



## Bernard Lewis at 90

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It is often said that the United States isn't easy on its scholars and public intellectuals--that they are not accorded the prestige and respect that they are given in the Old World. This complaint, usually made by left-wingers struggling against the tide in the United States, isn't totally without merit. A good literary scholar or classicist in the United States perhaps doesn't quite have the same social cachet as would a similarly accomplished scholar at Oxford or the Sorbonne. But when scholars do make it in the United States--and there certainly seem to be vastly more European scholars hoping to make it in America than Americans trying to snag a sinecure in Europe--there is simply no comparison in the eminence, influence, and renown that they can achieve. Since arriving in the United States in 1974, the British historian of the Middle East Bernard Lewis has become one of America's--and thus the world's--most famous academics.

For those of us seriously interested in the Middle East--and since 9/11 that has become a rather large crowd--Lewis, who will celebrate his 90th birthday on May 31, has attained a stature in the field and with the general reading public unrivaled by any historian, living or dead, of the Middle East and Islam. His range of writings--from the pre-Islamic period, through Islam's classical and medieval ages and its premodern "gunpowder" empires, to today's Muslim nation-states--is simply unparalleled by any other scholar, even from the golden age of Islamic studies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the field's terrifyingly erudite, multilingual European founding fathers--the much despised "orientalists"--bestrode the earth. Lewis is the last and greatest of the orientalists--an awkward, geographically imprecise name for those who gave birth to the disciplined study of Islamic civilization. To borrow from Shiite Mus-

lim legal scholarship, Bernard Lewis is the *marja-e taqlid*, "the source of emulation," the scholar to whom on the great questions one must make reference. He has joined that elite group of academics--the economists Milton Friedman and John Kenneth Galbraith come to mind--who have decisively shaped public discourse, if not always government policy, on their subjects.

This is an odd situation, for reasons both personal and pedagogical. His place in America would not have been predicted 35 years ago, when Lewis was already one of the great dons of Islamic studies, precisely because he is (in all the best senses) so very English--which doesn't always play well in the United States. He is unrelentingly ironic and nuanced, preferring to come at the most consequential of matters obliquely. He is conservative, with a quiet, deep curiosity about small details and the traditions that have evolved and endured over centuries. He is urbane and witty, punctuating the most serious of discussions with subtle, usually mischievous, often mordant humor, gathered and delivered in many languages (translations are provided, though not without occasional frowning). He can be shy and, despite his vast learning, at times arrestingly modest. These attributes are hard to square with his experiences--few men have read and remembered as much as Lewis has forgotten, or traveled the world as thoroughly, or dined so regularly with the high and mighty--but they nonetheless are attributes that define his character, and make him

open to people and places that great men, by the time they become great men, usually can no longer see.

Lewis has gained the broadest fame and notoriety for being the intellectual godfather behind the Bush administration's critique of the Muslim Middle East. To quote Ian Buruma in the *New Yorker*, "if anyone can be said to have provided the intellectual muscle for recent United States policy toward the Middle East it would have to be him." Pedagogically, this, too, would not have been expected. Lewis's complicated ideas are not easily compacted and translated into policy prescriptions, by him or others. He has, nevertheless, been for years a man of public affairs. In 1970, Richard Perle, as a young staffer for Washington senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, observed Lewis giving a speech, and was astonished by his eloquence ("most people speak in sentences; he spoke in paragraphs") and historical reach. Perle later introduced the Englishman to Washington. However, Lewis's comings and goings in Washington and the media have been relatively quiet for a celebrity scholar. While many of his most vocal academic critics trumpet their appearances before Congress or on cable news programs or at VIP private dinners, experience over decades has taught Lewis (if not his critics, who usually have had less knowledge of the mechanics of American governance) that dinners in Washington rarely translate into policy--at least not policy that *pen-seurs* would recognize as their own. Lewis dislikes prognostication--the common denominator of policy life

in Washington--because an accomplished historian more than others knows the role that blind luck can play in turning history upside down.

