

# Policy and the Academy: An Illicit Relationship?

by Martin Kramer

One of the issues that is much discussed since September 11, 2001, is the proper relationship between policy and the academy. For a host of reasons, a very wide gap exists between the two.

In part, this has to do with the political predilections of the academy. Much of the academy is left of center, distrusts anything that smacks of national security, thinks of itself in opposition to power, and imagines that the slightest contact with agencies of policy might infect and corrupt the agencies of thought represented by the academy. But the gap also arises from the highly overspecialized state of academe—its domination by theories, methodologies, and jargons that are inaccessible to anyone beyond the campus gates (and to many people inside the campus gates as well).

Since September 11, some have made bold to ask whether something should be done to close the gap, especially when it comes to the knowledge needed to formulate foreign policy. In the United States, government has made a sweeping gesture: since September 11, it has showered the academy with new funds to promote the study of foreign languages and cultures, especially of Muslim countries. And a few voices have been raised, especially among political scientists, arguing that the academy has been shirking its duty, and that it should render service if it expects to remain relevant.<sup>1</sup> Some in academe are beginning to appreciate a point made by the Orientalist Gustave von Grunebaum back in 1965:

No group, society, or civilization, so history allows us to postulate, will consistently support an intellectual endeavor unless it believes this effort to be serviceable either to its practical or to its existential needs—and one may do well to remind oneself that it is, in the last analysis, the existential need that determines what is to be recognized as socially useful and thus as a practical need.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Need for Praxis: Bringing Policy Relevance Back In," *International Security*, Spring 2002, pp. 169-83; Larry Diamond, "What Political Science Owes the World," *PSOnline*, Mar. 2002, at <http://www.apsanet.org/PS/post911.diamond.cfm>.

2 Gustave E. von Grunebaum, "Specialization," in George Makdisi, ed., *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of Hamilton A.R. Gibb* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 285.

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Von Grunebaum's law is as demonstrable as gravity, as every academic empire builder is bound to discover sooner or later.

But there is a fly in this ointment, in the form of an essay by Elie Kedourie. It is entitled "Foreign Policy: A Practical Pursuit," and it was originally published in 1961, in *The Princetonian*.<sup>3</sup> In it, the author repudiates the idea that academics have any business urging foreign policies on their governments. It is an argument that few would make today. Yet can the argument be lightly dismissed? Who was Elie Kedourie, and why should his essay of forty years ago detain us now?

## DISSIDENT CONSERVATIVE

Elie Kedourie (1926-92), professor of politics at the London School of Economics (LSE), was the most formidable practitioner of a dissident historiography of the Middle East.

In detailed studies of British diplomatic history,

Kedourie attributed the failure of British imperial will in the Middle East to romantic illusions about the Arab-Muslim world. In his studies of Middle Eastern politics, he documented the importation of radical nationalism that ultimately transformed the Middle East into what he called "a wilderness of tigers." A deep conservatism,

born of a disbelief in the redemptive power of ideological politics, suffused all of Kedourie's writings. Armed with a potent and lucid style, he waged a determined defense against the siege of Middle Eastern history by leftist

theory, the social sciences, and fashionable Third Worldism. Kedourie's iconoclastic work forms the foundation of that diffuse school that views the modern history of the Middle East not as an "awakening" but as a resurgence of its own despotic tradition, exacerbated by the West's dissemination of the doctrine of self-determination.

In Kedourie's later years, he became a well-known public intellectual in the United States, warning Americans against the same flagging of will that had diminished Britain. While his influence among conservative American intellectuals grew, he became disillusioned by the declining standards of British universities, including his own. He retired from the LSE in 1990 and was about to take up a new chair in modern Middle Eastern history at Brandeis University when he died suddenly at the age of sixty-six. In a recent essay, the historian Efraim Karsh described Kedourie as a "forgotten iconoclast."<sup>4</sup> Yet his work remains an inspiration for the small but influential group of scholars who continue to challenge the orthodoxies of Middle Eastern studies.

