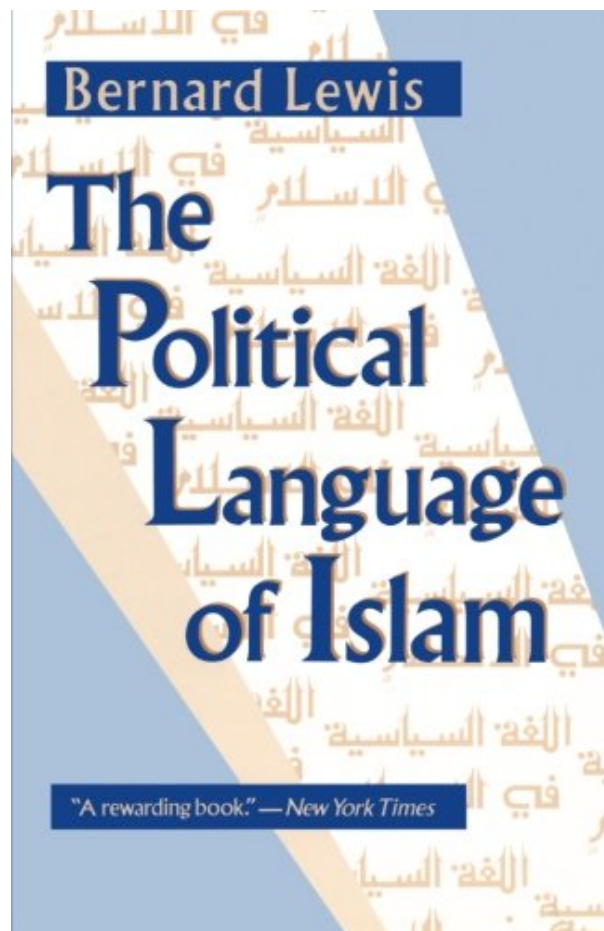
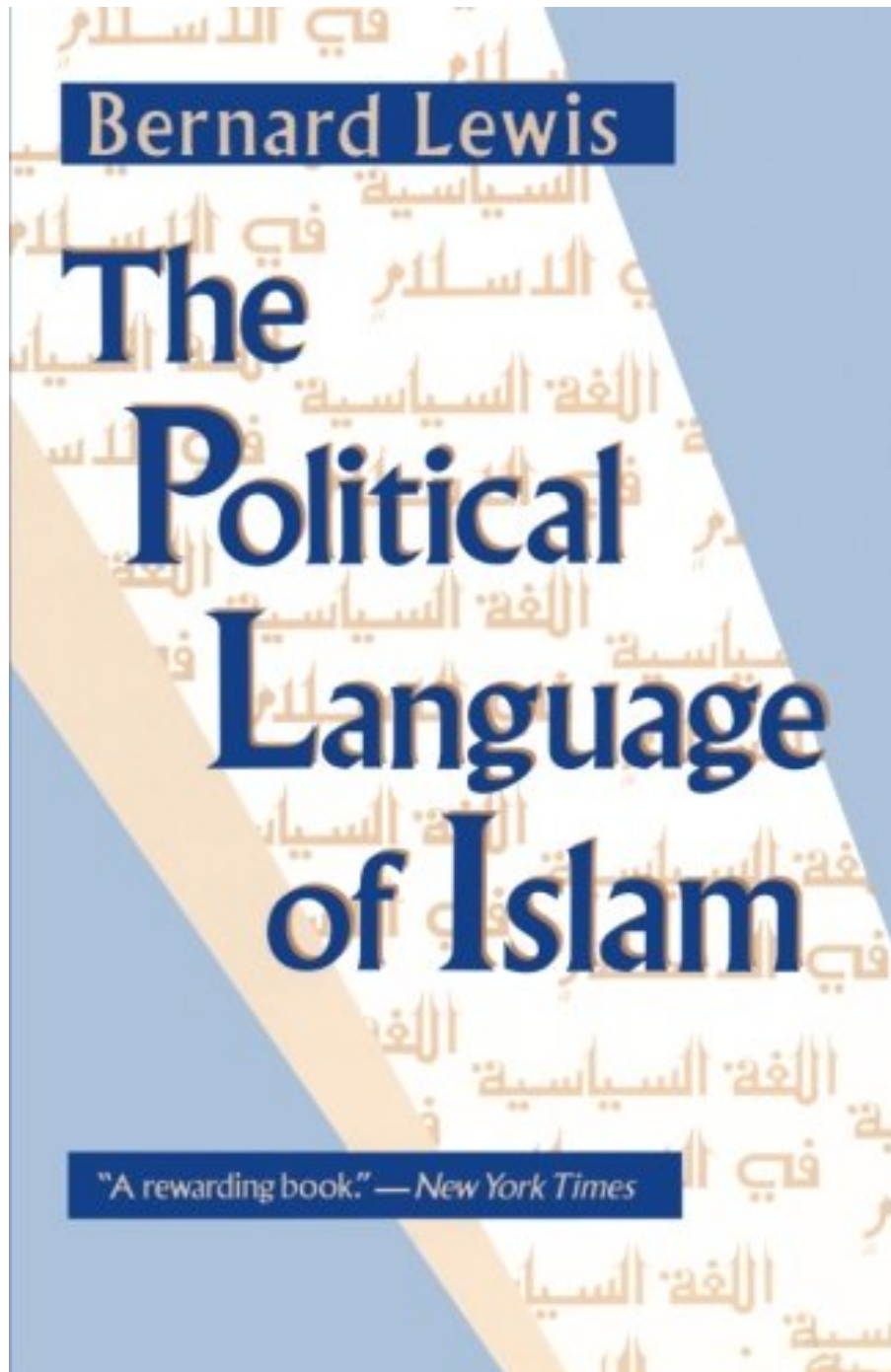


