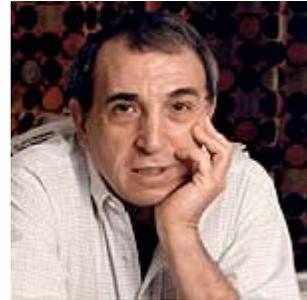


International Affairs speaks with Mr. Milton Viorst about his new book, *Storm from the East: The Struggle Between the Arab World and the Christian West*. Milton Viorst has covered the Middle East as a journalist and scholar since the 1960s. He was The New Yorker's Middle East correspondent, and his work has appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and The Wall Street Journal. He has written six books on the Middle East  
By Dimitri Neos. (5/21/2006)



**International Affairs Forum:**  
You talk in your book about historical memory and its importance in understanding Arabic-Western relations. Would you expand on that concept?

**Mr. Milton Viorst:** I'm not sure I understand why scholars generally, not just in the Middle East, talk so little about historical memory. I got involved with it with my last book when I wrote about Jews and Jewish politics going back to Moses. I discovered something very mysterious. How can you really check how ideas, notions, values and culture get passed down from mothers and fathers to children over the course of years, decades, centuries. I made an argument in the last book that the people that gave Moses such a hard time in Sinai after the flight from Egypt in '2000 BC' are the same people

who are the Jews of today. Of course, that's subject to exaggeration but I think there's considerable truth to that. It's certainly true with the Arabs and with Americans as well.

Historical memory is different from history. History is an intellectual discipline, it's a search for truth. Historians will acknowledge that uncovering all the truth is never attained but the quest continues. Historical memory may be based on history but also imbues it with mythology, ideology, fears, grudges, anger...all kinds of other emotions. That's what I call historical memory and it influences collective and individual behavior in a very large way. I try, in the book, to trace the major elements in the Arab historical memory and how it contrasts with the West's historical memory – which takes the same facts and comes out

with quite different attitudes as a consequence of them.

**IA-Forum:** Please highlight some major moments that have shaped Arabic-Western history.

**Mr. Viorst:** Mohammed founded this religion in the first quarter of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. By the time he died, it encompassed most of the Arabian Peninsula and under his successors, it moved outward. It moved east into Zoroastrian areas such as Persia, westward into places of Christian culture, and into North Africa. Then it turned north into Spain and crossed the Pyrennes into France where its armies were defeated by the French under Charles Martel at Pointiers.

That was the high point of the Arab conquest of the west – they started retreating from that point on. But it's something Europe has never forgotten as a threat and the Arabs have never forgotten it as their highpoint. Meanwhile, other Arab armies were moving around the other side of the Mediterranean and conquered the vast majority of Asia Minor where there were a huge number of Christian communities, though they never took Byzantium (Constantinople). So they threatened Christianity in the west (Spain) and in the east

(Byzantium/Constantinople), something that stayed in the historical memory of both sides.

Christianity's great counterattack, was the Crusades, when waves upon waves of warriors came back to reclaim this area for Christianity. It was not terribly successful. These were the early centuries of an ongoing 1400 year-old struggle and we are only experiencing the latest chapter right now in Iraq.

In the ensuing centuries after the Crusades, a sharp contrast between east and west emerged. Great changes began taking place in the west. There was a lot of internecine warfare between the church and state, the fall of feudalism and the rise of nationalism. More important was the arrival of the renaissance, the enlightenment, and then the beginnings of the industrial revolution. Europe was changing from within in a fundamental way while little was happening in the Islamic world where methods, values, and beliefs were pretty changeless. While Europe was introduced to secularism, rationalism and humanism, those ideas made little to no impact in the Islamic world. There are many people who would defend Islam's course. They don't hold secularism in great esteem.

But when you're talking about power, there is a major link between these ideas and power. Gradually what emerged between the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the 18<sup>th</sup> century was clear European superiority. By the time of the French Revolution, it began to make itself felt.

**IA-Forum:** Then came Napoleon...

**Mr. Viorst:** In 1798, Napoleon went to Egypt and swept away the Arab armies. The complacency in which the Muslim world lived was deeply shaken. The French army not only had greater firepower but there was an entirely different kind of military organization that was a product of the changes that were taking place over the course of these centuries. Although the French were driven out, they weren't driven out by the Arabs, they were driven out by the British in one of those national wars that characterized that period of European history.

