

Florida Atlantic University

*The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*

A Book Review Submitted To

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## Book Review

Bernard Lewis. *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*. New York: Modern Library, 2003. 184 pp.

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After the attacks against America on September 11, 2001, Americans struggled to find answers to the question of why they were attacked? Historian and Professor Bernard Lewis tried to answer this question in an article he wrote for *The New Yorker* in November 2001, called "The Revolt of Islam." He used this article and expanded it for the creation of his book, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*. In his book, Lewis explains that terrorism contradicts the teachings of Islam, but that Radical elements within the religion feel that the religion has become tainted due to the interference of Russia, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and France during the nineteenth and twentieth century in the region that is now called the Middle East. For this reason, Lewis explains that these Radicals target the West and its current leader, the United States because they feel that Western culture and its values are contradictory to the values of Islam and have taken away from the purity of the religion. Lewis makes clear that to purify Islam, these Radical Muslims will stop at nothing to rid the Islamic world of Western influence, including, but not stopping with assassinating Muslim heads of state, as they did with Anwar Sadat of Egypt, for what they saw as his interaction and tolerance of Western values.

Lewis wrote *The Crisis of Islam* to try to enlighten Americans as to what the motivating factors were of the Muslim terrorists who attacked America. He believes that understanding these factors are necessary if America and the Western world are to be

successful in combating terrorism. This was his explicit intention for writing this book and he stays true to his mission. His book appears to be written for the American government officials, who will actually be targeting the terrorists, and also to help the general American populous cope with and to make sense of the attacks they have endured on their country. He may also have written this book to spread the truth about the Muslim Radicals, who commit terror, in an attempt to discredit them to the rest of the Muslim world. To accomplish his objectives, he first tries to make a distinction between these terrorists and what he sees as the true nature of the Islamic religion. He explains that these terrorists choose to follow the more militant parts of the Qur'an, interpreting jihad as the Muslim prophecy to rule over or to convert all infidels to the religion of Islam.

While Lewis admits that world domination has long been desired by Muslims, he makes it clear that Muslims have co-existed for centuries with the two other major world religions, Judaism and Christianity. Co-existence, according to Lewis, is still desired by the vast majority of Muslims, noting only that Muslims are frustrated by the history of exploitation by the West and the tyrannical puppet dictators, like the former Shah of Iran, who was reinstalled by the United States, and who they were forced to endure before he was finally overthrown by the Iranian people. Lewis expends great effort, nevertheless, to explain that the desire to eliminate Western influence from Islamic lands is the aspiration of only a select few, which he explains is all that is necessary for terrorism to be effective. Grimly, Lewis warns that if the US does not stop meddling in Muslim politics, Islamic fundamentalism, which the radicals spread, could grow in popularity

with “all those who [feel] that there has to be something better, truer, and more hopeful than the inept tyrannies of their rulers...”

While this historian strongly attempts to be neutral, explaining facts as they happened, criticizing the faults of the Islamic world and those of the Western world, he ends up coming off as sympathetic to the Muslim population. Considering that problems and differences continue to exist between the Islamic and Western worlds, this is understandable, though, as the author is too close to the action to explain the problems with complete objectivity. He cites the double standards of the West for allowing countries, like Saudi Arabia and Libya, which commit countless human rights violations in their countries, to be part of the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations. His anger and resentment is crystal clear in his comment that the West believes “It is simpler, cheaper, and safer to replace a troublesome tyrant with an amenable tyrant, rather than face the unpredictable hazards of regime change...brought about by the will of the people.” This lack of respect for the dignity of Muslims troubles Lewis and he emphasizes that this was the very reason that led the people of Iran to rise up in 1979 against the US-backed Shah of Iran who was cruel to his people.

There is no apparent agenda on Lewis' part, except his desire for peace in the world. He tries very hard to be as objective as possible, but he does not disregard the cold hard facts of American and Western imperialism in the Middle East that has resulted in Muslim frustrations with the West. He is keen in mentioning how the California-based oil company, Standard Oil signed an agreement with Saudi Arabia in 1933 that provided the economic backing for Saudi Arabia to increase its territory and influence in the Middle East and to spread its Wahhabi teachings around the region. These teachings,

which are called fundamentalist, he says are the origin of the recent purification cycle in Islam. Lewis clarifies that “Most Muslims are not fundamentalists, and most fundamentalists are not terrorists, but most present-day terrorists are Muslims and proudly identify themselves as such.”

