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Why Is Paris Burning?

Two new books fan the flames of the European-Muslim conflict.

ISLAMIC IMPERIALISM: A HISTORY BY EFRAIM KARSH • YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS • 2006 • 288 PAGES • \$30

WHILE EUROPE SLEPT: HOW RADICAL ISLAM IS DESTROYING THE WEST FROM WITHIN BY BRUCE BAWER • DOUBLEDAY • 2006 • 256 PAGES • \$23.95

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alking down Wallensteinstrasse, a main artery of Vienna's Twentieth *Bezirk*, or District, there are nearly as many women wearing *hijabs* as there are in jeans. The area is a magnet for immigrants. Sitting in the local branch of Aida, a coffee shop chain with blond waitresses in bright pink 1960s uniforms, German is just one of the languages spoken by patrons. At Koc, a local grocery store, the coffee, vegetables, and even cleaning supplies originate in Istanbul. So imagine the shock when, amid this multicultural *mélange*, you first encounter the tram-stop signs posted by the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (the Austrian Freedom Party, formerly headed by Nazi sympathizer Jörg Haider). The signs demand, among other things, that *Österreich Bleib Frei!* ("Austria stay free!")—a message that entails keeping Turkey out of the European Union (EU), keeping immigrants out of the country, and disentangling Austria itself from the EU. Other advertisements, featuring

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a white woman wearing a full *burka*, ask “Should this be our future?” Equally surprising are the letters to the editor in the *Kronen Zeitung*, a popular newspaper, that warn against a coming “third Turkish siege of Vienna”—a reference to the Ottoman attempts to take the city in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and, apparently, still a font of Austrian anxiety.

Austria is not alone. Across Western Europe, there is an uneasiness about Islam that ranges from the palpable xenophobia of the far-right *Vlaams Belang* party in Belgium and Jean Marie Le Pen’s *Front National* in France to the softer bigotry and bewildered rhetoric and policies of more mainstream political parties.

To be sure, post 9/11—as well as post-3/11 and 7/7—there is much to be bewildered about. The situation of Muslims in Europe is not the same as Muslims in the United States where, on the whole, they are better off economically and emotionally, aided by America’s embrace of pluralism and religion and buoyed by having arrived, for the most part, educated and with some means. Not so in Europe, where the first Muslim immigrants were mostly men from former colonies who sought jobs on the lowest rung of the economic ladder. Families came later, as part of a policy of reunification, but just as the work dried up. The most recent are asylum seekers, fleeing with little. And few were offered the paths to citizenship and integration found in the United States.

A few years ago, when I first began exploring Islam in Europe, I met a 30-year-old French Tunisian woman named Najoua in Paris. Pretty and lightly made up, wearing jeans and a white crocheted top, we talked in her Seventh *Arrondissement* office (she ran the business side of a children’s magazine) about the dis-integration of her peers. Najoua called herself an “escapee” from the *banlieue*, the suburban rings of bleak public housing around Paris that erupted in rioting last year. She described how men and boys she had known growing up had turned from rootless unemployment to radical Islamism. “The young boys who don’t work, and they don’t see a future, they have no confidence,” said Najoua. “But someone comes to you and says you *are* good. But you have to pray.” Likewise, some of her old girlfriends had taken the veil and turned to Allah as a means of finding answers to the grinding poverty and village mentality of the *cités*, the high-rise blocks that housed immigrant workers who came from the former French colonies in the 1960s and early ’70s and stayed.

Given the stakes—economic and social—as well as how the issue of Muslims in Europe strikes at the heart of what it means to be “French,” “German,” “Dutch,” or even simply “European,” it is no surprise that the debate over the future of Islam and the West has produced its own lengthy shelf of literature. Written by academics, journalists, and politicians, the genre is an important part of the debate. But while some of these texts aim for an honest assessment of

radicalism, Islam, and democracy—and raise difficult questions for those who hope to integrate Muslims into European society—others seek to fan anxiety and bolster a kind of aggressively ideological denunciation of Islam writ large, masked as scholarly research or muckraking journalism. Joining the crowd in this latter category are two new polemics: Efraim Karsh's *Islamic Imperialism: A History* and Bruce Bawer's *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam Is Destroying the West from Within*. Both intend more to shock and alienate than to educate (and provide a slew of "I told you so" anecdotes for those who already hold that Islam is incompatible with the West).

