



The Atlantic Monthly | January 2002

THE HARD QUESTIONS

What Went Wrong?

By all standards of the modern world—economic development, literacy, scientific achievement—Muslim civilization, once a mighty enterprise, has fallen low. Many in the Middle East blame a variety of outside forces. But underlying much of the Muslim world's travail may be a simple lack of freedom

BY BERNARD LEWIS

.....

n the course of the twentieth century it became abundantly clear that things had gone badly wrong in the Middle East—and, indeed, in all the lands of Islam. Compared with Christendom, its rival for more than a millennium, the world of Islam had become poor, weak, and ignorant. The primacy and therefore the dominance of the West was clear for all to see, invading every aspect of the Muslim's public and even—more painfully—his private life.

Muslim modernizers—by reform or revolution—concentrated their efforts in three main areas: military, economic, and political. The results achieved were, to say the least, disappointing. The quest for victory by updated armies brought a series of humiliating defeats. The quest for prosperity through development brought in some countries impoverished and corrupt economies in recurring need of external aid, in others an unhealthy dependence on a single resource—oil. And even this was discovered, extracted, and put to use by Western ingenuity and industry, and is doomed, sooner or later, to be exhausted, or, more probably, superseded, as the international community grows weary of a fuel that pollutes the land, the sea, and the air wherever it is used or transported, and that puts the world economy at the mercy of a clique of capricious autocrats. Worst of all are the political results: the long quest for freedom has left a string of shabby tyrannies, ranging from traditional autocracies to dictatorships that are modern only in their apparatus of repression and indoctrination.

Many remedies were tried—weapons and factories, schools and parliaments—but none achieved the desired result. Here and there they brought some alleviation and, to limited elements of the population, some benefit. But they failed to remedy or even to halt the increasing imbalance between Islam and the Western world.

There was worse to come. It was bad enough for Muslims to feel poor and weak after

centuries of being rich and strong, to lose the position of leadership that they had come to regard as their right, and to be reduced to the role of followers of the West. But the twentieth century, particularly the second half, brought further humiliation—the awareness that they were no longer even the first among followers but were falling back in a lengthening line of eager and more successful Westernizers, notably in East Asia. The rise of Japan had been an encouragement but also a reproach. The later rise of other Asian economic powers brought only reproach. The proud heirs of ancient civilizations had gotten used to hiring Western firms to carry out tasks of which their own contractors and technicians were apparently incapable. Now Middle Eastern rulers and businessmen found themselves inviting contractors and technicians from Korea—only recently emerged from Japanese colonial rule—to perform these tasks. Following is bad enough; limping in the rear is far worse. By all the standards that matter in the modern world—economic development and job creation, literacy, educational and scientific achievement, political freedom and respect for human rights—what was once a mighty civilization has indeed fallen low.

"Who did this to us?" is of course a common human response when things are going badly, and many in the Middle East, past and present, have asked this question. They have found several different answers. It is usually easier and always more satisfying to blame others for one's misfortunes. For a long time the Mongols were the favorite villains. The [Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century](#) were blamed for the destruction of both Muslim power and Islamic civilization, and for what was seen as the ensuing weakness and stagnation. But after a while historians, Muslims and others, pointed to two flaws in this argument. The first was that some of the greatest cultural achievements of Islam, notably in Iran, came after, not before, the Mongol invasions. The second, more difficult to accept but nevertheless undeniable, was that the Mongols overthrew an empire that was already fatally weakened; indeed, it is hard to see how the once mighty empire of the caliphs would otherwise have succumbed to a horde of nomadic horsemen riding across the steppes from East Asia.

The rise of nationalism—itself an import from Europe—produced new perceptions. Arabs could lay the blame for their troubles on the Turks, who had ruled them for many centuries. Turks could lay the blame for the stagnation of their civilization on the dead weight of the Arab past, in which the creative energies of the Turkish people were caught and immobilized. Persians could lay the blame for the loss of their ancient glories on Arabs, Turks, and Mongols impartially.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries British and French paramountcy in much of the Arab world produced a new and more plausible scapegoat—Western imperialism. In the Middle East there have been good reasons for such blame. Western political domination, economic penetration, and—longest, deepest, and most insidious of all—cultural influence changed the face of the region and transformed the lives of its people, turning them in new directions, arousing new hopes and fears, creating new dangers and new expectations without precedent in their cultural past.

