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The Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776-1815

Robert J. Allison

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There are perplexing similarities between what is happening today and what happened in the past. But this simple truth is for the most part neglected, due to a lack of historical perspective. This perspective (or consciousness) not only makes the events of today meaningful, but also allows us to relate them to the past. Allison's book, *The Crescent Obscured*, has drawn on such an ordinary, but crucial, observation.

Allison states that he observed the Iranian Revolution (1979) while studying the early national period of the American history. The Iranian Revolution was perceived by the American people at that time as a movement opposed to progress and liberty. During the revolution Iranians seized the American embassy in Teheran and took fifty-two Americans hostage. Similarly, in the early period of American history there was a war between America and the Barbary states of North Africa, in which many American sailors being held captive by these states.

This struggle was indeed related to trade routes. But it was perceived then by the American people as a part of the contest between Christians and Muslims or between civilization and barbarism. The Americans had inherited the European understanding of the Muslim world and pursued this cause more relentlessly than the Europeans. The image of contemporary Iranians as Muslims is closely related with the historical image that the Barbary States once represented. But this image of Islam (or Muslims), Allison says, was not a representation of reality, but rather an inverted image of a world which the Americans were proudly opposed to.

It is against this background that Allison investigates the history of the American encounter with the Muslim world. Early encounters took place in the 17th century when there was as yet no United States of America on the scene. After the United States was established the struggle continued. The 18th century represents the peak of this struggle. Sending its ships to the Mediterranean, America sought foreign markets for its goods. But these ships were seen as a source of revenue by the North African states. By the 18th century, the Barbary States of North Africa (Algiers, Morocco, Tunis, and Tripoli) threatened the weaker states of the time, such as Denmark, Sweden, the Italian city-states and

America. Furthermore, the North African states at this time were no longer a threat to Britain or France, but rather had become a kind of tool of these powerful states.

In Chapter One (*American Policy Toward the Muslim World*, pp. 3-34), Allison gives a detailed picture of the struggle that took place in the Mediterranean at the end of the 18th century. The British, who wanted to frighten off American commerce from the Mediterranean, encouraged the North African states to seize American ships. Algiers captured twenty-two ships, Tripoli six, Morocco five, and Tunis two. Sailors were taken prisoner and America's economic interests and their dignity were damaged.

Consequently, the Mediterranean issue led to a fierce debate in America. There were two major sides of this debate. One side (represented by Congress) was in favor of negotiation with the Barbary States to settle the issue and preferred paying tributes to waging war. The other side (headed by Jefferson, then the Secretary of State), rejected the idea of paying tribute to these states and stood for declaring war as a long-term solution if enough power were to be maintained. If the U.S. opted for war it would need to cooperate with the smaller European states, as Britain and France would not support such a joint action. Moreover, war required a naval force, which at the time America lacked. While building its navy and waging a war against Tripoli, America failed to reach a conclusive victory (Chapter Eight, *Remembering the Tripolitan War*, pp. 187-206).

The situation of the American sailors in captivity is examined in Chapter Six (*The Muslim World and American Benevolence*, pp. 127-152). American citizens wanted to relieve the American captives by raising donations and collecting charity at home. But seeing this effort as interference with its duty, the U.S. government rejected the idea, thinking that it would weaken its own position during the negotiations with the Barbary States. The main goal was to preserve the peace in the Mediterranean. America's efforts in this direction are discussed in Chapter Seven (*American Consuls in the Muslim World*, pp. 153-186). Building a navy or waging a war against the Barbary States, Allison says, was only to be a deterrent. In order to maintain peace in the Mediterranean region, America decided to send consuls to the North African states. But these consuls that were being sent to represent the U.S. were private merchants who were also trying to advance their own interests. Their dual roles, Allison says, was one of the main obstacles that stood in the way of Mediterranean peace.

Chapter Two (The United States and the Specter of Islam, pp. 35-60) seeks to answer the question as to what the 18th century image of Islam (or the Muslim world) was in the American mind. Islam and the Muslim world is described in 18th century American and English literature in a pejorative style, using the following terms: Religious and political tyranny, religious imposture, blasphemy, anarchy, wickedness, fanaticism, lust, lethargy, superstition, avarice, bigotry, intolerance etc.

