



The Modern Wars and The Ancient Crusades on The Islamic World: A Comparative Review Study

Wasna Mohammed Jafer Sadeq¹, Abbas Khalid Abbas Ali²

¹Al-Farahidi University, Technical Medical College,
Department of Medical Devices

²University of Samarra, College of Education,
Department of Geography

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

Abstract— This review study claims parallels and differences of the medieval Crusades (1095-1291) and the recent West military interventions in the Islamic world especially the war in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). Using historical, political, and cultural literature, this paper will examine how modern conflicts have been decoded using the Crusades as a prism by several players, including the Western political heavy-weights, Islamist movements and the academicians. The paper will examine the Clash of Civilizations thesis proposed by Samuel Huntington, and its critiques and will discuss how the paradigm has influenced the process of policy making as well as the way it has influenced the people. With the help of exploring the continuities and discontinuities between medieval and modern wars, this review proves that the historical contexts of the Crusades and the contemporary geopolitical rhetorical and symbolic appeals are still perpetually connected in the historical and present-day geopolitics and interreligious and interethnic relations.

Keywords: Crusades, Iraq War, Afghanistan War, Clash of Civilizations, colonialism, Western intervention, Islamic world, comparative history.

I. INTRODUCTION

The connection between the medieval Crusades and the current-day Western military intervention in Muslim-majority states is an object of both strong scholarly discussion and political discussion. When President George W. Bush used the word crusade to refer to the impending war on terrorism, following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, it immediately brought back memories of history that appealed differently to the Western and the Islamic societies [1]. This verbal gaff, which was promptly denied by the government, still served to highlight how much the imagery of Crusades continues to have a symbolic resonance in the modern world of geopolitical rhetoric [2].

The proposed review article will compare the ancient Crusades and the modern wars with the Islamic world by taking into consideration the scholarly works that touch upon the historical events and the contemporary interpretations. Three overarching questions will be used to conduct the study: First, what are the substantive similarities/differences between medieval Crusading campaigns and contemporary Western military interventions? Second, what have different actors such as political leaders, religious figures and militant groups done to utilize the Crusade rhetoric to frame modern day conflicts? Third, what do we learn of tensions between western and Islamic societies today based on this comparison?



The paper will be structured in the following manner: Section II will give a historical background of both the medieval Crusades and the contemporary interventions. The third section reviews the thesis of Clash of Civilizations and its opponents. Part IV examines the application of the Crusade rhetoric in modern speech. In section V, the main dimensions are compared. Section VI has conclusions and recommendations on future research.

II. Historical background The Medieval crusades to modern interventions

A. The Medieval Crusades (1095-1291)

The Crusades were a sequence of religious battles endorsed by the Latin Church, the main aim of which was the reclaim on the Holy Land under the Islamic control. These campaigns were initiated by the pope Urban II appeal in the Council of Clermont in 1095 and involved the founding of Crusader states in the Levant that lasted until the Crusader defeat of Acre in 1291 [3]. The modern historiography focuses on the idea that the Crusades were driven by the intricate combination of religious faith, political ambition, and economic gain, and not by the religious zeal [4].

According to the seminal work by Hillenbrand, it is shown that the reactions of the medieval Muslims to the Crusades were initially scattered, and that the local leaders were usually making pragmatic alliances with the Crusaders against Muslim opponents [5]. The consolidation of the counter-Crusade led to unification under Saladin and only became possible after decades of gradual consolidation and this culminated in the recapture of Jerusalem in 1187 [6]. Importantly, over several centuries before and after the end of the Crusades, Islamic historiography considered the conflicts to be a rather insignificant event in comparison with the devastating Mongol invasions [7].

B. European Colonialism and the Revival of the Crusade Memory.

The symbolism of Crusades was revived in the 19th and first part of the 20th centuries during the European colonial expansion. Madden believes that the current conflicts about the Crusades are mostly due to the creation of a certain perspective by the colonial nations in the nineteenth century and passed onto Arab nationalism [8]. In 1920, upon the entry of French General Henri Gouraud into Damascus, he is quoted saying: Behold Saladin we have returned, at the tomb of Saladin, a declaration that perfectly summed up the European confusion of the medieval Crusading with the modern imperialism [9].

