

The War on Iraq: a Historical Middle East Perspective

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This article traces the future steps of the Neocons in spreading their version of democracy through the muzzle of a cannon. It unveils their grand scheme and puts into context their relationships with Iraq's neighbors.

The Middle East has been the subject of a colonial devastation since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Behind the mask of teaching and spreading democracy, Europe's colonial plunder during the mandate, partitioned the Middle East and left it in the hands of puppet regimes and unstable political systems that were far from being democratic.

These acts of plunder have been ongoing for such a long time, as in Palestine, to the point where the victim loses the strength to scream and the world turns a deaf ear. In contrast, the frenzy in Iraq by the neocons and their cohorts has awakened some to the injustice taking place. This awareness on Iraq has developed while remaining asleep on the issue of Palestine and failing to piece together the broader master plan of "Spreading Democracy in the Middle East".

Many people are led to believe that there were two Gulf Wars while most experts concur that it was only one. Moreover, the war between Iraq and Iran should be understood in this broader Iraqi war. After all, the United States was giving support to both sides, openly to Saddam, and covertly to Iran through the Iran-Contra deals. The war needed to go on and for both sides to sap each other's strength.

It seems obvious why the United States would want to cut Iran down to size after the Shah but the benefit from Saddam getting involved became clear to me later.

Saddam was easily convinced to enter the war, as he would be the first casualty of an Iranian revolution export. He was at the helm of a country where a minority ruled a majority and that majority is Shiite with potentially close ties to Iran. Protecting his seat of power has always been his preoccupation.

Unlike other Arab nations that have energy resources, Iraqis had the right combination of work ethics and human and scientific resources to become the second South Korea and a regional economic power that would translate into political power at the helm of the Arab world. Compared to Iraq, the Saudis are the larger exporters of energy with an equal size population but they lack all the other components. Other Arab nations have energy resources but either their populations are too small like Qatar, Kuwait, and Libya to industrialize and form an economic power, or, too large like Egypt with minimal oil income per capita to make a dent in their economic outlook. The only one that comes close to Iraq

is Algeria but its reserves prevent it from being the long-term player.

Since the death of Nasser after the war of 1967, the Arab world lacked the strong leadership and the potential of Iraq becoming that leader did not suite American Middle East interests or Israel's. The war with Iran set Iraq back and differed such leadership role for close to a decade and left it burdened with huge debts> But it did not knock it out of contention.

To the credit of Baathist regime, economic development and spending on infrastructure, even though at a lower level, continued through the war with Iran. There was a push to be self-sufficient and the industries that were in place to support the war effort could easily be transformed to service the country during peace time.

At the end of the Iran war, oil revenues were to be the source of this transformation but Kuwait which was accused by Iraq of sabotaging its economic recovery by overproducing and depressing oil prices set the stage for its invasion. We should not forget the quasi green light given to Baghdad from Washington through its ambassador in Iraq.

With regard to the so called First Gulf War, Abbas Alnasrawi gives a detailed analysis of its economic impact on Iraq in "[Iraq: economic embargo and predatory rule](#)". The following is an excerpt from his analysis.

2. The Air War and the Economy

On 16 January the Coalition forces led by the U.S. started the six week Desert Storm campaign which culminated in the eviction of Iraqi forces from Kuwait by the end of February.

The bombing of Iraq was aimed not only at military targets but also at such assets as civilian infrastructure, power stations, transport and telecommunications networks, fertilizers plants, oil facilities, iron and steel plants, bridges, schools, hospitals, storage facilities, industrial plants, and civilian buildings. And the assets that were not bombed were rendered dysfunctional due to the destruction of power generating facilities.

