CHAPTER VII

Conclusion

The study has dealt with the contemporary Islamicist discourse in the United States, focusing particularly on the last two decades. One of the main findings of the study is that American discourse on the Arab and Muslim worlds is far from a monolithic phenomenon. Divergent trends proceed from differing viewpoints, present different pictures and reach different conclusions. However, this diversity is not a clash of opposed worldviews pitted against one another in an endless combat. The two trends dealt with in the thesis—i.e. the Orientalists and neo-Orientalists on the one hand and MESA social scientists on the other—proceed from a common theory of hegemony as a legitimate quest and a “manifest destiny” for the United States. The ultimate question of hegemony is not radically questioned even by scholars who disagree with much of the American project of global domination, and who espouse liberal attitudes towards the Third World. This is also evident in the much apologetic content to Israel in the writings of scholars such as John Esposito. In other words, both trends—and by extension, the think tank-proliferated and the media discourse—are manifestations of a common outlook of the role of the United States in the world and the place of the Arab world in relation to the United States.

The Orientalist discourse has proved an inseparable ingredient—and a central one at that—of the hegemonic project of the United States and Israel in particular and the West in general. This discourse emanates essentially from within the hegemonic structure of the West, rather than being an innocent value-free intellectual endeavor. The huge investments in explicitly politically-oriented knowledge reveal the overriding concern for hegemony. This is also evidenced by the massive and
sustainable efforts to thoroughly explore and keep track of new developments so as to read and manage the future through them. Moreover, the disproportionate preoccupation with relatively minor events and recasting such events in the molds of politics and bringing them to the foreground intentionally or unintentionally as representative of the complicated reality are manifestations of power-channeled discourse.

The historical legacy and its twin, obsession with power, result in dealing with Islam as an urgent concern, rather than undertaking a patient intellectual inquiry that transcends the descriptive and prescriptive ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ which are meant for enlightening the policy-makers. This involves studying Islam and Muslim societies for the sake of studying them rather than for the aim of drawing political implications and recommendations. It requires avoiding the violent projections of concepts, categories, and experiences that cannot fully grasp the inner dynamics of Islam and Muslim societies.

American discourse on Arabs/Muslims and Islam is overwhelmingly political. Even those works that do not overtly and directly deal with politics are nonetheless politically inspired. They are unconsciously determined by political concerns. Moreover, the various discourses fail to deal with the Arab world and Islam in their specific historical and political contexts. The Western worldview is always, or at best the standard, yardstick by which Arab and Muslim contexts are weighed and gauged. This standardization of the Western Weltanschauung dwarfs the Arab/Muslim experiences, reducing them to caricatures. In such a state of affairs ideology gets a friendly milieu in the discourse. Arab experiences are judged vis-à-vis those ideologies and the extent to which they are deemed to affect those ideologies.
American discourse on the Arab world and Islam defies any single definition. Various positions can be discerned with regard to the millennial Orientalist tradition. These can be summarized as post-Orientalism, anti-Orientalism, and Orientalism par excellence. Scholars embracing and advocating the Zionist ideology not only follow the path of classical Orientalism, but also defend that tradition and struggle to make it the universal standard in the study of the Arab world and Islam. This is so because Orientalism—or diluted versions of it—sustains their ideological positions; their ideologically-inspired attitudes cannot withstand the scrutiny and detached analysis of the social sciences. Social science theories would render that ideology untenable and would reveal its inner contradictions as well as its bankruptcy and oddity in relation to reality. Since the Zionist ideology is sustained by a series of myths, only an equally myth-accommodating system of thought would perpetuate those myths and guarantee their survival.

