

Uncharitable donation: A gift book from the IRD

by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [May 15, 2007](#) issue

Recently 98,000 ministers found a gift in their mailboxes: a special edition of Efraim Karsh's *Islamic Imperialism*, compliments of the Institute on Religion and Democracy. Why such generosity? "We learned a lot from this book and wanted to share it with religious leaders," an IRD spokesperson said when I called to inquire.

But it's not hard to decipher the IRD's agenda. Karsh's 2000 book *Fabricating Israeli History: The New Historians* was widely reviewed. Ian S. Lustick, chair of the University of Pennsylvania's political science department and past president of the Association for Israel Studies, said that *Fabricating* targets "the whole body of revisionist Israeli history and social science, especially the work of Israeli historians who have made new British and Israeli archival material about the establishment of Israel available to a wider audience." These new materials have called into question some of the founding myths of Israel by presenting evidence, for example, about Israelis' expulsion of the Palestinians.

As for *Islamic Imperialism*, it argues that from the Prophet Muhammad to Osama bin Laden, Muslim leaders have been motivated by an overriding desire for wealth and power and have sought to conquer the world by the sword. According to Karsh, an Israeli historian who teaches at the University of London's King's College, European imperialism was relatively benign and short-lived; Islamic imperialism has been ruthlessly self-serving and continues unabated. Israel has been an innocent pawn in struggles for power among Arab rulers.

The book focuses entirely on diplomacy and war, ignoring demographic, economic and cultural factors. Karsh views the Islamic world as a constant threat to the rest of the world, especially to the West. The title and the cover, which connects Islam with the menacing eyes of Osama bin Laden, get the message across.

The back-cover endorsement by Carlin Romano declares that the book presents Islam as "an imperialist seventh-century Arabic movement that forced itself on

neighboring lands such as today's Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Egypt for secular colonialist payoffs—money, booty, territory.”

At a time when American Muslims are struggling against anti-Islamic prejudice, when many people are misinformed about Islam, when Jews, Christians and Muslims so desperately need to understand each other and work together, this book is far from helpful. Clergy who have taken the trouble to learn about Islam and to meet their Muslim neighbors will quickly dismiss it; those who know little may be influenced by its distorted views.

Karsh confirms the perspective of the religious right and all others who want to see the Muslim world as the great opponent of the West and Islam as an unworthy religion. He offers little to those who want a clearer understanding of the faith or of the viewpoints of the Muslims who are a growing segment of Western societies.

If the IRD were truly interested in enlightening ministers, it would distribute Albert Hourani's *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr's *The Heart of Islam* or Paul Barrett's *American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion*—a book written by a Jewish writer who strongly supports Israel, yet manages to discuss Islam and American Muslims in an insightful and helpful way.