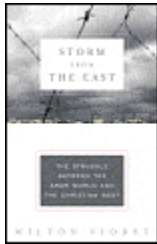




Storm from the East: The Struggle between the Arab World and the Christian West

Milton Viorst , Joanne J. Myers

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs. On behalf of the Carnegie Council, I'd like to thank you all for joining us this morning.

Today our guest is Milton Viorst. He will be discussing his book, [*Storm from the East: The Struggle between the Arab World and the Christian West*](#).

In exploring the history of the relationship between the Middle East and the West, it is not difficult to find striking parallels between past actions and present-day events, for the struggle of the Arabs to liberate themselves from foreign domination is a battle that has been ongoing for over 1,400 years. In reading *Storm from the East*, you will discover what the Bush administration should have known, but failed to perceive, which was that a Western invasion in Iraq could only do one thing, and that was to ignite an explosion of Arab nationalism which, in turn, has become a uniting force, widening the gap between the Arab world and the West.

Mr. Viorst argues that with history comes understanding and the knowledge that the Arabs, for a very long time now, have seen the West as making promises that have only led to mistreatment and betrayal. Therefore, this invasion could only be seen as yet another crusade where Americans would once again deceive them, as the Christian West had done so many times before. To deny this would be to deny history itself.

Our speaker this morning has covered the Middle East as journalist for almost forty years. With a profound understanding of foreign policy and history as his guide, Mr. Viorst articulates a deeply informed familiarity with this region. In *The Storm from the East*, he offers a compelling framework for understanding the events of today and addresses why our strategy must change if we are to have success and credibility in the region.

Mr. Viorst was the Middle East correspondent for *The New Yorker*, and his work has appeared in several papers, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. He also has an article in the June issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, "Enemy of the State." His six books on the Middle East include the widely acclaimed [*In the Shadow of the Prophet: The Struggle for the Soul of Islam*](#).

While many have pointed to our failings in the region, few have posited solutions for what can be done to make things right. While arguing that what the Arabs want is freedom to control their own destiny and

not to have their fate imposed by invading forces, he has just the right formula to help us extricate ourselves from this quagmire, an idea which he will shortly share with us.

Please join me in giving a very warm welcome to Milton Viorst. We are delighted to have him here this morning.

Remarks

MILTON VIORST: Thank you very much.

When I was preparing for this talk, I came across a cartoon in *The New Yorker*. Two couples are sitting around a table smoking cigarettes and drinking martinis in their bikinis. It doesn't seem to be New York; it seems more like Malibu. One of them says, "I think that if these Islamic fundamentalists got to know us, they'd really like us."

This sums up much of what I have to say, that we are dealing with two different cultures now. The question is whether we can find some reconciliation between them, even one that may not solve all of the problems, because not all of the differences between us will be solved anytime in the future. But we can both benefit from a serious truce, a long-term lull.

This is a conflict that began 1,400 years ago, and Iraq is only the latest chapter. [Muhammad](#), a merchant from Mecca, claimed to receive a series of revelations from God early in the 7th century and established a new religion. By the time he died, in 630, he had expanded his religion to cover the entire Arabian Peninsula, and from there, he and his successors took Syria and Iraq a few years later, Egypt by 640, and then moved across North Africa towards the Atlantic, all the while moving northward to Asia Minor and Byzantium. At that time all of these were Christian lands. He was to conquer a Christian empire and to transform it into an Islamic empire.

The armies of Islam were finally defeated, after they had penetrated Spain and crossed the Pyrenees, by a French force in 732, at Poitiers. That was the highpoint of Arabic expansion into Europe.

These early centuries were the golden age of Arab civilization, not just military, but intellectual. This was based largely on wisdom received from the Greeks, much of which had been stored in Byzantium. When the Arabs moved to the gates of Byzantium, they began receiving the studies that the ancient Greeks had engaged in.

This, too, created a serious schism within the Arab world. There was a group that pushed very hard to liberalize Islam along the ideas of the Greeks. They had the support of the monarchy, of the Arab kings, but they lost this intellectual civil war. By the 10th century, Islam was even more dedicated to the austere desert values that started with Muhammad and remain to this day.

There never has been anything like the Arab golden age after that period, after the suppression of the Greek ideas, which, curiously, then made their way to Europe. It was a superiority that didn't last in that era.

