

The Crisis of Islam – Holy War and Unholy Terror by Bernard Lewis. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003.

Dreaming of Damascus – Arab Voices from a Region in Turmoil by Stephen Glain. John Murray, 2003.

Islam and the West by Amin Saikal. Palgrave Macmillan 2003.

In The Crisis of Islam, Professor Bernard Lewis, one of the foremost scholars of Islam in the world, has developed an essay originally written for the New Yorker magazine into a short book. In some ways, *The Crisis of Islam* follows on from where his previous work, *What Went Wrong*, but it also stands on its own well enough.

Essentially this is an introduction for anyone who wants to understand something about Islam, as well as the Islamic world, and who seeks to comprehend why there is so much conflict in the modern world at which Muslims are at the heart.

Lewis' most interesting chapters are those about the relationship with America, the Great Satan (this soubriquet defined here in with great clarity), and the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the Wahhabist Islam that it espouses. In the final chapter Lewis turns to global Muslim terrorism, and in a dark prognostication of the future, leaves one wondering precisely to whom the crisis of the title applies.

In Dreaming of Damascus, the economic journalist Stephen Glain takes a fresh approach to the Middle East that nevertheless complements that taken by Lewis. In the course of six highly readable chapters he analyses the state of play in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan Palestine (sic), Iraq and Egypt. Having served for three years as the Middle East correspondent of the Wall Street Journal, Glain is both extremely knowledgeable about the area of which he writes as well as personally connected to many individuals whose business interests and economic involvement will play a crucial role in any economic and, possibly, political revival in the region.

Glain's analysis of each of the countries that he visits is grim, and he clearly demonstrates the extraordinary gap between the way things could be and the way they are; the sclerotic bureaucracies that stifle enterprise, and the debilitating 'brain drain' of the educated and the middle classes. He also points out the huge explosion in population, particularly among the least advantaged or educated, leading them to seek refuge from their frustration and solace for their lack in radical Islam.

As the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' widens, and as anger at the power of Israel and its patronage by America grows, his general prognosis regarding both peace and stability is very disturbing.

Of these three books it is perhaps the last (*Islam and the West*) that, page for page, is the most impressive and informative. Professor Amin Saikal, Director of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Australian National University in Canberra, writes with powerful honesty and balance about the state of the Islamic world and its internal and external relations.

He analyses the forces and influences at work in the Islamic 'ummah, considers the impact – usually hugely clumsy and negative – of US foreign policy and actions, and reflects on the tensions and stresses surrounding the State of Israel. He reflects on the awkward dynamic that exists between the authoritarian structures of Islam and the freedoms of Western-style democracy, and opines on why it has proved so difficult to seed the latter in Muslim countries.

In the most interesting chapter of all, Saikal reflects on what he views to be the major issues, including the Iranian Revolution, the Palestinian problem and Afghanistan, and in all of these the US figures as a major contributor to the various crises engendered. In his final chapter, Saikal looks to a future which he paints in somewhat dark hues. He stresses how important it is that the United States makes the right moves, particularly with regard to the rebuilding of Afghanistan and engagement with Iran, but he also indicates the need for Muslim states to re-assess their method of government and many aspects of the relationship between the governed and those who govern. The abiding conclusion that must be drawn, however, is not overflowing with optimism.

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