

INTERVIEW WITH BERNARD LEWIS*

In this exclusive interview with TPQ, Bernard Lewis attributes Turkey's historical progress to the practice of self-critique and to the choice of women's empowerment. These are also the qualities, if maintained and developed, that will ensure a bright future for Turkey, he states. Indicating that in Turkey "at the moment, the movement seems to be backwards rather than forward," Lewis points out that Turks currently face a choice. About Turkey's role in the Middle East, Lewis reflects skepticism but also hope, relaying the message that Turkey can indeed play a leading role in the Middle East but whether this will strengthen Turkey in the global arena or not depends on how Turkey uses this influence, to what end, and in what direction. Decisions made today, in areas such as to enable frank and critical discussion, to innovate, and to provide women with the full range of freedom will determine how the future of Turkey and of the region at large is shaped.



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When we look at Turkey and compare it with the rest of the Muslim Middle East, Turkey stands out in terms of its achievements – civil liberties, economic performance, global status. How was it that Turkey got set on a path that led to such relative achievements?

The past is always important. The present is the product of the past. Turkey's great strength was that it had never lost its independence. Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan were really the only Muslim countries which retained full independence. All the rest of them passed under one form of European imperial rule. And, I think, it is interesting to compare the three with one another and the rest.

In Turkey now, we can observe somewhat a glorification and a romantization of the Ottoman civilization and the role the Turks played in leading the Muslim Middle East. An enthusiasm to revive that role, perhaps using education and economic development, to carry the Muslim Middle East to a higher global stature can be heard. Do you think Turkey has the potential to lead change?



They have had such a role but from time to time this role is interrupted and reversed. Take for example the question of astronomy. I do not remember the exact date, but it must have been around 1600, there were two major observatories in the world, one in Turkey, one in Europe. These were observing the sky and collecting data of the

stars and so on. And, they were about equal in their accomplishments. At that point, the difference became enormous. Then, the European one became the basis of the whole modern science, while the Ottoman one was destroyed by official order on grounds that it contradicted the Quran.

There are a whole lot of differences between the Islamic and the Western world. And, the crucial ones may help to explain why this society went forward and that society fell back. What I find admirable is the frankness with which the Turkish historians discuss the question. Usually, if you look at traditional historiography, they are never willing to admit defeat or responsibility. It is always somebody else's fault or someone's evil plan. If you look at the Ottoman literature about the time of the second failure of the Vienna siege, it is admirably frank and open. What did we do wrong? What mistakes did we make? And, they never pretended the defeat was a victory.

There was that tradition deeply rooted, even in Ottoman times. There is a crucial difference between taking responsibility for something you did versus blaming others and where both lead – for an individual or a group or whole societies prepared to take responsibility. I mean, when something goes badly wrong, there are two questions you can ask: what did we do wrong or who did this to us? If you ask the second question, which is the usual one in most of the Muslim world, “who did this to us?”, this leads to all kinds

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of conspiracy theories and what I can only describe as social and cultural neurosis. If on the other hand you say “what did we do wrong?,” you get an honest examination of the society and a reasonably good chance of doing it right. And, in Turkey, you had both. The “what did we do wrong-line” is very important right through the 19th century.

Some see Turkey as a model for the transition in the Muslim world. Do you think Turkey can lead as an example, in the case of women for instance?

I think, Turkey should serve as an example. And, for a while, it did. But now Turkey is following rather than leading in this respect. The remarkable difference between the Turks and most of the other peoples of the Muslim

world is the question “what did we do wrong”, rather than the other question “who did this to us.” This is the difference between taking responsibility versus shirking responsibility.

The issue of women is also crucial.

You have always focused on women’s place in public life. Where does this consideration stem from and how important do you think this issue is for the region?

It was a long, long time ago when I was still teaching in the University of London. One day, one of our undergraduate students in the department of history asked for an appointment, which, of course, I fixed for her. She explained that she was going to drop out and had not wanted to do so without saying goodbye. She was a good student, one of our best, so I wanted to make sure it was not a money problem, for which we may have been able to find funds to help her. But she explained to me that she had met a young man, fallen in love, they were about to get married. The young man in question had had a poor record in high school, not getting admittance to any university, he had gone to work. And, I still vividly remember this young lady who must have been 19 or 20 at that time saying: “I do not think it would make for a happy marriage, if the wife is educated to a higher level than the husband.” I remember being really shocked by this and the thought that occurred to me was if you happen to fall in love with a one-eyed man, which could happen, would you feel obliged to poke out one of your eyes? I did not say it of course. Her mind was made up and she left. I have no idea what happened to her after that. But that sort of alerted me to this problem and really made me a feminist. After that, I became known as particularly sensitive to the problems and the needs of women students.

