

**Memorandum - Book Review:  
“The Crisis of Islam”  
by Bernard Lewis**

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March 30, 20005

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## Memorandum

To: Professor Eliot Cohen

Date: 30 March 2005

From:

Subject: Review of a recent book ("The Crisis of Islam") by Bernard Lewis

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1. In "The Crisis of Islam" Princeton professor emeritus Bernard Lewis follows up on his earlier publication "What Went Wrong?" that had looked at how the Ottoman Empire, convinced of the inherent superiority of the Muslim world, had largely failed to adapt to and adopt the accelerating pace of progress set by Europe. More recent experiences of Muslim countries promise to help explain radical Islam in its political and terrorist versions as the Middle Eastern failure to advance towards modernity now even contrasts unfavorably with experiences of non-Western regions of the world.

2. From the outset, Lewis emphasizes that Middle Eastern identity and the questions it arouses can only be understood against the background of history. For Muslims, "Islamic history (...) reflects the working out of God's purpose for His community." The predominant concept of history is therefore that of the entire community of believers – "a religion subdivided into nations." Lewis illustrates well how this transnational notion shapes the way Muslims see contacts with the West, and permeates Islamic political thought. The weight of history on perceptions of contemporary Arab problems in the explain why Usama bin Laden frames his war against the West as one against "the Crusaders."

3. In the third chapter, Lewis retraces this history that some Muslims continue to see as the struggle of two civilizations who consider themselves "custodians of God's final message to humanity", which both feel is "their duty to bring to the rest of the world." In this struggle, for Muslims the last three centuries have brought an increasingly dolorous *cognitive dissonance*. For since the days of the Prophet Muhammad the expansion of Islam as a religious community seemed to progress along the growing reach of an Islamic empire, both of which were supposed to be one. Western victory over the Ottoman Empire, abdication of the caliph, and occupation of the Middle Eastern heartland of Islam put into question the Muslim self-image of a world-historical force to bear out God's mission on earth. Out of this springs, according Lewis, a deep irritation and sense of humiliation among Muslims. It is this "humiliation and disgrace' that Islam has suffered for 'more than eighty years'" that Usama bin Laden referred to after September 11. made The various ways in which Muslims answer or rationalize this challenge to their sense historical mission are of great importance to the West.

4. Lewis points to hopeful signs of critics who look for reasons within the Muslim world in a secular way. The *Arab Human Development Report 2002* openly criticizes dearth of freedom, lack of civil society, widespread illiteracy and the dismal status of women in the Arab world. Despite the doctrine that "the Qur'an itself is uncreated and eternal, divine and immutable", Lewis presents evidence that interpretation and application of its verses has varied widely. He is confident that the Qur'an's "No compulsion in religion" can become a cornerstone of more liberal religious interpretation permitting Islam, that is "far from unanimous in its rejection of the West" to be able to show its beneficial force.

5. Currently, though, Lewis sees as a very real threat the religious fundamentalist answer: Islam has erred from the ways of God and needs to find back to its pure roots. Religious radicals dispose of special power as they can thrive on established networks of the Islamic community that even authoritarian governments can't suppress. They portray the West as the source of the pernicious influences and temptations that have led Muslims astray. Whereas Lewis would concur concerning the Western brainchild breed of Arab Socialism, Anti-Semitism and proto-fascist parties, fundamentalist critics attack the path to modernity that the West and others have successfully taken. As Lewis explains, the radical wave of Islamism derives its power from the frustration with these Western concepts, a continued sense of humiliation that encountered a new sense of power based on oil wealth and reinforced by the new element of contempt for the West.

