

## From European to American Orientalism

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### ABSTRACT

*This article highlights the transition of Orientalist scholarship from European academia to American academia. During post-colonial era Orientalist scholarship was dominated by British and the Europeans. In the twentieth century the banner of this scholarship was transferred to Americans. Europeans studied classical Islamic texts whereas Americans studied Islamic and Middle Eastern societies. Whatever the approach or origin Orientalist scholarship projected West as progressive and rational as compared to the East. Orientalist scholarship was short of objectivity and loaded with misrepresentations and continued to stereotype Arabs. The article also highlights the fundamental problems with the resultant academia. The key themes of nineteenth century European orientalist scholarship entered the twentieth century American Orientalist scholarship such as the interpretive framework which guided these studies and the bias against the East. In early twentieth century American Orientalist scholarship focused on the ancient Near East and showed less interest in Arabic and Islam but followed in the footsteps of their European predecessors in their approach. This article further draws attention towards the literature produced by leading European and American Orientalists such as D'Herbaltot, Goldziher, Schacht, Duncan Macdonald, Gibb, Coulson and Bernard Lewis.*

**Keywords:** Orientalism, orientalist scholarship, West, East, Islam, Middle East, Muslims

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Orientalism**

Orientalism is an ancient tradition of Western scholarship in which Islam and Arabs are portrayed as inferior and corrupted as against the West. During post-colonial era Orientalist scholarship was dominated by British and the Europeans. In the twentieth century the banner of this scholarship was transferred to Americans. U.S. State department and foreign affairs department worked closely with Middle Eastern Studies departments, Oriental Studies departments and departments of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at various American universities to establish their political hegemony over the Middle East and the Muslim world during the cold war. European philological approach was appropriated with American social science research agenda to study the Islamic and Middle Eastern societies closely. Europe manipulated Islamic texts through the use of philology and Americans manipulated Islamic societies through social science researches. Islamic texts were relevant to European Christians and Jews because of their deep rooted enmity for Islam and its revealed texts. On the other hand Muslim societies (specially the Middle-East) were relevant for the Americans to establish political and economic control as a Super Power and to exploit oil resources of the Middle East. According to Orientalist scholarship whether European or American, West is projected as progressive and rational as compared to the East. Orientalism thus is an ancient tradition of Western view of the East, or what we can call today as Europocentric.<sup>4</sup> European scholars, writers and others appropriated certain images and notions about the East

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<sup>4</sup> European view of the world.

and Islam from what they had come to perceive as Europe's distinctive past, refashioned them in keeping with their own contemporary concerns, and propagated them as relevant for their own time. It is this process of selective borrowing and creative recycling, which goes on even today that makes delving into early images and attitudes useful for understanding how Islam and the Middle East would come to be understood and portrayed even in the modern era.<sup>5</sup>

### **Orientalism during Colonial Era (15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Century)**

The first European colonization wave took place from the early 15th century (Portuguese conquest of Ceuta in 1415) until the early 19th century (French invasion of Algeria in 1830).<sup>6</sup> In this era Europeans colonized the Americas and created European colonies in India and Maritime Southeast Asia. The second major phase of European colonization also known as New Imperialism was primarily focused on Africa and Asia. During this period there was limited interaction between Muslim and European cultures even though there was plenty of trade between Europe and Middle East. During European Renaissance Muslims had to flee to Middle East and North Africa due to Spanish persecution which curtailed interaction between Muslims and the Europeans.