This trend is represented by Zionist scholars such as Bernard Lewis, Daniel Pipes, and Martin Kramer. The variations between these scholars in approaching Arab and Muslim affairs have nothing to do with methodology; all of them share a common look in this regard. Rather, those variations have to do with those scholars’ erudition in Arab and Muslim affairs. Erudite scholars such as Bernard Lewis can invoke classical texts and episodes to explain the present due to his copious knowledge of Arab tradition and history, whereas a scholar such as Daniel Pipes—who shares Lewis’s outlook and conclusions—suffers limitations of knowledge of classical texts and history to the extent that he is prone to committing disastrous errors when dealing with the past. For instance, it is odd for an expert on Arab and Muslim affairs to be ignorant of the very basic information that a first-year B.A. student would know such
as the confusion over the name of the third and fourth caliphs after the Prophet (Pipes, 2003: 50). This lack of knowledge, let alone erudition, is mainly due to lack of interest in knowledge as such and the pursuit of sketchy incidents to put them in the service of ideology and political ends. In fact, Pipes admitted his shortcomings in this regard, complaining that Sharia is “so detailed, so nuanced, [that] it requires a lifetime of study to master” (Ibid., p. 11).

Hence, the neo-Orientalists—as they are sometimes called—are Orientalists lacking the erudition of their classical mentors. They make up for that deficiency by presenting carefully contrived and selective accounts of contemporary events and developments, and prop up their discourse with generalizations about Arabs/Muslims and Islam. The pictures they draw are supported at times by invoking selective accounts of the past, at others by drawing on marginal voices which are unrepresentative of the wider Arab and Muslim panoramas, and quite often by sheer capitalization on stereotypes and canonical representations rampant in the friendly milieu of popular culture and public awareness at large.

In a nutshell, the classification of these scholars into Orientalists and neo-Orientalists is of minor significance as it does not preclude, or even mitigate, their identification with classical Orientalism. This is evidenced by the enormous efforts of these scholars to restore Orientalism and make it the only viable and methodologically as well as epistemologically correct discourse. Kramer’s emphasis on the point that the field of Middle East studies in the United States has degenerated into “error” is instructive in this regard (Kramer, 2005). It is also evidenced by the numerous overwhelmingly polemical critiques of Middle East studies as pursued by MESA social scientists and the intimidation campaigns that go hand in hand with these
polemics. This approach is based on attributing a cultural essence to the Arab and Muslim worlds and presenting that essence in terms of culture and civilization as explanatory categories.

On the other hand, within the ranks of MESA, scholars largely go beyond Orientalism. They reject the outmoded approach of the millennial discipline and the concomitant demonization of Islam and Muslims it engenders. This is due to several factors: the unique trajectory of American Middle East studies as a field based essentially in the social sciences; the unique trajectory of American empire and hegemony as determined by post-World War II geopolitical milieu; the timely and overdue critiques of Orientalism; and the nature of the field as a patriotic and political endeavor providing empirically valid knowledge beneficial—enlightening rather than confusing—to policy-makers. Moreover, this was facilitated by the rise of Third World voices and the resultant breakdown of Western monopoly of determining the discourse as well as the recognition of Third World intellectuals and scholars as interlocutors and contributors to knowledge about their own societies and their relation to the imperial metropolis. Developments in other area studies programs and the recruitment of an increasing number of academics from Arab and Muslim backgrounds contributed to the transformation of the field as well.

However, over-politicization of the field has rendered some aspects of the Orientalist tradition resistant to change. Certain aspects have proved enduring. Scholars tenaciously held to some biased and prejudiced attitudes and images of Arabs and Muslims. In other words, residues of Orientalism persist in MESA scholarship both consciously and unconsciously. These residues of Orientalism are fanned by overreactions to developments in the Arab and Muslim worlds and are
invigorated by the centuries-old suspicion and fear. Islam is almost always presented as a threat and/or challenge, always viewed with fear and suspicion. Residues of Orientalism are also enforced by the aggregate sum of cultural awareness which is projected into analysis. These have proved stumbling blocks to scholars. The Western worldview is also taken by all scholars as the ultimate point of reference, especially the secular outlook which determines the orientation of—and navigates—the discourse. The secular worldview is taken for granted and is seldom, if ever, problematized. This has a detrimental impact on the study of various phenomena in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Nonetheless, despite the remaining Orientalist influences, on the whole, MESA scholarship on the Arab and Muslim worlds demonstrates an example of the exit from Orientalism and the commencement of the post-Orientalism phase. Some MESA scholars even go a step further and avowedly adopt anti-Orientalist attitudes. The receptive propensity to contribution from scholars who are not essentially Middle East experts and engaging criticism proactively have rendered the transition from Orientalism to post-Orientalism a smooth and strikingly rapid process.