And it must be said that the professor's influence has, in all probability, been overstated--both by his friends and most loudly by those who have emotionally and intellectually been unhinged by the Iraq war. Until President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, his former deputy Paul Wolfowitz, and White House speech writer Michael Gerson write their memoirs, we really won't know to what extent Lewis, directly or indirectly, shaped their views of the Middle East, radical Islam, al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein, and the possibilities for a post-Saddam Iraq. (When the Clinton administration was bombing Saddam's regime on a nearly daily basis in 1998, when its senior officials were routinely describing the damage that the Iraqi dictator could do to us with his WMD programs, was it also under the spell of Professor Lewis?)

I strongly doubt that Wolfowitz, long an advocate of toppling Saddam Hussein and an admirer and serious student of Lewis, pushed war primarily because of what the professor had written or said about the Middle East. When Wolfowitz remarked that a post-Saddam Iraq would be inclined toward being a more liberal state because over 50 percent of the population was female, that opinion surely didn't derive from Lewis, who has keenly understood the magnetic power of

traditional Islamic teachings for both men and women, even as he has underscored the extraordinarily debilitating effect that Muslim patriarchy, with its multiple wives and concubines, has had on Islamic civilization's competitiveness. Further from Lewis than Wolfowitz, the president and the vice president in all probability didn't see the necessity for war against Saddam and the establishment of a functioning democracy after his fall primarily through a Lewisean lens. (Ditto, by the way, for most of the pro-war editors of this magazine.)

Thoughtful observers could easily have favored a policy that aimed to replace the Baathist dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, and to rethink America's reflexive support of the autocratic regimes in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where bin Ladenism was born, *and* been ignorant of the writings of Princeton University's most famous professor emeritus. This certainly would not have been the ideal intellectual preparation for conflict in the Middle East, but it is a situation that I suspect occurred quite often inside the administration and out. No wild-eyed, Bush-admiring Wilsonian hawk, the *New Yorker's* George Packer, who chronicled post-Saddam Iraq in his magazine and in the book *The Assassin's Gate*, doesn't appear particularly influenced by Bernard Lewis's *oeuvre*, yet he supported the war, however riddled with angst and foreboding. Ditto for Ken Pollack, the military strategist who now hangs his hat at the liberal Brookings Institution. Pollack's *The Threatening Storm* in the fall of 2002 was the single most

influential book explicitly arguing in favor of war against Saddam Hussein. This work is not an extended essay on the cultural, spiritual, economic, and military decay of the modern Middle East *à la* Bernard Lewis, yet it is a compelling argument for why sensible men could support the war and the American occupation.

Although Lewis was certainly in favor of the war (still is), and certainly backed the idea of U.S. support for the establishment of an Iraqi democracy (still does), his views on Muslim history, which are usually expressed in broad brushstrokes that capture several centuries, always have underscored the unrequited expectations of those who would liberalize the modern Middle East. An appreciation of this point was behind the critique done by Buruma, an intellectually serious effort that avoids the anti-Zionist animadversions that have defined most left-of-center critiques of the Princeton professor since 9/11.

Buruma suggests that Lewis's affection for the Muslim Middle East got the better of him, causing him to rashly throw his hitherto conservative intellectual force behind the democracy-through-war project of the Jacobin neocons in the Bush administration. Buruma finds the decision to go to war against Saddam rationally inexplicable, and particularly discordant for Lewis, who has long warned about the dangers of Islamic extremism (per Buruma, the "Iraqi regime was hated by religious extremists"). For years, the professor had written about the obstacles to

democratic growth in the Muslim world. But Lewis, it appears, lost his patience and his conservative values because "his beloved civilization is sick." After all, according to Buruma, "what would be more heartwarming to an old Orientalist than to see the greatest Western democracy cure the benighted Muslim?" This, then, is what motivated Lewis's pro-war zeal, "or something less charitable: if a final showdown between the great religions is indeed the inevitable result of a millennial clash [Lewis, not Harvard's Samuel Huntington, originally coined the phrase *clash of civilizations*], then we had better make sure that we win."

Buruma's assessment is the polar opposite of those in the academy who despise Lewis for being insufficiently sensitive to Arabs and Muslims and supportive of Israel. Nonetheless Buruma's reading is a variation of Edward Said's charge against the Princeton scholar--that Lewis advances the "white man's burden"--though out of love, not imperialist motives, as Said claimed. Buruma is undeniably correct in discerning an evolution in Lewis's views since the University of London graduate in 1939 published his dissertation on the Assassins, a medieval heretical Shiite sect that once scared Sunni Muslim potentates from its strongholds in Iran and Syria.

