Orientalism Polemics

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Introduction

The debate regarding Orientalism was still raging when Edward Said died in September 2003. This debate stirred up the Arab intelligentsia for the last quarter century around this issue: How should we relate to Orientalism, that discipline which was created in the West and deals with research of the Middle East, North Africa and Islam, and at whose knee many of us and our children were educated. This polemic, as is typical of all polemics, adds color, interest and drama to intellectual life. However, it also has value above and beyond its unique topic. It raises fundamental questions regarding inter-cultural contact, understanding the "other," and especially understanding the fundamental orientation of the Arab world.

The cause of the debate was the book Orientalism by the Palestinian-American scholar, Edward Said, published in New York in 1978 and quickly translated into Arabic and many other languages (to Hebrew in 2000 by Am Oved publishers). It is strange that a book that furiously attacks Orientalism as a pseudo-scientific tradition that sullies the names of Islam and Arabism, should stir up such a storm. Similar arguments to the ones raised by Said, such as Orientalism's close ties with the missionary movement and colonialism, have been prevalent for about a hundred years in the circle of enlightened persons the Middle East, and especially among Ulama [Islamic men of religion], activists in the Islamic movements and even in the Pan-Arab movement. And now an enlightened Arab arrives (from Protestant roots) who made his mark on the academic establishment in the United States, and accords these theories importance and a stamp of approval. After all, Said earned his reputation in the field of Western literature (Joseph Conrad, deconstruction). His work on Orientalism benefited from these. The amazing thing is that the book actually received intense scrutiny, especially in the midst of secular Arab circles whose cultural outlook is close to Said's. And opposition has continued, even gaining renewed momentum in the 1990's, despite rebuttals from Said and his followers.

Said's deconstrucive approach to Orientalism draws its strength from the fundamental queries posed by the book: How do we portray cultures different than our own? What is a culture different than our own? Is the concept of a "different" culture (or race, religion, or civilization) a useful concept? While critiquing or deconstructing what Westerners wrote about Islam (especially in Britain and France), Said employs a method (in the footsteps of Michel Foucault) that shows that the West endeavors to achieve power and control by establishing hegemony within a particular field of knowledge. Knowingly or unknowingly, Said maintains, Orientalism has served from time immemorial as the excuse for the West to gain control over the East (that is, the world of Islam). The West achieves this, in part, by using a method that prefers abstract generalities about the East, especially those that are based on texts that represent classic Eastern culture, over direct testimony from contemporary Oriental reality. This results

in anachronistic readings of texts such as the Koran with the expectation that they will provide explanations of daily life, as if this life had been virtually fossilized for about fourteen hundred years, or at least since Islam achieved its definitive form in the twelfth century. Thus Islam has "earned" a sort of academic mummification by Orientalists, and its inferiority is justified by its inability to withstand the challenges of modernity. This leads, by necessity, to dependence on the West: colonial dependency in the not-so-distant past, and neo-colonialism in the present.

Early Secularist Reviews of Orientalism

Orientalism provided ammunition to all those circles motivated by hostility to the West's economic, political, and cultural hegemony, both in the past and the present. These circles include the Muslim establishment, Islamic radicals and Pan-Arabists. But a few of the secular Pan Arabists, along with some in leftist or secular circles, felt uncomfortable with the book from the beginning, despite the positive reviews it received in Western, leftist intellectual circles.

Three salient figures set the tone for the reaction of the secular-modern circles to Said's book: Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, Nadim al-Bitar and Fu'ad Zakariya. Al-Azm, a Syrian philosopher who received his education at Yale University, authored a book about the Arab defeat in 1967 and its cultural roots. A year later he wrote an agnostic critique of Islamic thought (1969) that stirred great controversy and led to his arrest and the loss of his position at the American University in Beirut. Nadim al-Bitar is a Lebanese sociologist who was educated in the United States and maintains a left-wing Pan Arab outlook. He is also known as an outspoken critic of religious traditions whose position led to threats on his life by Islamic extremists forcing him to escape to North America. Fu'ad Zakariya is an Egyptian music critic and philosopher who became well known as a commentator. His articles and books are dedicated to rationalistic criticism of Arab thought, first the Marxist and Nasserite schools, later radical Islamic thought. His name appears on several of the black lists that are distributed among extremist groups.[1]

Azm, Bitar and Zakariya agree with Said that Orientalism, as an intellectual enterprise, has direct links with colonial rule in the Middle East. But they express a concern regarding the comprehensiveness of the subject of Said's book and its methodology. Said himself estimates that about sixty thousand books about the Arabic East were published between 1800 and 1950 alone. If this is the case, Bitar asks:

How could Said generalize and claim that Orientalism in its entirety is characterized by animosity to Islam? How could he use such absolute sweeping statements, without qualification, and then claim that his generalizations are scientific? Has he actually read, in depth or even superficially, all sixty thousand of these books and didn't find in them anything to contradict his discoveries regarding the nature of Orientalism and the stance of inferiority-from-birth of the East?

