

BOOK REVIEWS

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AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror. By Mia Bloom. (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2005. Pp. 251. \$24.95.)

The author of this book discusses the contemporary phenomenon of suicide terror, taking the phenomenon as one that is worldwide. She examines the best-known cases of suicide attacks (those associated with al-Qaeda and the Palestinians) as well as those lesser known (the Tamil LTTE, the Kurdish PKK, and a number of others). Mia Bloom analyzes all of these movements from a historical perspective and uses her personal encounters and interviews with a great many of their members. She also asks critical questions about why certain conflicts have generated suicide terror while others have not and addresses the question of whether the participation of women within the process of suicide terror is in fact representative of feminism within these societies (her conclusion is that it is not).

Although the book is well written and documented, there are a few problems with *Dying to Kill*. Lack of context and general disorganization is a serious problem for the reader. For example, on page 52 we are introduced to a Tamil figure of Prabhakaran (the leader of the LTTE), whose significance is never clarified for those who are not familiar with him, although, after repeated references, by page 57 one might gather that he is significant within the movement. The same is true of other figures as well, and the whole second chapter (on Palestinian suicide attacks) requires a great deal of knowledge of the conflict, the Oslo negotiation process, and the personalities involved in order to be comprehensible. Likewise, when the author deals with the question of whether (or when) another suicide attack will occur on U.S. soil, there is a ten-page digression on the subject of Iraq during the course of which one forgets about the original issue (167).

Bloom's most original contribution is chapter four, in which she presents her readers with a theory of suicide terror that makes the rest of the book worthwhile. This broad assessment of both individuals and group motivations and methods is quite well written and documented.

Factual errors or questions include: on page xv, "Muslim Brotherhood, *Mujamma' al-Islami* established in Egypt by Hasan al-Banna in 1974 . . ." should be amended to "the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood (which was originally established by Hasan al-Banna in Egypt in 1928) appeared in Gaza in 1974." There are incomplete sentences on page 102 and page 176. It is questionable whether Ramzi Yusuf was working for al-Qaeda, as is stated on page 183. The Madrid bombings in 2003 were not suicide bombings as asserted

on page 184. The reviewer has no idea where the “October 7, 1998 attack on the Egyptian covered spice bazaar” took place (113). The lengthy quote at the bottom of page 131 and the top of page 132 concerning Afghanistan and central Asia does not seem to have any relation to the discussion concerning Chechnya and Georgia that precedes it. The note on page 206 (16ff.) should be corrected from “Nizar” to “Nizam al-Mulk” (in any case his assassins were hardly suicide attackers; they made an attempt to flee and were later captured). In general, the attempt to use Zealots, Ismailis, and Thugs as historical antecedents for contemporary suicide attacks has serious problems, because none of these organizations conducted any operations that can be categorized together with suicide attacks (4–12).

Rice University

David Cook

Islamic Imperialism: A History. By Efraim Karsh. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006. Pp. 276. \$30.00.)

At the core of historical Islam lies an imperial impulse that has manifested itself repeatedly. That is the central thesis of this book. The author constructs a narrative history of the Middle East over the last fourteen centuries, from Muhammad to Osama bin Laden, focusing on episodes that he believes reflect this imperial imperative. The prose is engaging, if a bit melodramatic. But the argument is controversial, and many readers will find it unconvincing. The narrative sweep of the book is ambitious. Analyzing Islamic history as an integrated whole, however, is a difficult project. Efraim Karsh is an accomplished historian of the modern Middle East, but his discussion of premodern Islam misconstrues its history in some important ways. For example, he traces the Islamic imperial impulse to the religion’s universalism and ascribes that universalism unproblematically to Muhammad himself (4). This follows the assumptions of later Muslim tradition that Islam, including its universalist streak, was fully present from its foundation, but it misses the deeply Arab character of the Islamic community in its earliest phases, when Arab and Muslim identities were, if not identical, more closely overlapping than they have since become. In somewhat contradictory fashion, he then describes the Arab conquests as “a quintessential expansionist feat by a rising imperial power” and dismisses the traditional Muslim explanation for their success—religious zeal—as mere window dressing (22). “The problem with this view is that the Arab conquerors were far less interested in the mass conversion of the vanquished peoples than in securing their tribute” (21). But this is to misunderstand the nature of the religious zeal driving the early conquests and