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A WORLD ADRIFT

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by

The Rt Hon Sir John Major KG CH

Dr Nizami, Your Excellencies, Distinguished guests,

There are many reasons why I was delighted to be invited to deliver this lecture. But, most of all, the attraction was the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies itself. The Centre meets an evident need in furthering our understanding of the Islamic world and culture. It promotes academic excellence in all its guises. And it is allied to one of the world's great universities. To someone like me, such an attraction is irresistible.

I didn't go to Oxford – or, indeed, any University. I left full time education before my 16th birthday and only then began to study. I devoured every book I could lay my hands on and travelled – most memorably to Nigeria during the Biafran War and to countries in South East Asia in the infancy of their independence. As I did, I learned much about life that no university could have taught me. But, the older I become, the more I believe that the most precious gift is the opportunity to stock your mind with learning at the beginning of adult life.

Some months ago, I was asked to give a title for this lecture. At that time – rather a turbulent one in the aftermath of the referendum – I hadn't begun to think about it: November seemed a long way off. But there was a recurring theme that troubled me. I'm no longer in the daily political bubble. No longer in Government – and I see events through different eyes. And it seems to me that much that was once familiar is breaking up; is being re-appraised as old lessons are forgotten or ignored. A new world is forming; as yet shapeless, but vigorous and thrusting and more nationalist than before. Too often the response to global issues is national self-interest. We seem to be living in a world in transition, adrift, with no certain destination.

This issue took root as no more than a jumble of concerns, of possible risks or threats that might not materialise. That being so, there were no obvious solutions: it was, therefore, an unsatisfactory topic. But, in our complex world, a great deal is inconclusive. It is simply not true that for every problem there is a solution; it is more likely that, for every solution, there is a new problem. So I concluded it was far better to raise concerns than ignore them: better to be forewarned rather than uninformed. I reasoned that history is littered with events where being uninformed was fatal. If Caesar had listened to the soothsayer he may have remained dictator of Rome. If Napoleon and Hitler had taken account of the extremes of Russian weather they might not have suffered calamitous military defeats. I could go on. So, tonight, I wish to focus on risks the world can no longer ignore.

Even before I begin, I can hear the cry that ignoring future risks is just what Governments do: they live in the present and ignore the future. With respect, I disagree. Government is more complex than that. It doesn't live in a vacuum. It does live in a world in which policy must obtain approval from widely different interests; a world where public attitudes are inflamed by events, by outrages – and impacted by ill-informed and, sometimes, extreme or bigoted views. But there comes a time when it is right to take stock and re-set the international agenda. I believe that such a time – if not already upon us – is fast approaching.

In the years after the end of the Second World War, the United Nations was established to prevent the horrors of another such conflict if one were ever threatened. Subsequently, its remit widened to include human rights, peace-keeping, humanitarian aid, social and economic development. Its aims are noble but – seventy years on – it is hard to argue that it has fulfilled the hopes of its members. Apart from the familiar criticisms of bureaucracy and inefficiency the most potent issue is the composition of the Security Council. Ten of its fifteen members are elected on a temporary basis but five – China, France, Russia, the UK and the US – are Permanent Members with an effective veto on Security Council decisions.

Seventy years ago, these five were thought to be in a position to “enforce” peace, which patently they haven’t been able to do! Even when, as with Syria, there is an undeniable need for action they cannot agree. Today it can no longer even be argued that all these five are the dominant nations of the world. The Permanent Five cries out for reform and yet there is little or no chance of that being agreed. Any proposal for change would be blocked by at least one of them. Any proposal for adding to the Permanent Membership – India, say, or Germany or Brazil – would be opposed, not only by some of the Five, but by rival countries that believed they had a prior claim. This self-interested attitude is dispiriting and undermines the credibility of the whole institution.

I don’t believe the need for a United Nations has gone away: quite the reverse. Its humanitarian work, for example, is vital and effective. They have a new Secretary General who seems a good choice. Yet, if we wish the UN to fulfil the hopes placed upon it, then it needs reform, it needs adequate funding and it needs to be enabled to do what it was set up to do. Without reform and resources it can only wither in influence at a time when China and Russia are re-establishing precisely the “spheres of influence” that former US Secretary of State Cordell Hull told Congress would be obsolete once the UN was established. The point is this: the UN needs re-visiting to accommodate the demands of today, not those of three-quarters of a century ago. This will need leadership – from within the Permanent Five – of a quality we haven’t seen for a long time. The question cries out: “Where is the Leader who can do this?” At present, no-one knows. Certainly, it will not be easy. The re-alignment of power never is. But it is necessary. And necessary now – not in another seventy years’ time.

