A War on Terror Primer

The key writings all pre-date 9/11... by decades. Without them, we'd have no idea whom or what we are fighting. Isn't it time our policymakers and pundits had a look?

by Laurie Mylroie

ALFRED SLOAN SAID IN HIS MEMOIR about his creation of General Motors, "A problem well defined is a problem half solved." With that in mind, here is a brief essay on some essential writings about Islam that help explain what Islam (including its radical component) is and what it is not. They also illustrate why rhetoric about "Islamofascism" and "World War IV" adds little that is useful to our foreign policy deliberations about the Muslim world and may well contribute to dangerous, ill-informed decision-making.

In his seminal article, "The Return of Islam," Bernard Lewis lamented the failure of Westerners—over centuries—to understand Islam in its own terms. Citing a medieval French epic that depicts Muslims as worshipping a trinity—Mohammed and two devils—Lewis wrote, "We are amused by medieval man unable to conceive of religion or indeed of anything else except in his own image," before explaining that the problem persists. Islam is the most deeply held identity of the Muslim masses, Lewis noted, and the idea of separating religion from politics is a Christian notion alien to Islam.

Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser was the paladin of "secular" Arab nationalism, but as Lewis observed, "Even in Nasserist Egypt, Islam continued to provide a main focus of loyalty." An Egyptian army manual issued in 1965, as Egypt fought for dominance in Yemen, stated: "We must always maintain that our military duty in the Yemen is a *jihad* for God.... Our duty is the holy war for God. 'Kill them wherever you come upon them and drive them from the places from which they drove you' [Koran, ii, 191]." (Sylvia Haim's *Arab Nationalism: An Anthology* made a similar point. It includes a lengthy introduction, as well as key texts that she selected and translated. Haim is the widow of Elie Kedourie, whose work is discussed below.)

Lewis's keen insight into how the West chronically misunderstands Muslim societies—published in the January 1976 issue of *Commentary*—is as relevant now as when it first appeared. (Haim's *Arab Nationalism* was first published in 1962 and last published in 1976, University of California Press.) Many of today's pundits—few of whom paid serious attention before 9/11 to the Middle East beyond Arab-

Israeli issues, if that—define America's present enemy as "Islamism" or "Islamofascism." This is said to be the successor ideology to fascism, the enemy in World War II, and communism, the enemy in the Cold War. Like the medieval French, they have massaged the contemporary foe into a form with which they are familiar.

Overlooked are crucial differences. "Islamism" is a radical form of a religion, albeit a political one, while fascism and communism were modern ideational constructions that supported the domestic rule of major European powers and their aggressive expansion. To the extent that "Islamism," particularly as it is manifest among the Sunni militants of al Qaeda, might be said to underlie the rule of any contemporary regime, it would be Saudi Arabia. Yet the United States is not at war with that country. Rather, President George W. Bush just paid a major visit there. Either Bush chose the wrong target in launching a war against Saddam Hussein's secular regime or this is a very flawed definition of the enemy—promulgated while the United States is engaged in its most serious military campaign in three decades.

THE MOST AUTHORITATIVE, CONCISE, and lyrical book on modern Islam is Bernard Lewis's *The Middle East and the West* (Harper & Row). First published in 1964, it has a startlingly contemporary feel. "The present wave of hostility," Lewis wrote over 40 years ago, "is due to the crisis of a civilization," reacting against "alien forces that have dominated, dislocated, and transformed it."

From its inception and for the next millennia, Islam was a successful, conquering religion. In the 17th century, however, the Ottomans, the foremost Muslim power, were turned back outside Vienna. Further setbacks followed, and in 1699, they were compelled for the first time to sign a treaty whose terms were dictated by a victorious foe. Those defeats proved prelude to total military collapse a century later, when French forces occupied Egypt, heralding yet further European conquests in the Muslim heartland. One initial Muslim response was to try to replicate the European army, "a simple matter, so it seemed, of training and equipment." But the military reformers, intending "to open a sluice gate... admitted a flood," because armies could not be reformed without wholesale changes in society.

