
STATE ENDING AND THE DURABLE ILLUSIONS OF EMPIRE

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Failure to come to terms with the American role in the destruction of Iraq continues to have devastating consequences and not just for Iraqis. The conventional view sees the devastation and horrendous loss of civilian life as the consequence of an inept American administration that simply did not understand the implications of the American-led invasion of a country as large and complex as Iraq. The occupiers, so the conventional understanding goes, were ill-prepared for the chaos that followed the rapid American military success. Destruction was the unintended consequence of unplanned mishaps and chaotic mis-steps, without larger meaning and without purposeful rationale.

Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums Were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered stands firmly against such views. The book makes the case that the destruction of Iraq was deliberate and systematic, embracing political, economic, social and cultural spheres. The destruction of the Iraqi state was no accident, nor was state-ending in any way a conspiracy. Rather, it was a conscious, announced policy.

Conceptually, the notion of state-ending allows one to connect the dots and see the underlying pattern to such seemingly discreet events as the degradation of institutional structures, the failure to protect Iraqi cultural treasures, encouragement of the out-migration of the middle class elite, and the systematic assassination of intellectuals, with a particularly clear targeting of the professorate. Actions on the ground were completely in line with the broad policy of eliminating a strong Iraqi state and diminishing prospects for the emergence of a unified, independent successor. The core concept of state-ending in Iraq, I would further suggest, has even greater relevance and importance today for the American empire under the leadership of Barack Obama.



Copper model of a quadriga from Shara Temple at Tell Agrab, c. 2600 BC.

Ironically, for all the misinformation and outright lies of the Bush administration, that infamous 'mission



accomplished' banner told a terrible truth: the American-led invasion of Iraq aimed to destroy the Iraqi state and so much more was indeed destroyed. Just days after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, then Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz declared that a major focus of US foreign policy would be 'ending states that sponsor terrorism'. No persuasive evidence of Iraq's connection to the 11 September attacks and its backers was ever produced. To the contrary, specialists agree that Iraq under Saddam had in fact effectively contained all varieties of extremism, other than his own, of course. Iraq was nevertheless identified as a 'terrorist state' and targeted for 'ending'. Those surrounding President Bush were pressured to establish a link between September 11 and Saddam Hussein's regime, whatever the actual facts of the matter. They scrambled to do so and the United States launched its illegal war. The actions of the invaders during the invasion and in post-invasion Iraq are fully consistent with this stated aim of state-ending. There is no question here of a conspiracy theory. The calculated destruction of the Iraq state was declared policy and not some secret plot. However inept and amateurish the key players, whatever the celebrated role of 'the fog of war' the policy makers intended the ending of the Iraqi state and actions on the ground consistently advanced that aim. Wolfowitz meant what he said. He said it openly. His words make sense of policies actually pursued, however much he has tried to back-peddle since.

In the wake of the invasion, museums were looted, libraries burned and academics murdered, all as part of undermining the cultural foundations of the modern Iraqi state. Mission accomplished. Iraq was destroyed at the cost of hundreds and hundreds of thousands of lives, the displacement of millions, and the destruction of one of the world's great cultural centres.

Consideration of the meaning of state-ending in Iraq today requires attention to the broader developments taking place today throughout Arab lands. The Arab street, so recently the object of universal contempt for its passivity and irrelevance, has stunned and inspired the world. Everything has changed. And everything has remained the same.

A new spirit of active, hopeful defiance is surging through the streets of Arab cities. Two tyrants have fallen. A third is wreaking havoc, even as opposition forces, backed by NATO air strikes, struggle to wrench power from his grasp. In 17 countries throughout the region people have taken to the streets. They include Iraqis who have felt the stirrings of the Arab spring. Major Iraqi cities have had their first 'days of rage' with demands that transcend sectarian interests. Across Arab lands millions and millions of ordinary people have broken through the barriers of hopelessness and fear. They have acted for freedom and social justice. These events carry the promise of radical transformation. They remind us what hope looks like.

Yet, in face of such radical refusal of the existing order there can be no doubt that the counter-revolution is gathering strength and has already begun to move. The march forward will be obstructed everywhere by the formidable barriers raised by the wreckage of lives and societies. Meanwhile, America, viewed as a highly militarized declining imperial power, remains



Cylinder seal with herd from Khafajeh, Jemdet Nasr, c. 3000-2800 BC

what public opinion in the Arab world considers the most dangerous nation on the planet. It has been viewed rightly as an ally of reaction in the region. A great deal remains unchanged, though it is still much too early to know how the intervention in Libya will affect that standing view.