But the Anglo-French interlude was comparatively brief, and ended half a century

ago; Islam's change for the worse began long before and continued unabated afterward. Inevitably, the role of the British and the French as villains was taken over by the United States, along with other aspects of Western leadership. The attempt to transfer the guilt to America has won considerable support but, for similar reasons, remains unconvincing. Anglo-French rule and American influence, like the Mongol invasions, were a consequence, not a cause, of the inner weakness of Middle Eastern states and societies. Some observers, both inside and outside the region, have pointed to differences in the post-colonial development of former British possessions—for example, between Aden, in the Middle East, and Singapore or Hong Kong; or between the various lands that once made up the British Empire in India.

Another European contribution to this debate is anti-Semitism, and blaming "the Jews" for all that goes wrong. Jews in traditional Islamic societies experienced the normal constraints and occasional hazards of minority status. Until the rise and spread of Western tolerance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they were better off under Muslim than under Christian rule in most significant respects. With rare exceptions, where hostile stereotypes of the Jew existed in the Islamic tradition, Islamic societies tended to be contemptuous and dismissive rather than suspicious and obsessive. This made the events of 1948—the failure to prevent the establishment of the state of Israel—all the more of a shock. As some writers observed at the time, it was humiliating enough to be defeated by the great imperial powers of the West; to suffer the same fate at the hands of a contemptible gang of Jews was intolerable. Anti-Semitism and its image of the Jew as a scheming, evil monster provided a soothing antidote.

The earliest specifically anti-Semitic statements in the Middle East occurred among Christian minorities, and can usually be traced back to European originals. They had limited impact; during the Dreyfus trial in France, for example, when a Jewish officer was unjustly accused and condemned by a hostile court, Muslim comments usually favored the persecuted Jew against his Christian persecutors. But the poison continued to spread, and starting in 1933, Nazi Germany and its various agencies made a concerted and on the whole remarkably successful effort to promote European-style anti-Semitism in the Arab world. The struggle for Palestine greatly facilitated the acceptance of the anti-Semitic interpretation of history, and led some to attribute all evil in the Middle East—and, indeed, in the world—to secret Jewish plots. This interpretation has pervaded much of the public discourse in the region, including that seen in education, the media, and even entertainment.

An argument sometimes adduced is that the cause of the changed relationship between East and West is not a Middle Eastern decline but a Western upsurge—the discoveries and the scientific, technological, industrial, and political revolutions that transformed the West and vastly increased its wealth and power. But this is merely to restate the question: Why did the discoverers of America sail from Spain rather than from a Muslim Atlantic port, out of which such voyages were indeed attempted in earlier times? Why did the great scientific breakthrough occur in Europe and not, as one might reasonably have expected, in the richer, more advanced, and in most

respects more enlightened realm of Islam?

more sophisticated form of the blame game finds its targets inside, rather than outside, Islamic society. One such target is religion—for some, specifically Islam. But to blame Islam as such is usually hazardous and not often attempted. Nor is it very plausible. For most of the Middle Ages it was neither the older cultures of the Orient nor the newer cultures of the West that were the major centers of civilization and progress but the world of Islam. There old sciences were recovered and developed and new sciences were created; there new industries were born and manufactures and commerce were expanded to a level without precedent. There, too, governments and societies achieved a freedom of thought and expression that led persecuted Jews and even dissident Christians to flee Christendom for refuge in Islam. In comparison with modern ideals, and even with modern practice in the more advanced democracies, the medieval Islamic world offered only limited freedom, but that was vastly more than was offered by any of its predecessors, its contemporaries, or most of its successors.

The point has often been made: If Islam is an obstacle to freedom, to science, to economic development, how is it that Muslim society in the past was a pioneer in all three—and this when Muslims were much closer in time to the sources and inspiration of their faith than they are now? Some have posed the question in a different form—not "What has Islam done to the Muslims?" but "What have the Muslims done to Islam?"—and have answered by laying the blame on specific teachers and doctrines and groups.

For those known nowadays as Islamists or fundamentalists, the failures and shortcomings of modern Islamic lands afflict those lands because they adopted alien notions and practices. They fell away from authentic Islam and thus lost their former greatness. Those known as modernists or reformers take the opposite view, seeing the cause of this loss not in the abandonment but in the retention of old ways, and especially in the inflexibility and ubiquity of the Islamic clergy, who, they say, are responsible for the persistence of beliefs and practices that might have been creative and progressive a thousand years ago but are neither today. The modernists' usual tactic is not to denounce religion as such, still less Islam in particular, but to level their criticism against fanaticism. It is to fanaticism—and more particularly to fanatical religious authorities—that they attribute the stifling of the once great Islamic scientific movement and, more generally, of the freedom of thought and expression.

