

## Jihad 101

by Martin Kramer  
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Professors and Pundits: An occasional column devoted to makers and brokers of ideas

Predict this. Who even imagined the possibility of a September 11? Well, you might say, Steven Emerson and Daniel Pipes did. Well, you are wrong. Richard Bulliet, professor of Islamic history and past director of Columbia University's Middle East Institute, now claims that the academic "experts" on Islam had seen it coming all along. In recent years, "a torrent of studies of Islamic movements and political currents gushed from academic and journalistic presses around the world," wrote Bulliet, in an essay for a website.

There is little to indicate, however, that any government policy horses chose to drink from the fresh scholarly water poured in their trough. On September 11, 2001, therefore, while a substantial number of analysts in the scholarly world could honestly claim that they had seen and understood the handwriting on the wall, even if the message had not included the date, place, and time of the actual attacks, very few people in the policy community could make the same claim.<sup>1</sup>

Now perhaps I haven't read enough in the literature this past decade, but I cannot conjure up a single scholarly analysis that acknowledged even the existence of a wall, let alone the handwriting on it. Of course, in Bulliet's case, one never knows what constitutes a prediction: this is someone who claims he predicted the Iranian revolution—in a novel.<sup>2</sup> But there have been plenty of conventional predictions in recent scholarly writing, and they all pointed away from terrorism as an Islamist option. And while the policy community will have to answer for itself, it would be impossible for officials to have been more negligent than the academics. So, Bulliet has the chutzpah of a true New Yorker. After all, a few introspective academics have admitted to missing the trends that led to September 11. They excuse themselves by claiming that the FBI and CIA did no better, despite their vast resources—an argument with some merit. Bulliet's claim is much more sweeping: he says the academics got it right and fed that knowledge to government, which ignored it. This is a serious charge, and it cannot be left sitting unsubstantiated on a website. This column urges Professor Bulliet to assemble the mystery analyses and publish them. If he doesn't, consider this more of the wind that has blown off Morningside Heights ever since Edward Said discovered himself.

Which reminds me: do give credit to Bulliet for one of the more quotable quotes to follow September 11. "Does this mean I'm throwing my copy of [Edward Said's] *Orientalism* out the window?" he quipped to a student forum in the first week after the attacks. "Maybe it does."<sup>3</sup> That would be a good start.

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Default analysis. “Why do they hate us?” The suicide hijackers did not say, leaving Americans to ponder what drove so many men to commit such horrific acts and sacrifice their own lives in the process. As the evidence accumulated and the identities of the hijackers came into focus, a fascinating picture emerged. Most of them came from the edges of Saudi Arabia, the prime recruiting ground for Saudi-born Osama bin Laden. Later in the fall, his own recruiting video went up on the website of Columbia University Press, along with a detailed content analysis. “Make no mistake,” wrote one of the editors. “First and foremost bin Laden is concerned about his home front in Saudi Arabia. His main goal is to challenge and deny the very legitimacy of the Saudi royal family in order to topple it.” Palestine came second in emphasis, Iraq third.<sup>4</sup>

But the rest of academe decided otherwise. To the question “Why do they hate us?” the professors answered in unison: “Palestine”—or, in many cases, “Palestine, stupid,” a rebuke to Americans for failing to see how U.S. support for Israel had invited the disaster. Few if any of the “experts” bothered to delve into the backgrounds of the known terrorists or analyze the bin Laden material in video and print. Instead, they did what is done every day in the Middle Eastern studies guild: they fingered Israel, knowing full well their colleagues would nod in automatic agreement. It’s the default analysis, the no-risk explanation, and invoking it requires nothing so onerous as research.

Exhibit “A”: an essay by Harvard social anthropologist Nul Yalman, published in *The Harvard Crimson*. Yalman lectures to perhaps the most important undergraduate course in the field, “Foreign Cultures 17: Thought and Change in the Contemporary Middle East.” This fall the course was swamped: it had about 250 students (three times the usual enrollment), divided into fifteen sections, taught by ten teaching fellows. (According to a press item, one of the students lost a parent at the World Trade Center.) Yalman was a very big man on campus after September 11.

