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# Bernard Lewis Revisited

## What if Islam isn't an obstacle to democracy in the Middle East but the secret to achieving it?

By [Michael Hirsh](#)

America's misreading of the Arab world—and our current misadventure in Iraq—may have really begun in 1950. That was the year a young University of London historian named Bernard Lewis visited Turkey for the first time. Lewis, who is today an imposing, white-haired sage known as the “doyen of Middle Eastern studies” in America (as a *New York Times* reviewer once called him), was then on a sabbatical. Granted access to the Imperial Ottoman archives—the first Westerner allowed in—Lewis recalled that he felt “rather like a child turned loose in a toy shop, or like an intruder in Ali Baba's cave.” But what Lewis saw happening outside his study window was just as exciting, he later wrote. There in Istanbul, in the heart of what once was a Muslim empire, a Western-style democracy was being born.

The hero of this grand transformation was Kemal Ataturk. A generation before Lewis's visit to Turkey, Ataturk (the last name, which he adopted, means “father of all Turks”), had seized control of the dying Ottoman Sultanate. Intent on single-handedly shoving his country into the modern West—“For the people, despite the people,” he memorably declared—Ataturk imposed a puritanical secularism that abolished the caliphate, shuttered religious schools, and banned fezes, veils, and other icons of Islamic culture, even purging Turkish of its Arabic vocabulary. His People's Party had ruled autocratically since 1923. But in May 1950, after the passage of a new electoral law, it resoundingly lost the national elections to the nascent Democrat Party. The constitutional handover was an event “without precedent in the history of the country and the region,” as Lewis wrote in *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, published in 1961, a year after the Turkish army first seized power. And it was Kemal Ataturk, Lewis noted at another point, who had “taken the first decisive steps in the acceptance of Western civilization.”

Today, that epiphany—Lewis's Kemalist vision of a secularized, Westernized Arab democracy that casts off the medieval shackles of Islam and enters modernity at last—remains the core of George W. Bush's faltering vision in Iraq. As his other rationales for war fall away, Bush has only democratic transformation to point to as a *casus belli* in order to justify one of the costliest foreign adventures in American history. And even now Bush, having handed over faux sovereignty to the Iraqis and while beating a pell-mell retreat under fire, does not want to settle for some watered-down or Islamicized version of democracy. His administration's official goal is still dictated by the “Lewis Doctrine,” as *The Wall Street Journal* called it: a Westernized polity, reconstituted and imposed from above like Kemal's Turkey, that is to become a bulwark of security for America and a model for the region.

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Iraq, of course, does not seem to be heading in that direction. Quite the contrary: Iraq is passing from a secular to an increasingly radicalized and Islamicized society, and should it actually turn into a functioning polity, it is one for the present defined more by bullets than by ballots. All of which raises some important questions. What if the mistakes made in Iraq were not merely tactical missteps but stem from a fundamental misreading of the Arab mindset? What if, in other words, the doyen of Middle Eastern studies got it all wrong?

A growing number of Middle Eastern scholars who in the past have quietly stewed over Lewis's outsized influence say this is exactly what happened. To them, it is no surprise that Lewis and his acolytes in Washington botched the

war on terror. In a new book, provocatively titled *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*, one of those critics, Columbia scholar Richard Bulliet, argues that Lewis has been getting his "master narrative" about the Islamic world wrong since his early epiphanic days in Turkey—and he's still getting it wrong today.

### In Cheney's bunker

Lewis's basic premise, put forward in a series of articles, talks, and bestselling books, is that the West—what used to be known as Christendom—is now in the last stages of a centuries-old struggle for dominance and prestige with Islamic civilization. (Lewis coined the term "clash of civilizations," using it in a 1990 essay titled "The Roots of Muslim Rage," and Samuel Huntington admits he picked it up from him.) Osama bin Laden, Lewis thought, must be viewed in this millennial construct as the last gasp of a losing cause, brazenly mocking the cowardice of the "Crusaders." Bin Laden's view of America as a "paper tiger" reflects a lack of respect for American power throughout the Arab world. And if we Americans, who trace our civilizational lineage back to the Crusaders, flagged now, we would only invite future attacks. Bin Laden was, in this view, less an aberrant extremist than a mainstream expression of Muslim frustration, welling up from the anti-Western nature of Islam. "I have no doubt that September 11 was the opening salvo of the final battle," Lewis told me in an interview last spring. Hence the only real answer to 9/11 was a decisive show of American strength in the Arab world; the only way forward, a Kemalist conquest of hearts and minds. And the most obvious place to seize the offensive and end the age-old struggle was in the heart of the Arab world, in Iraq.

