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HOW THE WEST LOST THE MIDDLE EAST

It is an appropriate moment to consider Western policy towards the Middle East. After years of failures and stalemates there is a surge of new activity in the region, most notably on the Israel/Palestine question and on Iran. Of course we wish those initiatives well: but they will only succeed if we recognise why in the past we failed.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. In this instant media age so is truth. Reality is submerged by perception, and in the case of the Middle East perception does us no favours. All that matters is the perception of what you do. And the West has never done the Middle East very well.

As a result the Arab Street doesn't trust us. They believe that we have always only been interested in their region for our own gain and that when they have trusted us we have betrayed that trust.

We haven't been clever. In situations where a light touch was called for, we have almost always responded with a heavy hand. 'Shock and Awe' shocked and awed the Arab Street as much as it did Saddam Hussein. 'Degrading the enemy's military capability' has become a euphemism for destroying enemy forces without worrying too much about collateral damage to innocent civilians in the way.

In the early post-Ottoman days the Arab Street put up with us because they hoped that we would be better than what had gone before. Instead they found themselves exploited for the West's own interests.

More recently they have watched us picking unnecessary fights within their region while the threat of jihadist Islamism has quietly spread from the Arabian Peninsula across North Africa and into the Sahel as well, leaving us badly behind the curve. A prime example of an unnecessary fight was the Iraq war; misconceived and disastrously followed up. It demonstrates a clear aspect of why we lost the Middle East.

We need urgently to work out how and why we got it so badly wrong. To do that we must on this occasion set the truth on hold and concentrate on the perception upon which people act.

In the power vacuum left by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire the West had a genuine opportunity to become a real ally to the Arab nation and a true influence for progress throughout the region. Instead we blew it so badly that as our influence in the region wanes, that of Turkey, heirs to the Ottomans, has risen.

The reasons we blew it are simple; contemptuous arrogance, unforgiveable ignorance, betrayal, greed, prejudice, misjudgement and a failure to learn from our mistakes.

The West, or more accurately in those early days Great Britain and France, initiated this trail of mistakes through arrogance and betrayal. With promises of independent autonomy the British persuaded the Arab nation to harass the Ottoman forces on the Peninsula. Even then betrayal was already in the wind. In 1916 the notorious Sykes-Picot plan secretly agreed to apportion control and influence over the Middle East between France and Britain. They drew lines creating new nation states with little regard to ethnic, religious, or tribal realities. On top of that the Balfour Declaration of November 1917 pledged the creation of a Jewish Homeland within the region, inferring displacement of Arabs from land they had held for generations. By skilfully cultivating the appointed Arab leaders and playing to their vanities the fallout from the betrayals was minimised; but the Arab sense of betrayal and distrust was not.

US involvement came later with the overthrow of Mosaddeq in Persia in 1953 and then became imbedded, partly as a reaction to the USSR threat to create a red crescent in the region. Domestic oil demand however was the other significant reason for increasing American involvement leading the US to appear to be treating much of the region as their own backyard.

Western policy was indeed largely driven by how to keep the oil flowing in its direction at an acceptable price and to prevent its supply being threatened. It led the West into backing and arming Saddam Hussein of Iraq against the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran in a war where ironically chemical weapons were used by the Iraqis without much comment from the West.

Our fear of Soviet hegemony in the region led us during the occupation of Afghanistan to encourage the deployment of the so-called 'Afghani Arabs' led by Usama bin Laden and the recruitment and training of the Taleban in north-west Pakistan to fight a guerrilla war against the Soviet Army. Strategically useful perhaps; but exploitation nevertheless which we crassly compounded after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan by turning our backs on these our creations leaving them to find their own way – and they did.

The unpleasant truth is that something deep within the western psyche instinctively mistrusts Islam and the Islamic nations, possibly a throwback to mediaeval fear of Muslim dominance. It is a perverse instinct because it takes little account of Islamic excellence in mathematics, in the sciences and in the arts. Yet it still persists. A Shiite academic said to me recently "it is

important for us in Islam to try to understand why you hate us so much", a perception which to put it mildly is toxic.

At the same time the West seems never really to have understood the complex religious difference between Shia and Sunni, frequently siding with Sunni regimes for economic strategic reasons at a time when remaining neutral between the two would have been more sensible. The West's obsession with Iran and its nuclear ambitions predicated much of this. The recent EU proscribing of Shia Hezbollah's military wing in Lebanon as terrorists while at the same time supporting rebel militias in Syria largely composed of Sunni Jihadists reinforces it. It led us from the start to underestimate the jihadist fundamentalism of AQ into which the Afghani Arabs had metamorphosed. We still make the mistake of seeing them as an organisation that can be destroyed by decapitation rather than a universal movement capable of springing up all over the region as we have now seen with AQAP in Yemen, Al-Shabab in Somalia and Kenya, and Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Sahel. With hindsight we might also have been cleverer in preventing Gadhafi's sophisticated Libyan arsenal becoming so readily available to AQ surrogates across large parts of the Sahel.

