

'Sword and Scimitar' Offers In-Depth Study of Landmark Battles Between Islam and the West

[Raymond Ibrahim](#)

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An interview with author Raymond Ibrahim about his new book: *Sword and Scimitar: Fourteen Centuries of War between Islam and the West*

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Editor's note: Middle East Forum director Gregg Roman recently interviewed [Raymond Ibrahim](#), formerly the associate director of the Forum and currently the Judith Friedman Rosen Writing Fellow. Ibrahim's new book, *Sword and Scimitar: Fourteen Centuries of War between Islam and the West*—a featured selection of the History Book Club and current best seller in several Amazon categories—was released earlier this week and is [available at a variety of book distributors](#).

Roman: *Welcome to this MEF interview, Raymond. Tell us a little bit about your new book, Sword and Scimitar.*

Ibrahim: Sure, Gregg, thank you. As indicated by its title, the book is first and foremost a military history, narrated around the two civilizations' eight most decisive clashes. If truth is stranger than fiction, so were these real-life battles more dramatic than the make-believe "epics" playing on television screens everywhere. (Of course, since they were also occasioned by Muslims invading and terrorizing the West from every corner and for over a millennium—that is, since they contradict the mainstream narrative of Muslims "grieved" by Western aggression—Hollywood will not touch them with a ten-foot pole.)

But while these dramatic military encounters form the centerpieces of the book's eight chapters, the bulk of the narrative chronologically traces and tells the general (but much forgotten) story of Islam and the West, and how their perennial conflicts changed the face of the globe.

Roman: *The book's early praise is impressive. The Hoover Institution's Victor Davis Hanson, America's premiere military historian, says in his foreword to your book that "Sword and Scimitar is a much-needed history of landmark battles between Islam and the West," and a "first-rate military history and a product of solid scholarship and philological research." A number of other professional historians, such as Thomas*

Madden and Darío Fernández-Morera, have also heartily endorsed your book. Perhaps one of the most interesting comes from crusades historian, Dr. Paul F. Crawford: “Raymond Ibrahim has the humility to take seriously the voices and opinions of history’s Christians and Muslims; the result is a refreshingly honest account of Islamic expansion and Christian reaction that provides useful insights into today’s problems. This is history as it should be done: allowing the past to inform and guide the present, rather than distorting the past to fit contemporary political ideologies.” Can you elaborate on what he means?

Ibrahim: Sure, unlike many secondary histories—books heavy with their authors’ subjective interpretations and light on objective substantiations—I intentionally gave the Muslims and Europeans of the past, including those who fought and bled the ground red, much space to tell their story. Most of the book’s one-thousand endnotes cite primary source quotes, supplemented by the interpretations of authoritative (and unbiased) historians. The result is a story line that strongly contradicts the currently fashionable narratives concerning Islam and the West’s history.

As one example, many academics, especially those entrenched in Middle East Studies departments, have long insisted that, “five centuries of peaceful coexistence [between Islam and Europe] elapsed before political events and an imperial-papal power play led to [a] centuries-long series of so-called holy wars that pitted Christendom against Islam and left an enduring legacy of misunderstanding and distrust,” to quote Georgetown University’s John Esposito. Other academics have gone so far as to pin modern day Islamist terrorism on “grievances” against the crusades.

Real history tells an antithetical story. In fact, during those so-called “five centuries of peaceful coexistence” preceding the crusades, jihadi armies had invaded, terrorized, and conquered three-quarters of the Christian world (as documented in the first four of the book’s eight chapters). In the years preceding the First Crusade, Turks had overrun Anatolia, slaughtering and enslaving hundreds of thousands, and prompting the Byzantine emperor to implore the West for aid. Such are the rarely cited origins of the crusades.

Roman: *It seems, then, that your book, while revolving around historical events, has relevance for contemporary debates?*

Ibrahim: Yes, precisely. Take for example the question of whether the behavior of Islamic groups such as the Islamic State (IS) is Islamic or not. Those who insist on the latter will be hard pressed to explain why over a millennium of leading Muslims—caliphs, sultans, emirs, ulema and jurists of the highest order—have said to and done in Europe the same exact things IS says and does to “infidels” today. This is a literal point: When IS proclaims that “American blood is best and we will taste it soon,” or “We love death as you love life,” or “We will break your crosses and enslave your women,” virtually no one in the West understands that they are quoting verbatim — and thereby placing themselves in the footsteps of — the original Islamic conquerors of Syria, especially Khalid bin al-Walid (d. 642), the “Sword of Allah.”

Whereas many of the world’s Muslims make the connection and appreciate the deeper meaning behind the words and deeds of their politically active coreligionists, the West remains oblivious of the deliberate continuity. As the late Bernard Lewis once said, “most Muslims, unlike most Americans, have an intense historical awareness and see current events in a much deeper and broader perspective than we normally do.” As such, the book was also written with an eye at bringing Westerners up to speed with Muslims, at least

when it comes to the latter's frequent (and to Western ears, cryptic) referencing of history. (In the context of discussing Yasser Arafat's doublespeak, Daniel Pipes gives another good example of this phenomenon [here](#).)

Roman: *When did you get the idea to write this book and do you have any other interesting tidbits?*

Ibrahim: I actually began working on portions of this book back in 1998-99, when I first started doing academic research for what became my MA thesis (in History): the [Battle of Yarmuk](#), the first decisive encounter between Islam and the Eastern Roman Empire in 636. I have, accordingly, been working on this book—even if sometimes only in my head—for some twenty years, including seven years spent at the African and Middle Eastern Division of the Library of Congress where I identified and translated several older non-English manuscripts (including into [The Al Qaeda Reader](#)). The immense labor that went into *Sword and Scimitar* is evident in its list of “works cited,” which contains about 220 books and monographs.

The book contains 37 relevant photos and epic paintings, and a comprehensive general map tracing the historic struggle between Islam and the West. I also utilized sources in (and translated from) other languages—mostly Arabic, but also Greek and Latin—including by providing, to my knowledge, never-before-translated excerpts.

Additionally, the publisher, Da Capo, is a leader in military history and a member of the Hachette Book Group—the third largest publisher in the world—and the book is already scheduled to be translated into other languages.

Roman: *Thank you, Raymond; best wishes to your book on behalf of the Forum.*

Ibrahim: Thank you, Gregg, including for the opportunity to discuss it.

Editor's note: [Click here](#) to order a copy of *Sword and Scimitar* from your preferred book dealer or [here](#) from Amazon.

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