

# **Bernard Lewis on Islam: A Critical Study**

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Submitted By:  
**Hanna-e-Kalbi**  
ID No. 090186-009

Supervised By:  
**Dr. Amjad Waheed**  
Assistant Professor

**Department of Islamic Thought and Civilization  
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES  
UNIVERSITY OF MANAGEMENT AND TECHNOLOGY, LAHORE**

## **Abstract**

In his sixty years of career, Bernard Lewis emerged as the most celebrated and influential Oriental Scholar of America. His work on Islamic History is the cause of it being known to the European and American world. He has conveyed the knowledge about the pre-modern and modern Muslim world. Lewis has played a great role in formation of contemporary Middle Eastern history. His studies of rebellious Muslim sects, slaves, and Jews in Muslim societies broke new ground by expanding the scope of history beyond the palace and the mosque.

It is crucial to study and analyze Bernard Lewis for he is the most cherished Western scholar. His advice and thoughts on the region's current events are sought by the most senior current and former members of the U.S. government. Though Lewis is a great scholar of Islamic, Middle Eastern and Ottoman History, there are some areas which need to be critically analyzed. Edward W. Said and A.L. Tibawi are great names among the critiques of Bernard Lewis. Said addresses the issues related to Arabs and Tibawi analyses him as a Zionist Jewish writer. However, I have addressed some other issues which can be ignored by a common Muslim, who does not understand the twists and curls of the language. Not understanding the way of writing of Oriental class of scholars can easily make one think what they right is unquestionable. This dissertation is an endeavor to distinct right from wrong in one of the widely read writers and thought provokers of West: Bernard Lewis.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

Bernard Lewis is a living legend. He is regarded as the most eminent western scholar of Muslim history and oriental studies. He is a prolific writer and has published around twenty books and numerous articles during his long academic and research career spread over six decades.

Bernard Lewis specialized in Arab history, oriental studies and the history of the Ottoman Empire. He is considered an authority in Islamic economic, cultural and political history and the historical and present day relationship between Islam and the west.

As he is regarded one of the leading scholars of the Middle Eastern region, his books and articles have been widely cited. His opinions have been sought by American policy makers. G. W. Bush administration also sought his advice in making US Policy on Iraq. In his early days Lewis developed an extraordinary interest in the learning of the languages. With times he developed his writing skills and became adept in describing concepts elucidating thinking patterns and narrating events. He has made good attempts at scholarly presentation of historical events, explanation of ottoman policies, trends in Muslim societies, and have exploited his linguistic skills in defining and redefining long held concepts and terms, e.g. ‘Arab’ in “The Arabs in History”

Before Lewis the Orientalists and western historians looked at the east through the colored glasses given them by western and the European culture. They studied the Middle

## Chapter 1

# **Bernard Lewis: An Introduction**

## ***Bernard Lewis: An Introduction***

### ***Bernard Lewis: A Biographical Note***

Bernard Lewis was born in London, UK on May 31, 1916. His parents were Jewish and belonged to the British Middle Class. He earned his BA from the University of London. He pursued his post graduate studies at the University of Paris and received the “*diplome des ‘etudes semitiques’*” there. He earned his PhD from the School of Oriental and African studies, University of London, in 1939. His doctoral thesis was on “The Origins of Ismailism”. He joined the same center as Assistant Lecturer in Islamic History in 1938.

During the Second World War he served the British army in the Royal Armored Corps and Intelligence Corps. His marriage with Ruth Helene Oppenheim in 1947 survived for 27 years and gave him two children. He rejoined the University of London after the war in 1949. He was appointed to the new chair in Near and Middle Eastern History. Lewis

moved to America after his divorce in 1974 to join Princeton University NJ, USA and at the same time the Institute of Advanced Studies, located in the same vicinity, Princeton. He was naturalized in 1982.

His working hours at Princeton were flexible. He taught only one semester every year and was not given any administrative role. So he could give one full semester to his research work every year. He had time enough at his disposal to consult his previously collected material and produce quite a few books and articles. He retired in 1986 and joined The Cornell University where he worked until 1990.

