



“This region is better understood with a historical lens”

— Justin Marozzi, journalist-historian-travel writer

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SUNDAY
CONVERSATION

By Anand Holla

To condense the prolific work of journalist-historian-travel writer Justin Marozzi into four lines seems nearly as daunting a task as unswervingly compressing centuries of history into a chapter or a tome would be for him.

Marozzi, a Starred Double First in History in Cambridge University, has penned acclaimed and compelling books such as *South from Barbary* (an account of his explorations through the Libyan Sahara), *Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World* (a feted biography of the Mongol conqueror Timur), *The Man Who Invented History: Travels with Herodotus* (a biography of the world's first historian), and *Baghdad: City of Peace, City of Blood* (pulsating history of Baghdad through



BROAD CONTOURS: This region is better understood with a historical lens than a quick-fire journalist judgment, says Justin Marozzi.
Photo by Jayan Orma



DOWN MEMORY LANE: Marozzi in the Western Desert of Egypt at the Siwa Oasis, a few years ago.

13 centuries of splendour and destruction).

As a guest of the British Council in Qatar, Marozzi was in town last week. Here, in a freewheeling chat, he shares precious nuggets of historical smarts:

Tell us about your forthcoming book which is touted to be a comprehensive history of 15 of the most iconic cities of the Middle East.

My book looks at the region's 15 specific cities at specific moments in their histories; one city per century. So it starts from Mecca in the seventh century, right all the way through to Doha in the 21st, via some of the greatest Muslim cities such as Baghdad, Damascus, Istanbul, Beirut, Kabul, Isfahan and so on. I have chosen to focus on interesting, dramatic, mostly positive, optimistic and prosperous times for these cities, and also some of the dark days.

Personally, what inspires you to explore the Islamic world and this region so passionately?

I credit my father with giving me the early interest in the Middle East and the Muslim world from a young age. When I was a child, my father was doing a lot of business in the Middle East, especially in places like Iraq, Egypt, and Libya. He was born in Beirut, and grew up in Cairo, Damascus and Jerusalem. Although he has no Arab blood, I think the Arab world was an important part of his cultural hinterland. I was born in the UK and I grew up there. But with a father, who was involved with the Middle East, it sort of just came down almost by osmosis. He took me to Libya in the '80s. I went to study Arabic in Cairo as an 18-year-old and fell in love with the great city of Cairo, the Muslim world, and found it fascinating. Without making a conscious decision, I found myself

remaining involved with the region ever since; as a journalist and more recently, as a historian.

That must have positively influenced your perspective on the region?

For me, this region is better understood with a historical lens than a quick-fire journalist judgment, especially as an outsider. In the West, there was a lack of historical understanding. Perhaps, you could argue that is why we blunder around in the Middle East and Western foreign policy frequently leaves a lot to be desired in this region as well.

Do you expect your work to be understood in the context of all the historical insight you are privy to?

I am not trying to be an activist. I am just fascinated in stories and history-writing is also story-telling. I like to try to combine history and travel together, to provide as full and rounded a picture of somewhere as possible. Also, I love travelling, especially in this region.

Take us through some themes that emerged in your research of this region.

Some of the things I will be looking at would be cosmopolitanism, which I think is an extremely important part of this region; the multi-faith aspect and how much of it is under threat here. One of my arguments will be that when it is at its greatest, this region is one of the most tolerant, most cosmopolitan, and most multi-faith. When you see those parts of the equation breaking down, problems surface — Syria and Iraq today being classic examples of that. Where's the tolerance there? It's introverted, narrow and sectarian, and the people pay a terribly bloody price for that. The Gulf interests me, especially now as places like Dubai

and Doha are much more open to the world. They are moderate, rich from trading, engaging with the outside world; the values that have made the Middle East glorious at its most successful periods.

The title of your Baghdad book seemed high on optimism given how even during its peaceful times, the city suffered from unrelenting repression. Do you see the current low for Baghdad as among its worst periods?

Well, Baghdad was anything but peaceful for huge amounts of its time. So, however tragic today's situation is, I feel it unfortunately bears testament to a level of historical continuity. This is not new. From the earliest days, Iraq is bedevilled by that sort of sectarian split. I have met Iraqis who tell me — You Westerners, you have invented this problem. I say — That's absolutely not true... Read your history. There are riots between Sunnis and Shias in Baghdad from the earliest time. That strain routinely opens up, is exploited by extremists and you see blood on the streets again.

