

Iraq War Anniversary: Israel, Palestine Links Absent

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The Stockholm air was too cold, even for the most animated speaker to excite a crowd. But I had little choice: thousands of anti-war protesters had descended on the capital's main square to show their support of the Iraqi people on the four-year anniversary of the US invasion, and to demand an immediate American withdrawal.

As I took to the stage and began my speech, I was struck by the fact that there was not one Palestinian or Lebanese flag. Even the Venezuelan flag, which is often an invited sign of defiance and steadfastness, was absent. If that spectacle was a sign of strategic calculation: to distance the war in Iraq from all others, it was a grave mistake. I spoke exactly of that: it's the same war, the same occupation; Israel and its neoconservative benefactors are recurring faces in the Middle East's ongoing chaos. That is a fact that anti-war movements everywhere must keep at the forefront if they want their message to have validity or relevance.

The Israeli connection to the political 'realignments' in the region goes back as early as 1992. The draft Defense Planning Guidance (DPG), which was circulated around the Pentagon for weeks before being 'leaked' to the New York Times, envisaged a future in which the US establishes uncontested supremacy in the post cold-war world. Though the guidance didn't underscore Israel and its role in that new world, those who composed the document were primarily the well known Israel crowd in Washington: then-Defense Department staffers Ewis Libby, Paul Wolfowitz, and America's man in Iraq a few years later, Zalmay Khalilzad.

Israel's role in that 'vision' didn't crystallise fully until Richard Pearle, a leading neocon, along with Douglas Feith and others, proposed "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm" to Israeli Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu. The policy document envisaged a larger role for Israel in the region that would equate its influence to that of the US, not a mere client state but an equal hegemon. It plotted for the toppling of the Iraqi regime and the re-drawing of the geopolitical map of the entire region. The same recommendations were marketed to the Clinton administration in 1997/98 but failed; Clinton, who conceded much of America's interests to Israel's, was, perhaps, not yet ready to accommodate such a grand vision.

That vision, an Israeli one to the core, was often presented as exclusively American, most notably by the Project for the New American Century, established by leading neocons in 1997, the same individuals who vowed allegiance to Israel for many years. PNAC was the key group behind the war in Iraq. The moment terrorists struck the Twin Towers with their deadly airplanes, PNAC campaigners were ready with a map of the Middle East, pointing out the countries they wished to bomb and the regimes that needed to be changed.

This should not absolve other war enthusiasts, but to underestimate the neocons's leading role, in which Israel's interests were part and parcel is to defy damning facts.

The influence of the neocons has faded, or more accurately has gone into an early state of hibernation due to the disasters they have inflicted on the country, the scandals they have generated and the negative media coverage that they could not possibly survive unscathed.

Based on their vision, the US administration has hoped that its occupation of Iraq would reconfigure the region and inspire a New Middle East. Four years later, the US-Israeli plan is faltering. The stiff resistance in Iraq is costing the US its military reputation and is strengthening the Iranian position, especially since Iran has its own proxies in Iraq. Syria is also in a strong position despite its withdrawal from Lebanon which actualised under intense US-led international pressure. Hezbollah is keeping the Lebanon domain somewhat free from Israeli influence. In the final analysis, Israel, though it has gained through the toppling of Saddam and his regime, is still facing a serious challenge from Iran. The US is losing on all fronts, politically, financially and militarily.

The US' so-called de-Baathification of the country, also a neocon scheme, was its greatest blunder, for it meant stripping the country from its most important tools of unity: the army, civil services, thus its national cohesion. This invited disaster, which rendered all subsequent US efforts irrelevant. The US military administration replaced the existing regime apparatus, which affected millions of people, with a sectarian regime that itself was an amalgam of Shia exclusivism, pro-Iran political groups, unruly militias, etc. This new assortment reflected itself in the set up of the Iraqi army, police, government and parliament; the result was devastating, since the national army and government were tools of division, a fact that drove the sectarian divide into a civil war. The US democracy project — tailored perfectly to fit American interests — was also an astounding failure, and predictably so. The fact was dismissed that real democracy doesn't get delivered via tanks and cruise missiles, but by a civil society capable of asserting itself without fear or intimidation. What's happening in Iraq is America's definition of democracy for the Arabs, and certainly not the Arabs' choice for themselves.

The US will leave Iraq; that should hardly be questioned. It cannot possibly bear such financial and material losses indefinitely. The New Statesman reports that caring for the war wounded alone will cost the country \$2.5 trillion in the next few decades. But to ensure that such military chaos, such awesome losses of irreplaceable lives on all sides are not repeated, one must not speak of the Iraq war in too general terms: empire, oil and hegemony, and lose sight of most relevant specifics. Israel and its benefactors have played and continue to play a major role in all of this. Ignoring this fact for the sake of not 'mixing' the issues would simply mean fighting the right cause with the wrong strategy, to say the least.

-Ramzy Baroud is a US writer and journalist. His latest book: The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People's Struggle (Pluto Press, London) is available online via Amazon.com and the University of Michigan Press

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