The Christian counterattack began at the end of the millennium. Christianity took back much of the Middle East during the Crusades, and though they made few inroads into the Arab world, they held Jerusalem for more than a century. This shattered the Arabs' sense of the permanence of their power. Indeed, by the 11th century, the Arab world began to be subject to the assault, first, of the Mongols and then of the Turks. By early in the second millennium, Arab ascendancy had given way to the Turks. By 1500, the Ottomans gained control of the entire Arab world, which they held until the 20th century.

The phenomenon called historical memory is different from history, which is an intellectual discipline. Historical memory is what, collectively, any society chooses to remember. It is selective with its history, but it is rich in myths and symbols. It is shaped by failures, as well as triumphs. Occasionally, it's a source of inspiration, but just as often, it is a source of fear, self-doubt, grudges, even hatred.

Freud and others talked about historical memory. It passes down through families and cultures. Every

society has historical memory embedded in its psychological, its cultural, its sociological DNA. Historical memory lies at the foundation of cultural values, and explains why Italians behave like Italians and Jews like Jews and Westerners, including Americans, like Westerners, and Arabs like Arabs.

For much of the West, Jesus is part of that historical memory. For the Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad's encounters with God, which became the Koran, are deeply rooted as part of the Arabs' historical memory. In the British historian Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, you can feel the fear in his statement that if the Arabs had won the Battle of Poitiers in 732, the Koran would now be the basis of teaching at Oxford.

Similarly, the Arabs never forget their golden age or the Crusades. When a kid on the Arab street points to an American soldier and says, "Crusader," it's much more than a metaphor. It's historical memory.

What does this say about the presence of religion as a factor in the war in Iraq today? One of the things we all learn is that no great event has a single cause. In Iraq, we have to talk about oil or President Bush's relationship to his father or the Arab-Israeli conflict. But we can't forget that the president is a religious man, perhaps as religious as any of the imams of Iraq. Both subscribe to faiths with deep evangelical roots. Both Christianity and Islam believe not only that they are right in their religious faiths, but that there is a duty to pass it on to the other side.

[Kevin Phillips](#) pointed out that President Bush told us that, as the Iraq War started, every morning he read the sermons that were delivered by a Christian evangelical who was attached to the British army that took Jerusalem in 1917. This is a man who, quite sincerely, sees his faith in a very deep-seated way, and has not simply adopted it for political ends. It would be naïve not to perceive the war in Iraq as a new chapter in the rivalry, now 1,400 years old, between the Islamic East and the Christian West.

To return to history, from the 11th-12th century to the 18th century, the military balance swung back and forth, with neither side preeminent for any length of time. Europe, however, was largely preoccupied with wars of its own. The French were fighting the British, and the Bourbons were fighting the Habsburgs, and there were wars of religion, which were wars of Christianity. Europe was busy colonizing the New World, while the Turks were consolidating their dominance within Islam.

But while the Turks were so preoccupied, the Renaissance, followed by the Enlightenment, and then the early years of the French Revolution were transforming Europe. Feudalism fell apart. The church lost its monopoly over the faith. Powerful nation-states were rising. Europe was gravitating to new values, to secularism, to humanism, individualism, nationalism, rationalism, while at the same time the Islamic world was paralyzed, stagnating, and not changing much at all.

That doesn't mean that the threat from the East didn't continue. [The Ottomans](#) took Istanbul in 1453, after a very long siege. That put an end to the Byzantine Empire, the Christian empire in the East. Even as late as the 16th and the 17th centuries, Ottoman empires were banging at the gates of Vienna, which was certainly deep in Europe. But intellectually very little was changing in the East. While all of these new ideas were pervading Europe, Islam remained committed to its old ideas of the Islamic community, to the preeminence of worship, to the importance of scripture, to the dominance of the hereafter over earthly concerns.

Many would defend this changelessness. Certainly, the fundamentalists would extol it. But in terms of power, it boded ill indeed for the future of the Islamic world.

This gradual transformation exploded with the French Revolution and with the appearance of [Napoleon](#) at the gates of Egypt in 1798. His armies attacked Egypt; he overthrew a Muslim government at that time. It was clear evidence of the superiority of the West, not just in weapons of war, but also in organization for war. Napoleon was driven out, but not by Muslim armies. He was driven out by the British, in one of those ongoing European wars.