European interest in Arabic literature, Arabic science and Islamic philosophy was felt in the 16<sup>th</sup> century France and 17<sup>th</sup> century England. Over these years study of the Orient had been an enduring feature of Western learning. Western world used this knowledge of the Orient to their advantage and to gain control over them as Turner puts it, “*to know is to subordinate*” (Turner, 1994:21). West controlled the East by making them believe that they are backward and uncivilized, and it is only with the help, guidance and control of the West that they will be lead to the path of progress and welfare. D’Herbalot’s “*Bibliothèque Orientale*” was published in 1697 and it remained the standard reference work on Orientalist scholarship in Europe until the early nineteenth century. In *Bibliothèque* d’Herbalot calls Muḥammad “*author and founder of heresy which has taken on the name of religion, Muḥammadan.*”

Western writers studied Far Eastern and Near Eastern societies based on certain assumptions and were successful in creating a unique stereotyped image of Arabs and Muslims. This is expressed in the following passage:

*“However, despite academic and referential value of these studies, they largely contributed to creating a unique stereotyped personality for the orient in general and Arabs in particular. The accuracy and authenticity of that unique personality have never been verified by other sources. Even Arabs themselves, the subject of those assumptions, never got the chance to counter balance the orientalist approach.”*<sup>7</sup>

Thus the Western observers constructed the image of the Eastern culture and the same was translated to the Western readers.

*“Hence, the deep-rooted collective image in Western mind about Arabs and their culture and history has been largely relying on the representation which the orientalists provided throughout the years.”*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lockman, Zachery. (2010). *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The history and Politics of Orientalism* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. p. 8-9

<sup>6</sup> <http://medlibrary.org>

<sup>7</sup> Dr Tahir Ramdane and Dr. Merah Saud, (2011) ‘*Between Orientalists and Al-Jazeera: Image of Arabs in the West (Comparative Inquiry)*’ *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol.1 No. 4; April 2011. p.64.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73

This body of literature concerning Islam and Arab culture written by the West was short of objectivity and loaded with misrepresentations. Throughout Enlightenment and Modern ages Orientalists continued to stereotype Arabs. Prominent European philosophers such as Voltaire, Hume and Kant reflected racial discrimination against Arabs in their writings. Hume expressed this discrimination in these words:

*“There never was any civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor does even any individual eminent action or speculation, no ingenious manufacture among them (Arabs), no arts, no science.”*<sup>9</sup>

Hume’s statement reflects that Orientalists studied the Eastern and Arab culture with pre-conceived notions and, biases which reflects their sense of superiority over a nation projected as uncivilized and regressive.

To understand how the key themes of nineteenth century orientalist scholarship entered the twentieth century we should refer to Albert Howe Lybyer’s ‘*The Government of the Ottoman Empire in the time of Sulieman the Magnificent*’. As discussed earlier Renan’s views, Lybyer too strongly believed in the dichotomy based on racial characteristics rather than religion. Lybyer gives the example of Ottoman state as being divided into the ‘ruling institution’ and the ‘Muslim institution’ similar to the division of church and the state. Lybyer equates Turkish ruling institution with the ‘Turkish –Aryan’ and Muslim institution with the ‘Semitic race’.

### **Modern Orientalism (19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> Century)**

The period of “Modern Orientalism”, began when Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798 to 1801 in which scholars started taking keen interest in this field and it gradually developed into a relatively consistent field of study.<sup>10</sup>

Classical Arabic texts were translated into European languages which were then analyzed, criticized and exploited by the European scholars against the Arabs and Islam. This wealth of information and knowledge replicated by the West about the East is today termed as Orientalist scholarship. This scholarship flourished under European Imperialism and once again reinforced essential differences between the Muslim World and Europe. Two features of Oriental scholarship dominated this era, firstly threat of Islam and the Ottoman Empire and secondly the adoption of philological approach adopted by Europeans scholars in the course of their study of classical Islamic texts. Philology had two contradictory effects on the field; it catered distortion but affirmed that study of Islam had to be based on the original Arabic texts. It also paved way for incorporating ideological agendas of the West. The interpretive framework within which this body of knowledge was shaped had an imprint of hostile encounters between Muslims and the West in the past.

