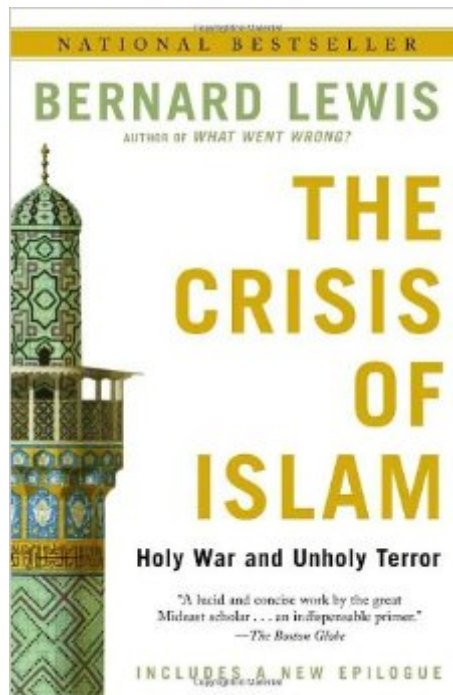


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# The Crisis Of Islam: Holy War And Unholy Terror



## Synopsis

In his first book since *What Went Wrong?* Bernard Lewis examines the historical roots of the resentments that dominate the Islamic world today and that are increasingly being expressed in acts of terrorism. He looks at the theological origins of political Islam and takes us through the rise of militant Islam in Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, examining the impact of radical Wahhabi proselytizing, and Saudi oil money, on the rest of the Islamic world. *The Crisis of Islam* ranges widely through thirteen centuries of history, but in particular it charts the key events of the twentieth century leading up to the violent confrontations of today: the creation of the state of Israel, the Cold War, the Iranian Revolution, the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan, the Gulf War, and the September 11th attacks on the United States. While hostility toward the West has a long and varied history in the lands of Islam, its current concentration on America is new. So too is the cult of the suicide bomber. Brilliantly disentangling the crosscurrents of Middle Eastern history from the rhetoric of its manipulators, Bernard Lewis helps us understand the reasons for the increasingly dogmatic rejection of modernity by many in the Muslim world in favor of a return to a sacred past. Based on his George Polk Award-winning article for *The New Yorker*, *The Crisis of Islam* is essential reading for anyone who wants to know what Usama bin Ladin represents and why his murderous message resonates so widely in the Islamic world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Bernard Lewis is a master of clarity. I must say I have not read any of his works other than his "Middle East," but the quality of these two books, combined with his general reputation make it clear

that he is a giant in the field of Arab and Islamic studies. His grasp of history is phenomenal, and his ability to apply history to current exigencies is astounding. "The Crisis in Islam" very neatly, but not simplistically, lays out the history of relations between the (mainly) Christian West, and the world of Islam, beginning with the generation of the Prophet up to the current times. It is critical to understand, and the brilliant introduction lights the way, that Muslim from birth see the world in metaphors that we can barely describe. The former American imperative of Manifest Destiny is a pale reflection of the inevitability many, but certainly not all, Muslim feel about the spread of the "Dar al-Islam" in the world. This literally translates as "House of Peace" and implies the eventual conquering and conversion to Islam of the entire planet, without room for compromise. All other "nations" and religions are within the "Dar al-Harb," literally "House of the Sword." No permanent peace can exist between the two houses. (Again I stress that this is NOT a universal attitude.) In Lewis' thesis, attitudes toward the West have evolved through contacts with first the Eastern Empire in Constantinople, then Spain, Portugal and France, and through years of direct conflict in the Crusades and the colonial wars of the 19th and 20th centuries. Combine this with the flourishing of multiple schools and "sects" within Islam, combined with chance vagaries of history, and you wind up with the hegemony of the Wahhabi school within the Kingdom of the Su'ud family (now Sa'udi Arabia). Then add the discovery of oil. Then add the poverty of most Arab Muslim people whose only access to any education is via Wahhabi supported schools and mosques, and you have a very heady recipe. While this is grossly oversimplified, it gives the barest skeleton of the first part of the book. To Lewis, the influence and philosophy of the Arab Wahhabis and Iranian Shi'ites make accommodation pretty much impossible. The West, especially the United States is seen as primarily a force for temptation and corruption. There are many surprise insights in the book; one big one for me was the revelation that the hostage crisis in Iran in 1979 was not due to the decline in relations between the two "Dar"s, but instead because there was a threat of 'rapprochement' which was seen as potentially corrupting. Another was the explanation of how democratic process is used by some as a tool to achieve power legitimately, then subverted in a method he calls amusingly the "One man (only men), one vote, one time" method. While popular demand may be for self-determination, the hard-liners (who are really NOT fundamentalists) have other agenda. And the West has done a pretty poor job making a case for co-existence, given its history in such places as Iraq and Syria. I cannot recommend the book enough as a quick, but not superficial way to "catch up" with how our Muslim brothers have arrived at the current impasse, and how terrorism seems to function within a peculiar and very important social structure.

Bernard Lewis continues his lifetime devotion to teaching about the Middle East and Islamic culture in this all too thin volume. As in his last book, *What Went Wrong*, here again Lewis focuses on raising the average readers understanding of this crucial region and its history. Unlike many so called academics, who argue from polarized positions on CNN and FOX News, Lewis takes a complex and nuance approach to this most complex of regions. Indeed, while everyone else seems to either want to condemn all Islam and its culture or apologize for the terrorists it currently inspires, this author writes from a position of respect and appreciation for this civilization all the while refusing to be blinded by base sentimentalism. Looking through Islamic history, Lewis explains how a preoccupation with a loss of status and power, a world view looking to blame outsiders rather than looking inward for critical self-examination, and a lack of democratic tradition, continues to radicalize the Middle East. The author further seeks to explain how Islamic culture holds a different world view from those in the west and that we need to understand this world view if we are to confront the threat of terrorism. Readers should be aware that this text is not an introduction. Lewis does not write for laymen. Assuming a certain baseline of knowledge, he tends to gloss over arguments or offer evidence in a sort of short hand, expecting the educated reader to understand references and names. In a world where most non-fiction is over written, Lewis is a throw back to an earlier age, writing thin volumes that are light on detail and heavy on argument. This does not detract from the quality of his work, but it does limit what a reader without a firm grasp of the fundamentals can learn from reading it. Still, there is much to be learned from this work, in particular his examination of the Wahabbi sect being exported by Saudi Arabia and the traditional self understanding of Islam as an "ascendant" religion that would spread over the whole world. Readers should also look to Lewis's earlier work, in particular *The Middle East: A Brief History* and *Islam and the West*, both essential reading for someone wishing to understand the modern Middle East.

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