

## What Went Wrong with the Muslims?

**A Review of: Bernard Lewis 2002. What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East Weidenfeld & Nicholson London**

By

**Ibrahim Ado -Kurawa**  
[majekarofi@yahoo.com](mailto:majekarofi@yahoo.com)

This book by a leading Western scholar of Islam is indeed very important because of its theme and the current trend in world politics. And it should be read along with the more detailed Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, another scholar whose paradigm of clash of civilization is accepted by Western policy makers. The main argument or thesis of Lewis is that Muslims are the source of their predicaments in the world today but they tend to blame others. His recipe is westernization. According to him Muslims must assimilate western culture for them to be able to catch up with the West and restore their dignity in the world. His thesis in this sense is opposite of Huntington's observation that regards such an ideology as Kemalism, a failed ideology which makes a country or nation *torn*. Kemalist response has always been unsuccessful because it infects the country with a cultural schizophrenia, which is difficult to expunge. Japan and China were earlier forced into "momentary infatuation" with this ideology but they later discarded it and opted for reformism[1]. Huntington's prescriptions for world peace are the recognition of cultural differences and refrain from the imposition of one universal culture. But as an intellectual and a patriot he wants the pre-eminence of the western world and the maintenance of its dominant position in the world.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the entire Muslim world came under western domination except Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan. According to Lewis there was no attraction to colonize the last two countries because they were very poor territories but he did not mention the failed British attempt to conquer Afghanistan [2]. Even Turkey and Iran came under indirect control of the West. In fact U.S. involvement in Iran was one of the most bizarre forms of imperialism in history[3]. To Lewis colonial domination was too brief to account for all the problems of the Muslims. Therefore the Muslims should find another excuse for their backwardness.

Lewis is also not concerned with the fact that most of the dictators and tyrants in the Middle East were either sponsored or came to be close associates of the West as confirmed by other scholars and intelligence Chiefs who see such linkage as a necessity of defending Western interests [4]. That is why the Algerian election that was aborted because the Islamic party was about to win was not important enough to deserve the attention of Lewis. The double standards of the West in its pretension of promoting democracy and human rights are also not important enough to deserve his attention. But Huntington in a recent interview with *The Observer*[5] confirmed that the west cannot afford to promote human rights in Saudi Arabia in fact he acknowledged that when he was a member of the National Security Council they never contemplated promoting human rights in that country.

Western involvement in countries of the Middle East and other Muslim countries did not receive the attention of Lewis because he could easily attempt to dismiss such involvement as conspiracy theories. But the scholarly community cannot afford such a dismissal. The role of Ambassador Glaspie in instigating Saddam to invade Kuwait was well presented by a Saudi Prince and commander during the gulf war[6]. When Saddam entered the trap and invaded Kuwait because he thought the U.S. was indifferent to such a move President George Bush (Snr) turned the table and declared that U.S. has special interest in the security of the region.

According to Lewis, Muslims or Middle Easterners cannot attribute their predicament to the Jewish state of Israel. After all how many Jews are there in the world. He discounted the influence of the Jews in the U.S. as a myth or an exaggeration. But he was quick to demonstrate how few Jews were able to defeat the Arabs, who have even outgunned the Jews. Scholars do not need the conspiracy theory contained in the protocols of the learned elders of Zion to demonstrate Jewish influence in the West. It is nothing but intellectual bullying to say that Israel can ever survive without the support of the U.S. or that the Jews were super human and the Arabs dullards hence their

defeat at the hands of half a million Jews as Lewis attempted to show. Who is the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid? In 1986 the per capita aid of US to Israel was \$8000[7], which was more than the per capita of most Arab countries. Currently the U.S. gives \$13 million per day of U.S taxpayers' money[8] to Israel to subsidize its occupation of Palestine and brutality against the Palestinians. This is contained in a letter Rand Carter wrote to the U.S. President in which he stated the number of UN resolutions violated by Israel [9]. It is not only Muslims who noticed the influence of the Jews in the U.S. In fact non-Muslims have documented the evidences beyond reasonable doubt[10].