In fact, Said goes further, claiming to reveal the essence of Orientalism, which is applicable to anyone who has ever written about the East, in the widest meaning of the word. Such a claim implies that Said

has read, skimmed or studied tens of thousands of books that were published about the East in general, and found nothing in them to contradict his theory. Did Said read all these books? And if he did not read them, how can he make such sweeping generalizations? These questions are especially compelling given Said's claim of a Foucauldian methodology. To be true to Foucault's approach necessitates the massive effort that Bitar mandates for Said, or at least obligates Said to limit the scope of his conclusions to specific points in place and time.

Al-Azm also expresses incredulity in this regard, and wonders why Said didn't limit himself to the already monumental task of studying modern Orientalist research rather than seeking Orientalist roots in the writings of Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides and Dante. In his search for an all-encompassing explanation, Said appears to be captive to old methodologies of the history of ideas that are characterized by impressionism and focusing on a few salient authors (in Said's case, about twenty Orientalists), who supposedly represent an entire intellectual enterprise.

This leads to the most problematic issue for these early Arab critics — Said's ahistorical conclusions. Accordng to Said, Orientalism has always possessed the same essence throughout history. "Instead of examining the specific conditions that existed in Western Europe that engendered Orientalism," al-Bitar continues, "He displays it as possessing deep roots in Western history, as exemplified by the mistaken, even racist opinions that were commonly held regarding the East from the days of the ancient Greeks. Orientalism is, therefore, a propaganda enterprise that was intended to distort the image of the East [...] thus emphasizing the superiority of the West." Said, then, does to Western Orientalism what he accuses Orientalism of doing to the East, thereby perpetuating the same myth of "essential traits" that he attempts to destroy. He recreates an essentialist dichotomy, "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet."

As left-wing thinkers, these writers are hypersensitive to the subject of essentialism having contested essentialist trends in religious thinking, as well as similar trends in the mythologies of the Pan-Arab nationalist movement. It was, therefore, an unpleasant surprise to discover that someone they had considered to be a progressive ally (even though he lived abroad), was breathing life back into the despised essentialist doctrine. The fact that he did this in relation to the enemy was only of little comfort.

These leftist thinkers pay close attention to Said's arguments not because of any good will towards Orientalism , but out of their concern for the intellectual health of the Arab world. Al-Bitar claims Said's arguments are "of [an] unscientific and arbitrary nature" obscuring the reality that should be confronted, and over-simplifying complex data. Orientalism, he suggests, should be viewed in the historical context of the nineteenth century that was imbued with Western racism and ethnocentrism. And even then, he asks, was this characteristic of all of Europe?

Zakariya, Azm, and Bitar and criticize the way Said ignores facts that do not fit into his theory, and note that this approach can be highly subjective. For example, Said does not mention that Western criticism of Islam was part and parcel of the Enlightenment critique of religion in general and most particularly of Christianity. These critics are even more angered by his total disregard for the accomplishments of Orientalist research. Al-Azm comments ironically that this approach effectively condones and justifies Orientalism: If the only inter-cultural discourse that is permitted is subjective, then Orientalism "only did what any culture would do under similar circumstances." Said's book claims that there is no trend of Orientalism that is free of bias (with possibly two or three exceptions). So how is the Orientalism of the last hundred years to be understood? How can one deny, writes al-Azm, that despite rendering services to Imperialism, Orientalism has made important contributions to scholarship in deciphering the Islamic past? These contributions cannot be denied regardless of whether the major researchers were sympathetic to Islam (such as Louis Massignon), neutral (Gustav Fleischer) or hostile to it (such as Henri Lammens).

When Said is hard pressed to produce an alternative to Orientalism, he calls for researching Arabs and Muslims as individuals, and denounces Orientalism that deals with "texts and not people." But this alternative does not impress Said's critics from the Arab left. Zakariya notes that philological methodology, which relies almost completely on texts, was the accepted form of research in the humanities in the nineteenth century. Thus Orientalism was, at least partially, the product of its time and especially of the German university that was the model for emulation in all fields until the rise of Hitler. This school of thought strongly favored the history of ideas and the research of elite groups as they are expressed in major documents (philosophic, legal, scientific etc.). In Zakariya's view, this was the basis for the elitist emphasis in Islamic research, not some evil imperialistic scheme. This focus declined with the wane of German hegemony in the humanities, and the opening of Islamic research to the methodologies of the social sciences. In other words, researchers started to view Islam as a way of life as it actually takes place, with changes and nuances of time and place.

Even Orientalism's connection with imperialism was a product of the times. Orientalism belonged to the Western humanistic tradition, and was closely linked in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to research of Christianity. In the nineteenth century certain ties based on commercial control developed into old-style colonialism and later imperialism (based on military-political domination/dominion and, afterwards, economic exploitation). These connections were unavoidable with Great Britain, France, Russia, Holland and Belgium, although more tenuous with Germany.