I think, the point was well made by Atatürk in one of his earlier speeches in which he talked about women’s rights. It is something rather surprising for an Ottoman Pasha to promote women’s rights. And, he put it very well, he said: “Our task is to modernize the Turkish nation, we will not modernize the Turkish nation if we only modernize half of them.”

I think, Atatürk got it right in giving such importance to the position of women. What he did was important; and he was not the first. The question

of women had come up earlier. You know, after the second Turkish siege of Vienna, the great debate began in the Ottoman Empire on the question of what went wrong. Until then, the Islamic world in general, and the Ottoman Empire in particular, had been triumphantly advancing their own areas. From there on, they were forced into the defensive, retreating step by step by step.

From the late 18th century onwards, there was an agonizing debate in much of the Muslim world but especially in Turkey which was the most articulate and the most aware of the Muslim nations: What went wrong? What did we do wrong? What are they doing right that we are doing wrong? ... and so on and so on. And many, many different answers were put forward: military, political, economic, social, and so on.

And then, I can not remember the exact date but in about 1880, a Turkish writer called Namık Kemal came up with a new and different explanation. He said the reason that we have fallen behind the West is the way we treat our women. He said by treating our women the way we do, we produce several negative results: first and foremost, we deprive ourselves of the talents and services of half the population. Moreover, we submit the early education of the entire population to downtrodden mothers. And, he made a good point. It was taken up by others and developed from then onwards.

The household is important. If there is authoritarianism and inequality between man and woman in the household, this shapes life. The Sharia is very clear: a woman is half a man. The daughter gets one half of what the son gets. In testimony, two women equal to one man and so on and so on.

Do you think those who claimed to carry the torch of Atatürk and the founding ideals that he set forth, be it bureaucracy, politicians or intellectuals, have sufficiently furthered those goals?

It depends on what you mean by “sufficiently”. They did a pretty good job in the whole, they brought enormous changes. On the other hand, there are some respects in which they failed. For example: polygamy and concubinage. Concubinage they managed to abolish. Polygamy became illegal in the Turkish republic. It was nevertheless widely practiced.

When you look at the brink on which some Arab countries find themselves right now, the transition countries, do you see the role of women as promising? Is there an opportunity for women to step up?

Well, there was a beginning, but it did not go very far. Now things go in the opposite direction, going back rather than forward.

Some seem to think that Turkey needs to increase its Islamic credentials in order to get support, following, or influence in the Middle East. Is this the right route in your view, or is Turkey's Western vocation what would maximize its potential of influence? What do you think of the idea of an Ottoman commonwealth?

It is certainly a way to gain influence. The question is how are you going to use that influence and in which direction are you going to move. There are obviously very different answers.

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On the other hand, Europe is also very uncertain. A distinguished Syrian recently wrote a book ending with the statement that the question which remains is whether there will be an Islamized Europe or a Europeanized Islam.

The term "West" is also losing its meaning. Western culture stands out though as one of self-criticism. This is its strength.

I think, there is this important distinction to make between honor-shame society and duty-guilt society. Honor and shame are related to what others think of you, duty-guilt is what you think of yourself. That is the key. Most of the Muslim world is based on conceptions of honor-shame.

Whereas, asking “did I do the right thing” fosters self-criticism that makes people better and leads them to do right. The question is: where is Turkey’s future on that one?

The idea of an Ottoman commonwealth is that just as the British Empire is long gone and finished but it survives as a group of independent states with certain historical, cultural, and political links which function as a group, the Ottoman commonwealth could be the same. But I think it is an unworkable idea. Only the Turks would accept that.

Can Turkey, should Turkey, aim to lead the Muslim Middle East?

It depends on where Turkey leads the Middle East: if Turkey is leading the Middle East back to an Ottoman caliphate then I do not think that is a very bright future. I also do not think there is a Western block anymore though. We are living now in a different world. The Middle East is becoming less and less important. In time, it will become totally unimportant. Let me explain why. The Arab world has absolutely no products other than fossil fuels, I mean, the entire exports of the Arab world other than oil and gas amount less than those of Finland, which has about 5.5 million people.

Sooner or later, oil and gas will either be exhausted or superseded. And, when that happens, the Middle East will sink into insignificance. It is already beginning. Europe has lost interest; America has visibly lost interest in the Middle East. The center power shift is eastwards. The superpowers of the 21st century will be India and China. And that will be the center of world power, of competition or cooperation. The Middle East will be only of interest as an area where the two might compete or cooperate, depending on how things work out.

I think Israel will be able to play some sort of a role because it will depend not on oil and gas but talents and human resources. It is interesting that both India and China are keenly developing their relations with Israel.