This Western domination has continued until this day. It is what deceived President Bush. Yes, the Arabs were outgunned in organized warfare, but they didn't lose the capacity to wage war. There was a long

tradition, deeply embedded in this historical memory, of what we might call “disorganized warfare,” which they practiced in the desert going back to Muhammad’s time. The Algerians kept the French on the run long after they seized Algeria, a few decades later. It is a rather pragmatic component, but very intrinsic nonetheless to historical memory.

Getting back to Napoleon, not long afterward, the West began the process of nibbling away at Arab patrimony. The French took Algeria in 1830. The British, with their interests by then well-established in India, were moving around the other side and positioning themselves within the Persian Gulf. After the Suez Canal was built, the British took the grand prize, Egypt, which they controlled for seventy years. It was a practice that soon became known by the name of “imperialism.” By the eve of World War I, all of Europe was getting into the game. It was no secret that the imperial powers had an eye on the Ottoman Empire, which was still a major military force in the region. As long as it was there, the dream of the British and the French to penetrate into the Arab world could not get past them.

That ended with World War I, when the empire fell at last, opening the door to the conquest by Western imperialism of the Arab heartlands. The conquest was particularly messy.

At that time, Arab nationalism was only beginning to emerge. Most Arabs were content to remain within the Ottoman Empire. They felt comfortable with the Islamic framework presented by the Ottomans. Few were infected by the ideas of nationalism, ideas that, ironically, were introduced to them from the West, chiefly in Lebanon, by Christian missionaries. The center of Arab nationalism in the years before World War I was the American University in Beirut, which was established by American Christian missionaries.

When the Ottomans entered the war, however, the British saw an opportunity to take advantage of this nascent nationalism. They found a leader in [Sharif Hussein](#), whom we might look back on as the great-grandfather of the late [King Hussein of Jordan](#). They selected him— or he, largely, selected himself—as a leader of Arab nationalism. For the British, this was a shortcut for overthrowing the Ottomans. But to Sharif Hussein, it was also an opportunity to restore Arab grandeur and nationhood. He thought of it in terms of ruling, himself. But he thought that he had made a deal in negotiations with Britain in 1915—originally, by [the McMahon letters](#)— in which the British had promised, after the war, to sponsor an Arab nation under his leadership.

What he did not know was that the British were secretly writing what is called the [Sykes-Picot Treaty](#) with the French to divide up the Arab heartland among themselves.

How many of you know what the Sykes-Picot Agreement was? Would you raise your hand?

If I asked this of an Arab audience, all the hands would go up, because this is so deeply entrenched in what Arabs understand and know. I suspect that President Bush would not have raised his hand.

Russia was an original signer of the tripartite agreement to divide up the Ottoman Empire. But with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, these mean Communists dug into the tsar’s archives and pulled out the agreement. They themselves withdrew from it, leaving just the names of the British and the French negotiators, thus Sykes-Picot.

But it was a shock to the Arabs to find that the British and the French had done this behind their backs, and coming on the heels of [the Balfour Declaration](#), it was a clear indication that they were about to be betrayed. It remains, within the Arab psyche, within this historical memory, irrefutable evidence that the West simply can’t be trusted.

The end of World War I was a brief moment for the United States to win the hearts of the Islamic world.

When I talk about the Islamic world, I am not talking about Indonesia and the Pacific. I am talking about that part of the Islamic world that began originally with the conquest of Muhammad. So we are talking about something that goes only as far east as Pakistan or Afghanistan.

It was an opportunity for us Americans to win the hearts of the Arabs. We had lost our own imperialist virginity some decades before, first in Hawaii, then during the war with Spain, in the Philippines, Cuba,

and Puerto Rico. But we were unblemished in the Middle East.

[Woodrow Wilson](#), when the United States entered the war, had promised to bring self-determination to colonized peoples. He specifically included the Arabs among them. Many Arabs believed him and were inspired by him. But Wilson's vision collapsed in [the negotiations at Versailles](#). He turned out to be a rather poor bargainer compared to [Lloyd George](#) for the British and [Clemenceau](#) for the French. He soon thereafter fell sick with a stroke, in the middle of the talks. Perhaps most important of all, he had lost any support that he had for his idealistic vision, probably among the American people, but certainly among the Republicans who by then controlled Congress.

This idea of Wilsonian self-determination, of Wilsonian democracy, was an opportunity that was lost by the United States forever.

