
A Millennium of Byzantine Power

W. SCOTT THOMPSON

REVIEW OF EDWARD N. LUTTWAK

The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire

(Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009) 512 pages, \$35 hardcover

How did Byzantium emerge with so much power and control beyond its small European–Asian outpost, as the Western Roman Empire crumbled? Edward Luttwak starts his remarkable book by focusing firstly on Attila the Hun and his forces, out to conquer the world. What stopped them—enabling the Eastern Roman Empire to spread over much of what is now known as the Middle East and Balkans?

The reason, at least partially, lies in a problem with the otherwise all-powerful crossbow, whose arrows could reach 485 meters and had enough accuracy up to 100 meters to target and pierce armor. The crossbow was a product of multiple layers of wood and leather, so glue was essential. But the glue was hydroscopic, as Luttwak explains, absorbing moisture from the air and, “for this reason alone, the mounted archers of the Eurasian steppe could not prosper in wetter northern climates, limiting the geographic reach of their conquests.” Hence the “decisive” defeat inflicted on the Hunnic forces by their former German subjects in the battle of Nedao in 454. Welcome Western civilization.

Luttwak is master of the infinitesimal detail; however, unlike other authors with this talent, he also has the ability to give the readers a sufficient

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outline of the story. In his new book, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, Luttwak gives us three reasons for Byzantium's staying-power: first, the Empire developed a systematic tax base; second, it trained its men for years before sending them into battle; and finally, it preferred any form of peaceful conflict solution to the use of arms.

This last reason becomes the underlying theme of the entire book, and one assumes this is not accidental. Even Attila, we learn, was economical in the use of war: the Hun leader preferred to receive tons of gold in tribute than to engage in battle. As for Byzantium, its belief in diplomacy first, force last, signaled yet another difference from Rome—"diplomacy first, force second, for the costs of the former were only... temporary, while the risks of the latter could be all too final."¹

The history of Byzantium is given short shrift in Western education. Yes, Western Rome fell, but Eastern Rome thrived for a thousand years thereafter, a brilliant city on a small peninsula that managed to control huge swaths of land from Sicily to well over the Steppes. And it was still Rome—that was its name and how it was known to its people. I once encountered Luttwak in Asian Istanbul, who on a brief tour pointed out to me foundations still extant bearing the city's Roman name.²

Luttwak is seldom didactic about the lessons of history. In his magisterial study of Roman strategy, which he wrote at a young age, he spares the reader overt lessons; rather, at one point he asks whether the two-century struggle to master Spain was worth it—by noting that two thousand years later all of Iberia spoke the patois of the Roman army. This was during the "Vietnam era;" however, not all of his readers got the point, though most would wonder whether an American military patois might have ever suited Vietnam.

In Luttwak's latest book, he seems to have gone beyond his earlier provocations, such as his July 1999 *Foreign Affairs* article "Give War a Chance," in which he argued that some conflicts were better fought out on the battle field than permitted to smolder, temporarily suffocated by would-be peacemakers.

The Byzantine grand strategy turns out to be his grand lesson this time around: "...whereby the direct use of military force to destroy enemies was no longer the first instrument of statecraft, but the last." After all, Byzantium at its core was small, dependent on territories beyond for necessary resources. It could hardly afford to use its armies to aggrandize the city-state; they were there to back up the negotiators who were masters of intelligence, espionage, bribery, cunning, and dynastic marriages.

The book's organization is its weakest feature. It starts with a magisterial presentation of Hun conquests, which we finally understand as the

necessary challenge to Byzantium not long after its inception. Part I, "The Invention of Byzantine Strategy," describes the response. Part II, "Byzantine Diplomacy: The Myth and the Methods," leaves the reader breathless as the author runs up to, then mostly avoids, the final collapse on that Friday in May 1453. Yet this last century gets barely a paragraph.

