

COMPLETE VERSION

THE CRISIS OF ISLAM, IN THE WORDS OF BERNARD LEWIS

Introduction

Bernard Lewis is Professor Emeritus of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. He was born and educated in England, earning his PhD at the University of London in 1939. He served in British military intelligence during World War II. He emigrated to the United States in 1974, joining the faculty of Princeton University. He has been an American citizen for twenty years. His many books have been translated into more than twenty languages, including Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Indonesian. He is currently in his middle eighties and is still an active writer and scholar. His articles have been published in *The New Yorker* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

Professor Lewis' fame with the general public took a leap forward when his book titled *What Went Wrong?* was published in early 2002. The timing of its publication, together with its title, tended to make people think that it dealt specifically with the reasons for 9/11, which it did not. Its topic was instead the precipitous decline of the Islamic world since reaching its apogee of world power and influence. Muhammed died in 632. It took only about a century until the Muslims dominated all of northern Africa, the Iberian peninsula, and Asia Minor south of the Black and Caspian Seas and as far east as Afghanistan. Two hundred fifty years passed before the First Crusade captured Jerusalem, and a little less than a century later it was recaptured by Saladin. "For most of the Middle Ages, Christianity was on the defensive. In the fifteenth century, the Christian counterattack expanded. The Tatars were expelled from Russia, and the Moors from Spain. But in southeastern Europe . . . Muslim power prevailed, and these setbacks were seen as minor and peripheral. As late as the seventeenth century, Turkish pashas still ruled in Budapest and Belgrade, Turkish armies were besieging Vienna, and Barbary corsairs were raiding both shipping and seashores as far away as England . . . [and] Ireland. . . . Then came the great change. The second Turkish siege of Vienna, in 1683, ended in total failure followed by headlong retreat—an entirely new experience for the Ottoman armies. This defeat, suffered by what was then the major military power of the Muslim world, gave rise to a new debate, which in a sense has been going on ever since." [51-2]

It was *What Went Wrong?* that introduced me to Lewis' work, and I found myself buying and reading others of his books and coming away deeply impressed by both his knowledge of the Islamic world and his balance and judiciousness. Since in today's world our relationship with Islam is front and center, and since both Maggie and I have a history of relationship with the Sufis, the mystics of Islam, I thought that a paper built on Bernard Lewis' work might be interesting. At first I thought the paper would be a kind of Lewis stew, combining ingredients from several of his books. But I finally decided to focus on one book, published in 2003 (a year after *What Went Wrong*) and titled *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*. Most of this paper will consist of direct

quotes, taken (as was the quote you just heard) from that book. An additional source of quotations was a three-hour interview of Professor Lewis conducted about a year ago on PBS.

Before beginning the paper proper, I should add the caveat that I in no way pretend to be anything but *interested* in this topic. I do not claim expertise. I trust that you will bear that in mind when we come to the question/discussion part of tonight's program!

And one further point: If you would like a copy of my paper, which is somewhat longer than tonight's reading, just e mail me and I'll send you a copy by return e mail.

From this point onward, the words are those of Bernard Lewis.

The present state of the Muslim world

“Almost the entire Muslim world is affected by poverty and tyranny.” [113] “The combination of low productivity and high birth rate in the Middle East makes for an unstable mix, with a large and rapidly growing population of unemployed, uneducated, and frustrated young men. By all indicators from the UN, the World Bank, and other authorities, the Arab countries—in matters such as job creation, education, technology, and productivity—lag ever further behind the West. Even worse, the Arab nations also lag behind the more recent recruits to Western-style modernity, such as Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore.” [113-4] In the listing of economies by GDP, the highest ranking Muslim country is Turkey, with 64m inhabitants, in 23d place, between Austria and Denmark, with about 5m each.” [114] “In comparative purchasing power, the first Muslim state is Indonesia in 15th place, followed by Turkey in 19th place. The highest-ranking Arab country is Saudi Arabia, in 29th place, followed by Egypt. In living standards as reflected by GDP per head, the first Muslim state is Qatar, in 23d place, followed by the United Arab Emirates in 25th place and Kuwait in 28th.” [114] In a listing by life expectancy, the first Arab state is Kuwait, in 32d place.” [115] In book sales, “A listing of 27 countries, beginning with the US and ending with Vietnam, does not include a single Muslim state.” [115] “The Arab world translates about 330 books annually, one-fifth of the number that Greece translates.” {115} “The GDP in all Arab countries combined stood at \$531.2b in 1999—less than that of . . . Spain (\$595b).” [116] “According to the World Bank, in 2000 the average annual income in the Muslim countries was only half the world average.” [117] “Israel's per capita GDP was 3 ½ times that of Lebanon and Syria, 12 times that of Jordan, and 13 ½ times that of Egypt.” [117]

