



What Went Wrong?

By Bernard Lewis
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Introduction

"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 new, expanding superpower in the East. If they can abandon grievance and victimhood, settle their differences, and join their talents, energies, and resources in a common creative endeavor, then 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 their own." --from *What Went Wrong?*

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In his new book, acclaimed historian Bernard Lewis explains the complex path to the present crisis. For many centuries, the Islamic world was at the forefront of human achievement—the strongest military and economic power in the world and a leader in the arts and sciences. However, the course of history began to change, and European nations made significant progress in the civilized arts. The balance of power and clash of religious ideology between Islam and Christianity that had been growing since the advent of Islam in the seventh century continued, and the question became for many Muslims, Where did we go wrong? How did the Islamic World lose its status as a world power? This work brings the reader through hundreds of years, showing how world events played out in the deteriorating imbalance between Islam and the West. Bernard Lewis describes the defeats of Islam by Christendom; the Arab loss of Spain and Portugal; the Tartar defeat in Russia; the Ottoman retreat in the Balkans; and the growing European presence in South and Southeast Asia. He addresses the critical historical events and political changes that have led to both a desire for retaliation and hatred for the Western world in many Muslims. He shows how the Middle East turned its attention to understanding European weapons and military tactics, commerce and industry, government and diplomacy, and education and culture. What emerges from this book is a portrait of a culture in turmoil. *What Went Wrong?* documents through a beautifully written narrative the differences between Western and Middle Eastern cultures from the 18th to the 21st centuries and is published at a time when it is now more important than ever before to study the history behind the current disastrous state of world affairs. **Discussion Questions**

1. The central truth of Islam has not changed since its beginnings in the seventh century A.D. Is this an impossible proposition in the modern world? How has terrorism grown out of these ancient beliefs?
2. Is democracy compatible with Islam? Is secularism compatible with Islam?
3. Medieval Europe learned a great deal from Islamic culture which once led the world in the arts and the sciences. Eventually this equation reversed itself, but the Muslims refused to avail themselves of culture and progress borne in other nation. How does this action of turning inward rather than looking outward contribute to the strongest, richest and most influential and international of the world's civilizations losing their former greatness?
4. The Muslim world was not totally without attempts at reform and renewal. In fact, Lewis details Ottoman, Arab and Iranian scholars who, from the 18th century onward, called with growing alarm for change. Their calls, sadly, went largely unheeded. Why? Toward what end?
5. Reading *What Went Wrong?*, one is reminded that there are many reasons for the humbling of Islam and the rise of the West, ranging from Europe's superiority at ship building, which allowed small countries like Holland and Portugal to become powers, to Islam's subjugation of women, which squandered the talent of half its population. What other reasons are there?
6. The fundamental reason for the fall of Islam, Lewis believes, derives from the major cultural differences between Christendom and the Islamic world. Identify these differences and discuss how they contributed to the fall.
7. In recent years, Princeton professor Bernard Lewis, one of the foremost living historians of the Islamic Middle East, has been demonized by certain groups. Lewis's longstanding interest in Muslim misconceptions about a modernizing Europe, his insistence on stressing the relationship between Islam and contemporary Middle Eastern terrorism, and his discussion of Muslim scapegoating of both Jews and Westerners were marked by some as proof of the bigotry plaguing the field of Middle Eastern Studies. Did the events of September 11th validate Lewis's views?
8. Lewis believes that the solution to the conflicts in the Middle East lies within the Muslim community. He feels that they can either continue on this "downward spiral" or that they "can abandon grievances and victimhood," and join forces with the rest of the world. Do you get a sense that Lewis believes the latter is possible? Are there other reasonable solutions in addition to what Lewis proposes?

About the Author: Bernard Lewis is the Cleveland E. Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies Emeritus at Princeton University. He is the author of over two dozen books, including *The Arabs in History*, *The Assassins*, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, *The Political Language of Islam*, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, *Cultures in Conflict*, *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2000 Years*, and *Music of a Distant Drum: Classical Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew Poems*.