CHAPTER II

Orientalism American-style: Middle East Studies in the United States

The American Arabist and Islamicist Discourse as a Peculiarly American Phenomenon

Prior to the World War II, Arab and Islamic studies in the United States were in a primitive condition. Apart from a few departments of Oriental languages and literature—including Arabic, Hindi, Persian and Urdu—, there was not much interest in the Arab world. These departments were poorly staffed and functioned mainly as missionary training centers. To this was added a sparse and unsustainable interest in Islamic studies, oriented in the fashion of the European Orientalist tradition. Scholars relied on the philological approach that was by then dominant in Europe. The American Oriental Society was established in 1842 and was modeled after other Orientalist societies in Europe such as the societe asiatique in France established in 1822 and the Royal Asiatic Society in Britain founded in 1823 (Said, 1978: 99). However, the American Oriental Society was a peripheral institution lacking both the active involvement and collaboration with empire and the erudite scholars that its corresponding societies across the Atlantic could boast. Its activities were, to a great extent, confined to efforts to save the degenerate souls of the Orientals, coupled with a pervasive awareness of the American potential to preach Christianity. On the whole, it remained a peripheral isolated effort lacking in popularity even within the shores of the United States.

The predominantly isolationist course pursued by the United States prior to the World War II and the limited contacts with the Arab world and the Arab peoples due
to the lack of geographical proximity that was true of Europe were determining factors in the lack of interest in Arab and Islamic studies in the United States. Certainly, there had been contacts with the Arab world that went back to early American history, mainly with the North African mini-states such as Tripoli and Tunis, better known in traditional American historiography as the Barbary Coast. These were mainly negative contacts involving Berber piracy and imposition of tributes on American navigation in the Mediterranean. The Berbers were suppressed by force in the early days of the burgeoning republic. It may be recalled that relations were not always intense as the various treaties and official correspondence show. The relation was more complex than is sometimes supposed. Morocco, for instance, was the first country in the world to recognize the newly-declared republic and build relations with it. Memoirs of slavery, despotism and piracy, however, gained momentum in the American conception of Islam. Apart from the dogmatic attitudes towards Islam inscribed in religious discourse and inherited traditions portraying Islam as the antithesis of Christianity and its rival, the American experience of Islam was different from that of Europe. Indeed, close to nothing was known about Islam, or the Arabs for that matter, in the United States until relatively recently. The Muslim world did not pose a challenge to the United States in the way it did to Europe. Due to these factors, the influence of the Orientalist tradition remained limited in the United States.

Indigenous discourses on the Arabs and Islam were developed in the United States in response to domestic and external needs, often posed against a definition of the Self. The meager interest in Arab and Islamic studies in the United States in the
pre-World War II era is an indication of how considerations of knowledge are wed to power.

The American ascendancy to the superpower status in the post-war era marked a turning point in American relations with the outside world. The circumstances amidst which American ascendancy took place together with domestic factors had a paramount influence on the nature of the American rise to prominence, and even dictated its course. Throughout their history, Americans have regarded their country as a beacon of freedom, progress and struggle against oppression; and thought of themselves as the apostles of the American ideal. They regarded that ideal with a great degree of assurance as irresistible destiny that could not but be emulated across the globe. Such zeal had occasionally been embraced by missionaries and other travelers since the eighteenth century. Americans capitalized on such issues in their early contacts with the Arab world during the interwar period as American oil companies began oil exploration in the Arabian Peninsula. Their first contacts in the Arabian Peninsula, especially with Saudi Arabia, left an overall positive impression of a disinterested nation very much unlike Britain and France whose colonial legacies had aroused suspicion and distrust. When Ibn Saud was hospitalized in the American hospital in Bahrain, he came out with a generally positive image of America and the American people (Foley, 2010: 26). Unlike Britain and France, the United States did not have an empire of its own; the American pioneers, unlike their British and French counterparts, talked in a language closer to that of the colonized peoples. It was clear to these that the United States had no imperial designs on them, and soon the Americans gained footing in the Arabian Peninsula.
The colonial experiences of Britain, France, and other European powers had demonstrated that rule over other peoples by force had become an increasingly impossible task. The rise of the colonized peoples against occupation and their struggle for liberation had often led to instability and hence endangered the imperial interests of the imperial centers. The rising tide in nationalist sentiments and the spiraling increase and intensity in movements of liberation in the colonies especially in the wake of the World War II sharpened this awareness in the colonial centers themselves. This was further complicated by the rivalry of the two superpowers during the Cold War which immediately succeeded the war. The Cold War which expanded to an unprecedented global scale necessitated knowledge about various regions of the globe not merely to increase the awareness of the American public of areas that had become significant to their country as some authors suppose, but also to secure American dominance and hegemony in those areas.

