

# When Will the West Ever Learn from History?

A Conversation on the Middle East Between Lord Lothian and Amir Nour

By [Lord Lothian](#) and [Amir Nour](#)

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Region: [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#),  
[USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

*"I regret the wasted years during which 'the West lost the Middle East' but I feel that now maybe the time has come to put all that behind us. In this modern age of horizontal communication we must seek to engage each other more. We can still build a better world" Lord Lothian ([1]).*

*Amir NOUR ([2]): Your Georgetown University pamphlet titled "How the West Lost the Middle East" became an essential part of Amir Nour's ([3]) book which has created a real buzz in Algeria and is yielding an increasing interest elsewhere in the world. Such an interest is most probably due to the tragic events unfolding in the Middle East, but also to the "unusual" criticism voiced by a Western politician vis-à-vis the foreign policy of the West in general towards the Middle East. What caused you to adopt the position you outlined in Washington D.C in October 2013?*

Lord LOTHIAN ([4]): I have spent much of the last fifteen years immersing myself in the politics of the Middle East and the Magreb, as well as the wider region. My interest was fired by the number of conflicts, real, potential and incipient, which I found within the region beginning with the obvious Israel/Palestine conflict but extending to the divisions within Lebanon, the sectarian divide in Iraq, the wider Sunni/Shia conflict as it emerged from time to time and place to place; and obviously the security implications for the West dramatically brought into focus by 9/11. Current events not only confirm the reasons for my concern but also refocus my increasing concerns that none of us seem to learn from past events and we make avoidable mistakes which only compound our previous errors.

My initial purpose in delivering my Georgetown University lecture was not only to demonstrate how wrong the West had got the Middle East but also how we missed a great opportunity for building a commonwealth of interest between the West and the Arab peoples as the Ottoman Empire disintegrated and are continuing to miss what little remains of that opportunity. I believe however belatedly in being honest about our past in the hope that those who come after us may avoid the same mistakes and could yet build in our modern network world a new relationship between the West and the wider Middle East including the Magreb (the MENA). Given current developments there is an urgent community of interest and a greater need for mutual cooperation than for many years. It would be a tragedy for us all if we ignore it.

*AN: Judging by the die-hard approach to the region prevailing among Western politicians – as illustrated, for instance, by your fellow countryman Tony Blair's recent Bloomberg speech on "Why the Middle East matters"- and elites alike, isn't one rightly entitled to label you a "Robinson Crusoe" of Western politics with little, if any, impact on the decision-making*

*centres in the U.S. and Europe?*

LL: My own personal view of Tony Blair expressed over many years is that he has never had a real grasp of facts and that he has always been more concerned with the effect of what he says than the reality which he should be addressing. Hence his incomprehension that his solidly pro-Israeli stance (along with George W Bush) during the July War in Lebanon in 2006 as Beirut as I witnessed was torn apart could have a damaging impact on Arab perception of him as he was made the Quartet's Peace Envoy. His whole career – except for Northern Ireland where I pay tribute to his achievement of the Good Friday Agreement – has been based on what appears to amount to self delusion not least in his justification of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. I feel particularly sensitive about this as I was assured in Parliament by him at the time that this was not about regime change (which in international law was illegal) but solely about robust evidence of WMD on the basis of which I called on my Party to support him only to find out later that I had been misled. I therefore take what he says about the Middle East with a very large pinch of salt, as I do much of the justifications offered for what has followed. I must gently question also what he has achieved as Envoy in the Middle East. The answer is 'not much'. As for being Robinson Crusoe I can't judge what impact if any my thoughts and lectures might have. That doesn't mean in this network world that they are not worth thinking and delivering. It might be easier to remain silent on many of these issues; it doesn't mean that it is right to do so and it certainly isn't courageous. The lone voice may not always immediately be heard, but over time it can show its worth.

*AN: What's your response to those critics according to whom, your "brave" stance is conceived from a Realpolitik perspective, i.e. from the title chosen deploring the "loss" of the Middle East, to the insistence on "perceptions" rather than "realities", and the concluding remarks highlighting the wish to "win back", one day, the "lost region", your pamphlet simply reproduces the Western conventional wisdom on Middle East affairs?*

LL: Cynicism and scepticism are the traditional and easily discharged weapons of the critics. After forty years in politics they do not bother me. The details of the criticisms set out in this question arise from a misunderstanding of nuance, one which was not lost on my Georgetown audience with their historic perception of winning friends and influencing people. I also needed to find a snappy title to engage American interest – which it did. When I speak of 'winning back' I am referring to hearts and minds and trust which in 1916 we might have achieved but which through our subsequent actions we comprehensively squandered and which hopefully it is not yet too late to begin to win back. In truth therefore it wasn't so much that the West lost the Middle East but that it never had it to lose in the first place. Failure to win might have been a more accurate description but it would not have caught the attention that my title has. Claiming as the critics do that my lecture simply reproduces the Western conventional wisdom on Middle East affairs sits strangely with the criticism I have received from western pundits who feel that I have been most unfair to the West. Being criticised by both sides is not a bad place to be.

*AN: As once famously stated by your other illustrious fellow countryman, Lord Palmerston, international relations are all about the defense of national interests. Don't you think therefore that the West only cares about its own interests and sides with whoever guarantees the prevalence of these interests in the Middle East, be it a Sunni or a Shia "partner"?*

LL: International relations are traditionally and rightly about the pursuit of national interests,

but it is a frequently made mistake to equate that with selfish or simply material interests. Part of the West's error over the last hundred years in the region has been to secure material interests at the expense of losing valuable friendships. My argument is that this has not worked, that in the end national interests have not been served. I do however believe that it is not and should never be for the West to take sides in the age old religious divide between Sunni and Shia. That is why I am so anxious that we should not again become embroiled ourselves in this re-emerging conflict.

