

**TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY**

**Mortimer and Raymond Sackler Institute  
of Advanced Studies  
and  
The Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies**

Dialogue between Professor Bernard Lewis, Professor Emeritus,  
Princeton University,

and

Professor Itamar Rabinoch, Tel Aviv University

**On**

**THE MIDDLE EAST AND MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES**

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Transcribed BY:

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**TEL-AVIV UNIVERSITY**

**The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies,  
Tel Aviv University**

**Dialogue between:**

**PROF. BERNARD LEWIS, Professor Emeritus, Princeton University  
and**

**PROF. Itamar Rabinovich, Tel Aviv University**

**On**

**The Middle East and Middle Eastern Studies**

**Chairman: Prof. Eyal Zisser**

Prof. Zisser: Good evening to all of you, good evening Bernard, good evening Itamar. It is a privilege and an honor to welcome you all to this I think unique (and I tend to think it will be an unforgettable) evening - to a dialogue between two great scholars, two great historians of the Middle East, ancient and modern, who will discuss the Middle East and Middle Eastern studies. I think it was Pres. Obama who said we should engage in a dialogue, so here we are engaging in a dialogue between these two great scholars. For the past thirty years Bernard has been covering, in his annual lectures, every possible aspects and dimensions of Middle Eastern politics, Middle Eastern studies, culture – life in the Middle East in general and here we are, as I said before, at a quite unique evening. So Itamar and Bernard – the floor is yours.

Prof. Rabinovich: Good evening ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this evening – it is a special evening; most of you may not be aware of the fact that this year concludes the fourth decade of Bernard Lewis' annual visits to Tel Aviv University which began in 1971 and have taken place every single years since then. It has been I think one of the great intellectual assets of Tel Aviv University, and for my colleagues and myself, a great source of pleasure and intellectual stimulus to have Bernard Lewis with us every single year for meaningful periods of time, available to all of us for conversation, discussion, tutoring and whatever resource we needed. Second – Bernard Lewis has begun working on his memoirs and this gave us the idea that it would be a good thing to deviate from what has been the standard practice for many years – for Bernard Lewis to deliver two annual lectures under the auspices of the Sackler Institute of Advanced Studies and instead to have a conversation that would deal with the subject matter itself – that is to say the Middle East, with Middle Eastern studies and the discipline or disciplines that together make up our field of study and research and finally, to look a little at Bernard Lewis the person who has sailed through several decades in the Middle East and Middle Eastern studies, and to hear a little about Bernard Lewis himself and some of the other people he has met – mostly leaders – and some of the personal experiences that has had

through the decades of dealing with Middle Eastern history. I would like to thank the Institute headed by Prof. Avraham Nitzan who is here with us and who has hosted Prof. Lewis for many decades together with the Dayan Center.

So Prof. Lewis, let me begin by asking you the most fundamental questions; what brought you to become a student of Middle Eastern studies?

Prof. Bernard Lewis: Before I answer your question my I say very briefly how very much I appreciate being here again; as you pointed out to the audience, it has been a very long time, and quite astonishingly – for me at least – it gets more and more interesting all the time, the reverse of the normal effect, and I am delighted to be here once again. Now I come to your question; I think I started in the usual place when I was being prepared for Bar Mitzva. My parents were, how shall I put it, not very active members of the Jewish community. They were what we used to know in those days as 'twice-a-year Jews' – Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – and when the time came for my Bar Mitzva, or rather when the time was approaching for my Bar mitzvah, I was not attending any of the normal synagogue classes, so they decided they had better hire a teacher to prepare me for this minimal but necessary operation. And my supreme good fortune was the man whom they found, who was a 'maskil' in the purest and deepest sense of that word. The idea was

simply to enable to recite the blessings and read my portion but already at that age I was very very interested in two main subjects in which I excelled at school: history and languages.

I was doing two languages at school – French and Latin – and two kinds of history – English and European and ancient. This provided me with an opportunity of access to another language and another history and my good fortune was that the teacher was someone who could recognize and respond to this interest. So instead of just teaching me my portion, he taught me Hebrew. I remember several people remarking at the time in astonishment "Do you mean you are learning Hebrew as a language?" This was considered odd to say the least, or unusual; you learned Hebrew in order to recite your bit and that's it. The idea that you would actually tackle it and learn it like a language, the way you learned French or Latin, seemed extraordinary to say the least. Well, that was when I started to learn Hebrew as a language and developed in Hebrew literature. And then one thing led to another: from Hebrew I went on to do some Aramaic, and then I thought it would be interesting to learn some Arabic and by the time I was ready to go to university, this had so to speak pre-determined by choices.

My family had decided that I should be a lawyer: my mother would have preferred me to be a doctor, my father preferred me to be a lawyer. This must sound very

familiar to you. The choice was lawyer since I was – shall we say less inept on that side than on the other side. The practice then – probably still now was you go to university first and do a BA in whatever interests or amuses you and while you're doing that, or soon after, you start the serious study of the law. So we did it that way – I went to university and that time the School of Oriental Studies in London, under the auspices of the University of London, had just inaugurate a new programme of which I was one of the first generation of students. This was what in English universities is called an honours degree in history with special reference to the Middle East. In English universities, an honours degree means that you choose one subject or rather one field of studies and specialize in that for the last two years of your undergraduate education. History normally meant English and European history; sometimes they added 'ancient history; sometimes they added 'imperial history'. My good fortune was that, just about at that time, they added 'Near and Middle Eastern history"; so I jumped on that and was as far as I know the first, or rather one of the first two students, to take that subject. I took my BA degree, my BA honours degree (honours is not a mark of achievement, it's a type of syllabus) in Middle Eastern history. The assumption was that, having done that, I would then get down to the serious business of life and the law. Well in the history school, and not just Middle