Area studies programs in the United States are the brainchild of the geopolitical global competition with the former USSR. The Cold War politics of fighting communism and containing the Soviet Union were overarching concerns of area studies in the early years (Hajjar and Niva, 1997: 3). Issues of national security were also central to the establishment of area studies programs in the United States. Brand (2005) observes that

an examination of the relationship between the academy and the US government since 1945 makes clear that government security agencies in particular have played a major role, both in funding and in shaping the establishment of numerous institutions and centers, as well as the texts, the methodologies and even the body of knowledge regarded as central to the academic enterprise. (p. 5)

Area studies programs in the U.S. were a peculiarly American invention. Mitchell (2003) observes that “while the division of the American academy into
discrete professional disciplines impeded the study of the [Middle East], paradoxically it was also an important impetus to the development of the distinctively American phenomenon of area studies” (p. 6). The existing few centers for Oriental studies were revamped and restructured along the new creation. The sheer existence of Oriental studies centers in the universities has led some scholars to overemphasize this fact. For example, Beinin (2003c) maintains that the critiques of the field of Middle East studies were based on “a misconception of its history. Middle East area studies began to emerge, not during the Cold War, but during the interwar period” (p. 11). Many centers for Middle Eastern studies were initiated in a number of academic institutions. The new invention departed from the age-old tradition that was functioning in Europe.

Surely, there had been precedents of area studies in the United States. These were not the few Oriental studies centers in the academe, but rather institutes and think tanks modeled on social science disciplines and focusing on policy-oriented research. Yet, there were many limitations to these as their boundaries were clumsily defined along issues rather than specific regions. These include the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, established in 1910; the Council on Foreign Relations which publishes the prestigious journal *Foreign Affairs*, founded in 1921; the Brookings Institution, founded in 1927; and the conservative American Enterprise Institute, established in 1943. Issues of national security and national interest were fundamental goals of these institutions. The Arab world was of almost no significance in the think tank industry prior to the World War II. The Middle East Institute was established in 1946, yet it remained marginal in the policy-making community and exercised no political clout (Lockman, 2004a: 246; Hajjar and Niva, 1997: 9 n.5).
The establishment of the field of area studies came as a government initiative to gain accurate knowledge beneficial to the policy-makers with regards to crucial areas. The alignment of the discipline along geographical areas rather than other categories such as culture, religion, etc. testifies to the founders’ strategic concerns that dominated Cold War politics. The Arab world was deemed a crucial region due to its oil reserves, particularly the Persian Gulf region, in addition to its strategic location which acquired additional significance during the Cold War. The burgeoning Middle East studies became part of a larger network covering many areas worldwide.

The political, economic and strategic military exigency that surrounded the establishment of the field meant that focus would be placed on present and future needs rather than on a distant past or tradition of little relevance to the present situation with which the United States had to deal or the new concerns and developments of crucial import to the United States. The founders of the field and government sponsors were aware of these facts and the demands they required. What was needed was knowledge relevant to pressing American concerns, based on scientific study and analysis, and providing an all-encompassing analysis of politics, economy, social structures and development, and the like. The various disciplines were to work in a team to provide the necessary scientific analysis relevant to policy-making. The author of a 1948 Social Science Research Council (SSRC) report put this idea forth clearly, “Teamwork is absolutely necessary in area study as in medicine”. The author continued,

No single person, or even science or discipline, is capable of dealing with the complexities of the culture and environment of an area. The geographic limits of an area induce the specialists to pool their knowledge and prevent them from ignoring the relevance of factors which are outside the domains habitually considered by any one of them (as quoted in Lockman, 2004a: 123).
Middle East studies, like the studies of other areas, were based in the social sciences—political science, history, economics, anthropology, sociology, and geography—which emphasized relevance and kept track of recent developments. The existing Near East studies centers were revamped along these lines. The emphasis of the European Orientalist tradition on civilization and culture as the domineering approach to the study of Arab and Muslim societies was assigned a backseat in the formulation of the emerging discipline. The founders were cognizant of the prestige attached to the social sciences. Orientalist studies were greatly mired in antiquated philological decipherments and ancient texts (Kramer, 2001: 7), as well as in loose categories of explanation that could claim little scientific value. Furthermore, they were laden with irrelevant issues and complex intricacies that were of little value to the contemporary American context. The emphasis on social science provided a relevant alternative to the outdated, and what the Americans considered, antiquarian tradition. The question of relevance to contemporary concerns would further guarantee government as well as private support for the field (Ibid., p. 7). Many American historians of the Arab and Muslim worlds substituted social science methods of historiography for the traditional Orientalist methods, and kept track of the new developments in theory, applying them to the study of the Arab world; linguistics substituted the outmoded discipline of philology (Ibid., p. 8).

Focus was placed on development which in the first two decades was approached within the framework of “modernization theory”. Thus, whereas the Orientalist tradition emphasized the static nature of Arab and Muslim societies, their inherent backwardness and their incapability of change, modernization theory—which became the principal framework for the study of what came then to be known as the
Third World of which the Arab world was a part—was supposed to shift the focus of teaching and research to the dynamics of social, political, economic and cultural change in the contemporary Arab world and to approach the area in a multidisciplinary and multidimensional way so that the expertise would be of value to the policy-making community (Lockman, 2004a: 123). This emphasis on change along American lines was deeply rooted in American history and the idea of America as an example to be emulated and duplicated across the globe. In this sense, Middle East studies in America, as Kramer (2001) observes,

were not only an academic field to be explored; they were also a message to be preached. The message varied in emphasis, and its theoretical ground often shifted, but it remained a fairly constant refrain: the feasibility and even inevitability of reform, development, and modernization[.]. (pp. 13-14)

Kramer (2001) lucidly summarizes the emergence of Middle Eastern studies in the United States:

[The American formula for Middle Eastern studies constituted a brilliant invention. In a little more than a decade, Oriental studies have been revamped from top to bottom. The brand new network emphasized relevance; associated itself with the “scientific” disciplines; created high-profile centers of its own; spread its activities across the continent; created an association to link them all; mobilized imported dignitaries and academic entrepreneurs; and offered the entire package as a contribution to the national interest[.]] (p.11)

Although the idea of Middle Eastern studies was the brainchild of the government, in their early stages Middle East studies centers, like other disciplines, were not supported by the government. They relied on the support of private donors such as the Carnegie Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation during the 1940s. In the 1950s the Ford Foundation stepped in and amply supported Middle East centers and individual experts (Lockman, 2004a: 124-125). Developments that took place at the dawn of the Cold War aroused much obsession in the United States. The Soviet
launching of Sputnik in 1957 took the Americans aback; they felt that they had lagged behind the Soviet Union. The “Sputnik crisis” gave area studies a boost. Title VI of the National Defense Education Act was introduced in 1958. Middle East studies received their share of government funding (Hajjar and Niva, 1997: 3; Lockman, 2004a: 125).

Orientalists, in the traditional sense of the word, were not excluded from the scene, however. The lack of sufficient and erudite expertise in Arab and Islamic studies in the United States, coupled with the desire to make use of the established authorities in the field called for the recruitment of luminary Orientalists to help establish and direct centers of Middle Eastern studies. The founders included such preeminent Orientalists as Philip Hitti who established and directed the center at Princeton, the first in the United States, in 1947, H. A. R. Gibb who directed the center at Harvard, and Gustave von Grunebaum who ran UCLA’s Center for Near Eastern Studies (Ibid., p. 126). Bernard Lewis later joined Princeton’s Center for Near Eastern Studies. Many other Orientalists such as Vatikiotis and Elie Kedourie were either visiting faculty or tenured full-time professors at Middle East studies centers.

The Orientalists strove to influence the orientation and methodology of the field of Middle East studies from the very beginning. To preserve their legitimacy, the Orientalists realized that dwelling on the past and decipherment of texts would further perpetuate and increase their isolation. Hence, a shift of focus on contemporary issues was a necessary step if they were to preserve their legitimacy. When Lewis joined Princeton, he became deeply involved in contemporary politics and departed from focus on the past that characterized his early work such as The Arabs in History (1950). Gibb sought to preserve a place for the old tradition and even entrusted to the
Orientalists the role of the wise learned men and respected authorities who would provide the deeper insights into the research done by the social scientists. This was not merely to retain a tradition with a long history and prominent names attached to it; but also to assign it a prominent place in the curricula and research agendas of the field; a division of labor in which the social scientists and the Orientalists would work side by side in a complementary endeavor. Gibb was a member of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Joint Committee on the Near and Middle East, which sought to advance the status of Middle Eastern studies in the United States. Gibb’s concern was to integrate the Orientalist tradition into the fabric of the field which was dominated by social scientists. Although he acknowledged the limitations of Orientalism, he insisted that Orientalism had to make itself relevant by dealing with contemporary issues beneficial to the policy-making community and to overcome its self-imposed isolation; yet, it could not be isolated from Middle East studies (Ibid., pp. 129-130).

In Gibb’s formulation, Orientalism is a crucial and indispensable ingredient, of paramount significance at that, in the scheme of Middle East studies. The Orientalist is the one who understands the inner workings and logic of Islamic civilization and culture; and therefore whose task it is to explain and interpret what takes place in the Muslim societies,

to bring together and correlate the findings of the separate social studies … The Orientalist’s function is to furnish that [central] core out of his knowledge and understanding of the invisibles—the values, attitudes and mental processes characteristic of the “great culture” that underlie the application even today of the social and economic data—to explain the why, rather than the what and the how, and this precisely because he is or should be able to see the data not simply as isolated facts, explicable in and by themselves, but in the broad context and long perspective of cultural habits and traditions. (As quoted in Lockman, 2004a: 130)
To be sure, the Orientalists persisted in their approach, unaffected by the interdisciplinary patterns and the innovations in the social science theory. They were and still are influential in the academy, the media and government circles. Their impact is further doubled by their voluminous works which gain wide popularity among the public. Their books made up the bulk of the curricula in the centers of Middle Eastern studies; their teaching positions coupled with their credentials of seniority provided them with the opportunity to indoctrinate a number of their students, some of whom assumed academic positions, especially among the first generation. Nonetheless, their influence was most marginal in the academy. The Orientalist presence in the early years loomed large in Middle East studies. It was quite difficult to restrict their impact in the curricula and the types of courses offered. Their impact, together with the inherited biases and prejudices about Islam and the Arabs which were rampant in American popular culture by the mid-twentieth century combined to swerve the course of the social science-based discipline into what became in effect a form of “neo-Orientalism”, only substituting modernization theory for classical Orientalism and basing research agendas in the prestigious social sciences rather than in antiquarian methodologies and disciplines such as philology. Modernization theory, with its focus on development, was, according to Kramer (2001), “the natural successor of the missionary tradition, and infused Middle Eastern studies with American optimism” (p. 13).