It is unfortunate that Lewis downplayed the influence of pro-Israel lobby, which is so powerful even in Europe . For example France and Belgium have been described as anti-Semitic because of their criticism of Sharon 's policies. Belgium attempted to try him because of the war crimes he committed in Sabra and Chatila[11]. The powerful pro-Israeli lobby has succeeded in making all objective critics of Israel anti-Semites including those who call for justice for the innocent Palestinians. This is as if the Palestinians are not Semites[12]. To silence critics of Israeli injustice " Europe 's greatest taboo" is invoked: "criticize Israel and you are anti-Semite just as surely as if you were throwing paint at a synagogue in Paris "[13].

Lewis never bothered about Jansen's suggestion that most western scholars are not objective while treating the conflict between Muslims and the state of Israel . He might have discarded Jansen's observations because as an authority he wants to tell the Muslims look these are your problems and here are the solution take them or leave them. But Jansen's observations can not be discarded easily, this was what he wrote:

For example, the British academic Dr. Bernard Lewis is a prolific writer on modern Middle Eastern topics. His first books on the Arabs appeared after the establishment of Israel . He is a passionate defender of that country, to the extent that he has testified in its defence to committees of the United States Congress. Should not this political stance affect our opinion of his scholarly objectivity when he writes of countries that are sworn enemies of Israel (and with the exception of Egypt every single Muslim state is such)?[14]

Muslims represented by the Ottoman Empire thought that the secret of western success was military power therefore they embarked on military reforms but this did not reverse their retreat and the subsequent destruction of their empire. Muslims assimilated western military innovation in both hardware and discipline even Khomeini's Iran accepted the drill and uniform based on Western style. Yet Muslim defeat has remained irreversible. Napoleon was the first to expose Muslim weakness when he landed in Egypt with a small expeditionary force and took over the pearl of the Muslim world. That trend has continued to this day with the widely celebrated defeat of the Taliban. Even if Muslims adopt western military hardware and strategy they cannot go anywhere so Lewis argues that the answers must be found elsewhere.

In chapter two Lewis demonstrated Muslims' failure to resolve their problems because of wrong assumption that the solution is acquisition of wealth and power. He presented catalogue of Muslims' distress. Again western imperialism was brushed aside. But Western imperialism is the greatest disaster in human memory the Africans know better than anyone. It has been proved reasonable doubt that the crisis in central Africa was caused by western companies so this cancer is not restricted to the Middle East [15]. The U.S. Congress turned deaf ear to the evidences given to it by an American journalists on the atrocities of the companies and U.S. government agencies [16].

Another example of imperialism currently in progress and similar to the Middle East is Western involvement in Afghanistan an area that is the easiest outlet for the oil rich Muslim central Asia . This is because " Afghanistan is indispensable to regional control and transport of oil in central Asia as Egypt was in Middle East "[17]. Other routes will depend on Russia and China the rivals of the West in that region. The U.S. supported the Mujahidun and they were even honored by President Regan as "the moral equivalents" of America 's founding fathers[18]. Zbigniew Brzanski [19] the architect of the initial policy of U.S. in that region stated clearly how the U.S. administration planned and executed its strategy of using the Muslims to get at the Soviets. Brzanski said "The day the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter: We now have the opportunity of giving the USSR its Vietnam War. Indeed, for almost 10 years,

Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet Empire". He was asked whether he does not regret fueling Islamic fundamentalism and the emergence of Taliban he quickly dispelled that and asked: "What is more important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold War?"[20]

In chapter three Lewis attempted to show the cultural and social barriers that inhibited Muslim development to the stage of westernization. As usual the dominant theme is the emancipation of women an area in which the Muslims could easily be castigated. But the contradiction is that despots and tyrants have always advanced the women's rights in Muslim countries for example Attaturk, Sadam, Qadafi and the rulers of Yemen . He observed that: "Among the Arab countries legal emancipation of women went farthest in Iraq and in the former South Yemen , both ruled by notoriously repressive regimes". As expected Lewis never mentioned the continuous Muslim women's love for Islamic practices such as the veil. The secularists in Turkey have oppressed Muslim women who chose the veil voluntarily as the case in France and other western societies. Is that democracy or freedom? Again this does not deserve the attention of Lewis, like the Turkish secularist his position is that the Muslim women do not know the problem. Therefore they need to be guided. Also he did not resolve the contradiction that the despots are the promoters of women's rights in the Muslim world.