The ‘knowledge as power’ paradigm is as relevant today as it was in the mid-1940s when the field was established. The very rationale for the existence of the field has always been—and still is—its political relevance. Based in the social sciences, the area studies discipline focuses to a large extent on the current situation, especially its political and economic manifestations, the repercussions of that to American dominance, and the implications for America’s place in the global system. The overriding concern of Middle East experts in the United States has been the preservation of American hegemony.
The modest attempts to go beyond the political have not gained their desired impact. Political exigency and political relevance lurk behind the scenes in treatment of obviously non-political topics, and more often than not intrude into the analysis, only to destroy more than to enlighten. Where political concerns are not explicit, a broader worldview takes on. This is especially evident in judging sociopolitical developments in the Arab and Muslim worlds. A festive embrace of secularists, no matter how unpopular and unrepresentative of their societies they might be, governs the discourse.

Preconceptions and expectations engulf MESA scholars into an unquenchable search for an “Islamic Reformation” on the European model. Some of them enthusiastically endorse the idea since it would bring the Arab and some other Muslim-majority countries into the folds of the Western worldview, which is deemed, though often implicitly, to be superior to the Islamic weltanschauung. Others are not interested in the final outcome, but pragmatically view the emerging scenarios as a threat/challenge to be preempted and a problem to be resolved. In the case of the Orientalists and neo-Orientalists, the threat hypothesis is predominant, and tough measures, especially suppression by force, are the solution. To these, the Western worldview, implanted wholesale, is the way to modernity—and not merely modernization—in the Arab and Muslim worlds. A unifying link of the two trends dealt with in the study is the standardization and canonization of both Western and Arab/Muslim experiences; thus, narrowing choices and negating history and diversity.

Apart from the discourse of Orientalists and neo-Orientalists, which fans hostility towards Arabs/Muslims and Islam, MESA scholars have done disturbingly little to counteract the negative view of Arabs and Muslims in American
consciousness. They are not to be faulted for that, however, since this is in the first place the responsibility of Arab and Muslim governments, organizations and intellectuals, as well as that of indigenous Americans of Arab and Muslim backgrounds.

The much obsession with hegemony taints the discourse on the Arab world with complicity to the idea and practice of empire. The Zionist partisan scholars endorse the idea of empire and vigorously defend it. Their discourse demonstrates strong advocacy of aggressive American policy towards Arab and other Muslim-majority countries. Demonization—even denial—of the other and apologia for classical imperialism figure prominently in their discourse. Bernard Lewis is exemplary in this regard. In the discourse of this trend, the Muslim world and the West are supposedly implicated in a crucible of perpetual conflict, with the Muslim world as always the aggressor. In the view of these scholars, Islam has always posed a serious threat to the West and will continue to do so unless it is suppressed by force.

MESA scholars, on the other hand, present a milder picture. Yet still, hegemony occupies a central position in their discourse. Both trends dress their ideas in the language of “national interest” and compete for gaining the attention of the policy-makers to their views. The partisan scholars define American interests in a way that is dictated by their ideological affiliation and congenial to Israeli interests as they see them. In other words, their first priority is Israel; the United States comes only next. This explains their unmitigated and militant advocacy of wars and destruction of what Israeli leaders consider to be threats to Israel’s existence. The invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 is such a case in point. Ample evidence shows that had it not been for the Zionist lobby in the U.S., that invasion could not have taken place.
MESA scholars, by contrast, emanate from a view of American interests that takes these as a priority of American policy. These scholars identify ‘American interests’—a euphemism for enforcing American hegemony and imperialism—in relation to the redefinition of power in the context of global geopolitics in the course of the last two decades, as expounded by Joseph Nye, Jr. To them, “soft power” and “hard power” are complementary. “Soft power” is as important as “hard power,” and sometimes even more important since it dovetails well with the nature of global politics and is symmetrical with the information revolution. A benign policy that does not compromise American supremacy, however, increases leverage and guarantees safer and longer American dominance. Whereas the ideological partisans define American interests in the short term in tandem with the dictates and necessity of their ideological exigency, MESA scholars look farther afield into the future and focus on America’s long-term imperial well-being.