While the development and modernization model did not copy Orientalism, it failed to transcend the limitations of the canonized Orientalist discourse; the more so as it adopted an approach deeply influenced by and much infected with Orientalist dichotomies. Hence, the modernization theory easily lapsed into hard dichotomies of
binary oppositions which it was supposed to transcend. The term ‘modernization’ figured in the jargon of the social scientists to denote the transition from tradition to modernity. According to Lockman (2004a), the social scientists viewed this process as “both universal and unilinear”. Moreover, they regarded traditional societies as largely static, lacking in the internal social, political and economic dynamics necessary for change. Consequently, transformation had to be enforced from outside; that is, dominant Western cultural, economic, political, and social categories had to be incorporated in the system of the traditional societies so as to give rise to change (Ibid., pp. 134-135).

In the final analysis, modernization theory converged with classical Orientalism in the sharp dichotomies they drew between “us” and “them”, the developed and the underdeveloped, the modern and the traditional, etc., that often ended in condemnation and essentialization, notwithstanding the feasibility of ultimate change maintained by the modernization theory and the various ways both methodologies dichotomized the world. Whereas Orientalism drew distinctions between “Islam and the West,” modernization theory divided the world into the modern developed West and the traditional underdeveloped Third World (Ibid., pp. 138-139). Such dichotomies passed in the first two decades for conventional wisdom and were an acceptable discourse that went wholly unchallenged. Yet, the emergence of contributions by Third World scholars, written from the vantage point of the underdeveloped, shook that logocentric view to the roots and redefined the theoretical norms of the social sciences.

To recapitulate, the field of Middle Eastern studies in the United States has never been marked by uniformity such as that which characterized classical
Orientalism in Europe. Diversity could be greatly felt in the field from its very inception in the post-war era. In that early stage, three trends, at least, could be discerned: missionary, classical Orientalist and social science-based. The missionary approach was based outside the academy altogether and hence had no clout in formulating ideas about the Arab world and Islam in the academy. The Orientalists were highly visible, but their influence was limited in the academy as social scientists viewed their expertise as outmoded and flawed, in spite of the efforts of the former to incorporate contemporary issues such as democracy and modernization into their scholarship to make it more relevant. At any rate, the Orientalists failed to achieve the large-scale impact the hoped for in the academy. This was evident in the structure of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) at the top and membership levels since its inception in 1966. Middle East studies in the United States continued throughout to be marked by various orientations and diverse trends of which Orientalism was one, and this situation holds true even today. Diverse trends have existed side by side from the outset. As Hajjar and Niva (1997) observe, “The founding fathers were a combination of classical Orientalists and social scientists, indicating the field’s efforts to bridge—and fuse—disparate perspectives and backgrounds” (p. 3).

At the level of the thematic, American scholarly discourse on Arabs and Islam is infused with the American spirit, responds to American concerns, and reflects an American view of the world. While it is true that this discourse has not been free of dogmatic views, stereotypes and even outright condemnation and demonization, it is not wholly responsible for the mainly negative views of Islam and the Arabs rampant in American popular culture. While the European Orientalist tradition constructed an image that went into circulation and created an Other, American Orientalism merely
perpetuated an image that had already been there for a long time. However, over the last three decades, the construction of an image anew in the form of an “Islamic threat” was a primary function of the Orientalists. Little (2004) observes that by the dawn of the twentieth century “anti-Islamic sentiments were as American as apple pie” (p. 4). Marr (2006) puts forth a similar argument with regard to latent American Orientalism up to the mid-nineteenth century:

Islamicist imaginations transformed the alien threat of Islamic difference into indigenous cultural capital that worked in complex ways to universalize American practices. These imaginary compensations provided rhetorical resources that other citizens exploited to share in the exoticism of oriental Islam by domesticating its alterity as a resource of significant power for globalizing their own cultural enterprises. As a constituent element of the hybridity of American cultural identities, therefore, islamism needs to be seen as part of the long and variegated process through which Americans from the United States have aspired to build a global and historical status as a progressive civilization. (p. 9)

The negative image of Arabs and Islam predates the advent of Middle East studies in the United States. Images such as harems, camels, Bedouins, and desert dwellers have been in circulation well before the advent of area studies, propagated especially by the film industry. Surely, American scholarly discourse on the Arabs, Muslims and Islam—at least that branch of it based in the social sciences—does not fit Edward Said’s picture of sensuality, Arab lethargy, slavery, sexuality, eroticism and superstition that rightly characterized Orientalism even in its American version, nor was it inspired by the missionary zeal for saving degenerate souls and putting them back on the guided way of Christ. This view of the Arabs as grotesquely exotic gave way to a belief in change. According to Bulliet (2004), the American imaginings of a new Middle East are the exact opposite of those put forward by the European artists that Edward Said writes about. But lumping them all together as two different faces of Orientalism, while logically plausible, conceals the degree to which American government policies in the Middle East have been driven for half a century by a new
vision: Arabs and Muslims that Americans can love and who will love America in return. (p. 98)

Most of the expertise on the Arab world and Islam was based on a secular view of the world. This secular view was held with such zeal that it often lapsed into dichotomization. An image was constructed from within the social science disciplines, and the domineering modernization theory. Psychological analyses became dominant in explaining the lack of change and transformation along the narrowly-defined path. Islam did not loom large in the American view as propagated by the social scientists. It was considered as something that already belonged to the past and had nothing to offer in the modern world; hence, it was simply not a central obsession to the social scientists who were confident enough of the swerving power of modernization that would ultimately undermine religion and erode it from the public sphere. This tendency was further reinforced by the extraordinary rise of nationalist aspirations, overwhelmingly secular in scope, content and orientation, that it seemed that religion had at last lost its grip on the Arabs and Muslims generally in their national aspirations. The social scientists were convinced that Islam was too weak to pose a challenge to the vociferous demands and longings for modernization. This downplaying of Islam was not, however, something inherent in the social science theory, though Western experiences of secularization were far from excluded from analysis. It was the outcome of what most social scientists regarded as an increasing marginalization of religion; and it was after all revoked as events in the Muslim world took a different trajectory from the late 1970s onwards.