Brief history, last two centuries

“Modern history in the Middle East dates from 1798, when the French Revolution, in the person of a young general called Napoleon Bonaparte, landed in Egypt . . . For a small Western force to invade one of the heartlands of Islam was a profound shock. The departure of the French was, in a sense, an even greater shock. They were forced to leave

Egypt not by the Egyptians, nor by . . . the Turks, but by a small squadron of the British Royal Navy, commanded by a young admiral named Horatio Nelson. This was the second bitter lesson the Muslims had to learn: Not only could a Western power arrive, invade, and rule at will but only another Western power could get it out.” [54-5]

This leads to the question of western imperialism, “a particularly important theme in the . . . Islamic case against the West. For them, the word *imperialism* has a special meaning. . . It was perfectly legitimate for Muslims to conquer and rule Europe and Europeans and thus enable them—but not compel them—to embrace the true faith. It was a crime and a sin for Europeans to conquer and rule Muslims and, still worse, to try to lead them astray.” [55] “The impact of imperialism was seen as immense and, in the eyes of most people in the region, wholly harmful.” [57] There were, however, from the western perspective, “some benefits—infrastructure, public services, educational systems, . . . the abolition of slavery and the . . . reduction though not elimination of polygamy.” [57] [Slavery, by the way, was not legally abolished in Saudi Arabia until 1962.] [58]

“By the early 20th century . . . almost the entire Muslim world had been incorporated into the four European empires of Britain, France, Russia, and the Netherlands.” [59] “Since [in mid-century] the Western allies . . . effectively dominated the region, Middle Eastern resisters naturally looked to those allies’ enemies for support. In WW II they turned to Germany; in the Cold War, to the Soviet Union.” [59] “The defeat of Germany . . . left an aching void. As many saw it, it was during the resulting interlude that in 1948 the Jews were able to set up their state and inflict a humiliating defeat on the Arab armies that were sent to prevent it. A new patron and protector . . . was urgently needed. It was found in the Soviet Union. And then came the collapse of the Soviet Union, which left the US as the sole world superpower. . . At first it seemed that the era of imperial rivalry had ended with the withdrawal of both rivals—the Soviet Union because it couldn’t, the US because it wouldn’t play the imperial role. But before long events, notably the Iranian Revolution and the wars of the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, forced the US to involve itself more directly . . . Middle Easterners saw this as a new phase in the old imperial game. Americans did not, and showed that they had neither the desire nor the aptitude for an imperial role.” [60-1] “The West as a power bloc . . . now consisted essentially of the US, leaving an interesting new possibility for continental Europe to assume the opposing role. . . But though they [Europe] have the will, they lack the means.” [61-2] The fundamentalists “and notably Usama bin Ladin—interpreted the collapse of the Soviet Union . . . [as though] they, not America, had won the Cold War. In their eyes, the Soviet Union was not the benign helper in the . . . struggle against the Jews and Western imperialists but rather the fountainhead of atheism and unbelief, the oppressor of many millions of Muslim subjects, and the invader of Afghanistan. As they saw it, not implausibly, it was their struggle in Afghanistan that had defeated the mighty Red Army and driven the Soviets to defeat and collapse. . . Their next task was to deal with . . . the US.” They believed “that fighting America would be a simpler and easier task. In their view, the US had become morally corrupt, socially degenerate, and in consequence, politically and militarily enfeebled.” [62-3]

Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism

“Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab was an 18th century Arab theologian . . . [who] launched a campaign of purification and renewal. His declared aim was to return to the pure and authentic Islam of the Founder.” [120] “The rise of Wahhabism was . . . a response to changing circumstances of the time. One of these was of course the retreat of Islam and the corresponding advance of Christendom. . . . The ire of the Wahhabis was directed not primarily against outsiders but against those whom they saw as betraying and degrading Islam from within. . . . They were . . . strongly opposed to any . . . version of Islam, whether Sunni or Shi’ite, other than their own. They were particularly opposed to Sufism, condemning not only its mysticism and tolerance but also what they saw as the pagan cults associated with it.” [121-2]

With “the signature, on May 19, 1933, of an agreement between the Saudi minister of finance and a representative of Standard Oil of California . . . Saudi politics and Wahhabi doctrines [eventually came to rest] on a solid economic foundation.” [126] How solid this foundation was is shown by the figures of Saudi oil extraction for ten-year intervals beginning in 1945: 21m bbl, 356m bbl, 804m bbl, and in 1975, over 2 ½ billion bbl. [127] The net result of all this is that “the custodianship of the holy places [Mecca and Medina] and the revenues of oil have given worldwide impact to what would otherwise have been an extremist fringe in a marginal country.” [130]

The rise of terrorism

“Most Muslims are not fundamentalists, and most fundamentalists are not terrorists, but most present-day terrorists are Muslims and proudly identify themselves as such.” [137] “There are several forms of Islamic extremism current at the present time. The best known are (1) the subversive radicalism of Al-Qu’ida and other groups that resemble it all over the Muslim world; (2) the preemptive fundamentalism of the Saudi establishment; and (3) the institutionalized revolution of the ruling Iranian hierarchy.” [138]

“If one looks at the historical record, the Muslim approach to war does not differ greatly from that of Christians, or that of Jews in the very ancient and very modern periods when this option was open to them.” [142] There remains, however, “the larger issue of the attitude of religions to force and violence, and more specifically to terrorism.” [143]

“The practice and then the theory of assassination in the Islamic world arose at a very early date, with disputes over the political headship of the Muslim community.” [143] “Members of the Muslim sect known as the Assassins (from the Arabic *Hashishiyya*), active in Iran and then in Syria from the 11th to the 13th century, seem to have been the first to transform the act that was named after them into a system and an ideology. Their efforts, contrary to popular belief, were primarily directed not against the Crusaders but against Muslim rulers, whom they saw as impious usurpers.

“In this sense, the Assassins are the true predecessors of many of the so-called Islamic terrorists of today, some of whom explicitly make this point. The name *Hashishiyya*, with its connotation of “hashish taker,” was given to them by their Muslim enemies. They called themselves *fidayeen*, from the Arabic *fida’i*—one who is willing to sacrifice his life for the cause.” [144-5] “[This] term was revived again by the militant wing of the PLO and, from the 1960s onward, designated terrorist activists of the Palestinian organizations.” [145]

“In two respects, in their choice of weapons and in their choice of victims, the Assassins were markedly different from their present-day successors. The victim was always an individual, . . . highly placed . . . , who was seen as the source of evil. He, and he alone, was killed. . . The weapon was always the same: the dagger. . . The Assassin did not expect . . . to survive his act, which he believed would ensure him eternal bliss. But in no circumstances did he commit suicide. He died at the hands of his captors.” [145-5] One other point: “The medieval Assassins were an extremist sect, very far from mainstream Islam. That is not true of their present-day imitators.” [146]