Had Kedourie been an economic or social historian, his ideas on foreign policy and the academy might be brushed aside. But he was first and foremost a diplomatic historian. No one outside the British Foreign Office understood the mechanisms of British policymaking better than he did, and no one knew the archival record of Britain's choices in the Middle East as well as he did. For all these reasons, the essay entitled "Foreign Policy: A Practical Pursuit," deserves—and repays—close reading.

## LEARNED FOOLS

Kedourie begins his essay by stating the obvious: foreign policy is a practical pursuit. It is not speculation; its purpose is "the attain-

**Kedourie: "The academic advising or exhorting action will most likely appear the learned fool, babbling of he knows not what."**

3 Elie Kedourie, "Foreign Policy: A Practical Pursuit," in *The Crossman Confessions and other Essays in Politics, History, and Religion* (London: Mansell, 1984), pp. 133-6 (first published in *The Princetonian*, Jan. 4, 1961).

4 Efraim Karsh, "Elie Kedourie: The Forgotten Iconoclast," *International History Review*, Sept. 1999, pp. 704-13.

ment of advantage or the prevention of mischief.” At which point, Kedourie asks this question: “Is the academic fitted by his bent, his training, his usual and wonted preoccupations, to take or recommend action of the kind which generals and statesmen are daily compelled to recommend or take?”<sup>5</sup>

Some would say yes, adds Kedourie; after all, academics have “a highly trained intelligence, they are long familiar with the traffic of ideas, and long accustomed scrupulously to weigh evidence, to make subtle distinctions, and to render dispassionate verdicts.” But Kedourie begs to differ:

If the academic is to recommend action here and now—and in foreign policy action must be here and now—should he not have exact and prompt knowledge of situations and their changes? Is it then proposed that foreign ministries should every morning circulate to historians and “social scientists” the reports of their agents and the dispatches of their diplomats? Failing this knowledge, the academic advising or exhorting action will most likely appear the learned fool, babbling of he knows not what.<sup>6</sup>

Kedourie then immediately anticipates the riposte:

It may be objected that this is not what is meant at all; we do not, it may be said, want the academic to concern himself with immediate issues or the *minutiae* of policies; we want his guidance on long-term trends and prospects; and here, surely, his knowledge of the past, his erudition, his reflectiveness will open to him vistas unknown to the active politician, or unregarded by him. And should not this larger view, this wider horizon be his special contribution to his country’s policies and to its welfare?<sup>7</sup>

Yet this, too, Kedourie rejects. “This appeal to patriotism, this subtle flattery, needs must be



Remembered iconoclast  
*Elie Kedourie*

resisted,” he writes. Why? “The long view, the balanced view, the judicious view, can positively unfit a man for action, and for giving advice on action.” To make policy, writes Kedourie, is to leap into the unknown.

Shall academics presume to instruct a man how he shall leap? Presumption is the pride of fools, and it ought to be the scholar’s pride not to presume. It is pursuit of knowledge and increase in learning which gives scholars renown and a good name. How then should they, clothed as they are in the mantle of scholarship, yet imitate this lobby or that pressure group, and recommend this action or that, all the time knowing full well that in politics one is always acting in a fog, that no action is wholly to the good, and that every action in benefiting one particular interest will most likely be to another’s detriment.<sup>8</sup>

## CONTRA TOYNBEE

From these passages, one might conclude that there was no equivocation in Kedourie’s position. In fact, we shall see that Kedourie did allow for a seemingly narrow exception to his

<sup>5</sup> Kedourie, “Foreign Policy,” p. 133.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 135.



Lord of Chatham House  
*Arnold Toynbee*

rule. But before we explore it, two points about the essay are worth noting.

Kedourie published it during a stint as a visiting professor at Princeton, and at a time when he must have been largely unknown in America. But it would have been especially apt for an American readership.