This way of thinking had the remarkable virtue of appealing powerfully to both the hard-power enthusiasts in the administration, principally Bush and Donald Rumsfeld, who came into office thinking that the soft Clinton years had made America an easy target and who yearned to send a post-9/11 message of strength; and to neoconservatives from the first Bush administration such as Paul Wolfowitz, who were looking for excuses to complete their unfinished business with Saddam from 1991 and saw 9/11 as the ultimate refutation of the "realist" response to the first Gulf War. Leaving Saddam in power in '91, betraying the Shiites, and handing Kuwait back to its corrupt rulers had been classic realism: Stability was all. But it turned out that the Arab world wasn't stable, it was seething. No longer could the Arabs be an exception to the rule of post-Cold War democratic transformation, merely a global gas station. The Arabs had to change too, fundamentally, just as Lewis (and Ataturk) had said. But change had to be shoved down their throats—Arab tribal culture understood only force and was too resistant to change, Lewis thought—and it had to happen quickly. This, in turn, required leaving behind Islam's anti-modern obsessions.

Iraq and its poster villain, Saddam Hussein, offered a unique opportunity for achieving this transformation in one bold stroke (remember "shock and awe"?) while regaining the offensive against the terrorists. So, it was no surprise that in the critical months of 2002 and 2003, while the Bush administration shunned deep thinking and banned State Department Arabists from its councils of power, Bernard Lewis was persona grata, delivering spine-stiffening lectures to Cheney over dinner in undisclosed locations. Abandoning his former scholarly caution, Lewis was among the earliest prominent voices after September 11 to press for a confrontation with Saddam, doing so in a series of op-ed pieces in *The Wall Street Journal* with titles like "A War of Resolve" and "Time for Toppling." An official who sat in on some of the Lewis-Cheney discussions recalled, "His view was: 'Get on with it. Don't dither.'" Animated by such grandiose concepts, and like Lewis quite certain they were right, the strategists of the Bush administration in the end thought it unnecessary to prove there were operational links between Saddam and al Qaeda. These were good "bureaucratic" reasons for selling the war to the public, to use Wolfowitz's words, but the real links were deeper: America was taking on a sick civilization, one that it had to beat into submission. Bin Laden's supposedly broad Muslim base, and Saddam's recalcitrance to the West, were part of the same pathology.

The administration's vision of postwar Iraq was also fundamentally Lewisian, which is to say Kemalist. Paul Wolfowitz repeatedly invoked secular, democratic Turkey as a "useful model for others in the Muslim world," as the deputy secretary of defense termed it in December 2002 on the eve of a trip to lay the groundwork for what he thought would be a friendly Turkey's role as a staging ground for the Iraq war. Another key Pentagon neocon and old friend of Lewis's, Harold Rhode, told associates a year ago that "we need an accelerated Turkish model" for Iraq, according to a source who talked with him. (Lewis dedicated a 2003 book, *The Crisis of Islam*, to Rhode whom "I got to know when he was studying Ottoman registers," Lewis told me.) And such men thought that Ahmad Chalabi—also a protégé of Lewis's—might make a fine latter-day Ataturk—strong, secular, pro-Western, and friendly towards Israel. L. Paul Bremer III, the former U.S. civil administrator in Iraq, was not himself a Chalabite, but he too embraced a top-down Kemalist approach to Iraq's resurrection. The role of the Islamic community, meanwhile, was consistently marginalized in the administration's planning. U.S. officials saw Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most prestigious figure in the country, as a clueless medieval relic. Even though military intelligence officers were acutely aware of Sistani's importance—having gathered information on him for more than a year before the invasion—Bremer and his Pentagon overseers initially sidelined the cleric, defying his calls for early elections.