The authors, naturally, insist they are simply setting the record straight, illuminating a problem and reality that others have missed. But in doing so both assume a simplistic uniformity of Islamic experience that supersedes national identity, colonial history, and adopted country. Their tone—the academic and journalistic equivalents of a Molotov cocktail—is angry, a call for constructing barricades against an oncoming enemy. They highlight a small number of violently radical immigrants and claim they are representative of the entire population, as if Europe's Muslim communities were masked intruders, stealing onto the continent in the dead of night and fanning out, ready to literally blow up its cities. What these authors do not do is consider the less fantastic, but far more difficult, task of reconciling two different and complex cultures. By misrepresenting the issue, they further the very "us versus them" positioning that honest analysis must avoid. Karsh and Bawer may boost book sales by declaiming Europe's Muslim immigrants as an undifferentiated terrorist threat, but in doing so they make strife between Europe and Islam all the more likely.

These texts are the newest salvo in a series that began in 1993 with Samuel Huntington's now-infamous "clash of civilizations" essay, and they draw on his *weltkulturkampf* approach in articulating a three-part battle that takes place on a transnational level, between Islamic countries and Europe and the West; on a domestic, internal level, between immigrant groups and their adopted nations; and on an ideological level, between religious faith and Western reason. Islam, they posit, has been falsely represented as a religion of tolerance and peace, when in fact it is a religion that rejects all others, a warrior theology that will not rest until it has submitted all non-believers to its will. When we were told that Osama bin Laden, as the eminent historian of Islam Bernard Lewis wrote two years ago, is a "grotesque travesty of the nature of Islam," we actually were misled. "Bin Laden's proclamation of jihad was no novelty," writes Karsh, "declaring a holy war against the infidel has been a standard practice of countless imperial rulers and aspirants since the rise of

Islam. Nor does bin Laden’s perception of jihad... differ in any way from traditional Islamic thinking... [it is] the distinct translation of Islam’s millenarian imperialist vision into concrete action.”

Karsh heads the Mediterranean Studies program at Kings College, University of London, and his book is the more academic of the two. Heavily annotated, he narrates a cursory sweep of Islamic history—the first 100 pages cover the 1,000 years from Muhammad (about whom Karsh has nary a kind word) to the end of the Ottoman Empire—casting a net so broad that it is necessarily limited at best and purposely skewed at worst. He selectively quotes from the Koran to prove that far from peaceful, Islam is a religion of war, territorial advancement, and “quintessential imperialism.” Karsh takes great pleasure in redeploying the word “imperialism,” so often cited as the reason for Islamic distrust of the West, against Islam itself. “Contrary to what is sometimes thought,” he writes, “Islamism [was] not a response to the ascendancy of European imperialism.” Instead, he posits, Islamism is, and always has been, imperialist itself. On the caliphate—a period often cited with nostalgia by Islamists and Islamic scholars—he writes, “no matter how hard the caliphs professed their commitment to the pursuit of a holy war, theirs was a straightforward act of empire building.” Saladin, the vaunted victor over the Crusaders, was a “quintessential imperialist seeking territorial and political self-aggrandizement” who then becomes the “ultimate role model for generations of Pan Arab leaders.” The latter includes Gamel Abdel Nasser, on whom Karsh spends more time than any other Islamic leader. But, despite his best efforts, it remains unconvincing that this is a case of *Islamic* imperialism per se, and not simply a handful of imperialistic regimes that happen to be Muslim.

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Indeed, Karsh contends that even the Palestinian national movement is not a response to Zionism or the needs of the Palestinians; rather, it is representative of the Islamic world’s “imperial dream.” To the Arab world, in Karsh’s thesis, the idea of losing Jerusalem is an anxiety about ceding a piece of the “House of Islam” (*Dar el Islam*, meaning an area under Muslim rule) to the infidels, not about the claims of the Palestinians themselves. “The ‘Question of Palestine,’” writes Karsh, “is neither an ordinary territorial dispute between two national movements nor a struggle by an indigenous population against a foreign occupier. It is a holy war by the worldwide Islamic umma.”

By eliding the nuance and uniqueness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and integrating it into his grand theory of Islamic imperialism, Karsh's perspective naturally leads to a frightening conclusion: If all Muslim grievances against non-Muslims are a manifestation of imperialist tendencies, then the rising tensions between a burgeoning Muslim population in Europe and its non-Muslim host countries portends a future where Muslims will not be satisfied until the Austrian poster of a white non-Muslim, woman in a *burka* becomes reality. That is, of course, unless Europe defends itself. In drawing such conclusions, Karsh lets Europe's xenophobes off the hook—moderation and compromise are dead-ends, because the encroaching Muslim imperialists will stop at nothing in their expansionist zeal.