Thus, American writings about Islam, especially those based in the social sciences are the reflection, at least in the early stage, of American anxieties and crises emanating from within the hegemonic conceptualizations of power politics. The
primary concern is not Islam as such, as much as the preservation and continuation of American hegemony. Haddad (1991a) opines, “Scholars went from blaming all things on Islam in the nineteenth century to attributing little or no significance to it at all, an attitude that lasted into the 1980s” (p. 12). Those anxieties are pragmatically inspired by political, economic and cultural concerns, which are interlocked and interdependent in considerations of power. From such formulations emerge the divergent trends in dealing with this primarily American problematic. The emphasis on change that characterized the early American discourse on the Arab and Muslim worlds soon gave way since the 1970s to preservation of the status quo; a shift inspired mainly by the foreign-policy community, though there continued in the American Middle East studies as well as in the official discourse a tendency to look for change albeit cautiously and along American ordained contours.

Search was especially made for secularist elements that would endorse American agendas. Unlike the British and French Orientalists who portrayed desert savages and corrupt lethargic effendis, the American experts meant business. The Arab world they envisioned centered on a Westernizing minority that would transform the Arabs en masse to modern secular-oriented societies in a secular and secularizing effort (Bulliet, 2004: 97-98). In the 1950s and 1960s the American discourse was obsessed with the nationalists who were secular in orientation, and hence religion seemed of little value in explaining the behavior of those groups and the emerging developments. The Orientalists, on the other hand, persisted in their reading of those events along cultural, and especially religious, patterns. Lewis’s list of religious fundamentalists, for instance, would not exclude such figures as Nasser, Sadat, Saddam Hussein, Qaddafi, etc. (Lewis, 1993a).
If any single issue needs to be emphasized, it is the way the Middle East studies in the United States saw itself and the way it viewed its task. This applies not merely to the social science expertise, but also covers the Orientalist variety. The United States did not see itself for a moment as an empire; rather, most Americans see themselves, with a great degree of conviction, as liberators and benefactors. U.S. imperialism is to a large extent “informal, neo-colonial, in flux; and therefore did not provide a stable base on which to build programs; the new scholars were trained to deny the existence of the very empire that they served” (Schaar, 1979: 73). Although that training proved superficial, as Schaar observes, and Orientalist ideas—incorporated from the views of the Orientalists who had been imported to the U.S.—found their way into the mainstream discourse, albeit in social science jargon, the whole endeavor of modernization was presented as an altruistic one. References to a self-interested empire were subverted to successive crusades of modernization, development, and democratization, often concealing the immediate demands of U.S. imperialism.

It may be plausible to state that such discursive strategies are not wholly an American creation. The British and French policy-makers, intellectuals and Orientalists had set the historical precedent of the ‘White Man’s Burden’, and used such jargon as ‘reform’ in their dealings with the fatigued Ottoman Empire—nowadays reproduced as democratization and modernization in the American version; yet, reality is more complex than that. The ‘White Man’s Burden’ of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century was implicated in sordid realities of colonialism and outright expansion and annexation that the rhetorical camouflage failed to conceal. The Americans, on the other hand, have mainly preached a global crusade of
modernization, subtly structured around ideals that, on the face of it, seem altruistic; it achieves American imperial aspirations while America stays largely at home.

American dominance is mainly achieved through economic exploitation, free market economy, ‘political liberalization’ which amounts to preserving American stooges and overthrowing unfriendly ones regardless of their orientations, as well as bombarding indigenous traditions and cultures in a subtle way by projecting American culture as the way of the world. American expertise on the Arab world plays a major role in this regard by conducting research for government agencies including intelligence agencies, and following the government trajectory on many issues at the level of the discourse, and often endorsing U.S. imperial projects. In a nutshell, while Middle East studies in the United States have their unique setting, demonstrated in institutional as well as intellectual shifts that parted from the Orientalist tradition, there remained a common ground for convergence where the two meet and interact.

**American Discourse on the Arabs and Islam after Said’s Critique**

The Palestinian intellectual, Edward W. Said (1935-2003), was professor of comparative literature at Columbia University. His early book, *Beginnings* (1975) dealt with the British author of Polish origin Joseph Conrad, who was regarded by many critics in the first half of the twentieth century as a vociferous voice of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. Yet, Said’s reading of Conrad was totally different. His analysis placed the British novelist at the heart of the imperialist culture. Said’s early works are a testimony of a dissident intellectual who challenged conventional wisdom and offers an insightful vision that there is always another way of looking at and doing things. His preeminent insights, developed and nurtured at an early stage of
his career, were to a large extent the outcome of a sense of exile in a hegemonic setting that was uncompromising towards the ‘Other’. Said’s sense of disillusionment was reflected in his writings with the emphasis he placed on what he saw as the comprehensive and all-encompassing dehumanization of the Arab and Muslim other in Western culture at large.