### Looking for love in all the wrong places

Lewis has long had detractors in the scholarly world, although his most ardent enemies have tended to be literary mavericks like the late Edward Said, the author of *Orientalism*, a long screed against the cavalier treatment of Islam in Western literature. And especially after 9/11, Bulliet and other mainstream Arabists who had urged a softer, more nuanced view of Islam found themselves harassed into silence. Lewisites such as Martin Kramer, author of *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (a fierce post-9/11 attack on Bulliet) and other prominent scholars such as Robert Wood of the University of Chicago, suggested that most academic Arabists were apologists for Islamic radicalism. But now, emboldened by the Bush administration's self-made quagmire in Iraq, the Arabists are launching a counterattack. They charge that Lewis's whole analysis missed the mark, beginning with his overarching construct, the great struggle between Islam and Christendom. These scholars

argue that Lewis has slept through most of modern Arab history. Entangled in medieval texts, Lewis's view ignores too much and confusingly conflates old Ottoman with modern Arab history. "He projects from the Ottoman experience onto the Middle East. But after the Ottoman Empire was disbanded, a link was severed with the rest of Arab world," says Nader Hashemi, a University of Toronto scholar who is working on another anti-Lewis book. In other words, Istanbul and the caliphate were no longer the center of things. Turkey under Ataturk went in one direction, the Arabs, who were colonized, in another. Lewis, says Hashemi, "tries to interpret the problem of political development by trying to go back to medieval and early Islamic history. In the process, he totally ignores the impact of the British and French colonialists, and the repressive rule of many post-colonial leaders. He misses the break" with the past.

At least until the Iraq war, most present-day Arabs didn't think in the stark clash-of-civilization terms Lewis prefers. Bin Laden likes to vilify Western Crusaders, but until relatively recently, he was still seen by much of the Arab establishment as a marginal figure. To most Arabs before 9/11, the Crusades were history as ancient as they are to us in the West. Modern Arab anger and frustration is, in fact, less than a hundred years old. As bin Laden knows very well, this anger is a function not of Islam's humiliation at the Treaty of Carlowitz of 1699—the sort of long-ago defeat that Lewis highlights in his bestselling *What Went Wrong*—but of much more recent developments. These include the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement by which the British and French agreed to divvy up the Arabic-speaking countries after World War I; the subsequent creation, by the Europeans, of corrupt, kleptocratic tyrannies in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan; the endemic poverty and underdevelopment that resulted for most of the 20th century; the U.N.-imposed creation of Israel in 1948; and finally, in recent decades, American support for the bleak status quo.

Yet as Bulliet writes, over the longer reach of history, Islam and the West have been far more culturally integrated than most people realized; there is a far better case for "Islam-Christian civilization" than there is for the clash of civilizations. "There are two narratives here," says Fawaz Gerges, an intellectual ally of Bulliet's at Sarah Lawrence University. "One is Bernard Lewis. But the other narrative is that in historical terms, there have been so many inter-alliances between world of Islam and the West. There has never been a Muslim umma, or community, except for 23 years during the time of Mohammed. Except in the theoretical minds of the jihadists, the Muslim world was always split. Many Muslim leaders even allied themselves with the Crusaders."