One thing which is really important is modern communication which enables the awareness of people of the outside world, of the situation elsewhere and of the difference between their misery of life and that in other parts. I think, even the most ignorant and illiterate people are keenly aware of how badly off they are, compared to almost anywhere else.

There is a remarkable statement by a Palestinian-Arab intellectual in which she said: “The only part of the Middle East where an ordinary Arab man in the street can live a decent life with reasonable public services is as a second class citizen in Israel.” What is remarkable is that someone is prepared to say that. That is new.

And Turkey?

Turkey has not decided yet. Basically their choice is to go back in the past or go into the future. The Turks themselves will have to decide on that. Besides having to do with examining failures, how innovation is approached will also be decisive.

In the Islamic World, innovation (bid’a in Arabic) has become a condemnation. (The logic is that) all the questions have been answered with the total and final revelation, so anything new is, by definition, bad.

If Turkey decides to go that way, the future for Turkey is dim. But Turkey has not yet decided. There are different trends to go in both directions. The Turks still have a choice.

The Turkish people have the capacity, without sacrificing their devoutness or Islamic culture, they can innovate, as many do who live in conducive cultural environments. Patronage is the key. If you have patronage, then it is not merit. You do not get it because you deserve it, you get it because of your family, your allegiance. A Turk who is really good and does not have the right connections has got to leave Turkey for somewhere like America in order to succeed. Something is wrong with that point.

I wrote in a book about “predictions” that Turkey seemed to be moving backwards to a more religiously oriented dictatorship, whereas, in Iran there is certainly a very strong democratic movement.

In Turkey, they still have the choice but at the moment the movement seems to be backwards rather than forward. There is a struggle between the establishment and those who want to become the establishment.

What do you think about the chance for change of regime in Iran?

In Iran, there are very powerful opposition movements, thanks to modern communication, telephone, email, and people can be in touch with each other. There is no doubt at all that the regime in Iran is extremely unpopular. There are two oppositions. There is an opposition within the regime and one against the regime. There is overwhelming evidence that the vast majority of the Iranian population would like to get rid of the regime as soon as possible. If only we in the Western world had been able to do something a little more active, giving discrete action here and there to the opposition. We might have had achieved something. Instead, we have done absolutely nothing or worse than nothing. I will not go into that but it is still possible.

In a country transitioning in the Arab world, should the objective of secularism be dropped because it is so unrealistic given political Islam is so strong?

It does not seem to be possible at the moment. I feel that generally speaking in the Muslim world, the best hope, perhaps the only hope, is the women. Because women obviously have a strong vested interest in change they would be the main beneficiaries of a change. They are slightly more than half of the population and they can really do something.

Are they mobilized enough though?

Not really, no. There have been some quite remarkable women who have emerged in Muslim countries in modern times. Sometimes, they played a major role. They are their best hope.

Do you think there will be segregation in the region between those who abide by full Islamic living versus the others, living in different pockets?

It looks like things are moving in that direction. This does not make me happy.

Does it seem to you like Turkey is becoming more like the Middle East, instead of the Middle East becoming more like Turkey.

I am afraid so.

Is secularism a viable goal in the Arab spring countries?

There is no world for “secular” in the languages of Islam, the very notion is alien. There is a difference between the Islamic and the Christian world. The Christians were a persecuted minority for several centuries after Christ. And it was not until the conversion of the Emperor Constantine that they would obtain over control of a state.

Islam, during the lifetime of Mohammed, had a state – in fact an Empire. So, the difference between secular and profane, between religion and politics in the Islamic world simply did not arise in the way in which it arose in the Christian world. So, even the vocabulary is lacking, it has been created in modern times. It is the historical evolution in particular and we are all products of the past in which we grew up.

A geographical entity is explicitly rejected in Islam. There are stories about the early caliphs who tell them not to be like the local peasants who base their identity by the place they were born. Ataturk’s forging a new identity based not on loyalty to Islam but on loyalty to the homeland, to a country, to geographic borders was thus alien.

Was there persecution of pious Muslims in the Republic?

They were certainly discriminated against but not persecuted. Persecution is actually inflicting suffering.

It is the question of how you define these things. Talking about persecution and discrimination, I have seen this in the countries where I lived most of my life, in England and the United States. There are different levels, perceptions, social contact. When I first went to America, I was shocked by this sort of pattern of social discrimination by race, by color, by sex, by religion, by all sorts of things which in England at that time would have been inconceivable. On the other hand, striking was the acceptance in the United States of the newcomer which in England would have been inconceivable. In England, for example – I do not know how it is now, but it is probably no different- to attain any position of trust or importance in the government service you would have to have at least two generations of British birth. I mean, the

career of a Henry Kissinger would have been impossible, not because he was Jewish – that would not have been the problem, but because he was ‘foreign’.