There were three fundamental problems with the resultant academia. Firstly, European scholars engaged in limited and selective reading of the original Arabic texts available to them. Secondly their studies focused on essentializing the cultural differences rather than minimizing it. Lastly the interpretive framework which guided these readings contained bias against Arabs, Asians and Muslims. Turner (1994:37) rightly mentions that,

*“Knowledge of the Orient cannot be separated from the history of European expansion into the Middle East and Asia”*

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<sup>9</sup> David Hume , ‘*Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*’

<sup>10</sup> Phillip Rushworth, ‘*Orientalism Revisited*’, at <file:///C:/Users/a/Documents/PhD,literature/Orientalism/2012-> last revised February 2012.

The harsh treatment of Arabs remained tainted by inaccurate myths and stereotypes, even when the scholarly orientalism emerged in the eighteenth century, a period which witnessed active colonial enterprise.<sup>11</sup> Britain and France produced leading orientalists during colonialism, this tradition was then passed to the Germans and finally to Americans.

### **British and European Orientalist Tradition**

Orientalists from Europe, Great Britain, Holland, Russia and Western regions worked closely with colonizers and military commanders and conducted many social and linguistic inquiries in the East. Their mission was primarily to belittle and reduce the contribution of Islam and Arabs to the progress of human civilization. In generalized and politically motivated tones, leading Western thinkers, scholars, historians, philologists and legal experts dominated the field of Orientalism. Ernest Renan (d. 1892), Max Muller (d.1900), Sir William Muir (d.1905), Ignaz Goldziher (d.1921), Theodore Noldeke (d.1930), Hurgronje (d.1936), Lammens (d.1937), Wensinck (d.1939), David Samuel Margolish (d.1940), Louis Massignon (d.1962) Guillaume (d.1965), Joseph Schacht (d.1969), Fueck (d.1974), Montgomery Watt (d.2006) , Juynboll (d.2010) are some leading European and British orientalists whose writings shaped the contours of study of Islam in the West.

Ignaz Goldziher (d.1921) was a Hungarian scholar of Islam, and a contemporary of Theodore Noldeke and Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje. He is considered to be the founder of modern Islamic Studies in Europe. His major publications are “*Vorlesungen uber den Islam*” (1910), later translated in numerous languages and in English as “*Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*”. “*The Zahiris*” (1884) written in German language and later translated in other languages which was the first scholarly discussion on *usūl u fiqh* in a Western language. The chapter he wrote on Islamic law in his *Vorlesungen* gained more popularity probably due to the general nature of the work and the issues raised in it about Islam. In “*Muhammedanische Studien*” he showed how *Hadith* reflected the legal and doctrinal controversies of the two centuries after the death of Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) rather than the words of Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him) himself. He was a strong believer in the view that Islamic law owes its origins to Roman Law. Goldziher raised numerous issues on Islamic Law in his writings Published in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Goldziher’s studies on Islamic law were extended by a German orientalist Joseph Schacht (d.1969) in his two major works, “*The Origins of Muḥammadan Jurisprudence*” (Oxford, 1950) and “*An Introduction to Islamic law*” (Oxford, 1964). These works together became the basis of Islamic Legal Orientalism in academic writings on Islamic law. Thus with the writings of Ignac Goldziher another dimension was added to ‘Orientalist Scholarship’ that is ‘Legal Orientalism’.

### **American Orientalist Tradition**

In early twentieth century American Orientalist scholarship focused on the ancient Near East<sup>12</sup> and showed less interest in Arabic and Islam. To study the ancient Near East philological approach was adopted by the orientalists. In 1919 Henry Breasted, an American,

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<sup>11</sup> Dr Tahir Ramdane and Dr. Merah Saud, (2011) ‘Between Orientalists and Al-Jazeera: Image of Arabs in the West (Comparative Inquiry)’ *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol.1 No. 4; April 2011. p.12.

<sup>12</sup> Term Near East was coined from the Western perspective of European writers . The earliest use of Near East is dated 1856. In 1958, U.S. State Department explained that the terms “Near East” and “Middle East” were interchangeable, and defined the region as including only Egypt, Syria, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar. The first official use of the term “Middle East” by the United States government was in the 1957, which pertained to the Suez Crisis. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles defined the Middle East as “the area lying between and including Libya on the west and Pakistan on the east, Syria and Iraq on the North and the Arabian Peninsula to the south, plus the Sudan and Ethiopia.”

established Oriental Institute at University of Chicago and in 1927 Princeton University started the Department of Islamic Near East headed by a Christian Arab Philip Hitti (1886-1979) who then started a program of “Arabic and Islamic Studies” at Princeton, he introduced the field of Arab culture studies to United States.

