Bernard Lewis, *The End of Modern History in the Middle East*

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**Recommended Citation**

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol72/iss72/13
Bernard Lewis, *The End of Modern History in the Middle East*  
Hoover Institution Press, 2011  
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Bernard Lewis is one of the best and most respected scholars of the Middle East. During his long life, he has seen the first signs of the Middle East and Muslim world begin to stir after four centuries of sleep. Their awakening has not been a happy one, it seems, because of their failure to recognize their own institutions have been more responsible for their economic and social backwardness than the colonial master they prefer to blame. Even in blaming colonialism, the Arab world focuses only on European, not Ottoman Turkish colonialism.

Lewis believes that a growing number of educated Middle Easterners are beginning to see that it rests with them to change the institutions that have left them in a state of “failure to thrive,” the analysis of the *United Nations Human Development Report* of 2002. Were that report to be updated in 2013, the failure to thrive has become far worse.

The problems, as seen by the Arab intellectuals who wrote this *Report*, are the same as those seen by Bernard Lewis: more than half of Arab women are illiterate; the region's infant mortality rate is twice as high as in Latin America and the Caribbean, over the past 20 years, income growth per capita has also been extremely low. The *Report* highlights the causes of these deficits and identifies three areas where Arab institutional structures are hindering performance and crippling human development: governance, women's empowerment, and access to knowledge.

This small book has an insightful introduction by Fouad Ajami, another of the best of Middle East scholars, this one born in the region itself (he is a Lebanese). Ajami gives us the history of the Hoover Institution (a Stanford University think tank) which had been indispensable in the ongoing scholarship about the Soviet Union. The scholarship took a new turn after the fall of the Berlin Wall with the founding of a Working Group on Islamism and the International Order. We learned on 9/11 how much our country is engaged and dangerously exposed in this newly radicalized Muslim world.

Radical Islam (Islamism) has “declared war on the states in their midst, on American power and interests, and on the very order of the international state system. Although they are a minority in the world of Islam, they are very determined that they would use terror if necessary to restore a central dictatorship (the Islamic emirate) that will force the world to recognize and yield to their notion of the Religion of Allah.”

Islam in its greatest period was a crossroads civilization with trading routes and mixed populations: a supranational empire. The modern world is a complex of nation states with largely common values and, under the influence of America and Western Europe,
increasingly liberal international norms, all of which are abhorrent to Islamism (and difficult even for mainstream Muslims).

Religious toleration, gender and racial equality, secular education, and a free and largely capitalist global economy are particularly opposed by the Islamists, to the detriment of the entire Muslim world.

Bernard Lewis is at the forefront of the scholarship analyzing and pinpointing what the Muslim World needs to flourish and join the currents of modernity.

Introduction

The book’s Introduction, also by Fouad Ajami, provides the biography of Bernard Lewis’ long life. Lewis worked for British Intelligence during World War II, and he morphed from an academic medievalist to a scholar with a taste or modern affairs. “In 1940,” he said, “we knew who we were, we knew who the enemy was, we knew the dangers and the issues…. It is different today. We don’t know who we are, we don’t know the issues, and we still do not understand the nature of the enemy.” It is to this end that Lewis has written his many thoughtful books on the history and varieties of the Muslim World. This book is his latest.

Chapter One: The End of Modern History in the Middle East

Modern history in the Middle East began when General Napoleon Bonaparte invaded and conquered Egypt (easily, despite Egypt being a colony of the Ottoman Empire). This began a period when Europeans had the ultimate power over the region, starting with Britain and France, and ending with the rivalry of the US and Soviet Union. Despite the end of military and political intervention by the West, Middle Easterners continue to assume that real responsibility and decisions still lie elsewhere. These beliefs lead to “wild and strange conspiracy theories directed against those whom they regard as their enemies: Israel, Jews, the US, and the West. There is still a widespread belief that America is an imperial power in the Middle East, which, if this were true, would by now have modernized and westernized the region far more than it is today.

