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Palestinian Prospects Now

Edward W. Said Speaks With Mark Bruzonsky

BRUZONSKY: What's your personal background? Were you born in Palestine?

SAID: Yes, I was born in Jerusalem; my family is a Jerusalem family. We left Palestine in 1947. We left before most others. It was a fortuitous thing. My family was in business in Egypt and so we moved between Palestine and Egypt. I didn't suffer at all. My immediate family was affected only commercially. I was twelve when we went to Egypt. Then I emigrated [to the U.S.] when I was sixteen, but not my family.

Let's turn to the Palestinian issue. What should the Palestinians do at this historic time?

I feel that what is needed is a very clear enunciation of a Palestinian political process around which people can organize and work and significant advances can be made. We need a clearer program for progress toward peace—forthright statements of a two-state solution and some indication of how this might come about beyond slogans like "armed struggle," "continuing the struggle," and so forth. We know we're all going to continue the struggle. The question is: How do you advance the political process to your advantage, given the world in which we live—a kind of post-Camp David world? The armed struggle that was enunciated back in 1969 is not the principal program of the Palestinians. Now, if that's the case, what is the political program? I don't have an answer. It's not something I can give.

But you must have some ideas.

Sure I do. But I'm simply talking about the need to open a space for debate in the Palestinian community. There's a lot of surreptitious discussion that we need to talk to the U.S., we need to do this, we need to open our ties with Jordan, we need to do something to get the Syrians off our back. I want this debate to take place in forums that will give the possibility for these things to happen, not just an occasional journalistic leak such as

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Arafat talking to Anthony Lewis and saying x, y, and z, and then the whole thing is dropped the next time somebody comes around. I want it to be embodied in Palestinian political activity. That's all I'm saying.

How do you evaluate Arafat's leadership of the PLO? Are you indirectly criticizing his leadership?

No, no. I think that in the present circumstances he's the only person who could lead the PLO. That's where I begin. He is the figure who represents the Palestinians' fate today. And I think that he now needs the support of more Palestinians like myself who believe that what is necessary is something more than just survival. We want to try to translate the Palestinian dispersion and fragmentation into a kind of process that won't leave us always on the margins, attached to one power or another.

Why am I having such trouble getting you to tell me something about this more concrete process?

Well, because, you know, it's not something that an individual can do.

Well, you told me the Palestinians should do more with the Americans, and more with the Jordanians, that they don't have a clear enough program....

I think we should do it! That's what I'm saying. I'm saying we should do all of those things that need to be done at this moment.

So what are the priorities?

I'll tell you. *First*, we ought in some way to regularize and institutionalize our relations with Jordan. *Second*, in some way we should begin to address in a serious way the U.S. If we believe the U.S. has interests and institutions and things that it supports in the area, and that we stand in an adversarial position with regard to these, then I believe we should address the U.S. politically and not leave it to an occasional statement rejecting [Resolution] 242 and then dropping everything. In other words, I think that what we should do is something that we've never done, and that's to engage the U.S. politically.

You're talking about showing the U.S. how a Palestinian state could be in the interests of the U.S.?

Precisely. Not only in the interests of the U.S., but in

the interests of peace. In other words, demonstrating that peace is in the interests of everybody who now has interests in the area. If indeed what we're talking about is peace that will be in the interest of our people, then I think we should make that policy and our vision available to more people.

Then all you have to do is let the Carter administration know you'll accept 242 with reservations.

But that's not necessarily the way we perceive it. That's precisely what I'm trying to say. If we reject 242 with a reservation, what then is the alternative we present? And so far there's no alternative. But I can't outline the specific steps because then I'll get into problems.

But don't you continue to beg the question of what that new clear policy should be?

Well, because I myself am confused. I'm not clear just what our positions on these questions are. I don't think many Palestinians are. Look, the main thing is: Are we a national independence movement or are we a national liberation movement? In a certain way we're claiming that we're both. We're at the juncture where we have to make a decision. What I'm really saying is that the whole period of indecision between one alternative and the other is pretty much at an end.

And when do you foresee this decision being taken?

I think within the year. And I would rather that it was taken by us than, in a certain sense, imposed upon us. Imposed by any combination of the Arabs, the Israelis, and the U.S.—and even the Soviet Union.

What are the ramifications of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty?