Almost half of the remaining text is more a brilliant catalogue of events than a grand analysis of strategy, and one wonders whether it might have been integrated into the main text or even preceded it. There is, for example, an almost forty-page chapter devoted to the sixth-century emperor Maurikios's Strategikon. Perhaps some of it could have been presented as an appendix, with its main lessons heavily foreshadowed in the book's first half.

Likewise, a thoughtful after-note on how the term "strategy" can be used regardless of whether the Eastern Romans thought of themselves as strategists should have been integrated earlier into the text. As in all his writings, Luttwak makes the reader separate strategy and tactics; victories at the latter level may be irrelevant if not part of the higher strategic logic. He writes that, "...while strategy and tactics are governed by exactly the same logic, the level of the action is very different and is subject to different influences, including divergent human proclivities." But the final defeat of the Bulgarians in 1018 represents a particular triumph: "Byzantine rule was restored from the Adriatic Sea to the Danube for the first time in three centuries. Theatre-level relational maneuver is the highest form of the art of war."³

Where Byzantium was supreme in history, he concludes, was in the balance found in the use of force versus diplomacy. "In all their infinite variety, grand strategies can be compared by the extent of their reliance on costly force, as opposed to the leveraging of potential force by diplomacy..., inducements..., and deception and propaganda." The lesser the actual force content, the greater the possibility of transcending the material balance of strength, to achieve more with less. In this, "[the] Byzantines...became and perhaps remain the unsurpassed masters." Byzantium was surrounded on all sides by enemies, but its genius was to "turn the very multiplicity of enemies to advantage, by employing diplomacy, deception, payoffs, and religious conversion to induce them to fight one another instead of fighting the empire..."⁴

Luttwak has made the same argument in reference to American and Israeli strategy in the Middle East, on the grounds that Arab states have been induced to quarrel among themselves, though such an argument often looks problematic to some of those opposing his view.

Luttwak has an astonishing command of the literature and the geography. One claim for a battle site of Attila rests on Luttwak's knowledge of the area as it was near his own birthplace in Romania. And the book is full of delightful details. Did we know the term 'maxims' comes from Valerius Maximus? Interested in naval sambuca, which were used to assail seawalls? The Roman Commander Marcus Claudius Marcellus relied on them for a quick conquest of Syracuse in 214 BCE during the second Punic war, "except that the chief engineer on the other side happened to be Archimedes, who had his powerful anti-sambuca hooked levers ready to upend them—along with the ships on which they were mounted." And the death of Attila, "supposedly [occurred] after a drunken feast to celebrate his marriage to a new, young, and beautiful wife—a lubricious tale that may be true—why else be a conqueror?"

This *enfant terrible* of strategy has matured—is this the pen that launched a thousand coups?⁵ This reviewer was told recently that Luttwak would not be welcomed in a particular, supposedly democratic, Asian country, because its not-quite-so-democratic leader is terrified that he

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might be coming to organize a coup against her forty-two years after his small book, *Coup d'Etat*, arrived in that country. Most American political scientists, grabbing for the claim of relevance, would love to have a tiny mite of such reputation! But no doubt there is more to come. Luttwak has become the indisputable heir to Clausewitz, though

academe has not always embraced him (of course, since he does not court their good opinion). After all, defense ministries in Asia and Europe pay considerable attention to his judgment, even while others fear his influence.

Luttwak has never had to rely on the good opinion of deans, much less department chairpersons. For four decades now he has been a veritable benchmark for would-be strategists in formidable command of the tactical, theatre, and global levels of strategy. He is put down for contemporary judgments on current events, but for how long will the bushwhackers be read? Of all current writers on strategy and international politics, I am sure only of Luttwak's place in fifty or one hundred years. His place is secure, in part due to his superb command of the literature, but also thanks to his ability to clothe his judgments about current world politics in a careful reading of history.