So the Middle East was organized after World War I by Britain and France along the lines of the Sykes-Picot understanding. Syria and Lebanon came under French control. Iraq and Jordan, along with Egypt, which was already there, fell to the British. Palestine became the curious entity that Britain ran, but was promised to the Jews, and ultimately became Israel. All of these lands were called mandates, as if to imply that they were somehow on the route to self-government. But, in effect, that was just a fancy name for Western colonies.

A rather extensive study that was made at that time, a poll of serious scholars, made clear that if the Arabs were forced to accept the mandatory system, they all preferred that the United States be the mandatory power. But at that point, Wilson had lost whatever authority he had, and that was out of the question. So the United States played no role whatever in building this system, and if the Arabs did not hold the United States directly to blame, they saw our complicity, or at least our indifference to what happened to them.

So we embarked on the post-World War I imperial era. It was not a particularly easy era for Britain and France. It was one of constant warfare. The Arabs had no capacity for organizing armies to confront the British and the French, but they were still good at guerilla warfare, and hundreds or thousands of British and French troops died, not in great battles, such as Britain and France had experienced in Europe just a few years before, but by twos and threes and by dozens. The cost for both was enormous.

It made sense, before long, that the British and the French try to enlist the Arabs in their own self-government. They set up what looked like democratic structures, but were, in reality, only a façade. A British or French high commissioner always had the last word. When real elections were held—and the British and French periodically held real elections in Syria, Egypt and elsewhere—if they didn't like the results, they simply dismissed the assembly and sent the newly elected officials home.

This may sound a bit familiar to you, much like the U.S. response to [the Palestinian election](#) a few months ago.

Small wonder that the Arabs developed a skepticism, if not an outright hostility, to democracy. What they wanted was not a particular form of government, however attractive it might have been. What they wanted was freedom: the right to determine their own destiny, the ability, if necessary, to make their own mistakes free of Western powers, free of Christians, free of Crusaders. This is precisely what France and the British refused to grant.

It's amazing that our own leadership here in Washington never studied this period to see what it was likely to encounter in Iraq, what lay at the foundation of this society. The war we are fighting now is not terribly different from the war the British and the French fought eighty years ago. The attitude toward democracy is what the Arabs learned from the British and the French occupation. When we send [Ambassador Khalilzad](#) to the Iraqi assembly to tell the Iraqis what to do—sometimes he has very good advice to offer, but what this evokes in these people is exactly what the British and the French did by sending a high commissioner in eighty years ago. When our secretary of state visited Iraq with the now former British foreign minister [Jack Straw](#), it was déjà vu. It would almost be laughable if it weren't so tragic.

President Bush failed to understand any of this when we entered Iraq. I suspect he still doesn't.

Britain and France finally did leave direct control of the Middle East after World War II, but they didn't leave graciously. They fought a rearguard action to maintain their influence. This was another opportunity for the United States. We had taken a position during World War II, a promise to end colonialism. [Roosevelt](#) took many steps. The British and the French resented this. But in the immediate post-war era, we were true to it, and we did put a great deal of pressure on the imperial powers to get out, and, reluctantly, they did. Britain, particularly, tried to hold on to military bases in the region.

According to *Newsweek*, we have allocated more than \$1 billion to build permanent bases in Iraq. It was Britain's way of retaining some modicum of influence over the region. Clearly, our own government intends to follow the same course, unless it is frustrated, as the British were at that period.

The British were ultimately refused by the Arabs. They said, "If we are to get our independence, we want our independence. We don't want you guys hanging around here in military bases, ready to pounce upon us at every opportunity." They finally did leave.

This was another opportunity for us to establish good relations with the Arab states. But I'm afraid that we lost the opportunity again. To be sure, it would have been difficult for the United States at this stage, particularly given the Palestinian problem, in which both Arabs and Jews took hard-line positions. We didn't bring any creative diplomacy to the table. But it was an opportunity nonetheless. The reason, perhaps more than any other, that we lost the chance to restore some credibility in the region was [the Cold War](#).

At the very least, at this stage, as independent entities, the demands of self-government were not going to come easily to the Arabs. It was their first experience with self-government in a thousand years. They showed little aptitude for it. What self-government required was regional stability, some calm, some period for them to develop workable institutions. They got none of that.

Relations with the West started going downhill with [the Arab-Israeli War in 1948](#), and with the arrival of the Cold War during that same period, they became worse and worse.