6. Lewis undertakes to traces this explosive mixture of hatred and contempt back to more than the often cited U.S. foreign policy towards the region. Anti-modern, fascist and socialist criticism of a capitalist and materialist America has left its mark on the region during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, more than that the "rejection and condemnation, at once angry and contemptuous" is more powerfully expressed in moral and religious motifs. Since the Egyptian writer Sayyid Qutb published his account of the United States in the 1950s, the materialism and promiscuity of American life, as well as the

spiritual shallowness of American churches have been condemned from afar and even more feared as corrosive at home. Among radical Muslims and al Qaeda then, the United States figures as a civilizational enemy – something that cannot be alleviated by redressing any of the usually cited grievances such as American support for Israel. Having lost the last ally against the West with the Soviet Union, radical Islamists concluded that they now will have to take on the US directly and on their own in a “holy war” of “unholy terrorism”. Seen as the West's apotheosis in supposed “moral degeneracy and consequent weakness”, the United States would be an “politically and militarily enfeebled” obstacle to the promise of Islam's predominance.

7. Bernard Lewis explains to the Western reader Islam's notions of *jihad*. He emphasizes that other than the celebrated concept of individual moral striving that of a military holy war is real and alive. Yet, as “an obligation of the faith, it is elaborately regulated in the shari'a” and at any rate “[a]t no point do the basic texts of Islam enjoin terrorism and murder”. “At no point (...) do they even consider the random slaughter of uninvolved bystanders.” It is clear that Al Qaeda is selective in its reading of the Qur'an. Here as on other helpful explanations on Islamic teaching, Lewis leaves the reader wondering how much practical relevance these prescriptions possess for Muslims today, and in how far they can translate into a mass following for either a modern or a radical version of the religion.

8. Wahhabism as the radical, and state-sanctioned form of Islam preached in and spread from Saudi Arabia receives due consideration. Lewis introduces the reader to its historical roots and its present existence as key factor in spreading puritan and radical Islam. The author makes clear how Saudi oil wealth, the prestige of custodians of the holy places and the need of the ruling dynasty for backing by religious authorities combine with radical religious zeal to turn Wahhabism into an explosive export, exploiting religious education for indoctrination. However, the reader does not learn how its wide network of finances, indoctrination and support feeds into terrorism inside and outside of Arabia?

9. Al Qaeda's and other groups of radical Islamism, however, profess an even more peculiar version of Islam, distorting it and adding new influences. They take up Sayyid Qutb's hatred of United States as a degenerate society and polity dangerous to Islam, of the State of Israel, and his advocating the destruction of “apostate” Middle Eastern regimes. It is in this sense, that Al Qaeda refers to the United States as Pharaoh and Crusaders – the impersonation of the infidel enemy of Islam against whom one is to wage holy war. They also added another innovation: the use of suicidal murderers willing to kill thousands of civilians to achieve their purposes. Lewis does a useful service by reminding us that suicide is a grave sin for Muslims and that the suicide attacker is “taking a considerable risk on a theological nicety” - that his death is martyrdom and brings heaven rather than eternal damnation.

10. Lewis raises the reader's awareness to one of the causes of this violent heresy: domestic political and economic grievances in Arab countries and the tragic deadlock (at best) it has been caught up in for the last forty years. The double standards that Lewis feels the West supports in the region are an important lightning-rod for criticism, and its role in strengthening radicals is one reason why political transformation in the Middle East needs to be a strategic priority for the West. Lewis warns of the danger that “[g]oing too far too fast would give an immediate advantage to those skilled in the arts of manipulation and of intimidation”. Yet, unlike Fareed Zakaria, he does not offer concise advice on how such reform in societies at the breaking point can be done in a way that promises to strike a balance between stability and transformation that is beneficial to the strategic interests of the West.

11. Bringing Lewis' eminent learning in a highly readable form to the instruction about the Muslim world, the book unfortunately leaves some important questions open. How relevant is the theological essence of teachings on the caliphate today? What about Shi'ite Islam -important in many crucial countries- on this and many other aspects where the book seems to present mainly the Sunni majority version? What about the Indian Deobandi school of Islam with its network of madrassas as the main influence on the Taliban? Where can one find more material on this? In general, a weak side of the “Crisis of Islam” is focusing nearly exclusively on the Middle East, turning attention away from the majority of Muslims who are to be found in South and Southeast Asia, and those in countries such as Sudan or Nigeria where Islam is directly in touch with sizable Christian populations. The reader therefore is left with the troubling question of how much of current problems may reflect more a 'crisis of the Arab mind and self-image' or of 'Arab Islam' than a general “crisis of Islam”.