And this was Yalman’s assessment of the motive behind the attacks (pardon the fractured grammar): “It was obviously an act of blood revenge, a subject about which anthropologists have long written about in terms of the tribal codes of the Middle East. There is, regrettably, nothing very surprising in this. There had been too much murder going on in Israel and the West Bank for no extreme reprisals to take place.” If only Clinton had succeeded in bringing Israelis and Palestinians to an agreement, “this disaster could well have been avoided.” And since it was about Palestine, a war in Afghanistan would be pointless. “There are not many men left alive in that unfortunate land,” Yalman calculated. “Most of the population consists of women and children,” and it would be pointless “to bomb ruins further into ruins. In any case, this is a side issue. The main question lies in and around Jerusalem, both in myth, in history, and for the present.”<sup>5</sup>

Now to my untrained eye, it looked like there were quite a few men still alive in Afghanistan, riding about in tanks and Toyota pickups, and the whole business looked very remote from Jerusalem. But even when it came to al-Qa‘ida and the Arab hijackers, where was Yalman’s evidence that their actions arose from the Palestine blood feud? As it happens, the hijackers left behind only one clue to a possible political motive: their nationalities. These didn’t point to Palestine but to Saudi Arabia and Egypt. One doesn’t have to be a Harvard anthropologist to know that regimes and Islamists have waged bloody feuds over who should rule these two states. They are, respectively, the richest and the most populous in the Arab world, and they are America’s two major Arab allies.

The problem, of course, is that American academe is obsessed with Palestine, to the exclusion of nearly everything else. Many professors are tenured homing pigeons. Set their minds aloft anywhere from the High Atlas to the Hindu Kush. They will wind up flying to Jerusalem and congregating on the esplanade of the Dome of the Rock. Every issue must somehow be processed and reduced to an aspect of the Arab-Israeli conflict. And the underlying theory is this: Israel is responsible for everything that goes

badly in the Middle East, and if the linkage is not apparent, it is the scholar's duty to claim otherwise—by bald assertions.

As for Yalman, by mid-semester one of his students couldn't take it any more and sounded off in the *Crimson*. "The material from Foreign Cultures 17 is not quite propaganda," she wrote, "but it comes close." Students were "being indoctrinated, not educated," and the course had "not delivered what it promised at the beginning of the term."<sup>6</sup> Harvard's undergraduate tuition and fees this year are \$26,019.

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The F-16 theory. Exhibit "B": an essay for the website of the Social Science Research Council by Said Amir Arjomand, professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and an expert on Iran. Arjomand offered this hierarchy of "causes": "the [Israeli] use of American weapons against Palestinian civilians, our continued bombing of Iraq, and our support for compliant Arab regimes who maintain our oil supply." But the first "cause" was so dominant that Arjomand even suggested an immediate linkage: "Who is to say that if the F-16s had not been so visible in the destruction of Palestinian targets a short while ago, some of the plotters in this highly improbable and risky project would not have wavered and caused its failure, as happened in the attempt to destroy the World Trade Center in 1993?"<sup>7</sup>

Who indeed? But why speculate in only one direction? For example: many Arab and Iranian public figures sanctified a wave of Palestinian suicide bombings over the summer. If they had done otherwise, casting doubt on the bombers' reward in paradise, might some of the plotters have wavered and failed? It's an idle speculation as valid as Arjomand's (to my mind, even more valid). Perhaps on this basis, the FBI should add all those who endorsed Palestinian suicide bombings to the terrorist wanted list. Perhaps the Palestinian Authority bears responsibility as well.

Of course, sociologists and greengrocers are entitled to speculate; in the absence of evidence, there isn't any reason to prefer one to the other. The problem arises when a sociologist's idle speculation is stamped with the imprimatur of the Social Science Research Council, as part of its effort "to bring theoretical and empirical knowledge to bear" on September 11. Is this really the best that the grand presidium of the social sciences can muster?