Remember that in 1961, Harvard professors were flooding Washington, invited down from Cambridge by John F. Kennedy. It was as close to an academic takeover of Washington as there ever would be. That year, McGeorge Bundy, dean of arts and sciences at Harvard, left the university to become Kennedy's special assistant for national security. In 1961 another Harvard professor, John Kenneth Galbraith, left the university to serve as U.S. ambassador in India. Again in 1961 a Harvard history professor, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., left the university to serve as Kennedy's adviser and speechwriter. No American reader could have read through Kedourie's piece without thinking of the so-called "best and brightest" from the academy who had assumed key policy positions. (Interestingly, *The Princetonian* elected to publish Kedourie's piece. It is difficult to imagine that all the to-do about Harvard in the new Kennedy administration did not grate on the Princetonians.)<sup>9</sup>

But Kedourie himself may not have had these Harvard professors in mind when he wrote his 1961 essay. The best evidence is that the essay gives only one specific example of an academic's folly, and it relates to none other than Arnold Toynbee, the celebrity historian against whom Kedourie would serve his most famous indictment, his famous 1970 essay, "The Chatham House Version."

As it happened, the reference to Toynbee in this article touched not on the Middle East, but on China. It will be recalled that the Republican regime in China had made Nanjing its capital between the world wars; and that Toynbee had adduced this as more evidence for one of his laws, about the migration of power from the interior of countries to their coastal marches. In 1949, the Chinese communists broke Toynbee's law, by restoring Beijing as China's capital.

Kedourie chose this instance as the prime exhibit of academic obtuseness in his essay, in these memorable words: "The famed academic, Dr. Toynbee, writing his *Study of History* in 1935 came to the conclusion, on the weightiest and most erudite of grounds, that there was no likelihood of Peking ever again in the future becoming the capital of China! Should he not have remembered the sad and moving confession of Ibn Khaldun—a writer he much admired—that his minute knowledge of prosody unfitted him for the writing of poetry?"<sup>10</sup> It ap-

9 Kedourie later held up one of these Kennedy professors as an example of the dangers of the academic's intervention. He does so in his essay, "The Apprentice Sorcerers," where he reviews Miles Copeland's *Game of Nations*. Kennedy had sent one of his economics professors, Edward Mason, to meet Nasser and report on the regime. As Copeland related, Professor Mason reported back to Kennedy that "he could not conscientiously find fault with any of Nasser's major actions"—including nationalizations, press censorship, arrests of dissidents, and propaganda assaults on Arab leaders friendly to the West. They were "actions which Nasser could logically be expected to take given his circumstances." As Kedourie wryly noted, it was "doubtful whether Nasser and his fellow-conspirators had any need to call on the resources of American political science for such lessons in tyranny." Kedourie, *Arabic Political Memoirs and Other Studies* (London: Frank Cass, 1974), pp. 174-5.

10 Kedourie, "Foreign Policy," p. 134.

pears to have been Kedourie's first shot at "the famed academic, Dr. Toynbee," and he would repeat this very same Chinese example in a footnote to "The Chatham House Version."<sup>11</sup>

It is impossible to separate Kedourie's hard-line position on policy and the academy from his contempt for the policy interventions of Toynbee—a contempt that built to a crescendo in the 1960s. Indeed, a careful reading of "The Chatham House Version" reveals that at various points, Kedourie finds the very root of Toynbee's errors in his harnessing of history to policy and advocacy. As Kedourie put it: "The belief that there is a tight connection between the study of policy and the making of it, the assumption of the unity of theory and practice, has deeply marked the character and activities of Chatham House."<sup>12</sup> Toynbee himself, wrote Kedourie, "believed in the practical uses of history and had no compunction in exhorting and advising."<sup>13</sup> All of which not only had a deleterious effect on policy, but on the writing of history: "The desire to prescribe and prophesy was clearly one main reason why the Chatham House Version, as has been shown, also failed as history."<sup>14</sup>

The academic left justifies its rejection of an advisory role by arguing that proximity to power corrupts—that the mere interaction of the academy with policymakers could easily corrupt the professors and so should be abjured. Kedourie believed that the greater danger was that the professors would corrupt the policymakers—that they would infect them with

dangerous theories. A consistent theme in Kedourie's work is the destructiveness of half-baked academic theories planted in the minds of decision-makers, whether democrats or despots. It was not only in the interest of academe, of its freedom and self-regulation, that it refrain from advising. It was in the interest of society and the polity that the hazardous speculations of scholars be contained within the academy, lest they mutate into doctrinaire policies. Certainly this is what had happened at Chatham House, which through Toynbee had become a transmission belt for English radicalism into British foreign policy.

