

The Pathology of Middle Eastern Studies

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Keynote address to the Ninth Annual Conference of the
Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA)
October 28, 2016

Transcript as delivered. Full address may be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/191273192>

Thank you, good afternoon to all of you. I appreciate that rather extensive recitation of my credentials. There's a timeworn response to such introductions. It's a quote from Lyndon Johnson, who once said after being introduced: "I wish my father and mother could have heard that introduction. My father would have enjoyed it, and my mother would have believed it." (Laughter.) As it happens, my mother and father are in the audience. (Applause.). So I'm looking forward to the drive home.

When I was asked to deliver this address, I was flattered, but I also thought to myself: so it's come to this. So thin are the top ranks of my school of Middle Eastern studies, that it now falls to me to deliver the ASMEA keynote.

This day has come too soon. I suppose I knew that the moment was approaching when Bernard Lewis would draw silent. In May he celebrated his centennial. I still vividly remember his appearances before ASMEA, both in this room, and in the evening reception. I was in denial to think we would bask in his presence in perpetuity, only because he's defied the odds for so long. I'm delighted to report that Bernard is in good health and humor. Buntzie Churchill is here; she accompanies Bernard and looks after him. I'm happy to report, via Buntzie, that he sends his regards, and is doing well. But I think we have to acknowledge that in this forum, we've heard his last.

As for the co-founder of ASMEA, Fouad Ajami, he was torn from us far, far too early. He died two years ago at the age of 68. His untimely departure came as a shock, and constituted a loss of a magnitude that can't ever be made good. In darker moments, I imagine that the years given to Bernard perhaps were subtracted from Fouad—that somewhere in the firmament, there is a grim beancounter, determined that we not excessively profit from the longevity of any of our heroes.

So today, I feel the burden acutely—all the more so as I'm one of the very few people who formally studied under both men. I first studied under Fouad at Princeton, when he was a young instructor only a few years my senior. I later studied under Bernard, also at Princeton, when he was *the* very distinguished scholar just imported from England. With both teachers I

forged long and enduring friendships of forty years, and for all that time, whenever some battle had to be fought, I always knew that one of them would rise to the occasion.

Now the task has fallen to the likes of me. Let us not delude ourselves. There's a huge gap in the ranks of scholarship, precisely in my generation. It has its reasons, and I'll come to them momentarily. But let's begin by acknowledging that we're poorer than we were, and that we'll be without the likes of Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami for a good time to come.

Having said that... With those words, I'm signaling to you that there's also good news. In this address, I'm going to speak about some of the pathologies of Middle Eastern studies. But I believe we're much closer to a cure than we were ten or fifteen years ago. To make that argument, I'm going to be looking down at the field from a very high altitude. For those of you in the trenches at one or another institution, things may look different. But my basic argument this afternoon is that events are forcing change in Middle Eastern studies, which is precisely the mission this association was established to advance. If I'm right, there are opportunities here, and we should be prepared to seize them.

Now it's been mentioned that I have a new book [*The War on Error*], a volume of collected essays. Chapter 2 of this collection is entitled "The Shifting Sands of Academe." It's not been published before; I recommend it to you. I delivered it as a lecture to students at Harvard in 2007. There I said, and allow me to quote myself: "Perhaps once in thirty years, a field will experience a dramatic upheaval that changes its contours. In such times of trouble, there is much turbulence, and there are winners and losers. When the dust has settled, the field has a new configuration."

"Once in thirty years..." When I reread this, it reminded me that we are, as we convene, at a thirty-year anniversary. It was thirty years ago, on November 22, 1986, that Bernard Lewis debated Edward Said at the Middle East Studies Association annual conference in Boston. I was there, and perhaps a few of you were there too. (Can I see hands, just out of curiosity?) Let me recap what happened there, as I recall it. Because it marks something of a watershed.

For seven or eight years before that, Middle Eastern studies had been reeling under the impact of Edward Said's book *Orientalism*. Said, a young English professor in his early forties, a complete outsider to Middle Eastern studies, had managed to throw into question a whole tradition of scholarship. He did it by targeting its most vulnerable points at the moment of its greatest weakness. The old Middle Eastern studies establishment of the 1960s and 1970s hadn't seen the Palestinians, hadn't studied their grievances, hadn't documented their struggle, and so missed their rise to the headlines. Said widened his indictment, insisting that this failure reflected a deeper prejudice: Orientalism, a kind of antisemitism directed against Arabs and Muslims.