The general sense of disenchantment in the Arab world with the U.S. will increase. The feeling that in a sense Egypt has been transformed from an Arab state into a new quantity that is generally unacceptable to the Arab world will intensify.

Palestinian resolve, and with it Jordanian resolve, not to be a part of this—in the present form at least—will stiffen. In this sense Palestinian determination to provide a sort of alternative will become more crucial and will, in the end, prevail on the Saudis. I don't think the Saudis can go along with this, not only because of the separate peace thing, but also because the Israelis have gone out of their way to spell out in no uncertain terms that the "autonomy" is—as a recent article in the *Jerusalem Post* pointed out—an attempt to eliminate Palestinian national aspirations and not satisfy them.

Another thing will be that the demarcation between Israeli and U.S. intentions will grow. And U.S. intentions may well be good.

Do you think there's any significant likelihood that the Americans and Egyptians will be able to prevail and push this beyond a separate peace?

No, my perception of this—and also the general feeling in the Arab world that I sense—is that the treaty in its present form has to be seen as an attempt to throw

the clock back to the days before the revolution in Iran. It seems like a throwback treaty that Dulles would have promoted.

But you also said you think the Americans have sincere intentions.

Yes, with regard to the autonomy. But sincere intentions are one thing, and the detailed juridical modalities of this treaty and its consequences will, I think, in the end prevail over the intentions. Because what happens is—as happened at Camp David—you get committed to what you have. And as many liberal journalists—like Anthony Lewis—have said, "Well, Camp David is all we've got." But when Camp David is pared down to its working essentials, it turns out to be this kind of treaty and then there's very little you can build on except what's in it. The Israelis have the machinery, the men and forces and resources on the ground in the West Bank. And it seems to me that just American good intentions are not going to budge them.

So a year from now, when the Egyptian populace realizes they've been told things that aren't happening—for instance, Prime Minister Mustafa Khalil has said the treaty means the Palestinians will come to control the whole West Bank plus East Jerusalem—what will happen in Egypt?

Exactly. And, by the way, Mark, I'm not even sure it will begin in Egypt.

What will begin?

The instability and the oppositional current that will grow. Maybe I'm giving too much credit to what may in fact not exist in the way of oppositional elements. But a lot of what's in this treaty banks on the fact that the regimes—especially the Sadat regime—are the prevailing realities and will continue and that their people can be made to swallow the line of the regime. So, I could be wrong, but....

In this atmosphere is it conceivable that the Palestinian leadership can make the clear choice you call for: to choose between being a national independence movement or a national liberation movement?

I don't know.... I can't tell. It's a very difficult question now. I'm worried that the Palestinian movement will be completely left out of whatever comes now.

And you're worried that Arabs other than Sadat will cooperate with the Americans?

Yes, of course, it's perfectly possible that at some point the Jordanians might enter in, that some Palestinians might be found on the West Bank and Gaza to cooperate. Sure.

What would be the reaction within the Palestinian community if the PLO leadership decided to choose to be a "national movement" rather than a "liberation movement," as you've suggested, and then came out with a statement saying there would be Palestinian recognition of Israel if the Palestinians get their independent state?

I think...I think...if it came about within the context

of moving the Palestinians out of the present morass.... In other words, I think it can be politically prepared for. And if it were politically prepared for, then I think it would gain much acceptance.

Even at the grass-roots level, from people living in the area, in the camps?

Yes, by political preparation. What I as a Palestinian would accept is not "Take it or leave it; this is a package deal." But, rather, if it appeared, as I think it ought to, that this is part of the reexamination of the whole Palestinian case, and the whole question of Palestinian rights is being discussed in the context of peace—then I think it would be an acceptable thing. If it were possible to see this two-state solution in the context of a wider discussion of the fate of those Palestinians—let's say in Lebanon—who are not from the West Bank.... How are their national rights to be addressed, their lost property, their national identity, their repatriation? Then there's the fate of the Palestinians inside Israel.

So if the overture toward peace was made in the context of addressing all of the issues, I think it would be willingly accepted. But if it's always seen in the context of "We're going to solve the Palestinian problem once and for all by confining all Palestinians on the West Bank in a state that is dominated by Israel," then nobody will buy it. And that's been the case all along.

You personally believe all those questions can be addressed and the outcome can still allow for a viable Israeli state somewhere within the 1967 boundaries, professing to Zionist ideology in a moderate and nonexpansionist form? Or am I putting words in your mouth?

