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## Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East

Jonathan Cook

London - Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2008

Pp. 204

In this well-researched and very readable book, Nazareth-based journalist Jonathan Cook traces the developments of the last few decades that have led to the dangerous and deplorable state of affairs in the Middle East today.

Focusing on US and Israeli policy, he links oil, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Iraq and Lebanon wars, and the campaigns against Syria and Iran in a lucid regional analysis with heavy global implications. In the process, he makes an important contribution to the ongoing debate as to who has the upper hand in the strategic US-Israeli relationship.

While Noam Chomsky typically explains the US almost unconditional support to Israel by the extent to which the Zionist state serves American global strategy, the study published by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt in 2006 gave ammunition to those who claim that Israel controls US policy.

Cook finds both views lacking and, instead, seeks an explanation in the convergence of US and Israeli interests which decisively cohered after September 11.

The book is replete with examples to substantiate this view. Most convincing is Cook's analysis of the different tendencies and shifts within the US and Israeli power blocs.

Cook looks back to the seminal essay by Israeli foreign affairs official Oded Yinon, which was published by the World Zionist Organisation in 1982, advocating the transformation of Israel into a regional imperial power by fragmenting the Arab world "into a mosaic of ethnic and confessional groupings that could be more easily manipulated". (p. 107)

Not least of the benefits to be derived from dissolving the existing Arab states was that Israel could more easily proceed with its ethnic cleansing policy in the occupied Palestinian territories.

At this time, however, US administrations were pursuing a status quo policy, bolstering compliant regimes and harassing the non-compliant. Also Israeli officials' vision of their empire was based primarily on ensuring regional stability.

It was not until the rise of the neocons and their exploitation of the post-September 11 climate that US policy decisively shifted in the direction charted by Yinon and increasingly adopted by Israeli strategists in the interim period.

Another factor contributing to the shift was the end of the cold war, for "in the post-Soviet world, nation states and their leaders became far less significant guarantors of stability". (p. 116)

Threats to imperialist control now often came from non-state actors.

"Given this context, it becomes possible to understand how, following the collapse of the Soviet empire, an Israeli military plan to spread 'organised chaos' across the Middle East, to ensure its own regional dominance and US control of oil, may have been so persuasive to the neocons in Washington." (p. 118)

Of course, the prime example of the shift is how the Iraq war was piloted. While the US State Department favoured regime change, and Big Oil envisioned the installation of a new strongman in Iraq the neocons opted for regime overthrow and the resulting fragmentation

...the neocons' plan for regime overthrow and the resulting fragmentation.

“The oil industry favoured the creation of an Iraqi state-owned company that would restrict production, staying within quotas and shoring up Saudi Arabia’s control of OPEC.... The neocons, on the other hand, wanted the Iraqi oil industry privatised so that the global market could be flooded with cheap oil and the Saudi-dominated cartel smashed.” (p. 32)

Obviously, the neocon plan promised more benefits to Israel - undermining the Arab regional economy as a whole, curtailing Saudi funding to the Palestinians and Islamist groups, eliminating the Iraqi regime as a military rival and Saudi Arabia as a rival for influence in Washington.

Israel had already provided the laboratory for the fragmentation model with its carving up of the occupied territories and fomenting of inter-Palestinian strife. On this backdrop, Israel and the US have worked in concert to reduce the Palestinian question to a domestic matter, meanwhile refocusing international attention on the broader struggle against “Shiite extremism”, targeting Hizbollah, Iran and also Syria.

The core concern is not, according to Cook, that any of these states or groups might really threaten Israel militarily, but that they might be able to influence the peace process in ways beneficial to the Palestinians and ending the occupation.

From the US vantage point, a Shiite alliance including Iraq, Iran and parts of Saudi Arabia would control a substantial portion of the world’s oil reserves and might initiate energy cooperation with economic rivals such as China or India.

**Sally Bland**

*31 March 2008*

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