



# American Thinker

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## How War with Islam Shaped and Defined Us

By [Thomas Lifson](#)

*Sword and Scimitar: Fourteen centuries of war between Islam and the West*

by Raymond Ibrahim

De Capo Press/Hachette Book Group

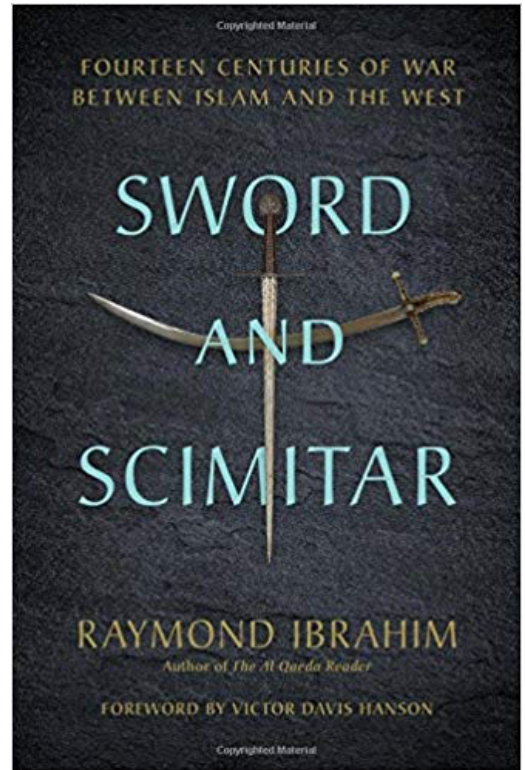
394 pages with notes and index

Every once in a while, I come across a book that I can say changed the way I understand the world I live in. Raymond Ibrahim's new book, *Sword and Scimitar*, altered the way I understand the development of our civilization – I mean the one that America inherited from Europe and made our own. It drove home to me how little I knew about the way Islam – in the form of attempted and often successful conquest – really changed the way our civilization evolved and the way it grew to understand itself.

For one thing, prior to Mohammed, our predecessors didn't think of themselves as part of "Western" or even "European" civilization. Back when Mohammed kicked off the promise of eternal jihad in 630 (recorded in Koran 9:29), our civilizational forebearers thought of themselves as part of Christendom, an area that included North Africa, much of the Middle East, modern Turkey, and more. Mohammed and his successor jihad warriors over the next centuries cut Christendom down to Europe, the western flank of the [dar al-harb](#), where more secular geographic and cultural identities eventually thrived. They became "Western civilization" because they were west of the Islamic heartland in Arabia and beyond.

*Sword and Scimitar* takes the form of a military history of eight key battles between Muslims and the Christian world over the course of almost a millennium and a half, in which a variety of Islamic military leaders of very different ethnic and racial backgrounds – Arab, Berber, Mongol, Tartar, and Turk – carried out Mohammed's injunction of eternal jihad. They understood jihad not as a spiritual quest to be better, but as armed conquest, followed by plunder, enslavement, mass torture and execution, and repopulation, with mass conversion under threat or advantage, helped along, I might add, by systematic rape of the nubile female population to produce Muslim babies.

I think I understand why my education left me bereft of a good understanding of the role of Islam in defining my own civilization. It is often an uncomfortable history, too often a story of failure with the direst possible consequences for the side I (and our past but not current crop of historians) identified and sympathized with. At many junctures, factionalism, greed, stupidity, and worse played a major role. Ibrahim does an excellent job of showing how this played out on both sides, and not always for the worse in the West. It should be noted that four of the battles covered are Christian defeats and Muslim victories, but four are the reverse.





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Raymond Ibrahim tells this history vividly, clearly, and engagingly. He deserves the major credit for this feat, but it is worth noting that he is a student of Victor Davis Hanson – and it shows. *Sword and Scimitar* is in a sense two books: the author provides a historical narrative that moves along briskly, telling the stories of the development of the eight battles, their fighting, and the outcomes and consequences. For each of the battles, Ibrahim provides an excellent look at the political, cultural, and economic context *on both sides*, so the detailed accounts of what happened in battle fill in a broader picture of civilizational conflict. But the large number of footnotes on the bottom of pages provides not just further details, but excursions into tangential topics raised by the main narrative. I confess that I was often torn between continuing the main narrative and following the additional thoughts and stories of the footnotes. (This was not an unhappy dilemma – books can be picked up again to return to the footnotes.)

The author, born to Coptic Christian immigrants from Egypt, has spent years reading and translating Arabic, Greek, and other historians, often incorporating phrases and sentences from them in the midst of his narrative. He strives to convey and succeeds in conveying how both sides saw their confrontations and how later historians on each side explained the outcomes.

He starts with the six-day-long Battle of Yarmuk in 636, two years following the Arab invasion of Syria, then much larger and deeply Christian, a province of the Roman Empire (governed from Constantinople). There, vastly numerically inferior Arab forces defeated a far larger detachment sent by the Byzantine emperor to crush the early military challenges coming from Arabs inspired by messianic expansionism. Following the collapse of Christian forces at Yarmuk, near the current Jordanian-Syrian border, the Arab jihad warriors spread rapidly, capturing Jerusalem the following year, and on to Egypt, the oldest continuous Christian community in the world, as Ibrahim points out, and from there, North Africa (completely subdued by 709) and then Spain and into France, where Charles Martel finally halted the advance at Tours in 732.

One of the things that makes *Sword and Scimitar* so valuable is that unlike the dominant secular mindset of most academic historians, Ibrahim understands the role religion plays in the lives of individuals, groups, nations, and civilizations. He makes it clear that religion was central to the Islamic conquests – which seems obvious, except that many modern historians prefer to see the battles in economic terms. The fact that Muslim warriors were promised heaven and a supply of virgins if they died in battle, and the chance at plunder, rape, and domination if they survived and won, provided a tremendous advantage in recruiting and motivating the troops – so much so that after the better part of a millennium, a countervailing doctrine was cooked up for the Christian forces in the Middle Ages.

A second and even more valuable feature of *Sword and Scimitar* is the author's examination of the continuities in jihad warfare across the fourteen centuries of battle and on to our own time of terrorism and ISIS. If you want to understand these current vital concerns, you need to read this book.

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