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Jihad and the Weakness of the West

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Bernard Lewis, professor emeritus at Princeton University, is one of today's most influential experts on the Middle East. In the May 16, 2007 edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, Professor Lewis explains that the Islamic Jihadists and the West read history very differently.

The fact that Muslims and the West read the history of epochs like the crusades differently is hardly news. But Professor Lewis is looking at a far more recent historical development, and his argument is both haunting and fascinating. As he explains, the Jihadists wanted to launch a battle against their two great enemies — the Soviet Union and the West. In effect, they adopted a two-stage strategy. As they see it, the first stage was stunningly successful.

From his article:

For a long time, the main enemy was seen, with some plausibility, as being the West, and some Muslims were, naturally enough, willing to accept what help they could get against that enemy. This explains the widespread support in the Arab countries and in some other places first for the Third Reich and, after its collapse, for the Soviet Union. These were the main enemies of the West, and therefore natural allies.

Now the situation had changed. The more immediate, more dangerous enemy was the Soviet Union, already ruling a number of Muslim countries, and daily increasing its influence and presence in others. It was therefore natural to seek and accept American help. As Osama bin Laden explained, in this final phase of the millennial struggle, the world of the unbelievers was divided between two superpowers. The first task was to deal with the more deadly and more dangerous of the two, the Soviet Union. After that, dealing with the pampered and degenerate Americans would be easy.

We in the Western world see the defeat and collapse of the Soviet Union as a Western, more specifically an American, victory in the Cold War. For Osama bin Laden and his followers, it was a Muslim victory in a jihad, and, given the circumstances, this perception does not lack plausibility.

Professor Lewis explains that the Jihadists truly believe that their efforts toppled the Soviet Union. Furthermore, he warns that the Jihadists see the West as a far weaker enemy than the Soviets. Thus, these radicals see the West as poised for collapse. All that is needed is the unrelenting push of jihad.

Professor Lewis explains:

Stage One of the jihad was to drive the infidels from the lands of Islam; Stage Two—to bring the war into the enemy camp, and the attacks of 9/11 were clearly intended to be the opening salvo of this stage. The response to 9/11, so completely out of accord with previous American practice, came as a shock, and it is noteworthy that there has been no successful attack on American soil since then. The U.S. actions in Afghanistan and in Iraq indicated that there had been a major change in the U.S., and that some revision of their assessment, and of the policies based on that assessment, was necessary.

More recent developments, and notably the public discourse inside the U.S., are persuading increasing numbers of Islamist radicals that their first assessment was correct after all, and that they need only to press a little harder to achieve

final victory. It is not yet clear whether they are right or wrong in this view. If they are right, the consequences—both for Islam and for America—will be deep, wide and lasting.

Westerners (especially Americans) are prone to think that other peoples and groups think basically as we think. Professor Lewis knows better. He understands that a different reading of the past leads to a different understanding of the present — and different plans for the future.

As for the basic weakness of the West — are the Jihadists right? As Professor Lewis concedes, “If they are right, the consequences—both for Islam and for America—will be deep, wide and lasting.”

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