

## **Analysis: Neo-Colonial Ambitions**

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Few in the Middle East believe Washington seeks to intervene in Iraq for anything but self-interested reasons.

In March 1988, I was in the first party of journalists to visit the Iraqi border town of Halabja, just conquered by the Iranian Army, and report on the terrible vengeance which Saddam Hussein wrought on its Kurdish inhabitants. He had gassed them all.

Shock at this grisly scene was quickly followed by disbelief at the official American comment on it. It might, Washington said, have been Iranian, not Iraqi, handiwork. A few months later, in eastern Turkey, I saw the thousands who had fled across the frontier in the wake of Operation Anfal, Saddam's bid to subjugate Iraq's Kurdish citizens by gassing at least 100,000 of them. The American, indeed the wider Western, response to this genocidal act was minimal.

It is now known that this was deliberate. In a policy of which Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld and other neo-conservative members of the current administration were key executives, the US had aligned itself behind Saddam in his war on Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's fundamentalist Iran, and in the aftermath of Halabja officials were instructed to lie and obfuscate on his behalf.

So it will be hard to credit the American-led war on Iraq with any of the disinterested purposes that the administration ascribes to it, like "liberating" the Iraqi people and replacing Saddam's despotism with a "democratic" new order. It is easier to agree with those who discern only a self-interested agenda - one which the neo-conservatives hardly bother to disguise themselves.

The Middle East stands on the brink of geopolitical upheavals unlike anything since the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. The US is embarking on a quasi-colonial enterprise, involving direct, physical conquest and occupation, comparable to the one it opposed 80 years ago when Britain and France were doing the colonizing. The basic idea is to install a client regime in Iraq, then turn this potentially rich and strategically pivotal country into the fulcrum of a wider design that will bring the entire region firmly under Israeli-influenced American control.

The Palestinians, completely bereft of any Arab support, will be forced to acquiesce in the formalized apartheid that is Ariel Sharon's idea of a final settlement. America will secure the high hand over a denationalised Iraqi oil industry, and, from that position of strength, set production, supply and pricing policies for the whole region, undermining the traditional ascendancy of Saudi Arabia, emasculating OPEC, and ushering in an era of cheaper and more abundant oil.

Such quasi-colonial ambitions are good reasons for the Arabs to oppose the war. The trouble is that in doing so, they oppose the wishes of those Arabs, the Iraqis themselves, most directly concerned and with greatest right to the decisive voice in their own future. The Iraqis want to be rid of Saddam Hussein. For the Iraqi opposition, the rationale for war - dismantling Saddam's weapons of mass destruction - is the wrong one, or at least a subsidiary, one. They believe that what counts is Saddam's uniquely evil regime, with or without those weapons. For the opposition, the key UN resolution was never 687, which calls for Iraqi disarmament, but 688, which calls for an end to the "repression" of the Iraqi people.

For the opposition, too there is no other means to fulfil that resolution than an international military intervention. And if that turns out to be mainly, or even exclusively, American, then so be it. They have tried everything down the years: assassination, military putsch, terrorist insurgency, popular uprising. The 1991 rebellion came closest to success. It only failed because - in a shameful betrayal - the administration of George Bush the father withheld the international backing which, with troops in southern Iraq, it could so

very easily have furnished.

To be sure, some of the main opposition factions have had misgivings about an American intervention. Not for the reasons that other Arabs do, but because they needed to be convinced that America was truly serious at last - first about getting rid of Saddam; secondly, about installing an acceptable new order in his place. They still have misgivings about the second of these things.

Such is the gulf between Iraqi and Arab positions on the coming war that some Arab newspapers call Iraqi opposition leaders traitors, because they are ready to enlist the services of a foreign devil against their own. But these accusations only dramatize the moral and political confusion into which, over this momentous question, the Arabs have fallen. They consider that the coming onslaught will be directed against the entire Arab world, not just Iraq.

But they would not be facing this calamity if, in the past 20 years, they had recognized Saddam for what he is, the most villainous and destructive of Arab leaders, the worst manifestation of a sickness that afflicts almost all Arab societies; and if, having recognized this, they sympathized with the Iraqis, who had to endure it, and helped them end it.

When Saddam gassed the Kurds, he may have earned unconscionably little reproach from the West. But that little was enough for the Arab regimes, via the Arab League, to volunteer their "total solidarity" with him.

However valid the reasons for war, disarming Iraq or bringing about regime change will still be seen as the supreme expression of those double standards which are the single most important reason why Arab hostility to the US has reached the intensity it has. It will be wreaking punishment on an Arab country for its acquisition of weapons of mass destruction and its violations of UN resolutions even as the US continues to indulge an Israeli protégé which has a far longer, no less deceitful, illegitimate and ultimately dangerous record of doing the same.

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