But Europe's appetite was whetted and by 1830, the phenomena called imperialism was introduced to the Arab world. The French took Algeria and not long after that, Britain who had already established deep roots in Egypt, decided they wanted to establish way stations to further communications and set up

colonies in and around the Persian Gulf. After the building of the Suez Canal, they took over Egypt and held it up to modern times. Europe's spread was thwarted only by the Ottoman Empire, which was still a considerable force. It was no secret that the British and French were waiting for the collapse of the Ottoman Empire to open up the Arab world to colonialism and it did place with the end of World War I.

**IA-Forum:** Which brings us to the Sykes-Pico agreement...

**Mr. Viorst:** To get some historical perspective first, the Turks had taken over the Arab world by 1500 and the Arabs seemed pretty satisfied because the Turks were Orthodox Muslims and the Arabs felt comfortable with the kind of embrace that the Ottoman empire at that point provided. There was none of the nationalism that generated eruptions elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire in Greece and in Serbia. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this began to change because the British and French were sending in missionaries. The missionaries' principal job was to make converts to which they failed – but they did establish schools and started to bring in European values.

One of the European values in that era was nationalism.

Ironically, Arabs became nationalistic more from Protestant and Catholic missionaries than by anything that came from within their own society. The hotbed of Arab nationalism at that time was the American University in Beirut, originally called the Syrian Protestant College.

At the beginning of World War I, particularly after the British defeat at Gallipoli, it was realized that the Turks were stronger than anticipated. The British sought to reinforce themselves by enlisting the help of the Arabs. The British looked for a leader to lead the Arabs against the Turks and found one in the King of Hejaz, Sharif Hussein, who was the great grandfather of the late King Hussein of Jordan. He was a descendent of the Prophet so that gave him legitimacy beyond what an ordinary revolutionary would have had. In return for leading the Arab revolt, Hussein was promised that the liberated Arab provinces would become an Arab nation under his leadership. The Arab revolt was initiated in 1915. While there's some dispute over how much of an influence it made in overthrowing the Turks, there's no denying its contribution.

While the British had conveyed to Hussein that the downfall of the Ottoman Empire would

result in an Arab nation, they were secretly discussing with France about dividing up the Arab provinces among themselves. That's what they did in the Sykes-Picot Treaty. It was the key to the future of the Arab world. But the Arabs knew nothing about it until 1917 when they found out that had the French and English decided to absorb them into their empires, the British also issued the Balfour Declaration that committed Palestine to the Jews as their homeland.

By the end of the war, Woodrow Wilson promised self-determination to colonized countries and quite specifically spoke about the Arabs. But it turned out Wilson wasn't much of a negotiator, his health wasn't good and he had no political support at home. So the treaties regarding the Middle East were drawn up by Lloyd George of England the Clemenceau of the French – it was strictly a European action, the US had nothing to do with it. Sykes-Picot was the model: France got Lebanon and Syria, Britain got Iraq and what's now Jordan; they already had Egypt. Palestine was a not quite definable commodity that was supposed to be for the Jews. So the Arabs got very little except for Trans Jordan which was a desert kingdom of no great consequence. So the whole

thing ended on a very sour note with the Arabs.

**IA-Forum:** The foundation of a sentiment that hasn't abated among the Arabs...

**Mr. Viorst:** When I give a talk, I usually ask the audience whether they've heard of the Sykes-Picot agreement and most of time a half dozen people out of a hundred might raise their hands. But if you ask an Arab audience, every hand goes up because Sykes-Picot is deeply ingrained in their historical memory as the great symbol, the great act of western betrayal. It is something they don't forget for a minute.

After WWII we had another shot at winning the hearts of the Arabs but the Cold War interceded and we took great pride in measuring people around the world by whether they were on the side of good or evil. Of course we represented good and the communists represented evil. The Arabs said, "We don't want to take part in this, it's none of our business. We were never occupied by the Russians, we were occupied by the British and the French for a very long time and now you (US) are asking us to make a military alliance with the very people who oppressed us for so long and we just can't do it. What we would like to do is have some peace and

tranquility so we can begin shaping our own institutions." Remember, the Arabs had not been self-governing for a thousand years so they didn't have much political experience. The British and French gave them a little exposure to democracy but it was a democracy that was run on behalf of the colonial administration, not on behalf of the Arabs themselves. So they had a very strong skepticism about the virtues of democracy. What was most important to them was self-determination, even if it meant making their own mistakes. What they did not want was to continue to be under the thumb of colonial powers.