American Islamicist discourse over the last two decades is produced in the context of unipolarism. The collapse of the bipolar system following the disintegration of the Soviet Union called for the search for a new enemy. The “green threat” or Islam superseded the “red threat” or communism as the enemy of the West and indeed, through Western projections, a threat to global peace and well-being. Much jargon was incorporated from the Cold War lexicon to explain the Muslim world and Islam, and new terms and concepts were devised. The view of Islam as the enemy and threat to the West is not new, however. In fact, it dates back to the Middle ages. The historical legacy is rehearsed and built upon to suit the contemporary context. Yet, there are variations in this regard between the two trends dealt with in this study. The partisan scholars present Islam as the source of the problem. Islam is
portrayed in their discourse as a creed of fanaticism, preaching terrorism and is not content of anything short of global domination and destruction of the West. Their accounts draw heavily on conspiracy theories. Ideology guides and determines their discourse, turning it into a sheer outspoken lobbying effort. They violate the rules of scholarly inquiry in this lobbying endeavor, and indulge unrestrainedly in fabrication, distortion, intimidation, and other such practices that constitute a part of lobbying activities. Moreover, they identify the actions of a radicalized fringe in Muslim communities with Islam as a faith. The “Islamic threat” becomes a canonized explanatory category; and policy prescriptions are drawn in view of a serious threat and a resolved enemy.

MESA scholars, on the other hand, swing between the notions of an “Islamic threat” and “challenge”. What binds both trends together is their logocentric view, their notion of Islam and the Arab and world as a problem to be resolved. Both trends focus disproportionately on the radicalized violent trends in the Muslim world, with a sense of urgency. This results in the standardization of particular persons, actions and discourses, which, in the last analysis, tend to depict those people, actions and discourses as the core of the Arab world and other Muslim-majority countries.

Standardization of discourse is a widespread phenomenon in the American study of the Arab world and Islam. Whatever its causes and motives, it contributes to the misunderstanding of Islam in the public arena due to its exaggerated obsession with negative events which are often carried beyond their real import. This has proved an enduring obstacle in the writings of most scholars, even those who are otherwise cautious to avoid this trap. Standardization in the American Islamicist discourse is either consciously contrived as a discursive strategy of indoctrination and presenting
Islam and the Arab world in an unfavorable light, or is unconsciously incorporated into the discourse due to the much obsession with perpetuating American hegemony. The omnipresent sense of urgency in the American Islamicist discourse spills into the quality of scholarship. Apart from a few scattered efforts at genuine authentic in-depth understanding of the sociopolitical situation in the Muslim world, the majority of research—consciously and unconsciously—fails to transcend political exigency. The exaggerated focus on the here and now doubles into blinkers that obstruct fathoming the intricate situations; thus, ruling out deep analysis and often ending up in caricatures or simplifications of reality.

This *ad hoc* approach amounts to disposable knowledge production. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge and even for the sake of bridging the gap between the Arab world and the West is lost sight of in the pursuit of strategic approaches to deal with the “Islamic threat” or “challenge”. Books and articles which flood the press houses fall into this category of disposable knowledge. Their urgent message, strategy-oriented and problem-solving approach reveal this nature; i.e. they are destined to be readily disposed of and discarded as the situation changes and their raison d’être ceases to exist. However, the question of relevance of the produced knowledge is not merely due to the changing reality, but also to the changing perceptions and calculations—which are often faulty—and the changes in ideological strategy.