You're putting words in my mouth. There is a Zionist state. There is an Israel. I think we have to credit that most Palestinians can see that there is a state and that there is a society. We're not just talking about a collection of people who can be sent away tomorrow. Most Palestinians, if they're honest, see it as a state. Therefore, what I also give us credit for is being able to see that state and our state in the area reaching some kind of *modus vivendi*.

Then why am I putting words in your mouth?

Well, all right. But when you say Zionist ideology, for me Zionist ideology denies the existence of a Palestinian people. Anyway though, that's their problem, and I don't want to define for them what their ideology is. What I'm saying is that if there's some recognition—some accommodation—to the idea that there is a genuine Palestinian national identity that has a right to its mode of existence in the land of Palestine—which would also mean for the first time that Zionism has made an accommodation to this that it hasn't done historically—then that Zionism is quite a different thing from the Zionism of today.

Would you agree with what Abu Iyad said in Eric Rouleau's new book: that when the Palestinians get their state, the military struggle ends?

Yes, ends.... OK, I would basically agree.

Isn't this really a three-state solution?

You mean with Jordan. Yes. Demographically, the Hashemite Kingdom is part of this Palestinian entity.

So an historic accommodation to let the king live as long as....

Now that I really can't say; I really don't know. I mean, frankly, I don't see any simple resolution of the question of Palestinian nationalism versus Hashemite nationalism at this point. They do seem to me in conflict with each other.

When you talk of resolving your relations with the Israelis, why can't you resolve them with Amman?

There is a kind of overlap between the two, with both making claims to the same constituency, which is quite different from Israel and a Palestinian state. Most Palestinians understand that a choice has to be made between the monarchy and Arafat.

So in that context the kind of compromise we're talking about....

I don't like the word compromise. It suggests there's a median point. What I'm talking about is a kind of engagement between opposing positions in which in the end the just position will get the most adherents and prevail.

What does that mean? I thought we're talking about a two-state and maybe a three-state compromise—I use the word compromise—where the Palestinians will in reality, if not in complete ideology, give up their claim to 70 per cent of what used to be Palestine....

I didn't say they're giving up their claim. I said that claim will be addressed. There are 560,000 Palestinians living inside Israel. Who's denying their claim? They're there. That issue obviously has to be dealt with. I certainly don't expect that 600,000 or 700,000 Palestinians will be asked to go and leave Israel and settle on the West Bank.

No, I suppose they'll be citizens of Israel or maybe some will want to go to the West Bank.

Exactly, so that problem will have to be addressed.

Every time I try to pin you down ideologically on what we've talked about you do the same thing that the PLO does. You won't speak clearly about what you want.

Because we're talking from two different worlds of discourse. You're talking about something that can be arranged. But it's not an arranged marriage. It's something that has to be done *ultimately* by a confrontation between two peoples.

Well, I'd say the Jewish bottom line is a Jewish state plus peace. Wouldn't you agree?

Yes, I suppose that's what they want. Well, I'm not asking to define their world. I want to be given the chance to decide what are the minimal conditions for me. That's what the issue is now. We know what their conditions are.

"Policy doesn't mean you throw the Palestinians autonomy and say that they are entitled to participate in determining their own future..."



But you may never get that chance if you don't convince enough people....

It's not about convincing, you see, Mark. I'm saying that we have a political position that is basically very powerful, very potent. And a political position that we have not yet parlayed into the political process which would then force people—like the Israelis and the Americans who have for years gotten along by ignoring us—to engage with us. We have to make ourselves irresistible. And I don't mean attractive. I mean that we have to be dealt with. And the way you do that is to say, "Look, we're not going to just make remarks; we're going to engage, we're going to fight politically for a program. And the program is clearly a state whose lines are x, y, and z and whose provisions are a, b, and c...."

So I hear you saying that for the time being you need to play the political game to get a state. This is tactical. But I don't hear you saying that you are assuming an overall strategic, long-term posture.

No. It's a definite political goal. We have to stake our political activities on goals and aims for which we are responsible. In other words, these can't indefinitely be left floating and vague. And if that means that we want a state—one whose contours are clear and whose constituency is known and a state that also in some way engages the whole problem of Palestinian national rights in Israel, etc.—then we should adapt ourselves to that goal and not leave to generalities the whole question of the liberation of Palestine.... That period is rapidly coming to an end.