I am a longstanding admirer of the people of Israel, courageous, resilient, stubbornly democratic, innovative and inventive. I admire what they have achieved in that narrow stretch of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. But that does not mean that I cannot be critical of them. I have always been bluntly critical of their Lebanese incursions of 1982 and 2006 which I believed were both counterproductive and wrong. Yet the West in general has been awkwardly reluctant to criticise Israel. Political sensitivities aside, it should be part of constructive friendship to speak truth to one's friends. Moreover in the Middle East even-handedness is crucial to honest broking and there has been little Arab perception of that.

This long running conflict is central to the local perception of Western foreign policy in the Middle East. Ever since 1948 it has been a running sore across almost the whole of the Muslim world. There is only one workable and durable solution, the so-called 'two state' solution of an autonomous and viable Arab State of Palestine alongside a secure State of Israel. Most western countries signed up to that some time ago. Yet most of them, including the US and the UK failed to see the wood for the trees. The West leaned towards Israel, providing her with the arms and resources to grow into a successful modern country. To the Arabs the West was therefore *parti pris*; and we apparently still cannot see that it is not possible to be an honest broker when the perception is that we are umbilically attached to one side. We have singularly failed to work towards a combined and united Palestinian approach which would essentially have to include Hamas if any settlement is to stick. We have also failed to prevail upon Israel to stop building settlements on illegally occupied land in the West Bank and to persuade her that her security does not necessitate occupation of other people's land. While the complex nuts and bolts of a Middle East settlement is for detailed negotiation the will on both sides to reach that stage can only be established by informal dialogue between all concerned, something lacking since Oslo in 1993. Secretary Kerry's current initiative has once again rushed towards negotiations without the preceding dialogue

and once again by excluding Hamas ensured that only half the Palestinian people are represented at the table. It does not bode well.

The perception on the Arab Street is that the West has never been truly serious about resolving this issue. They still see the close ties between the US and Israel alongside which they have watched the ambiguity of the West's reaction to the so-called Arab Spring, 'support for the voice of the people' until that voice didn't suit western purposes or match western aspirations. And they watched the West's tacit support of Israeli bombardments of Shia Muslims in the July War of 2006.

The Arabs recently have taken a lot of lectures from us on democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Yet they watched in 1952 the West, America and Britain, engineering the overthrow of the democratically elected Mosaddeq in Iran/Persia which led in due course to the 1979 revolution and the onset of Resistance. They saw us encouraging democratic elections to the Legislative Council in the Palestinian Authority in 2006 only to turn our backs when it was won by Hamas; what Khaled Meshal, Hamas elected leader, described to me as a 'Cinderella' Election - "you only win if the shoe fits". The same ambiguous approach to democratic outcomes has recently been seen again in relation to the West's reaction to the military coup against the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt. Apparently the ballot box is not the be all and end all of democracy – at least for the Middle East.

There is also a strong Muslim perception that the West places little or no value on Muslim lives. The aerial 'turkey shoot' of fleeing Iraqi conscripts on the road from Kuwait to Basra in 1990 angered and offended many in the Muslim world who held no candle for Saddam. In some Muslim communities it acted as a recruiting sergeant for Islamist movements. Abu Ghraib prison later further inflamed those feelings. Extraordinary rendition, Guantanamo, half-hearted apologies for accidental bombing of innocent civilians all added fuel to the fires of anger and resentment. The use of drones has provided a quantum leap.

Warfare by remote control from a safe distance was readily adopted by the western war machines. Drones were the epitome of that, and the use of armed drones to take out your enemies outside the areas of conflict was endorsed by military and politicians alike. The perception and possibly even the truth is that this is not warfare at all; it is targeted assassination without any pretence of due process or judicial review. It has crossed serious new ethical boundaries endorsing a type of warfare without rules, without conventions and theoretically without limit. What matters here in terms of perception is that the assassins are western and the assassinated are Muslims.

On top of that is the inevitable although categorically denied collateral civilian damage. We are told that the systems are so accurate that collateral damage is rarely an issue. Yet local reports speak of considerable collateral damage. What the truth is we don't really know. What we do know is that once again the Muslim perception is that the West doesn't really

care, that phrases such as 'the fog of war' are casually used to explain such incidents away, that the imperative of decapitating the Taleban and AQ justifies it all anyway. This lack of any credible contrition and the continued use of drones, especially now in Yemen, reinforces Muslim anger. For them there is no greater contempt for life than to destroy it from a great height and from a great distance by remote control.

Misguided responses to events have severely damaged our credibility within the region. Justified antipathy to AQ in Afghanistan became general antipathy to the Taliban to whom the West is now going to have to talk. What suffering might have been avoided if we had pursued this course from the beginning? Again our antipathy to Saddam led to the introduction of AQ into Iraq. Our swift change from misguided friendship with Gaddafi into the campaign for his overthrow created signals that the West is an unreliable partner. Libya also was the precedent for endorsing 'interim governments' which have little credibility or durability and only make us look foolish. We are at it again in Syria today. Our gullibility in the face of events in the Middle East was clearly seen in the reaction of western leaders to the so-called Arab Spring. Photo-ops to celebrate the so-called birth of 'liberal democracy' in Arabia somehow ignored the clear evidence in the background of Islamist banners and flags. And now to cap it all we assert that a military coup in Egypt which overthrows a legitimately democratically elected government is not a coup!