The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire and *The Logic of Peace and War* remain Luttwak's most significant works. But *Byzantium* is a master-

piece in its own right and will force Byzantine strategy into the minds of students of history and those who bother to contemplate grand strategy. One awaits his next opus—reportedly on Chinese strategy in this century—with a bit of trepidation.■

ENDNOTES

- 1 The text says 'were only be temporary,' presumably one of many typos the press failed to catch. I would fault Harvard University Press on several technical criteria. The two indices are skimpy (while the footnotes, by the author, are characteristically ample and often amusing); and they apparently have not mastered spell-check (see 39, 'nothing like it would seen again,' *sic*).
- 2 In the interest of disclosure, I note that I have been acquainted with Luttwak for forty years and have agreed and disagreed with him as much as with anyone. To exclude oneself from reviewing a book because of acquaintance, in the case of Luttwak, would be to exclude much of the appropriate reviewing class, given the international scope of his friendships. And in any case, to know Luttwak is to know how to spar; though in the end, one often feels like an eleventh-century Bulgarian.
- 3 Luttwak, 195.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 415.
- 5 See *Coup d'Etat, a Practical Handbook* (Greenwich, CT, 1969). It is something more than a handbook and wise in its understanding of the culture that gave way to armed takeovers; but this writer has never met a coup leader in Africa or Asia, from Nigeria to the Philippines, that didn't go marching without a re-read of this essential book, now a classic, and translated into multiple languages.

Political Islam from Muhammad to Ahmadinejad

LORENZO VIDINO

REVIEW OF JOSEPH M. SKELLY, ED.

Political Islam from Muhammad to Ahmadinejad

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In 2001, Martin Kramer published a book that generated intense debate among Middle East experts. Suggestively entitled *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*, the book condemned what the author saw as the politicization—either by Third World biases or apologists for radical ideologies from the region—and decline in expertise in the field. Kramer, a Princeton-educated expert on medieval Islam who has divided his career between Israel and the United States, identified the beginning of the decline with the 1978 publication of Edward Said's much-celebrated book, *Orientalism*. Said's main thesis was that much of Western scholarship on the region was tarnished by a deep-seated prejudice against the East and that this ethnocentric bias skewed the objectivity of most analyses.

Said's writings have had an enormous impact. Several scholars opposed his views, accusing him of making politically motivated and poorly evidenced charges. But many others found Said's critique convincing and inspiring. The field of Middle East studies soon became divided between "Orientalists" and "Saidians." The latter slowly outnumbered the former and managed to

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control the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), the national organization that unites experts on the region. As Said himself wrote, following the publication of *Orientalism* “the formerly conservative Middle East Studies Association underwent an important ideological transformation,” and Said’s positions slowly became mainstream among American experts on the Middle East.¹

Kramer’s book condensed the accusations that critics leveled against Said and the course taken by MESA, whether publicly or, more often than not, privately. *Orientalism*, according to Kramer, “made it acceptable, even expected, for scholars to spell out their own political commitments as a preface to anything they wrote or did.”² Moreover, he charged, the dogma to follow was to see the people of the region as victims of the “three legs of the orientalist stool:” Western racism, American imperialism, and Israeli Zionism.³

Orientalists and Saidians quarrel on many issues, but in recent years no subject has divided them more than Islamism. Saidians charge Orientalists with erroneously lumping all Islamist groupings in one category, failing to see that there are reformist and democracy-prone Islamist movements that have little to do with al-Qaeda and other fringe groups. Orientalists respond by accusing Said’s disciples of whitewashing Islamism, and ignoring ample evidence pointing to the undemocratic and intolerant nature of all Islamist groups, even those embraced by the Saidians. In his book, Kramer complained that the Saidian-dominated American academia’s failure to understand Islamism had left a vacuum in the field and wondered what would fill it.⁴

The answer to this question came in 2007, six years after the publication of Kramer’s book, when two of America’s most senior Middle East experts, Bernard Lewis (Kramer’s mentor at Princeton) and Fouad Ajami of Johns Hopkins University, founded a new organization with the not-so-hidden goal of creating a viable alternative to MESA. Since its foundation, the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA) has attempted both to create a network of professionals who hold views that are distinct from those espoused by MESA and to coalesce those views to counterbalance MESA’s influence. The inaugural conference of ASMEA was held in Washington in 2008, and some of the papers presented during the event have been collected in the organization’s first book.