The influence of the trends dealt with in the study has witnessed shifting successes over the last two decades, with one side gaining attention in a particular domain while the other outweighs the competing view in other key issues. Influencing policy is a domain that is marked by a see-saw scale of success, though to the
advantage of the Zionist partisans. The study shows that there is a reciprocal exchange and harmonious twin relationship between the Orientalist and Zionist discourses. The Orientalist and Zionist discourses are complementary in the sense that the former fits in well with the latter. Enveloping the Zionist ideology in and presenting it through Orientalism are crucial for the perpetuation of the Zionist ideology. Orientalism does not question the unfilled gaps in the Zionist discourse, but rather endorses them unquestionably and reproduces them unaltered. A balanced study based on social science disciplines would undermine Zionist assumptions and debunk Zionist myths. Orientalist apologetics are also strikingly parallel to Zionist apologetics. In regard to the Zionist Orientalists, Orientalism offers an ideal discourse to maintain Zionist consensus as it provides a huge capacity for maneuvering, evasiveness and eclecticism.

Therefore, the much discussed notion of the end of Orientalism is only partially true. While the ideologically-partisan scholars endorse Orientalism in its entirety, MESA scholarship is still vulnerable to relapses into the outmoded discipline in some respects and is by no means immune to residues of Orientalism.

In today’s world of globalization and interdependence, mutual understanding is crucially needed. Mutual recognition is a prerequisite for coexistence. The Arab world and the West cannot afford to continue in the path of exclusion and mutual distrust that has been a dominant feature of discourse on their historical encounter. Intellectuals and scholars on both sides—as opinion-makers and leaders in discourse formulation—have a great role to play in this regard. It is their duty to seek common grounds and create channels of communication that would enhance mutual understanding and recognition.
Although some positive steps have been undertaken in this regard, still much has to be done. To be true to intellectual integrity and to feel their responsibility to their societies and humanity in general, scholars should go beyond the myopic dictates of ideology and parochial selfish interests. Their scholarly and intellectual responsibility makes it incumbent upon them to open up to the other, and recognize difference as the natural and inevitable order of things. The task of scholars and intellectuals is not to harp on differences, but to accept difference as a principle of human existence that does not preclude coexistence.

Hence, attempts to fashion the ‘other’ in one’s own image, to judge their experiences and developments in their societies in a unitary manner which is a replicate of the experiences of another society only tend to obscure the common grounds they share. The messianic spirit with which one’s own experiences are upheld and advocated as the only model for others is worthy of reconsideration. It is high time to stress the common links that tie the Arab world and the West. Multiculturalism based on mutual understanding is the answer in today’s world. Common links and similarities need to be popularized instead of sowing seeds of discord and exclusion that is still prevalent in some quarters which preach collision and destruction.

This involves sustained efforts on the part of scholars and intellectuals to supersede the state of being entrenched in their respective worldviews, to reach out to—and work in tandem with—the ‘other’ so as to widen common grounds. Indeed, the process of othering itself needs to be rethought afresh as it involves emphasizing difference and creates an unbridgeable chasm. Consequently, a critical inward-looking inspection is necessary. Serious and genuine efforts are required to unload the
package of egocentrism from scholarly enquiry as well as to rid the discourse of self-projections and inflations of a certain way of life, ideology, or worldview as the way of the world.

Politically-inspired discourse has proved an enduring stumbling-block to profound analysis. It implicates scholars into the pursuit of short-sighted concerns. Instead of assuming a leading role in the process of mutual understanding, scholars end up as strategists, overwhelmed by considerations of hegemony. Hence, whatever contributions they make towards understanding are dwarfed and swept away in the process of relentless preoccupation with political outcomes. Less immersion in politics would help open neglected venues of interest of paramount significance to mutual understanding and coexistence. It would also uplift the stumbling efforts that have been made and raise the quality of knowledge; thereby enhancing mutual well-being and constructive coexistence.