## **His Research**

Bernard Lewis is renowned for his famous research work on Ottoman Empire, which included Medieval Arab and Syrian history. His field research faced a heavy blow with the existence of Israel in 1948<sup>1</sup>. As in those days, Jewish historians in Arab countries were suspected as Israeli spies. Therefore, he directed his research to a more comfortable field topic, Ottoman Archives<sup>2</sup>. His works regarding Ottoman Empire are regarded as authoritative and influential.

Bernard Lewis' articles on History of Islam have revolutionized the Middle East history. He was of the view that Muslims did not adapt to the changing scenario of the Globe and are left behind. As the 11th Century Muslim societies started decaying due to internal problems like "cultural arrogance" and external, Crusades. He was critical of the Soviet's and Arabs' label for Israel as a racist and Semitist country and wrote a study on anti-

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<sup>1</sup> [Martin](#) Kramer, "Bernard" [in](#) *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, Vol. 1, 719–720.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Semitism, Semites and Anti-Semites.<sup>3</sup> His other scholarly works include *The Arabs in History* (1950), *The Middle East and the West* (1964) and *The Middle East* (1995).<sup>4</sup>

### **Lewis' Work on Armenian Genocide**

Bernard Lewis' work on Armenian Genocide was hit by many controversies. Lewis was influenced by the Armenian massacre of 1915 and he stated it in text *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (1961 and 1968) as 'the terrible massacre'. He also stood denied the U.S Congress resolution to account it as 'genocide'. His later versions of texts regarding the massacre, termed it as "the terrible slaughter of 1915. This development made other contemporary historians to comment that Lewis engaged in revising of historical events in order to serve his personal and political interests<sup>5</sup>. However, he labeled the 1915 events as 'genocide' in November 1993 *Le Monde* article of "Armenian version of the history". It made him to face civil proceedings in French court. The court stated "by concealing elements contrary to his opinion, he neglected his duties of objectivity and prudence".<sup>6</sup> Consequently, he was ordered to pay one franc for his statements regarding Armenian genocide in Turkey. Other historians also commented that Lewis' account of Armenian society is not only distorted but also exaggerated. They further state that Armenians had an army for self-defense. However, the fact is to the contrary, Armenians did never have a police force or an army. Armenian National Committee also condemned honoring of Lewis by National Humanities Medal from US president George W. Bush. Sociologists like Stephen Zunes also criticized it by describing it as "notorious genocide-

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<sup>3</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>5</sup> Vahakn N. Dadrian, *Warrant for genocide: Key elements of Turko-Armenian conflict*, 2003, 131.

<sup>6</sup> [Lewis receives adverse civil judgment](#), 21 June 1995 (French).

denier”.<sup>7</sup> Alain Finfielkraut, Yves Ternon, Richard G. Hovannisian, Albert Memmi, Pierre Vidal-Naquet and YairAuron also denied Bernard Lewis view of Armenian genocide in his works.

### **Views and Influence on Contemporary Politics**

Bernard Lewis’ extensive research on Middle East country has established him as a political expert among media, policy makers and high profile politicians of the West and US. His advice was deemed essential when it came to relation building between West and Middle East countries. He closely observed the Israel- Palestine conflict and rising of militancy in Islamic countries. Later, in 1998, he read in a London-based newspaper Al-Quds Al-Arabi (declaration of war) against US by Osama Bin Laden, which was substantiated in his essay “License to Kill”; he depicted Bin Laden as an immediate threat to US and Europe. He was of the view that Arab’s rage against Israel is not balanced and majority of the Muslims in Central Asian countries are being oppressed by Soviet Administration. He was a harsh critic of Soviet interference in Middle East and argued that it is necessary that west should have closer ties with Middle East and modern Turkey.<sup>8</sup> His support for introduction of modern and Liberal Turkey to European Camp awarded Lewis by an Honorary Fellowship by Institute of Turkish Studies.

In *The Roots of Muslims Rage*, a 1990 essay, Lewis indicated that differences between Islam and West are widening. He also commented Islam and Christendom as two

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<sup>7</sup> David B. MacDonald, *Identity Politics in the Age of Genocide: The Holocaust and Historical Representation* (Routledge, 2008), 241.