Undeniably, Orientalism facilitated remorseless control and occupation. Intelligence and Orientalism were, and sometimes still are, tightly linked. But, Zakariya asks, is the product of such a combination, necessarily negative in terms of its contribution to the pool of human knowledge? An intelligence man is required to provide detailed accounts and correct explanations that will benefit his bosses. If he occupies himself with propaganda he will mislead the political echelons. Of course this information may have contained mistakes and prejudices, but these were not usually caused by a deliberate intent at

misrepresentation. There are, of course, some Orientalist findings and theories that relate to the negative aspects of Islamic history, but this does not necessarily prove slanderous motives on the part of the researchers. Zakariya cites one example: The Orientalist attitude towards Islam despots which is confirmed by left-wing revisionist Arabic historians as well as by radical Islamic philosophers.

Critique in Context

Azm, Zakariya and Bitar had many disciples that added details to their thesis but did not essentially change the bases of their arguments against Said. Academic researchers, on the other hand, prefer to invest their time in creating alternative paradigms rather than in rebutting Said's arguments. They critically examine specific products of Orientalism. The Lebanese Walid Nuwayhid, for example, studies the contribution of European Orientalism to the study of historical Islamic thought, while the Iraqi Hasan Ali al-Saghir investigates the contribution of Orientalism to the study of the Koran.[2] They have discovered that Orientalist research was stimulated by diverse motives that were variously imperialistic, missionary or purely scientific. But Nuwayhid and Saghir refuse to deduce from this that these studies should be disqualified a priori. Instead they are willing to examine them "cautiously and suspiciously," but with a measure of openness, revealing important lacunae in previous studies and unmasking hostile researchers who tended towards distorted interpretation. These academics expose respectable researchers of high esteem who produced perfunctory translations or wild conjectures "that do not give credit to researchers of their stature." In general, however, they believe that Orientalist research is of great value: cautious, intellectually honest and possessing strict methodology. The findings of Orientalist researchers who disclosed primary sources and deciphered handwritten texts are very precious, even if their interpretations don't always withstand the test of time. And the validity of the interpretations is not connected to the affinity of the researchers to imperialism. Saghir compares the French and German translators and researchers of the Koran and concludes that there are no essential differences between them, even though France penetrated the Muslim world a hundred years before Germany.

The role of the German Orientalists in the nineteenth century is particularly interesting; they seem to fit Said's category of the "academic effort to mummify Islam." However, the German approach cannot be attributed to an imperialistic presence in Islamic countries. In fact, German Orientalism of the nineteenth century viewed Islam as a classical culture — dead but possessed of great value and worthy of the same philological scrutiny and attention granted to studies of ancient Greece and Rome. In the process they performed "funeral services" which presumed to bring the remains of a noble culture to eternal rest, accompanied by great respect and veneration. The British and French, though they tried to emulate the prestigious academic tradition of Germany, could not allow themselves the luxury of classicist purity. Instead, the pressing needs of their empires dictated their research of Islam as a living culture.

The importance of contextualization becomes clearer when we consider the analogy of German nineteenth century research of Islam to "Judaic studies" that developed in Germany during that same

time period. Germany produced top quality research in both fields within the same century. The researchers of Judaism, although primarily Jews, were unabashed classicists who viewed their own creed as a dormant or dying religion in a period of enlightenment and assimilation. Some of the prominent researchers were active in both the Islamic and Jewish fields (Moritz Steinsheneider, Ignatz Goldziher, Abraham Geiger). The "mummifying approach" undoubtedly narrowed their field of vision, but did not prevent them from attaining impressive achievements. Their view was limited not only by classicism, but also by the idealistic worldview in Germany of the nineteenth century that led to essentialism. These phenomena were completely unrelated to imperialism and racism.

Aziz al-Azmeh, a Syrian scholar living in Britain who publishes in English and Arabic, deals with different aspects of this cultural context. Aziz reveals the "cultural archives," or prejudices about the West, that Muslim travelers and geographers brought back to the Islamic world after a glimpse of the West during the Middle Ages. In other words, Arabs also had, and still have, assumptions and stereotypes about the "other"—assumptions that are not always substantiated and certainly changeable. Some are rooted in the past; some are dependent on situation and context.[3]

And it is evident that the reactions of Said's critics are also based on context, in particular the current worries of the secular-modernistic camp. Of greatest concern is the intensification of the phenomenon called "inverted Orientalism," (the term was coined by al-Azm). This approach asserts that there is an authentic Islamic (or Arab) nature or spirit which originated in the seventh century (or even earlier) that is basically unchangeable over time, spiritual and idealistic in essence, and the converse of Western materialism. This is not a new concept, but with the rise of Muslim fundamentalism it became very fashionable among the ex-modernists and secularists who were disenchanted by failures of Pan-Arabic economic development. Said's brand of ahistory has a clear fundamentalist parallel in the notion that "Islam is appropriate for any time or place, and its permanent essence can be implemented in the individual and in society as a whole." A book like Orientalism, therefore, can be used to vilify the West and secular modernism while bearing the standard of the East and Islam.