At this Centre, it seems appropriate to turn to events in the Middle East. Over the last decade and a half we have seen the collapse of a one hundred year order. The first Gulf War evicted the Iraqi Army from their illegal invasion of Kuwait. The second invaded Iraq without a plan to govern it. The Arab Spring swept away long-term autocratic leaders and gave rise to hopes that have not yet been fulfilled. Today there is a civil war in Syria that has led to millions being displaced and millions more becoming homeless refugees in neighboring countries. There is conflict in Iraq, Libya and Yemen; disarray in Egypt; and policy disagreements even within the traditionally united Gulf States. The long running Israel–Palestine saga seems to become ever more entrenched as year succeeds year. The Sunni-Shia antagonism continues. So does Iranian mischief. Autocracy is gaining ground in Turkey. And the Taliban still seeks supremacy in Afghanistan. Within, and part of, this disturbing mix are extreme terror groups: most obviously, but not only, Islamic State, all injecting their own ambitions and their own brand of chaos into the region.

Is there a solution? I doubt that external force will ever, permanently, settle down the Middle East, although military assistance may force back terrorism. But even if the use of foreign arms changes realities on the ground, it rarely changes minds for the better. To achieve that, other principles seem sound. Persuasion is better than compulsion. Religious direction can help defeat perverted versions of Islam. Arbitration, itself used by the Prophet Mohammed to broker agreements thirteen centuries ago, may have a role to play. In recent years, many prominent, and brave, religious leaders have spoken out against violence and criticised the distorted views of Islam that activate terror. The former Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shaykh Ali Gomaa, a Sunni, has often challenged extremist views and offered non-violent interpretations of Islam. "Terrorism", he stated unequivocally, "cannot be borne of religion. Terrorism is the product of corrupt minds, hardened hearts and arrogant egos, all unknown to the heart of the divine." Views such as that offer hope, not hatred.

It is always easier to set out problems than solutions. I am sure solutions must come from within the Arab world. But the Western democracies cannot look away from the suffering. They contributed to the present unrest. They have a duty, where they can, to help put it right. And they have an interest in doing so. Instability at the crossroads of the world is damaging far beyond the Middle East. A further thought. Apart from its natural resources, which are large, but not infinite, the Middle East has a huge asset for the future: its human capital and the economic advantage of its youth and abilities. In Saudi Arabia and Iran, for example, over 50% of graduates are women; a huge, relatively untapped resource for the future. In other countries, Jordan and Tunisia among them, increasing priority is being given to education. Across the region, people demand, and have a right to, dignity, a job, a home and a say in the future of their country. Education is the key to a future that meets these demands.

We live in a world in which authority tends to be either autocratic, or democratic. The autocrat can dictate action. The democrat has a lesser freedom. He must reconcile what he does with political and public opinion, as well as his own philosophy and conscience, in a climate of opinion in which compromise is often seen as weakness rather than leadership. The committed partisan, whether from the Left or Right of politics, is contemptuous of compromise. For him (or her) to be a moderate; to accept that your opponents may sometimes be right; to acknowledge that wisdom is not the sole prerogative of any one philosophy, is simply seen as feeble. In every way, this is wrong. As we look around the world today, it is clear that we need compromise and understanding, perhaps as much as ever before. We need diplomats, not demagogues. If nation shouts at nation, and tribe abuses tribe, we merely deepen disputes, in an age when news of reckless words and deeds travels swiftly to every corner of our global world.

Our world is changing – more, perhaps, than we realise and more rapidly than is comfortable. The post-war transatlantic settlements are weakening and in danger of fracturing. Western security was built upon NATO, yet the future of this, too, is now being questioned. Suddenly, NATO is no longer the rock solid guarantee of security that we have long relied upon. There are cracks in the edifice. For four decades, the US and the Soviet Union built up their nuclear arsenals and confronted one another. Large numbers of American troops were stationed in Europe, both for its defence

and as a frontline against the perceived Soviet threat. And then, in 1989, the Communist system collapsed. Today, a quarter of a century on, European complacency on defence is striking. After the demise of the Soviet system many Europeans have taken international peace for granted. They can only imagine a peaceful future. I hope they're right, but it's a risky assumption.

