

# The Legacy and Fallacies of Bernard Lewis

Bernard Lewis, seen by some in the West as a giant of Arab and Muslim scholarship, left behind a legacy of falsehoods and politically-motivated distortions, as As'ad AbuKhalil explains.

**By As`ad AbuKhalil**

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There is no question that Bernard Lewis was one of the most politically—not academically—influential Orientalists in modern times.

Lewis' career can be roughly divided into two phases: the British phase, when he was a professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and the second phase, which began in 1974, when he moved to Princeton University and lasted until his death on May 19. His first phase was less overtly political, although the Israeli occupation army translated and published one of his books, and Gold Meir assigned articles by Lewis to her cabinet members.

Lewis knew where he stood politically but he only became a political activist in the second phase. His academic production in the first phase was rather historical (dealing with his own specialty and training) and his books were then thoroughly documented. The production of his second phase was political in nature and lacked solid documentation and citations.

In the second phase, Lewis wrote about topics (such as the contemporary Arab world) on which he was rather ignorant. The writings of his second phase were motivated by his political advocacy, while the writings of the first phase was a combination of his political biases and his academic interests.

Shortly upon moving into the U.S., Lewis met with Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, the dean of ardent Zionists in the U.S. Congress. He thus started his political career and his advocacy, which was often thinly hidden behind the titles of superficial books on the modern Arab world. Lewis not only mentored various neoconservatives, but he also elevated the status of Middle East natives that he approved of. For instance, he was behind the promotion of Fouad Ajami (he dedicated one of this books to him), just as he was behind introducing Ahmad Chalabi to the political elite in DC.

Furthermore, Lewis was also behind the invitation of Syrian academic Sadiq Al-

Azm to Princeton in the early 1990s (as Edward Said told me at the time) because Lewis always relished Al-Azm's critique of Said's *Orientalism*. Sep. 11 only elevated the status of Lewis and brought him close to the centers of power: he advised George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and other senior members of the administration.

In the lead-up to the Iraq war, he assured Cheney (relying on the authority of Ajami) that not only Iraqis, but all Arabs, would joyously greet invading American troops. And he argued to Cheney before the war, using the dreaded Zionist and colonial cliché, that Arabs only understand the language of force. (Lewis would later distort his own history and claim that he was not a champion of the Iraq invasion although the record is clear).

Lewis was not only close to the higher echelons of the U.S. government, but in addition to his long-standing ties to Israeli leaders, he was close to Jordanian King Husayn and his brother, Hasan (although Lewis would mock what he considered a Jordanian habit of eating without forks and knives, as he wrote in *Notes on a Century: Reflections of a Middle East Historian*, on page 217).

Lewis was also close to the Shah's government, and to the military dictatorship in Turkey in the 1980s. Kenan Evren, the Turkish general who led the 1980 military coup, had a tete-a-tete with Lewis during one of his visits to D.C. Lewis had contacts with the Sadat government, and Sadat's spokesperson, Tahasin Bashir, in 1971 sent a message through Lewis to the Israeli government regarding Sadat's interest in peace between the two countries.

### **Distorted View of Islam**

There are many features of Lewis's works, but foremost is what French historian Maxime Rodinson called "theologocentrism", or the Western school of thought which attribute all observable phenomena among Muslims to matters of Islamic theology.

For Lewis, Islam is the only tool which can explain the odd political behavior of Arabs and Muslims. Lewis used Islam to refer not only to religion, but also the collection of Muslim people, governments ruling in the name of Islam, Shari`ah, Islamic civilization, languages spoken by Muslims, geographic areas in which Muslims predominate, and Arab governments. A review of his titles show his fixation with Islam. But what does it mean for Lewis to refer to Islam as being "the whole of life" for Muslims, as he does in *Islam and the West*?

Lewis also began the trendy Islamophobic, Western obsession with Shari`ah when he wrote years ago in the same book that for Muslims religion is "inconceivable without Islamic law." There are hundreds of millions of Muslims in the world who

live under governments which don't subscribe to Shari'ah. No Muslim, for example, questions the Islamic credentials of Muslims who live in Western countries under secular law. Lewis even notes this fact, but it confuses him. In *Islam and the West* he states in bewilderment: "There is no [legal] precedent in Islamic history, no previous discussion in Islamic legal literature."

Lewis could have benefited from reading James Piscatori's book, *Islam in a World of Nation States*, which shows that Shari'ah is not the only source of laws even in countries where Islam is supposedly the only source of law. But Lewis was stuck in the past, he could only interpret the present through references to the original works of classical Islam.

His hostility and contempt for Arabs and Muslims was revealed in his writings even during the British phase of his career, when he was politically more restrained. He was influenced by the idea of his mentor, Scottish historian Hamilton Gibb, regarding what they both called "the atomism" of the Arab mind. The evidence for their theory is that the classical Arabic poem of *Jahiliyyah* and early Islam was not organically and thematically unified, but that each line of poetry was independent of the other.

