

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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## COMMENTARY

# Fouad Ajami on America and the Arabs

Excerpts from the Middle Eastern scholar's work in the Journal over nearly 30 years.

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*Editor's note: Fouad Ajami, the Middle Eastern scholar and a contributor to these pages for 27 years, died Sunday at age 68. Excerpts from his writing in the Journal are below, and a related editorial appears nearby:*

*"A Tangled History," a review of Bernard Lewis's book, "Islam and the West," June 24, 1993:*

The book's most engaging essay is a passionate defense of Orientalism that foreshadows today's debate about multiculturalism and the study of non-Western history. Mr. Lewis takes on the trendy new cult led by Palestinian-American Edward Said, whose many followers advocate a radical form of Arab nationalism and deride traditional scholarship of the Arab world as a cover for Western hegemony. The history of that world, these critics insist, must be reclaimed and written from within. With Mr. Lewis's rebuttal the debate is joined, as a great historian defends the meaning of scholarship and takes on those who would bully its practitioners in pursuit of some partisan truths.

*"Barak's Gamble," May 25, 2000:*

It was bound to end this way: One day Israel was destined to vacate the strip of Lebanon it had occupied when it swept into that country in the summer of 1982. Liberal societies are not good at the kind of work military occupation entails.

*"Show Trial: Egypt: The Next Rogue Regime?" May 30, 2001:*

If there is a foreign land where U.S. power and influence should be felt,

Egypt should be reckoned a reasonable bet. A quarter century of American solicitude and American treasure have been invested in the Egyptian regime. Here was a place in the Arab world—humane and tempered—where Pax Americana had decent expectations: support for Arab-Israeli peace, a modicum of civility at home.



Fouad Ajami GETTY IMAGES

It has not worked out that way: The regime of Hosni Mubarak has been a runaway ally. In the latest display of that ruler's heavy handedness,

Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a prominent Egyptian-American sociologist, has recently been sentenced to seven years' imprisonment on charges of defaming the state. It was a summary judgment, and a farce: The State Security Court took a mere 90 minutes to deliberate over the case.

*"Arabs Have Nobody to Blame But Themselves," Oct. 16, 2001:*

A darkness, a long winter, has descended on the Arabs. Nothing grows in the middle between an authoritarian political order and populations given to perennial flings with dictators, abandoned to their most malignant hatreds. Something is amiss in an Arab world that besieges American embassies for visas and at the same time celebrates America's calamities. Something has gone terribly wrong in a world where young men strap themselves with explosives, only to be hailed as "martyrs" and avengers.

*"Beirut, Baghdad," Aug. 25, 2003:*

A battle broader than the country itself, then, plays out in Iraq. We needn't apologize to the other Arabs about our presence there, and our aims for it. The custodians of Arab power, and the vast majority of the Arab political class, never saw or named the terrible cruelties of Saddam. A political culture that averts its gaze from mass graves and works itself into self-righteous hysteria over a foreign presence in an Arab country is a culture that has turned its back on political reason.

Yet this summer has tested the resolve of those of us who supported the war, and saw in it a chance to give Iraq and its neighbors a shot at

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 OPINION VIDEO
 

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political reform. There was a leap of faith, it must be conceded, in the argument that a land as brutalized as Iraq would manage to find its way out of its cruel past and, in the process, give other Arabs proof that a modicum of liberty could flourish in their midst.

*"The Curse of Pan-Arabia," May 12, 2004:*

Consider a tale of three cities: In Fallujah, there are the beginnings of wisdom, a recognition, after the bravado, that the insurgents cannot win in the face of a great military power. In Najaf, the clerical establishment and the shopkeepers have called on the Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr to quit their city, and to "pursue another way." It is in Washington where the lines are breaking, and where the faith in the gains that coalition soldiers have secured in Iraq at such a terrible price appears to have cracked. We have been doing Iraq by improvisation, we are now "dumping stock," just as our fortunes in that hard land may be taking a turn for the better. We pledged to give Iraqis a chance at a new political life. We now appear to be consigning them yet again to the same Arab malignancies that drove us to Iraq in the first place.

*"Bush of Arabia," Jan. 8, 2008:*

Suffice it for them that George W. Bush was at the helm of the dominant imperial power when the world of Islam and of the Arabs was in the wind, played upon by ruinous temptations, and when the regimes in the saddle were ducking for cover, and the broad middle classes in the Arab world were in the grip of historical denial of what their radical children had wrought. His was the gift of moral and political clarity. . . .

We scoffed, in polite, jaded company when George W. Bush spoke of the "axis of evil" several years back. The people he now journeys amidst didn't: It is precisely through those categories of good and evil that they describe their world, and their condition. Mr. Bush could not redeem the modern culture of the Arabs, and of Islam, but he held the line when it truly mattered. He gave them a chance to reclaim their world from zealots and enemies of order who would have otherwise run away with it.

*"Obama's Afghan Struggle," March 20, 2009:*

[President Obama] can't build on the Iraq victory, because he has never really embraced it. The occasional statement that we can win over the reconcilables and the tribes in Afghanistan the way we did in the Anbar is lame and unconvincing. The Anbar turned only when the Sunni insurgents had grown convinced that the Americans were there

to stay, and that the alternative to accommodation with the Americans, and with the Baghdad government, is a sure and widespread Sunni defeat. The Taliban are nowhere near this reckoning. If anything, the uncertain mood in Washington counsels patience on their part, with the promise of waiting out the American presence.

*"Pax Americana and the New Iraq," Oct. 6, 2010:*

The question posed in the phase to come will be about the willingness of Pax Americana to craft a workable order in the Persian Gulf, and to make room for this new Iraq. It is a peculiarity of the American presence in the Arab-Islamic world, as contrasted to our work in East Asia, that we have always harbored deep reservations about democracy's viability there and have cast our lot with the autocracies. For a fleeting moment, George W. Bush broke with that history. But that older history, the resigned acceptance of autocracies, is the order of the day in Washington again.

It isn't perfect, this Iraqi polity midwived by American power. But were we to acknowledge and accept that Iraqis and Americans have prevailed in that difficult land, in the face of such forbidding odds, we and the Iraqis shall be better for it. We have not labored in vain.

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