<sup>8</sup> Martin [Kramer](#), “[Bernard Lewis](#)”, *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, 719–720.

civilizations that are in perpetual conflict after the advent of Islam in 7th century. He was the first person to introduce the term “Islamic Fundamentalism” in America.<sup>9</sup>

## **Stance on the Iraq War**

Lewis views on Iraq war do not amuse one with great irony but also with bewilderment. He suggested that an imposed democracy and change in regime would set the stage for modernization of Middle East. In fact, other Orientalist argued that Lewis provided an intellectual basis for invasion of Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

However, in 2008, he wrote as if he does not advocate the imposed freedom or democracy in a Muslim state.

"There are things you can't impose; Freedom, for example or democracy. Democracy is a very strong medicine which has to be administered to the patient in small, gradually increasing doses. Otherwise, you risk killing the patient. In the main, the Muslims have to do it themselves."<sup>11</sup>

It was backed by Ian Burama, who denied his peers allegations that Lewis promotes war with Iraq in order to serve the purposes of Israel. In his article, *The New Yorker*, Burama wrote:

“It is a common phenomenon among Western students of the Orient to fall in love with a civilization. Such love often ends in bitter impatience when reality fails to conform to the ideal. The rage, in this instance, is that of the

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<sup>9</sup> Amber Haque, *Islamophobia in North America: Confronting the Menace*, ed. Barry van Driel, *Confronting Islamophobia in Educational Practice* (Trentham Books, 2004), 6.

<sup>10</sup> “[Bernard Lewis Revisited](#)”, *Washington Monthly*, November 2004 (Retrieved April 26, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Ruthie Blum, “[One on One: When defeat means liberation](#)”, *The Jerusalem Post*, March 6, 2008.

Western scholar. His beloved civilization is sick. And what would be more heart warming to an old Orientalist than to see the greatest Western democracy cures the benighted Muslim? It is either that or something less charitable: if a final showdown between the great religions is indeed the inevitable result of a millennial clash, then we had better make sure that we win.”<sup>12</sup>

However, Lewis, in his “Notes on a Century” says that he did not call for the war in Iraq but he advocated for the “northern zone of Iraq which was already working, out of “Saddam’s control” and desired to declare itself the “Free Government of Iraq” and bring down the regime from within.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Assumed nuclear threat from Iran**

Lewis was confident that Iran is acquiring nuclear weapons, for last fifteen years in order to use them against Israel. August 22, 2006 was the deadline for Iran to respond to U.S demands regarding Iran’s nuclear program. Lewis stated in an article for Wall Street Journal, that this date is 26<sup>th</sup> of Rajab in Islamic calendar and Muslims commemorate the night flight of Holy Prophet *salla allahu ‘alaihi wasallam* on this day. Iran can possibly go for a nuclear strike on Israel and make ‘apocalyptic end of Israel’ or even further ‘end of world’.<sup>14</sup> As he described:

“What is the significance of Aug. 22? This year, Aug. 22 corresponds, in the Islamic calendar, to the 27<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Rajab of the year 1427. This, by tradition, is the night when many Muslims commemorate the night flight of the prophet Muhammad on the winged horse *Buraq*, first to “the farthest mosque,” usually identified with Jerusalem, and then to heaven and back (*Qur’an*, 17:1). This might well be deemed an appropriate date for the apocalyptic ending of Israel and if necessary of the world. It is far from certain that Mr. Ahmadinejad plans any such

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<sup>12</sup> Ian Buruma, “[Lost in Translation: The Two Minds of Bernard Lewis](#)”, *The New Yorker*, June 14, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Noel Malcolm, “Notes On A Century by Bernard Lewis: review”, *The Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/biographyandmemoirreviews/9334117/Notes-On-A-Century-by-Bernard-Lewis-review.html>, Retrieved 16<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

<sup>14</sup> [August 22. “Does Iran have something in store?”](#), *Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2006.

cataclysmic events precisely for Aug. 22. But it would be wise to bear the possibility in mind.”<sup>15</sup>

The article got famous among the media circle and invited many counter statements. As in 2009, Juan Cole stated in his book:

“Lewis’s beliefs about Iran are even more bizarre than Ahmadinejad's about Israel, but unfortunately he had the ear of the Bush administration. Of course, nothing came of his ridiculous prophecy, which said more about the irrational anxieties of Western ultra-Zionists than about Iranian political reality.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Debates with Edward Said**

Edward Said regarded Orientalism as a field to affirm political intellectualism and individualistic Concepts. He argued that the field of Orientalism lacks objective study.