I remember back in 1993 when I discussed the matter with Muhsin Mahdi, a professor of Islamic philosophy at Harvard University, when I was reading the private papers of Gibb at the Widener Library. Mahdi said that their ideas are completely out of date and that recent scholarship about the classical Arabic poem refuted that thesis. (Lewis would resurrect the notion about the "atomism" of the Arab mind in his later *Islam and the West*).

Other writings of Lewis became obsolete academically. In his *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* he recycles the view that Muslims had no curiosity about the West because it was the land of infidelity and that they suffered from a superiority complex. A series of new scholarly books have undermined this thesis by Lewis largely by scholars looking into Indian and Iranian archives. The Palestinian academic, Nabil Mater, in his books *Britain and the Islamic World, 1558-1713*, *Europe Through Arab Eyes, 1578-1727*, and *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*, paints a very different—and far more documented—picture of the subject that Lewis spent a career distorting.

### **Relished in Disparaging Arabs**

In addition, the tone of Lewis' writings on Arabs and Muslims was often sarcastic and contemptuous. Lewis did the work of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), which was started in 1998 by a former Israeli intelligence agent and an Israeli political scientist, before MEMRI existed: he relished finding outlandish views of individual Muslims and popularizing them to

stereotype all Arabs and all Muslims.

In the early editions of *Arabs in History*, Lewis remarked that none of the philosophers of the Arab/Islamic civilization were Arab in ethnic extraction (except Al-Kindi). What was Lewis's point except to denigrate the Arab character and even genetic makeup? In the same book he cites an Ismaili document but then quickly adds that it "is probably not genuine." But if it is "probably not genuine" why bother to cite it except for his fondness for bizarre tidbits about Arabs and Muslims?

The Orientalism of Lewis was not representative of classical Orientalism with all its flaws and shortcomings and political biases. He harbored more of an ideology of hostility against Arabs and Muslims. This ideology shares features with anti-Semitism, namely that the whole (Muslims in this case) form a monolithic group and that they pose a civilizational danger to the world, or are plotting to take it over, and that the behavior or testimony of one represents the total group (Islamic Ummah).

In writing about contemporary Islam, Lewis spent years recycling his 1976 *Commentary* magazine article titled, "The Return of Islam." What he doesn't answer is, "return" from where? Where was Islam prior? In this article, Lewis exhibits his adherence to the most discredited forms of classical Orientalist dogmas by invoking such terms as "the modern Western mind." He thereby resurrected the idea of epistemological distinctions between "our" mind and "theirs", as articulated by the 1976 racist book, *The Arab Mind* by Israeli anthropologist, Raphael Patai. (This last book would witness a resurrection in U.S. military indoctrination after Sep. 11, as Seymour Hersh reported).

### **An Obsession with Etymology**

For Lewis, the Muslim mind never seems to change. Every Muslim, regardless of geography or time, is representative of any or all Muslims. Thus, a quotation from an obscure medieval source is sufficient to explain present-day behavior. Lewis even traces Yaser Arafat's *nom de guerre* (Abu `Ammar) to early Islamic history and to the names of the Prophet Muhammad's companions, though `Arafat himself had explained that the name derives from the root `amr (a reference to `Arafat's construction work in Kuwait prior to his ascension to the leadership of the PLO).

Because `Arafat literally embraced Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran when he first met him, Lewis finds evidence of a universal Muslim bond in the picture. But when Lewis revised his book years later, he took note in passing of the deep rift which later developed between `Arafat and Khomeini and said simply: "later they parted company." So much for the theory of the Islamic bond between them.

Lewis must not have heard of wars among Muslims, like the Iran-Iraq war.

Lewis read the book *Philosophy of Revolution* by the foremost political champion of Arab nationalism, Nasser of Egypt, as containing Islamic themes. He must have been the only reader to come to that conclusion.

Another feature in Lewis's writings is his obsession with etymology. To compensate for his ignorance of modern Arab reality, Lewis would often return to the etymology of political terms among Muslims. His book, *The Political Language of Islam*, which is probably his worst book, is an example of his attempt to Islamize and standardize the political behavior of all Muslims. His conclusions from his etymological endeavors are often comical: he assumes that freedom is alien to the Arabs because the historical meaning of the word in an ancient Arabic dictionary merely connoted the absence of slavery. This is like assuming that a Westerner never engaged in sex before the word was popularized. He complains that some contemporary political terms, like *dawlah* (state), lost some of their original meanings, as if this is a problem peculiar to the Arabic language.