Subsequently, the notion emerged that "political freedom was the secret source" of Western success, "the Aladdin's lamp with which the East might conjure up the genie of progress." The resulting 19th-century wave of constitutionalism eventually failed, giving way to an angry nationalism whose focus was independence. That was achieved after World War II with the assistance of the United States, which naively saw European colonialism as *the* problem.

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"The ending of foreign rule, when it came," however, "did not solve, but merely revealed the fundamental, social, and political problems of the Arab lands," Lewis writes.

"From the beginnings of Western penetration of the world of Islam... the most characteristic, significant and original movements of thought have been Islamic." Another Muslim response to the increasing dominance of the West was religious militancy—in India, in the early 17th century, whence it stimulated similar movements in the Arabian Peninsula, most notably Wahhabism. A much later wave of Islamic extremism included the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. Americans might be surprised to learn that Osama bin Laden represents nothing terribly new.

LEWIS MAKES CLEAR THAT THE enmity between Islam and the West has no one cause. It is not the result of Israel's retention of territories captured in 1967, its founding, or even of large-scale Jewish immigration to Palestine—because it predates all of them. Nor is it the consequence of petrodollars pouring into Wahhabi hands—before the 1973 oil embargo and five fold increase in oil prices, Saudi Arabia was not wealthy. Rather, a long-standing existential crisis exists in Muslim societies, an "envious rancor," because a once successful civilization, whose power was long seen as proof of God's favor, exists in a state of decrepitude, for which there is no evident solution.

Despite many, deep-seated difficulties, Lewis believes democracy is possible for Muslims. Elie Kedourie was more pessimistic. Born and raised in Iraq, Kedourie probably will be judged to have been on the wrong side of history—he believed the Ottoman Empire was the best possible form of government for Muslims, far more tolerant than its successor regimes. Yet Kedourie was a brilliant iconoclast, and he knowledgeably analyzed a complex history with which most Americans are unfamiliar.

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In *Politics in the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 1992), Kedourie reviewed nearly two centuries of attempts at political reform in the Ottoman Empire, later Turkey, Iran, and several Arab states. He described those efforts as "a tormented endeavor to discard the old ways, which have ceased to satisfy and to replace them with something modern, eye-catching and attractive." He concluded, "The torment does not seem likely to end soon."

With the qualified exception of Turkey, liberal constitutionalism never established firm roots. Rather, because of the deeply religious nature of society, millenarian politics—radical Islam or its "mirror image," a revanchist Arab nationalism—repeatedly prevailed. Kedourie passed away unexpectedly the year this book was published, at the age of 66. We do not know how, or even if, the intervening years would have changed his views, but they are a useful caution against some of today's more far-reaching expectations for political reform in Muslim societies.

The Arab Mind—first published by Charles Scribner in 1973 and most recently by Hatherleigh Press in 2007—is the work of the late anthropologist, Raphael Patai. It analyzes a range of cultural issues that contribute to the dysfunctionality of modern Arab societies. The two most recent editions carry an insightful foreword by Norvell De Atkine (Col. USA, Ret.).

Patai's understandings are grounded in his experiences with Palestinians in pre-1948 Jerusalem. As De Atkine notes, underscoring the book's contemporary relevance, traditional cultures change slowly. Arab societies, Patai explains, are "shame" rather than "guilt" societies. Conformity to the group—of which the family is the most basic unit—prevails over individualism. "Honor," a broad term encompassing generosity, hospitality, courage, and virility, is the pre-eminent virtue in a hierarchical, male-dominated society. The consequences are far-reaching, particularly for a people unaccustomed to self-government and the responsibility it entails.

"The Arab people are unable to accept facts with the speed and flexibility required by serious situations," Patai writes, "but are forced to hide shortcomings and failures to order to preserve appearances.... [The Arab] is dominated by the concept of shame and the fear of shame more than he adheres to reality and objectivity." Patai is in fact citing an Egyptian intellectual. Not every individual has these characteristics, but they are a prominent tendency in Arab societies.