Even in progressive Arab countries, writers without an iota of fundamentalism will try to prove scientifically that the Arab language bears unique values of Arabism from time immemorial, values that cannot be imitated just as the Koran, source of the Arab-Muslim creative genius, cannot be emulated.[4] Some even speak about the "cultural mission" of Arabism to all of humanity. The East-West dichotomy, spirit-versus-substance, only facilitates the strengthening of these arguments. The main danger, as perceived in Arab secular circles, is that receptivity to modernism will be damaged beyond repair. Said's critics claim that a civilization grows by borrowing from other civilizations, and by excommunicating the "other" risks stagnation. Thus it turns out that Said gives a modern seal of approval to cultural isolation that Islamic extremists extoll. The important Lebanese commentator Hazem Saghie, whose writings are read all over the Arab world, claims that Orientalism as a hostile, uniform phenomenon is only a flight of Said's fancy, but the arguments for its existence facilitate radical Islam.[5]

Said also unwittingly serves "reverse Orientalism"with his wholesale defamation of the supposedly innately aggressive and mendacious West. He is also likely to strengthen other problematic characteristics of Arabic national thought, as cited by Hasan Hnafi: impressionism, preferring deduction over induction, apologetics and a tendency towards idealistic and metaphysical explanations. These are, by the way, the mirror image of the infamous qualities Said portrays in Orientalism.

But the argument of Said's that most angered secular circles was his assertion that all cultural criticism that comes from within Arab society serves as a sort of "Arabic Orientalism," a concept that has turned into an insulting epithet within Pan Arab and conservative circles. Modern secular Arab thinkers feel themselves cut to the quick. "He writes that these are second-hand analyses; let him explain to us why they are so inferior," writes Bitar with irony. "Is it because they try to free (the Arabs) from the shackles and relics of the past?"

Said expresses his reservations regarding the attempts of serious Arab thinkers over the last thirty years to confront the past and the influences of the past on the present. This is the main difference of opinion between Said and most of the left-wing, liberal Arab thinkers, including those who never expressed themselves publicly regarding his book. Said is party to those thinkers and researchers who believe that modernism is only a superficial, affected pretense in the Arab States, and limited, at best, to instrumental borrowing, at worst to borrowing of gadgets from the modern world. This "superficial nature" avoids the borrowing of modern values that are closely tied to technological changes. It avoids dealing with the way some of these values contradict Arab heritage, instead preferring to "bridge" the gap by use of vague formulaic statements. Like so many modernist Arab thinkers, Said claims that so-called revolutionary and progressive regimes will not bring essential changes. The Arab world, he claims, will only solve its problems through cultural revolution and total severance from the past.

But here the similarities end. Said denies any relevance of the Islamic past to the understanding of the Middle East of our days. In a television program on the PBS network in 1977, Said claimed that the Muslim civilization of the past no longer has significance in the modern context any more than European events of the seventh century contribute to our understanding of the United States today. But modernist Arabs have reached the opposite conclusion: that the past does have a strong hold on contemporary Arab society.

The relevance of the past in understanding the present is the point of intersection for secular Arabs and most Western Orientalists. Despite their major differences in point of view, the Western Orientalists and secular Arab modernists share a strict methodology, an awareness of historical context and respect for principles of factual evidence. Al-Azm relates to this in his comments on Said's criticism of the British Orientalists, MacDonald and Gibb. These two British scholars were doubtless engaged in interpreting Islam for the West or to be more precise—for the benefit of the British Empire. But, this

does not a priori disqualify their analyses, says the Syrian philosopher: after all, the British researchers were concerned with supplying as realistic an assessment as possible regarding Islam.

Arab social critics, therefore, find themselves on the same side of the fence as most of the Orientalists in issues that are related to the effect of the Arab past on the Arab present. This is true even though their goal is to move from theory to praxis, from diagnosing reality to changing it. But Bitar counters: "Said hints that any criticism by a Western Orientalist about the East smacks of racism. This means total negation of history, because contradictions and differences of opinion are found in every historical phase and in every culture and nation. Said is, in effect, telling us that any thinker who criticizes the East … is, of necessity, a stooge for Orientalism as he understands it." This tough answer leads us to believe that the "Arab thinker" referred to, is Bitar himself.

 Said writes (Orientalism p. 310-311) that the Orientalist generalizations about Arabs tend to be more detailed when they present a very critical picture especially with respect to the Arab family, which is controlled by men and is an influential force in society. Al-Azm responds: Isn't the man-woman duality one of the central dichotomies in the Arab culture? This duality does not mean, as Orientalists were wont to say in the past and some still say in the present, that this essential framework will never change. It is clear that changes have and will continue to take place. The role of the woman sheds light on the family itself, which is the principle fortress of traditional Islamic values that are handed down from generation to generation. Liberal and left-wing researchers who studied the extended Arab family discovered that it is a microcosm of the entire society. For example, patterns of subject-ruler relations are imbued with Islamic family-like values such as authoritarianism (based on age and gender), excessive dependence on the social structure, helplessness vis-à-vis those in power, and a lack of personal initiative. The main instruments for enforcing obedience on the individual are manipulation of the emotions of disgrace and guilt. The norm is social conformism; in patterns of speech, behavior and social discourse. To stand up for your beliefs is a vice.