The division of the Ottoman Empire after World War I was represented by the Western media as the final result of the Crusading business, and the London Punch magazine published a drawing of Richard the Lionheart observing the British troops marching into Jerusalem with the text: It is my dream come true [10]. The outcome of this European romanticization of the Crusades, according to Phillips, was to great extent the manner in which the Arab nationalists came to learn and utilize Crusade memory in the future as anti-colonial memory [11].

C. Contemporary Military Warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Global War on Terror can be traced back to the U.S-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, which was as a result of the September 11 attacks. International support of the intervention was wide and the NATO invoked Article 5 of its charter in the first time in history [12]. The objectives mentioned above were to destroy the al-Qaeda organization and to eliminate the Taliban government as well as deprive the terrorists of their safe haven [13]. Nevertheless, that two-decade



occupation did not lead to a sustainable stability and at the beginning of August 2021 the Taliban came to power again [14].

In the invasion of Iraq in 2003, this was much more controversial. Unlike Afghanistan, this was not widely supported by other nations, and it was made under the pretext of weapons of mass destruction and connections to the al-Qaeda [15]. According to the Center of Public Integrity written reports, top officials of the Bush administration made at least 935 false statements in the two years before the war [16]. The results were massive losses of civilian lives estimated to fall between 151000 and one million Iraqi deaths, the rise of ISIS and destabilization of the greater Middle East [17].

III. The thesis of The clash of civilizations and the critics

The article by Samuel Huntington titled *The Clash of Civilizations?* was written in 1993. and later 1996 book offered the most powerful theoretical perspective on the post-Cold War conflicts in terms of culture and religion. Huntington maintained that the conflicts that will take place in the future would be along cultural fault lines dividing the major civilizations and specifically, he talked about the conflicts between the Western and Islamic civilizations [18]. He dated this struggle 1,300 years ago, and the Crusades became one episode of an active civilizational fight [19].

This renewed the interest in the thesis after September 11, 2001, in which opinion leaders perceive the attacks as a validation of the thesis [20]. Nevertheless, the thesis has been criticized by many scholars. Amartya Sen criticized the Huntington model to have considered civilizations as monoliths, which fail to reflect the tremendous internal diversities of both the Western and Islamic societies [21]. Empirical analysis of data collected by World Values Survey conducted by Norris and Inglehart has revealed that the central conflict within the Western and the Islamic world does not deal with democracy as Huntington thought it to be but pertains to the questions of the gender equality and sexual liberalization [22].

Berman, Paul argues that cultural barriers do not exist in the modern world as there is no Islamic civilization or a Western civilization as a whole [23]. Another point that critics make is that Huntington paradigm has been embraced by right wing populists in the west, as well as Islamist extremists who use it to support their respective positions in the supposed inevitability of a civilizational clash [24]. This reciprocal embracing indicates that the clash of civilizations is more of self-fulfilling prophecies than a factual account on the way international relations operate.

IV. CRUSADE RHETORIC of the modern-day discourse

A. Western Discourse of Politics.

The use of Crusade imagery in Western politics has been largely unintentional and not intentional, as the symbolism is so ingrained in the Western cultural memory. The statement made by Bush on September 16, 2001, "This war on terrorism, this crusade is going to take a while," immediately caused international controversy and especially in the Arab region [25]. Administration is a quick to disavow this terminology, which they knew was inflammatory [26].

However, the themes of Crusade-like rhetoric have been observed by researchers in post-9/11 rhetoric in instances where the Crusade was not used. As shown in the analysis of Maggio, the speeches of Bush created a story of civilizational confrontation, putting the United States in the role of a promoter of the freedom against evil in quasi-religious context [27]. Domke defines this



as political fundamentalism a combination of the evangelical religiosity and the foreign policy activism that resembled medieval justifications of holy war [28].

B. Islamist Rhetoric and the Zionist-Crusader Alliance.

Islamist movements have been much more open in availing themselves of Crusade rhetoric. A fatwa by Osama bin Laden in 1998 titled the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders declared that American military presence on the Arabian Peninsula was thus a follow-up on medieval Crusading [29]. It was a declaration of war by the Americans against God, his Prophet, and the Muslims, and demanded jihad against the crusader-Zionist alliance [30].

The Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL) has used imageries of the Crusade in its propaganda extensively, and its English magazine Dabiq frequently invoked the medieval wars [31]. This discourse plays several roles: it gives historical justification to violence, creates an account of the unstoppable Western aggression, and places the jihadists of today in the role of medieval mujahideen who manage to drive out the Crusaders [32]. According to Khan, this propaganda is based heavily on early Islamist conceptions such as Sayyid Qutb who consumed Western scholarly critiques of the Crusades when acquiring an education in the 1950s [33].

V. Comparative Analysis Comparison and Discontinuity

A. Fundamental Differences

The historians have highlighted important differences between medieval Crusades and contemporary interventions. To begin with, the Crusades were religious ventures per se and approved by the papacy and providing religious benefits (indulgences) to their participants [34]. In comparison, the modern western incursions are now officially secular, and they are supported by the calls to democracy, human rights, and national security instead of the religious obligation [35]. Second, Crusader states had a permanent settlement and the setting up of Latin Christian settlements in the Levant, modern interventions have not attempted the annexation of a territory [36].

Third, there is a fundamental change in the international system. The medieval world did not have the nation-states, international law and such institutions as the United Nations. The contemporary interventions take place in (and frequently in breach of) a set of international law [37]. Fourth, medieval armies had insignificant technological differences in comparison to the massive military advantage of modern Western interventions [38].

B. Perceived Continuous and Symbolic Parallel

These basic differences notwithstanding, there are various reasons which lead to the sense of continuity. Both entail deployment of the Western military forces in the Muslim dominated territories within the Middle East. The two have come with religious rhetoric even when the state was officially secular. They both have caused massive civilian deaths of Muslims and cultural damages [39]. Arguably, the presence of military installations in the Arabian Peninsula, which is adjacent to the sacred places of Islam, reminds the medieval Crusader invasions to the Holy Land [40].

According to Mourad, the legacy of the Crusades in the Muslim world in his case is reflected by the view that the west is always trying to weaken Islam, whether by acquiring physical colonialism or by acquiring cultural colonialism [41]. This impression is reinforced when the leadership of the West uses language that is religious or where the policies seem to address the Muslim population



directly. This continuity, however, might not be concerned with objective similarities, but with previously existing historical grievances and long-term power asymmetries [42].

VI. CONCLUSION

This comparative review has shown that even though the medieval Crusades and modern Western interventions in the Islamic world have significant differences in the motivation, structure, and historical context, there are still symbolic and rhetorical links between the two to influence the contemporary discourse. A potent tool of mnemonics, the Crusades are used by Western nationalists as well as Islamist extremists to build civilizational narratives of conflict [43].

The scholarship under review hints at the fact that the framework of the clash of civilizations can be used because it is politically powerful; however, it distorts the past and present realities. The relations between the medieval Crusader-Muslim had a significant amount of cooperation, trade, and cultural exchange with conflict [44]. Modern tensions can also not be traced down to religious foundation or civilizational basis but an intricate play of political, economic, and strategic interests [45].

The concept of the constructedness of Crusade memory and its modern applications should be understood to create more refined strategies on the development of Western-Islamic relations. According to Cobb, it is better to say that the Crusades represented a complex period in medieval history when individuals were both engaged in inter-cultural warfare and were also capable of coexisting in some sort of harmony, as opposed to the simplistic accounts of the age-old civilizational clash [46]. Further inquiries in this field ought to be whether or not historical memory influences modern policy as well as whether alternative frames can be developed that acknowledge historical resentments yet which do not impose the self-fulfilling prophecy of civilizational warfare.