*AN: You are critical of the West's use of unfortunate terminology such as "War on terror", "Shock and Awe", "collateral damage". Yet, according to some, you yourself seem to fall into that same language trap when using terms like "Islamism", "jihad" -which are frequently equated with "terrorism"-, and "Arab Street". What's your take on that?*

LL: I was always critical of the use of the phrase 'war on terror'. Wars are fought between armies and protagonists. The reaction to 9/11 was the pursuit of the perpetrators of a heinous crime in which the victims were not enemies but innocent folk of many nationalities and religious confessions. Describing the pursuit of those evil criminals as a war gave them a status and a credibility which they certainly yearned for but equally certainly did not deserve. Terrorism is the use of fear resulting from a violent act to secure political ends. It is a form of blackmail. It is not war, and to describe it as such gave it a kudos which in turn helped it to radicalise and recruit gullible young to their evil cause. 'Shock and Awe' I decry as unhelpfully propagandist and designed to scare. It is part of an alienating and unnecessary rhetoric. 'Collateral damage' I condemn as being a mealy mouthed attempt to cover up the truth that innocent people are getting caught in the crossfire and are getting severely injured or killed. This is particularly the case in relation to Drones. It is basically intended to deceive. I was surprised to find the term 'Arab Street' being included amongs the criticised terminology. It was a term introduced to me by a number of Arab intellectuals many years ago to distinguish the ordinary Arab - what we in Britain would call the man in the street - from their rulers who may be motivated by more personal ambitions.

*AN: You equally denounce the West's double standards and other political inconsistencies in terms of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Aren't you just sharing in that policy when you endorse the Israeli "stubborn democracy" -branded as Apartheid by former President Jimmy Carter - and dismiss the so-called "Arab spring"-by reducing it to an adventure (in Libya) or a "Jihadist" drive (in Syria), without even mentioning the Tunisian democratic experience. The latter criticism seems all the more significant since you are the co-chair of the British Council Hammamet Conference?*

LL: My criticism of the 'Arab Spring' is not so much about its conceptual meaning but about its outturn and the rash and unconsidered hopes that the West invested in it without doing any due diligence on it. Tunisia has certainly pulled through, not without some difficulty, and is making sound progress. The West however originally welcomed the phenomenon as the birth of liberal democracy within the region. In Egypt? In Libya? In Syria? I believe that sadly today the facts speak for themselves and do not need me as an advocate.

*AN: The book rightfully warned of territorial disintegration and sectarian conflicts within the Muslim world. Because of the ongoing de facto partition of Iraq, red flags are being raised elsewhere in the region. How best do you think these looming threats can be countered efficiently?*

LL: The situation in Syria/Iraq is so fluid that I have avoided making substantial comments

upon it other than to assert that it would be a mistake for the West to become militarily involved in either country as once again it would add to the problem rather than resolve it. ISIS is a concern to the West because of its capacity to recruit western based Muslims therefore spreading the security risk to those western countries as well. But the ISIS problem is largely a regional one and must be resolved within the region by the region itself. Western intervention would be counterproductive.

*AN: Following the success of your Georgetown conference, do you intend to write some kind of a follow-up work in the future?*

LL: I have given another wider lecture recently called 'When will we ever learn'. It can be downloaded from the Global Strategy Forum website ([5]).

*AN: Any final words to the Algerian and international audiences?*

LL: I regret the wasted years during which 'the West lost the Middle East' but I feel that now maybe the time has come to put all that behind us. In this modern age of horizontal communication we must seek to engage each other more. We can still build a better world.

## Notes

[1] The conversation took place on July 5th, 2014.

[2] Algerian researcher in international relations, author of the book « L'Orient et l'Occident à l'heure d'un nouveau Sykes-Picot » ("The Orient and the Occident in time of a new Sykes-Picot"), Editions Alem El Afkar, Algiers, 2014. He is a fervent advocate of the henceforth vital "dialogue of civilizations", the alternative option of which in today's increasingly globalized and polarized world, is a catastrophic "clash of civilizations".

[3] Downloadable free of charge, in French and Arabic languages, by clicking on the following links: <http://www.mezghana.net/amir-nour.pdf> (French version)

and <http://www.mezghana.net/Sykes-Picot.jadeed-REAL.LAST.pdf> (Arabic version).

[4] Lord Lothian PC DL, (formerly Michael Ancram) is the first Chairman of Global Strategy Forum (An open forum, founded in 2006 and dedicated to the promotion of fresh thinking and active debate on foreign affairs, defence and international security issues. It is an independent, non-party political organisation. It publishes commissioned research and holds a series of lectures and debates seeking the views of leading politicians, academics and opinion formers, both in Britain and internationally). Lord Lothian served in the Conservative Government and from 2001 to 2005 held the portfolios of Deputy Leader, Shadow Foreign Secretary and Shadow Defence Secretary. He served on the House of Commons Intelligence Select Committee until he stood down from Parliament at the May 2010 General Election. On 22nd November 2010, he was created a Conservative life peer as Baron Kerr of Monteviot, of Monteviot in Roxburghshire, and was introduced in the House of Lords the same day.

[5] See : <https://www.globalstrategyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/Lord-Lothian-El-lecture-2June2014.pdf>

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