

The continuing Byzantine/Ottoman war

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24 August 2006

When I was nine or ten, I thought wars were a historical artifact. Intelligence and literacy have grown throughout the world over the centuries, and we'd finally reached such a level of global unification that we'd all be able to put blunt ugliness behind us. The USA would be at the forefront of this, they told me in fifth grade, since we're nice people who don't have centuries of baggage weighing us down.

Though, when you're nine years old, *everything* is history.

Desert Storm was the first war that involved the USA that I could remember, and it was hailed as what all wars would be like in the future. It was clean and quick. Since only U.S. casualties count, about two people died. The President's approval rating soared, and it was to be the model for the future, where wars are just three-day affairs in those bad weeks when negotiation breaks down.

So here we are, well past the millenium mark, and we've all collectively realized that it's business as usual. In September of 2001, all the commentators pointed out that the former battle between the USA and Russia has been replaced by a battle between the West and the Islamic states, and switched from asking "Is history over?" to "Are we at war with Islam?" and "Is Islam at war with us?"

But the story there isn't quite right. It's not that George 'Dubya' Bush suddenly declared a crusade on 16 September, 2001. Europe has been at war with the Middle East for *seven hundred years*. For a while there, it was called the clash between the Byzantine Empire and the Ottoman Empire, but then the Byzantine Empire fell apart; and Rome gained dominance, leading to the (original) crusades; then the Habsburg Empire, AKA the Holy Roman Empire, started to bump up against the Ottomans; and next thing you know you're at World War I, where the Ottoman Empire fell apart, and we went into a period of many, many minor skirmishes.

The story is that the Christian/Muslim War was dormant during the Cold War, and the Soviet Union certainly did a good job at the border of the former Ottoman Empire of starving everybody of the resources they needed to fight each other. But the War between Islam and Christianity went about its business, in Algeria, in Afghanistan, and even in British-run India. After the Soviet Union broke up, look where all the skirmishes were from the 1990s to present: Chechnya, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan (again), the Persian Gulf—these are the

edges of the Ottoman Empire.

Remember the Battle of Kosovo, between Serbian Christians and Muslims to the East? That could refer equally well to 2001 and 1389.

Of course, everything is much more fragmented than it was back in the old days. The Christians have their infighting (e.g., WWII) and the Muslims have theirs (see my earlier notes on the Shiite/Sunni conflict). But where there is a border between Muslim and Christian, there is tension and occasional outbreaks, and that is as true today as it was in 1400.

Although both Christianity and Islam are names of religions, this has little or nothing to do with religion. After all, they're both People of the Book, who place themselves at the feet of the same God of Abraham. Allah (contraction of Al Ilah) translates literally to 'The God', which is exactly the term a Christian would use—unless the Christian uses Jehovah, which is just an attempt at pronouncing the yud-yud used by Jews. [For the computer geeks, the symbol for the Name of God is Unicode code point 05F2.]

So what is the conflict about? I could only guess. Whose fault is it? I don't f.ing care. What can we do about it? Nothing.

My ideal, in such a world, is migration. Muslims move to Paris and New York, Christians move to Jerusalem and Cairo, and the black and white lines on the map just fade into a muddled grey. But the same forces that have kept the war going for seven hundred years are the forces that bar the door in the name of security and that make it uncomfortable for those minorities who do get through. So the greying of the map may one day happen, but there'll be a whole lot of wars before then.

When I was nine, I felt as though we were on the edge of something great, on the edge of lasting peace. When you're a kid, people talk to you a lot about peace. But thinking that we're the special generation that will finally bring peace is all just hubris. Two hundred years from now, kids will be reading about the Iraqi war in exactly the same way that we read about the Ottomans attempting to take Vienna. "In the early 2000s, Baghdad, an Islamic capital, was taken by U.S. forces in a series of bloody battles," the textbook would read, and the kids would be grateful that it's all just distant history.