

# Ivory Towers on Sand, by Martin Kramer

reviewed by [Thomas Idinopulos](#) in the [August 14, 2002](#) issue

This bombshell of a book indicts the American academic Middle East studies establishment as guilty of minimizing and ignoring the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and of thereby failing to anticipate acts of Muslim terrorism against the West and the United States. Martin Kramer, editor of the *Middle Eastern Quarterly* and past director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University, does not mince words. He accuses the most prestigious and powerful scholars in the field of presenting a skewed, erroneous, wrongheaded view of the Middle East. John Esposito of Georgetown University, Richard Bulliet of Columbia University, Augustus Richard Norton of New York University and Rashid Khalidi of the University of Chicago are mentioned, along with influential journalists like Robin Wright of the *Los Angeles Times*.

Behind them lies the figure of Edward Said, whose influential book, *Orientalism* (1978), employed the language of postcolonial, Third World ideology to establish a new agenda for viewing the Middle East. It is a measure of Said's influence that an entire chapter is devoted to what Kramer believes to be the baleful influence of Said's ideas on the academic study of the region.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of Kramer's book is the way in which he traces the evolution of Middle East studies in America. He speaks of the formative and positive contributions of Sir Hamilton Gibb, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Roger Owen at Harvard University, Leonard Binder at the University of Chicago and Philip Hitti and Bernard Lewis at Princeton, who for all their Western "orientalist" perception of the Middle East pioneered the academic study of the area and inspired scores of students to follow in their footsteps.

The crucial turning point occurred in the late 1970s when Middle East studies centers, under Said's influence, began to show a preference for ideology over empirical fact and, fearing the taint of the "orientalist" bias, began to prefer

academic appointments of native-born Middle Easterners over qualified Western-born students, Kramer contends.

The great loser was American society, in Kramer's opinion. Just at the time when American policymakers needed accurate analysis and sound judgment about developments in the Middle East, they got nothing of the sort from the academic experts. Kramer details the failures of academicians to predict the civil war in Lebanon, the Iranian revolution, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the potentiality for terrorism.