As a historian, do you think your acquiring of wisdom through history helps you make better sense of the contemporary realities?

We like to think it does. But history always confuses us as does the future. You could gain wisdom from historical research and understanding of how this part of the world has operated for hundreds, if not thousands of years. You can detect certain themes like tolerance, sectarian relations, and multi-faith.

What's your view on ISIS?

I would see Daesh (Arabic name for ISIS) as the latest in a long line of extremists who burst onto the scene. We live in the world of 24-hour media now. I think we

made them more important than they are, and I regard them as a phenomenon that will relatively quickly disappear. But I don't think the extremist ideology will disappear as quickly, if at all.

There's this prevailing misconception in the West that chaos or unrest is an inherent problem in the Muslim world. How would you counter that?

Anyone can use religion for their own ends — like the Christian Crusaders did in the Middle Ages. Extremism is a human quality. I think it's dangerous to start blaming this on Islam.

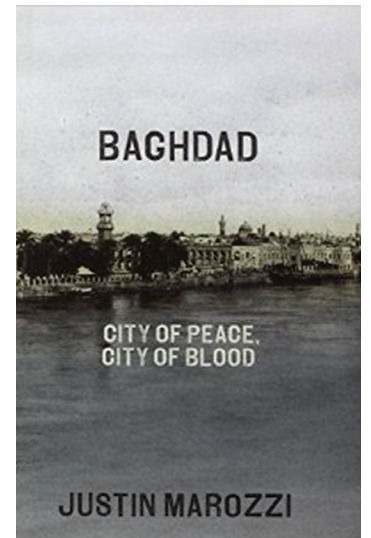
What is your understanding of the evolution of Middle East?

I feel some of these cities are at their greatest when they are controlling themselves. The problem arises when you lose independence and have colonialism or foreign interventions coming in, like Tamerlane (Mongol conqueror Timur) who conquered Baghdad and much of the Middle East, the Mongol Hulagu, the Ottomans, the British or the Americans, or now Daesh.

Even internally, all the pieces couldn't perhaps fit all that well?

Yes. After colonialism, there was Arab nationalism, pan-Arabism, Arab socialism; a lot of models that sought to restore strength, pride, prosperity and independence to the region. But I think they have all been found to be lacking. Again, this takes me to the Gulf. I think with so much of the Middle East in turmoil today, a lot of the Muslim World would do well to look at the Gulf and see what makes it work. A number of factors unite Dubai and Doha, like their approach to the outside world, or moderation.

So you are essentially trying to show the Middle East in a



ACCLAIMED: A cover of one of Marozzi's works.

different historical light?

That's because it's important to challenge the prevailing narrative of everything being full of despair and doom and gloom. I don't see the Middle East like that. It's a tragic moment and a challenging one for several countries but there are positives as well. I came to Qatar last year, after 14 years, and it looked like Qatar had created a Singapore or Hong Kong in a decade. It's astonishing. I found it very dramatic; architecturally, politically, economically, and the way Qatar has emerged as an influential player in the region, which has sort of made people all over sit up and listen.

There is, what you call a 'gulf of misunderstanding', which exists between a lot of people from the Middle East and the West. Is there a way to thaw this hostility?

We live in a globalised world these days. We visit each other's countries. There's more cultural exchange. That's got to break down the barriers as well. I'm just watching this lady coming in an abaya and niqab and there would be people in the UK who would find that threatening. It's a question of cultural understanding and ignorance. People have very strong views on both sides; in the West, many people find the Middle East very threatening, and there are plenty in the Middle East who despise the West. Actually, I think we are all human. We grow up with our own prejudices, our own cultures, and yet there's a common theme of humanity. We, Homo Sapiens, are an incredibly difficult species, forever fighting.

Look at the wars within Europe, disagreements within the Gulf, or between the West and the Arab world. There's this huge, long tradition of fighting and war. But equally, we are capable of some great cultural achievements; science, the arts, humanities, architecture. We may be the most fascinating species on the planet, the most violent and the most peace-loving. So it's not just about the West versus the Middle East.