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Lewis, utilizing Arabic, Persian and Turkish documents dating from the time of the Prophet to the present, analyzes the disparity between Islamic and Western political thought.

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What does jihad really mean? What is the Muslim conception of law? What is Islam's stance toward unbelievers? Probing literary and historical sources, Bernard Lewis traces the development of Islamic political language from the time of the Prophet to the present. His analysis of documents written in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish illuminates differences between Muslim political thinking and Western political theory, and clarifies the perception, discussion, and practices of politics in the Islamic world.

"Lewis's own style, combining erudition with a simple elegance and subtle humor, continues to inspire. In an era of specialization and narrowing academic vision, he stands alone as one who deserves, without qualification, the title of historian of Islam."--Martin Kramer, Middle East Review

"A superb effort at synthesis that presents all the relevant facts of Middle Eastern history in an eminently lucid form. . . . It is a book that should prove both rewarding and congenial to the Muslim reader."--S. Parvez Manzor, Muslim World Book Review

"By bringing his thoughts together in this clear, concise and readable account, [Lewis] has placed in his debt scholars and all who seek to understand the Muslim world."--Ann K. S. Lambton, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies

"[Lewis] constructs a fascinating account of the ways in which Muslims have conceived of the relations between ruler and ruled, rights and duties, legitimacy and illegitimacy, obedience and rebellion, justice and oppression. And he shows how changes in political attitudes and concepts can be traced through changes in the political vocabulary."--Shaul Bakhash, New York Review of Books

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Lewis, utilizing Arabic, Persian and Turkish documents dating from the time of the Prophet to the present, analyzes the disparity between Islamic and Western political thought.

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Most helpful customer reviews

16 of 16 people found the following review helpful.

Distilling the Essence of Islam Linguistically

By Ralph White

This book is very unlike Bernard Lewis' other writing on Islam. "What Went Wrong" is much more accessible to the general reader and I recommend it highly. If, however, you have read most of Professor Lewis' work, and want to continue through his opus, then this will be your cup of tea. The book's title cannot be taken too literally; the subject is the derivation and meaning of words in the major Middle Eastern languages. The bulk of the book consists of his contrasting the usage of Islamic vocabularies with the counterpart words in English, and occasionally, Romance languages. It is fascinating, but even for a reader interested in linguistics, it becomes a blur. The Arabic (both classic and modern), Turkish, Iranian (and often Hebrew) words flash by. With Islam in the news so much these days, the general reader will recognize some of them, such as "sadr," as in Sadr City, the slum in Baghdad. It turns out that the Arabic word means "chest" literally, but has come to mean centrality, leadership, command. In Turkish it is part of the Grand Vizier's title. It is true, too, that the reader will learn much about the Qur'an, the Traditions of the Prophet, and of sharia, the Muslim law. For instance, since the principal function of government is to enable the individual Muslim to lead a good Muslim life, there is no thought of the separation of church and state. Also, since there is no clerical bureaucracy, there is no formal theocracy, although most Muslims believe that the Prophet Mohammed was the giver of all law. It is a brief 116 page book, and the notes and index comprise a third of its volume. Notwithstanding my admiration of Professor Lewis, I cannot recommend this book to any but Islamic-language speaking people. With their strange, and meaningless, diacritical marks, the foreign words cannot be held in memory once the page is turned, and the import of the exposition is lost.

If you wondered why a celebrated Princeton Professor's book was published by the University of Chicago, it is because it is based on a series of lectures sponsored by the University of Chicago back in 1986. The book was published two years later, and is still in print. You may also be surprised to see that half of the back cover encomiums are from reviewers with Arabic names. This is because there is not one critical, cynical, or condescending word against Islam. It is a thoroughly neutral treatment of a topic which was twenty years ahead of its time.

Keep in mind, too, that these chapters were written separately, although with a unifying theme. The result is that some chapters are less "linguistically intensive" than others. For instance, the chapter titled "War and Peace" is a good read on the fundamentals of jihad, and is less of an Arabic vocabulary study than the other chapters are. If you have time for only one chapter, this is it.

