

Briefly in the 1980s many Americans came to feel that the United States was losing its economic and technological pre-eminence to Japan. As it turned out, the 1980s were not Japan's moment, but at the time, this historical ripple caused some sharp reactions. Disgruntled autoworkers smashed Toyotas while corporate managers avidly studied the secrets of Japanese management.

But imagine reactions to a more dramatic situation, extended over centuries and compounded by a string of political, military, and commercial failures. And worse, attempts to import successful foreign ideas exacerbate the situation by tearing apart the social fabric. In *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, Professor Bernard Lewis shows that this is precisely what happened in the Middle East. The results for the region have been poverty, oppression and a bullying, stubborn radicalism. Although Professor Lewis, the West's leading authority on Islam and the acknowledged dean of Middle Eastern historians, wrote this slim volume before 9/11, it is prescient in describing the depth and nature of the anti-American sentiment prevailing in the Middle East. In the aftermath of September 11th, senior national security officials including Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld have been reportedly consulting Prof. Lewis.

But *What Went Wrong* is not a narrowly focused book on current affairs. Professor Lewis takes a broad historical view, beginning over 500 years ago when Muslim civilizations were the most sophisticated in the world. Muslim scholars had an impressive legacy that combined and expanded upon the knowledge of the ancient cultures of the Middle East and that of India and China. Muslim treatment of religious minorities was, by the standards of the time, moderate and European dissidents fled towards the relative freedom offered under Islamic rule.

These achievements were accompanied by military strength. The leading power of the Muslim world was the Turkish Ottoman Empire. In 1453, the Ottomans captured Constantinople, ending the ancient Byzantine Empire. In 1526, the Ottoman Empire conquered Hungary and in 1529 laid siege to and nearly captured Vienna. An organized political class and effective legal administration helped make the Ottomans the envy of Europe for a time. This was the Empire's peak.

At first the decay was on the fringes. Western merchants and warships took control of trade in the far East. This trade, particularly in spices, had been a major source of wealth to the Middle East, and its control by the Europeans had enormous economic consequences. This condition was made worse by the mismanagement of agrarian resources resulting from the absence of a true landed class. On the military side, Ottoman support for allied Muslim states to the north was ineffectual in the face of

Russian advances. In 1682, the Ottoman Empire launched a new war against Austria, laying final siege to Vienna in the summer of 1683. It ended as an utter defeat. A few years later, the Ottomans were expelled from Hungary. Defeat followed defeat.

As the Middle Eastern power that most directly confronted Europe, it was the Ottoman Empire that was the most directly affected by the rise of the West. Lewis also discusses Arab and Persian reactions, but for most of this period the Arabs were under Ottoman control and the Persians were somewhat buffered from the Europeans by the Ottoman Empire. (In fact the Persian Empire frequently made alliances with European powers in its wars against the Ottomans.)

Beyond the geopolitical ramifications, European successes raised a theological problem. Islam, according to Muslims, had superseded Christianity and Judaism and was the final revelation. The Ottoman Empire was a Muslim state, its law was the holy law of Islam, Shari'a, and so a theological problem had political implications for the state itself. For the Christian West to consistently prevail over an Islamic polity implied an inconceivable shift of divine favor.

The Ottoman leadership recognized that something was wrong. Lewis writes that Ottoman memorialists often asked, "Why is it that in the past we were always able to catch up with the new devices of the infidels, and now we are no longer able to do so?" Lewis carefully observes that the Ottomans did not ask why it was always the infidels introducing the new devices.

As Western military superiority became evident, the Ottomans were determined to rectify their ignorance during a series of 19th century reforms. European military experts were imported. Ottoman officials traveled through Europe, gathering information.

But the Ottoman Empire continued to recede in defeat. They searched for deeper causes, sending students to Europe, learning how different European society was from Middle Eastern society. After initial focusing on the military, they began looking at European technology and economics, followed by European politics and culture. As they adopted, adapted, and bought Western factories, educational systems, and administrative institutions that seemed successful, the Ottoman decline was not stemmed. Western forms were readily adopted, but the substance underpinning them was not as easily transplanted – and in some cases, particularly the political realm, the transplant proved malignant.

Historically the civilizations of the Middle East have not been democracies but there were boundaries as to what is permissible and obligations and understandings binding the ruler and the ruled. But importing Western politics, without the principles that underpinned them only damaged these bonds.

For example, in 1839 the Ottoman Empire declared that existing laws and rights applied equally to all Ottoman subjects. But the Ottoman Empire was an Islamic state and Islam defines the role of the unbeliever. When the unbeliever acquired a new “equal” social status, Islamic society was not able to accommodate this change. At the same time, this equality meant that the established perquisites enjoyed by the minority communities were lost, undermining the freedoms they had long enjoyed. Other Western political ideas like nationalism and democracy spread, and minorities began demanding self-determination, Westernized elites began calling for Parliamentary rule. When Parliaments were established however, they only made things worse. Powerless, Middle Eastern parliaments only whetted popular appetites for democratic government without satisfying it. The practical result of this Western reform was to undermine civil society and lead to the breakdown of the existing order.