Now, Lewis had already taken on Said, in the *New York Review of Books*, in 1982. In his article, "The Question of Orientalism," Bernard made an erudite and I think persuasive critique of Said's book. There he showed that Orientalism, the field, the scholarly tradition,

had actually shattered medieval European prejudice against Islam, and laid the foundation for an accurate and objective assessments of Islam and the Muslims. Said replied, but most observers thought Lewis had won that round.

Yet, somehow, there was born the idea of a rematch—this time as a formal debate. I remember walking with Lewis at the Boston hotel through the gauntlet of the book exhibit, on his way to the podium. He was seventy at the time, still in his prime, although Said, at fifty, had a certain advantage of youth. Said wouldn't be diagnosed with cancer for another five years. The atmosphere in the hotel was electric. There may have been 3,000 people there.

There's a transcript of that debate, later published in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*. It's there, I suppose, because the partisans of Edward Said thought that Said had won it. And to be objective about it, I also recall feeling that Bernard had misread the audience. He appealed somewhat naively to the crowd's sense of professional duty, whereas Said had come out swinging. This wasn't an audience of sober scholars. The MESA multitudes were agitated: they had come to see blood spilt.

Said later said that Lewis "fumbled around and tried a senior common;room chit-chat which completely failed." I do remember that Lewis was booed. Said, in contrast, gave the crowd what they wanted by naming names. He understood something about America that Bernard never quite grasped. In this country, you don't allude, you list. And so name after name poured from Said's lips, just as they had poured from his pen in *Orientalism*. Example: Said gave this list of persons he claimed were "entirely responsible for what is essentially the entire gamut of media representation of the Middle East. It includes: Bernard Lewis, Elie Kedourie, Walter Laqueur, Ernest Gellner, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Martin Peretz, Norman Podhoretz, J.B. Kelly, Daniel Pipes—I could go on." You get the flavor.

Now to the younger people in this room, this folklore might not seem especially interesting. I've elaborated because this was a turning point in Middle Eastern studies. From that date forward, the partisans of Said declared the debate about Middle Eastern studies to have been decided and resolved. There would be no need for further debate. In 1998, MESA celebrated 20 years to the publication of *Orientalism*, with a plenary panel featuring Said and those who came to praise him. In 1999, MESA elected Said an Honorary Fellow. Honorary Fellows of MESA are a select group of what are defined as "outstanding internationally recognized scholars who have made major contributions to Middle East studies." So MESA elected Said, who himself once freely declared, and I quote him, "I have no interest in, much less capacity for, showing what the true Orient and Islam really are." Lewis, who did have the interest and more capacity than anyone in his generation, didn't warrant the same honor.

Now, you may ask, what was the issue that defined the difference between the approaches of Said and Lewis? A simplistic view might be to say that they stood on opposite sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That, I suppose, they did, but I think that reduces something complex to its lowest common denominator. The difference revolved around what made the Middle East move.

In the view of Said and his canonizers in MESA, the Middle East, and especially its Arab core, were striding resolutely forward in the name of Arab nationalism and Palestinian revolution. European empires may have disappeared, but American imperialism hadn't. The Arabs had a justified grievance against it, including against Israel. The future belonged to the resistance, mounted in the name of Arab unity and Palestinian rights. These were secular causes, progressive in nature. They were but one aspect of the worldwide movement of the oppressed and downtrodden, from Vietnam to Cuba. And even if other movements waned or failed, Arab nationalism and Palestinian revolution remained credible. Ultimately, they would define the future of the Middle East. Those who denied them, resisted them, expressed mere skepticism, were on the wrong side of history. They hadn't gotten with the program; they stood in the way of progress; they had to be pushed aside.

Two scholars took the opposite view: Bernard and Fouad. Bernard did so famously in his article "The Return of Islam," published in 1976—that's forty years ago, and before the Iranian revolution. There he pointed to signs that Islam was making a comeback as a driver of political mobilization, and he did it in a very provocative way. He cited "the present inability, political, journalistic, and scholarly alike, to recognize the importance of the factor of religion in the current affairs of the Muslim world." And he dismissed the use of Western terminology, such as left and right, as unsuited for "explaining Muslim political phenomena." And he declared Islam to be "still the most effective form of consensus in Muslim countries, the basic group identity among the masses."