The Islamists, medieval though they are, understand enough of modernity to know how to manipulate it. Groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood have been able to run in an election, win, and then attempt to make democracy mean, as we have seen before, “one man, one vote, one time.” There are public statements about democracy, but then private statements scorning this value.

Although we have seen Islamists winning elections, Lewis tells us that there is a marked difference between the democrats and the Islamists: “the former have a program of development and betterment, while the latter offer only a return to a mythologized past. The problem is that the weaknesses of the democrats are immediate and obvious; their strengths are long-term and, for many, obscure.”
The one Middle Eastern state with what appeared to be a decent democracy was Turkey, which since the election of its first Islamist president, is undoing a half century of parliamentary democracy. His political party (Justice and Development) “reveals attitudes that are anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, anti-Western and, more generally, anti-liberal and anti-modern. Its leaders and spokesmen show affinities --- and form alliances --- with the most extreme elements in Iran and in some of the Arab countries.”

In a discussion of the Palestinians’ long struggle against Israel, Lewis notes that the leadership continues to make terrible choices that do nothing but hurt them. Their first error was choosing the Axis in the Second World War. They then chose the Soviets in the Cold War and Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War. This is astonishingly wrongheaded! They have lost the goodwill of the United States, but more serious was the loss of the goodwill of the Arab members of the anti-Saddam coalition --- the Saudis, the Kuwaitis, and the other Gulf States, their supporters and paymasters in the struggle against Israel. Their support for terrorism has lost them even more than that on a global level.

In assessing the future conflicts in the region, Lewis sees a continuation of a cold war between Israel and the Muslim world. He speculates that Syria might pursue its long-time goal of becoming once more a “greater Syria,” but his book was written before the current civil wars and Syria’s bad decision to use poison gas. This story is not yet over.

Iran is at a crossroads. The Islamic Republic is not much loved by its population, and bad decisions (such as the nuclear program) have sent the economy into disaster mode. Lewis speculates that the Iranian Revolution may culminate in a Napoleon or a Stalin (he sees a fascist future there) but notes that this venture could end as both Napoleon’s and Stalin’s did.

The regional chaos may also result in geographic changes, pushed by aggression. Iraq tried to swallow Kuwait; Syria has planted its foot on Lebanon; Egypt is eyeing the Sudan; and Libya may soon break up into its constituent sections. This chaos also opens the door to adventurism from outside of the Muslim world. Weakness invites intervention.

The two most urgent commodities that will roil the region are oil and water. The third source of turmoil is a population explosion, already putting stress on water; and new energy sources may render oil less of a golden goose. Tourism, one of the region’s best opportunities for self-support is in collapse because of the chaos and anarchy. Egypt is suffering most from this decline.

Finally, Lewis says that “the competition between democracy and fundamentalism will have a direct bearing on another choice --- between outward and inward modernization.” Outward modernization is the purchase of modern war technologies or, in Saudi Arabia, modern technologies in general, which they have no capability to produce.
Inward modernization is learning to manufacture and ultimately design such technologies, something not happening in the region’s outdated educational systems. “In this respect, the Middle East still lags far behind other more recent recruits to modernity such as Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore.

“There are three factors which could help transform the Middle East: Turkey, Israel, and women---the first previously aloof, the second previously excluded, the third previously suppressed.” Of these, the most important is women. Support for this sector is coming from the overseas Muslim populations in the US and Europe. There can be no modernity without women as partners in today’s world.

Perhaps the best hope for the region is the gradual if reluctant emancipation of women. “Already in the nineteenth century some Muslim observers noted that one significant reason why their society was falling behind that of the West was that they were depriving themselves of the talents and services of half the population----the female half.” In large parts of the Muslim world, women are still subject to constraints and disabilities far worse than anything prescribed in Muslim scripture and law or even practiced in early Islamic times.