Lewis subtly describes these fundamentalists as insincere and self-serving in their own right because while they seek to eliminate modernization, governments like the Saudis, which practice and spread Wahhabi teachings, have become rich from modernization from their relations with the American company, Standard Oil. This wealth that they achieved, too, is a violation of Muslim law in that all Muslims are supposed to be equal. These Saudi teachings though, are responsible for the growth of terrorism in Egypt, Syria, and of all places, Afghanistan. Afghanistan was the training ground for the attacks against America that were pulled off by Egyptian and Saudi nationals and which were masterminded by Al-Qa‘ida leader, Usama bin Laden.

Lewis’ book is divided into nine thoughtfully divided chapters, going over the full spectrum to explain the current problem with terrorism from “Defining Islam” to “The Rise of Terrorism,” which is his longest chapter. Within these chapters, he paints a vivid picture of the true nature of the Muslim religion, making the terrorists appear as outcasts within the religion, who are the real infidels for not following and betraying the virtues of Islam. He explains that there is a small group of radicals within the religion who claim to speak for the entire Muslim population, but Lewis insists that they only represent themselves. Lewis tries to discourage discrimination against Muslims, but he leaves the Western reader to continue to ponder the question of how not to discriminate against Muslims when it is impossible to discern between the good Muslims, who are willing to

co-exist, and the terrorist Muslims, who will stop at nothing to destroy American civilization?

For his work, Lewis uses a wide range of textual evidence to increase the merit of his scholarship and his beliefs. He uses primary sources, including official documents, speeches, and has read the autobiographies of several key individuals to better understand their motives and their mind frames, in addition to using a fair amount of secondary sources to adequately provide the background for the region. His work is especially useful because he delves into both English and Arabic texts. This is what has allowed him to create a semblance of objectivity because he is willing to look at events and circumstances from the vantage point of all sides. However, it seems that when an English language translation was available for certain texts, he made use of them. This does not make his conclusions any less valuable, although it needs to be considered whether the translators of the works he used had any sort of an agenda that was slipped into their translation.

This work by Bernard Lewis imparts to the reader a substantial amount of knowledge about the region of the Middle East and of the radicals who were behind the great terror of September 11, 2001, without leaving the reader overwhelmed by meticulous details. His writing style is scholarly, but his excellent use of transition between his sentences allows the book to flow smoothly. The four maps that he includes at the beginning of this book, are especially helpful to the reader in that they depict the control of Islamic lands by various powers throughout Islamic history. These maps provide a nice reference for the reader to visualize his explanations of the history of the region. There are no pictures of prominent radicals, such as bin Laden, which makes it

clear that Lewis was writing this book for a modern audience and he does not intend it to withstand the test of time. If this book were meant to have a long lasting contribution to historical scholarship, including pictures of figures like bin Laden would have been essential because the future reader will not necessarily remember or have seen images of bin Laden on the news.

Lewis' intention in writing *The Crisis of Islam* was to help knowledge-seeking Americans and government officials to understand the forces that drive these terrorists, explaining that understanding these terrorists is the first step to combating them. He emphasizes that Muslims at large want to have interaction with the West, while a small group of radicals, who are willing to use force to purify their religion of Western influences and values, vehemently oppose this interaction. Lewis proclaims that if these terrorists are successful in spreading their beliefs to more Muslims, the future of the world does not look bright. Therefore, to ensure that the Radical Muslims are discredited in the eyes of the Muslim world could also have been an underlying purpose of his writing of this book, since his books are translated into the languages of the Middle East, including Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. If the reader wishes to learn more about terrorism and the forces behind it, a good follow-up book to *The Crisis of Islam* is *Inside Terrorism* by Bruce Hoffman. In addition, to reinforce and to strengthen American security from attacks, such as those perpetrated on September 11, 2001, reading *The 9/11 Commission Report* is highly recommended.