Eastern, but the whole history school of all branches, I came out no. 1, which carried with a prize in the sum of 100 pounds. In the year 1936 when I got my BA, this was a princely sum. The prize carried with it a condition: that I continue with graduate studies. So we compromised: I continued with graduate studies but at the same time began my law studies. I did the following year in Paris; I had told my teacher what I was interested in and he thought it would be a good idea for me to go to Paris and work for a while with Massignon and other French professors, which I did. Then I came back and when I was back from Paris on a visit but not yet finally, I went to see my teacher, Sir Hamilton Gibb, and he said to me: "You have now been studying the Middle East for four years, don't you think it's time you saw the place?" I thought this was eminently reasonable, but I would remind you that these were the deepest years of the depression and nobody had any money and I could no more have gone to the Middle East than I could have gone to the moon. Gibb understand that perfectly well and said I think we can do something about that. The next thing I heard was that the Royal Asiatic Society had offered me what was called a 'Traveling Fellowship' and this gave me the truly princely sum of 150 pounds sterling which enabled me to spend six months traveling around the Middle East. This may sound unbelievable to day, but I assure you that it was so in the nineteen-

thirties. So I set out on my first visit to the Middle East in the year 1937 and I spent roughly six months traveling around – first Egypt, then mandatory Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and then I came home. I was doing two things at the same time; trying to complete my doctoral dissertation, which of course I had to do as a graduate student, and also to do something in the field of law studies. The law studies didn't go too badly: the first thing I had to do was Roman law which I was required to study in the original Latin texts; that was fun, I enjoyed that. The next subject I had to do was constitutional law and that was a kind of history, so I wasn't too bad at that. The next was criminal law, which was useful because it helped me to understand detective studies to which I am addicted and was then, and then two things happened at about the same time: in my law studies, the next thing I had to do was real property and conveyancing, which is monumentally boring and difficult. And the University of London offered me a job as an assistant lecturer, not professor, that's the American terminology. In the English system there were only professors, no assistants. You were an assistant lecturer, then a lecturer, then a senior lecturer, then a reader, then a professor. Assistant lecturer was the lowest form of human life in the British universities. The University of London offered me a job as assistant lecturer at a salary of 250.- pounds a year, and naturally I jumped at this eagerly, particularly as the

alternative was real property and conveyancing in the law. So that was the beginning of my academic professional career.

Prof. Rabinovich: This of course gives rise to several questions but I would like to share with the audience; Prof. Lewis mention that he was good at history and languages. I think you can speak – is it 14 or 16 languages? At least fourteen. I once asked him: you know fourteen languages yet you always lecture in English? The answer was: "I know 14 languages but I can express myself in English". You mentioned two names: you mentioned Gibb as your teacher in London, and you said that Gibb himself wanted you to spend some time in Paris and study with some of the great French orientalist such as Mesignon. To those of us in the audience who are students of Middle Eastern studies these two names resonate: Gibb, a major British historian of the Middle East, wrote a textbook on Islam called 'Muhamedanism' and many other important books; and Mesingnon, who was an expert mostly on Muslim mysticism and a great French orientalist as well, and both men, if I remember correctly, also had policy experience, let us call it. So I think this would be a good opportunity to begin by asking about these two individuals; these are two great figures to all of us, or rather to all of us who have read their works and would like to know a little bit about the persons behind the names.

Prof. Lewis: Let me start with Gibb. You referred to Gibb as an eminent historian of the Middle East/ Gibb himself would have rejected that description: he was a philologist: he studied Arabic, Arabic literature and various aspects of Islamic history and civilization through Arabic texts, but he always insisted that he was not a historian and that one should look elsewhere for guidance in history. And for that recognition I am profoundly grateful to him, because until then the history of the Middle East, in fact the history non-European areas in general, was done by a group of people called 'orientalists'. Orientalists are basically philologists. Their field is language, the study of texts and so on. The approach of the historian is a different one and you can see this distinction very clearly if you look at writings on Greek and Roman history where you have the philologists on the one side and the historians on the other; and Gibb insisted - and he was right - that although he wrote on history, he was not a historian. He attached great importance to the fact and I am eternally grateful to him for it. I took my BA degree in history, which went with my basic methodological training, and that was not in language and philology, though I happened to study the languages, but in history as such, and it is true that my appointment at the University of London was the first appointment in Middle Eastern history in any British university ever. All previous appointments had been in on or other language,

sometimes in religion, mostly in language. And I think that was very important and I am eternally grateful to Gibb for having seen this, understood it and guided me accordingly.

Now let me say a word or two about Gibb: he was (by the way Gibb never took a Ph.D. In those days it wasn't essential in British university life to have a Ph. D. It was optional and came in rather late). He took an MA and again, in British universities, you are not a professor until you are what in American universities is called a 'full professor'. There is no such thing as an assistant or anything like that. So until Gibb was appointed to a Chair, he was Mr. Gibb, that was how he was normally addressed by his students, and after we'd learned a certain amount of Arabic, his students came to know him as emir-elmok banin el Mr. Gibb-ella. Gibb gave me a good basic training in such subjects as Arabic of course, Islam and Arabic literature, and the basic outlines of history. But – if I may digress for a moment, for my training as a historian, I was sent to do another branch of the Middle East program: as I said, there was a degree specializing in Middle Eastern history. Now Middle Eastern history consisted of two main parts: one part was Islamic history, the other was Byzantine history, a central part of the Middle East until 1453. So I was required to do Byzantine history and I went to the professor of Byzantine history in the university, an

eminent byzantinist called Baynes, who wrote standard works on Byzantine history. And I am eternally grateful to Baynes because it was from him that I learned what you might call 'the professional historical approach', using test studying history but studying it as a historian rather than as textual philologist. Now Gibb, as I mentioned before, decided that I should go to Paris and study under Messignon. Now Messignon was a very different man; he was a professor at the College de France and my relationship with him was always a rather equivocal one (that is the best word I can think of); he had strong feelings and didn't hesitate to express them. He did his duty – care and guidance and so on, but he still maintained that there were things he objected to. I was never quite sure which of my two offences he was complaining of: was it because as an Englishman I had burnt Joan of Arc, or was it because as a Jew, I had crucified Jesus? These were my main two offences and I say, Messignon held me responsible for both.