Both Americans and Europeans, Allison says, inherited their knowledge of Islam from the writers of the Enlightenment. It was a distorted but useful image for them. First of all, Islam represented anarchy and tyranny for them. Everybody could draw conclusions from this image based on their political or ideological orientation: "During the debate over the Constitution, Federalists could warn of the dangers of anarchy and instability, pointing to the Ottoman Empire, which had no control over its distant provinces, while anti-Federalists repeated the Revolutionary warnings of centralized power, pointing to the absolute tyranny of Muslim sultans." (p. 35)

America's struggle with the North African states coincides with the publishing of many books related to Islam. This literature, which was full of pejorative attributes about Islam, conveyed a consistent (but not so realistic) picture of the Muslim world. Moreover, this was a functional and inverted image of the world which the Americans were trying to create anew. In this literature, the Muslim world was typically represented in one person as a tyrant, whether he was Prophet Muhammad or the Turkish sultan. The sultan enslaved his people, while in fact, ironically, he was also the slave of his own passions and ambitions.

Chapter Three (A Peek Into the Seraglio: Americans, Sex, and the Muslim World, pp. 61-86) includes a further discussion of the same theme, but this time with a more familiar topic: Sex. According to the same literature, a second attribute which accompanied the religious and political tyranny was wild sex. In the Muslim world, the sultan oppressed the whole of society first, and consequently the male population oppressed the weaker members of society (women). According to such literature this sexually defined power structure was the sole basis of the entire Muslim society. This image was conveyed, Allison says, through 18th century magazines, newspapers, plays, stories, and travel accounts. Women were not seen by the Muslim society as the spiritual equals of men, but mere objects of male lust. For this reason, to prevent sexual anarchy, Muslim society had to confine its women for their own protection. But the confinement of women only led to greater moral depravity. Under these conditions, nothing could be expected

other than polygamy, impotence and homosexuality. On these subjects, a different, but negating voice came from Lady Montagu, who visited Turkey in the first part of the 18th century. But her observations were not sufficient to change this fixed and terribly biased perception. For this, she blamed those Western travelers who had visited the Muslim world with pre-conceived notions.

In Chapter Four (American Slavery and the Muslim World, pp. 87-106), Allison makes comparisons between the reality of slavery in the U.S. and the conditions of the American captives in the North African states. It was mentioned above that 18th century American literature emphasized the political, religious and sexual tyranny that prevailed in the Muslim world. According to this literature, the Muslim world was void of any moral virtues. But when one comes to the issue of slavery, the situation is different. Allison gives examples of other literature that discusses the issue of American slavery. In this literature, the U.S. is compared with the Barbary States (or the Muslim world) from the point of view of slavery. In this respect, the Muslim world is described as being in a better position than the U.S., which claimed that it was the land of freedom. Not stopping here, this evaluation leads to a comparison between Islam and Christianity. And Islam is presented in this regard as a morally superior religion than Christianity. But, says Allison, this kind of book had a smaller audience and therefore, less impact.

The issue of slavery is also dealt with in Chapter Five (American Captives in the Muslim World, pp. 107-126) and Chapter Nine (James Riley, the Return of the Captive, pp. 207-226). In Chapter Five, Allison compares the conditions of the American captives (700 sailors) with the suffering of slaves in America (in the 1800s, nearly one million people), and concludes that the complaints of the captives, who called themselves "slaves in Barbary states", seems to be rather hypocritical. Chapter Nine relates the dramatic story of Captain James Riley. Having survived captivity and written a book, *Authentic Narrative of the Loss of the American Brig Commerce* (1817), Riley dedicated himself to the cause of fighting slavery.

Finally, it can be said that Allison asks important questions that need to be answered with regard to the early period of American history and the process of the formation of national identity. As a functional and fictitious image, it seems that the Muslim world played a decisive role in the process of identity formation. In a nutshell, *The Crescent Obscured* is a good example of a work that manages to establish a connection between the history of events and the history of ideas.

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