One could go on, with Exhibits "C" through "Z." The bottom line is that most of academe performed miserably in providing a context for the attacks. They did somewhat better in explaining the attitude of Arab public opinion but then blew it by exaggerating the volatility of the "Arab street" and the fragility of Arab regimes. The Islam "experts" then embarrassed themselves by urging a suspension of the war during Ramadan.<sup>8</sup> Happily, they were ignored, and the Taliban did not outlast the Ramadan moon.

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New Age Jihad. Jihad is perhaps the most loaded word in the lexicon of Islam's relations with the West. Over the last twenty years, it has been invoked by a succession of Muslim movements to justify their violence. Terrorist groups, some of them infamous for suicide bombings, have even named themselves "Islamic Jihad." And Usama bin Ladin described his terror campaign as a jihad. After September 11, America looked expectantly to its "experts" to explain what jihad means for those who invoke it.

They never got an answer. Instead, they were told that Usama had it all wrong: jihad has nothing to do with war or violence. Listening to the academics, jihad began to sound like a traditional self-help technique—perhaps an Islamic version of controlled breathing.

Consider, for example, a New York Times op-ed written by Roy Mottahedeh, the Gurney Professor of History and chairman of the Committee on Islamic Studies at Harvard. Mottahedeh began by citing Muslim clerics who had condemned September 11 as a violation of Islamic law. Indeed, some did condemn it. But then he made a leap. “Some politicians and imperfectly educated Muslim clerics have used the word jihad loosely in the sense of armed struggle,” he complained. But “this meaning is rejected by most modern Muslim scholars, who say it properly refers to the struggle against the distortion of Islam.” According to Mottahedeh, “a majority of learned Muslim thinkers, drawing on impeccable scholarship, insist that jihad must be understood as a struggle without arms.”<sup>9</sup>

Jihad—unarmed struggle? How so? Barbara Stowasser, professor of Arabic at Georgetown University, elaborated at a forum held on her campus in October. “Jihad,” she stated, “is a serious personal commitment to the faith,” a struggle against “evil intentions,” and a “working toward the moral betterment of society.” Only at the very end of the Qur’an is it used to denote armed struggle, and even then, she added, Muslims are enjoined only to engage in defensive war. In Stowasser’s view, al-Qa’ida “goes against the majority of Islam and against most of Islamic legal theory.” They were a group that “picks and chooses in its approach to the Qur’an.”<sup>10</sup>

Well, of course they do, but so do the American scholars who have picked and chosen their way through the Qur’an and Islamic legal theory, in a deliberate effort to demilitarize both, or even to turn Islam into a pacifist faith—a kind of oriental Quakerism. This interpretation is as tendentious as al-Qa’ida’s. Emile Tyan, author of the article on jihad in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, described this approach as “wholly apologetic.” “Jihad consists of military action with the object of the expansion of Islam,” he determined; presenting it as peaceful persuasion or self-defense “disregard[s] entirely the previous doctrine and historical tradition, as well as the texts of the Qur’an and the Sunna.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, someone has to be “imperfectly educated” to argue that jihad must be understood as struggle without arms. As Rudolph Peters wrote in his book on the doctrine of jihad, it is the idea of pacifist or defensive jihad that is new; Islamists (like bin Ladin) are much closer to classical doctrine.<sup>12</sup> And that doctrine has enjoyed an obvious revival over the past twenty years.

When it comes to explaining foreign terms, the usual business of scholarship is to show how their meanings range over time and space. The problem with the Islam “experts” is that they are so enamored of their subject that they feel compelled to shore up its defenses, to the point of posing as Islam’s reformers. It’s a professional deformation with a long history in Islamic studies. One might question whether the reform of Islam is the proper job of American university professors, who are paid to explain. But they prefer to plead and apologize, and who can stop them? If only real Islam did conform to the Islam of the American academy. Even New York’s skyline would attest to it.

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Get thee to a madrasa. Many academic commentators on September 11, anxious to exculpate Islam itself, announced that bin Ladin was not really a Muslim. Coming from a lot of professors who don’t profess Islam—and a few who do, but whose foreheads haven’t touched a mosque floor in years—it was a bit much. Actually, being a Muslim is a bit like being an Islam “expert”: the status is easy to acquire if you make a simple profession of faith, and you keep it regardless of whatever folly or evil you later perpetrate.

