

A Predatory Orientalism
What Went Wrong?
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In an earlier era, before the Zionist movement descended on the heads of unsuspecting Palestinians, the least bigoted voices in the field of Oriental studies were often those of European Jews.

At a time when most Orientalists took Muhammad for a scheming imposter, equated Islam with fanaticism, denigrated the Qur'an as a crude and incoherent text, and claimed that the Arabs were incapable of abstract thought, Jewish scholars of Islam often took opposite positions. They accepted the sincerity of Muhammad's mission, described Arabs as "Jews on horseback," viewed Islam as an evolving faith that is more democratic than other religions, and debunked Orientalist claims about an unchanging Islam and a dynamic West.

Ironically, these pro-Islamic Jews did not escape the voracious interest of Bernard Lewis, the leader of the new Zionist Orientalists. In a 1993 essay, he writes that they "were among the first who attempted to present Islam to European readers as Muslims themselves see it and to stress, to recognize, and indeed sometimes to romanticize the merits and achievements of Muslim civilization in its great days." It would appear that these Jews were anti-Orientalists long before Edward Said.

These contrarian positions had their origin in a variety of motives. Even as the Jews began entering the European mainstream, starting in the nineteenth century, they were still outsiders, only recently emerged from the confinement of ghettos, and it would be scarcely surprising if they were seeking to maintain their distinctiveness by emphasizing, and identifying with, the achievements of another Semitic people, the Arabs. In celebrating Arab civilization, these Jewish scholars were perhaps sending a non-too-subtle message to Christian Europe that their civilization was not unique, that Islamic achievements often excelled theirs, and that Europeans were building upon the achievements of their adversaries in science and philosophy. In addition, their discussions of religious and racial tolerance in Islamic societies, towards Jews in particular, may have offered hope that this was attainable in Europe too. It may also have been an invitation to Europeans to incorporate religious and racial tolerance into their standards of civilizations.

Yet the vigor of this early anti-Orientalism of Jewish scholars would not last; it would not survive the logic of the Zionist movement as it sought to create a Jewish state in Palestine. Such a state could only emerge as the bastard child of imperialist powers, and it could only come into existence by displacing the greater part of the Palestinian population, by incorporating them into an apartheid state, or through some combination of the two. In addition, once created, Israel could only survive as a militarist, expansionist, and hegemonic state, constantly at war with its neighbors.

In other words, once the Zionist project entered into its implementation phase after 1918, it was inevitable that the European Jews' attraction for Islam was not going to endure. In fact, it would be replaced by a bitter contest, one in which the Jews, as junior partners of the imperialist powers, would seek to deepen the Orientalist project in the service of Western power. Bernard Lewis played a leading part in this reorientation. In the words of Martin Kramer, a Zionist Orientalist himself, Bernard Lewis "came to personify the post-war shift from a sympathetic to a critical posture."

Ironically, this shift occurred when many Orientalists had begun to shed their Christian prejudice against Islam, and several were making amends for the excesses of their forebears. Another factor aiding this shift towards a less polemical Orientalism was the entry of a growing number of Arabs, both Muslims and Christians, into the field of Middle Eastern studies. The most visible upshot of these divergent trends was a polarization of the field of Middle Eastern studies into two opposing camps.

One camp, consisting mostly of Christians and Muslims, has labored to bring greater objectivity to their study of Islam and Islamic societies. They seek to locate their subjects in the matrix of history, see Islamic societies as adjusting to the challenges posed by the West, neither innately hostile to the West and Western values, nor trapped in some unchanging obscurantist mindset. The second camp, now led mostly by Jews, has reverted to Orientalism's original mission of subordinating knowledge to Western power, now filtered through the prism of Zionist interests. This Zionist Orientalism has assiduously sought to paint Islam and Islamic societies as innately hostile to the West, and to modernism, democracy, tolerance, scientific advance, and women's rights. This Zionist camp has been led for more than fifty years by Bernard Lewis, who has enjoyed an intimate relationship with power that would be the envy of the most distinguished Orientalists of an earlier generation. He has been strongly supported by a contingent of able lieutenants, whose ranks have included the likes of Leonard Binder, Elie Kedourie and David Pryce-Jones. There are many foot-soldiers too who have provided distinguished service to this new Orientalism. And no compendium of these foot-soldiers would be complete without the names of Daniel Pipes, Martin Kramer, Thomas Friedman, Martin Peretz, Norman Podhoretz, Charles Krauthammer, William Kristol and Judith Miller.

I try to visualize an encounter between these new Orientalists and some of their eminent predecessors like Hienrich Heine, Abraham Geiger, Gustav Weil, Franz Rosenthal, and the great Ignaz Goldziher. What would these pro-Islamic Jews have to say to their descendents whose Orientalism denigrates and demeans the societies they study and who work to incite a civilizational war between Islam and the West? Would Geiger and Goldziher embrace Lewis and Kedourie, or would they be repelled by their new predatory Orientalism?