Furthermore, he claimed:

"Bernard Lewis hasn't set foot in the Middle East, in the Arab world, for at least 40 years. He knows something about Turkey, I'm told, but he knows nothing about the Arab world."<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, he accused him of “demagogy and downright ignorance” and considered that in his explanations and writing about Islam, Lewis lacks profound knowledge of plurality, internal dynamics and historical complexes in Islam. Lewis treats Islam merely as a monolithic entity.

Lewis responded by saying that Orientalism provides a softer image of Europe for Middle East countries. And, Orientalism does not advocate the cause of Imperialism.

On Lewis’ views on Islam Said claims,

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.opinionjournal.com/extra/?id=110008768>. 2010

<sup>16</sup> J. Cole, *Engaging the Muslim World*, (Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 205.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Said, “[Resources of hope](#)”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, April 2, 2003 (Retrieved April 26, 2007).

“Lewis’ polemical, not scholarly, purpose is to show... that Islam is an anti-Semitic ideology, not merely a religion. He has a little logical difficulty in trying to assert that Islam is a fearful mass phenomenon and at the same time “not genuinely popular,” but this problem does not detain him long. As the second version of his tendentious anecdote shows, he goes on to proclaim that Islam is an irrational herd or mass phenomenon, ruling Muslims by passions, instincts, and unreflecting hatreds. The whole point of his exposition is to frighten his audience, to make it never yield an inch to Islam. According to Lewis, Islam does not develop, and neither do Muslim; they merely are, and they are to be watched, on account of that pure essence of theirs (according to Lewis), which happens to include a long-standing hatred of Christians and Jews. Lewis everywhere restrains himself from making such inflammatory statements flat out; he always takes care to say that of course the Muslims are not anti-Semitic the way the Nazis were, but their religion can too easily accommodate itself to anti-Semitism and has done so. Similarly with regard to Islam and racism, slavery, and other more or less “Western” evils. The core of Lewis’s ideology about Islam is that it never changes, and his whole mission is now to inform conservative segments of the Jewish reading public, and anyone else who cares to listen, that any political, historical, and scholarly account of Muslims must begin and end with the fact that Muslims are Muslims.”<sup>18</sup>

## **Debates with Noam Chomsky**

In a 2002 interview with the CBC's "Hot Type" program, linguist and political activist Noam Chomsky detailed a series of comments from a declassified Eisenhower

Administration memo:

“President Eisenhower, in an internal discussion, observed to his staff, and I'm quoting now, "There's a campaign of hatred against us in the Middle East, not by governments, but by the people." The National Security Council discussed that question and said, "Yes, and the reason is, there's a perception in that region that the United States supports status quo governments, which prevent democracy and development and that we do it because of our interests in Middle East oil. Furthermore, it's difficult to counter that perception because it's correct." <sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin Books, 1978, 1995), 317-318.

<sup>19</sup> Evan Solomon, “[Hot Type Transcript: Noam Chomsky "9-11" Interview](#)”, CBC News, Archived from [the original](#) on June 4, 2008 (Retrieved November 21, 2010).

Chomsky claimed that Bernard Lewis omitted evidence of Western culpability for failures in the region.