Prof. Rabinovich: We had a common friend – you and several of us her – the late Eli Cadouri. Eli Cadouri did not have a Ph.D. because, famously, of Gibb: by the time he submitted his doctoral dissertation on British policy and the destruction of the Ottoman Empire in 1914-1921, Gibb in Oxford, no longer in London, and Gibb was very close to policy-making circles in Britain. He was unhappy with this scathing criticism of British policy and he wanted

Cadouri to change certain portions of his dissertations, which Eli Cadouri refused to do, and so he ended up without a Ph.D. However he published the dissertation as a book called "England and the Middle East" which gave him the basis for a very distinguished academic career. He was given a post at the London School of Economics, he never had a Ph.D. and eventually he published his correspondence with Gibb. It is quite remarkable to see a young refugee from Iraq standing up to the great hamelton Gibb and the whole Oxford establishment. Eli Cadouri in a way took his revenge years later when he published the Chatham House version in which he showed how Gibb and Toynbee were trying to affect British policy in the Middle East through their academic and semi-academic work. Maybe you could illuminate that side of Gibb as well.

Prof. Lewis: Could I just make one point that could help to usefully understanding what happened. In the English universities at that time, and as far as I know still now, though I can't be sure of that – the procedure for a Ph. D. examination was very different from the American system. I don't know how it is here; in the American universities, the oral examination for a Ph.D. candidate, is largely ceremonial. The really important matter is getting your thesis approved by your supervisor; the supervisor recommends that it may be submitted to the Board of Examiners and the rest is, as I said, ceremonial.

Now in the British universities this was not the case: a Ph.D. thesis had to be submitted to a board of three examiners consisting of the supervisor, another professor from the same university and another professor from another university; and the board of examiners had three options, all of which were used at one time or another. They could accept the thesis, in which case the candidate is awarded a Ph.D.; they could reject the thesis, in which case the candidate has to go away empty-handed. Or they could do what is known as 'referring thesis': referring the thesis means 'Go away, re-write this, that and the other thing and re-submit it, and then, if we like it, we'll give you a Ph.D.'" What happened in Eli Cadouri's case was that, after this encounter with Gibb at the board of examiners' meeting (Gibb was a member of the board, in fact he was the chairman of the board) Gibb said: "No, we can't accept this, we will refer the thesis". Eli Cadouri refused to accept that and he said "I am perfectly willing to accept criticism of my scholarship but not criticism of my political opinions. The point on which we differ is not a point of scholarship – the question of scholarly accuracy is not involved – it's a matter of political opinion and I cannot agree that the thesis should be referred so that the candidate may change his opinions." He therefore withdrew his thesis and as you said, he was appointed not long afterwards to a post at the LSE and began a very brilliant and distinguished

career. But I think one needs to know something about the procedures of an English PhD. Examination in order to understand what happened.

Prof. Rabinovich: How close was Gibb to policy-making in Great Britain?

Prof. Lewis: Only during the War and immediately before the war. Before that I don't think he had a great deal to do with policy-making. In the late 'thirties, when war was becoming imminent and when that fact was obvious, the government, especially but not exclusively the Foreign Office, began to try and mobilize what talent was available in the country and people were asked to serve on this or that committee. Gibb formed an advisory committee for the foreign office and that committee appointed a number of sub-committees on various topics, which included me by the way: I was included in one of those committees and for the first month of the war I was actually in the Foreign Office as a member of this committee chosen and appointed by Gibb. But that was a purely temporary arrangement.

Prof. Rabinovich: You mentioned working on your Ph.D. You wrote your Ph.D. and published your first book on the Ismailia. Why did you choose a rather obscure topic?

Prof. Lewis: Like many young people in those days, I was interested in opposition movements and the Ismailis were an important, in some ways the most important opposition movement in medieval Islam, and their successful

revolution gave rise to the Fatimid caliphate, and it seemed to me that here was an interesting subject to study. So I chose the Ismailis as the subject of my doctoral dissertation; I read what was available in print, I read the manuscripts to which I had access and then, when I had my first visit to the Middle East as a graduate student, I went and spent a little while in the Ismaili villages in Syria. There are, if I remember rightly, three Ismaili villages.

Prof. Rabinovich: In this connection – eventually you published a book, much later, on The Assassins.

Prof. Lewis: May I just make one other point? I published my thesis because of the war. Normally a thesis is not really a book, a thesis is written for the board of examiners; a book is written for a somewhat wider readership and it is usual practice, having done the necessary minimum to satisfy the board of examiners, to take the thesis and revise, expand, clarify so that it may reach a different and wider readership as a work of scholarship. This was just after the outbreak of war and the future was very uncertain. The University of London offered me a publication grant; they liked the thesis, they thought the thesis should be published. So, as the war had already begun and I was about to depart on national service, it seemed to be a good idea to publish the thesis as it was rather than take the risk of its disappearing totally. It had a tremendous impact, it had 500 copies and it took almost

500 years to sell those 500 copies. One thing which did gratify me was that very soon after it was published in English, an Arabic translation appeared in Baghdad. That was a mystery.

Prof. Rabinovich: So no royalties?

Prof. Lewis: Of course not.

Prof. Rabinovich: The book 'The Assassins' actually branched out of your interest in these matters.

Prof. Lewis: Yes, The Assassins is in a sense an offshoot of the Ismailis. The Assassins were a group of people to whom their name is by way a branch of Ismaili bredon, I can't remember the precise circumstances which led me to write that book but obviously it was a logical continuation of my previous interest in the Ismailis.