“For each and every country and for the region as a whole, there is a range of alternative futures: at one end, cooperation and progress toward peace and freedom, enlightenment and prosperity; at the other, a vicious circle of poverty and ignorance, fear and violence, tyranny and anarchy, hatred and self-pity, leading perhaps in the end to a new alien domination.”

If the Muslim world doesn’t reform and catch up with the rest of us, they will be a tempting target for some new empire or other. (China?) Their choices at the moment are to continue to fragment, or to launch a new holy war, a jihad, which could again provoke the response of an opposing holy war, a new crusade.

Chapter Two: Propaganda in the Middle East

This chapter explores the ultimate purposes of propaganda: getting one’s ideas across and accepted. Lewis explores its uses in the West (including Hitler and Stalin), America, and the Muslim world with its current propaganda campaigns by the Islamists. A large part of the latter involves the unthinking belief in conspiracy theories, theories that can result in mindless violence.

Chapter Three: Iran: Haman or Cyrus

This is a wonderful discussion of the two possibilities for the emergence of Iran after the demise of the Islamic Revolution: a worse society (fascist), characterized by the evil Haman in the Bible; or a return to Iran’s humanistic roots as exemplified by the first great Persian shah, Cyrus. The country could go either way.
Chapter Four: The New Anti-Semitism---First Religion, Then Race, Then What?

Many thoughtful people have asked the question: Why are Jews so universally hated? What did they do?

Lewis goes back through history to explore antiquity, in which ethnicities engaged in mutual dislike and often warfare. The dislike was rooted in different allegiances, and we can see this today in our own lives.

The conflict between Rome and Judea was a case in point; the Romans did not hate Jews for their religion (the Romans didn’t care); but they responded to a revolt in Judea and settled it by exiling most of the population from their land.

The hatred did not become religious until an emerging offshoot of Judaism, Christianity, came into competition and conflict with the mother faith. When the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its state faith, the competition with the older religion went viral. Jews were hated for not recognizing the new cult and not getting in line under the Roman Empire. They became the permanent “other.”

After the Enlightenment, fathered by those who were disgusted by the religious wars between the Protestants and the Catholics that roiled Europe for two centuries, religion was discarded as a reason for hatred. Race became the focus of anti-Semitism, and this concept was backed by a bad misuse of science.

The problem with the racial analysis is that, unlike religion, race cannot be changed. One could escape religious persecution by converting (as many Jews did to Christianity and Islam). But what can one do with race?

Today’s struggle between Israel and the Palestinians (and the entire Muslim world, even where Jews are not living) has spawned a new sort of anti-Semitism, one with roots in the racial theories of Hitler, adopted eagerly by the Muslim world and equally, it seems, by intellectuals in both Europe and to a lesser degree, the United States --- an extraordinary double standard.

What is good for the goose is not good for the gander. The Palestinians (or Muslims altogether) can do things that Israel cannot because the standards are different. During the founding war for Israel, 750,000 Palestinians fled (and in some cases were pushed) from the new state. At the same time, 750,000 Jews were pushed (or murdered) from Arab countries where they had been living for millennia. The UN set up camps for the Palestinians, where they sit even today. The UN did not worry about the Jewish refugees who took care of themselves (or had a few years of help from Israel). But the propaganda emphasizes the Palestinian plight, never the Jewish plight.
“For more than a half a century, any discussion of Jews and their problems has been overshadowed by the grim memories of the crimes of the Nazis and of the complicity, acquiescence or indifference of so many others. But inevitably, the memory of those days is fading and now Israel and its problems afford an opportunity to relinquish the unfamiliar and uncomfortable posture of guilt and contribution and to resume the more familiar and more comfortable position of stern reproof from an attitude of moral superiority. It is not surprising that this opportunity is widely welcomed and utilized.

“One might argue that when Arabs are judged by a lower standard than Jews, as for example the minimal attention given to the atrocious crimes committed at Darfur, this is more offensive to Arabs than to Jews. Contempt is indeed more demeaning than hatred. But it is less dangerous.”