In his early years, Lewis was close to the classical Orientalists: he wrote in a beautiful style and his erudition and language skills showed through the pages. His early works were fun to read, while his later works were dreary and dull. But Lewis was unlike those few classical Orientalists who managed to mix knowledge about history of the Middle East and Islam with knowledge of the contemporary Arab world (scholars like Rodinson, Philip Hitti and Jacques Berque). Lewis's ignorance about the contemporary Arab world was especially evident in his production during the U.S. phase of his long career. His book on the *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, which was one of the first to rely on the Ottoman archives, was probably one of his best books. There is real scholarship in the book, unlike many of his later observational and impressionable works.

In his later best-selling books, *What Went Wrong?* and *The Crisis of Islam*, one reads the same passages and anecdotes twice. Lewis, for example, relishes recounting that syphilis was imported into the Middle East from the new world. His discussion of Napoleon in Egypt appears in both books, almost verbatim. The second book contains calls for (mostly military) action. In *The Crisis of Islam*, Lewis asserts: "The West must defend itself by whatever means." The book reveals a lot about his outlook of hostility towards Muslims.

### **Misunderstood Bin Laden**

One is astonished to read some of his observations on Muslim and Arab sentiments and opinions. He is deeply convinced that Muslims are "pained" by the absence of the caliphate, as if this constitutes a serious demand or goal even for Muslim

fundamentalist organizations. One never see crowds of Muslims in the streets of Cairo or Islamabad calling for the restoration of the caliphate as a pressing need.

But then again: this is the man who treated Usamah Bin Laden as some kind of influential Muslim theologian who is followed by world Muslims. Lewis does not treat Bin Laden as the terrorist fanatic that he is, but as some kind of al-Ghazzali, in the tradition of classical Islamic theologians. Furthermore, Lewis insists that terrorism by individual Muslims should be considered Islamic terrorism, while terrorism by individual Jews or Christians is never considered Jewish or Christian terrorism.

In his retirement years, his disdain for the Palestinian people became unmasked. Although in his book *The Crisis of Islam* he lists acts of violence by PLO groups—only ones, curiously, that are not directed against Israeli occupation soldiers. He lists not one act of Israeli violence against Palestinians and Arabs. To discredit the Palestinian national movement, he finds it necessary to tell yet again the story of Hajj Amin Al-Husayni's visit to Nazi Germany, apparently seeking to stigmatize all Palestinians.

He is so disdainful of the Palestinians that he finds their opposition to Britain during the mandate period inexplicable because he believes that Britain was, alas, opposed to Zionism. Lewis is so insistent in attributing Arab popular antipathy to the U.S. to Nazi influence and inspiration that he actually maintains that Arabs obtained their hostility to the U.S. from reading the likes of Otto Spengler, Friederich Georg Junger, and Martin Heidegger. But when did the Arabs find time to read those books when all they read were their holy book and Islamic religious texts—as one surmises from reading Lewis?

While he displays deep—albeit selective—knowledge when he talks about the Islamic past (where his documentation is usually thorough), his analysis is quite simplistic and superficial when addressing the present (where he often disregards documentation altogether). For instance, he sometimes produces quotations without endnotes to source them: In *Islam and the West* he quotes an unnamed Muslim calling for the right of Muslims to “practice polygamy under Christian rule.” In another instance, he debates what he considers to be a common Muslim anti-Orientalist viewpoint, and the endnotes refer only to a letter to the editor in *The New York Times*.

Lewis once began a discussion by saying: “Recently I came across an article in a Kuwaiti newspaper discussing a Western historian,” without referring the reader to the name of the newspaper or the author. He also tells the story of an anti-Coptic rumor in Egypt in 1973 without telling the reader how he collects his rumors from the region. On another page, he identifies a source thus: “a young

man in a shop where I went to make a purchase.”

Lewis was not shy about his biases in the British phase of his career, but he became an unabashed racist in his later years. In *Notes on a Century*, he did not mind citing approvingly the opinion of a friend who compared Arabs to “neurotic children”, unlike Israelis who are “rational adults.” And his knowledge of Arabs seems to decrease over time: he would frequently tell (unfunny) jokes related to Arabs and then add that jokes are the only indicator of Arab public opinion because he did not seem to know about public opinion surveys of Arabs. He also informs his readers that “chairs are not part of Middle Eastern tradition or culture.” He showers praise on his friend, Teddy Kollek (former occupation mayor of Jerusalem) because he set up a “refreshment counter” for Christians one day.

The political influence of Lewis, who lent Samuel Huntington his term, if not the theme, of “the clash of civilization”, has been significant. But it would be inaccurate to maintain that he was a policy maker. In the East and the West, rulers rely on the opinions and writings of intellectuals when they find that this reliance is useful for their propaganda purposes. Lewis and his books were timely when the U.S. was preparing to invade Muslim countries. But the legacy of Lewis won’t survive future scholarly scrutiny: his writings will increasingly lose their academic relevance and will be cited as examples of Orientalist overreach.