[Eisenhower](#) presided over the first steps in this decline, but we should be more accurate in saying that the spearhead was not so much the president, but his secretary of state, [John Foster Dulles](#), the most powerful secretary of state of the post-war era—even more powerful than [Kissinger](#) subsequently was. Dulles determined to bring the Arabs into the Cold War as American allies. It is important to note that Dulles was a devout Christian who had a strong evangelical view of the responsibilities of the United States. His interpretation of the Cold War was not that this was a confrontation of two huge and powerful empires, but a struggle between good and evil, and he could only understand the Arabs as having a responsibility for siding with the good.

The Arabs did their best to point out to the United States that they had a different view. They had never been occupied by the Russians, and did not regard Soviet Communism as evil. They didn't give it much thought at all, because Britain and France were their traditional enemies, not the Russians. [Nasser](#), who was the dominant Arab leader of the period, asked the United States to understand these truths, that they had never been colonized from the Soviet Union, and it was too much to ask the Arabs to enter into a military alliance with its former colonizers, at least without a long period of convalescence, a long period of independence in which they could begin to shape their own destiny.

Dulles had no use for that argument, nor for Arab concepts of neutralism and nonalignment. The United States refused to grant this wish. So we embarked on a period in which the Arabs, second only to the Soviet Union itself, were regarded more as enemies than friends of the West. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy for which we have paid heavily ever since.

Terrible clashes with the United States followed, including:

1) [The Aswan Dam](#), when we promised and then withdrew a commitment to fund this dam that the Arabs

wanted to build for electrical power and irrigation;

2) [The British-French-Israeli assault on Suez](#);

3) The aborted [Baghdad Pact](#), when Dulles was absolutely convinced that we had to have a military alliance running from Turkey all the way across Pakistan through the Arab world, which we insisted that the Arabs join;

4) [The recurring Arab-Israeli wars](#), when the Arabs, needless to say, thought we invariably chose the wrong side.

Each one of these only exacerbated Arab mistrust of the United States, so that, inexorably, step by step, we assumed the role that Britain and France had had before as the diabolic Westerner, the new imperialist. Again, our leadership now failed to understand what had happened, or perhaps it didn't care. That is, in large measure, the explanation for why we find ourselves in the current painful position in Iraq.

In theory, at the end of the Cold War, this should have been another opportunity to open ourselves to a new policy in the Middle East. But the absence of the Soviet Union transformed power completely in the Middle East. We could now pretty much do what we wanted to do, much as Britain and France thought that they could do as they wanted after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. But it turned out that we showed no more wisdom, no more restraint than they had in the post-World War I era.

The end of the Cold War in 1990 came just after [Saddam's](#) victory over [Khomeini](#) in Iran, a victory which, ironically, we had abetted. Clearly, this left Saddam with big dreams. He was thinking of a restoration of Arab grandeur. We were determined not to allow him to realize these dreams. After the fall of [the Shah](#) to Khomeini, we felt insecure about the oil in that region, which was essential to the industrial society which we had built. Given the ensuing power vacuum, we had no intention of letting Saddam move into a position where he could dominate the region.

Rather thoughtfully, he invited us to take him on—or he fell into our trap. He made the significant blunder of invading Kuwait, and we seized the opportunity. This started the warfare between the United States and Iraq, which continues to this day.

The first President Bush showed some caution in waging the war. He even had Arab allies, which, when you look back on it, seems a bit incongruous. But by now the Arabs had acquired vested interests in their own nations, and they were, themselves, outraged that Saddam had the presumptuousness to take over another Arab state.

So the first war was, from our point of view, rather successful but inconclusive. President Clinton maintained this inconclusiveness by air raids and embargoes. These were devastating to the Iraqis at relatively little cost to the United States, but certainly solved nothing. President Bush decided not to seize upon the opportunity to use this lull to solve any problems with Iraq.

Certainly the second President Bush showed no similar restraint. And we have a duty to ask why he didn't do his homework. It didn't take spies or satellites to grasp the meaning of Arab nationalism and its impact on the Arab world, and particularly on Iraqis. All of this information was available in our universities, in our diplomatic corps, even among journalists.

Was it the crusader in President Bush? He himself used that term more than once. Did that get the better of him? Did he have no sense of reality? Remember the statement that came out of the White House early in the war, in which an official said, "We don't worry about reality in this administration. We create our own reality."