To Bernard, the future of the Middle East belonged to Islam. And he seemed to have been vindicated when an Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini overthrew the Shah. Then came Fouad Ajami, who extended Bernard's framework. First, he wrote a book, *The Arab Predicament*, declaring Arab nationalism and revolution to be spent and bankrupt. Then he wrote another book, *The Vanished Imam*, that emphasized the importance of sectarianism in the Arab heart of the Middle East. Fouad informed everyone, and reminded everyone who had forgotten it, that there were also Shi'ites in the Arab world. Sunnis had marginalized and oppressed them in the name of Arab nationalism. Bernard had called Islam "the basic group identity among the masses," which was offensive enough. Fouad went even further: it was sectarian Islam which formed the basis of group identity. This was true for Shi'ites as well as Sunnis.

Why did this provoke such opposition? Because many in academe were themselves Arab nationalists at heart and sympathizers of the Palestinian revolution in its secular versions. The notion that Islamists and sectarians had seized the future embarrassed and shamed them. They had set themselves up as explainers of the Middle East, as defenders of Arabs and Muslims against prejudice and ignorance in America. This was at the core of Said's political project. Every time a group calling itself Islamic or Muslim committed an act of terror, it exposed the gaps in their narrative.

Americans began to pose hard questions. Why were Muslims experiencing a resurgence of

political religion? Why had Islam become such a force for mobilizing people for jihad and martyrdom? Why did the Islamic world seem to be the one zone of the globe opposing Enlightenment values? The experts gave evasive answers. These acts had nothing to do with Islam, they said; or what seemed to be Islamic had some other social or political cause; or these deeds were the work of an infinitesimally small number of extremists; or this was just a reaction to an ill-conceived Western crusade against Islam.

And therein lies the significance of the 1986 debate. It provided the pretext for shunning Lewis, so that Middle Eastern studies could carry on undisturbed by internal dissent, as an industry for manufacturing a mythical Middle East for American consumption. Lewis's approach, with its focus on the centrality of Islam, was denounced as the thought crime of Orientalism. After 1986, Lewis was gradually purged from syllabi. Yes, he still appealed to a wider reading public. But students were told they needn't bother to read him. As Fouad was once quoted as staying, "In most American universities, the battle of ideas between Lewis and Said was, alas, won by Said and his disciples. To me, that is a tragic outcome."

Tragic indeed, not for Lewis, but for Middle Eastern studies. Its principal effect was to persuade many talented young people that the academic study of the Middle East was not so much a field as a minefield, and one best avoided. In every past generation, the Western study of the Islamic lands had attracted its fair share of eccentrics, but also a good number of geniuses. America had fewer than Europe, but there were a few. After the onslaught of *Orientalism*, the well went dry. Bernard described the outcome in his memoirs:

"Many younger people in the earlier stages of their careers have suffered serious damage. They find themselves in a position where they have either to conform or get out. The Saidians now control appointments, promotions, publications and even book reviews with a degree of enforcement unknown in the Western universities since the eighteenth century."

What is the result? There is not a single practitioner in the field, in my generation, whose name registers in the American public more broadly, or even commands much respect in the wider academy. No field can grow and flourish without the constant flow of new, dissenting voices. Said's acolytes, by turning the field into a fenced-off enclave of identity politics, impoverished and ghettoized it.

This is where Middle Eastern studies stood fifteen years ago, on September 11, a day that immediately changed the skyline of New York, and gradually changed the landscape of Middle Eastern studies. Its first and most urgent effect on the field was to reopen the debate that had been declared closed. The facile dismissals of Islam as irrelevant no longer worked to silence questions. Said himself dodged the media. Here's a quote from him: "What could I know about the crazed fanatics who committed suicide in the slaughter of innocents? And why indeed was there this extraordinary assumption that from my university office I had some special insight into the smoldering twin towers?" Quite an admission. Of course he had no insight. Lewis did, and he came roaring back, with two *New York Times* bestsellers, *What Went Wrong?* and *The Crisis of Islam*. My own short book, *Ivory Towers on Sand*, appeared

only weeks after 9/11, and turned a spotlight on the dark corner Middle Eastern studies had become. So it was my turn to be booed in the MESA plenary, in San Francisco that year, in my absence. The guardians of the field rushed to defend it and denounce me, in review after review of my book.