Chapter five on secularism and the civil society is perhaps the most persuasive attempt. This is the core of the book. It acknowledged that secularism is a solution to Christian problem but in a brilliant style it tried to show that the Muslims over time have contacted the "Christian disease" therefore they need the cure. The most interesting case is Shiite Islam, which in recent years established clerical rule therefore he observed that they might be triggering a reformation. Perhaps if he had studied Soroush the man hailed as "Martin Luther" of Islam in the West he would have concluded that secularism would triumph in fact Soroush has already been defeated by it[21]. But this chapter like all the other chapters mentioned above cannot withstand analytical rigor. Only chapters four and six can escape such a scrutiny because there may be little or no disagreement with the Muslim positions.

According to Lewis all the above observations he made cannot be the reasons for Muslims' failure in the modern world but it is caused by refusal to Westernize, after all the Japanese westernized and were followed by the Koreans who have all overtaken the Muslims. Some scholars will argue that Japanese modernized but did not westernize their culture. Lewis documented the elements of Westernization assimilated by the Japanese, which the Muslims refused to assimilate. His theory is based on the fact that "in every era of human history, modernity, or some equivalent term has meant the ways, norms, and standards of the dominant and expanding civilization....the dominant civilization is Western, and Western standards therefore define modernity" (p. 150). Few non-Western scholars will agree Lee Kaun of Singapore and other advocates of Asian values will be the first to object. The argument will continue. Why were Attaturk and his successors failures despite their total submission to the West in everything while the Confucian Asians who were selective in submission were successful? Lewis never treated these questions.

The most important shortcoming of the book is that it has shown beyond reasonable doubt that the Turks followed all the steps of westernization but it deliberately refused to acknowledge that Kemelism is a failure. Attaturk was an overzealous secularist and his military successors have remained secularist fundamentalists because they "insist that only their claim of universalism is valid and all others must conform to their standards"[22]. Kemelists have refused to allow an unfettered democracy by denying some parties the right to participate in the political process. Why is it that despite its westernization as prescribed by Lewis , Turkey has remained a failure? The Simple answer is that his thesis is flawed. Why? This is because he deliberately ignored or down played some facts in his analysis. One of the reasons for this is that Lewis is aware of his position in the academic world and the difficulty many Muslims will face in debunking his feeble thesis especially in the aftermath of September 11, which made the book a best seller and demonized all Muslims who disagree with Western conservative scholarship as terrorists.

Lewis downplayed the reasons for the rise of the West. This was deliberate because of his thesis. He rhetorically asked why were the voyages of the discoveries from Christian Europe or

precisely Iberia and not the Atlantic coast of the Muslim world. The Harvard scholar, Sachs excellently illustrated the rise of Europe in comparison to decline of the Muslim world:

In fact the role of culture in the relative decline of the Islamic world is vastly overrated. The difficulties in Islamic societies have more to do with geopolitics and geography than with any unbridgeable differences with the west.....

Islam was both made and undone in part by its geography...