Today, progress in the Arab world will not come by secularizing it from above (Bulliet's chapter dealing with Chalabi is called "Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places") but by rediscovering this more tolerant Islam, which actually predates radicalism and, contra Ataturk, is an ineluctable part of Arab self-identity that must be accommodated. For centuries, Bulliet argues, comparative stability prevailed in the Islamic world not (as Lewis maintains) because of the Ottomans' success, but because Islam was playing its traditional role of constraining tyranny. "The collectivity of religious scholars acted at least theoretically as a countervailing force against tyranny. You had the implicit notion that if Islam is pushed out of the public sphere, tyranny will increase, and if that happens, people will look to Islam to redress the tyranny." This began to play out during the period that Lewis hails as the modernization era of the 19th century, when Western legal structures and armies were created. "What Lewis never talks about is the concomitant removal of Islam from the center of public life, the devaluation of Islamic education and Islamic law, the marginalization of Islamic scholars," Bulliet told me. Instead of modernization, what ensued was what Muslim clerics had long feared, tyranny that conforms precisely with some theories of Islamic political development, notes Bulliet. What the Arab world should have seen was "not an increase in modernization so much as an increase in tyranny. By the 1960s, that prophecy was fulfilled. You had dictatorships in most of the Islamic world." Egypt's Gamel Nasser, Syria's Hafez Assad, and others came in the guise of Arab nationalists, but they were nothing more than tyrants.

Yet there was no longer a legitimate force to oppose this trend. In the place of traditional Islamic learning—which had once allowed, even encouraged, science and advancement—there was nothing. The old religious authorities had been hounded out of public life, back into the mosque. The Caliphate was dead; when Ataturk destroyed it in Turkey, he also removed it from the rest of the Islamic world. Into that vacuum roared a fundamentalist reaction led by brilliant but aberrant amateurs like Egypt's Sayyid Qutb, the founding philosopher of Ayman Zawahiri's brand of Islamic radicalism who was hanged by al-Nasser, and later, Osama bin Laden, who grew up infected by the Saudis' extreme version of Wahhabism. Even the creator of Wahhabism, the 18th-century thinker Mohammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, was outside the mainstream, notorious for vandalizing shrines and "denounced" by theologians across the Islamic world in his time for his "doctrinal mediocrity and illegitimacy," as the scholar Abdelwahab Meddeb writes in another new book that rebuts Lewis, *Islam and its Discontents*.

Wahhabism's fast growth in the late 20th century was also a purely modern phenomenon, a function of Saudi petrodollars underwriting Wahhabist mosques and clerics throughout the Arab world (and elsewhere, including America). Indeed, the elites in Egypt and other Arab countries still tend to mock the Saudis as *déclassés* Bedouins who would have stayed that way if it were not for oil. "It's as if Jimmy Swaggert had come into hundreds of billions of dollars and taken over the church," one Arab official told me. The hellish culmination of this modern trend occurred in the mountains of Afghanistan in the 1980s and '90s, when extremist Wahhabism, in the person of bin Laden, was married to Qutb's Egyptian Islamism, in the person of Zawahiri, who became bin Laden's deputy.

Critics were right to see the bin Laden phenomenon as a reaction against corrupt tyrannies like Egypt's and Saudi Arabia's, and ultimately against American support for those regimes. They were wrong to conclude that it was a mainstream phenomenon welling up from the anti-modern character of Islam, or that the only immediate solution lay in Western-style democracy. It was, instead, a reaction that came out of an Islam misshapen by modern political developments, many of them emanating from Western influences, outright invasion by British, French, and Italian colonialists, and finally the U.S.-Soviet clash that helped create the mujahadeen jihad in Afghanistan.

### Academic probation

Today, even as the administration's case for invading Iraq has all but collapsed, Bernard Lewis's public image has remained largely intact. While his neocon protégés fight for their reputations and their jobs, Lewis's latest book, a collection of essays called *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East*, received mostly respectful reviews last spring and summer. Yet events on the ground seem to be bearing out some of the academic criticisms of Lewis made by Bulliet and others. Indeed, they suggest that what is happening is the opposite of what Lewis predicted.

The administration's invasion of Iraq seems to have given bin Laden a historic gift. It has vindicated his rhetoric describing the Americans as latter-day Crusaders and Mongols, thus luring more adherents and inviting more rage and terror acts. (The administration admitted as much last summer, when it acknowledged that its "Patterns of Global Terrorism" report had been 180 degrees wrong. The report, which came out last June, at first said terrorist attacks around the world were down in 2003, indicating the war on terror was being won. Following complaints from experts, the State Department later revised the report to show that attacks were at their highest level since 1982.)

