

## PREFACE

In summer 2007, Ghaith Abdul Ahad of the *Guardian* and Rajiv Chandrasekaran of the *Washington Post*, two young journalists who had recently won awards for their coverage of the US occupation of Iraq, sat down to discuss the disaster unfolding there. In particular, Abdul Ahad, an Iraqi who had spent years on the run from Saddam Hussein's army, could claim an intimate familiarity with Iraqi society not possible for his Western colleagues. Also unlike them, he did not live in the Green Zone, a sealed-off area of Baghdad from which Western journalists rarely ventured, and when on assignment he never 'embedded' with US soldiers. The two journalists agreed that Iraq, a country where more than 650,000 people had probably been killed since the US invasion, would continue to be 'bloody and dark and chaotic' for years to come. They also noted that before the US invasion, no one had been able to tell whether a neighbourhood was Sunni or Shia, two branches of Islam whose rivalry was at the root of a sectarian war engulfing the country. Under Saddam, Iraq had had the highest rate of Sunni and Shia intermarriage of any Arab or Muslim country, they pointed out. Abdul Ahad observed:

Now we can draw a sectarian map of Baghdad right down to tiny alleyways and streets and houses. Everything has changed. As an Iraqi I go anywhere (not only in Iraq, but also in the Middle East), [and] the first thing people ask me is: 'Are you a Sunni or a Shia?' ... I think the problem we have now on the ground is a civil war. Call it whatever you want, it is a civil war.

Four million of Iraq's 27 million inhabitants had already fled the country or become internal refugees, exiled from their homes. Was partition of Iraq between the three main communities there – the Sunni, Shia and Kurds – inevitable? Chandrasekaran thought so: 'People are already voting with their feet. They're dividing

themselves on their own, people are moving from one community to another, one neighbourhood to another in Baghdad. In some cases they're leaving Iraq outright. This is the direction things are headed.' Abdul Ahad, clearly upset by the thought of his country breaking apart, nevertheless had to agree that communal division was happening:

I see a de facto split in the country, I see a de facto cantonisation between Sunnis and Shia. To enshrine this in some form of process will be messy, it'll be bloody. The main issue is for the Americans to recognise they don't have an Iraqi partner.

So who was responsible for the civil war and the humanitarian catastrophe? Chandrasekaran answered: 'I wouldn't blame the US for the civil war in Iraq, but I certainly think an awful lot of decisions made by Ambassador [Paul] Bremer, the first American viceroy to Iraq, have helped to fuel the instability we see today.'<sup>1</sup>

In this book, I argue that this prevalent view of Iraq's fate – that its civil war was a terrible unforeseen consequence of the US invasion and a series of bad decisions made by the occupation regime – is profoundly mistaken. Rather, civil war and partition were the intended outcomes of the invasion and seen as beneficial to American interests, or at least they were by a small group of ultra-hawks known as the neoconservatives who came to dominate the White House under President George W. Bush. The neoconservatives' understanding of American interests in the Middle East was little different from that of previous administrations: securing control of oil in the Persian Gulf. But what distinguished Bush's invasion of Iraq from similar US attempts at regime change was the strategy used to achieve this goal.

In his recent book *Overthrow*, Stephen Kinzer, a former *New York Times* correspondent, argues that Iraq was only the most recent of several examples over the past century when the US government directly intervened to depose a foreign ruler. Kinzer admits that this kind of 'regime change' is the exception: more usually the US resorts to threatening uncooperative foreign

governments to make them do American bidding, or it supports coups and revolutions carried out by others. Kinzer cites twelve other examples of US-implemented regime change that preceded the Bush Administration's Middle East adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. One thing is notable about his list: most of the invasions, starting with Hawaii and Cuba in the 1890s and including Puerto Rico, Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Grenada and Panama, targeted small, largely defenceless countries, mostly in America's 'backyard' of Central America and the Caribbean, that could be attacked, or even occupied, by the US with relative impunity. In the handful of more significant examples – Iran (1953), South Vietnam (1964–75) and Chile (1973) – it is clear that the US had in mind whom it was planning to assist or install and how it hoped to effect regime change, even if in Vietnam, for example, US planners failed miserably to achieve their goal. However, in the case of Iraq – and Afghanistan – not only is it impossible to identify the new strongman Washington hoped would replace the old one, but the actions of the Bush Administration post-invasion deliberately ensured that no new strongman would emerge. Iraq, unlike Kinzer's other significant cases, seems to be a genuine example of regime overthrow rather than regime change. Brutal military occupation appears to have been the goal of the invasion rather than a brief transition phase while a new leader was installed.