This is only one arena in which imported Western ideas had a deleterious affect on the old order. Perhaps the most striking example is the impact of Western technology. Because only the rulers had the resources to invest in large-scale Western technology, rather than expanding individual freedoms, Western technology actually enabled some Middle Eastern rulers to build totalitarian states.

Middle Easterners did not limit their borrowing from the West to engines of military, economic, and political power. To grasp the impact of Europe’s rise on Muslim civilization, Lewis points out that the Ottomans not only reorganized their army along European lines, they also adopted European uniforms. Throughout Middle Eastern society aspects of Western culture were adopted. Basketball and soccer became popular sports. As early as the 18th century Western architectural influences began appearing on mosques. Despite the language barrier, Western literary forms were adopted and in time there were Middle Eastern plays and novels. The extent of this cultural borrowing gives some sense as to how deeply the rise of the West shattered the cultural self-confidence of the Muslim world.

The decline continued unabated. By every international measure of prosperity and freedom, the current Middle East places poorly. The exceptions are Israel (which was founded by Jews who emigrated from Europe) and Turkey. After World War I, the Allies disassembled the Ottoman Empire, and governed its Arab territories, but the Turks were able to establish Turkey as an independent state. Lewis discusses how Turkey then underwent a dramatic Westernizing and secularizing process led by its founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. It is now a democracy irreconcilable with the rest of the Middle East, which is dominated by dictatorships clinging to failed ideologies, whether borrowed or indigenous. And for all of their borrowing of western technology and ideas, most of the Middle East remains mired in poverty and intolerance. Perhaps most painfully, despite their tremendous focus on building military power, the states of the Middle East are regularly defeated when they challenge Western armies directly – as testified by the Gulf War and by Israel’s victories. The missing ingredient that underpins

Western (and the increasingly Asian) success remains a mystery viewed suspiciously in the Arab world.

Lewis does not provide a pat answer. Instead, he explores the implications of three areas in which Western ideas and practices have not made substantial inroads: women’s rights, science, and music.

The difference in the status of women between the West and the Middle East is an issue of substance, not form. Muslim travelers to 18th century Europe were struck by the apparent freedom of European women. In the mid-19th century a few Turkish intellectuals speculated that the comparative lack of freedom for women was depriving them of the talents of half of the population, and thereby putting them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis Europe. But, unlike establishing powerless Parliaments, freedom for women strikes at the heart of Muslim culture. Lewis writes, “The emancipation of women, more than any other single issue, is the touchstone of difference between modernization and Westernization... The emancipation of women is Westernization; both for traditional conservatives and radical fundamentalists it is neither necessary nor useful, but noxious, a betrayal of true Islamic values.”

Ottoman reformers recognized the benefits scientific research brought to the Europeans, and attempted to establish a modern science program. But little came of it. Today, outside of Israel, the Middle East plays a marginal role in scientific research. This failure is particularly curious in light of the tremendous scientific achievements of Muslim scientists during the Middle Ages.

Muslim rulers attempted to import Western music as a possible element of the West’s success. Music seemingly had fewer barriers to its importation than many other cultural imports. But Western music characterized by large philharmonic orchestras has not found a Middle Eastern audience (outside of Israel and to a lesser extent Turkey). Lewis explores whether this reflects something profound about the cultures of the Middle East:

A distinguishing characteristic of Western music is polyphony, by harmony or counterpoint.... Different performers play together, from different scores, producing a result that is greater than the sum of its parts. With little imagination one may discern the same feature in other aspects of Western culture – in democratic politics and in team games, both of which require the cooperation, in harmony if not in unison, of different performers playing different parts in a common purpose.

At the end of the book, discussing the ingredient Middle Eastern society seems to be missing, Prof. Lewis writes:

To the 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.

So far, most of the Middle East has not started on that road. Instead it has led to the all-too-human reaction of blaming others for the catastrophe, and that is the habit into which the Middle East has fallen. Paranoid conspiracy theories are trumpeted in the mass media, the United States and Israel are held responsible for Arab ills. The various ethnicities of the region blame each other. Secularists blame Islam, although Lewis discounts this because of Islam's prominent role in what was the leading civilization of its time. Islamists blame the secularists, and all who have deviated from the path of pure Islam. This line of thinking has motivated Wahhabism (a Saudi fundamentalist spin-off of traditional Islam) and more recently the Iranian revolution, the Taliban, and bin Laden.

In it, Lewis provides timely warning: "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..."

However, Lewis also notes that there is hope for the Middle East. Some have stopped playing the blame game and have started asking, "What did we do wrong?" and "How do we put it right?"

This is a crucial first step. But if the Middle East is to travel towards freedom, it must break the patterns of its history, while also bearing its burdens. *What Went Wrong* illustrates the weight of those centuries of failure on the modern Middle East.

Many prior works of Lewis over the past sixty years have described similar historical themes in greater detail, but *What Went Wrong* provides a compact, accessible and fresh summary for new readers and Lewis disciples alike. But as important as *What Went Wrong* is as a general primer for the Western strategist, it ought to cause more useful introspection among those readers who are the book's subject.