Follow in Their Footsteps: The Crusades and Family Memory in the High Middle Ages*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012.



- [4] M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, L. A. Coser, Trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- [5] M. Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.
- [6] J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- [7] J. K. Olick, V. Vinitzky-Seroussi, and D. Levy, Eds., *The Collective Memory Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- [8] M. Cassidy-Welch and A. Lester, "Memory and interpretation," *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 225-236, 2014.
- [9] J. Riley-Smith, *The First Crusaders, 1095-1131*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- [10] C. Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.
- [11] J. Phillips, *The Crusades: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- [12] A. M. Sheir, "The historiographical memory of the Crusades in nineteenth-century Egypt," in *Arab Memory of Crusades*, Trivent Publishing, 2025.
- [13] O. Sokolov, "The crusades in the Arab social and political discourse of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries," *Crusades*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 1-24, 2023.
- [14] J. Phillips, *The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.
- [15] O. Sayfo, "From Kurdish Sultan to Pan-Arab champion and Muslim hero," *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 65-85, 2017.
- [16] O. Khalifah, *Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.
- [17] A. Ansari, "The Eagle of Saladin: A Symbol of Arab Nationalism," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 64, no. 2, pp. 245-260, 2010.
- [18] M. Khouri, *Arab National Project in Youssef Chahine's Cinema*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010.
- [19] U. Bhatia, *Forgetting Osama bin Munqidh, Remembering Osama bin Laden: The Crusades in Modern Muslim Memory*. Singapore: RSIS, 2008.
- [20] H. Khashan, "Collective memory and Arab-Israeli relations," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 12-27, 1997.
- [21] World Islamic Front, "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders: World Islamic Front Statement," *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, Feb. 23, 1998.
- [22] B. Lewis, "License to kill: Usama bin Ladin's declaration of jihad," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 77, no. 6, pp. 14-19, 1998.
- [23] M. A. Khan, *Islamic Jihad: A Legacy of Forced Conversion, Imperialism, and Slavery*. iUniverse, 2009.



- [24] J. Riley-Smith, *The Crusades, Christianity, and Islam*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- [25] G. W. Bush, "President: Today We Mourned, Tomorrow We Work," *White House Archives*, Sep. 16, 2001.
- [26] R. Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. New York: Random House, 2005.
- [27] J. Maggio, "The presidential rhetoric of terror," *Politics & Policy*, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 810-835, 2007.
- [28] J. Hubanks, "An examination of President George W. Bush's post-9/11 discourse," *Intersections*, vol. 10, pp. 45-78, 2009.
- [29] D. Domke, "September 11 and the rise of political fundamentalism," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 243-264, 2008.
- [30] C. Tyerman, *The Debate on the Crusades, 1099-2010*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011.
- [31] G. Constable, "The historiography of the Crusades," in *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, A. E. Laiou and R. P. Mottahedeh, Eds. Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2001, pp. 1-22.