Said (Orientalism, p. 308, 312, 331) claims that passivity is one of the tell-tale signs of Arab society that wily Orientalists like to write about. But Arab social critics are very concerned about this trait of passivity partly because of its political implications: it is a major stumbling block in inculcating a political culture based on participation, which is a critical condition for progress in democratization. The last few years have seen many articles and books that deal with the "passivity of the Arab masses" and the ease with which rulers are able to manipulate their subjects. Field studies such as that of Kamal Manufi on the political culture of the Egyptian village,[6] verified the persistence of the conception that "bad government is better than no government," a world-view that has been preached by the Ulama for hundreds of years.

Fu'ad Zakariya dealt with the failure of the Arabs to take advantage of the golden opportunity of the hike in oil prices [in the Seventies] in order to attain lasting economic prosperity. He places part of the blame on a lack of serious planning, which he ascribed to an ancient perception of the future as being a

hidden domain, holy and forbidden, a taboo subject that should be left to Allah, "which He, alone, knows." George Corm, an economist with sensitivity to cultural issues, also ascribes an important role in explaining the ongoing historical dependency and backwardness of the Arab world to partiality for policies that are past-oriented over those that are future-oriented.[7]

The presence of the past is not only an objective phenomenon but a subjective one as well, on the cognitive level, leading to an excessive preoccupation with the Islamic past and especially its Golden Era. This preoccupation is mainly dedicated to apologetics, to singing the praises of a past culture without attempting to understand it. Left-wing historians and their ilk, the social critics, devoted considerable effort to uproot intellectual trends that are founded on apologetics and externalization of blame. The Arab secular thinkers are very worried by Said's support of these trends that are flourishing today due to Muslim fanaticism regardless of whether that support is unintended. In Said's eyes, al-Bitar maintains, all the evils of the Arab world arise from Orientalism without regard for such mundane factors as the socio-economic, political and ideological makeup of the Arab world or its cultural historical backwardness.

It is not surprising that left-wing thinkers who repented their secular ways (such as Adil Hussein, Munir Shafiq, Anwar Abdel Malek) adopt Said's arguments with such enthusiasm. Objectively, they joined what Azm sarcastically calls the "Islamania trend." These "crazies for Islam" are passionate about "essentialism," authenticity, and searching their roots for the natural, spiritual superiority of Islam. The danger in their approach is the possible severing of cultural connections with the rest of the world, thus bringing about the stifling of creativity and the banishment of modernity. In addition, their worldview is likely to deliver a death blow to the already slim chances of democracy. Arab fundamentalism, supported by the "Islamaniacs," views democracy as a regime that is not compatible with "real Islam." Fundamentalism is also likely to strengthen the already-existing inclination to discriminate against women, and to reinstate discrimination against other inferior social categories such as non-Muslims. Finally, fundamentalism is likely to put an end to Pan-Arabic nationalism and change it into a meager branch on the Islamic tree. Ethnocentrism and obscurantist religiosity would rule the day. Azm ironically adds: "And why not also reinstate the tribal-religious community system from Ottoman times, and even perhaps slavery!"

Said's critics felt almost betrayed since they had assumed that Said was one of them, secular and modernist. And in certain ways, he was. The difference is that the liberal and left-wing intellectuals grapple with reality, do not delude themselves, and do not employ verbal machinations to discount the influence of the past on Arab society of the present. They do not flinch from self-criticism and they flagellate the left-wing Arab for his inner schizophrenia: that he has not completely freed himself from the legacy of the past, and he lacks direct affinity for the masses. They are painfully aware that many intellectuals from their own camp have become so estranged that they have withdrawn from society altogether, or have subordinated themselves to the regime. In this gloomy state of affairs, the loss of another potential ally is a blow to morale: hence, the especially bitter reception to Said.

The Gulf War and its Aftermath

In the wake of the Gulf War, the exiled Iraqi social critic Kanan Makiya (who used the pen name of Samir al-Khalil) incisively criticized the Arab educated classes that did not confront the reality of the Iraq regime and the significance of the conquest of Kuwait. He likened this to the same myopia they exhibited earlier to the terrible slaughter of the civil war in Lebanon or the killing in the Iran-Iraq War, and instead, preferring to pin the blame on the intrigues of foreign agents. They never described the true internal nature of the Iraqi totalitarian regime and were duped by its trappings of secularism and progress; they never portrayed its aggression towards its neighbors a long time before the invasion of Kuwait, and used cosmetic descriptions to downplay the invasion itself. In this general context Makiya takes Said to account for the manner in which he portrayed, in press articles, the Gulf crisis.[8] Over ten years after Said chose to direct his arrows against Western conceptions of the Orient in his book, he chose again to direct his arrows against Western media, and especially the United States, for the manner in which it covered the Gulf crisis. Said claimed that it was based on Orientalist clichés, ignorance and distortion. Makiya retorts that even if this accusation was true of the United States, it was not true for Britain where the media coverage was serious and even-handed, and certainly much better than that of the Arab States (an issue that Said does not mention at all).