Duncan Macdonald (1863-1943) an American orientalist was the first expert on Islam in American academia. He is considered as the father of the field of Islamic studies in America. He studied Semitic languages at Glasgow and Berlin before teaching at Hartford Theological Seminary in U.S. He studied Muslim Theology and believed that stories in “*One Thousand and One Nights*” reflected Muslim piety. Throughout his writings Macdonald seems to be essentializing the difference between an Oriental and Occidental mind. Macdonald thinks that Muslim mind is unable to comprehend complexity.

Hamilton Gibb (1895-1971) the next most famous Orientalist in Anglo-American Orientalism proceeded to explain why Muslim societies behaved in accordance with Macdonald’s dictum. He was of the view that Middle Eastern societies are devoid of reason and sense of law. In 1940s Gibb and Harold Bowen were commissioned by London based Royal Institute for International affairs to study Western impact on Middle East, as a result of their research they published two volumes on the nature of Islamic society titled, “*Islamic Society and the West: A Study of the Impact of Western Civilization on Moslem Culture in the Near East*”.<sup>13</sup>

To Gibb, Muslim mind is incapable of comprehending complexity and further attempted to explain the reasons for “lack of law” in Islam. He also talks about “obscurantism of Muslim theologians” and the atomism of Muslim imagination. He was a Scottish historian and learned Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic. During WW-1 he joined British Royal Regiment of Artillery in France and was awarded war privilege Master of Arts in 1918. He succeeded Margoliouth as professor of Arabic and came to Harvard as visiting professor in 1950. He later became Director of Harvard Center of Middle Eastern studies- became a leader of the movement in American universities to set up centers of regional science, bringing together teachers, researchers and students in different disciplines to study the culture and society of a region of the world.

By mid twentieth century that is after the World Wars and during Cold War era Americans had started influencing the world politics in all its spheres so the Orientalist tradition is dominated by American scholarship in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. American academy accepted most of the European paradigms for the study of Islam. From the beginning of nineteenth century till the end of World War II America dominated the Orient and approaches it as France and Britain once did but it is the British Orientalist tradition that left the most lasting imprints on the American field of Islamic Studies.

After the Second World War American policy makers identified the need of experts in languages and cultures of Middle East and Islam for intelligence and Foreign Service. At this time United States was projecting its role as super power and increasing its global involvement. The increased interest of US in Middle Eastern Studies and Islam overlapped with the growth of Area Studies in US. In 1958 National Defense Education Act (NDEA) was passed by Congress. The law provided large scale government funding for higher education, especially for Area Studies and languages. Area Studies in turn gave largest incentive to Middle Eastern Studies and Islamic Studies in US. The objective of area studies initiative was to apply social science methodology to understand the cultures and regions of the world.

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<sup>13</sup> Gibb, H. A., & Bowen, H. (1950). *Islamic society and the west A study of the impact of western civilization on Moslem culture in the near east*. London: Oxford University Press. part 1, 1950, and part 2,1957.

Before passing of the NDEA, Ford Foundation established the Foreign Area Fellowship program in 1951 and a Division of International Training and Research in 1952 with a mandate to establish university area studies centers. By the time it was terminated in 1966, the Division had awarded grants of \$270 million to 34 universities. By comparison cumulative NDEA funding of area studies centers from 1959-1987 amounted to only \$167 million of which 13.4 percent or about \$ 22 million were allocated to Middle Eastern studies. Besides Middle East area studies centers Ford also funded the establishing of Center of Arabic studies in Cairo for language training.<sup>14</sup>

