

Setting the Record Straight on Israel

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Martin Kramer is the founding president of Shalem

College in Jerusalem, where he also chairs the department of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies. He is the author of several books, including *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle East Studies in America*, and [*The War on Error: Israel, Islam, and the Middle East*](#), which has just been released by Transaction Publishers.

Kramer is not only a distinguished scholar of the Middle East who writes with an eye to the past as well as the present (and future), but also a gifted prose stylist. Indeed, he's one of my favorite writers. Whenever he publishes an article or essay—even a blog post!—I rush to read it, for the information, worldview, wit, intelligence, and sheer pleasure of Kramer's prose. I'm lucky to call him a friend, and recently had the opportunity to speak with him about his new book, the Middle East, Israel, and America, the Ari Shavit affair and other matters.

Lee Smith: The title of your new book, *The War on Error*, signals your campaign against a long history of our misunderstanding the Middle East. What's the worst, or biggest, misconception Americans have about the Middle East?

Martin Kramer: We saw the great American illusion at work in the Iraq war and the “Arab Spring.” Americans tend to assume that everyone wants democracy, and that more democracy is the solution for dysfunctional parts of the world. That's no surprise: America has an admirable record in spreading it around in the globe. But parts of the Middle East resist, and for good reason: democracy and its freedoms undercut the entire political, social,

and moral order. So if you bring down a dictator, it's not "mission accomplished." It's "mission complicated," because you've unshackled all the genies that the dictator locked up, such as Islamism and sectarianism.

LS: What's the worst misconception we have about Israel?

MK: Well, here's the paradox. Americans sometimes forget that Israel really is a democracy, a vibrant one. Israel's top leaders are sometimes faulted in America for not making "tough decisions" or taking "risks for peace." But they're politicians in a democracy, they answer to voters, and Israelis aren't putty in anyone's hands. There's a lot of wisdom in the Israeli "crowd," the common people. In almost every household, there are soldiers and reservists who know the realities surrounding Israel through first-hand experience. They've not just been brainwashed by a newspaper or a politician. The idea that someone can blindfold them and lead them to peace or war, or lure them away from democracy, is fundamentally misinformed

LS: Why can't policymakers or analysts predict events in the Middle East? Should we hold them accountable when they fail?

MK: They can't predict them there, because they can't predict them anywhere. In my book, I write that failed predictions shouldn't be considered "errors." Most of us work from incomplete information, and there's always the factor of chance. That said, you have to be aware of a third factor: your bias. Bias

is endemic and pervasive, so you have to be on guard against it, and correct for it. That doesn't mean you'll get it right if you do: it's only one factor. But it's often the decisive one. People should be held accountable for perverting the vetting process. But if we drop everyone who makes a failed prediction, we'll have no one left who's learned from one. Now in some settings, especially among political activists, bias is deemed a virtue. There is no vetting process. Those people should be kept at arm's length—and away from policymaking. I suppose academe is the safest warehouse for them.

LS: Has Middle East studies changed since your path-breaking work on the academic study of the Middle East, *Ivory Towers on Sand*? Did 9/11 and the Iraq War have the effect of making researchers more realistic, or did it just drive them crazy?

MK: At one level, nothing much has changed. That's because there's a time lag between events in the world and their reflection in academe. The tenured ranks are full of people who acquired their power in the past, by channeling an outdated priority or prejudice. There's a disincentive for these people to revisit their premises: it would undercut their status, and they still hold power. But among younger people, I detect a huge shift. They've come to the study of the Middle East under the impact of 9/11, Iraq, and Arab "spring," and ISIS. They're definitely more reality-driven, less interested in airy "narratives." Some of them are among the nearly three million Americans who've done stints in the Middle East since 2003. They're also not fixated on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; that's

not where the exciting action has been. All this is for the better, and it leaves me optimistic—in the long term.

LS: Has the Middle East itself changed much since you first started studying it, or do we see the same patterns repeating?