**Kedourie feared that the professors would corrupt the policymakers with half-baked academic theories.**

## MAKING EXCEPTION

So much for Kedourie's principled position. But Kedourie allowed for an exception to his rule, both in the 1961 piece and later. In 1961, he put it this way:

Scholars, of course, are also citizens, and as such jealous for the welfare and honor of their country. Equally with other citizens they can recommend and exhort, but they should take care that a scholarly reputation does not illicitly give spurious authority to some civic or political stance.<sup>15</sup>

And again, in his posthumous essay on politics and the academy:

The notion of freedom from political commitment does not imply that an author floats in some colorless empyrean, removed from all sublunar judgments and references. Such a being is simply unthinkable. Freedom from

11 Kedourie, *The Chatham House Version and other Middle-Eastern Studies*, new ed. (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, 1984), p. 459, n. 51.

12 Ibid., p. 353.

13 Ibid., p. 392.

14 Ibid., p. 394. When Toynbee, in a rejoinder, claimed that the "key" to "The Chatham House Version" was "the tragic fate of the Jewish community in Baghdad," Kedourie shot back: "Has it not occurred to Professor Toynbee that the wish to rescue history from prescription and prophecy could actually be the key to my book?" Kedourie, "Was Britain's Abdication Folly? I: A Reply to Arnold Toynbee," *Round Table*, July 1970, p. 358.

15 Kedourie, "Foreign Policy," p. 135.

political commitment signifies what it says—namely, that *in his work*, the writer is not concerned to defend or attack some political cause in order to ensure either its victory or its defeat.<sup>16</sup>

As a particular example of a scholar who had failed to distinguish between his academic responsibilities and his politics, Kedourie offered Sir Hamilton Gibb. Gibb, Britain's preeminent Orientalist, had disapproved of Kedourie's Oxford thesis, on what Kedourie regarded as purely political grounds. Kedourie withdrew his dissertation and never received his degree. "Gibb was politically committed," Kedourie wrote years later. "He had strong sympathies and equally strong views about the right policies for the Middle East. In itself, this was not objectionable, but the political commitment fatally spilled over into, and encouraged, academic tendentiousness."<sup>17</sup>

Here we come closer to the heart of the issue.

**How can a scholar possibly neutralize the effect of his scholarly reputation on the reception of his political position?**

It is legitimate to have strong views about policies, writes Kedourie, but not to allow them to spill over into one's academic work, one's professional realm. One may advise, admonish, exhort, demonstrate—but not bring such commitments into the work area. Here was Kedourie's first concession to the fact that an academic is also a man (or a woman), and that

man is a political animal. But Kedourie also insisted that the academic not be a political animal everywhere and always—not in his dominant role among students (as Gibb had been),

and not in his university study.

Having myself written a book decrying what Kedourie called "academic tendentiousness"—the way in which political commitment has penetrated scholarly writing—I find myself in strong agreement with Kedourie on this point. Yes, academics are entitled to their views like anyone else, and they are entitled to demonstrate for them in the streets, hobnob with policymakers to express them, or even take a leave of absence to work as practitioners. What they are not entitled to do is inflict them on either their students or the readers of their academic work.

But how does one translate Kedourie's principle of virtuous scholarly conduct into practice? Consider his exhortation that scholars "should take care that a scholarly reputation does not illicitly give spurious authority to some civic or political stance." It is a fine principle, easiest to implement for scholars with very small reputations. But scholars do not control their scholarly reputations; it would be a very different world if they did. When those reputations grow large, scholars' names become inseparable from their scholarly accomplishments.

If a scholar takes a political position as a citizen, how can he possibly neutralize the effect of his scholarly reputation on the reception of that political position? How would one expect a Noam Chomsky, or an Edward Said, or a Bernard Lewis, or an Elie Kedourie to actually *do this*? Would it suffice if Professor Noam Chomsky, MIT, signed his diatribes on Palestine as Mr. Noam Chomsky, Lexington, Massachusetts? It probably would be a good thing if scholars could agree never to sign a political petition with their academic titles and affiliations, never to speak at a political gathering as professor of this or that. But it is obvious that such an attempt to separate the person from the persona is destined to fail.