There are lessons to be learned from the Tahrir Squares of the Arab world. Those lessons frame the Iraqi invasion in new and even more damaging ways. Egyptians and other Arabs rose up in the name of political and social freedom, registering astonishing gains. They quite consciously set about to create a model for the democratisation of the Arab world by 'peaceful people power' rather by sanctions, no-fly zones, and ultimately invasion and violent remaking.

Of all the gestures of those brave, youthful Egyptian souls in some ways the most profound were the immediate efforts by volunteers to begin the clean-up of the city centres. Egypt before the fall of Mubarak and the popular uprising was a country where it was all but impossible to meet a young person who did not dream of escaping for just about anywhere else. Suddenly, these same young people, along with their parents and friends, are voluntarily sweeping the streets and restoring the public spaces of their city.

Nowhere will this task of clean-up in the wake of tyranny and empire be more daunting than Iraq. The occupiers are still there with permanent bases and a fortress embassy. Foreign interference from more than one source is a fact of life. The country's infrastructure is everywhere degraded, as utterly depressing reports from Amnesty International and other impartial observers inform us. Saddam Hussein had already degraded social service and educational institutions with the heavy hand of dictatorship and the wastage of wars against Iraq's neighbours, most notably Iran. Today the sectarian government backed by the US wallows in ineptitude and corruption from all angles. Iraqi oil wealth has been mortgaged. The demons of sectarianism and death squads stalk the land. An Iraq in turmoil has for the first time in its modern history become a destination site for extremists. In his March 28 address President Obama noted that we are 'leaving Iraq to its people', though he said nothing about the condition of that ruined nation and of our own role in the ruination.

Ordinary people throughout Iraq are suffering: their demands are for jobs, food, water, electricity. How difficult it is to read the Amnesty International reports and the exhaustive studies of life in Iraq today by the scholars and activists of the Brussels Tribunal. A recent meeting in Brussels focused on the unimaginable damage done to Iraqi institutions of higher learning and the decimation of the Iraqi professorate with some 450 targeted assassinations of some of the finest minds in Iraq.

What makes these realities on the ground all the more painful is the way they are written out of the dominant narrative of American empire. Almost without challenge in the alternate universe of the mainstream media the illegal and immoral war against Iraq is counted a great, though costly success. It is deemed yet another chapter in the America's global crusade



Cylinder seal with god in boat from Tell Asmar, Early Dynastic III, c. 2500-2350 BC.



for democracy. In this regard the Obama presidency has brought no change at all. Yes, it is true that Obama in his recent address warned against going down the regime-change road. However, his reservations focused not on the costs for Iraqis but rather the drain on American resources. The implications of the President's words were clear: if we could afford it in terms of treasure and military resources, the model for the removal of the tyrant in Iraq would be the way to go in Libya. The only way to make such a case is to gloss over the hundreds and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilian lives lost. An American president, celebrated for his rhetorical skills, did precisely that. Americans suffered the terrible tragedy of over 4,000 young lives sacrificed. We do not know exactly how many Iraqi lives were lost but we do know that the numbers easily reach the hundreds and hundreds of thousands. While we may not be able to put this question of scale into words easily, but we do owe it to Iraqis to recognise the unspeakable difference. President Obama chose to ignore the dilemma. He put it this way in his March 28 speech: 'To be blunt, we went down that road in Iraq. Thanks to the extraordinary sacrifices of our troops and the determination of our diplomats, we are hopeful about Iraq's future. But regime change there took eight years, thousands of American and Iraqi lives, and nearly a trillion dollars. That is not something we can afford to repeat in Libya.' In the American president's eyes, the Iraqi people have their country back and the President is 'hopeful' about their future.

The ease with which the US entered the Libyan civil war on the side of the rebels finds partial explanation in this official and totally misleading narrative about our role in Iraq. Wash out the scale of the destruction and minimize the loss of Iraqi lives and the America invasion can be recast as a costly but ultimately successful battle for liberation. Add a persuasive humanitarian dimension, as well as multilateral participation and the case for yet another intervention becomes almost irresistible. Failure to come to terms with the realities of what America did in Iraq has consequences. As I write, the Libyan intervention 'to protect civilians' is under way and support for it has held. Might we have here, one has to wonder, a model for how to deal with Iran?

As for ruined Iraq, the international media itself has moved on. The Iraqi story has all but disappeared in press and media coverage. Even the recent days of rage in Iraq have been reported mostly as a side commentary on the more dramatic events in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya.