The new Iraq is also looking less and less Western, and certainly less secular than it was under Saddam. In the streets of Baghdad—once one of the most secular Arab capitals, women now go veiled and alcohol salesmen are beaten. The nation's most popular figures are Sistani and his radical Shiite rival, the young firebrand Moktada al-Sadr, who was permitted to escape besieged Najaf with his militia intact and is now seen as a champion of the Iraqi underclass. According to a survey commissioned by the Coalition Provisional Authority in late May, a substantial majority of Iraqis, 59 percent, want their religious communities to have "a great deal" of influence in selecting members of the new election commission. That's far more than those who favored tribal leaders (38 percent), political figures (31 percent), or the United Nations (36 percent). The poll also showed that Iraq's most popular political figures are religious party-affiliated leaders such as Ibrahim Jaferi and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim. To a fascinating degree, Islam now seems to be filling precisely the role Bulliet says it used to play, as a constraint against tyranny—whether the tyrant is now seen as the autocratic Americans or our man in Baghdad, interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi.

Bremer once promised to ban Islamic strictures on family law and women's rights, and the interim constitution that he pushed through the Governing Council in March affirms that Islam is only one of the foundations of the state. But Sistani has dismissed the constitution as a transition democracy, and Iraq's political future is now largely out of American hands (though the U.S. military may continue to play a stabilizing role in order to squelch any move toward civil war). "I think the best-case scenario for Iraq is that they hold these parliamentary elections, and you get some kind of representative government dominated by religious parties," says University of Michigan scholar Juan Cole. Even Fouad Ajami, one of Lewis's longtime intellectual allies and like him an avowed Kemalist, concluded last spring in a New York Times op-ed piece: "Let's face it: Iraq is not going to be America's showcase in the Arab-Muslim world ... We expected a fairly secular society in Iraq (I myself wrote in that vein at the time). Yet it turned out that the radical faith—among the Sunnis as well as the Shiites—rose to fill the void left by the collapse of the old despotism."

### Turkey hunt

Today, the anti-Lewisites argue, the only hope is that a better, more benign form of Islam fights its way back in the hands of respected clerics like Sistani, overcoming the aberrant strains of the Osama bin Ladens and the Abu Mousab al-Zarqawis. Whatever emerges in Iraq and the Arab world will be, for a long time to come, Islamic. And it will remain, for a long time, anti-American, beginning with the likelihood that any new Iraqi government is going to give the boot to U.S. troops as soon as it possibly can. (That same CPA poll showed that 92 percent of Iraqis see the Americans as occupiers, not liberators, and 86 percent now want U.S. soldiers out, either "immediately" or after the 2005 election.) America may simply have to endure an unpleasant Islamist middle stage—and Arabs may have to experience its failure, as the Iranians have—before modernity finally overtakes Iraq and the Arab world. "Railing against Islam as a barrier to democracy and modern progress cannot make it go away so long as tyranny is a fact of life for most Muslims," Bulliet writes. "Finding ways of wedding [Islam's traditional] protective role with modern democratic and economic institutions is a challenge that has not yet been met."

No one, even Bush's Democratic critics, seems to fully comprehend this. Sens. Joseph Biden (D-Del.) and Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) have introduced legislation that would create secular alternatives to madrassas, without realizing that this won't fly in the Arab world: All one can hope for are more moderate madrassas, because Islam is still seen broadly as a legitimating force. "What happens if the road to what could broadly be called democracy lies through Islamic revolution?" says Wood of the University of Chicago. The best hope, some of these scholars say, is that after a generation or so, the "Islamic" tag in Arab religious parties becomes rather anodyne, reminiscent of what happened to Christian democratic parties in Europe.

This may already be happening slowly in Turkey, where the parliament is dominated by the majority Islamic Justice and Development Party. The JDP leader, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan—who was once banned from public service after reciting a poem that said "the mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets, and the faithful our soldiers"—has shown an impressive degree of pragmatism in governing. But again, Turkey is a unique case, made so by Kemal and his secular, military-enforced coup back in the '20s. If Erdogan still secretly wants to re-Islamicize Turkey, he can only go so far in an environment in which the nation's powerful military twitches at every sign of incipient religiosity. Erdogan is also under unique pressure to secularize as Turkey bids to enter the European Union, which is not a card that moderate Arab secularists can hold up to win over their own populations.