Over the course of centuries, the demographic balance shifted decisively in favour of Europe ....[23]

He went on to demonstrate how the population of Europe supported by a better environment made it to over take the Muslim world which was arid and lacked natural resources compared to Europe . The population of the Muslim world was "nearly unchanged for centuries". The temperate zone Turks did better "demographically than the Arabic desert regions, and not coincidentally Islamic leadership passed from Arabia to the temperate based Ottoman Empire ". This led to the outnumbering of Islam by Europe and Vasco Da Gama also outmaneuvered it. The Muslim states lost the trade revenue while the Europeans accumulated capital, improved their military and captured more territories. "By the time Suez Canal restored trade through the Red Sea in 1869, it was too late for Islam. Europe had already won, and would assert control over Suez Canal and the associated ocean-based trade through military occupation and financial control". Without energy resources Muslim states could hardly compete thus "by 1900 at the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire , Europe had coal, hydro power, timber, and Iron ore. The Islamic countries had few stocks of these 19<sup>th</sup>-century necessities for industrialization. The oil fields were discovered and exploited only after the Europeans had seized control". European domination was further consolidated. "By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then, the Islamic countries had lost control over trade routes, primary commodities such as oil and even sovereignty itself in much of the region". This "long, sorry story" of the decline of the Muslim world, "has led to grotesque mythologies on both sides of the divide"[24].

Lewis's book falls into the category of intellectual rationalization of such mythologies. One most give him credit for the power of his writing, which made him to attempt to dismiss almost every explanation that does not agree with his thesis. He has demonstrated an outstanding ability of brushing away important questions in a few words. For example he asked: "Why did the discoverers of America sail from Spain and not a Muslim Atlantic port, where such voyages were indeed attempted in earlier times? Why did the great scientific breakthrough occur in Europe and not, as one might reasonably have expected, in the richer, more advanced, and in most respects more enlightened realm of Islam?" He knows very well that such questions can never be treated without thorough explanations of the issues raised by Sachs. So other questions will be turned over to answer these questions. Were there gender equality and secularism in the Iberian peninsular when these advances occurred?

Lewis will certainly not accept the fact that western countries manipulate Muslim countries as observed by Sachs: "It is the network of civil society that will overcome the centuries of war, distrust, and manipulation by the dominant western powers". Even the current U.S. presence in Central Asia was planned ahead before September 11 to secure the central Asian pipeline. He will rhetorically answer why did the Muslims allow themselves to be manipulated? And the Muslims will say we want freedom to decide for ourselves as in Algeria , Turkey and Egypt where various tendencies of Islamists were denied power despite their performance in elections. The paradox is difficult for the West to resolve because of the material greed of its ruling classes. According to Huntington those who support democracy and are likely to win any elections in those countries are those who are antagonistic to the West. The Muslim countries such as Algeria are pivotal to Western interests therefore Islamists would never be allowed to take over because that will be a threat to Western interests. Algeria is so crucial to the future of the Western World therefore the imperialists will use all the resources at their disposal even conspiracy against the Islamists. The pivotal importance of Algeria is summarized thus: **"What happens in Algeria will help to decide how closely Europe holds on to America "**[25].

Nobody can deny that there is no freedom in most Muslim countries. But here again Lewis's favorite Turkey has failed woefully and he never treated the issue effectively. In Turkey Muslims

want freedom to practice Islam but this has been denied by overzealous Kemelists. It is perhaps the only country in the world where a parent could be convicted for teaching his less than twelve years old ward the Qur'an. The Kemelists did everything to become western including denying Muslims their freedom of conscience. If there is freedom in the Muslim countries the people will choose Islam as they have shown in Algeria and Turkey .

Both Lewis and Huntington recognized the importance of Turkey but in different ways. Lewis has consistently shown Turkey as a westernizing country while Huntington has shown the failure of this ideology and that Turkey 's future is in rediscovering its past. It has been rejected by the European Union in public because of economic reasons but in private everyone knows that Turkey was rejected because it is a Muslim country [26].

Without a core state the Muslims can never restore their dignity in the world and be equal partners with other civilizations. It is only a core Muslim state that could address the paradox of geopolitics in the interest of international peace and security. And the only country that fits that status is Turkey because as observed by Huntington it "has history, population, middle level economic development, national coherence, military tradition and competence to be the core state of Islam....So long as Turkey continues to define itself as a secular state leadership of Islam is denied it". It could only achieve this by redefining itself. "At some point Turkey could be ready to give up its frustrating and humiliating role as a beggar pleading for membership in the West and to resume its much more impressive and elevated historical role as the principal Islamic interlocutor and antagonist of the west"[27]. Then Turkey will be accepted as a dignified partner of Europe . Some Turkish generals have stated thinking that Turkey needs to change its style and move to the Middle East and perhaps Russia . But Russia is now moving closer to Europe so Turkey has no option but the Muslim world where it belongs.