Why hasn't some Palestinian group—either on the West Bank or out of the occupied territories—suggested a suitable autonomy plan?

Exactly. That's what I'm saying.

Maybe the Palestine National Council should have when it met in January.

I certainly think it should have. This is the place. That's exactly what I mean.

Let's go to the Americans now. You live in the U.S. and are an American citizen. And I assume you watch Carter as closely as any of us. So how do you evaluate him?

I thought that his early statements were very encouraging and unusual. But what impresses me more than anything else as time goes on is what strikes me as a kind of total blank, I mean a human blank, where the Palestinians are concerned. In other words, one can understand that in an abstract way he wants peace and he wants justice. But as to any sense from the administration that the Palestinians are a functioning, lively, political society with a particular history, a particular culture, a particular tradition, a particular predicament—there's none of it.

I'm surprised by what you're saying. Bill Quandt is at the White House. Brzezinski was on record even before coming to office as favoring a Palestinian state that would by necessity be PLO-dominated. And the president is on record talking about a Palestinian people, a Palestinian nation....

These are abstractions that, at the time, they probably believed. I'm willing to grant the president that when he began his campaign that's really what he felt. But I'm saying that when push comes to shove, when you have to translate this into policy, there's a sort of vacuum, there's a sort of blank. Policy doesn't mean you throw the Palestinians autonomy and say that they are entitled to *participate* in the determination of their own future—which at best allows for some vague thing called "the Palestinians." In some way you take *serious* stock of what is everywhere happening before your eyes—that there's a people, that there's an organization that represents every Palestinian (and they know it as well as anybody) and which you come to terms with. There's been no coming to terms with the Palestinians.

What you said earlier, though, implied that you're still hopeful for Carter. Or did I misunderstand you?

Well, I'm optimistic in the sense that I believe in the end common sense prevails. Certainly it seems to be that, given what's happened in Iran and what's obviously happening throughout the Arab world and Asia, these kinds of arrangements, where we rely upon rulers who seem to please us and give us the satisfactions that we want, will change.

Sometimes you speak as an American and sometimes as a Palestinian.

I'm both.

You've linked in your own mind Palestinian interests and American interests in the Middle East?

No, no. Some American interests and some Palestinian interests. All of us—all Palestinians and people who live in the Third World. This is one of the interesting antimonies, you might say, of modern political life.

There's a genuine sense of idealism about America. At the same time, there's a very strong revulsion from the American political empire. It's perfectly possible to understand the sense of idealism that people have toward the ideals of a republic and the revulsion from the practices of recent American governments. But I don't think it's paradoxical to say that one feels a genuine admiration for the people and the kind of society in general in which one lives and the ideals that still find voice in the republic. And that's perfectly possible within the American tradition of dissent. And that's what I think most of us can live with.

There's another school of thought that sees Palestinian

interests linked up to Soviet interests. Is that just propaganda?

Look, I can't speak for other Palestinians, just for people like myself. I grew up essentially in the West. And there's no question that historically and culturally our ties are more intimate, more strongly linked to the West.

And politically and economically?

Well, for me—and I stress just for me—those are abstractions. I can understand and I feel a kind of sympathy with the Left. I consider myself a man of the Left. But whether that necessarily for me means Bolshevism, I would say, no, not necessarily. I have yet to see—to my mind—a satisfactory translation of European Marxism into Arab or Third World terms. That hasn't come about yet. There is no successful Marxist Arab organization. There have been attempts—noble, valiant, heroic attempts, the Egyptian Communist party, and so forth—but....

As for political and economic interests, certainly it's not lost on any Palestinian that the Soviet Union originally supported partition, that the Soviet Union supports 242, does not support all our programs, does not come to our aid (for example, in the invasion of the south of Lebanon last March). And so on and so forth. The Soviets are slow-moving, ponderous, difficult to fathom as a political force. But it is a tactical alliance.

Now that we're talking about tactical alliances, let's talk about Iran. Does the Iranian revolution really alter the whole strategic and political equation over there? Or is it just one of those passing things...?

Oh, no, it's clearly not a passing thing. I think it's



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much more than that. I think most Palestinians are reacting quite naturally and quite enthusiastically to the symbolic spectacle.