President Bush had a meeting during the period soon after the war, when he was convinced that we had everything nicely under control—around the time when he appeared on the deck of the aircraft carrier with the "Mission Accomplished" sign behind him. He had a meeting with [President Chirac](#) of France, not one of his favorite people. But Chirac had something to say, because he had been a lieutenant in the

French army in Algeria in the late 1950s and the 1960s, and understood what fighting Arabs was all about. He tried to convey this to the president. He told him that we weren't out of the woods, that Arab nationalism remained a powerful force and that we would have more trouble than he anticipated.

Bush said, "I cannot disagree with you more, Jacques. Iraqis love us. We liberated them from a bloody dictator. The very few who fight against us are either remnants of the old regime who are responsible for massive massacres and the use of torture chambers or foreign terrorists who hate life itself."

It wasn't that easy. Indeed, it would have been wise had Chirac's warning been taken seriously.

You remember that Nixon had his secret plan for ending the war in Vietnam. I have a plan, as Joanne suggested, for bringing some relief to the situation in Iraq today. It took Nixon five years to end the war in Vietnam. I'm not sure that we have five years now at the rate at which things are going. But we need to make some effort to bring this folly to an end.

Questions and Answers

JOANNE MYERS: Would you please expand on your proposal about [the Arab League](#) in Lebanon?

MILTON VIORST: My thought is based upon what I call the Lebanese model. That is, in 1975, the Lebanese embarked on a terrible civil war related to the instability within their society. You might say it dated back to French colonialism, but that's not nearly as important as the fact that we had Christians fighting Muslims and Sunnis fighting Shiites and Druze and other sects. Then in 1982, the Israelis invaded, making the situation even more complex. There seemed to be no hope whatever for ending this civil war.

By the end of the 1980s, there was a collective recognition on the part of the Arab leadership around the entire Arab world that this was extremely dangerous, not just to Lebanon and to the Lebanese, but to the Arab world itself. So the Arab League, which did not have much of a record for accomplishment up until that time, pulled itself together. Some of its leaders—there was a "three kings" leadership, Saudi Arabia, the president of Algeria, and the king of Morocco—took charge, organized committees, and appointed a rather extraordinary diplomat, [Ibrahimi](#). He did such a good job that he continued to work under UN auspices and was sent to Iraq to offer to help the United Nations shortly after the American invasion, when our leader, [Bremer](#), sent him home.

He led in the writing of a new Lebanese charter, not terribly different from the old charter, but with enough changes that it succeeded in persuading the various factions to commit themselves to a cease-fire. Once the cease-fire was in place, the Arab League invited all of the Lebanese participants in the civil war to assemble in Taif, a small town in Saudi Arabia. Under pressure from the Arab League, they said, "You guys are going to stay here until you come up with an agreement," and so they did.

Lebanon being what it is, the Arab world being what it is—volatile and fragile—it didn't solve all problems. There is still a great deal of uncertainty in Lebanon. But for the last fifteen or seventeen years, there has been no massive warfare.

What was so extraordinary was that this was one of those rare instances where the Arabs did it themselves. This was an Arab undertaking, totally removed from Western domination, surveillance, leadership.

That gives us a clue as to what can be done in Iraq. The Arabs now recognize once again that the entire Arab world is in danger, not just Iraqis, and they are eager to do something. The Arab League has passed a few resolutions suggesting that they would be willing to pitch in. But what it requires, more than anything, is for President Bush to acknowledge that, "Look, we made some mistakes here. We are now turning this over to the Arabs to see what they can do with it." But this happens to be an administration which isn't very good at acknowledging mistakes.

At this point the Arabs are willing to seize the opportunity. But it would require, at the very least, that American forces withdraw to the periphery of Iraq, where they would not intrude. Only Arabs themselves

have the necessary credibility to have an influence on the ongoing struggles within Iraq. We, as the heirs of the Crusaders, as the heirs of the British and the French imperialists, have no credibility. They mistrust, as indeed they have good historical reason to do.

I wish I were optimistic that something like this could happen, but under the present government that we have in the United States, the likelihood of acknowledging error and moving on from there is nonexistent. But I do feel that if we don't make the Arabs responsible for their own destiny, which is what the Arab nationalist movement is all about, we will sink deeper and deeper into the current morass.

QUESTION: Could you speak to the question of who will be more handicapped in this long struggle: the Arabs, who have a strong historical memory to bolster their already-strong faith—and keeping in mind that historical memory can shape public attitudes and is a driving force—or the Americans, who have very little historical memory? I can't imagine a young American greeting an Arab with the same idea, "You're a crusader." He'd throw 9/11 at them.