In 1951, five leading universities of US established centers of Middle Eastern Studies. When US universities established Middle Eastern Studies and Area Studies departments Gibb suggested that methodologies of social sciences should be adopted instead of philology to develop a better understanding of cultures. But it was a difficult task to find scholars who were trained in social science research. Thus all leading American Universities hired European Orientalist to head Area Studies and Oriental Studies departments. These Europeans were trained in philology and languages of the Orient and not in the discipline of the social science. Gibb moved to Harvard University in 1955 where he directed the center for Middle Eastern Studies. In 1958 Austrian Orientalist Gustave Von Grunebaum (1909-1972) was hired by UCLA. German scholar Frantz Rosenthal was hired by Yale in 1956 and another German Scholar Joseph Schacht (1902-1969) was hired by Columbia University.

Thus the newly established centers of Middle Eastern Studies failed to apply methods of social sciences. Gibb suggested that there is a need to have the orientalists and social scientists work together, but sadly though the traditional orientalist approach was carried forward by American orientalists which treated Islam as an ahistorical monolith.

By 1996 Area Studies was under attack from scholars in several fields who in general argued that area studies had been an invention of the Cold War, reflected US political interests and Eurocentric prejudices, and now that Cold War was over ,the area studies has lost its rationale and value. Numerous charges were levied at area studies scholars such as imposition of national agendas through scholarly writings. It was argued that the orientalists through their writings are denigrating other societies that have almost always been politically and economically subordinated. There must be some truth in these charges as Micheal Foucault says that political power and position and the generation of knowledge are inevitably entwined.<sup>15</sup>

Joseph Schacht (1902-1969) a British-German professor of Arabic and Islam at Columbia University in New York was a leading Western scholar of Islamic Law. His ground breaking publications "*Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*" (1950) and "*Introduction to Islamic Law*" (1962) earned him great fame. It would not be wrong to say that Joseph Schacht stands at the nexus of European, British and American scholarship. Schacht was born in Germany and was the youngest Professor in University of Germany Albert Ludwigs Universitat in Breisgau at the age of 25, he then moved to Britain during WW-II, taught at Oxford University in 1946 and was naturalized as British subject in 1947. He moved to Columbia University in 1959 and taught there till the end of his life.

Noel J Coulson (b. 1928) is considered to be a leading Anglo-American Orientalist whose special interest was Islamic law. He was a visiting professor on Islamic law in leading

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<sup>14</sup> Timothy Mitchell, '*The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science*' ed. By Szanton, D. L. (2004). The politics of knowledge: area studies and the disciplines. Berkeley: University of California Press., p.111.

<sup>15</sup> Tim Mitchell. '*The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science*' ed. By David Szanton, (2004) '*Politics of Knowledge; Area Studies and Disciplines*' University of California Press, p.23.

American universities such as Pennsylvania, UCLA, Harvard and Chicago. He was born in Britain and served as a Professor of Oriental Laws in University of London and was appointed as member of editorial board of Arab Law Quarterly. His remarkable contributions are “*A History of Islamic Law*” 1964, and four other works on Islamic law. Following national service as intelligence officer in Parachute Regiment on Cyprus and Suez, he returned to Oxford in 1952 as research student of Islamic law. He was appointed as a lecturer in Islamic law in SOAS and was a visiting professor of Islamic law.

Bernard Lewis, born in 1916 in London and still alive studied at University of Paris and SOAS London. He earned his name as British American historian, scholar in Oriental Studies, and Professor Emeritus of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. Bernard Lewis is recognized for his prodigious influence in policy circles but his influence in intellectual and academic field is minimal. His advice on Middle East is sought by policy makers of US administration. Professor Edward Said of Columbia University and author of *Orientalism* (1978) characterized Lewis work as a prime example of Orientalism. He questioned scientific neutrality of Lewis’ work on the Arab World and contends that:

*“Lewis” knowledge of the Middle East was so biased it could not be taken seriously and claimed “Bernard Lewis hasn’t set foot in the Middle East, in the Arab world, for at least 40 years. He knows something about Turkey, I’m told, but he knows nothing about the Arab world.”<sup>16</sup>*