One person who has acquired the status of an Islam “expert” by means of osmosis is Karen Armstrong, a prolific British writer on comparative religion (and a former nun), who discovered Islam in the 1990s and wrote a biography of the Prophet Muhammad and a short history of Islam. Her books sell like rosaries in Rome, presumably because she already enjoys a reputation as a spiritual seeker. Armstrong’s argument

seems to be that Islam is just about the best variety of monotheism, since it makes do without a church or a chosen people. Of course, it does have this problem of murderous fanatics who give it a bad name. But they aren't authentic Muslims. "It would be as grave a mistake to see Usama bin Ladin as an authentic representative of Islam as to consider James Kopp, the alleged killer of an abortion provider in Buffalo, N.Y., a typical Christian."<sup>13</sup>

Who, then, are the "authentic representatives" of Islam? Perhaps they are our Muslim allies, the enemies of bin Ladin. Sorry, it's not them either. Here is Armstrong on CNN's Q&A: "A lot of Muslims are laboring under highly undemocratic regimes, many of them, unfortunately, supported by the Western world—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria—countries that have rulers that are not Muslim, really, in any way."<sup>14</sup> In any way. One begins to get a sense that no Muslim really understands Islam with the same profundity and spirituality as ... well, as Karen Armstrong.

So there you have it: a charge of apostasy against those Muslim rulers most supportive of the United States (including the sovereign of Mecca), made on CNN by an ex-nun and self-described "freelance monotheist."<sup>15</sup> And you thought you had heard everything.

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Media Maulana. On October 5, Oprah Winfrey devoted her television show to Islam. The program claims to have more than twenty million viewers, who got to hear Queen Rania of Jordan and Pakistan's ambassador to Washington reassure them about the peaceful nature of Islam.

But the show was also the big American debut of Akbar S. Ahmed, Pakistani anthropologist and the new Ibn Khaldun Professor of Islamic Studies at American University in Washington. True, it was not the most edifying exchange. Oprah: "How in the name of Islam does something as horrifying as what happened on September 11 happen?" Ahmed: "That's a very difficult question you ask, Oprah, and a very complex question, but an important question. There is obviously something driving them." Ahmed left it at that, except to say that it was "not Islam, because Islam clearly says that the killing of one innocent life is like killing all of humanity. It is just not allowed in Islam."<sup>16</sup> Following Ahmed's appearance, his book *Islam Today* skyrocketed to the top forty in Amazon's rankings.

The New York Times later misspelled his name ("Okbar"), but they'll get it right eventually, because Akbar Ahmed is the Muslim media maven. During a decade in Britain (Selwyn College, Cambridge), he became the great talking head of Islam. BBC television and radio adored him (he narrated a six-part documentary for the BBC, *Living Islam*). On the eve of the Kuwait war, he gave a private lecture to Princess Diana at the Royal Anthropological Institute. ("I'm not Diana's guru, says top academic," screamed one tabloid.) "I was in danger of becoming the instant expert, the media guru, Mr. Know-All," he acknowledged. <sup>17</sup>

Twenty years ago, Ahmed wrote with authority about the Pashtun tribes of northern Pakistan. A decade ago, he wrote with some passion, but still with authority, about contemporary trends in Islam, and about Jinnah, founder of Pakistan. He now writes only with passion, and a large dollop of hubris, about America.

Some examples: America "seems within the short span of a few years to have collapsed." It is a place where "society itself is threatened as never before in history." The O.J. Simpson trial was "symptomatic of imperial decay. ... We are plunging into an era of uncertainty and O.J. confirms it for us."<sup>18</sup> The country's mass media "have achieved what American political might could not: the attainment for America of world domination. Hollywood had succeeded where the Pentagon had failed."<sup>19</sup> (One

wonders why al-Qa‘ida bothered to fly an airliner into the Pentagon. Perhaps the victory in Afghanistan is just a special effect.)