The impact of the intensity and the scale of the bombing was assessed by a special United Nations mission to Iraq immediately after the war as follows:

It should, however, be said at once that nothing that we had seen or read had quite prepared us for the particular form of devastation which has now befallen the country. The recent conflict had wrought near-apocalyptic results upon what had been, until January 1991, a rather highly urbanized and mechanized society. Now, most means of modern life support have been destroyed or rendered tenuous. Iraq has, for sometime to come, been relegated to a pre-industrial age, but with all the disabilities of post-industrial dependency on an intensive use of energy and technology (UN 1996: 186-8)

This vast scale of destruction should not be surprising in light of the fact that the initial plan of bombing had focused on 84 targets but had grown to 174 targets by 13 September 1990. By the time the air campaign began on 16 January 1991, the plan had grown to include 386 targets which was expanded in the course of the war to include 723 targets (House Armed Services Comm. 1992: 86)

In a post-war study of the air campaign it was acknowledged that the strategy went beyond bombing armed forces and military targets. In addition to purely military targets the bombing revealed that : (a) some targets were attacked to destroy or damage valuable facilities which Iraq could not replace or repair without foreign assistance; (b) many of the targets chosen were selected to amplify the economic and psychological impact of sanctions on Iraqi society; and (c) targets were selected as to do great harm to Iraq's ability to support itself as an industrial society. Thus the damage to Iraq's electrical facilities reduced the country's output of power to 4 percent of its pre-war level. And nearly four months after the war the national power generation was only 20-25% of its pre-war total or about the level it was at in 1920 (Hiro 1992: 354; Gellman 1991).

According to Abbas Alnasrawi, the destruction of Iraq's infrastructure was intentional in order to exacerbate already tenuous economic conditions for the Iraqi people, to force Iraq to be dependent on imports thereby increasing the effectiveness of the embargo, and, to delay by another decade the rise of Iraq as an economic power.

This assault on the infrastructure continued with the so called Second Gulf War; this time we can add to it such direct actions as the rounding up of 500 leading scientists under the guise of WMD searches; many of these scientists are still illegally detained while others are missing or killed. These scientists are the backbone of any industrial recovery.

There were two options after ousting Saddam from Kuwait: follow him to Baghdad and finish off his regime, or, keep him in power on a short leash while conditions more favorable to US interests are being cultivated.

Those who are considered neocons today and were part of the first Bush administration favored the first option while the old guard favored the second and the old guard prevailed. The objective was still the same, the removal of Saddam from power; the difference was when. The Clinton administration that followed did not deviate from the old guard's policies.

The reason the old guard prevailed is because at the time there was no viable pro-American substitute for Saddam. Saddam was toothless and predictable and keeping him in power contributed to an acceptable equilibrium within Iraq and with its neighbors, that allowed ample time to develop the more favorable outcome, which is a replacement regime with no interests other than pumping oil and using its disposable resources to further American policies akin to the rest of the Gulf States.

As an example of this lack of urgency and the need for a favorable substitute was the lack of any intention to come to the aid of the Shiites when they staged their revolt. Tricking them into rising against Saddam and their slaughter did help further the American plan of dismantling Iraq since it was the excuse they needed to create the southern no fly zone.

The Kurds at the time presented a viable partner but due to their infighting they did not present a reliable one. Still the Kurds were the only option with potentially two different roles if they could be rehabilitated and be made to see their future through American eyes.

The favored role is for them to be part of an Iraqi government that furthers America's interests and shields it from the legal ramifications of an illegal war - just imagine the economic and health impacts of Depleted Uranium. The second role would be that of the Trojan horse or the back door for continued American intervention if the country plunges

into a full blown civil war.

By the late nineties, the Kurds saw the light and stopped fighting and, through the help of the US, figured out a power sharing arrangement. The arrangement is still working to this day by having Barazani leading the autonomous north while Talabani is the Iraqi president.

To fulfill the favored role of a strong representation in the government, federalism had to be legitimized through the new Iraqi constitution in order to also fulfill Kurdish aspirations. That would require the writing of the constitution and its ratification through a national vote.

The Kurds' territorial over-reaching through their claims on Kirkuk, contested by both indigenous Arabs and Turkmen, and despised by the rest of Iraq has put the new constitution at risk.

To fulfill the second role that is less favored by the United States, it might be sufficient that the new constitution be written and for it to receive a favorable vote from the interim parliament. Regardless of what happens in Iraq after that, but certainly in the case of a civil war, such a favorable vote by a dubiously elected parliament would be enough of a fig leaf for the United States to pull out of Iraq and keep troops stationed in the relative safety of the Kurdish territory.