Said’s political involvement took shape at around the time he published his first books. That political awareness sharpened rapidly, pushing Said to level critiques against Western culture as he perceived it, and not merely against certain manifestations or specific categories within it. Said stated as much in his introduction to *Orientalism* (1978), “My own experiences of these [stereotypes and derogative representations] are in part what made me write this book. The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West, particularly in America, is disheartening” (p. 27). Furthermore,

The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is this web that every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny … The nexus of knowledge and power creating “the Oriental” and in a sense obliterating him as a human being is therefore not for me an exclusively academic matter. Yet it is an intellectual matter of some very obvious importance. (Ibid., p. 27; emphasis in the original)

According to Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (2001),

The intellectual power of [*Orientalism*] comes from its inspired and relentlessly focused analysis of the way in which a variety of disciplines operated within certain coherent discursive limits, but the cultural, and perhaps even emotional, power of the book comes from its ‘worldly’ immediacy, its production by a writer whose identity has been constructed, in part, by this discourse, who still feels the effects of Orientalist ‘knowledge’. (p. 55)
It would, however, be too simplistic to suggest that the political activist in Edward Said runs away with the profound intellectual. Said’s argument indeed fathoms the intricacies of a self-congratulatory discourse, traced and related that discourse to the imperial setting and hegemonic metropolis in which it was produced and of which it constituted an essential ingredient. Said was largely successful in outlining the broad contours of that discourse which was, at any rate, enmeshed in political considerations. The book was meant as a rectifying corrective to a broad spectrum of disciplines dealing not merely with the Arabs and Islam but with the Third World countries and the marginalized classes, peoples, and minorities as a whole. All this was tinted with an admirable humanistic spirit that infused it with vigor and energy. The marginalized, the subaltern, the silent spoke at last, and spoke so loudly that the domineering voice that had for long furnished and occupied the stage had no choice but to listen and to engage the hitherto silenced subaltern. The power of Orientalism is evidenced by the numerous responses it elicited and the vibrant debates it aroused. Those debates have endured over the last three decades, and the book is still discussed and debated even today. It has become a classic.

To be sure, Said was not the first to advance an argument challenging Western conceptions of the Orient. Orientalism had been the subject of occasional, albeit restricted, critical scrutiny. Abdel-Malek (1963), Tibawi (1964; 1979), Laroui (1973), Owen (1973), have revealed some of the shortcomings of the millennial tradition. Yet, their focus on specific aspects and the generally limited scope and restricted focus of their critiques concealed, at least partly, something of the vigor of their arguments. Of these Abdel-Malek’s article was by far the most ambitious; yet, Abdel-Malek’s focus on methodology dissuaded him from pursuing the argument to its final course. He did,
however, show that Orientalism as a discipline was in crisis. Tibawi’s critiques were a believer’s reaction against the demonization of a religion and dismissing it as a mere fabrication, due to either missionary or ideological factors. Laroui’s essay was restricted to the work of the prominent Orientalist Gustave von Grunebaum, while Owen’s was principally a review article of the *Cambridge History of Islam* (edited by Holt, *et al.*). Yet, this latter made insightful comments into the Orientalist historiography. If these critiques share anything in common, it is the overriding sense of a field in crisis; that something is deeply wrong with it and that reform is overdue. These articles, however, fell short of their authors’ expectations. They hardly aroused the interest of either the Orientalists or the social scientists. The former were too self-righteous to consider them, and the latter at least considered them irrelevant to what they were doing. Indeed, the few responses they elicited were exclusively restricted to apologetics, implicated in a sense of duty to defend one’s profession.

Said’s publication of *Orientalism* was a seminal event that marked a turning point in Arab and Islamic studies in the United States and Europe. Its influence went beyond Middle East studies to cover area studies in general, gender studies, the studies of minority groups, and postcolonial studies. Said’s critique is confined to outlining the existing status of the field and unfolding the inner logic that held those views together. It does not suggest alternative channels for studying the Arab world, a task rightly left to the specialists in the field, which had become too diverse to reduce to a single methodology. *Orientalism* is an intellectual analysis of the complex threads making up the network of the Orientalist discourse and its diverse manifestations.

Said’s book received much attention in the ranks of Middle East studies and well beyond. The preceding critiques of Orientalism had already prepared the scene
for a comprehensive account. Within the ranks of Middle East studies, only a few responded to the book in the following years (Kerr, 1980; Schaar, 1979; Lewis, 1982). It was mainly interest in the book in other disciplines that gave it its distinctive significance. Said’s critics focused on relatively peripheral matters. The oft-repeated ones are that Said was ahistorical, that he excluded German and other European scholarship, not to mention accusations of excesses, militancy, and over-politicization of the discipline as well as confusing the scholarly work of distinguished scholars with literature, travel narratives, etc. The core arguments, however, were skipped, nebulously treated, or conceded, sometimes grudgingly, with varying degrees of acceptance.