One of the common tropes in Karsh's kind of ideological representation of Islam and Islamic history is to focus on what the Egyptian-born (and exiled), Europe-based writer known as Bat Ye'or calls "dhimmitude." *Dhimmis* is the umbrella term for the status of Christians and Jews in the House of Islam. Karsh calls it "institutionalized discrimination." Lewis refers to it as "second-class citizenship," though he qualifies that "second-class citizenship, established by law and revelation and recognized by public opinion, was far better than the total lack of citizenship that was the fate of non-Christians and even some deviant Christians in the West." (It's worth noting that Karen Armstrong's book *Islam* translates *dhimmis* as "protected subjects" and observes that many preferred life under Muslim rule to Christian.)

Bruce Bawer, a gay, conservative New York native who now lives in Oslo, believes that Western Europeans have willfully entered into subservient "dhimmitude" masked as political correctness, bowing to the Muslim presence in their countries and privileging Muslim (read: totalitarian) needs over Western enlightenment principles even as immigrants rob the coffers of their adopted welfare states. Most Muslim immigrants, he writes, "come from poor villages in undeveloped countries, with high levels of corruption—a background that tends to breed cynicism, duplicity, and an exceptional skill at manipulating the system." If left unchecked, he darkly predicts, Western Europeans will soon wake up to find themselves living under *sharia* where adulterous women and gay people will face stoning; thieves will have hands amputated; and honor killing, arranged marriages, and female genital mutilation will be the norm—in other words, the Islamic imperialist fantasy Karsh warns of. Dire birth rate predictions are typical of such "we're being colonized from within" narratives, and Bawer strikes a similarly ominous note about birth rates among Muslims versus the negative rates among most native Western Europeans.

Bawer's book is a much easier read than Karsh's. It is, at its core, a meandering journalistic take on life as an American, libertarian ex-pat in Europe, as though Bawer has kept a notebook for the last five years and filled it with anecdotes, newspaper stories, and personal experiences. They are mostly negative, especially those that expose the dark underside of the European left, including gay- and America-bashing. In addition to his anti-Muslim diatribes (filtered through his experience in wealthy Scandinavia, which skews the picture considerably), we learn he was—and is—unabashedly in favor of the war in Iraq, that Norwegian journalism is so far to the left there isn't anyone to argue an alternative, and that he despises socialism and the European welfare state. Bawer often meanders into borderline hysterical anecdotes and sweeping generalizations. There seems to be no difference, in his mind, between French, Dutch, and British kowtowing to the sort of idealistic multiculturalism that makes criticizing the anti-liberal aspects of Islam impossible. But these countries, in fact, vary greatly in their relationship to their ethnic minorities and their path to citizenry. Nevertheless, to Bawer, anti-Muslim racism and economic discrimination exist only in the mind of the weak-willed multiculturalist. There is no ghettoization, only "self-segregation," he says, and dismisses liberal handwringing over what he sees as a contrived effort to gloss over incidents of immigrant-on-native-European violence and anti-Semitic acts.

"In some urban areas of Europe," he writes breathlessly, "all order has broken down. Young men roam the streets in packs and commit crimes in the daylight, in front of scores of witnesses, without fear of being stopped or punished." Where? And, if it is happening, is this Muslim violence? Or is it economic violence? Or a mix? In my totally Turkish neighborhood of Vienna, I've been mocked for worrying about walking home late at night, let alone during the day. Does he mean here?

It seems he means France. "Why are the *cités* so full of alienation and rage?" he asks. "For the Western European elite the answer is simple: poverty. Yet the young men of the *cités* are not poor: as [Theodore] Dalrymple points out, 'they have cell phones, cars,' (which like those driven by young Muslim men in every other European city I know, tend to be BMW convertibles)." I don't know which *cités*, or even cities, he has visited, but 40 percent unemployment is common in the *banlieues*. And BMWs? Maybe he's thinking of Norway. "Whence the rage then?" he asks, "Well, what else can one expect of young men who have been taught throughout their childhood that infidels are beneath respect, that Western women are whores, and that the only honorable response to the West's corruption and godlessness is the fury of jihad?"

In Bawer's desire to simplify the problems of Muslim rage and the European response, he ignores the obvious. Can't economic disparity, lack of citizenship, astronomical unemployment, and public transportation that cuts them off at 8 p.m. from the cities they see, but don't live in, make radical Islam attractive? Does recognizing that the problems are multi-faceted make radical Islam less dangerous? If only Bawer saw beyond his ideological blinders and broad sweeping stereotypes to ask these questions, his book might have been a more reasonable addition to the debate over Muslim-European integration. But, by assuming that all Muslims are potential terrorists and that radical Islam is simply a religious rather than a complex social pathology, he precludes just such debate from occurring.