Given the ugly history of the Muslim Middle East since 1945, it would be shocking if the professor's views had not evolved. In 1945, for example, Lewis was not in favor of a Jewish state in Palestine; today, he is,

seeing Israel as one of the things that has gone more right than wrong in the region. What Buruma does not appreciate--and he is far from alone in this--is that Lewis does see the rise of bin Ladenism, and 9/11 in particular, as an epochal event for both Islam and the West.

Although Lewis has *never* advocated the export of democracy by force, he became increasingly focused after 9/11 on the perverse nexus in the Muslim Middle East between tyranny and the growth of Islamic extremism. He understood--because he'd actually been reading the primary material produced by Sunni Wahhabi and Shiite extremists and by Arab dictatorships--that the United States in the 1990s was increasingly seen as weak in the Middle East, and that such perceptions could be lethal. He underscored the extraordinary dangers posed by Saddam's aggressive totalitarian regime, with a proven hunger for weapons of mass destruction, which, lest we forget, was on the verge of escaping, thanks to French and Russian efforts, from its sanctions and isolation. Lewis, a child of 1930s Europe and a profound admirer of Winston Churchill, did not think the United States should make the mistake again that it made in 1991, in failing to finish off the Butcher of Baghdad.

**BUT LEWIS'S CONSERVATISM REMAINS:** He is still a qualified advocate of democratic change in the Middle East. Here is the qualification: He understands the centrality of the Koran and the Holy Law to the Islamic identity and Muslim emotions, and he understands that

neither--even in the hands of the most brilliant Muslim modernists--is a vehicle for empowering democratic ideals. He does not trust Islamists. It is for this reason, among others, that Lewis has long admired the achievement of Kemal Atatürk, the dictatorial father of the secular (and semidemocratic) Turkish Republic.

Yet Lewis is also aware of the burgeoning democratic discussion in the Muslim Middle East. And he assesses this positively--democracy has become for him an essential part of solving the region's many problems. It is astonishing how many observers of the region choose simply to ignore or diminish the explosion of democratic sentiments that has occurred since the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. These sentiments have not yet transformed the Middle East, but they are a start. I think Lewis's emphasis on secularism and secularists as the all-critical component in democratic transformation may be a little too rigid. Democratic sentiments, however imperfect and self-serving, have embedded themselves to varying degrees even into the *ulama* and lay religious classes in the region. Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and the dissident Shiite clergy in Iran are the most famous and probably the most evolved of these religious drivers of democratic change.

Men of religion, I have argued, will advance the democratic movements in the Middle East more effectively than their secularist brethren will. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the font of so much violent Islamic

extremism, could well turn out to be the mothership for democratic change in the Sunni Arab world. (Change that will, at least in the short term, send anti-Americanism through the roof, adversely affect liberal, secular social values, and America's military and security relationships with the ruling elite in Cairo.) This is a bit much for Lewis. Nevertheless, it is probably correct to say that his conception of who will drive democracy in the Arab world no longer fits--if it ever did--the Turkish model, which the professor admires and so many in academe dislike, if not loathe. (Though they need not be mutually exclusive, liking Turkey and liking the Arab world are usually fire and water among scholars and among the experts of the State Department and CIA.)

So what is Bernard Lewis's place in history, especially along the Potomac? Undoubtedly, his two short but compendious, bestselling books that appeared after 9/11--*What Went Wrong?* and *The Crisis of Islam*--played a part in helping senior administration officials better understand the historical context of radical Muslims who had embraced terrorism as a means of expressing their faith. His seminal essays on Islamic militancy in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Commentary*, and the *New Republic* also worked their way into the foreign-policy establishment, even if members of that establishment didn't know the lineage of the views that they expressed.