Bernard Lewis’s response (1982), for instance, focused on the deletion of German and other European branches of Orientalism. In his response to those charges Said dismissed them as “superficial and trivial” (Said, 1985: 90). In a pre-emptive remark, Said had already indicated that colonial domination manifested itself not just in colonial rule and political manipulation, but also in the form of “intellectual authority over the Orient within Western culture,” and this was precisely “what German Orientalism had in common with Anglo-French and American Orientalism” (1978: 20; emphasis in the original). In his study of the German Indologist Richard Garbe, Bagchi (2003) shows that “there was indeed power and dominance in the relationship between Garbe and Indians” (p. 321). Bagchi concludes that the “relationship between European knowledge and European power was diffuse and yet quite discernible, even if it was not quantifiable in terms of an actual count of colonies” (p. 332).
The Said-Lewis exchange amalgamated to a polemic that was deeply enmeshed in their respective political affiliations representing two totally opposed views: the one of Palestinian demand for recognition, the other of Zionist denial of those demands. On its twentieth anniversary meeting MESA sponsored a debate between Said and Lewis, entitled “The scholars, the Media, and the Middle East” on November 22, 1986. Here again Said put forth a vigorous argument, while Lewis again failed to engage Said’s core arguments. Lewis, rather, stood firm in his position, disregarding criticism.

While traditional Orientalists and other scholar-lobbyists rejected Said’s critique out of hand simply persisting in their ways, the mainstream MESA scholars were to a large extent vehemently influenced by it. It bears assertion that the scholars referred to in this study as Orientalists and scholar-lobbyists—while they share common political affiliations and ideological partisanship—differ in their methodological approaches and visualizations, the sources they draw upon, and so on, depending on their erudition, respective disciplines and commonsense. Yet, the commonalities they share outweigh their individual peculiarities and differences. In the final analysis, ideology is a potential unifying power in pursuing a given agenda that transcends individual visualizations of it. These scholars’ Zionist dedications obfuscate their scholarship and determine what to do with it. Hence, their careers are shaped by their ideology. Change is often abominable if it would endanger one’s interests and affect the overall network of her/his ideological causes.

On the other hand, MESA scholars generally distanced themselves further from classical Orientalism, and dispensed with the simplistic ideas outlined in *Orientalism*. This is reflected in the pejorative sense that terms such as ‘Orientalism’
and ‘Orientalist’ have acquired. After Said’s critique, these terms became overloaded with a host of negative denotations, and no MESA scholar would think of her/himself as an ‘Orientalist’, or her/his work as ‘Orientalism’. Interestingly enough, MESA scholars often use the term disparagingly to refer to Lewis and those who follow him in the exchanges and debates over various issues between the two trends.

Said’s critique coincided with important developments that were to have a crucial significance for Middle Eastern studies. The Iranian Revolution (1978-9) was the principal example of those developments. The changes in the field cannot be attributed solely to the magical influence of Said’s *Orientalism*, a view held uncritically by Kramer (2001) and others with similar orientations. The Iranian revolution rendered the fallacy of the modernization theory crystal clear. On the theoretical level, scholars dispensed with the modernization theory and dissociated themselves from the dichotomies in terms of broad categories imported from classical Orientalism. The 1980s witnessed improvement in the discourse of the MESA social scientists. Attempts were made to keep Middle East studies abreast of developments and innovations in other area studies disciplines, such as Latin American studies. Crude stereotyping was largely dropped, and meticulous—at times even fastidious—search for adequate tools of analysis emerged. However, the complicated reality in the region was often blurred in the course of analysis. Yet, at the same time, the majority of academics displayed a willingness to go beyond the simplistic assertions fostered by the Orientalists.

Said’s impact on MESA is reflected in the symposium held by MESA in the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Orientalism* to acknowledge Said’s contribution to the field. The impact of Said’s *Orientalism* on the field is almost
undisputable. It is manifested in many developments on the theoretical level and the views expressed, as well as in the relation of the scholars to their subject of study. Sullivan and Ismael observe that “much of what has appeared in the field since 1978 has been in reaction to Said’s study” (1991: 2). In a similar vein, Hajjar and Niva maintain that the publication of Said’s *Orientalism* “was a seminal event, causing lasting reverberations throughout the academy” (1997: 4).

While Said’s critique rectified the language of Middle East studies—particularly that of the MESA scholars—and set limits to their liberty of misrepresentation, it did not determine the course of the field as Kramer (2001) supposes. Middle Eastern studies in the United States remained implicated in American power considerations, and tenaciously committed to the American ideal. Nonetheless, Said’s book perpetuated a divide in Middle East studies in the United States. The divide was so radically polarized that there was little in the way of a Middle ground. This is reflected in the lack of scholars bridging the chasm between the two dominant approaches in the American expertise on the Arab and Muslim worlds (Salla, 1997: 730).

A certain measure of ‘othering’ was, and still is, inevitable, especially as the new developments in the region seemed to foil the efforts, not merely of scholars, but also of policy-makers. Many scholars dissociated themselves from the intelligence community and were increasingly critical of government policies in a later stage. The MESA social scientists’ adoption of a line antithetical to the one adopted by policy-makers led to the exclusion of the former from policy circles. While policy-makers continued to listen to their views in theory—they often adopted the diplomatic jargon
of these scholars—in practice they followed a track comparable to that advocated by Orientalists and scholar-lobbyists.