But in retrospect, the walls had been breached. It's fifteen years since 9/11, fifteen years during which the United States has been immersed in the Middle East as never before. From Iraq to Afghanistan, from the Arab Spring to Syria and ISIS, the Middle East has become an American preoccupation. In 1986, when that debate was held, the Soviet Union still existed, Europe was divided, and they were the American obsession. In 2001, the Middle East rose to the top of the agenda, and it's been there ever since. The effect on Middle Eastern studies has been profound, but it has been gradual.

Here I want to emphasize the truth about the nature of change in the academy. Because of the way it's structured, in the humanities and social sciences, there is a time lag between events in the world, and their reflection in academic priorities. The tenured ranks are full of people who acquired their power in the past, by channeling a past fashion or prejudice. There's a disincentive for these people to revisit their premises: it would undercut their status. Even when those premises have been demolished in the wider world, they still serve their purposes in the academy, and so they persist. Ideas that disappeared from the competition long ago linger in the academy, because they were once fashionable, and back then could be translated into jobs for life. A whole generation of scholars rode the victory of Edward Said to appointments, tenure, and academic power. These men and women are now in their sixties, some are even older. They've tried to people the younger ranks with their acolytes, and they've had some success. But the trend has been running against them. Let me explain why.

First, and most important, reality counts. The Middle East simply conforms much more closely to the interpretation of it pioneered by Bernard, and elaborated upon by Fouad. Islamism and sectarianism are today what nationalism and revolution seemed to be yesterday. Yes, the familiar narratives that seek to minimize this fact still have mouthpieces in the academy. But their credibility is much eroded. Academics who persist in their denial are increasingly marginal to public discussion, and they're increasingly seen as academically passe. If you'd like a name, I'll give you one, just across the river: John Esposito. Once there was a huge appetite for his output, which consisted largely of depicting Islamism as a positive force in politics. The demand for this sort of spin is much diminished, and so is the profile of Professor Esposito and his associates.

Second, young people are entering the field who don't share the primary motives of an earlier generation. The aging establishment is comprised in some large part of people who entered the field because of some sentimental, ideological, or ethnic commitment to one or another cause in the Middle East. Some have done good work, some haven't, but the range of people attracted to the field was fairly narrow. This has changed since 9/11. In the fifteen years since then, about 2.5 million American service personnel have cycled through Iraq and Afghanistan.

I was introduced by one to this audience. Hundreds of thousands of private contractors have been through the region. This has no precedent in the history of America's interaction with the Middle East. These people came to the Middle East as agents of American power, and they acquired valuable on-the-ground experience. In my encounters with students as a visiting professor and lecturer here, I've found that there are always some in the audience members who've been "out there." Some of them have done advanced degrees, and they've been pushing at the doors of universities and think tanks. Of course they're encountering resistance. But as one generation yields to the next generation, they are establishing footholds. And for them, the disparagement of American empire and Orientalism seem like leftovers from another era. Members of this post-9/11 generation, whether they served "out there" or not, are bringing new kinds of diversity to Middle Eastern studies. The upshot is that change is coming.

Third, trends in the region are overturning old research priorities. A generation ago, the study of the Palestinians was all the rage. In 2005, I looked at the papers submitted to the MESA conferences over the previous four years, and broke them down by country. Palestine came in at the top. The Palestinians were the chosen people of Middle Eastern studies. Studying them, sympathetically of course, earned the approval of the same professors who had canonized Edward Said.

Now all that is over. Look at the more recent MESA programs, not to speak of the program of this conference, and you can see that the study of the Palestinians is in a steady decline. Young scholars who want to make a mark are gravitating to other subjects: Iraq and Syria, Islamism and ISIS, Kurds and Saudis and Turks. There's a lot going on in the Middle East, and it's often more compelling than the Palestinian story. The over-concentration in a few ideologically-charged areas is becoming a thing of the past.