Lewis responded:

“It doesn't have to be more civilized, I mean the Roman Empire and the medieval Islamic Empire was not conquered by more civilized peoples, they were conquered by less civilized but more vigorous peoples. But in both cases what made the conquest, with the Barbarians in Rome and the Mongols in Iraq, what made it possible was things were going badly wrong within the society so that it was no longer able to offer effective resistance... Mr. Chomsky's views on Middle Eastern history are about as reliable as my views on linguistics... Obviously imperialist powers are not blameless in this respect. They did contribute, but they are not the cause of what went wrong. What went wrong is what enabled them to come and conquer these places. And the record of the Imperialist powers is by no means uniformly bad. They did some bad things; they also did some good things. They introduced infrastructure, they introduced modern education, they established a network of high schools and universities that previously did not exist, and many other things. They even tried to introduce constitutional government, parliamentary and constitutional government. It didn't take in the Islamic lands, but it worked quite well in India... "It's not our business what goes on inside these countries. Let them have tyrants as long as they're friendly tyrants rather than hostile tyrants." This is the familiar method that's been used in Central America, Southeast Asia and other places... There are people who believe in using the same methods, you know.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Criticism of A.L. Tibawi**

A.L. Tibawi, indicating towards Bernard Lewis says that it is not easy to sum him up as he is more “audacious and extreme”. He teaches Arab and Islamic history to others and Muslims including Arabs and non-Arabs yet he put in all the efforts to belittle “Islam and Arab nationalism”.<sup>21</sup> Lewis is of the view that Qur’an is not the word of God and

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<sup>20</sup> Evan Solomon, “[Hot Type: Bernard Lewis Interview: What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response](#)”. CBC News. Archived from [the original](#) on April 30, 2008 (Retrieved November 21, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> A.L. Tibawi, “A Second Critique of English-Speaking Orientalists”, *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. A.L. Macfie, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 145-169.

Muhammad *salla allahu 'alaihi wasallam* is a false Messenger.<sup>22</sup> A.L. Tibawi gives detailed notes on his attitude towards Arab Nationalism and Israel's defense.

A.L. Tibawi claims that most of the Orientalist historians are not trained in this field and have little supplementary skills "other than linguistic proficiency". He also claims that Lewis is bound in his "Jewish prejudice" and according to A.L. Tibawi, "he is nakedly an ardent Zionist."<sup>23</sup>

## **Publications**

Some of his publications are: *The Origins of Islam* 1940, *Turkey Today* 1940, *British Contributions to Arabic Studies* 1941, *Handbook of Diplomatic and political Arabic* 1947, 1956, *Land of Enchanters* (ed.) 1948, *The Arabs in History* 1950, 1993, *Notes and Documents for the Turkish Archives* 1952, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* 1961, 1968, 2001, *The Kingly Crown* 1961, *Historians of the Middle East* (co-ed. With P.M Holt) 1962, *Istanbul and the Civilization of the Ottoman Empire* 1963, *The Middle East and the West* 1964, *The Assassins* 1967, *Race and Color in Islam* 1971, *Islam in History* 1973, *Islamic Civilization* (ed.) 1974, *Islam from the PROPHET Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople* (2 vols) 1974, *History-Remembered, Recovered, Invented* 1975, *The world of Islam* (ed.) 1976, *Population and Revenue in the Towns of Palestine in the Sixteenth Century* (with Amnon Cohen) 1978, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* 1982, *The Jews of Islam* 1984, *Semites and Anti-Semites* 1986, *As others See Us* (co-ed) 1986, *The Political Language of Islam* 1988, 1999, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* 1990, *Islam and the West* 1993, *The Shaping of the Modern Middle East* 1994, *Cultures*

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<sup>22</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (London, 1968 ed.), 38-39.

<sup>23</sup> A.L. Tibawi, "A Second Critique of English-Speaking Orientalists" *Orientalism: A Reader*, 145-169.

in Conflict: Christians, Muslims and Jews in the Age of Discovery 1995, The Middle East: Two Thousand Years of History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day 1995. The future of the Middle East 1997, The Multiple Identities of the Middle East 1998, Uno sguardo dal Medio Oriente 1999, A Middle East Mosaic: Fragments of life, letters and History 2000, Music of a Distant Drum, Classic Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Hebrew Poems 2001, What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response 2002, The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror 2003, From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East 2004.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Robert J. Elster (ed.), *The International Who's Who* (London and New York: Europa Publications Limited, 2005), 1069-1070.