Some European nations have cut their defence spending to very low levels; many American troops have been withdrawn and President-elect Trump is now questioning NATO's commitment to defend countries that are only modest contributors to it. This may only be for effect, but it should not be ignored. NATO resources are becoming a more pressing issue as the US fiscal deficit rises and their defence spending is projected to be cut from 3.2% GDP to 2.7% over the next decade. Even at this level, the US will comfortably outspend the Europeans, and she is expecting her European allies to begin to close the gap. Unless Europe is prepared to massively re-arm itself, at a cost it cannot afford, it would be pure folly to risk the unravelling of NATO. Far better, far more logical, to accept that expenditure must rise, and commit wholly and unambiguously to re-endorsing NATO as the West's defence weapon of choice.

All this comes at a moment when Russia is flexing her muscles at the Eastern end of Europe and acting atrociously in the Syrian conflict. If Europe does not contribute more to NATO for its own security and America becomes yet more impatient with its refusal to do so, what latitude does that leave Russia following her annexation of Crimea, her proxy war with Ukraine, her cut-offs of energy, her threats of trade embargoes, her cyber-attacks on Estonia, her hostile rage at neighbours, her bullying and her encouragement of pro-Russia minorities to ferment trouble in other countries? A united and resolute Europe can help penalise and deter Russia. A Europe in denial of risk is less able to do so.

Putin's Russia seeks a veto over the policies of neighbouring countries and, wherever possible, chips away at Western influence and American power. She undermines from within so she can divide and rule from without. And if, as reports suggest, Russia has not just been bombing Jihadist insurgents in Aleppo, but civilians too, then she is guilty of a war crime. We need to understand Russia has these abilities and is using them: power politics extends far beyond military action. I am not, and never have been, a Cold War warrior, but we ignore what Russia is doing at our peril. Of course, Russia doesn't want war with the West: we must hope Mr Putin does not miscalculate how far he can go.

China is also establishing a new sphere of influence, albeit by exerting her new economic power. Unlike modern Russia, China is a legitimate rival to the US. Her economic growth, although slowing this year, has grown at an unparalleled rate for over 30 years. This has helped balance the world economy perhaps better than ever before. That is very welcome. But, as China grows in influence, she has ambitions that unsettle much of the Indo-Pacific region. President Xi is building up his military, most notably the Navy, and has asserted dubious claims in the South China Sea that are declared to be illegal and will be an embarrassment to him. Nonetheless, he is determined to obtain Chinese dominance in East Asia. To this end, he has replaced

foreign policy caution with muscular nationalism. We should observe, but not overreact.

Some development of this kind was always likely given China's new position in the world and does not suggest she is seeking military confrontation. But her actions are creating tensions, most obviously with Japan, although India, South Korea and others are also looking on quizzically. More happily, China intends to develop the ancient Silk Road and we shouldn't under-estimate the symbolism of this: history tells us this was where the great religions were formed, where early literature thrived, and where Empires rose and fell in an age when America was undiscovered and Britons lived in mud huts. At home, China faces demographic challenges, an anti-corruption drive, a restless middle class fearful of losing its new wealth and demands for democracy that Chinese leaders cannot, and will not, concede. Although her South China Sea adventures potentially pit her against America, China already has her hands full on the home front: external adventures seem unlikely.

China's neighbor, North Korea, is a greater uncertainty. Past talks have failed to end her nuclear ambitions. It is now clear she has the capacity to launch ballistic missiles from a submarine. If so, her possible targets go beyond Tokyo or Seoul, or the region generally, and could impact anywhere within the range of the submarine. For decades, China has tolerated North Korea because, were she to collapse as a State and South Korea take over, then the whole Korean Peninsula would be an American ally. This is emphatically not what China wishes to see. Until now, we have tended to see North Korea, even under the unstable Kim Jong Un, as a client state of China. But it is no longer certain that China can control her. If a North Korean submarine, armed with a ballistic capability, were to be seen crossing the Pacific, America could not, dare not, allow this to go unchallenged. She would act. We know that China-North Korea relations have worsened over recent years, not least because of North Korea's nuclear programme; how much, we cannot be sure. But this opens an intriguing prospect: will, can, America and China work together to restrain North Korea and eliminate her nuclear capacity? I hope they can. I hope they will.

Over 200,000 years ago, a great convulsion, most probably an earthquake, sundered Britain from the European shelf as it created a catastrophic mega-flood that formed the English Channel. Until then Britain was a peninsula of Continental Europe. Last June another great convulsion, this time the will of the people, once again separated Britain from Europe, following a debate notable for its lack of serious content, its fictional expectations and its anti-immigrant rhetoric. So much has been said and written about Brexit that I have no wish to revisit the familiar arguments this evening. My hope is that, even if we end up wholly outside the EU, and I hope we don't, Britain and Europe can still find common cause with a relationship that holds us close together. But we can't be sure of that. So I wish to look for areas where the UK and her nearest neighbours can work together for mutual long-term advantage.