*Readers who would like more specific sourcing from Lewis’s books can contact the author at [AAbukhalil@csustan.edu](mailto:AAbukhalil@csustan.edu)*

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## Democratic Elite Scrambles to Respond to Ocasio-Cortez

Stunned by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s victory, the Democratic Party establishment is trying to contain the rebellion challenging its class interests and may try to stem the tide with a compromise on super-delegates, as Norman

Solomon reports.

**By Norman Solomon**



Conventional wisdom said that powerful Congressman Joseph Crowley couldn't be beat. But his 20-year career in the House of Representatives will end in January, with the socialist organizer who beat him in the Democratic primary in the deep-blue district of the Bronx and Queens poised to become Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

In a symbolic twist of fate, the stunning defeat of Crowley came a day before the Rules and Bylaws Committee of the Democratic Party voted on what to do about "superdelegates," those unelected Democratic Party elite who've had an undemocratic and automatic vote in presidential nominations since 1984 to prevent leftwing candidates from being nominated.

Crowley's defeat shows how grass-roots movements can prevail against corporate power and its pile of cash. The Crowley campaign spent upward of \$3 million in the Democratic Party primary. The Ocasio-Cortez campaign spent one-tenth of that. He wielded the money. She inspired the people.

As the 28-year-old Ocasio-Cortez was quick to say after her Tuesday night victory, her triumph belongs to everyone who wants social, economic and racial justice. She ran on a platform in harmony with her activism as a member of Democratic Socialists of America and an organizer for the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign.

Conventional wisdom said superdelegates—who exerted undemocratic power over the selection of the party's presidential nominee in 2016—couldn't be stopped from once again putting the establishment's thumbs on the scale.

But on Wednesday afternoon, the party committee approved a proposal to prevent superdelegates from voting on the presidential nominee during the first ballot at the 2020 Democratic National Convention. (The last time the party's convention went to a second ballot was 1952.)

As NPR reported, the committee "voted to drastically curtail the role 'superdelegates' play in the party's presidential nominating process. The DNC's Rules and Bylaws Committee voted 27 to 1 to block officeholders, DNC members and other party dignitaries from casting decisive votes on the first ballot of presidential nominating conventions."

Make no mistake: Those in the top echelons of the Democratic Party aren't moving in this direction out of the goodness of their hearts. Grass-roots pressure to



democratize the party—mounting since 2016—is starting to pay off.

### **Feeling the Heat From Below**

Corporate power brokers of the national party are in the midst of a tactical retreat. But it's not surrender.

During the latest Rules and Bylaws Committee meeting, former DNC chairs Donald Fowler and Donna Brazile voiced strong—and in Fowler's case, bitter—opposition to changing the superdelegates status quo. They may be indicating an escalation of insider pushback before the full DNC votes on rules at the end of August.

In recent weeks, some of Crowley's kindred corporate Democratic mates in the House—angry at the prospect of losing their privilege to vote on the nominee at the next national convention—have been railing against the superdelegates reform proposal. Rep. Gerry Connolly of Virginia complained that “it disenfranchises the elected leadership of the party.” He whined that it would “do terrible damage to party harmony.”

DNC Chairman Tom Perez has strategically advocated for blocking superdelegate votes on the first ballot, realizing the party must respond to the growing progressive revolt with compromise. That has put him in the line of fire from Capitol Hill. As *Politico* reported in early June, “Rep. David Price (D-NC), executive director of the early-1980s Hunt Commission that created superdelegates, said lawmakers were ‘infuriated’ by Perez’s stance, although he’s not sure there’s anything that can be done. ‘I think there was a good deal of incredulity and some pretty severe criticism,’ Price said.”

Very few entrenched Democratic officials were willing to criticize the setup when most of the 712 superdelegates made Hillary Clinton the far-ahead “frontrunner” by announcing their support for her before a single ballot was cast in a primary or caucus to choose the 2016 nominee.

Now, the huge defeat of Crowley, a Democratic machine politician, by the unknown Ocasio-Cortez underscores the possibilities that Bernie Sanders talked about in a recent video interview, in which he called for the inclusion of workers, youth and idealism into the party.

“It may take liberals by surprise to hear that a recent Reuters/Ipsos mega poll of 16,000 respondents, found that the Democrats are losing ground with millennials” even while “their support for Republicans has remained roughly stable,” *Guardian* columnist Cas Mudde wrote days ago. “While millennials still prefer the Democratic Party over the Republicans, that support is tanking. In just two years, it dropped sharply from 55 percent to 46 percent.”

Ocasio-Cortez's victory has alarmed a Democratic Party elite trying to figure out how to contain the revolt to protect their privileges.

*A version of this article appeared on TruthDig.*

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