“The 20th century brought a renewal of such actions in the Middle East. . . During the last years of the British Empire, imperial Britain faced terrorist movements in its Middle Eastern dependencies that represented three different cultures: Greeks in Cyprus, Jews in Palestine, and Arabs in Aden. All three acted from nationalist, rather than religious, motives. . . . Their purpose was to persuade the imperial power that staying in the region was not worth the cost in blood. Their method was to attack military and, to a lesser extent, administrative personnel and installations. All three operated only within their own territory and generally avoided collateral damage. All three succeeded in their endeavors.” [147]

“For the new-style terrorists, the slaughter of innocent and uninvolved civilians is not ‘collateral damage.’ It is the prime objective. Inevitably, the counterattack against the terrorists—who do not of course wear uniforms—also targets civilians. The resulting blurring of distinctions is immensely useful to the terrorists and to their sympathizers.” [147]

“Thanks to the rapid development of the media, and especially of television, the more recent forms of terrorism are aimed not at specific and limited enemy objectives but at world opinion. Their primary purpose is not to defeat . . . the enemy militarily but to gain publicity and to inspire fear.” [147] “Among the most successful and most enduring in this exercise has been the PLO.” [147] “The PLO was founded in 1964 but became important in 1967, after the defeat of the combined Arab armies in the Six-Day War.” [147] The success of the PLO in gaining attention and even support made it “small wonder that others were encouraged to follow their example.” [148]

“But despite its media successes, the PLO achieved no significant results where it mattered—in Palestine.” [148-9] “There was [therefore] an urgent, growing need for a new explanation of what was wrong, and a new strategy for putting it right. Both were found, in religious feeling and identity.” [149]

“For the fundamentalists . . . the various territorial issues are important but in a different, more intractable form. For example, for the fundamentalists in general, no peace or compromise with Israel is possible, and any concession is only a step toward the true final solution—the dissolution of the State of Israel, the return of the land of Palestine to its true owners, the Muslim Palestinians, and the departure of the intruders.” [150]

“The lack of concern at the slaughter of innocent bystanders . . . reached new proportions in the terror campaign launched by UBL in the early 1990s. The first major example was the bombing of two American embassies in East Africa in 1998. In order to kill twelve American diplomats, the terrorists were willing to slaughter more than two hundred Africans, many of them Muslims, who happened to be in the vicinity. . . . The same disregard for human life, on a vastly greater scale, underlay the actions in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001.” [151]

“The new type of suicide mission . . . seems to have been pioneered by religious organizations like Hamas and Hizbullah.” [152] “Unlike the medieval holy warrior or assassin, who was willing to face certain death at the hands of his enemies or captors, the new suicide terrorist dies by his own hand. This raises an important question of Islamic teaching. Islamic law books are very clear on the subject of suicides. It is a major sin and is punished by eternal damnation in the form of the endless repetition of the act by which the suicide killed himself.” [153] “Two features mark the attacks of September 11 and other similar actions: the willingness of the perpetrators to commit suicide and the ruthlessness of those who send them. . . . Can these in any sense be justified in terms of Islam? The answer must be a clear no.” [154]

“The callous destruction of thousands in the World Trade Center . . . has no justification in Islamic doctrine or law and no precedent in Islamic history. . . . These are not just crimes against humanity and against civilization; they are also acts—from a Muslim point of view—of blasphemy, when those who perpetrate such crimes claim to be doing so in the name of God, His Prophet, and His scriptures.” [154]

“Responses in the Arabic press to the massacres in New York and Washington were an uneasy balance between denial and approval, rather similar to their response to the Holocaust. On the Holocaust three positions are not infrequently found in the Arabic media: it never happened; it was greatly exaggerated; the Jews deserved it anyway.” [155] “Perhaps the most dramatic—and explicit—response came from the Hamas weekly, *Al-Risala*, in Gaza, in its issue of September 13, 2001: “Allah has answered our prayers.” [156-7]