Kinzer notes that in most of his examples US interference created 'whirlpools of instability from which undreamed-of threats arose years later',<sup>2</sup> or what is sometimes referred to as 'blowback'. But again Iraq was different: the threats arose immediately and were predictable – and readily predicted by many analysts of the region.<sup>3</sup> Also, unlike Vietnam, it looked impossible for the US to contemplate a withdrawal from Iraq. In the case of Vietnam, south-east Asia could be taught a painful lesson for its defiance, by bombing its inhabitants into the dark age, but in Iraq the US had either to remain in place as the occupier or find a suitable alternative way of controlling the country's huge oil reserves for its own benefit. Noam Chomsky has made much the same

point, observing that comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam are misleading:

In Vietnam, Washington planners could fulfill their primary war aims by destroying the virus [local nationalism] and inoculating the region, then withdrawing, leaving the wreckage to enjoy its sovereignty. The situation in Iraq is radically different. Iraq cannot be destroyed and abandoned ... Iraq must be kept under control, if not in the manner anticipated by Bush planners, at least somehow.<sup>4</sup>

This distinctive new strategy for regime overthrow adopted by the White House originated far from Washington, and was apparently opposed by most of the country's senior military command and by the State Department under Colin Powell. In the early 1980s Israel's security establishment had developed ideas about dissolving the other states of the Middle East to encourage ethnic and religious discord (Chapter 3). This was in essence a reimagining of the regional power structure that had existed under the Ottomans – before the arrival of the European colonialists and their forced reordering of the Middle East into nation states – but with Israel replacing the Turks as the local imperial power. In this way, hoped Israel and the neocons, large and potentially powerful states such as Iraq and Iran could be partitioned between their rival ethnic and sectarian communities.

For Israel, this outcome was seen as having four main beneficial consequences, all of which would contribute towards the related goals of strengthening Israel against its regional challengers and weakening the ability of the Palestinians under occupation to resist Israel's long-standing plan to ethnically cleanse them from within its expanded, 1967 borders. First, the 'Ottomanisation' of the Middle East would bolster the influence of other minorities in the region – such as the Kurds, Druze and Christians, all of which had been marginalised and weakened by the existing system of European-imposed nation states – against a more dominant Islam, in both its Sunni and Shia varieties. Israel would be able to make and exploit alliances with these minorities, as well as provoking conflict between the Sunni and Shia, and thereby prevent the

emergence of the biggest threat facing Israel: a secular Arab nationalism. Second, by destroying the integrity of other Middle Eastern states, and leaving their former inhabitants feuding and weak, Israel could more easily dominate the region militarily and maintain its privileged alliance with Washington. Its role as the region's policeman, though one spreading discord rather than order, would be assured. Third, it was hoped that instability in the region – particularly in Iraq and Iran – would lead to the break-up of the Saudi-dominated oil cartel OPEC, undermining Saudi Arabia's influence in Washington and its muscle to finance Islamic extremists and Palestinian resistance movements. And fourth, with the Middle East in chaos, and much of the Palestinian resistance already dispersed to refugee camps in neighbouring states, Israel's hand would be freed to carry on with, and complete, the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians from the occupied territories, and possibly from inside Israel too (for more on this last ambition see my earlier book, *Blood and Religion*).

Israel's moment arrived with the attacks of 9/11 and the rise of the neocons, who persuaded the rest of the Bush Administration that this policy would be beneficial not only to Israel but to American interests too. Control of oil could be secured on the same terms as Israeli regional hegemony: by spreading instability across the Middle East. That was why the US broke with its traditional policy of rewarding and punishing strongmen, and resorted instead in Iraq to regime overthrow and direct occupation, as described in Chapter 1. Notably, this policy was opposed by both the oil industry and the US State Department, which wanted a dictator in place in Iraq after Saddam Hussein's removal, assuring the safe passage of oil to the West. Divisions within Washington that surfaced during Bush's second term can be attributed to differing views on the wisdom of the neocon strategy. Whether the same model would be applied to Iran, despite a determination by Israel and the neocons to continue the experiment, was unclear at the time of writing. However, the build-up to an attack on Tehran, including the related assault on Lebanon in 2006 and a planned strike against Syria afterwards, is documented in Chapter 2.

Finally, it should be noted that the model of discord Israel and the neocons are pursuing was tested in the laboratory of the occupied Palestinian territories over several decades (Chapter 4). Interestingly, a possible lesson that might have been learnt from that ‘experiment’ was ignored: that in seeking to destroy Palestinian nationalism, and hopes of meaningful statehood, Israel encouraged a greater Islamic fundamentalism among some Palestinians that offered a new and different kind of threat. Similar developments can be detected in the deepening of Islamic extremism in areas of the Middle East, and particularly in the growing popularity of the Shia militia Hizbullah, even among Sunni Arabs, after its resolute engagement with the Israeli army’s 2006 assault on Lebanon.

Nonetheless, Israel and the neocons may have believed that there were benefits to be derived from the growth of Islamic radicalism too. With the rise of Hamas in the occupied territories, Israel was further able to exploit Western fears of Islam as a ‘global threat’. The question of what to do with the Palestinians has increasingly been tied to the question of what the West should do about Islamic extremism. Israel has therefore been nurturing a view of itself as on the frontiers of the West in an epoch-changing clash of civilisations. In particular, Israel and the neocons have seized the opportunity presented by the ‘war on terror’ to reshape the Middle East in their own interests. It is no coincidence that, today, many features of the US occupation of Iraq echo features of Israel’s occupation of the Palestinians. It is also not entirely accidental that in dragging the US into a direct occupation of Iraq that mirrors Israel’s own much longer occupation of the Palestinian territories, Israel has ensured that the legitimacy of both stands or falls together.

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Three points about language. In general, I have avoided littering the text with qualifiers denouncing regimes as aggressive, undemocratic, oppressive, militaristic, unpleasant and so on. This