On the ground where Iraqis live, the American 'success' stands revealed as a cruel taunt that makes the suffering all the more unbearable. In Iraq one encounters devastation everywhere. Nowhere is it more damaging to the future than in education. The educational system, once the pride of Iraqis and Arabs, lies in ruin. The billions for reconstruction translate on the ground into a paint job for decrepit and damaged buildings and huge profits for American consultants and corporations. None of this is an accident. The terrible truth is that destruction of the infrastructure of education was a deliberate part of the calculations of those who brought the 'gift of freedom' to Iraq. They wanted Iraq as a 'clean slate' in the education sphere. The real work of rebuilding Iraqi education, with Iraqis in the lead, has yet to begin.

Meanwhile, the ideologues of empire are already hard at work refurbishing the edifice of lies that brought destruction to Iraq. It is not all about Bush and the neo-cons. We do need to remember that support for the destruction of Iraq was not confined to the neo-conservatives and the right in general. We should not forget that liberal opinion in America supported the imperial wars, with help from more than a few progressives as



well. Across a wide spectrum Americans responded to irresistible siren calls to protect the homeland, liberate an enslaved people, and bring democracy to an Arab land.

The seductive illusions of empire invariably originate in convictions that exude a spirit of civilizational superiority. They always reek of contempt for others. Such sentiments, reinforced by assertions of power that extend the empire, inevitably permeate the cultural and learning centres of the metropole. Imperial wars and interventions require articulation of an elevated moral purpose. The moral purpose provides the essential screen to project the vision of the world imperialism will remake in its own beautiful image. It does so while concealing the violent crimes that the remaking entails. Mainstream Western social science has admirably served both ends.

The necessity of rethinking education and the scholarship that informs it is not confined to a devastated Iraq. We in the West have our work to do as well. For the generation of American social scientists who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, the grand illusion was 'the great ascent', the rise from backwardness to modernity. By these lights America, as leader of the advanced West, was charged to make possible the modernisation that the West had achieved for lesser peoples around the world. At the end of that project would be the prosperity and freedom of a free market economy and open society, within reach of all who followed the West's example. For today's new generation of American social scientists the grand illusion has centred on freedom and the creative imagining of what George W Bush called 'a great American liberating tradition', now projected globally. Candidate Barack Obama, whose presidency would have the character of Bush's second term, projected in his July-August 2007 *Foreign Affairs* article the very same notion of an imagined American that 'by deed and example, led and lifted the world ... stood for and fought for the freedoms sought by billions of people beyond our borders'.

Conceived in liberty, America is mandated to bring, by force if necessary, the blessings of freedom to tyrannised and terrorised people around the globe. The task now is not development but liberation and humanitarian rescue. Realities on the ground. In an astonishing pronouncement President Obama recently announced that in Egypt, America had stood from the outset on the right side of history. In reality, the US backed the Mubarak regime until the very last minute and then tried to engineer a handover of power from one corrupt and brutal general to another. Egyptians did notice, just as Iraqis have noticed, that Iraq's new democracy means rule by a ruthless, corrupt, sectarian regime capable of the worst possible abuses against the Iraqi people. Yet, in his March 28 speech explaining the rationale for intervention in Libya, President Obama sounded the same note when he commented:

But let us also remember that for generations, we have done the hard work of protecting our own people, as well as millions around the globe. We have done so because we know that our own future is safer, our own future is brighter, if more of mankind can live with the bright light of freedom and dignity.

The truth is that this notion of an American liberating is quite simply not real in any sober historical sense. The historical record, as historian Andrew Bacevich correctly notes in *The Limits of Power*, shows that 'never during the course of America's transformation from a small power to a great one did the United States exert itself to liberate others - absent an overriding perception that the nation had large security or economic



interests at stake.' [Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, Metropolitan Books: New York, 2008. p.19.]

Historians who write the history of our time will surely rank the destruction of Iraq as one of the great crimes of the early twenty-first century. It is disconcerting, therefore, that the full measure of the devastating consequences of that criminal invasion and occupation has yet to register. As a result, President Obama can evoke the implicit success in Iraq in making the case for interventions elsewhere.

There is something blinding about destruction on so terrible a scale. There is something just too painful about debating methods for calculating the number of slaughtered innocents when the figures almost immediately take us well beyond hundreds and hundreds of thousands of human souls. Faced with the consequences of the deliberate policy of state-ending in Iraq, the mind closes down, or so it seems. That may be one of God's mercies but it is one that should be resisted.

About the author

Raymond William Baker is an internationally recognised authority on the Arab and Islamic world. He is the author of a series of critically acclaimed studies of Arab politics, published by Harvard Press. His most recent book is the co-edited *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums Were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered* (Pluto Press) and *Islam Without Fear*, originally published in English by Harvard Press and in Arabic in 2010 by Dar al Sharouq. In recognition of his work on Islam as faith and civilization, Baker was designated a Carnegie Islam Scholar.

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