As to what it might mean in the long or even the short run, it's much too early to tell. But it's perfectly clear that aside from what will take place in Iran in terms of who comes out on top, what you see is that even the most repressive, the most determined force—with a large army and where there seemed to be no hope for change—even that is not invulnerable. In other words, it's a demonstration of political will that gives people who struggle against what they consider to be oppression and injustice a hope for change. It also dramatizes, in my opinion, even more importantly, the short-sighted folly of U.S. imperial policy: reliance upon unpopular, essentially minority regimes.

What choice does a status quo power have? There's the king of Jordan, there's Anwar Sadat, there's the Saudi royal family. You can't hedge your bets and fully support these regimes at the same time.

No, you can't. If you continue to consider everything as essentially bilateral, if you always think of the U.S. and Egypt, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, and so on—and doing so consciously promotes conflict between states in order to safeguard your position as the mediator of everything—then that is what you're going to do. But there's no reason why that need be automatically the way to proceed.

You're suggesting a regional view?

Yes, a regional, a *realistic* focus. When you don't deal with the PLO, when you don't deal with the Ba'aths, you're not making these things go away. What you're doing is provoking a harsher cycle of events, which in the end is not going to hurt you any less than it will hurt the people in the region.

Your point about "common sense will prevail." This almost sounds like the Western liberal version of historical determinism—"Somehow, it's all going to work out this way."

No, I didn't say that. Please. What I meant was the sense that is common will prevail, the position that accrues to it the most loyalties, the greatest sense of justice, the greatest sense of commitment will prevail in the end.

Well, in some ways that's the opposite of what I thought you meant. That means it is up to the struggling parties to make the future. There's no "common sense" solution we can be sure of at this moment.

Right. Absolutely not.

You perceive that the Palestinian movement could act badly and fail to get anything?

Yes, absolutely. You know, I like to say history's on our side. But history's littered with "just" causes that have just died by the wayside. It isn't enough to have a just cause. And it is perfectly possible that an overextended Israeli state, including the West Bank and maybe the East Bank too, will fall. But that by no means guar-

antees that we as Palestinians will benefit from this fall. That's what I'm trying to say.

So I'm the opposite of historical determinism. I don't believe in historical determinism. What I do believe is that you have to mobilize for a political goal that you feel committed to and which in the end will prevail if it is a common view. It's all a political process that involves constant conflict and organization.

What creates the conditions where Sadat decides to go against all past positions and accept a separate peace with Israel?

The easiest thing to say is that he does seem to me a rather strange combination of messianism and erratic qualities. At one point in his autobiography he says, "I am Egypt," or something like that. He sees himself on a very large sort of canvas. But at the same time, I think that has not traditionally been his arena. So what has happened to him, it seems to me, is a too rapid translation of himself from the small figure into the large figure; and the erratic quality is the sense of disorientation—that he's dealing in a world which, and I'm talking about the West now, in which he's not accustomed to be patient and follow things out.

And the effect on Egypt if Carter does succeed in pushing Sadat into a treaty with Israel? Obviously the Egyptian leadership doesn't agree with your assessment about them.

From the very beginning, when he went to Jerusalem, I've always felt that one of the most tragic things about Sadat is that he frequently doesn't know what he's getting into. And he only finds that out later. I felt two things very strongly when his Jerusalem trip was announced. One was surprise, a sort of combination of admiration and disgust at the theatrical quality of the gesture. It's imaginative in the sense that he prayed in occupied Jerusalem. It's very hard for me as a Jerusalemite to understand that. That's number one. Two, I felt that he didn't really know what he was doing. Had he studied and found out a bit more about Begin and about the political arena he was entering, he wouldn't have done it.

How come the Palestinian community and the Arab community as a whole don't have enough grip on American politics to be preparing the climate for 1981, when there might be another shot at a real comprehensive settlement?

They don't know anything about it! Forget it! You can literally count on your fingers (and this is something I get into in my book).... There is no place in the Arab world today—intellectual institutions, academic institutions, even commercial institutions—that considers itself responsible for the study of the U.S.

This is what I meant also by the need for serious Palestinian efforts. It's not enough.... When they want to reject 242, it takes the Palestinians at the Central Council three minutes to say "No." And then they write a little two-sentence thing. But when they want to discuss something as between the rejection front and Fatah, it takes them nine hours to sit down and write a

statement. There's something wrong here. You're dealing with a country that is a political reality in the region—the U.S. And this is part of what I said about Sadat. It's part of your responsibility as a political leader, and above all as an intellectual leader, to know something about this country.