Are you afraid that the evolution of the region will be defined by sectarian divides, along Shia versus Sunni lines?

I think that will become less important. I am not saying it will become unimportant but I think it will be overshadowed by other considerations .

My impression is that the Sunni-Shia difference is now less important than it was in the past. The important differences are between Muslims and non-Muslims and between radicals and liberals.

What do you think about Erdoğan’s accusation of Iran being “unIslamic” by supporting Assad in Syria, an Alawi?

Well, the Allawis are of course a heresy from a Muslim point of view, they are not really Muslims. They are a branch of the Shia but a radically different branch of the Shia.

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The Sunni-Shia division helps to define identity today. For example, for several centuries, the two great Muslim powers in the Middle East were Turkey and Iran: there was this long rivalry between the Ottomans and the Safavids, in Iran. It was at that time when Iran became officially Shiite, they had not been previously. Shiism helped to give them a separate identity.

In Syria, the Shi’a neighbors are supporting the Alawite government. Why?

You know the old saying: “Me and my tribe against the world, me and my family against the tribe, me and my brothers against my cousins, me against my brothers.” The fight goes on all levels, even at the most intimate level.

Recently, we see more willingness from Americans and Europeans to engage political Islam in the region, more willing to dialogue and work with them. Are there red lines that should be considered in this engagement?

These efforts have evoked no response. Dialogue is simply not working. The radical Muslims are not interested, because they see themselves as engaged in the final struggle, the final triumph of Islam in the world. And nothing less than that will satisfy them.

Does the West enable radicals? Is their search for moderates useful?

The problem is, when you are talking about the West, what exactly do you mean? It is a group of countries that sometimes pursue very different policies. And worse than that, even the same country can have two very different policies. Take the United States, the policies of the State Department may not be the same as the policies of the Defense Department. And, you will get contradicting policies being pursued supporting rival factions, and so on. There is no sense in which one can talk about a Western policy.

And what kind of challenges do those who try to understand the Middle East from Europe or the U.S. face?

One of the difficulties is the pattern of deceit in communication between the two sides! I spent some time working in the archives and I was particularly interested in the communications between the Ottoman Empire and the various European counterparts. At that time, nobody in the Ottoman Empire knew Western languages and nobody in Europe knew Ottoman Turkish. They had translators, intermediaries between them. And, going through the documents, I found a pattern of consistent mistranslation; what I would describe as deliberate deceit. It goes on century after century. The entire diplomatic relationship, for a long time, was totally false. For example the Sultan says to Queen Elizabeth I, “we expect that you will continue to be firm-footed in loyalty and subservient to our all-embracing imperial throne”. And the translation says: “we hope that you will continue to maintain the good and firm relations between our two governments.”.

Or another example, which I came across quite by accident: in England,

the BBC had a service of recording and translating the broadcasts of various parts in the world so that we knew what the Arab countries were broadcasting. We had the transcripts of the Arabic and the translation into English. These were unpublished, but they were available, they were accessible in the files, for anybody who wanted to see them. And I used to use these quite frequently. One day, I was on a lecture tour in the United States, and I wanted to quote one of these broadcasts. I did not have the text with me and to get it from England would have been difficult, I thought the Americans must be doing the same thing. They were. There were also people who listened to the broadcasts and translated them. So, I got the American translations and they were significantly different. The point was, the translators were all Arabs. The British ones were Arabs employed by the British government and the Americans were Arabs employed by the American government. On both sides, they were very anxious not to upset their employers. So, in the British translations anything anti-British was either turned down or omitted. And, anything anti-American was emphasized. The American ones were exactly the other way around.

To the extent that you do have hope in Turkey's future, what ingredients is it vested in? What about the Turkish context still gives you hope about the future?

Women.

There is a quote of yours in which you recall your first trip in the Middle East, noting that you felt like a bride meeting the groom with whom she would spend the rest of your life. Looking back, do you feel your intellectual marriage with the region was a rewarding, fulfilling marriage or one that disillusioned you?

Well, it had its ups and downs, but on the whole I would say definitely rewarding. I have never wished I did something else – oh, yes, once I did. Once I wished I had taken up Chinese instead of this. That was only very brief.

Obviously, I do not have much affinity with the various tyrants that rule the countries in the Middle East. But I find a lot of people there whom I can talk to and communicate with easily and readily.

As for the course of the region, many times I feel very alarmed, other times, I feel cautious optimism. But in general, I feel, as I said before, the Middle East is declining into insignificance. The superpowers of the future will be India and China. Oil and gas will be exhausted or superseded, and, then, the Middle East will not matter anymore. Turkey should take care not to invest too much in a company that is failing.