Edited by Joseph Morrison Skelly, a professor of history at New York City’s College of Mount Saint Vincent and ASMEA’s Treasurer, *Political Islam from Muhammad to Ahmadinejad* is an interesting collection of a very heterogeneous assortment of articles. The contributions deal with

subjects that span from the practice of *takfir* (the practice of declaring one an apostate from Islam) among Muslims in Ghana to an analysis of the role of Islam in the Somali resistance against British colonialism. Despite the variety of subjects addressed in the book, one theme runs constant throughout: the authors' negative assessment of political Islam in all of its forms. While it is apparent that most of the book's authors are well aware that the term Islamism encompasses many realities that cannot be lumped together with a broad brush, they are equally convinced that Islamism is a totalitarian ideology that has little to do with democracy and, for the most part, with Islam itself.

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After a short foreword in which Bernard Lewis condemns the “deadly hand of political correctness” that has “asphyxiated the rational discussion of Islam,” the book opens with three articles dealing with historical aspects of political Islam. Philip Carl Salzman, an anthropologist at McGill University, suggests that Islam's creation of the concept of *ummah* (a transnational Muslim community) and the division between *dar al Islam* and *dar al harb* builds on the “balanced security” model traditionally embraced by Arab society. Adding an additional layer of identification (*ummah*) to the preexisting ones (family, clan, tribe...), Islam managed to unite the “myriad of fissiparous, feuding Bedouin tribes of northern Arabia into a cohesive polity.” The article by Sherko Kirmanji similarly looks at the pre-Islamic, Byzantine, and Iranian origins of concepts often invoked by Islamists as uniquely Islamic. David Cook, a Rice University professor who has gained notoriety among experts for his studies on Muslim apocalyptic movements, writes an intriguing article tracing the reasons for the early Muslims' attack on the Byzantines to their veneration of the True Cross rather than to geopolitical motives.

The remaining eleven articles deal with disparate subjects ranging from the influence of Mahdism in modern Iraq to the potential impact of a modern reading of the medieval philosopher Averroës. As with any edited book covering such a wide range of topics, readers will prefer certain articles over others according to their individual interests. This reviewer found two

particularly noteworthy. Daniel Lav, a student at Hebrew University and the director of MEMRI's Jihad and Terrorism Threat Monitor, provides a very detailed analysis of the "revisions" authored by Sayyid Imam al Sharif, the former spiritual leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and the leaders of al-Gamaa al-Islamiya. The authors of these lengthy treatises challenge their own former theological positions, and their works constitute the basis of the two groups' abandonment of violence and reconciliation with the Egyptian state. Lav's piece provides an excellent overview of these "revisions," which are particularly relevant given that these writings, along with those coming from other groups such as, most recently, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, could undermine the appeal of other jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda.

Equally noteworthy is the article penned by Patrick Clawson, deputy director for research at the Washington Institute. Clawson, a seasoned commentator on Middle East affairs, offers an elegant and sweeping analysis of the political economy of the region and the mistakes made by its regimes. Clawson claims that nationalists first and Islamists later failed to create viable economies for the very same reason: "the absolute priority placed on radical political ideology at the expense of all else." On the contrary, argues Clawson on the basis of hard data, the only success stories in the region are the Gulf oil kingdoms and Israel, regimes that, to the dismay of their critics in the leftist and Islamist camps, have forged close relationships with the United States.

Political Islam from Muhammad to Ahmadinejad is an interesting book in which the liveliness of most articles makes up for the lack of a common thread among them. But its importance has only marginally to do with the scholarly contribution of each article. Rather, it is the first collection of work from scholars, both senior and junior, who are decidedly against the Saidian trend. Whether one agrees with the views of ASMEA's scholars—which, to be sure, are not all the same and are as diverse as those of MESA's members—anybody interested in an honest and lively debate on Islamism and, more generally, on Middle East affairs, should welcome this as the first of a long series of books. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 314.
- 2 Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001), 37.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., 57.