Prof. Rabinovich: I know that the book was published well before suicide bombings became a phenomenon, but once they became a phenomenon, the book was very much in demand because they seemed like an early precursor of suicide bombers.

Prof. Lewis: My first commercial success was the book on the Assassins which suddenly acquire a current relevance which neither the publisher nor I had ever dreamed of; it practically became a best-seller.

Prof. Rabinovich: Do you see, other than this success, do you see in the phenomenon of the Assassins, anything that suggests an early root of what eventually became,

Prof. Lewis: No I don't. The Assassins were very very different from the terrorists of today. For one thing, the Assassins were always very careful only to kill the designated victim; they took great care not to harm anyone else. The second point is that the assassin made no attempt to escape; he did it personally and stayed there. It was considered an honour to do it and be caught. The whole approach is fundamentally different.

Prof. Rabinovich: When you mentioned that you were trained and became a historian as distinct from a philologist or an orientalist like Gibb, that of course raises the whole issue of orientalism as a discipline. Since the late 'seventies, it has come under attack. It had not been well received in the Arab and Muslim worlds earlier but of course Edouard Said added particular poignancy to the offensive.

Prof. Lewis: Well my stuff was quite well received; my first book – my thesis – as I said, was translated immediately and published in Iraq; my short book "The Arabs in history", which was my first addressed to a wider public, was translated into Arabic more than once and was very favorably reviewed in the scholarly press in the Arab world at that time.

Prof. Rabinovich: I know that you yourself and others responded quite severely to Sa'id, both attacking his arguments but also defending orientalism as a very respectable branch of learning.

Prof. Lewis: Said's whole hypothesis is so absurd, so utterly unrelated to even the most basic historical facts that I have often wondered, I have often confronted myself with a difficult and embarrassing question: the question is where ignorance ends and deceit begins. Could one possibly be so utterly ignorant of European history as to assume that when chairs of Arabic were founded in Oxford and Cambridge in the seventeenth century, this was because of British imperial designs on the Arab world? Just consider what was happening: chairs of Arabic at Oxford and Cambridge were founded in the seventeenth century. In the seventeenth century, the Turks were still advancing through central Europe, they had twice laid siege to Vienna. Europe itself was under threat. Even in the British Isles, the Barbary Corsairs from North Africa were raiding the coasts of the British Isles, carrying off booty and victims. Not hundreds but thousands of English men and more especially Englishwomen were taken off by the Barbary Corsairs for sale in the slave markets of Algiers and other North African cities. It was England that was under threat from the Muslims, not the Muslims under threat from England. If you want to relate the beginning of scholarly orientalism in the English universities to imperialism, then you have to do it the other way round – the Muslim attacks on Europe, not that way. To know that requires only a minimal knowledge of English and European history and I find it difficult to

believe that a professor of English at Columbia University could have been so ignorant. That is my point about ignorance and deceit.

I finally found an explanation: we all tend to judge others by ourselves, it's natural human behavior. Said, you may recall, was professor of English at Columbia university. I think he may have assumed, very naturally, that an Englishman who is a professor of Arabic would have the same attitude to his subject as he had to his. You may remember that, writing about Jane Austen, he describes the imperialist content of her writings.

Prof. Rabinovich: Let me go back to the time-line – you completed your Ph.D.; you published a book – then of course there was the unfortunate hiatus of World War II and at the end of the war you came back to the university of London

Prof. Lewis: Right.

Prof. Rabinovich: hopefully not as 'the lowest form of human life' – not an assistant lecturer?

Prof. Lewis: No, I was promoted. I had an accelerated release from the Service. As you can imagine, in 1945, five years accumulation of would-be under-graduates going to university; five years of high-school graduates instead of going to university were going into the armed forces. Now suddenly, this vast accumulation of people were coming to the universities seeking an education. So the authorities arranged for an accelerated release for university teachers, which enabled me to return to the

university much sooner than would otherwise have been possible. When the war ended, I was in Egypt. I was flown back immediately to London and literally within a matter of days, I was released from my duties and allowed to return to the university to cope with this immense task of confronting the new intake.

That was when we really got started on developing historical studies of the Middle East in the British universities.

Prof. Rabinovich: You then – probably around 1950 – published your second book "The Arabs in History". This was of course an overview and if the origins of Ismailism was a very specific book, this was a very broad book, an interpretation rather than a narrative.

Prof. Lewis: This was in response to a request. One fine day I received, my utter astonishment and delight, a letter from a very distinguished Oxford professor of history saying that he was the editor of a series that was being published – short books of interpretation on various aspects and problems in history. Would I be willing to write a book with the title 'The Arabs in history'? not an outline of Arab history, not a summary of events, but an interpretation, a presentation of the significance of Arab history as part of human history, and so on. He went on to explain this and even more astonishing, he said that the publishers would pay me an advance of 50 pounds, at that time a princely sum.

This was also the first time that the very notion of being paid for writing something was entirely new -in the academic world at least. So I accepted this with shrill cries of delight and set to work and wrote this little book which was duly published and I suppose I must say it has probably been my most successful literary undertaking. It went through several re-prints, it was well received in the Arab world, well reviewed; it was translated into I forget how many languages and went through several re-editing processes updating it. I was even asked to write an article on re-editing one's own work. I think that was my most important book until fairly recently.

Prof. Rabinovich: I will overcome the temptation to ask you what you think is today your most significant work because we will get to that, but I would like to share with the audience that the book was translated into Hebrew in a very interesting way by Yonathan Ratosh who had very strong views about the Middle East and Jews and Arabs and Hebrews, and he does not translate Arabs as 'Aravim' but 'Arvaim' (with an 'aleph' in Hebrew) and the book in Hebrew, in addition to its intrinsic value, is an interesting phenomenon in itself. So if you can get hold of the Hebrew edition as translated by Yonathan Ratosh, that is strongly recommended.