These propensities are reinforced by the Arabic language. It lends itself to rhythmic, rhyming cadences, promoting a love of the language for the sound of words as much as their meaning. "Eloquence" among Arabs "is related to exaggeration, which is not meant to be taken literally, but which only serves the purpose of effect."

As De Atkine notes, Patai's insights into Arab culture help explain "Baghdad Bob," Saddam's information minister, who was still announcing victories as Baghdad fell in April 2003. They also help explain certain actions of the new Iraqi government, like the bus convoys it arranged last November to bring refugees back from Syria, as security improved with the "surge." Many homes belonging to those who would return, however, remained occupied by other refugees. U.S. officials soon put a halt to the move, which failed to take into account the likely consequences of the grand gesture.

These observations also apply to the Iraqi insurgents' "bombastic speeches and web-site declarations," which, as De Atkine observes, "are duly reported as news by Western journalists." The same might be said of the al Qaeda proclamations posted to the web and breathlessly rendered into Western

languages by a host of translation services. Indeed, what should we make of words presented with little context from a culture that understands language differently than we do? Are we encouraging the very sentiment we seek to quash, by making Islamic radicalism more appealing to chronically disaffected Muslim youth by regularly gushing over what is essentially enemy propaganda?

These are particularly relevant questions as studies on captured al Qaeda documents are now emerging—two by West Point's Combating Terrorism Center, "Cracks in the Foundation" and "Al Qaida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa," and a third by the *Wall Street Journal*'s Alan Cullison, "Inside Al Qaeda's Hard Drive," *Atlantic Monthly*, September 2004. They all report that the documents they examined reveal that al Qaeda was nowhere near as capable as generally believed.

As this review suggests, the Middle East is a vast, violent, and largely dysfunctional region—and has been for three centuries. The categories that now dominate U.S. thinking about the area are dubious. Neither the communist nor fascist analogy is appropriate, because there is no equivalent of the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany *behind* the ideology that defines the enemy for so many. As a conservative colleague complains, "There is no there, there."

Do Islamic militants really operate entirely, or almost entirely, on their own? Alternative structures—including a variety of possible forms of state support—are scarcely explored. We focus on the jihadis' propaganda; fail to consider the overblown style of Arab rhetoric; do not ask how they manage to carry off their more spectacular attacks; even as we ignore the reports that suggest the jihadis may not be all that competent. And we often misstate the most basic facts.

Norman Podhoretz's *World War IV* calls bin Laden the 9/11 mastermind and fails to mention Khalid Shaikh Mohammed (KSM) even once. Yet KSM is the true 9/11 mastermind—the individual who conceived and organized the attacks. U.S. authorities repeatedly describe him as such and *also* say that his nephew masterminded the 1993 World Trade Center bombing! Why should we take advice about a supposed "World War" from someone who does not know the most basic facts about 9/11 and whose breezy book betrays little awareness of the long-standing challenges to political reform in the Middle East?

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By contrast, Edward Jay Epstein, a respected author on intelligence matters, is far more accurate in presenting key facts. Epstein notes that the "KSM group," consisting of KSM and four nephews, began to attack the United States with the 1993 assault on the World Trade Center and did not join with bin Laden until 1996. That crucial point raises the possibility that the KSM group may represent something quite different from al Qaeda—such as a hostile state—which could have penetrated and used the organization. (i.e., the KSM group comes from Baluchistan; Saddam's regime used Baluch fighters in its war with Iran). Without serious, careful consideration of such points, it is hard to know just whom the United States should be at war with or how that war should be pursued.

The books and articles described above will help the thoughtful reader better understand the broad challenges that America faces in the Middle East. Almost all the books were published in more than one edition over more than one decade. They suggest that, perhaps, there is not so much new about the region, the 9/11 attacks notwithstanding, and they underscore the superficiality of much post-9/11 literature, which often reinforces new dogmas that obscure an enduring puzzle: How did one man, with a relatively small organization, in a primitive, far-away country, manage to carry out the single most lethal attack ever on U.S. soil?

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