Of course, some of his observations are apt: the efforts to integrate immigrants have come too late, and in ham-handed ways, like the new German citizenship tests that ask esoteric German history questions. But it is not at all clear that, to him, Muslims ever could have been integrated. Bawer also points out the alienating habit Europeans have of calling the children of immigrants "second" or even "third" generation, as opposed to French or Dutch or German, which highlights how difficult it is to ever truly become "of" one's adopted country. He recognizes—but unfortunately de-emphasizes—that deep-rooted problems in Europe do exist, at least in part, because the privileging of secularism has effectively placed anyone who believes in religion in opposition to the State. In France, the almost untranslatable concept of *laïcité*—institutionalized in response to an aggressive Catholic Church in 1905—has made religious Muslims totally incomprehensible to the French polity. But Bawer's Manichean worldview doesn't allow him to draw nuanced conclusions about this kind of institutionalized social segmentation.

Bawer professes to be merely protecting European society from itself, and he offers some "solutions" of his own. He advocates for more immigrants from East Asia, for example, because they are "hardworking," and he recommends sending all Europeans to the United States for one year to learn our "values." But such borderline racist proposals only highlight how disconnected he is from the present and unameliorated problem of millions of poor, disenfranchised Muslim immigrants living in Europe. Though it's not as if debate were Bawer's strong suit—indeed, he is loath to recognize anything that might contradict his arguments. The protests of French Muslims against the kidnapping of two French journalists in Iraq in August 2004 occurred only because "they could hardly have done otherwise" he writes, though in other places Bawer wonders where "the moderate Muslims" were and why they don't protest.

Bawer quotes from some of the most conservative thinkers in Europe—like Guy Millière in France, a professor at the Sorbonne and the translator of Daniel Pipes—and calls them members of a new “liberal resistance,” people who “saw the situation clearly” early on and were “determined to save Europe from suicide.” The “prophet and first martyr of this resistance,” he writes, was gay conservative Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, whose murder was the Netherlands’ first political assassination in some 500 years. Fortuyn, like Bawer, was liberal in championing women’s and gay rights, and, not incidentally, unabashedly anti-immigration. Fortuyn was often compared to leaders on the far right, but he wasn’t a fascist, and Bawer, though his arguments often seem to mimic those of groups like the FPÖ, uses Fortuyn and Milliere as a pivot on which to carefully position himself in opposition to the far right. As if to mollify his critics on the left, he calls this “Europe’s Weimar moment,” predicting that a rise in support for far right groups will come if the rise of radical Islam isn’t stopped in Europe. But, of course, in positing an undifferentiated, radical Muslim threat and discounting the possibility of moderate solutions, Bawer resembles less the liberals and conservatives who embodied Weimar than the extremist forces that overthrew it.

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Bawer’s inflammatory text is not designed to start a conversation—at least not with Muslims nor with Europeans. And neither Bawer nor Karsh has done anything to advance the cause of Muslim integration and a constructive Western response. We are left no closer to a solution for the youth of the *banlieues*, the radicals who turn into suicide bombers, the quiet jihadists.

Europe is indeed facing a dramatic integration and assimilation problem. The spring I found Najoua, I also met Sibelle, a 15-year-old Turkish girl whose family had tried to forcibly marry her to a Turkish national. Sibelle was fortunate. She reconciled eventually with her parents and survived to tell her story; other girls have not been so lucky. I met Sibelle through a small group called *Voix D’Elles Rebelles* (“The Voice of Rebellious Girls”), an organization that helps young women fleeing forced marriages. Like the French movement *Ni Putes, Ni Soumises* (“Neither Whores, nor Submissives”), which protests violence against girls in the *banlieue*, *Voix D’Elles Rebelles* exactly the sort of organization that, if given the chance, would allow Europeans to understand the tensions of what it means to be young, Muslim, and European.

The continent is desperate for more such grassroots movements, a task force of young European Muslim leaders who need not—and should not—be forced to abandon their faith or their history, leaders with whom Muslim youth can identify and whom they can recognize as their own. This is not to wax superficially lyrical. Islam and the West are at a critical juncture, exacerbated by unemployment and social alienation that can, and has, morphed into anti-Westernism, anti-Zionism, and anti-Semitism, at times spiraling into radicalism and terror. Rejecting the theses of Karsh and Bawer is not to abandon one set of ideological blinders for another. It is merely to recognize the need for dialogue and real policy solutions. Reconciling alienation and ignorance on both sides of the debate is, ultimately, the only chance for Islam and the West to forge a peaceful future. **▀**