I think your next major book was The emergence of modern Turkey; this must have been quite a switch?

Prof. Lewis: It was. This was after the war of course and I returned to the university after my war service and, as I said, I was very busy with the new generation of under-graduates and in the academic year '49-50, the university very kindly gave me a year's leave of absence to re-visit the Middle East or re-acquaint my self with the Middle East in a different way. Now this was 1950 – there were only two countries in the Middle East where I could set foot: one was Israel, the other was Turkey. In all the Arab countries without exception there was a line in the visa application form asking 'Religion?' and if you declared your religion as Jewish, you were refused a visa. When I went on my Middle East tour as a professor of Middle Eastern history of the history of London, I could not set foot – as I said – in any Arab country at that time; only Israel and Turkey. I spent a little while in Israel and I spent the rest of the time in Turkey where I worked in the Turkish archives. I applied for permission and to my utter astonishment, I was given permission, not through any particular merit of mine but because I just happened to apply at a time when there was a policy change: they decided to open their archives. And it was about that time, and probably because of those developments, that Chatham House – the Royal Institute of International Affairs – decided that it was time to do a monograph on modern Turkey and they asked me if I would be willing to do it. They offered me a number of trips to Turkey and

staying in Turkey as long as I thought necessary at their expense, and this was of course a considerable inducement. So I accepted this and went to Turkey on the first of a series of visits which helped me to produce this book –The emergence of modern Turkey.

There is one story which is interesting, if I may: my sponsor – the Royal Institute of International Affairs – said 'When you get to Turkey, you had better go and see the British ambassador, explain who you are and what you are doing and why.' So I made an appointment with the British ambassador and went to see him. He received me for lunch – he was very kind and helpful – and in accordance with British rules of politeness, we discussed everything except the business in hand until the coffee was served; and then, as the coffee was brought to the table, he turned to me and said "Now let's get on to business. Why are you here and what can I do to be of help?" So I explained to him that I had been asked by Chatham House to do this book on modern Turkey and that is why was now on the first of what would be a series of visits, and he said "Oh well, I'd glad to help you in any way I can; for example if you want to meet members of the government or people in government departments, I can set up appointments for you." I said Well thank you very much, but are you sure that would be wise? You know how sensitive people are in this part of the world? I don't know how this book is going to turn

out. When the book is finished and published, they may like it, or they may decide that it's offensive, in which case it would be embarrassing for you if you had introduced me" And he said – and I always remember this remark – "That's a risk we have to take. You a British scholar, I am your ambassador, it's my duty to help you." So he set up a number of appointments for me with various people in the government, and fortunately they decided they liked the book though there was no certainty that that would be the result.

Prof. Rabinovich: When you mentioned that in 1950, no Jew could visit an Arab country, I am reminded that 23 years later, this was no longer the case with many Arab countries but it was still the case in Saudi Arabia. Henry Kissinger, as part of his shuttle diplomacy, came to Saudi Arabia and of course they knew he was Jewish but he was the secretary of state of the United States and they had to let him in and he went to see King Faisal. Now King Faisal couldn't just let it pass, that a Jewish person came to Saudi Arabia and his welcoming sentence to Henry Kissinger was "Secretary Kissinger, we receive you here as a human being"; and Henry Kissinger, who is never short of a response, said "Some of my best friends are human beings".

You mentioned meeting Turkish government officials through the courtesy of the British ambassador but over the years of course you made a name for yourself and

when you visited Middle Eastern countries, you met more than just officials but also leaders, heads of state, kings and so forth. So I'd like to ask you about your meetings and acquaintances and in some cases friendship with a number of such personalities.

Prof. Lewis: I did get to know quite a number of people - heads of state and ministers of this or that.

Prof. Rabinovich: Let me begin with the Shah of Iran.

Prof. Lewis: I met him a few times and I vividly remember one particular conversation when he was being quite severely criticized in the western world, and he said 'Why do they keep doing this to me? Don't you realize that I am the best friend you have in this part of the world?' And I said 'Well you must understand that our foreign policy is based on Marxist principles.' And he said 'What?' and I said 'Not Karl – Groucho!' I asked 'Are you acquainted, your majesty, with the ....?' He said Of course. So I reminded him that Groucho said "I wouldn't want to be a member of any club that would have me as a member". 'It's the same thing – we don't want the friendship of any government that wants to have our friendship.'

Prof. Rabinovich: King Hussein?

Prof. Lewis: Oh with King Hussein I had a continuing relationship over many many years, starting from the late seventies when I went to Jordan for the first time and then continuing almost every year until the last time that I went and that was to his funeral. That way we used to

meet very frequently in the Palace, I was often there as a guest and had very frank and genuine discussions. I think he was a remarkable man for whom I have the greatest respect; a basically decent human being.

Prof. Rabinovich: Of the Turkish leaders and politicians that I heard you talk about over the years, I think you must have had a particular appreciation for Turgod Ozul?

Prof. Lewis: What I liked about Turgod Ozul was the frankness with which he spoke, sometimes devastating. At the time of the Iraq war I remember I was there; we talked of this and that and then I said 'And if it comes to a crisis, will you be with us?' and he said 'Of course' and I said 'May I ask why?' and he replied 'Oh, for the same reason that we declared war on the Axis in late February 1945. When the fighting stops and the talking starts (and I am quoting him verbatim), we want to be at the victors' table, and we want to be there on the guest list, not on the menu'.

Prof. Rabinovich: Sometimes, since – and when all is said and done, you are not just a Jewish person who visited Arab countries but who visited Arab countries when they knew that you regularly went to Israel. Sometimes they tried to rely on you in order to convey messages. I think the most significant example I can recall was in the early 'seventies when Sadat and his people were trying to send a message to the Israeli leadership that there was a major change in their outlook. I think this would be of great interest to everyone here.