It didn't work out that way, unfortunately, because the United States seemed to think that if you weren't anti-Communist and you weren't willing to be part of an alliance then you must be some evil kind of phenomenon. So what emerged was that, in the Arab mind, the U.S. replaced England and France as the colonial oppressor, the Western Satan. It's something that President Bush simply didn't recognize when he sent out forces in. He seemed to think that if our troops went in, overthrew Saddam Hussein and offered democracy, the Arabs would be grateful to us. That hasn't been the case.

In my experience from my trips to the Middle East, Iraqis would come up to me very often and say quietly, "we recognize that Saddam Hussein is a tyrant and oppressor and we hate him but he's our tyrant. Our government must be our doing, our responsibility. We have had enough of you guys, we don't want you Western Christian powers telling us what to do. We have to shape our institutions for ourselves. It doesn't mean anything to us if you overthrow Saddam Hussein and impose democracy on us. What we want is to shape our own future." I'm not sure the US government understands that even now. The administration also has not taken note of the considerable Arab guerilla warfare waged against the British and French during their stay there. It proved to be a very costly imperialism for them.

**IA-Forum:** What, if any, participation/effect can the Arab League have on the current situation in Iraq?

**Mr. Viorst:** I think we won't be able to get out of this morass in Iraq on our own because there is too much animosity that has been built up for 1400 years; most recently the residue of Sykes-Picot. We have managed to take on the clothing

of the imperialists Britain and France who were there before us. We are not looked upon as good guys. So we have no credibility. My argument is the only way reconciliation to take place in Iraq is to withdraw our military forces, at least to the edges of Iraq, and turn over negotiation of a new structure of government to an Arab consortium where there is at least some sense that everybody's on the same side. Arabs do not look upon us as being on our side.

Of course, there is a great deal of rivalry between Arab countries and leaders but there is something that Arabs have in common that would give them a better opportunity for solving the deep seeded problems of Iraq that we can't do ourselves. In my book, I cite evidence of this with the Lebanese experience where the Arab League, while it doesn't have an impressive track record in many areas, pulled itself together and hammered out peace after 15 years of internecine civil war in Lebanon – and it's worked. The Arab League or some other similar consortium of Arab powers can do the same at this time. It seems the only chance we have.

It will require that the United States acknowledge that it made a mistake in going into Iraq and thinking that it would

solve Iraq's problems, and thinking that the Iraqis were waiting for us to deliver them. We would have to acknowledge that we don't have the capacity to handle this problem. Unfortunately, we are governed by an administration that's very bad at acknowledging mistakes so it will be very hard for them to do it. I think the only alternative is a continuation of this bloody madness that can only get worse over the coming years unless we do something as radical as I suggest.

**IA-Forum:** Would you advocate pulling US troops out of not only Iraq but of other Arab states, Saudi Arabia, for example?

**Mr. Viorst:** Probably, but we would have to work that out with the governments concerned and we would need to get guarantees to ensure the safety and security of our energy supplies. I think the presence of our bases in Saudi Arabia has helped produce people the ilk of Osama Bin Laden and will continue to give birth to radicals like him in Iraq as long as we insist on staying. We cannot determine the fate of Iraq ourselves; we must turn it over to Arabs themselves.

**IA-Forum:** America's image is not at a high point around the world. What can we do to make it better?

**Mr. Viorst:** It make take a couple hundred years...the behavior in which we have behaved since the end of WWII has not made us very popular. One way to start would be to make a serious effort to negotiate peace not just in Iraq but, as an equally high priority, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. There are a lot of other issues but this has long been the primary one. There isn't an Arab radio or television station that doesn't remind Arabs how important that is. After that gets resolved, we can turn to long term issues. But we can't even get to the long term issues like poverty in the Arab world until we put some of our own muscle into solving, in a fair and just way, a solution that meets the aspirations of Arabs and Jews. Alongside Iraq, that has to be number one.

**IA-Forum:** Thank you, Mr. Viorst.