9 of 10 people found the following review helpful.

A Linguistic Approach

By R. Z. Basak

In *The Political Language of Islam*, Bernard Lewis attempts to trace the development of the political language of Islam from the Mohammedan Era, through the transformation of the religio-political discourse in modern times, to the present day. An eminent scholar of the Middle East and a professor at Princeton University, Lewis, presents an analysis of the discrepancies between Islamic and Western political thought. The book is based on his Exxon Foundation Lectures delivered at the University of Chicago in 1986.

In the first chapter of the book Lewis explains the differences between Islamic and Western political terms. He discusses the meanings and origins of words and compares them to corresponding terms in Western languages. He dwells on various metaphors and images, which reflect the traditional, social and political distinctions between Islamic and Western cultures. Despite these differences, Lewis says, there exist also resemblances between the two culturally different terminologies, due to the fact that the individuals of the two domains live in the same environment. He further adds that some of the similarities may be the result of

cultural influences and borrowings.

In the following chapters Lewis introduces an account of the issues relating to the state and political authority in the Muslim world. He elaborates on relations, particularly of the ruler and the ruled, people and the state, obedience and rebellion, rights and duties, justice and oppression and legitimacy and illegitimacy. He examines how certain political elements were perceived and practiced differently in various parts of the "Islamic bloc". Lewis also provides an informative synopsis of the political vocabulary of the Arabic language compared to Turkish and Persian expressions, followed by an analysis of their meanings, origins and changes in time.

The last chapters of the book are devoted to a discussion on war and peace, in which one can find a strong connection to the political climate of the present. Proving against the common belief, Lewis argues that "classic Arabic usage has no term corresponding to the concept of holy war." Therefore, the word "jihad" does not exist in Arabic language as it is perceived today. Its literal meaning connotes "strive" and "effort." But Lewis also makes it clear that "unceasingly to convert or at least subjugate those who have not" is an obligation imposed by God on all Muslims. "It must continue until the whole world has either accepted the Islamic faith or submitted to the power of the Islamic state." Lewis asserts that with an apostate being the worst enemy, rebels, bandits and apostates are enemies against whom it was legitimate to wage war. Yet according to some Muslim teachings the war did not have to be in the military sense, the jihad could be understood in moral and spiritual terms.

An ambiguity as such in Islamic thought among the Muslims reflects contested interpretations of the tenets of political Islam. Particularly following September 11 attacks, the word jihad has been in frequent use in both the Western and Muslim media. Although moderate Muslims and extremists divide amongst themselves in what they would call jihad, the western press instigates the meaning of the term as the holy war of the Muslims. In fact, according to Lewis, a term for holy war does not exist in Islam. As far as the current Islamic militant activism is concerned, contradictions between the political understanding of the moderate Muslims and the extremists as such constitute restlessness among the Muslim population. With the case of how meaning of jihad is perceived being one case, in "The Political Language of Islam" Bernard Lewis elaborates on various aspects of Muslim political language and illuminates the origins and the changes in the meanings of the political vocabulary of Islam. Although the book does not go very deep into details, it gives a lot of basic information on major aspects of political Islam. For those readers interested in studying the subject further, Lewis provides an informative section of links and footnotes. Lewis writes the book from an objective point of view, without taking a pro-Western or pro-Islamic side. Therefore the book lacks a strong argument. It is more a compilation study, than an argumentative work. "The Political Language of Islam" is highly recommended for academic circles, particularly for the faculty and graduate students of Middle Eastern Studies who would be willing to trace the political character of Islam in linguistic terms.

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

A Work of First Class Scholarship

By Eds Word

Lewis's works are known for their depth of analysis while simultaneously being presented with a simple elegance that makes them approachable to those of us who are not Arabists or Islamicists. In this work he expounds on the language of political discourse in Arabia, Persia, Turkey and Islamic lands in general. Political vocabulary more or less confines and defines the range of this discourse so understanding the language is not mere semantics but indeed critical to the understanding of the development of Islamic political thought.

This short book (116 pages plus 52 pages of detailed notes and references, including an index) traces the etymology behind key political concepts in Islam. If you are an informed reader of current Mideast events

encountering words like jihad, ayatollah, imam, shaykh, and fatwa and have a curiosity as to what these words are all about, under what context did they originally appear, and why they have contemporary relevance, you will find this unique volume hard to put down. The book is about the concept behind the word and its historical development more so than philological aspects, although the latter is also well covered. Originally published in 1988, an update reflecting the current state of affairs would be welcome. For example Islamic fundamentalists describe modern society as "jahili," a term originally used as a descriptor of Arabia before the time of the Prophet and related to the Arabic word for ignorance, "jahiliyya." Lewis' thoughts on how Muslims have dealt with attempting to end godless jahiliyya in the past and how it might apply to militant Islam today would have particular relevance as we try to understand the motivations behind the events of September 11th.

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