Universal peace is a utilitarian desire of the human race but this can never occur in an unjust world where even the United Nations is treated with recklessness because of selective implementation of its resolutions. When it comes to Israeli aggression against the Palestinians nothing is done despite its violations of dozens of UN resolutions for 54 years but Saddam, the Arab tyrant and innocent Iraqis are treated like the Nazis of evil memory for failing to comply with UN resolutions in 11 years. One of Lewis's main reasons of writing this book is to warn the Middle Easterners that if they do not modernize they would be subjected to worse form of domination and that the suicide bomber cannot rescue them but as an interested party as earlier noted by Jansen (1979) above he never treated the issue of double standards which even Butler former UN inspector to Iraq acknowledged recently that: "manifest unfairness-double standards-produced a situation that was deeply, inherently unstable. This is because human beings will not swallow such unfairness. This principle is as certain as the basic law of physics itself"[28]. This paradox could only be resolved peacefully if there is freedom of choice of leadership in the Muslim countries without manipulation by the external powers as noted by Sachs (2002). Violence in Muslim countries has always served the interest of the West. That is why western countries never encourage democracy in Muslim countries in fact they help in aborting it by supporting dictators such as the Algerian generals and Parvez Musharraf of Pakistan . The Pakistani dictator was well received by Washington, which brushed aside his crime of overthrowing an elected government voted by the people with "a most convincing margin" in Pakistan's tortuous attempt of an enthroning a viable democratic government. And above all that government was making genuine attempts of peaceful resolution of the Kashmir crisis[29]. Musharraf was propped up for the crucial role of toppling the Taliban, which is more important to the West than democracy in Pakistan .

### References:

- Amstutz, J. B. 1986 *Afghanistan : The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation* National Defense University Washington DC.
- Afzal-Khan, F. 2002 'Islam and Politics' *Counter Punch* August 28
- Beaumont, P. 2002 'The new anti-semitism?' *The Observer* Sunday February 17
- Findley, J. 1993 *Deliberate Deceptions: Facing the Facts About US/Israeli Relationship* Chicago : Lawrence Hill
- Gungwu, W. 2002 'The Future of Secular Values' Social Science Research Council Essay

- Huntington, S. P. 1998 *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* London
- Jansen, G. H. 1979 *Militant Islam* London
- Levine, J. 2002 'Divestment from Israel Is Peace Move' *Columbus Dispatch* November 16
- Mamdani, M. 2002 'Good Muslim, Bad Muslim-An African Perspective' Social Science Research Council Essay New York
- Monbiot, G. 2001 'America 's pipe dream: A pro-western regime in Kabul should give the US an Afghan route for Caspian Oil' *The Guardian* 23 October
- Mushtaq, N. 2002 'A Despot in Washington ' February 11, *Foreign Policy in Focus*
- Noonan, G. 2002 ' Butler accuses US of nuclear hypocrisy' *Sydney Morning Herald* October 3, 2002
- Pilger, J. 2002. 'The Colder War' *The Mirror* January 29
- Sachs, J. 2001 'Islam Geopolitics as a Morality Tale' *Harvard Magazine* October 29, 2001 , reprinted from *Financial Times*
- Siddiqui, A. 1989 'Review of Halsell, G. 1986 *Prophecy and Politics – Militant Evangelists on the Road to Nuclear War* Westport CT ' *The Muslim World Book Review* 9: 2 Leicester
- Sultan, K. Gen. HRH with Seale, P. 1995 *Desert Warrior: A Personal View of the Gulf War* London
- The Economist April 10<sup>th</sup> 1999 review of Chase, R., Emily, H. and Kennedy, P. 1999 *The Pivotal States: A New Framework for U.S. Policy in the Developing World*. Norton.
- Van der Veer, P. 1999 'Political Religion in the twenty-first century' in Paul, T. V. and Hall, J. A. (eds) *International Order and the Future of World Politics*

[1] Huntington 1998: 74, 77, 104-105, 115, 138, 147 and 154

[2] These attempts by the British, which he did not mention ended in disastrous failure the 17,000-man British imperial army was liquidated to the last man (Amstutz 1986: xxi).