His bestselling books and post-9/11 articles all hark back to Lewis's greatest work, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, published in 1982. Perhaps the most illuminating book ever written on the Islamic world--a history book that has the chance of being read 50 years from now as closely and as profitably as when it was written--*The Muslim Discovery of Europe* allows the reader to see how Muslims saw the West, from Islam's earliest days to modern times. (*The Muslim Discovery of Europe's* only real competitor would be *The Venture of Islam*, the three-volume masterpiece by the University of Chicago's late, great Marshall Hodgson.) Lewis's book could have been subtitled *The Origins of Curiosity About Infidels*, for it is a 1,400-year trek through the development of Muslims' encounters with unbelievers. There are many reasons European civilization raced ahead of other, once-superior civilizations. These reasons all somehow combined to explode the rapacity and range of the West's curiosity, both individually and collectively expressed.

As Lewis regularly points out, the word *curiosity* doesn't really have good equivalents in Islamic languages. The Columbia University literary critic Edward Said, who loathed Lewis and the "orientalist" tradition behind him, never really understood to what degree curiosity (and sympathy)--not dark, imperialist, exploitative motives--drove Western scholarship about the Islamic world, especially during the formative "orientalist" age. A Palestinian Christian Arab by birth,

whom Lewis famously debated on stage and dueled in the pages of the *New York Review of Books* in 1982, Said never really understood, either, how Western scholars could be proud, not particularly apologetic patriots and also profoundly respect foreign faiths, cultures, and lands. (Said never understood, as far as that goes, how men of differing views could remain civil. Under Lewis and his close friend Charles Issawi, a phenomenally accomplished scholar of both modern and medieval Islamic history who had fairly sharp political differences with Lewis, Princeton University was a refuge from the Third-Worldist, anti-Israeli political storms that made many Middle Eastern studies departments in America socially and intellectually unpleasant.) IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR A WESTERNER to digest Lewis's work without it profoundly affecting how he sees the Muslim Middle East. A determination to use primary material so that Muslims can speak for themselves animates all of Lewis's writings. President Bush's faith in the medicinal value of democracy for Muslims raised under dictatorship undoubtedly has its strongest roots in America's abiding trust in representative government. But Lewis's nuanced writings on democracy in the Muslim world, and his former students and his many friends, who've all absorbed over the years perspectives of the British émigré-turned-American citizen, have probably helped to flesh out the administration's rapidly evolving understanding of Middle Eastern politics and faith after 9/11. (An understanding that may now be

vanishing as the Near East Bureau at the State Department regains control of American policy in the Middle East.) Published at the time of the invasion of Iraq, before President Bush's most important speech in November 2003 about the need for representative government in the Middle East, Lewis's commentary on democracy in *The Crisis of Islam* anticipates and amplifies the president's themes:

*The creation of a free society, as the history of existing democracies in the world makes clear, is no easy matter. The experience of the Turkish republic over the last half century and of some other Muslim countries more recently has demonstrated two things: first, that it is indeed very difficult to create a democracy in such a society, and second, that although difficult, it is not impossible. The study of Islamic history and of the vast and rich Islamic political literature encourages the belief that it may well be possible to develop democratic institutions--not necessarily in our Western definition of that much misused term, but in one deriving from their own history and culture and ensuring, in their way, limited government under law, consultation and openness, in a civilized and humane society.*

*The forces of tyranny and terror are still very strong and the outcome is far from certain. . . . The war against terror and the quest for freedom are inextricably linked, and neither can succeed without the other. The struggle is no longer limited to one or two countries, as some Westerners still manage to believe. It has acquired first a regional then a global dimension, with profound consequences for all of us. . . . If freedom fails and terror triumphs, the peoples of Is-*

*lam will be the first and greatest victims. They will not be alone, and many others will suffer with them.*

Many years ago, when I was still an Iran-watcher in the CIA's clandestine service, I thanked Lewis, who had been my teacher at Princeton, for his writings and the long conversations that he'd so generously had with me. I could respect Iranian holy warriors, who then interested the United States government more than their Sunni counterparts, because the professor had helped me to see them as they really were. He'd taught me how to time travel--to reach back and touch the events,

people, and literature that still define so much of the Muslim soul. For a case officer, who feeds on the strengths and weaknesses of foreigners, there was no more valuable gift. With other students of the Middle East and Islam, with the common man who is just curious, and with Democratic and Republican officials in Washington who try to see beyond our borders, and who often are not blessed with keen historical insight, Lewis has been similarly generous and kind. We are all in his debt, and in his shadow. *Kheli tashakkor mikonam*, professor. Happy birthday, Bernard.

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