More intriguing is Kedourie's admonition that a scholar, *in his work*, should not defend or attack some political cause in order to ensure either its victory or its defeat. Elsewhere, Kedourie gives examples of "work" that might serve as models: Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, von Grunebaum on medieval Islam, Jakob Burckhardt on the Italian Renaissance, Fustel

16 Kedourie, "Politics and the Academy," *Commentary*, Aug. 1992, p. 55.

17 Kedourie, *England and the Middle East*, rev. ed. (London: Mansell, 1987), p. 8b.

de Coulanges on the ancient city, S.D. Goitein's *A Mediterranean Society*. Of these works, Kedourie writes, "By no conceivable stretch of the imagination can they be said to work in favor of a political cause or against it."<sup>18</sup> Kedourie is most probably right, although it is telling that he does not cite a work of modern history among these examples—or, for that matter, von Grunebaum's work on modern Islam.

But where does "work" end in contemporary academe? The classroom should not be a forum for political advocacy by professors. But once an academic has taught his hours, supervised his theses, and written for peer review and promotion, there is occasion for other pursuits, other lecturing, and other books.

For example, professors Chomsky and Said are committed to the Palestinian cause. In Professor Chomsky's book *Syntactic Structures*, Palestine is not mentioned. Nor is it mentioned in Edward Said's *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. Both gentlemen did their "work" in their respective fields, linguistics and literature. Is Chomsky's subsequent authorship of *Fateful Triangle*, or Said's later writing of *The Question of Palestine*, a transgression of Kedourie's principle? If so, how? Kedourie takes Edward Granville Browne to task for his 1911 book, *The Persian Revolution*, a volume that Kedourie rightly calls a "failure" as history.<sup>19</sup> But Browne did not purport to be a historian. He was a philologist and incumbent of a chair of Arabic, whose principal "work" was his four-volume *Literary History of Persia*. When it came to contemporary politics, Browne was a naked partisan, but it could well be argued



The British Foreign Office. Kedourie: "Is it then proposed that foreign ministries should every morning circulate to historians and 'social scientists' the reports of their agents and the dispatches of their diplomats?"

that *The Persian Revolution* was not his "work," only his pleasure.

In sum, even Kedourie allows sufficient exception to his own principle as to make it nearly unworkable. In no realm of endeavor does the notion of "company time" have less meaning than in academe. And in no realm of endeavor is the notion of "work" more elastic. Kedourie was always a staunch defender of the academy's privilege of self-regulation—he was an LSE adherent of the Oxbridge ideal. But what is the mechanism of academic self-regulation, if not peer review? And has not peer review defined what once would have been considered blatant political advocacy as "work"? It is peer review that determines what is "work" and what is not, so that we stand today in astonishment at what university presses publish, which books appear in syllabi, which publications confer tenure.

So while Kedourie may have restated the problem, he didn't solve it. And his exceptions

18 Kedourie, "Politics and the Academy," p. 55.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

to his rule—a scholar might act politically as a citizen, outside his “work”—opened precisely those loopholes that have made the academy so political a place. In any case, arguing that advocacy is inappropriate—that it is a betrayal of a

**To argue that advocacy betrays a professional code is to confront a stampede of cattle with a stop sign.**

professional code—is something akin to confronting a stampede of cattle with a stop sign. The more practical question, then, is this one: what does a scholar do, once surrounded by other scholars who advocate foolish or dangerous policies? This was the actual situation

in which Kedourie found himself, time and again—to which he found an interesting answer.

## DISCREET CONSULTANT

The answer, of course, is that Kedourie began to take advantage of that very exception he himself had allowed. As his reputation grew, more people from the media and government called upon him for his advice on foreign policy. He gave it. By the 1980s, Kedourie’s views on matters of policy were very much in demand, and his writing also became more contemporary. It was never straightforward policy writing, which is a distinct art, but Kedourie led his reader ineluctably to a policy conclusion—even if he did so only by way of a question.