The 1980s witnessed a sharp rise in the discourse on Islam due to the Iranian revolution and the rise of Islamist activism. Islam was brought back in the discourse of the social scientists as a factor in the study of those developments. According to Burke (1998):

> Over night, Islamic culture became highly toxic as a subject of intellectual investigation. One way of understanding what happened to Middle East studies in the 1980s is to say … that these changes inscribe the massive invasion of the intellectual field by the political field … it was an assertion of Orientalism (the discourse of power) over Orientalism (the discipline) [...] (p. 501)

The two camps engaged in a war of words that culminated in a series of debates over a host of issues in the post-Cold War era. Those debates were not merely sterile methodological arguments over theory, but also a struggle over the appropriate policy to be adopted by the United States towards the Arab world and other neighboring countries (Salla, 1997: 730).

Although the social scientists strived to distance themselves from the crude stereotyping and the denigration of Arabs and Islam, their focus on Islamist activism proved an insurmountable hurdle in this respect due to the sway of the ontological and epistemological secular view of the world that governed their discourse. The sheer suddenness of the Islamist upsurge—as experts deemed its advent—and the fact that it wholly went unnoticed in the preceding decades, coupled with the aggressive rhetoric of leaders within that upsurge, like Khomeini, often translated into inflated exaggerations, bias, and even adopting a militant stand. Thus, there was a good ground for the formulation of an “Islamic threat” in the works of the Orientalists, as
well as some MESA scholars who contributed to that corollary outcome in one way or another. The exaggeration and wide circulation of extreme viewpoints and events were not merely restricted to the Orientalists and the media, but such a tendency also found its way to the scholarship of mainstream Middle East studies. MESA scholarship proved vulnerable to the inclination to assume that Western norms and ideals were the ultimate points of reference and the touchstone against which other experiences and developments should be gauged. This process of displacement and projection often resulted in distorted readings of the unfolding panoramas, especially as Islam was often judged by Western standards and more often than not was found incompatible with Western experiences, the more so as analysis often focused on points of difference between Islam and Western culture rather than on similarities. In the discourse of the MESA social scientists, the obsession with Islamist activism, especially with the radical leaders within it, had the unintended consequence of enforcing the perception of an “Islamic threat”. Hippler & Lueg (1995) opine that scholars and the media alike “do not compare like with like: Christianity with Islam, or the realities of Europe with those of the Middle East. As a rule they are prone to comparing a religion (Islam) with a region (or society) (the West). And if you ask the wrong questions you do not get the right answers” (p. 156). This was exacerbated by the tendency to view those developments as manifestations and indications of extreme religiosity rather than socio-political phenomena in the first place, in response to social, economic and political realities.

The persistence of the lengthy debate on Orientalism together with the changing situation in the post-Cold War era induced many scholars to seek an exit from Orientalism and center scholars’ attention on broader, more pressing demands
brought by the unipolar politics and globalization. Dallmayr (1996) argues that the constellation of economic, political and imperial ventures of the colonial age “formed the backdrop of Western “Orientalism,” a label highlighting the collusion of scholarship with the imperatives of colonial domination”. He maintains that “this kind of constellation is no longer prevalent today. Our age of postcolonialism has also given rise to forms of “post-Orientalism,” that is, endeavors to rupture or transgress the traditional Orientalist paradigm”. Dallmayr is of the opinion that “Eurocentrism” and “logocentrism” were characteristic of the past, but are no more applicable to the contemporary situation. He concludes that “the ongoing processes of globalization, processes which in their pervasive effects, undermine the prerogative of area specialists” (pp. 115-116). According to this view, Orientalism in the present context has become an outmoded discipline,

an exit from Orientalism in our time seems to accord a certain privilege to an “ontology of openness” over an “ontology of (objectified) substances”; whatever its other corollaries may be, openness implies at least a certain willingness to transcend established categories in favor of a freer recognition of alien life-forms, thus permitting otherness “to be” in a non-possessive way … Under present conditions of Westernization, cross-cultural understanding is liable to be an intensely agonizing, perhaps agonistic, enterprise. (Ibid., p. 130)

Moreover, this task requires going beyond polemical debates and exchange of recriminations, as well as a reconsideration of basic concepts such as sameness and difference, and “genuine dialogical learning” (Ibid., p. 134). The question of relevance teases scholars in the field of Middle East studies. Khalidi (1995) deals with this issue. He reflects on the new challenges to Middle East studies in the United States at the threshold of a new phase in world politics; namely, the disappearance of the bipolar system and the emergence of a unipolar world introduced as the New World Order. MESA experts were worried about their stature as scholars, the health
and prosperity of their field and the possibility of cutting down federal support, especially as their field (and area studies in general) came to be seen by some as no more relevant in the new phase of world politics. In other words, the area studies programs were established to answer political needs and enhance the performance of the United States against “the Communist threat” during the Cold War. Now that that need is no more relevant to American policy, some came to see area studies programs as outmoded in a context of globalization.

Turner (1997) shares this view of going beyond Orientalism. The “end of Orientalism” requires a radical restructuring of “perspectives and paradigms” that should be preceded by a reformulation of political relations between East and West since “the transformation of discourse also requires a transformation of power” (p. 35). The reconstitution of discourse involves focus on the empirically valid multiple “Islams” and abandoning the reified essentialist notions of Islam; contextualizing those Islams in a global setting; going beyond nationalistic to global perspectives; and internal inspection in the form of othering “Western culture” so as to rid it of the privileged position and dominance (p. 104). Although such developments have not taken place, many MESA scholars have taken giant steps in this direction, notably Yvonne Haddad, John Esposito, Zachary Lockman, Rashid Khalidi, Farhad Kazemi, and Joel Beinin, to name only a few.