But Kanan Makiya is especially incensed by Said's attempt to link the political and military polarization in the Gulf to the cultural gap between Arabs and the West; that is, that the Gulf Crisis exposed the deep-rooted, satanic Western agenda for destroying Arab civilization. Makiya disagrees: instead, he believes, the Gulf crisis exposed the deep-rooted crisis within Arab civilization itself, and we have no need to externalize the blame. He mocks the euphemistic expressions Said uses to whitewash the Iraqi invasion and his total disregard of the Iraqi army 's behavior in Kuwait (plunder, confiscations, rape, expulsion, terror, etc.). Instead Said emphasizes the fact that most of the nations in the region have no firm historic legitimacy, and this seems to indicate that he accepts Saddam Hussein's invasion as legitimate. He also ignores the fact that Saadam Hussein did not find a single Kuwaiti diplomat—not from the opposition, not even from those he had supported financially—who would establish a puppet government. Said chooses to ignore all these difficult internal issues and instead, focuses on the West—as if only the West is to blame.

But what can the West be charged with, asks the Iraqi expatriate. This is not the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the attack of the West on Egypt in 1956; this is a case of an Arab state annexing a neighboring state. And Said does not relate to the nature of the invading state or its form of government at all.

Perhaps we should assume for the sake of argument, says Kanan Makiya, that Said simply chooses to write about culture and not politics. He is correct in writing that the West largely downplays the importance of Arabic literature and hardly translates it into Western languages. The West's interest in the Middle East also waned in the Eighties (as expressed by the number of books published on the

topic). But how does all this connect to the Gulf crisis, to Saddam's behavior and the response of the West? And why doesn't Said mention the problem of the Arab publishing world such as censorship, government control of the distribution network, and the decreasing number of book-buyers in Arab countries due to the high cost of books compared to the eroded income of the intelligentsia?

Makiya does agree that there is a connection between the cultural crisis and the Gulf crisis, but not as Said portrays it. Saadam Hussein invaded Kuwait on the basis of his cold-blooded calculation of the situation: deep dissonance between political reality and the linguistic politics in the Arab world, "the same language that Edward Said uses, unfortunately, despite his wide-ranging literary education." The Arabs have long lived in one reality and talked about another, while the civilization wants only to pursue scapegoats and is in no hurry to reveal its defects publicly. Saddam understood this gap only too well, and thus forcibly pushed Arab politics into a situation of chaos. Makiya does not exonerate the West either. He blames the West for helping Saddam in the Eighties and ignoring his infringements on human rights. But why did the lion's share of the Arab intelligentsia have no sensitivity to Saddam's actions? Why did Said himself express no sensitivity?

A New Middle East?
The Nineties signaled an end to the intra-bloc conflict, and a "New Middle East" appeared on the public agenda. Pan-Arabism declined and the concept of the national state became established. The beginnings of the Israeli-Arab peace process brought forth the question: Is it was possible to establish a miniature model of the "New World Order" in the Middle East, as suggested by Gorbachev and Bush? This vision of a New Middle East was founded on the understanding of reciprocal dependence of the countries regarding security, economics, ecology as well as appreciation of the dangers intrinsic to armed conflict, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and as a result—the critical need for a peaceful solution to inter-state conflicts. Egyptian commentators from the political center and left-of-center (Mustafa al-Fiqqi, Lutfi al-Kholi, Taha Abd al-Alim) first introduced the idea, and additional followers were then generated in Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon and the Gulf states. The proponents of the New Middle East regard all the states of the area as legitimate entities (including Iran, Turkey and Israel), but they view the new order as a means for Arab integration in the world order and economy, an integration that is a critical prerequisite for modernization. Their model for imitation was not Western Europe, but East Asia, an area where states were able to reach mutual agreements and peaceful solutions to inter-state conflicts despite ethnic and religious heterogeneity. This allowed them to invest their energies in export-directed economic development rather than pinning their hopes on economic integration. For these reasons, proponents of Middle Easternism see it as an answer to Islamic extremism: both to the extremists' vision of an unending jihad, as well as to economic distress and poverty, which spurs people to join the ranks of the extremists.

Over ten years after he wrote Orientalism, Said became one of the opponents of Middle Easternism because he viewed it as a surrender to American hegemony in the post-1989 world, a hegemony draped in the false "New World Order." He also resisted Middle Easternism because he strongly opposed the

Oslo Agreements both as another expression of surrender to American hegemony and a sign of the unwillingness of Yasser Arafat's "Vichy government" to continue their historic struggle due to inner weakness and burnout that brought them to sell the rights of their people for a song.