I have spoken of NATO. We need also to co-operate on all aspects of security; on terrorism; on crime. We need a united front to contain Russian misbehaviour. We should co-operate over the migrant surge to Europe, offer naval support in the Mediterranean, encourage investment in North Africa to promote hope and lessen the

tide of migrants, take a common position on climate change, on human rights and on representative democracy. Irrespective of the Brexit negotiations, we need engagement with Europe, not isolation from Europe. As we concern ourselves about the UK without Europe, Europe must consider its own future without the UK. What will Europe lose as the UK departs? It will lose:

- Sixty-five million citizens and its fastest-growing economy; potentially the largest economy in Europe;
- one of only two powers with a nuclear capacity and a significant military capability; and
- the nation with the longest and deepest foreign policy reach.

This loss will weaken the EU, especially when set against the superpowers of America or China. Europe, the cradle of modern civilisation, is about to become less relevant. This will become more apparent when the UK-EU divorce is complete.

Brexit has harmed the EU in other ways, too: it has energised the anti-EU, anti-immigrant nationalists that are prevalent in, amongst other countries, France, Germany, Greece, Finland, Poland and Hungary. These Nationalist Parties come from the far right of democratic politics. They have been enthused by Brexit. They have seen the colossus of Europe rejected. They are Davids, keen to poke a stick in the eye of Goliath. I have never hidden my own view that leaving the EU is an historic mistake. But my view has not prevailed and we must shift as best we can. We are a significant power. We will survive. Time alone will tell us whether the choice we have made is a wise or a foolish one. Either way, it is a perverse choice. In a global world, pulling together for trade and political security, the UK may be about to pull away from the richest market in the world. It is, as Sir Humphrey Appleby might have said in the BBC's "Yes, Minister", "a brave decision".

Seventy five years ago, President Roosevelt spoke of "four freedoms": freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear. Yet, still, these are not enjoyed in much of the world. This is not the only discontent. Look where you may, change in public attitude is as significant as changes in public policy. Global communications have shown the dispossessed what they are missing. Global and social media have exposed the shortcomings of government. No-one should be surprised that millions are challenging accepted wisdoms.

Thirty years ago, competition and free markets appeared to have won the argument against collectivism and became the prevailing economic philosophy. When Communism collapsed, it seemed even more entrenched. Today, its unattractive underbelly has become apparent. Global free markets have lifted hundreds of millions from absolute poverty. They have increased international trade and enriched formerly poor nations. But they have also widened the gap between rich and poor, depressed wages and jobs in industries facing competition, placed a premium on some skills and

eliminated the need for others and amplified a tendency to focus on short-term profit, as opposed to long-term good.

Following the sub-prime implosion, and the financial crisis, most average wage-earners in Western economies have had no real increase in their net disposable income for over a decade, while a disproportionate few have gained hugely. This is not how the free market is expected to work. It is not fair. It must not last. As a result, amidst a rumble of anger, the anti-global, anti-trade movement has grown. Its first effect has been to undermine, and try to defeat, multilateral trade deals such as the not yet ratified TPP, or the contentious TTIP. Trade protection has become a populist cry: it promises that blocking imports and reducing trade will protect domestic jobs. It's an enticing argument for the unemployed but, over any period of time, it is wrong. Cutting trade destroys more jobs than it saves.

The protectionist cry is also an anti-foreigner cry: "wicked foreigners are taking our jobs" is the not very subliminal message. It is a cry that morphs neatly into an ugly anti-immigrant message from the growing volume of nationalist voices. This fuels anger, and sometimes worse, and will not go away until growth returns to replace fear with hope. One final word about populism. It can be reformist and lead to desirable change. But sometimes, mostly, I think, it is the weapon of the demagogue. It may represent the will of the majority on a given day, but it ignores minority rights and opinion; it scapegoats groups that cannot defend themselves; it favours the short-term over the long-term; those that vote over those that can't; and is an ally of the cynic, not the Statesman.

This evening I have focused on a world in transition, facing many potential risks. But I am still an optimist. I do believe the risks can be headed off. The ugly and negative voices we hear are not the majority. They are merely those who shout the loudest. I believe the liberal economic order can re-burnish its credentials. And I conclude that, with reason and good judgement, even our most complex challenges can be met.