A more common approach to this theme has been to discuss a specific problem: the place of religion and of its professional exponents in the political order. In this view a principal cause of Western progress is the separation of Church and State and the creation of a civil society governed by secular laws. Another approach has been to view the main culprit as the relegation of women to an inferior position in Muslim society, which deprives the Islamic world of the talents and energies of half its people and entrusts the other half's crucial early years of upbringing to illiterate and downtrodden mothers. The products of such an education, it has been said, are likely to grow up either arrogant or submissive, and unfit for a free, open society. However

one evaluates the views of secularists and feminists, their success or failure will be a major factor in shaping the Middle Eastern future.

Some solutions that once commanded passionate support have been discarded. The two dominant movements in the twentieth century were socialism and nationalism. Both have been discredited—the first by its failure, the second by its success and consequent exposure as ineffective. Freedom, interpreted to mean national independence, was seen as the great talisman that would bring all other benefits. The overwhelming majority of Muslims now live in independent states, but this has brought no solutions to their problems. National socialism, the bastard offspring of both ideologies, persists in a few states that have preserved the Nazi-Fascist style of dictatorial government and indoctrination through a vast security apparatus and a single all-powerful party. These regimes have failed every test except survival, and have brought none of the promised benefits. If anything, their infrastructures are even more antiquated than those of other Muslim states, their armed forces designed primarily for terror and repression.

At present two answers to the question of what went wrong command widespread support in the Middle East, each with its own diagnosis and corresponding prescription. One attributes all evil to the abandonment of the divine heritage of Islam and advocates return to a real or imagined past. That is the way of the Iranian revolution and of the so-called fundamentalist movements and regimes in various Muslim countries. The other condemns the past and advocates secular democracy, best embodied in the Turkish Republic, proclaimed in 1923 by Kemal Atatürk.

For the oppressive but ineffectual governments that rule much of the Middle East, finding targets to blame serves a useful, indeed an essential, purpose—to explain the poverty that they have failed to alleviate and to justify the tyranny that they have introduced. They seek to deflect the mounting anger of their unhappy subjects toward other, outside targets.

But growing numbers of Middle Easterners are adopting a more self-critical approach. The question "Who did this to us?" has led only to neurotic fantasies and conspiracy theories. And the question "What did we do wrong?" has led naturally to a second question: "How do we put it right?" In that question, and in the various answers that are being found, lie the best hopes for the future.

During the past few weeks the worldwide exposure given to the views and actions of Osama bin Laden and his hosts the Taliban has provided a new and vivid insight into the eclipse of what was once the greatest, most advanced, and most open civilization in human history.

To a Western observer, schooled in the theory and practice of Western freedom, it is precisely the lack of freedom—freedom of the mind from constraint and indoctrination, to question and inquire and speak; freedom of the economy from corrupt and pervasive mismanagement; freedom of women from male oppression;

freedom of citizens from tyranny—that underlies so many of the troubles of the Muslim world. But the road to democracy, as the Western experience amply demonstrates, is long and hard, full of pitfalls and obstacles.

If the peoples of the Middle East continue on their present path, the suicide bomber may become a metaphor for the whole region, and there will be no escape from a downward spiral of hate and spite, rage and self-pity, poverty and oppression, culminating sooner or later in yet another alien domination—perhaps from a new Europe reverting to old ways, perhaps from a resurgent Russia, perhaps from some expanding superpower in the East. But if they can abandon grievance and victimhood, settle their differences, and join their talents, energies, and resources in a common creative endeavor, they can once again make the Middle East, in modern times as it was in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, a major center of civilization. For the time being, the choice is theirs.

The URL for this page is <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2002/01/lewis.htm>.

+ SPECIAL OFFER

Don't miss "American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center." Subscribe today (11 issues) and receive the entire three-part series, including **instant access** to Parts One and Two, "The Inner World" and "The Rush to Recover." Go to the following Web address to subscribe today:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/subscribe12>

All material copyright The Atlantic Monthly Group. All rights reserved.