Who has the upper hand here? As you point out, the current administration doesn't have much of an academic historical discipline. In the long haul, will this hobble us or the Arabs?

MILTON VIORST: We certainly have the upper hand in terms of power. They have the upper hand in terms of the key to ending this. Those are two very different channels. We are using our power in a very unconstructive way, and they are using their sense of providing for their own destiny.

We will continue to pay a heavy price, even if we just measure it in terms of oil. There is little to be said for making the Arabs more and more dedicated to distrusting us, hating us, committed to destroying us.

We are simply asking for more of the kind of trouble that we got on September 11. It is a totally different kind of warfare that the Arabs excel in, as we learn every day when we pick up the paper and see not only the Iraqis but the American soldiers who are getting killed, and also the kind of guerilla warfare that cost us so heavily in New York and in Washington on 9/11.

QUESTION: The Arabs have long been dependent upon American, British, French, Dutch technology to extract oil and have been very happy to take the resulting monies for their own elites. They have not passed it down to the poor. They have also been very content to accept American money. [Mubarak](#), King Hussein, and so on have all been on the U.S. payroll.

Where have you seen any kind of real effort by the Arab states to do anything more than establish themselves, as the elite in charge of their countries, to do something to manifest the nationalism that is responsible?

MILTON VIORST: Arab elites have not conducted themselves very well in terms of the poor. One of the reasons for the cheering on the Arab street — although maybe not the Arab elites that had vested interests in retaining positions of power and influence in their respective countries? when Saddam invaded Kuwait, was that everybody knew how rich Kuwait was, and instead of investing in the Arab world, it invested its money in New York and London.

But this is something that the Arabs have to resolve for themselves. We are not doing so well at taking care of our own poor here in the United States these days.

Many times in Iraq, somebody would come over and whisper in my ear and say, "Saddam Hussein is a terrible tyrant. Yes, he is a terrible tyrant. But he's our tyrant. We would rather have our tyrant than your putative goodwill. We want to do this ourselves."

QUESTION: Would you comment on the differences between the Arab world and the Islamic world, and how that affects your recommendations and the present situation?

MILTON VIORST: There is a wide Islamic world, which is said to encompass 1 billion people, many of them in the Pacific. But my comments are just to that part of the Arab world which created Islam as a direct consequence of the conquest of the Arab armies in the 7th century.

The rest of the Islamic world came about much later. That is, the civilizations of Indonesia and Malaysia, the Philippines all had strong foundations of their own when they encountered Islam through Islamic missionaries, traders and others. They have created a kind of Islam which is quite different from the Islam to their west.

There are two different problems. Iran is a Shiite society with a strong historical memory of its Persian roots. There is a powerful sense of pride and nationhood in Iran, which is quite different from the sense within the Arab world.

Pakistan is largely Sunni. There never was a Pakistani government or strong traditions of nationhood within Pakistan.

What I have addressed today, without complicating things unduly by pointing out the differences between diverse segments of this world, is the Arab heartland.

QUESTION: If you were to apply your Lebanese-Taif model to Iraq, do you not expect that Iran would have a seat at the table?

MILTON VIORST: As with so much that has been associated with our invasion of Iraq, the unintended consequences are that we have clearly made Iran much stronger than it was before. By empowering the Shiites in Iraq, we have created a natural alliance between Iraqi and Iranian Shiites. They are not interchangeable. During Saddam's war against Iran, the Iraqi Shiites were overwhelmingly faithful to Iraq, because they have some sense of themselves as Arabs, as Iraqis. Likewise, the Shiites in Iran have a sense of themselves as Iranians, as Persians.

But there is a huge common ground now. If we make Iraq into a powerful Shiite society, we are inviting a rapprochement that will probably grow stronger with time. Even in the course of the past couple of years we have seen this among the [Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon and elsewhere.

So we have done more than plant the seeds. The trees are beginning to grow now, where we have created a new balance between Sunnis and Shiites in the entire Middle East.

Iran is not a part of the Arab League. It is quite likely that if the Arab League gets into this, it will have to invite Iran in, in some sort of capacity, but perhaps not the central capacity. Iran can no longer be excluded from these considerations. How this actually plays out on the ground remains to be seen.

But we must start from the premise that the Arabs have to have the sense that they are doing this themselves. They can invite observers from anyplace they want, including Iran or Pakistan, who may indeed contribute to a solution. But as I envisage it, this must be an Arab solution.

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you very much.

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