Further in the “Clash of Ignorance” Edward Said considered that,

*“Lewis treats Islam as a monolithic entity without the nuance of its plurality, internal dynamics, and historical complexities.”<sup>17</sup>*

Bernard Lewis too acknowledges the academic weakness of Orientalism. To him, Orientalism has not emerged as a purely academic discipline. It has been devoid of scientific methods of investigation. European orientalists have been unable to overcome the language disability and build cultural bridges between East and West. Bernard Lewis asserts that the backwardness of the Middle East is due to their religion and culture.<sup>18</sup> This assumption of Lewis is opposed to the post-colonialists views according to which the major problems of the region are political and economic mal development due to 19<sup>th</sup> century European colonization.

Bernard Lewis also exemplifies Said’s critique on the relationship of scholarship to power. In 2002, Lewis’ book *What Went Wrong?* Appeared which explained 9/11 to an eager American audience as the decline of Islamic civilization. In it he warned “*that the suicide bomber may become a metaphor for the whole region*”.<sup>19</sup> Some influential books by Bernard Lewis are *The Arabs in History* (1950), *The Middle East and the West* (1964), and *The Middle East* (1995). Three of his books which were published after 9/11 are *What Went Wrong?*, “*The Crisis of Islam*” and “*Islam: The Religion and the People*”.

Ahmad Jawad in his honors thesis “*The Great Orientalist Bernard Lewis*”<sup>20</sup> critically analyzes his two recent books “*What Went wrong*” and the “*Crisis of Islam.*” He contends

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<sup>16</sup> Said, Edward, “*Resources of Hope*,” Al-Ahram Weekly April 2, 2003. Retrieved April 26, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Said, Edward, “*The Clash of Ignorance*” The Nation October 22, 2001. Retrieved April 26, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis, Bernard, *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Modern Middle East* ( London: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 156-180.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis, B. (2002). *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 159

<sup>20</sup> Jawad, Ahmed, (2012). “*The Great Orientalist Bernard Lewis*” Outstanding Honors Theses. p. 108.

that even with Lewis's eloquent and scholar-like writing ability and his neat citations, there are severe flaws in his writing and his ability to convey historical facts in an objective manner. The aim of historical study is to be able to observe the actions and reactions that made the world as it is today, and from these observations gain a better understanding of other peoples, cultures, and belief systems in order to allow them to coexist in peace and harmony. Lewis's writing does not offer this understanding, rather, it drives his Western Christian audience to see Arabs and Muslims as an ancient opponent, as an "other" that rivals the Christian world in an epic "clash of civilizations", and in this way Lewis seeks to legitimize the policies and military campaigns of his benefactors, the influential men of power who seek what is arguably imperialistic control and hegemony in the Middle East.<sup>21</sup>

Muhammad Samiei compares Lewis, Esposito and Kepel in his PhD dissertation (2009) in which he concludes that Lewis is a persistent follower of the old fashioned school of dualism.

*"His dismissal of the diversity and dynamism of Islam, his reliance on historical evidence and his reluctance to look directly at modern Muslim societies, his exaggeration of the religious part of Muslim identity, his overestimation of radicalism and his discourse of rage, clash and fear, his positivist methodology with his self-assured objectivity: all of these elements are the heritage of his Orientalist predecessors."*<sup>22</sup>

In the light of the above discussion it can be concluded that 18th and 19th century European Orientalist tradition was passed on to 20th and 21st century American Orientalist approach with the only difference that the philological and hermeneutical study of the classical texts of Islam was replaced by Social Science research agenda and Islam was replaced by Muslim societies. The essential paradigms and interpretive frame work which guided Orientalist scholarship whether European or American, remained same.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 108.

<sup>22</sup> Mohammad Semiei, (2009) 'Neo Orientalism? A Critical Appraisal of Changing Western Perspectives: Bernard Lewis, John Esposito and Gilles Kepel' PhD thesis awarded by University of Westminster. available at <http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>.



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