But this most recent observation, on the American reaction to September 11, tops them all:

“Commentators associated Muslims with the attacks from the moment the news broke ... If a Peruvian or a Japanese cult had stepped forward and claimed that they had organized the attacks, they would not have been believed. In the public mind, Islam was to blame.”<sup>20</sup>

As for the first part, it is simply untrue: commentators showed impeccable restraint in not jumping to conclusions. As for the last part, it is also untrue: the public did not blame Islam per se. And what can one say about the absurd part in the middle? While Professor Ahmed was punting on the Cam back in 1993, an earlier group of terrorists tried to blow up the World Trade Center, and they were not members of a Peruvian or Japanese cult. It is always astonishing when Muslims, who recall every grievance going back to the battle of Poitiers, rebuke Americans for having any memory at all.

Americans do have memories, but they also give newcomers the benefit of the doubt. There is no reason not to extend the same courtesy to Ahmed. He left Britain (where he served briefly as Pakistan’s ambassador) under a cloud of controversy. But Pakistan has not always been fair to its great men, and Ahmed may be one of them. In that spirit, it would be fitting for Ahmed to return the same courtesy to a country that has given him a very big break. “American University is ideally placed,” he has said. “Perhaps I can help clarify for policy makers what the pitfalls, the dangers [are], what the landscape is like.”<sup>21</sup> That sounds useful and promising—providing the new star practices a bit more caution in interpreting the complex landscape of America.

Welcome to Washington, Professor Ahmed. Break a leg.

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Outing “Outreach.” In the United States, fourteen Middle East programs based in universities are National Resource Centers—that is, they benefit from a subsidy from the U.S. Department of Education. The subsidy is awarded following a competition held every three years. Programs that wish to be competitive must engage in “outreach”—that is, they must be active in their communities in spreading wisdom about the Middle East. Nearly all centers have “outreach coordinators,” who in normal times do very little: they’ll send a graduate student to lecture at a high school or loan a video to a church group. But in times of crisis, they are swamped with requests for speakers and information. How did they perform after September 11? In at least one case, disgracefully.

That case involves the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. On October 15, it held a workshop for K-12 teachers, entitled “The September 11 Crisis and Teaching Our Children.” Toward that noble aim, the center put together a collection of readings, later offered for general sale through the center’s website.<sup>22</sup> It’s nothing other than a propaganda packet of anti-war, anti-American self-hate.

So you think perhaps a few texts by Muslims would be appropriate for the “Teaching about Islam” section? Forget it: instead digest an interview with Islamophile John Esposito, and two long articles by his known associate, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (from Esposito-edited tomes). Want to know more about Afghanistan and our major ally there, the Northern Alliance? Read about them in two disparaging articles by Robert Fisk, the militant British journalist who reviles America’s “filthy war.” Then go back and tell the sixth-graders that “Afghanistan Always Beats Its Invaders” (a Fisk selection).

But the best is the “Why Do They Hate Us?” section. You would think that an article by the eminently readable Bernard Lewis—perhaps his famous “Roots of Muslim Rage” from *The Atlantic Monthly*—would be appropriate for this section. Or maybe Lewis’ well-known article on bin Ladin’s jihad declaration from *Foreign Affairs*? Wrong again—because the message the kids need to hear is that they hate us, and rightly so. So, read through eleven articles by a parade of scribblers from the left. Here are two articles by Edward Said, and still another by Robert Fisk (all published abroad), suggesting America’s shared culpability for September 11. Read another British journalist, David Hirst, on “The Shame of Palestine.” (No American journalists need apply.) There are contributions from those old left standbys, Tariq Ali and Arundhati Roy, and entries from such tiresome journals of left opinion as *Z Magazine* and *Open Democracy*. The only author gone missing is Noam Chomsky.