Prof. Lewis: There was a major change of outlook in Egypt and for a very simple reason: Sadat did not change his attitude because he was suddenly converted to Zionism or because he suddenly saw the merits of the Jewish case. It was something very different from that: Sadat and most of the Egyptian nation were becoming painfully aware that Egypt was becoming a Soviet colony: the Soviet presence was overwhelming. I visited Egypt quite frequently in the late 'sixties and early 'seventies and there were whole areas to which no Egyptians were admitted; no Egyptian could set foot there. The Russians were really controlling the thing. I am old enough to remember the days of the British occupation of Egypt; the Soviet occupation was much more visible and much more offensive than the British occupation ever was, at least in the time when I knew it, and Sadat was obviously very painfully aware of this and aware that it was getting worse and worse and worse. Now he realized that, in order to get rid of the Russians he needed help. He turned to Washington which responded with the Sachs-Gromyko agreement: in effect portioning the world into American and Soviet spheres of influence and assigning Egypt to the Soviets. In desperation – and I think that's the right word – he turned to the Israelis on the quite logical assumption that on the best estimate of Israel's power and on the worst estimate of Israel's intentions, Israel was less dangerous to Egypt than the Soviet Union.

There were a number of attempts in various ways to communicate in which I participated. There were people whom I knew in the Egyptian government, at the bureaucratic, not the political level, and with whom I chatted in various places. And they made it perfectly clear to me that Egypt was fed up – as one of my Egyptian friends put it – with being the blood-bank of the Arab world, a phrase I heard more than once in Egypt. "For long enough Egypt has been the blood-bank of the Arab world". They were not only willing, they were anxious for some sort of a deal with Israel, and I tried to convey this, I went from Egypt to Israel, I spoke to various people: I spoke to Golda, I spoke to Dayan, and I was unable to get this message across. They rejected it – Golda because she did not believe me and Dayan because he did believe me. Golda really believed that I had allowed myself to be fooled by Egyptian propaganda. Dayan realized that they were ready and he said "Well if we make peace, we have to give up Sinai". He said he would rather have Sinai without peace than peace without Sinai". Well.

Prof. Rabinovich: I would now like to talk about your move from Great Britain to the United States. I would like to preface it with a story which you can either verify or deny: I think you spent a sabbatical or part of a sabbatical year at UCLA, my alma mater, in the late 'fifties or early 'sixties?

Prof. Lewis: In the fifties.

Prof. Rabinovich: And the story is that Prof. Lewis was invited to dinner at some palatial residence in Beverley Hills or some similar part of town and in the middle of dinner he was asked by the hostess or another guest "How does it feel for a professor from England to be here?" and the answer was "I feel like the Byzantine ambassador to the court of Charlemagne". So eventually, some fifteen years later, in the 'seventies, you moved from London to Princeton and you became part of a very different system. I'd like to ask you about the differences – first of all life at an American university as compared to life at a British university.

Prof. Lewis: I had several invitations the one from UCLA was the first. I had a number of subsequent invitations, all of which I refused. The invitation from Princeton came a moment in my personal life when I felt I needed a change. I can't really do a comparison between the American and British universities now because I have been in America since 1974 and my information therefore about the British universities is very out-dated. I can compare the systems as they were then, I don't know whether that's of archaeological interest.

The first difference was - what you needed in order to get into university: in those days the level of knowledge of a high-school graduate about to enter university in England was the same, or slightly better, than that of an American

BA. The level of high-school education in the US was, by European standards, appallingly low and at least the first two years, or sometimes more than that, of undergraduate education were spent trying to impart knowledge which in England and in most European countries, were part of secondary education, not higher education.

The undergraduate studies therefore in America seemed to be much poorer than in the English universities. At English universities, people came with two levels of examination behind them and a certain level of accomplishment as a requirement for entering university. And one could therefore proceed, during the undergraduate years, to a much higher level of specialization and knowledge than was possible in the American universities. Where I think the American universities were much better was in graduate studies. In the English universities – and again I specify, I am speaking of then not now; I don't know how it is now. In the English universities, once you had your BA, particularly BA honours, the assumption was that you had had all the training and education that you needed. There was no real program of graduate studies except in certain very limited respects. After that you were ready to undertake your research and go on and do your Ph. D. The MA was really just a sort of intermediate stage which very few people bothered to take.

Prof. Rabinovich: There's a story about your successor in your Chair in Princeton – Michael Cook. Normally you have to give what they call a 'job-talk' at an American university, and I think he was quite confident about the position, but still he had to give the talk. And after Michael Cook gave the talk at Princeton, somebody asked him "What is the conceptual framework that underlies your talk?" and he said "I am British, I don't need one".

Now I wanted to ask you about another aspect of the transition to America: I know that when you were a professor in London, you had friends and acquaintances in the foreign office; you used to meet regularly with senior policy-makers –

Prof. Lewis: - quite informally – I had no official relationship with the foreign office. I had friends – one in particular; we used to meet about once a month for lunch or dinner, either at his club or at my club, and we exchanged news and views. He provided the news, I provided the views.

Prof. Rabinovich: And then, when you moved to America, I'd say within a pretty short time you had close ties – I know that you became very friendly with Sen. Jackson, who testified famously before

Prof. Lewis: that was even before I moved to America.

Prof. Rabinovich: On your ninetieth birthday, I remember that Vice-President Cheney came, I know that you have been to see the President several times; so you interacted with

governments from the academe in both countries, but the interaction must have been very different.

