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IRAQ AND THE NEW AMERICAN COLONIALISM

Emmit B. Evans

The following maxim encapsulates the politics and history of the Middle East:

There is a saying in the West that the Middle East is a region too important to the outside world to allow it to be governed by Middle Easterners.¹

Within this context, the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States can be understood as a variation on an old colonial theme, but with significant new implications for the American public and the global community.

The importance of the Middle East to the West is historically geopolitical. The region forms a strategic land bridge connecting trade routes between the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa. As oil came to fuel an industrial world economy, the direct economic importance of the region mushroomed. While only 12% of current U.S. oil consumption is taken from the Middle East,² the region accounts for 67% of current world oil production and 73% of known world oil reserves.

The strategy of “Divide and Rule” has been adroitly applied by the West to control governance of the Middle East. The 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement between Britain and France carved the gigantic Ottoman Empire into a profusion of artificial states with artificial boundaries, enabling Western powers to manipulate a constant state of turmoil and conflict that has effectively undermined both nationalism and regional pan-nationalism.

The United States entered the arena of Middle Eastern power politics in Iran in 1953 when the CIA mounted its first effort to overthrow a foreign government. After the United States re-enthroned the Shah, American oil companies gained control of half of the British oil operations that had been nationalized by the popularly elected government of Mohammed Mossadeq. And American arms merchants gained access to a lucrative Middle Eastern arms market.

By 1953, direct colonial rule had largely evolved to indirect control through neo-colonialism. Through neo-colonialism, indigenous rulers are installed and maintained to act as “brokers” facilitating and enforcing the transfer of natural resources in return for “brokerage fees” in the form of foreign aid and other pay-offs. The Shah was an archetypal neo-colonial broker, as is King Fahd in Saudi Arabia today, and as was Saddam Hussein.

Whether direct or indirect, colonial rule is difficult to maintain. While the United States could control the Shah, the Shah could not control his people. Rebelling against the corruption and abuses of the Shah’s American-backed regime, the popular Iranian revolution of 1979 brought the fundamentalist Ayatollah Khomeini to power, and placed the military and police hardware supplied to the Shah in the hands of fiercely anti-American forces. As the United States sought to diminish Iran’s military capability, it formed a partnership with Saddam Hussein in neighboring Iraq. Massive Western aid to Iraq throughout its bloody 1980-1988 war with Iran, continuing to the eve of the 1991 Gulf War, created a new military power in the region.

Unlike the Shah, Saddam could control his people. However, the United States could not control Saddam. The 1991 Gulf War was in large part an operation to pare back military assets supplied to Iraq to destroy arms earlier supplied to Iran.

The 1991 Gulf War did not seek to remove Saddam from power. American policymakers feared that if Iraq fell apart, Iran and Syria might annex Iraqi territory and increase their power and that Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq might spark rebellions among Kurds in neighboring Turkey that would weaken this key NATO ally. The United States called for revolts among Shiites in the South and Kurds in the North to overthrow Saddam; it then withheld support for the revolts and allowed 20,000 crack Iraqi Republican Guard troops to pass through American lines, brutally repress the rebellions, and weaken opposition to Saddam’s regime.

The 2003 war against Iraq launches a new American strategy designed more to “Rule” than to “Divide and Rule.” In an article titled “Beyond Regime Change,”

Sandy Tolan describes the current United States' policy in the Middle East as a neo-imperial vision to redraw the map of the Middle East as ambitious as the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement.³ Tolan documents a blueprint to control the flow of Middle Eastern oil, and ensure Israel's continued regional military superiority. Short-term goals include regime changes in Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

Much of this "neo-imperial vision" is not in fact "new," but a throwback to direct colonial rule. As the world's sole hyper-power, U.S. officials apparently believe they have the military might to reestablish the kind of direct rule exercised by the U.S. during the colonial era in the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico and by the British and French in their colonial empires. Plans proposed in April 2003 for the administration of an occupied Iraq by American officials and no-bid contracts to insider United States' firms to "rebuild" the country meet basic criteria of colonial occupation defined in international law: territorial annexation, rule by foreign nationals, and control of natural resources.⁴

What is new, however, is that the globalized world of the 21st Century is a different world than that of the colonial era. The international community is no more likely to accept a new American colonialism than it was the 2003 war on Iraq. And violent resistance to and revolts against American occupation and whatever broker regime the United States might eventually install will not be limited to Iraq. The astonishing Al Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in retaliation for United States military presence in Saudi Arabia and post-9/11 economic decline foretell a challenging time for the American economy, and a perilous time for its civilian population.

It seems there is little we can do to directly affect the policies of the Plutocracy⁵ that has taken control of U.S. policymaking. It is imperative, however, that U.S. citizens work from the grassroots level in partnership with citizens of the global community to take control of our energy technologies and consumption. U.S. energy policy drives both global warming and the terrorism of suicide bombers and cruise missiles. Both imperil our collective global future. (S)

Endnotes

1. Joseph N. Weatherby, "The Middle East and North Africa," in Joseph N. Weatherby, Emmitt B. Evans, Jr., Reginald Gooden, Dianne Long, and Ira Reed, *The Other World: Issues and Politics of the Developing World*. 5th ed. Longman Publishers, 2003. 281.
2. American Petroleum Institute, April 2003. An improvement of only 3 miles per gallon in vehicle efficiency would eliminate any need for Middle Eastern oil in the U.S.
3. Sandy Tolan. "Beyond Regime Change." *The Los Angeles Times* 1 Dec. 2002: M1. Tolan's sources include Richard Perle (Pentagon Defense Policy Board), David Wurmser (Special Assistant to

the State Department), Donald Rumsfeld (Secretary of Defense), Paul Wolfowitz (Department of Defense), Elliot Abrams (Senior National Security Council Director), Dick Cheney (Vice-President), Patrick Clawson (Institute for Near East Policy), Michael Ledeen (American Enterprise Institute), and Ariel Sharon (Prime Minister of Israel).

4. See Helena Cobban, "Military occupations - the good, bad, and ugly." *The Christian Science Monitor* 27 March 2003: 11.
5. See Kevin Phillips, *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich*. Broadway Books, 2002. Phillips argues that the government of the United States has become an oligarchy.