MK: When I started my studies, in the early 1970s, the Middle East looked very different. There was no Islamism to speak of, and almost no one saw the Iranian revolution coming. Israel was still a pariah; it didn't have peace with a single Arab neighbor. The Shiites in Arab countries such as Lebanon and Iraq were invisible. The Arab principalities lining the Persian Gulf were sand-swept frontier towns; no one could have imagined them as a gold coast, or the rise of a metropolis like Dubai. The population of the Arab world has tripled, from about 130 million to 390 million, transforming the landscape. Yes, it's changed a lot. But one thing has remained constant. This is a part of the world consumed by its grievance against the West. Its struggle to become modern and stay traditional has been marred by frustration and punctuated by defeats. The turbulence won't subside anytime soon.

LS: Has the understanding of Israel changed at all in the U.S. academy? What about the Washington policy establishment?

MK: The American academy pretty much tracks liberal America as a whole. There's been a distancing from Israel that dates to 1977, when the Likud first came to power. This coincided with

the emergence of Edward Said as the refined voice of Palestine in academe. Supporters of Israel have been playing defense ever since. And yet, there's been impressive progress in the recognition of Israel studies as a legitimate field of scholarship. Programs, chairs, journals, conferences—the growth has been steady, and the standards have been high. As for the policy establishment, there's an endemic frustration with some Israeli policies. But in today's Middle East, the United States doesn't have many reliable and capable partners. That won't change any time soon.

LS: The Obama/Netanyahu years have seen a fairly contentious moment in the history of the US-Israel relationship, is this the new norm?

MK: What we've witnessed has been a sharp departure from the norm, and that is owed more to Obama than to Netanyahu. Of course, nothing is static, and I imagine there will be shifts in the relationship over time. The American Jewish community is in transition. So is the position of the United States, relative to other competitors in the region and the world. All these will impact Israel, and all of them argue for Israel reinforcing its independent capabilities. But there's still plenty to keep the relationship tight, and I would expect it to tighten again, with the change in administration. Certainly both candidates are promising just that.

LS: What will it take for the next administration to convince

Israel and other regional partners that after Obama's efforts to minimize America's footprint, the United States is back in the region?

MK: It's going to take time. Does the United States have a plan for when Mosul and Raqqa are taken from ISIS? People in the region will look for one, and if they don't see it, they'll assume that it's every regional client for himself. Does the United States have a plan for checking the ambitions of Iran and Russia? Without one, it will be hard to change the perception that both are on the rise. No one expects the United States to come onshore in a big way. But they want to see that the next president can reliably tell friend from foe, and that the United States will consistently stand by its friends.

LS: How do we see Israel's strategic position right now? Is it better than it was ten years ago, or worse? What are the country's most daunting challenges?

MK: Israel doesn't face a dire threat from any of its Arab neighbors. As long as the Arab disarray lasts—and no end is in sight—Israel can focus elsewhere. As for the Palestinians, there is a relatively stable status quo, and both sides have an interest in sustaining its core understandings, including security cooperation. Just as important, over the last decade, Israel has dramatically expanded its economic and technological base. So the gap between Israel and its adversaries has widened in Israel's favor. This adds to its deterrence. The looming challenge is

Iran's almost limitless regional ambitions. Iran is the only state in the Middle East, aside from Israel and Turkey, that can reliably project power beyond its borders. Blunting the thrust of Iran is a multi-decade project. The nuclear deal has postponed the reckoning, but the challenge still looms.

LS: You've got a long section in your book dealing with Israeli journalist Ari Shavit's celebrated account of Israel, *My Promised Land*. You note many factual problems with the book, especially with his account of what he calls a "massacre" in Lydda (Lod) in 1948. Why didn't Shavit tell the truth about it?

MK: Shavit has called his "difficult" chapter on Lydda "the best service I did for Israel and the Jewish people," because when people see "you're not giving a kind of *hasbara* cartoon, they begin to listen." So he's admitted that its effect was to get skeptics and doubters to listen to him--and read his book. Was that his aim from the outset? Ask him. It's certainly why the *New Yorker* excerpted the Lydda chapter and not another. Declaring that "Zionism committed a massacre" isn't *hasbara*, which of course the *New Yorker* would never touch. Alas for Shavit, the Lydda chapter is itself a cartoon—a web of exaggerations and fabrications. Alas for Israel, Shavit achieved his effect at the expense of its founders, whom he charged with wanton murder.