The level of knowledge about how the society functions, how the political process works, how congressional elections work, how a municipality works.... They have no idea!

You're suggesting that the level of naiveté...

It's not naiveté! It's *ignorance*!

...that the level of ignorance in the Arab world of America is even more than the level of ignorance in the U.S. of the Arabs?

It's a different sort. There's ignorance, which my book talks about, where you've got all the resources and you study and go through the process and you produce structures of myths that do what you want.

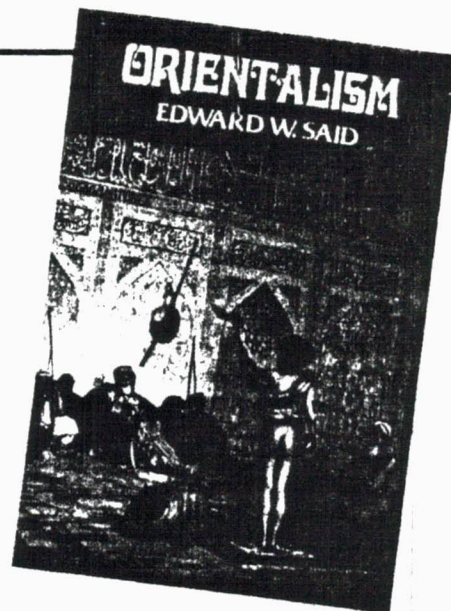
Then there's the inverse kind of ignorance that comes from the perpetuation of inequality and power—you've historically been the poor man, the weak partner in the relationship, and therefore you assume that you cannot know, that you have to take things as they're given to you, you don't make a *determined* effort to understand the society with which you're dealing. And therefore you say, "Well, the U.S. is simple," and of course you're lulled into thinking this. The Arab world has become a consumer market and you think it's all a matter of consumerism. If you wear blue-jeans and drink Coke and watch the "Rockford Files" you understand America.

Now, about your book....

It's an historical and cultural account of the notion that the world can be divided into two halves—one called the Orient and one called the Occident—and how, as a result of this division (which I call "imaginative geography," since there's no ontological distinction between parts of the world), there has been produced a whole series of knowledges that I call "Orientalism." All of these knowledges—imaginative, scholarly, and so on—essentially propose an imaginative conception that the Orient is in some way fundamentally different from the West, number one; and number two, that everything in the Orient is Oriental and therefore can be reduced to an ideal type.

Now, historically, I try to show this has never varied. Whether it's in the seventeenth century or whether it is the postcolonial period—say, from the eighteenth century on in France and Britain—whether it's scholarly writings or novelists' imagining, they essentially produce and reproduce the same thing. And ultimately, this is based on a sense of fear and distance from the Orient—the Orient is something that seems attractive and where you can be free because of sex and earthy delights. And yet on the other hand there's a feeling that the Orient is threatening and dangerous and so on.

And within the midst of this complex thing there's the notion of Islam. Islam is the religion that in a certain sense typifies all the antipodal views of the Orient. That



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is to say, on the one hand it is a fearsome competitor of Christianity because, historically, the Islamic world has been the only part of the East that did not adopt the Western ways. Japan did, China did, India did. Islam never did. It's always challenged the West politically, from the very beginning until now.

On the other hand Islam is essentially something that is, to a certain kind of writer, highly attractive because Islam seems to promote earthly delights, hidden sexual pleasures, fantasies of pleasure and desire....

...and mystery.

Precisely. The inscrutable East. The epigraph of my book is a quotation from Disraeli in which he says, "The East is a career." And the first part of the book is an attempt to show how this essentially European legacy of the Orient, which is principally embodied in the imperial careers of England and France, gets transferred to the United States, especially after World War II. And all the Orientalist expertise that comes out of Britain and France is deposited in this country and vulgarized by social science and churned into the kind of parody of stereotyping about the "Arabs" and "Islam" that then rules the popular imagination, the press, and policy.

How did you time the book so well that it comes out when there's so much interest in "Islam"?

Yes, fantastic! Amazing! It's the most extraordinary thing. One thing I don't say in the book is what the Orient really is. I mean I don't think there is any such thing as the Orient. I think you have to look at these things without those spectacles. You can't divide the world into an Oriental part, or an Islamic part, or anything like that. Those are self-limiting and canceling-out tools and can never deliver what reality is.