The most outspoken Middle Easternists see a strong connection between these positions and Said's criticism of Orientalism. Saghie, in his book The Cultures of Khomeinism and in numerous articles in the Al-Hayat newspaper, strongly criticized not only the aid that Said unwittingly offers Islamic extremists and other "essentialistic" schools of thought, but also his contribution to unrealistic political expectations. Saghie finds Said lacking in sensitivity to the dilemmas of economic backwardness and to the threat of weapons of mass destruction. More than that, he sees a hardness of heart in Said's response to the dilemma of Palestinians and the necessity to recognize the (relative) right of the Israelis and forge an historic compromise.

Abd al-Mun'im Said, director of the Ahram Center for Strategic Studies, said that Said extolls absolute principles and ignores the fact that human life, and therefore politics, are relative domains. "If the Palestinians would only have accepted the principles of relativity, compromise and gradual development, their situation today would be much better off; for example, there would be fewer [Israeli] settlements [over the green line]." But Said insisted upon an absolute confrontation between Arabism and imperialism. In witty irony, this Egyptian author wonders about the right of Said "who sits in an ivory tower in New York" and Said's disciples who live in luxury apartments in Beirut, Damascus and Cairo, far from the trials and tribulations of Gaza and Hebron, to seal the fate of a complex historical process. They refuse to accept the Oslo Agreement only because the peace process does not progress according to some ideal model they hold.

Lutli al-Kholi, a prominent commentator and proponent of Middle Easternism, deals intensively with the connection between essentialism, political absolutism and cultural isolation.[9] He asks, "Is the West always rigid, aggressive and hostile to us? Is the West still the root of all our ills?" He continues, "Anyone who does not distinguish between the absolute and the relative is condemned to propagandist thinking about matters of state: strident, fraught with illusions, futilely consuming vast amounts of limited energy. The result? Important Arab issues gain absolutely nothing." Once the Arab states achieve independence from their former Western colonizers, the responsibility is theirs alone: the reasons for their ills are internal and functional.

It is time that we re-evaluate our relationship with the West, writes al-Kholi. It is not clear that even in the past the West was always hostile, even if they were exploitative. And times have changed. "The old West is dead, or at the least went through fundamental changes and should be regarded with openness and reason. As we face the twenty-first century, the Arabs need the West more than the West needs the Arabs. This is the complete reversal of the situation during the imperialistic era and during the cold war." The dangers of isolation and marginality lie in wait for us. If the Arabs sink into voluntary

cultural isolation and "essentialist" hostility towards the West and towards modernity, the chances are great that these dangers will be realized.

Towards the end of 1996 and during 1997, a similar argument erupted with the publication of the book of the Syrian thinker, George Tarabishi, which countered the award-winning treatise of the Moroccan Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri, Critique of Arab Reason.[10] Additionally, Tarabishi accused Jabiri of developing an essentialist approach regarding the fundamental nature of Arab (Islamic) reasoning that requires a different path to modernization. Tarabishi accused Jabiri of cultural isolationism, opposition to universal values, and ahistoricism thereby serving the interests of the Islamic radicals. Jabiri's followers then accused Tarabishi of representing "the patronizing Western viewpoint," and Jabiri joined the fray to say that since Tarabishi is a Christian, he has no valid right to express an opinion on the Arab-Muslim tradition. We wonder what Edward Said would have thought about this, as he, too, was a Christian.

Thus the debate about Orientalism continues to reappear as a divisive force in the secular-modernist camp. It is a kind of litmus test that allows us to distinguish among priorities, between apologetics and self-criticism, between externalizing and accepting blame. It even appears in the debate about the feasibility of a Liberal Islam.

The proponents of Liberal Islam rely on Orientalist findings from Ignatz Goldziher's generation, which represents Islam as a dynamic, developing tradition. They want to create changes in Islam today in order to conform to the modern era of globalization, pluralism and democracy, and they deny Said's arguments that Orientalists attempt to deprive the Arab-Muslim world of its authenticity. But they would rather not add to the trials and tribulations of their precarious standing by taking on a cultural icon such as Said.

The only intellectuals in the Middle East who publicly disagreed with Said were Ridwan al-Sayyid, disciple of the German Orientalist Van Ess, and Said Mahmud al-Qimni; the former in more cautious terms, the latter, more emphatically. They both maintain that Said's doctrine deprives the Arab intellectual of invaluable cultural resources available from Orientalism, at least in the last hundred and twenty years, even if these resources are sometimes flawed. The rest of the Arab liberals are even more guarded. We find plenty of footnotes in their works that refer to Orientalist writings and evidence of critical derivations of Orientalist thinking. However, this is far from the direct confrontation of the secular Arab intellectuals with the challenge of Said.