As a reading list for an anti-war campus teach-in, this selection would be merely execrable. As fare for unsuspecting schoolteachers, dished up by a National Resource Center and subsidized by taxpayer dollars, it should be the subject of an investigation. It is one more argument, if one were needed, for taking the selection of National Resource Centers out of the hands of academic peer reviewers. Government officials should sit on the panels that select these centers and review all their mischief with a skeptical eye. And the sun-dried, Pacific-gazing Middle East “experts” who put out this “critical reader”? De-fund them in the upcoming cycle.

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Interim Assessment. The autumn of 2001 will be remembered in Middle Eastern studies as the best of times. The media besieged the profs, who became “experts.” On campus, at special events and teach-ins, they commanded audiences of hundreds and even thousands. Their books sold briskly. Reports from around the land told of droves of students standing in the aisles and pleading to get into packed courses on Islam, the Middle East, and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Professors who command big enrollments are better positioned to demand raises from their deans, and you could almost hear the buzz over money. In one case, you did hear it: Anne Betteridge, the executive director of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), excitedly told a journalist that universities could find themselves in salary battles to lure the best of the long-ignored Middle East faculty.<sup>23</sup>

None of this will last. The academic repertoire is too limited to sustain general interest. Enrollments will fall back—they always do, since the performance of the professors just isn’t strong enough to keep students interested beyond a crisis. The academics will have had their moment in the limelight. They will cash their fattened royalty checks; where deans are impressionable, they will get their raises.

But, the true windfall of September 11 may be just around the corner. The U.S. Congress is asking why Johnny can’t read (or speak) Arabic, Dari, and Pashto. And, it wants Americans to know more about over a billion people, friends and enemies, who profess Islam. The international studies lobby is casting September 11 as the equivalent of the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957: a nasty surprise whose recurrence the profs can help to prevent, provided the public purse is opened wide to area studies. Vast new entitlements for Middle Eastern studies are under discussion, and academic salesmen are busy repackaging their wares for an eager market. Middle Eastern studies could strike the mother lode. Watch this column.

Does something on your campus or hallway deserve comment? Notify this column: [mideast@columnist.com](mailto:mideast@columnist.com).

Martin Kramer is editor of the *Middle East Quarterly*.

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- 2 Richard W. Bulliet, "Twenty Years of Islamic Politics," *Middle East Journal*, Spring 1999, p. 189. His (thoroughly enjoyable) novel: *The Tomb of the Twelfth Imam* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).
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- 8 Prime example: "John Esposito: War during Ramadan?" CNN chat room discussion, Oct. 29, 2001, at <http://www.cnn.com/2001/COMMUNITY/10/29/esposito/>.
- 9 Roy Mottahedeh, "Islam and the Opposition to Terrorism," *The New York Times*, Sept. 30, 2001. The author was more cautious in a study that informed the op-ed: Roy Parviz Mottahedeh and Ridwan al-Sayyid, "The Idea of the Jihad in Islam before the Crusades," in Angeliki E. Laiou and Roy Parviz Mottahedeh, eds., *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2001), pp. 23-29.
- 10 Paul Dyer, "CCAS Hosts Open Forum: The War on Terrorism, The Middle East Dimension," *CCAS News*, Oct. 2001, p. 7.
- 11 *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2 ed., s.v. "Djihad."
- 12 Rudolph Peters, *Islam and Colonialism: The Doctrine of Jihad in Modern History* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), p. 131. In fundamentalist and classical texts, "views on the relationship with unbelievers are essentially identical."
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- 16 At [http://www.oprah.com/tows/pastshows/tows\\_past\\_20011005\\_c.jhtml](http://www.oprah.com/tows/pastshows/tows_past_20011005_c.jhtml).
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- 22 At <http://www.cmes.ucsb.edu/teacheroutreach.html>
- 23 Quoted by Mark Clayton, "Standing Room Only," *The Christian Science Monitor*, Oct. 2, 2001. Related Topics: Academia, Middle East studies | Martin Kramer | Spring 2002 MEQ receive the latest by email: subscribe to the free mef mailing list To receive the full, printed version of the Middle East Quarterly, please see details about an affordable subscription. This text may be reposted or forwarded so long as it is presented as an integral whole with complete information provided about its author, date, place of publication, and original URL.