Prof. Lewis: Yes, it's very different. In England after the war, I had no formal relationship with government. I would meet from time to time on a totally informal, personal private basis with people whom I knew – as I said lunch or dinner, his club or mine, and exchange ideas. My only official connection with government in England was in the field of what you might call 'cultural diplomacy'. I was never again employed by the government in England but from time to time I used to be sent on cultural missions, for example the British government signed a cultural treaty with the kingdom of Afghanistan, as it was then, and they wanted what to do next so somebody had the idea of sending me to Afghanistan to spend a little while there and explore the possibilities of Anglo-Afghan cultural cooperation. This somewhat startling assignment I must say I found irresistible, so off I went to Afghanistan and I had a really wonderful time there. I was provided with a land-rover and very good hotel accommodation. I spent sometime in Kabul; I met all sorts of people in government and in the academy. I went on a tour of the country with my land-rover. I remember one moment of intense patriotic pride when I came to a place where there was no bridge; the only way you could cross the river was at a certain place where the river was very shallow and you could drive across the water. I

came to this place and when I got to it there was a land-rover and a jeep stuck in the mud and I thought 'Oh my God, what am I going to do?' Then I drove ahead with my land-rover and went straight across to the other side. As I say – a moment of intense patriotic pride.

That was the only form of government connection that I had in England after the war: private conversations or cultural diplomacy. The British government also had a cultural treaty with Turkey and under that one, there was a permanent committee of six members – three British and three Turkish, which met in alternate years in London and Ankara. The three British members consisted of the head of the British Council, which is responsible for cultural relations; the Turkish desk officer from the Foreign Office, and me.

The three Turkish members consisted of the equivalent from the Turkish government and a professor of English from Ankara university. We met in alternate years in London and Ankara. Now as you know, government officials are constantly changing whereas professors stay for ever, so that, as the meetings went on, my colleague – the professor of English at Ankara – and I got to know each other very well, and we were more or less the permanent members.

Now one occasion which I remember vividly: normally we conducted our meetings in English. On one occasion the leading member of the Turkish group didn't know any

English so we had to have interpreters. That's quite an elaborate procedure conducted according to certain rules. First of all there are two interpreters: they have their interpreter, who is a member of their mission and translated what we said into Turkish. We had our interpreter, who was a Cypriot Turk and therefore British, who translated what we said into English. And the entire business was conducted in this way. Now at one point the head of the Turkish delegation made a very elegant speech in which he said how much the Turkish government appreciated the scholarships which were given every year by the British government to enable Turkish students to study at British universities. This was extremely valuable to the cultural relations between our two countries. And he said, delicately, it would be even better if the number of scholarships were to be increased so that the impact would be even greater. This was translated into English, then the leader of the British delegation said that he was delighted to hear that the scholarships were appreciated; we attach great importance to this matter, and we would take note of their request and he would certainly refer to this to higher authorities to try and secure a greater number of scholarships. For the moment however this would seem to be rather difficult because of certain budgetary constraints, but we hope that in the not too distant future

it will be possible to create additional scholarships for Turkish students coming to England.

And the Turkish translator said 'Yok!' and this really happened.

Prof. Rabinovich: You alluded earlier that there was a more recent book that you consider more significant than *The Arabs in History*.

Prof. Lewis: The two books that I have done since 9/11: "The Crisis of Islam" and 'What went wrong?' These are my two most recent books and one of them – as the title indicates – is an attempt to analyze what has been happening in the Islamic world and why things have reached their present pass, and the other is an examination of the debate among the Muslims themselves; their own debates and arguments about things that have gone wrong in their world and what to do about it.

'What went wrong?' a very simple English title, but it seems to have caused great difficulty to translators. The book was translated into several languages; the first one to appear was the French translation which was entitled: 'Que c'est il passé?' I talked to the French editor and I said Que c'est il passé? Doesn't mean What went wrong? It means 'What happened? – not the same thing – to which he said rather coldly, 'If something goes wrong, that is what a Frenchman would ask.'

The German translation had a much more imaginative title: it was called "Untergang des Abendlandes" – the

decline of the East, a parody of a famous German book on the decline of the West, they called it The decline of the East.

The Italian translation was called 'Il suicidi del Islam' 'The suicide of Islam', which is not really apt.

Prof. Rabinovich: We have spoken earlier about both Iran and Turkey; we spoke about the Shah and Ozal and Iran and Turkey which, during most of the twentieth century were not major actors in the Middle East whereas they had been imperial powers ruling the Middle East - or much of the Middle East - in earlier periods, and they are now back. I would like to ask you separately to look at turkey's return and Iran's return to the Middle East.

Prof. Lewis: We have a very interesting situation. As you say, for hundreds of years Turkey and Iran had been the dominant powers within the Middle East. After the end of the great caliphates in earlier times, two powers remained: one based in Turkey (it was not called Turkey, it was called the Ottoman empire; they didn't think in ethnic terms); and the other was the Safawid monarchy in Iran, and they either shared or contested the Arab world between them. The rivalry between them continued right up to early modern times; it ended with the entry of the Europeans and later the Americans and the Russians into the area, which reduced the role of both Turkey and Iran. But now the Americans have gone, the Russians have gone, Turkey and Iran are returning to their traditional role as

regional powers and increasingly as regional rivals. I think we are getting back to the time of the clash between the Ottomans and the Safawids and it will be interesting to see how this develops. At the moment it's still very unclear. At the moment, officially, Turkey is a secular republic; Iran is a theocracy. If the current trends in both countries continue, they may well exchange roles.

Prof. Rabinovich: Turkey of course was the Sunni empire and Iran was the Shi'ite empire and in recent years there has been talk about the Shi'ite questions, about Iran's quest for hegemony. At the same time Shi'ite groups and Sunni groups seem to collaborate in certain places seamlessly: Hezbollah and Hamas collaborate.

Prof. Lewis: The Sunni-Shi'a division is only important where you have both; in countries like Egypt and almost the whole of Arab Africa, and among the Palestinians, it's not a big issue because there are no Shi'a. Shi'ism simply does not exist in those places and therefore the problem is not an important one. I remember even being asked by a western-educated Egyptian 'Are we sunni or are we shi'a?' In other words, Shi'a had absolutely no meaning for him.