LS: And why was this chapter about the episode and the *New Yorker* excerpt so important to American Jewish readers?

MK: Many American Jews now believe they were raised on a fable of Israeli virtue and grit, exemplified by Leon Uris's *Exodus*—a schmaltz-laden, cinematic simplification of Israel's birth-narrative. They still want to love Israel, but they want to know the flaws and have them set in a Zionist context. Shavit's Lydda chapter did that: yes, we sinned, and it wasn't just expulsion, it was massacre. *Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. But Shavit also reassured bruised lovers of Israel that while it had to be that way, the path to forgiveness lay in "acknowledging" original sin. Well, confession is good for the soul—provided you confess to real sins. The problem is that Shavit's own account of Lydda is a schmaltz-laden, cinematic simplification. In fact, it's even worse than *Exodus*. After all, *Exodus* was catalogued as fiction. Shavit won the National Jewish Book award for history.

LS: Now that Shavit's history of sexually harassing women has come to [light](#), do you think the book will be re-assessed?

MK: In his apology, Shavit wrote: "I have been afflicted by blindness." He isn't the only one. The superlatives heaped upon *My Promised Land* beggared belief. Simon Schama, in the *Financial Times*, wrote that the book was "without the slightest trace of fiction" How could Schama, who isn't a historian of Israel, possibly know that? In my book, I insist that you'll find at least traces of fiction just about everywhere, because it's very hard for mere mortals to get stories straight. Isn't Shavit mortal? Reading Schama, I'm not sure. Leon Wieseltier, in the *New York Times*, called *My Promised*

Land “the least tendentious book about Israel I have ever read.” Really? Has he never read, say, Anita Shapira’s *Israel: A History*? Because only someone who hasn’t read Shapira, or a dozen other books that leap to mind, could write such a thing. I have respect for Schama and I admire Leon. But the intellectual gatekeepers of liberal Jewry let down their guard. Figuring out why that happened is even more important than reassessing Shavit’s book, because a false messiah could appear again.

LS: One of the things I have most valued about your work is your generosity toward those other scholars and writers you value. Thus, you’ve nearly singlehandedly constructed an alternative syllabus for understanding the Middle East—which includes figures like Elie Kedourie, Bernard Lewis, and Fouad Ajami. Drawing from this tradition, what are the five most important books on the Middle East?

MK: You could compile a syllabus comprised exclusively of books by, for, and against Bernard Lewis. This semester at Shalem College, I’m teaching an undergraduate course devoted precisely to that. Try his bestseller *What Went Wrong?: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*. Kedourie is long dead now—he passed away in 1992—but he always repays reading. Sample the best of his work in his collected volume, *The Chatham House Version and other Middle Eastern Studies*. Of Fouad Ajami’s last books, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs* is the most broadly conceived. I’ve already mentioned Anita Shapira’s history of Israel—a model of scholarship. For an outstanding history of the study of the

Middle East, see Robert Irwin's *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and its Discontents*. Unfortunately, there isn't a single practitioner in Middle Eastern studies, in my generation, whose name registers in the American public more broadly. That's because standout books are few and far between.

LS: Now that you've retired as president of Shalem College, what are your plans? Another book? Teaching?

MK: I'm going to accelerate my writing. If I don't cover these subjects from a critical perspective, and do it soon, no one else will. I'll be returning to The Washington Institute for Near East Policy a few times a year. I've been associated with it, on and off, for almost thirty years; it's where I launched this book. I have wonderful colleagues there, and it's a great place to meet Middle Easterners who don't come through Israel. I continue to teach at Shalem College, where the students shine. And I'm chairing the department of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies there, until some young talent can be found to relieve me. For the last forty years, whenever some battle had to be fought, I always knew that Bernard Lewis or Fouad Ajami, both my teachers, would rise to the occasion. Bernard is over 100, and Fouad is gone. I suppose it's my turn.

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Clash of Arab Civilizations (Doubleday 2010).