

BOOK REVIEW

Adeed Dawisha

Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, ISBN: 978-0-691-13957-9, 377 pp., £21.95 hb.)

The historical trajectory of the Iraqi nation-state has been profoundly marked by its role as a political-institutional laboratory of grand imperial projects. Its first master, United Kingdom, first forged Iraq from the three former Mesopotamian provinces of the Ottoman Empire (1918) and then experimented different forms of governance, from direct rule (1918-1920 and 1941-1945) to indirect rule as a Mandate power alongside of the Hashemite monarchy (1921-1932) to informal influence on an independent state (1932-1941 and 1945-1958). Its second master, the United States, treaded down the same path from direct rule through the CPA of Paul Bremer (2003-2004) to indirect rule alongside democratically elected governments (2004-2010) to Obama's envisioned informal rule after the alleged departure of all combat troops (from 2010). The commonality between the two cases cannot be limited to the attempt to exert a political/economic control over the Iraqi territory; in both cases the foreign powers endeavoured to create a self-sustainable nation-state which could serve as a model to all other countries in the region and in the global South: autonomous, yet pro-Western and liberal-democratic.

The book of Dawisha is a masterly study of the political development of Iraq which aims at accounting for the feasibility and problems of this perspective. A supporter of regime change and of many tenets of the neo-conservative project, after 2004 Dawisha tried "to make sense of the quagmire into which Iraq seemed to be sinking". What went wrong after the US invasion? Was the neo-conservative dream doomed from the start, did some major mistake jeopardise it, or was there still hope of a viable, pacified and friendly Iraq? With this idea in mind he thus turned to a detailed analysis of Iraqi history and, specifically, to the three fields of state-building, nation-building and democracy-building.

This approach explains some unexpected features of the narrative, such as the marginalisation of the theme of socio-economic modernisation, the disproportioned attention to the monarchical era (1921-1958: 7 chapters and 162 pages) versus the republican era (1958-2003: 2 chapters and 70 pages) and the overall benign attitude vis-a-vis the imperial power of the day. Within these limits, however, Dawisha provides a clear, accurate and comprehensive historical narrative of the highest standard. The



extensive use of Arabic-language primary and secondary sources lends to the description of political processes an accuracy never reached by other historical accounts, usually dominated by English-language sources. Particularly interesting and innovative is his treatment of the status of liberal-democratic freedoms in the different periods. Finally, although the political leanings of the author are transparent from his discussion of events and personalities, he never hides historical facts which could contradict his theses and thus provides an honest basis for further discussion and analysis.

Ultimately, the UK attempt to forge a pro-British and liberal Iraq to serve as model for the decolonising Middle Eastern states was derailed by the surge of the nationalist agitation of the middle and popular classes, temporarily in 1941 and definitively in 1958. The outcome of the US attempt to mould a pro-American and democratic Iraq to serve as a model for a “new Middle East” has led to an impoverished and disintegrated polity and seems equally bound to fail. Why?

Dawisha enumerates some specific realities and policy blunders which brought to the present quagmire: the failure to defeat the insurgency (partially overcome after Petraeus’s “surge” of 2007), the weakening of the state through Bremer’s decision to disband the army and ban the Baathists from civil service and, above all, the decision initiated by Bremer and exacerbated after the transfer of sovereignty in 2004 to entrench the ethnosectarian divide within the Iraqi political system. Disillusioned by the post-2003 developments, Dawisha nevertheless concludes by partially justifying this outcome with reference to the “[structural] fragility of the social order”, “ethnosectarian entrenchments” which pre-existed the intervention and made “the probability of communal conflict [...] pretty high”, and the absence of a socio-economic condition conducive to democratisation. This sudden lapse into historical fatalism is symptomatic of the key flaw of the author’s argument: his inability to understand that throughout Iraqi history the project of building a viable and cohesive nation-state was inevitably and unavoidably bound to clash with its dependency on an imperial centre.

The creation of an overarching sense of national belonging among the members of the different (religious, ethnical, linguistic, ecological, tribal, local, socio-professional) groups which were catapulted within the Iraqi state in 1918 required two very concrete preconditions: the expansion of the role of the state in the provision of security, education, jobs, social services and economic development to its citizens, and the equitable distribution of the benefits among the different sections of society.

On the first account, the state needed the financial and technical means to carry out these tasks. In the post-1918 period, the British presence directly or indirectly prevented the exploitation of the few resources available: the oil revenue, the agricultural revenue and the revenue from prospective industrialisation. In the post-2003 situation national socio-economic development, already in tatters after 23 years of wars and international sanctions, was similarly blocked by the sell-out of the only significant resource left to the country, the oil industry, to international corporations.

On the second account, an inclusive Iraqi nationalism had to prevail over other particularistic ideologies (e.g. Sunni-dominated pan-Arabism, Kurdish nationalism,



Shi'ite dominance). Both imperial powers, faced with the choice between preserving their influence and allowing an anti-Western national development, chose instead to practice the classic policy of "divide and rule". While in the British case they ultimately failed, provoking the formation and victory of a broad "Iraq first" alliance of the middle-class and working-class sections of all major communities, albeit unstable and deformed by the central role of the military, in the American case they have temporarily succeeded, turning a broad but disparate armed resistance against the occupation into a civil war between spatially segregated and intolerant ethnosectarian communities.

Paolo Chiocchetti

Postgraduate researcher in European Studies

King's College London