But then we've never been good with our terminology. The 'War on Terror' naively proclaimed unthinkingly on both sides of the Atlantic after 9/11 soon in many Muslim minds came to mean a War on Islam to which they were proud to sign up on the Islamic side.

And then there were our misguided military adventures. Two wars; 7 years in Iraq and 12 in Afghanistan and counting. I have no doubt in the aftermath of 9/11 that the US and the UK were justified in invoking the UN Charter's self-defence Article 51 and in taking action against AQ in Afghanistan and to remove the Taleban administration in Kabul. What happened thereafter defied rational explanation. A simple objective successfully achieved became a complicated mission of 'nation building', a failed mission of drug eradication and militarily of driving water uphill in the knowledge that the moment we are gone it will come rushing down again.

Iraq was worse. The rationale of WMD was as we now know false. The real reason was regime change, illegal as it happens under international law. And then when Saddam had fallen we resorted to the mantra of 'nation building'. Eight years later Iraq is a more violent and lawless place than it was when we began; and at what cost? It is rumoured half a million Iraqi lives. We had no clear objectives. We called it 'staying until the job is done' without ever defining what the job was, and our involvement escalated. And then we went further. We took to the air above Libya, overtly to protect innocent people but in reality yet again to effect regime change, now leaving a country in turmoil and anarchy. And common to all these wars is the underlying feeling that the value of Arab lives is not a major western

preoccupation. Unfair, certainly; but once again that is the perception and it is the perception that matters.

We have talked about the possibility of military action against Iran. While relations have recently improved with the election of President Rouhani the use of force to forestall the development of nuclear weapons has not yet finally been discounted. Of all the possible military adventures within the greater Middle East this could have the profoundest consequences both militarily and economically for the West.

And even now in Syria we are still threatening force if western demands on chemical weapons are not met. How much do we really know about Syria? Early on western leaders proclaimed Assad would be gone within weeks. This was patent nonsense. Those same leaders are now telling us that the civil war has led to jihadist incursions. In fact when at the beginning we were arrogantly recognising unelected rebel groups as the 'legitimate representatives of the Syrian people' the Jihadist threat was already there and well established.

In the current hiatus while proposals for dealing with chemical weapons are processed the West unhelpfully continues to issue threats. All this achieves is to increase Arab contempt for the West and to reduce still further our already damaged credibility. One thing is clear, that in a conflict where the distinction between the good, the bad and the ugly is so dangerously blurred for the West to intervene would be a catastrophic error.

Have we learned the lessons of the past? We continue to pursue a long-term settlement of the Israel/Palestine conflict while Israel still insists on building illegal settlements within the Occupied West Bank. We continue to support negotiations with only part of the Palestinian people excluding Hamas who are and will remain an unavoidable part of the Palestinian political structure. And for all the current rapprochement between the leaders of the US and Iran we still treat Iran as if it was an emerging nation rather than the ancient highly sophisticated country which it is.

All this probably matters today more than ever.

Islam is a force at the moment engaged in a fierce internal civil war between Sunni and Shia which could have implications for us all. It is however a civil war in which the West should have no part, let alone to take sides. Yet we have already appeared to take sides. Backing Sunni Saudi Arabia, the spiritual home of Wahabist extremism, against Shia Iran. Supporting the Sunni surge in Iraq against the majority Shia militia. Backing Sunni leadership in Bahrain as it seeks to suppress the Shia majority in its country. Supporting the Sunni, and vicariously even the extremist Sunni rebels in Syria against the secularist but nevertheless Shia Alawite regime of Bashar Assad.

This sectarian civil war will stretch far and wide, and it will be long-lasting. Pakistan is already suffering grievously from its depredations, particularly the Shia minority in Sindh Province and beyond. It has the capability of spreading into India, Bangladesh, Indonesia and indeed anywhere where there are Muslim communities including both denominations.

For the West to be involved would invite enormous trouble. Radical reaction not only on the ground but also within Muslim communities in the various countries of the West. It would heighten the serious threat to indigenous Christian communities within the region already under vicious attack by both sides. It would be one of the greatest foreign policy misjudgements the West has ever made. It is not our war. Let Islam sort out Islam.

Over the last few weeks there have been some encouraging changes of attitude. The Russians believing that they have scored a diplomatic victory over the West in relation to Syria are now preparing to be a little more cooperative on the issue of chemical weapons and have persuaded the Assad regime in Damascus to follow suit. The Iranians who have sensed the shifting and uncertain sands of American foreign policy over Syria are now prepared through their new President Rouhani to reach out a hand.

The West must grasp these opportunities, but in a modest way. The worst error would be for us to infer that these changes have come about because of our threat of military action against Syria. This is an opportunity genuinely to talk. It is a belated opportunity to show the Middle East that this time we come as friends and not as the duplicitous exploiters who did them so much damage in the past. It won't be easy but it is worth a try.

And if it works then perhaps we could at last talk about "How the West won back the Middle East".