Resolving the tension between Islam and politics will require a long, long process of change. As Bulliet writes, Christendom struggled for hundreds of years to come to terms with the role of religion in civil society. Even in America, separation of church and state "was not originally a cornerstone of the U.S. Constitution," and

Americans are still fighting among themselves over the issue today.

In our talk last spring, Lewis was still arguing that Iraq would follow the secular path he had laid out for it. He voiced the line that has become a favorite of Wolfowitz's, that the neocons are the most forthright champions of Arab progress, and that the Arabists of the State Department who identified with the idea of "Arab exceptionalism" are merely exhibiting veiled racism. This is the straight neocon party line, of course: If you deny that secular democracy is the destiny of every people, you are guilty of cultural snobbery. But somehow Lewis's disdain for Islam, with its hagiographic invocation of Ataturk, managed to creep into our conversation. Threaded throughout Lewis's thinking, despite his protests to the contrary, is a Kemalist conviction that Islam is fundamentally anti-modern. In his 1996 book *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2,000 Years*, for example, Lewis stresses the Koran's profession of the "finality and perfection of the Muslim revelation." Even though Islamic authorities have created laws and regulations beyond the strict word of the Koran in order to deal with the needs of the moment, "the making of new law, though common and widespread, was always disguised, almost furtive, and there was therefore no room for legislative councils or assemblies such as formed the starting-point of European democracy," he writes. In other words, Islam is an obstacle. "The Islamic world is now at beginning of 15th century," Lewis told me. "The Western world is at the beginning of the 21st century." He quickly added: "That doesn't mean [the West] is more advanced, it means it's gone through more." Following that timeline, Lewis suggested that the Islamic world is today "on the verge of its Reformation"—a necessary divorce between religion and politics that Lewis believes has been too long in coming. This view has become conventional wisdom in Washington, resonating not only with the neocons but also with the modernization theorists who have long dominated American campuses. Yet behind this view, say scholars like Bulliet, lies a fundamental rejection of Arabs' historical identity. The reason for that, Bulliet believes, resides in the inordinate influence that Lewis's historical studies of the Ottomans retain over his thinking—and by his 1950 visit to Turkey. Bulliet notes that as late as 2002, in the preface to the third edition of *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, Lewis "talked about the incredible sense of exhilaration it felt for someone of his generation, shaped by the great war against fascism and the emerging Cold War, to see the face of the modern Middle East emerge in Turkey." As a model, Bulliet argues, Turkey "was as vivid a vision for him 50 years later as it was at the time."

But again, Turkey's experience after the Ottoman empire's dissolution was no longer especially relevant to what was happening in the Arab world. Ataturk, in fact, was not only not an Arab, but his approach to modernity was also most deeply influenced by the fascism of the period (Mussolini was still a much-admired model in the 1920s). And Lewis never developed a feel for what modern Arabs were thinking, especially after he began to adopt strong pro-Israel views in the 1970s. "This is a person who does not like the people he is purporting to have expertise about," says Bulliet. "He doesn't respect them, he considers them to be good and worthy only to the degree they follow a Western path."

The neoconservative transformationalists of the Bush administration, though informed by far less scholarship than Lewis, seemed to adopt his dismissive attitude toward the peculiar demands of Arab and Islamic culture. And now they are paying for it. The downward spiral of the U.S. occupation into bloodshed and incompetence wasn't just a matter of too few troops or other breakdowns in planning, though those were clearly part of it. In fact, the great American transformation machine never really understood much about Arab culture, and it didn't bother to try. The occupation authorities, taking a paternalistic top-down approach, certainly did not comprehend the role of Islam, which is one reason why Bremer and Co. were so late in recognizing the power of the Sistani phenomenon. The occupation also failed because of its inability to comprehend and make use of tribal complexities, to understand "how to get the garbage collected, and know who's married to who," as Wood says. Before the war, Pentagon officials, seeking to justify their low-cost approach to nation-building, liked to talk about how much more sophisticated and educated the Iraqis were than Afghans, how they would quickly resurrect their country. Those officials obviously didn't mean what they said or act on it. In the end, they couldn't bring themselves to trust the Iraqis, and the soldiers at their command rounded up thousands of "hajis" indiscriminately, treating one and all as potential Saddam henchmen or terrorists (as I witnessed myself when, on assignment for Newsweek, I joined U.S. troops on raids in the Sunni Triangle last January).