Here is but one example. In 1978, Kedourie published an article in *Encounter* entitled “How to (and How Not to) Seek Peace in the Middle East.” In it, he analyzed the weaknesses of a now-forgotten policy report on the Middle East prepared by the Brookings Institution in the mid-1970s. The report had determined that the security and future development of Arabs and Israelis would remain in jeopardy “until a durable settlement is concluded.” This sort of banality is so ubiquitous that we no longer notice it. Yet listen to Kedourie interrogate it:

Is it not inconceivable that the very search

for a “durable” settlement between Arabs and Israelis will so exacerbate matters, and arouse among various parties such fears for their security and interests, that tensions in the area will be *increased* rather than lessened? Again, may it not be the case that a “durable settlement” will do nothing to provide “security and future development”? This is simply because the political and social problems of the Middle East are such as to preclude stability in any conceivable future. The Arab world today is the prey of an ideological and activist style of politics that is not compatible with stability.<sup>20</sup>

Without having stated a policy preference, Kedourie effectively expressed one—and had he only been in America in the 1990s to argue for it, perhaps his cautionary questions would have dampened the giddy euphoria for a “durable settlement” that has produced the present impasse.

Kedourie did more than write on policy. He also advised. Yet he gave advice with an exquisite discretion that reflected his determination to maintain something of that sacrosanct distinction between the academic cloister and the political arena. Peter Roberts, in his contribution to Kedourie’s memorial volume, has an interesting passage on Kedourie and policymakers that strikes just the right tone:

Those directly concerned with government also had a high regard for [Kedourie’s] knowledge of, and insight into, the contemporary world. He was discreet and modest about his relations with leading politicians and never discussed them with me. The interviewer in Canada asked him about his influence on Pierre Trudeau. Elie made clear the former prime minister was never his student. When pressed about acknowledgment in Trudeau’s books, Elie conceded that “there were some references.” The open record of consultations

20 Kedourie, *Islam in the Modern World and Other Studies* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1980), p. 244.



made by political leaders is slight. It is, however, difficult to ignore it altogether. ... It may be enough to say that the teacher of “government” had opportunities to observe those who governed. His observations perhaps reinforced his view that the tasks of the academic and even the journalist are different from the craft of making foreign policy.<sup>21</sup>

More could be said here, and some more was said in some of Kedourie’s obituaries, especially about his occasional advice to Lady Thatcher during her premiership.

## SCHOLAR’S SKEPTICISM

Kedourie was a principled scholar but not a doctrinaire man. His position on policy and the academy might best be summarized in this manner: in an ideal world, the two should not meet, and to the extent feasible, the two should be separated; but in this less-than-ideal world, where the radical part of academe has so intruded itself in policy, the conservative part has a license to neutralize it by doing the same. Kedourie did not stand entirely above the fray. But at least he knew it was a fray and never confused it with academic “work”—“work” that he continued to pursue to his dying day, in his researches on conservatism and Hegel. Kedourie had something to say on policy, and he said it; but he never professed to speak as a policy expert.

But there is one mischievous passage

21 Peter Roberts, “A Personal Memoir,” in Sylvia Kedourie, ed., *Elie Kedourie CBE, FBA, 1926-1992: History, Philosophy, Politics* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), p. 82.

where Kedourie suggests that policymakers might have something to learn from professors after all. It perfectly summarizes where he had come to rest on the question, and where perhaps all of us should come to rest. It is the last paragraph in his essay on “How to (and How Not to) Seek Peace in the Middle East.”

It is usually (and rightly) said that the academic’s virtues—his critical turn of mind, and his willingness to follow the argument wherever it leads—become defects in the man of action, who must accustom himself to make quick decisions on the basis of hunches and imperfect information. But in a region like the Middle East, where yesterday’s friend can become today’s opponent, where alliances and allegiances shimmer and dissolve like the *fata morgana*, the academic’s skepticism, his readiness to scrutinize far-fetched theories and unlikely suppositions, are perhaps qualities that even busy men of action should cultivate.<sup>22</sup>

And perhaps, one might add by extension, busy men of action should cultivate academics who possess these qualities, and those academics should allow themselves to be cultivated. Why? Kedourie makes the ultimate exception to his own rule, and it is this: We are dealing, after all, with the Middle East.



22 Kedourie, *Islam in the Modern World*, p. 248.