There's also a powerful deterrent keeping people away from the study of the Palestinians. It's BDS, the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement. Why would a promising young scholar enter Palestinian studies, when the first thing he or she must do is sign an ideological pledge of allegiance—because the senior scholars expect it? Better to study Libya or Yemen, and they're more topical anyway, at the moment. Any field that ceases to attract a variety of students with different motives and perspectives is bound to atrophy. That is the state of Palestinian studies today, and I'd lay the responsibility at the feet of the senior Palestinian professoriate, who've isolated their own field behind the BDS wall. Would you like a name? I'll offer one: Rashid Khalidi. But as Edward Said would say, I could go on. (Laughter.)

I might add that the imposition of BDS on MESA would do to Middle Eastern studies what it's already done to Palestinian studies. The BDS drive in MESA is a last stab by the old guard of Saidians to assert the primacy of Palestine—that Israel uniquely deserves condemnation, in a Middle East awash in gross human rights violations; and that the Palestinians uniquely deserve sympathy, in a Middle East awash in refugees and suffering. The fact that BDS keeps getting sidetracked in MESA is an indication that the pro-Palestinian professoriate isn't as strong perhaps as they pretend to be, and that their power to intimidate is not unlimited.

At the same time, I would add parenthetically, the field of Israel studies has seen a remarkable growth these past few years, both in size and credibility, precisely because they've not become an extension of Israel's lobby. Donors have been generous without being heavy-handed, and the associations and journals have been platforms for a wide range of views.

Fourth, the old establishment has failed to mobilize public resources. After 9/11, the Bush administration poured millions into international and area studies at universities, and Middle East centers experienced a windfall. But after 2010, with the sequestration, these budgets experienced cuts of around 40 percent, and that's where the level has stayed. Congressional staff have told education lobbyists that this doesn't reflect animosity toward the programs, but expresses Congressional doubt that they constitute a national priority. If so, this demonstrates a failure of the old-guard academic leadership to make a compelling public case for the worth of what they do. That means that a new leadership might do better, if they can make the case more persuasively that their centers serve some public or national interest. I don't want to embarrass anyone, but I do see some of these leaders coming online, and they've already had some success in securing public support for Middle East centers more responsive to national needs.

Now I've given you a list of reasons why one shouldn't despair of a future improvement in the quality of Middle Eastern studies. I think I'm right, but I could be wrong, at least in the short term. Never underestimate the resolve of an academic establishment that perceives itself to be under siege. The defense mechanisms are familiar: scorched earth tactics in admission, promotion and tenure committees; bogus claims of "silencing" and McCarthyism hurled at challengers; coercive pressure to sign loyalty oaths in the guise of petitions and letters. People don't cede power without a fight. Battles will be won, but they'll also be lost. At some institutions, Saidian orthodoxy is so entrenched that it may constrict the study of the Middle East for many, many years to come. Columbia, Said's home institution, falls clearly in that category, and there may be others.

But I think there's good reason to believe that we are on the cusp of a transformation, if not a revolution. Thirty years ago, Edward Said cast a spell over Middle Eastern studies. That spell has been broken. When this association was founded, it was in anticipation that such a day might come. I don't think that Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami ever completely despaired. Yes, they knew they'd lost a round. Yet Bernard agreed to chair this association, in the hope that it would serve not as a refuge, but as a place from which to regroup and go forward. Fouad was perhaps less persuaded that the academy was worth the fight. He once called Middle Eastern studies "a field that lacks dignity." (Laughter.) But he also thought the day of vindication would come. Of Lewis, he said, for example: "Lewis stood his ground against the disciples of Edward Said, and I think history will tell us who told that truth about that Islamic world." By history Fouad meant in fact, not the past, but the future.

Now when that future arrives, I don't think Middle Eastern studies will rehabilitate Bernard and Fouad as neglected prophets who should have been heeded. There will be a new and

unprecedented configuration. No one knows exactly what it will look like and who will fashion it. The mission of ASMEA, going forward, will be to identify and nurture the best new ideas, by offering them a platform in this conference and in print, and by serving as a place where they can be debated and refined. Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami won't speak to us again. But we are here, and we are not silent. Every thirty years, there is an upheaval. Thirty years are up; the time has come.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)