REFERENCES

- [1] G. W. Bush, "President: Today We Mourned, Tomorrow We Work," White House Archives, Sep. 16, 2001.
- [2] J. Maggio, "The presidential rhetoric of terror: the (re)creation of reality immediately after 9/11," *Politics & Policy*, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 810-835, 2007.
- [3] T. Asbridge, *The Crusades: The War for the Holy Land*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2010.
- [4] J. Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A History*, 3rd ed. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- [5] C. Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.
- [6] J. Phillips, *The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.
- [7] P. Cobb, *Race for Paradise: An Islamic History of the Crusades*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- [8] T. F. Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.
- [9] N. L. Paul, "The Theater of War: Crusade, Colonialism, and Chivalry," Gresham College Lecture, Jun. 2021.
- [10] Islamic views on the crusades, Wikipedia. [Online]. Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_views_on_the_crusades



- [11] J. Phillips, *The Crusades: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- [12] NATO, "Collective defence - Article 5," NATO Topics, 2022.
- [13] G. W. Bush Library, "Global War on Terror," Research Topic Guides, 2022.
- [14] U.S. Institute of Peace, "Afghanistan Timeline: Since the 2001 War," USIP, 2021.
- [15] Center for Public Integrity, "False Pretenses," Iraq: The War Card, Jan. 2008.
- [16] Rationale for the Iraq War, Wikipedia. [Online]. Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rationale_for_the_Iraq_War
- [17] O. Israeli, "US Invasion of Iraq, 2003: Indirect Link of ISIS Rising," *Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2023.
- [18] S. P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3, pp. 22-49, 1993.
- [19] S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- [20] J. Haynes, "Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' Today," *E-International Relations*, May 2018.
- [21] A. Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 3-17, 1999.
- [22] P. Norris and R. Inglehart, "Islam & the West: Testing the Clash of Civilizations Thesis," *Comparative Sociology*, vol. 1, no. 3-4, pp. 235-264, 2002.
- [23] P. Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003.
- [24] R. Brubaker, "Between nationalism and civilizationism: the European populist moment," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 40, no. 8, pp. 1191-1226, 2017.
- [25] D. Domke, "September 11 and the rise of political fundamentalism," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 243-264, 2008.
- [26] R. Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. New York: Random House, 2005.
- [27] J. Hubanks, "An examination of President George W. Bush's post-9/11 discourse," *Intersections*, vol. 10, pp. 45-78, 2009.
- [28] D. Domke and K. Coe, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- [29] World Islamic Front, "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders," *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, Feb. 23, 1998.
- [30] B. Lewis, "License to kill: Usama bin Ladin's declaration of jihad," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 77, no. 6, pp. 14-19, 1998.
- [31] U. Bhatia, *Forgetting Osama bin Munqidh, Remembering Osama bin Laden: The Crusades in Modern Muslim Memory*. Singapore: RSIS, 2008.
- [32] A. Holt, "The Modern Muslim Memory of the Crusades," Andrew Holt, Ph.D., Mar. 2017.
- [33] M. A. Khan, *Islamic Jihad: A Legacy of Forced Conversion, Imperialism, and Slavery*. iUniverse, 2009.
- [34] J. Riley-Smith, *The Crusades, Christianity, and Islam*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- [35] W. Urban, "Rethinking the Crusades," *American Historical Association*, Oct. 1998.



- [36] J. Prawer, *The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem: European Colonialism in the Middle Ages*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972.
- [37] F. J. Arroyo, "Iraq and Afghanistan: A Comparison Based on International Law," *Real Instituto Elcano*, Dec. 2021.
- [38] R. Irwin, "Muslim Responses to the Crusades," *History Today*, vol. 47, no. 4, pp. 43-49, 1997.
- [39] S. Menache, "The Crusades from a historical perspective," *Religions*, vol. 15, no. 1, p. 67, 2024.
- [40] Political views of Osama bin Laden, Wikipedia. [Online]. Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_views_of_Osama_bin_Laden
- [41] S. Mourad and P. Cobb, "Why Muslims See the Crusades So Differently from Christians," *History.com*, May 2025.
- [42] M. Cassidy-Welch and A. Lester, "Memory and interpretation: new approaches," *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 225-236, 2014.
- [43] Historiography of the Crusades, Wikipedia. [Online]. Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historiography_of_the_Crusades
- [44] K. Mourad, *Understanding the Crusades from an Islamic Perspective*. The Conversation, Dec. 2024.
- [45] L. Fawcett, "Iraq War 20 years on: towards a new regional architecture," *International Affairs*, vol. 99, no. 2, pp. 567-586, 2023.
- [46] P. Cobb, "Interview on Crusades historiography," *History.com*, 2025.