 Objections were also raised by Islamic thinkers such as Muhammad Arkoun and Jamal al-Din Bencheikh from the Magreb [northwest Africa]. They, too, acknowledge that a large number of Orientalists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suffered from a sense of cultural superiority that was typical of their time. However, they too believe that this bias did not necessarily affect the quality of most of the Orientalist studies, especially those hand-written texts that have only recently

been published. And, a change occurred in the Orientalist approach during and with the conclusion of de-colonization: Researchers began to accept that Islamic culture has attained important achievements even during the new/modern period — achievements worthy of research, and which reject the former approach that saw the Golden Period (eighth to eleventh centuries) as the only classic period worthy of attention. The last vestiges of condescension and cultural superiority have virtually disappeared among Orientalists, partly due to the influence of the anthropologists who cast doubt on the homogeneity of Islam and a recognition of its uniqueness among world civilizations, based ostensibly on cultural continuity.

Akoun and Bencheikh take a dim view of the positivistic movement of the nineteenth century that dominated Orientalism and emphasized the wholesale collection of data for its own sake, for descriptive and not analytical purposes. They saw a general methodological backwardness in Orientalism that was not related to imperialism, but was the result of overly conservative research, excessive specialization, and an aversion to multi disciplinarity.

Classic Orientalism has many more shortcoming, including an over-emphasis on the history of ideas and representations, but—as Arkoun, Bencheikh and Ahmad al-Madani write—Orientalists have corrected these as they began to place their ideas in a social-economic contexts.

Arkoun and his colleagues—much like al-Azm and the secularists-- claim that we need to be receptive to a selective and critical, rather than wholesale, absorption of Orientalist fruits: not generalizations and excommunications but exacting discussion of individual points within the context of ongoing dialogue with the major creative forces in the West. Excessive pursuit of Orientalism and its sins and failures—real or imagined—only serves to draw attention away from fundamental problems in the Muslim world, most of which are rooted in the Muslim world itself and are not the results of external manipulations or influences.[11]

Despite Said's death, polemics about his book are very much alive, in the West as well as in the Arab world . But the Arab debate is quite different--in context, themes, emotions and quandaries-- from the corresponding debate in the Western republic of letters. It illuminates, above all, the predicament of the Arab liberal today.

[1]Nadim al-Bitar, The Boundaries of National Identity [Arabic], (Beirut: 1982).
Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, Orientalism In Reverse [Arabic], (Beirut: 1981).
Asm,The Excommunication Mentality [Arabic], (Beirut: 1992).
Fu'ad Zakariya, "The Critique of Orientalism and the Crisis of Contemporary Arab Culture," Al-Fikr (Paris-Cairo: 1986).
[2]Muhammad Hasan Ali al-Saghir, Orientalists and Quranic Studies [Arabic],(Beirut: 1983); special issue on Orientalism, in Al-Fikr al-Arabi (Beirut) Jan.-March 1983; Walid Nuwayhid, series of articles

in Al-Hayat (London) June 30 – July 4, 1995; and the series by Michel Juha, in Al-Hayat, 16-19 Sept. 1993.

[3]Aziz al-Azmeh, The Arabs and the Barbarians [Arabic], (London-Nicosia: 1991). cf. George Tarabishi, Orient and Occident [Arabic], (Beirut: 1977); and his articles in Al-Hayat Feb. 27-28, 1997; see also the public debate between Said and Makiya as reported in Al-Hayat, Oct. 1, 1992.

[4]The left-wing Lebanese critic, George Corm's interview with Dirasat Arabiyya (Beirut) Jan. 1980, p.44; Cf. Mahdi Amil, Heart for the East and Reason for the West ? [Arabic], (Beirut: 1986).

[5]Hazem Saghie, The Cultures of Khomeinism [Arabic], (Beirut: 1995).

[6]Kamal Manufi, The Political Culture of Egyptian Peasants [Arabic], (Beirut: 1980).

[7]Fuad Zakariya, 'The Future of Arab Futurology," Al-Fikr al-Arabi al-Mu'asir, May 1981; G. Corm, Economic Dependency [Arabic], (Beirut: 1980).

[8]Samir al-Khalil (pseudonym of Kanan Makiya), The War Which Doesn't End [Arabic], (London: 1991). Cf. his book Cruelty and Silence, London 1991; Sa'd al-din Ibrahim, Getting Out of the Historical Predicament [Arabic], (Beirut: 1992).

[9]Lutli al-Kholi,"The Arabs and the West," Al-Hayat April 23, 1996. Cf. Usama Ghazali Harb, "Middle Easternism," Al-Ahram, July 12, 1996.

[10]G.Tarabishi, The Massacre of the Heritage [Arabic], (London: 1993); id. Reason as a Concept [Arabic], (London: 1996); Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri, Critique of Arab Reason [Arabic], (Beirut: 1990).

[11]Al-Fikr al-Arabi al-Musa'sir (summer 1982); Al-Fikr al-Arabi (Jan.-March 1983), interviews with Muhammad Arkoun, Jamal al-Din Bencheikh, Ahmad al-Madani.; Majallat al-Ijtihad (Beirut), nos. 51/52 (2001/2).