“There is no doubt that the foundation of Al-Qa’ida and the consecutive declarations of war by UBL marked the beginning of a new and ominous phase in the history of both Islam and terrorism. The triggers for bin Ladin’s actions, as he himself has explained very clearly, were America’s presence in Arabia during the Gulf War—a desecration of the Muslim Holy Land—and America’s use of Saudi Arabia as a base for an attack on Iraq. If Arabia is the most symbolic location in the world of Islam, Baghdad, the seat of

the caliphate for half a millennium and the scene of some of the most glorious chapters in Islamic history, is the second.” [160]

“There was another, perhaps more important, factor driving bin Ladin. In the past, Muslims fighting against the West could always turn to the enemies of the West for comfort, encouragement, and material and military help. Now, for the first time in centuries, there is no such useful enemy. Bin Ladin and his cohorts soon realized that, in the new configuration of world power, if they wished to fight America they had to do it themselves. In 1991, the same year that the Soviet Union ceased to exist, bin Ladin and his cohorts created Al-Qa’ida, which included many veterans of the war in Afghanistan. Their task might have seemed daunting to anyone else, but they did not see it that way. In their view, they had already driven the Russians out of Afghanistan, in a defeat so overwhelming that it led directly to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Having overcome the superpower that they had always regarded as more formidable, they felt ready to take on the other; in this they were encouraged by the opinion, often expressed by bin Ladin among others, that America was a paper tiger.” [161]

“Muslim terrorists had been driven by such beliefs before. One of the most surprising revelations in the memoirs of those who held the American Embassy in Tehran from 1979 to 1981 was that their original intention had been to hold the building and the hostages for only a few days. They changed their minds when statements from Washington made it clear that there was no danger of serious action against them. They finally released the hostages, they explained, only because they feared that the president-elect, Ronald Reagan, might approach the problem ‘like a cowboy.’ Bin Ladin and his followers clearly have no such concern, and their hatred is neither constrained by fear nor diluted by respect. As precedents, they repeatedly cite the American retreats from Vietnam, from Lebanon, and—the most important of all, in their eyes—from Somalia. Bin Ladin’s remarks in an interview with . . . ABC news [in 1998] are especially revealing: ‘We have seen in the last decade the decline of the American government and the weakness of the American soldier . . . This was proven in Beirut when the Marines fled after two explosions. It also proves they can run in less than twenty-four hours, and this was also repeated in Somalia . . . Our youth were surprised at . . . the American soldiers. . . . After a few blows, they ran in defeat. . . . They forgot about being the world leader . . . They left, dragging their corpses and their shameful defeat.’” [161-2]

“For the members of Al’Qa’ida it is the seduction of America and [what they see as] its profligate, dissolute way of life that represents the greatest threat to the kind of Islam they wish to impose on their fellow Muslims. But there are others for whom America offers a different kind of temptation—the promise of human rights, of free institutions, and of a responsible and representative government. There are a growing number of individuals and even some movements that have undertaken the complex task of introducing such institutions in their own countries. It is not easy.” [163]

“In two countries, Iraq and Iran, where the regimes are strongly anti-American, there are democratic oppositions capable of taking over and forming governments.” [163]

[Remember, this was published in 2003, before the US invasion of Iraq.] “We, in what we like to call the free world, could do much to help them, and have done little.” {163-4}

Conclusion

“If the leadership of Al-Qa’ida can persuade the world of Islam to accept their views and their leadership, then a long and bitter struggle lies ahead, and not only for America. Europe, more particularly western Europe, is now home to a large and rapidly growing Muslim community, and many Europeans are beginning to see its presence as a problem, for some even a threat. Sooner or later, Al-Qa’ida and related groups will clash with the other neighbors of Islam—Russia, China, India, who may prove less squeamish than the Americans in using their power against Muslims and their sanctities. If the fundamentalists are correct in their calculations and succeed in their war, then a dark future awaits the world, especially the part of it that embraces Islam.” [164]

The preceding paper, in slightly abbreviated form, was presented to The Philosophical Club of Cleveland on 23 November 2004 by member Warren A. Scharf.

Page citations are from the 2003 Modern Library Edition of *The Crisis of Islam*, published by Modern Library, a division of Random House, Inc.