There remains a deeper issue: Did Lewis's misconceptions lead the Bush administration to make a terrible strategic error? Despite the horrors of 9/11, did they transform the bin Laden threat into something grander than it really was? If the "show of strength" in Iraq was wrong-headed, as the Lewis critics say, then Americans must contemplate the terrible idea that they squandered hundreds of billions of dollars and thousands of lives and limbs on the wrong war. If Bernard Lewis's view of the Arab problem was in error, then America missed a chance to round up and destroy a threat—al Qaeda—that in reality existed only on the sick margins of the Islamic world.

It is too soon to throw all of Lewis's Kemalist ideas on the ash-heap of history. Even his academic rivals concede that much of his early scholarship is impressive; some like Michigan's Cole suggest that Lewis lost his way only in his later years when he got pulled into present-day politics, especially the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and began grafting his medieval insights onto the modern Arab mindset. And whether the ultimate cause is modern or not, the Arab world is a dysfunctional society, one that requires fundamental reform. "The Arab Development Report" issued in the spring of 2002 by the U.N. Development Programme, harshly laid out the failings of Arab societies. Calling them "rich, but not developed," the report detailed the deficits of democracy and women's rights that have been favorite targets of the American neoconservatives. The report noted that the Arab world suffers from a lower rate of Internet connectivity than even sub-Saharan Africa, and that education is so backward and isolated that the entire Arab world translates only one-fifth of the books that Greece does. Some scholars also agree that in the longest of long runs, the ultimate vision of Lewis—and the neocons—will prove to be right. Perhaps in the long run, you can't Islamicize democracy, and so Islam is simply standing in the way.

Iran is the best real-world test of this hypothesis right now. A quarter century after the Khomeini revolution, Iran seems to be stuck in some indeterminate middle state. The forces of bottom-up secular democratic reform and top-down mullah control may be stalemated simply because there is no common ground whatsoever between their

contending visions. That's one reason the Kemalist approach had its merits. Fouad Ajami argued in a recent appearance at the Council on Foreign Relations. "I think Ataturk understood that if you fall through Islam, you fall through a trap door. And in fact, I think the journey out of Islam that Ataturk did was brilliant. And to the extent that the Muslim world now has forgotten this. . .they will pay dearly for it."

But there is no Ataturk in Iraq (though of course Chalabi, and perhaps Allawi, would still love to play that role). For now, Sistani remains the most prestigious figure in the country, the only true kingmaker. Suspicions remain in the Bush administration that Sistani's long-term goal is to get the Americans out and the Koran in—in other words, to create another mullah state as in Iran. But those who know Sistani well say he is much smarter than that. Born in Iran—he moved to Iraq in the early 1950s, around the time Lewis saw the light—Sistani has experienced up close the failures of the Shiite mullah state next door. He and the other Shiites have also suffered the pointy end of Sunni Arab nationalism, having been oppressed under Saddam for decades, and they will never sanction a return to that. So Sistani knows the last, best alternative may be some kind of hybrid, a moderately religious, Shiite-dominated democracy, brokered and blessed by him and conceived with a nuanced federalism that will give the Kurds, Sunnis and others their due. But also a regime that, somewhat like the Iranian mullahs, uses its distinctive Islamic character, and concomitant anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism, as ideological glue. For the Americans who went hopefully to war in Iraq, that option is pretty much all that's left on the table—something even Bernard Lewis may someday have to acknowledge.

Michael Hirsh is a senior editor at *Newsweek*, based in Washington, and author of *At War with Ourselves: Why America is Squandering its Chance to Build a Better World* (Oxford University Press).

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