In either case, due to the lack of central power and planning, Iraq will not be allowed to reach its potential as a leading Arab country and would become an oil reservoir with a consuming population living on top.

If we take the first scenario, the one favored by the United States, and follow the American patterns of behavior that have been consistent since the Iran-Iraq war, we can run a progression that would unveil the neocons' future plans for the Middle East.

I know that Scott Ritter has mentioned that an attack on Iran has been approved and is imminent. I am also aware of the recent war drum beating, but neither seem to reflect the conditions on the ground; we need to take into consideration the possibility of a smoke screen. Iran, in exchange for keeping southern Iraq quiet and abandoning Syria will be allowed to go nuclear and be transformed into this enormous threat needed to secure American military presence in the Gulf States for years to come. The pattern certainly fits.

The only obstacle left that is preventing the Arab Middle East from becoming a contiguous pro-American region would be Syria. Currently, US troops are engaged in the ethnic cleansing of Tel-Afar on the Syrian border and the surrounding areas in order to create a wider corridor connecting Iraqi and Syrian Kurds. A Kurdish revolt in Syria that is supported by Iraqi Kurds under the direction of the US is the most plausible scenario resulting in a confrontation between Syria on one side and American and Pashmergh/Iraqi forces on the other.

Syria, as far back as I can recall, has shown an incredible understanding of regional geopolitics. Their ability to read their opponents and to position themselves to overcome adverse conditions is unmatched. The Syrians are aware of this neo-con plan and are ready for it. If Iraq was to be a cakewalk, the neo-cons should be very careful before they tread on Syrian soil.

A contiguous Arab Middle East that is pro-American is Israel's wish since it guarantees it peace on its own terms; a peace that is not based on justice for the Palestinians and

certainly one that will not last. It will be the peace that will buy Israel some time in the hope that the world would forget about Palestinian rights.

You might ask what about Turkey and the PKK; aren't the Iraqi Kurds going to help their brothers in Turkey? The answer is no. Turkey seems to be on board now and part of the total plan. The invasion of Cyprus experience, even though a source of national pride, did cost Turkey dearly on several fronts and was directly responsible for delaying its entry into the EU. The Turks are wiser now and will sell out the Turkmen and allow the Kurds to get their way in Kirkuk. In exchange, the Kurds will sell out the PKK and guarantee that Kirkuk's oil keeps flowing into Turkish seaports. Another sign that Turkey is on board is the recent warming up of relationships with Israel and the Israeli supply of drone technology to specifically fight PKK infiltration through northern Iraq.

The less favored option, which limits the American presence to Kurdish territory, would not allow for regime change in Syria. It might be what the neocons would have to settle for while they figure out something else.

Both the first and the second options require the cooperation of the Sistani merchant elite in the dismantling of Iraq and they have been very cooperative. Still, there is a purely Iraqi option that would preserve Iraq. It is an ugly option but, since the Iraqis currently in power are bent on selling off the country, it might be the only option left to Iraqi nationalists.

The option is a civil war, and, out of all people, Noah Feldman, the young law professor at Columbia who helped write the first constitution under Bremer seems to agree with me. He wrote this weekend in *The New York Times Magazine*: "Even if the Iraqis manage to ratify a constitution, it is bound to dodge and defer many big questions, just look at ours". Feldman was referring to the issue of slavery in the American constitution, a sticky issue that was deferred and later reared its head as the American Civil War. I guess for Iraqis the choice is now or later.

The present situation in Iraq was so clearly described more than 30 years ago by an Iraqi poet by the name of Muzzafar Al Nawwab in his poem "Jerusalem" (Al Quds). As a teen in Beirut, I had the fortune of hearing him recite it at the Arab University of Beirut.

In the poem, Mr. Al Nawwab is describing the sell out of Jerusalem by the Arab leadership. Jerusalem to him was the Arab bride on her wedding night; you can easily substitute with Baghdad and the current Iraqi leadership. My translation might leave a lot to be desired but this is the best I can do with this excerpt:

On her wedding night, you ushered the rapists into her quarters and waited eavesdropping at the door. Hearing her screams, you clenched your daggers invoking honor while shouting at her to shut up lest her own honor be blemished. How dare you ask a rape victim to be silent?

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