[3] The Shah did not even know that the U.S. changed his army chiefs for more information see Heikel 1983

[4] Huntington interview with The Observer and Former CIA Chief James Woolsey who was reported to have said: "In the past, some 'tyrants' in the Middle East were kept in power because the United states relies on their oil reserves....One of the reasons we don't have democracies in the Middle East is because we have regarded the Middle East as our gas station". (Reported in the Ottawa Citizen of November 15, 2002 but quoted from the email edition of the Mid-Hudson Activist Newsletter published in New Paltz N.Y. by the Mid-Hudson National Peoples Campaign on Nov. 21, 2002 ).

[5] Sunday October 21, 2001 available at [www.observer.co.uk](http://www.observer.co.uk)

[6] Sultan with Seale 1995: 160, 162 and 164.

[7] Siddiqui 1989: 46 and 47

[8] This has led some conscious Jews such as Joseph Levine (a professor of philosophy at Ohio State University ) to call for withdrawal of universities' money from companies that invest in Israel or sell it military supplies. The movement is gathering momentum despite opposition from conservatives such as Harvard President Lawrence Summers who want to blackmail it as an anti-Semitic effort as if the Palestinians are not Semites. (Levine 2002: 16 A14)

[9] See A Letter to President Bush in [Palestinian\\_Diary@yahoo.com](mailto:Palestinian_Diary@yahoo.com)

[10] For example the former U.S. Republican Congressman Paul Findley wrote a well documented book on this issue (Findley 1993)

[11] Beaumont 2002

[12] Paul Dennis wrote: "The biggest threat to Israel and Jewish people is the self destructive Jewish jihad being waged on our fellow Semites and nieghbours in Palestine by Sharon and the Israeli Army" in *Observer Worldview: 'The big issue: Is anti-Zionism anti-Semitic?'* Sunday February 24, 2002 *The Observer* available at [www.observer.co.uk](http://www.observer.co.uk)

[13] Beaumont 2002

[14] Jansen 1979: 85

[15] For more on Western involvement in Congo (former Zaire ) see the detailed study titled: 'How America ran and still runs, the Congo war' *New African* September 2001 London pp 18-22.

[16] The journalist is Wayne Madsen who is the author of *Genocide and Covert Operation 1993-1999* for more information see *New Africa* September 2001: 18-22

[17] Monbiot 2001

[18] See Mamdani 2002: 3

[19] According to John Pilger: "Brezinski not long ago revealed that on July 3, 1979, unknown to the American public and Congress, President Jimmy Carter secretly authorized \$500 million to create an international terrorist movement that would spread Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia and destabilize the Soviet Union. The CIA called this "Operation Cyclone" and in the following years poured \$4 billion into setting up Islamic training schools in Pakistan (Taliban means student) Zealot were sent to CIA training camps in Virginia-where future Al-Qaeda members were taught "sabotage skills"- i.e. terrorism. Others were trained in an Islamic school in Brooklyn . In Pakistan , they were trained by British M16 officers and trained by SAS The result quipped Brezinski, was a few "stirred up Muslims" meaning the Taliban" (Pilger 2002) quoted in Afzal-Khan 2002.

[20] *New African* 2001: 6 where interview with the Paris paper *Le Nouvel Observateur* of January 1998 was quoted.

[21] 'Pushing the Limits: Iran's Islamic Revolution at Twenty' *Middle East Report* 212—Fall 1999 "Temptation of Democracy": A Conversation with Morad Saghafi.