Now it is a very big issue in countries like Iraq and Syria and Lebanon where both exist side by side, where there is a long-standing hostility between them. What you have had in the Middle East for a long time now is a situation (and particularly in Iraq) – to describe the situation in

Iraq, I will borrow a word from Irish history: in Ireland they talk of the Protestant ascendancy; Ireland is a country the population of which is overwhelmingly Catholic but for hundreds of years, a part of the British Union, the dominant group in Ireland, the people who held all the positions of power and influence and profit – were Protestants. This is known in Irish history as the Protestant Ascendancy and we know where it led. I think that in Iraq, what they've had over the centuries was a Sunni ascendancy: the majority of the population has probably been Shi'ite for a very long time, from the days of the Abassids, through the later dynasties and to the present day, the Sunnis have controlled things.

And the same situation prevails in parts of Arabia – in eastern Saudi Arabia for example, there are important Shi'a populations. Now in the past, the Shi'a had no option but to acquiesce in this domination by the Sunni minorities. This is no longer true; with the militant Shi'a regime in Iran, they see a possibility of change and this constitutes what many of the Sunnis see as a mortal threat to the existing system. It's a danger to the Gulf states; to Saudi Arabia, to the states of the south-eastern and southern corners of the Arabian Peninsula, and I think they are right in recognizing this as a major threat at the present time.

Now that has had a major consequence: for people like the Palestinians, the Sunni-Shi'a thing is unimportant

because there are no Palestinian Shi'a; it's not an issue and therefore they are willing to go along with them. But in areas where there is a threat, it creates a new situation and a willingness to look rather differently at Israel. You may recall the battle a couple of years ago, when the Israeli army tried to deal with the Hezbollah. What is remarkable is that the Arab governments were watching this and obviously hoping that the Israelis would finish the job and were obviously disappointed when the Israelis failed to finish the job. This is a different situation; one is reminded of the Sadat situation: Sadat sought peace because he saw a greater threat in the Soviet Union. There are others now who I think are willing to seek peace or at least co-existence because of the Shi'a threat which is in some ways because it is more intimate than even the Soviet threat was.

Prof. Rabinovich: I'd like to enable the audience to ask some questions so I will raise one final issue: we have a fairly new president in the United States who made it the high priority of his Administration to ameliorate relations with the Muslim world; he traveled specially to Cairo and gave a speech dedicated to that end. How do you assess the efforts of Obama?

Prof. Lewis: In that part of the world, you do not win support by showing weakness.

Prof. Rabinovich: invites questions from the floor.

Q: I would like to ask Prof. Lewis – what do you think about the slow and steady invasion of the Muslims of the western world in general and Europe in particular?

Prof. Lewis: Invasion is a rather provocative word. It implies a deliberate attempt to take over and conquer. There are some certainly who would see it that way, but what we are seeing I think is a natural process which has been going on for some time and there is every indication that it will continue. Muslim migration into Europe has been enormous; there are now very significant and increasingly important Muslim populations all over Europe, even including places like Switzerland and Scandinavia. If it continues uninterrupted, then sooner or later Europe will become Muslim. You may have seen an article by the Syrian writer Tariq al-Asm in which he concludes that the only question about the future of Europe is – Will it be an Islamized Europe or a Europeanized Islam? And interesting question.

Q: Prof. Lewis, as a student in the United States, much of our curriculum around international politics and study of the Middle East is premised on theoretical Texts, that begin with a negation of nationalism and among the texts that we are encouraged or required to read are Hans Cohen, Anthony Smith, Benedict Anderson, and I was unsurprised to see some of the un-nuanced negations of nationalist there. What I was surprised to see was the Eli Cadouri's discussion of nationalism in the book

'Nationalism'. You discussed Eli Cadouri earlier, and I am wondering what your opinions are on Cadouri's book Nationalism. My question also is where would you encourage a student of Middle East politics to turn for a deeper discussion of the dangers and advantages of nationalism.

Prof. Rabinovich: (sums up the question) concluding 'more broadly and perhaps more interestingly for you, he asked how do you view the role of nationalism in the history of the Middle East as compared to other forces such as religion or any other force?

Prof. Lewis: I think it would be useful to make a distinction between nationalism and patriotism; these are two different things. Patriotism is the distinctive European loyalty defined by country. In the Middle East one does not find much of that; one finds it very strongly in Iran and I think that's an important thing to bear in mind in our dealings with Iran: not to give the present regime the gift of something which they don't at present enjoy, namely the loyalty of Iranian patriotism. One finds it also in Egypt, but elsewhere patriotism is meaningless in countries which, as such, are modern and alien creations. Nationalism is a different thing: that too is an importation from Europe and a fairly recent one; back to the nineteenth century but certainly not beyond that, and to no great extent even in the nineteenth century. Nationalism did evoke a response because it was possible

to relate to ethnic and tribal and local loyalties of a kind that are familiar. But I would say that the basic identity and loyalty is still religion rather than anything else.

This remains and is likely for the foreseeable future to remain the dominant factor.

You have now generations of Muslims from the Middle East, who are not only living in Europe but were born in Europe. Do they really define themselves as patriots of the countries to which they are born? I don't know, but I think it unlikely.

Prof. Rabinovich: Thank you. I remember in a certain book on the Middle East by one Bill Lewis, there is an observation that when they used to chant in Algeria 'Algerie francaise', the response was 'Algerie Musilman'.

I would like to thank Prof. Lewis for sharing such a rich texture with us. We are all looking forward to your visit next year, which will inaugurate the fifth decade of your visits to Tel Aviv University. Thank you very much.

(applause)

**- End of dialogue -**

