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How the US shaped the Middle East to its liking

Sunday, September 07, 2008 - Reviewed by Jonathan O'Brien

Israel and the Clash of Civilisations. By Jonathan Cook, Pluto Press, €22.20

We hear a lot these days about the motives for the US's current role in the Middle East. Oil is often cited as one of the main reasons, if not the main reason, why it invaded and occupied Iraq. Jonathan Cook argues in this brief but compelling new book that while those citing it are correct, it's not in the way that they think.

The general assumption is that the US went into Iraq in order to grab the country's oil supplies, thus preserving and prolonging its own energy-devouring, SUV-driving, gas-guzzling way of life. However, America does not actually need Middle Eastern black gold to keep itself going - most of its domestic energy needs are catered for by its own production, and the shortfall is taken up by imports from Venezuela.

The real reason the US is so desperate to retain a stranglehold on the Arab world's oil supplies is because if it holds the oil in the Gulf, it automatically has a measure of control over what rival countries can do. This is known as 'veto power'.

In the old days, the US used classic colonialist methods to keep the oil flowing and the lid on the pot, installing various pro-Washington strongmen (the Shah, Saddam Hussein, the House of Saud) and propping up their repressive regimes with financial and military aid.

Now, however, manipulating small factions to attack each other is viewed as the most effective way of keeping Israel as the most powerful state in the region, and of aiding its gradual permanent expansion into Palestinian territory.

Having a strong, well-armed Israel is also, of course, a great way of helping to make sure that America's own interests in the region are well looked after. The ongoing occupation of Iraq, Israel's 2006 invasion of Lebanon and (assuming it happens) the forthcoming American attack on Iran are, Cook argues, all part of this grand plan.

The neocons who found their way into key advisory positions when Bush took power in 2000 believed that US global dominance and control of Middle Eastern oil was "inseparable from Israel's regional dominance". Moreover, as long as Israel remained the only Middle Eastern country to possess nuclear weapons its status would be unchallenged. (The nuclear weapons remain unmonitored to this day because Israel has never admitted that they actually exist, and has therefore not had to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.)

As has been well documented, many of Bush's neocons came from Jewish backgrounds, making it perhaps understandable that they might view the Middle East through Israel-tinted glasses.

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The current state of the region was shaped by driven individuals such as Richard Perle, who in his days working for the Nixon administration was discovered by Henry Kissinger to be passing information from the National Security Council to the Israeli embassy; and Elliott Abrams, the State Department official disgraced in the Iran-Contra scandal, and an advocate that Jews residing outside Israel "should stand apart from the nation in which they live".

As early as 1996, these men were advocating the "rebuilding of Zionism" by "rolling back Syria" and removing Saddam Hussein from power.

But while the neocons wanted Saddam toppled at any price, the oil industry visualised "a US-backed coup by a Ba'athist army general; the new strongman would be transformed into a democratic leader by elections held within three months".

After that would follow the founding 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".

Some of this came to pass, but most of it didn't. Cook has permitted himself only 149 pages in which to make his case. Consequently, each page is crammed with detail, to the extent that there are 455 different sources credited in the footnotes section.

He takes pains in the foreword to explain why the book contains no emotive language: adjectives such as "aggressive", "unpleasant" and "militaristic" are, he says, "too often lazy shorthand to indicate which side an author is taking". As a result, he sticks exclusively to documented facts throughout.

So if you're looking for a righteous, Robert Fisk-style polemic dripping in anger, you've come to the wrong place. But Cook is a world-class analyst and has an enviable ability to condense complex issues into a couple of pages - witness how he compresses years of research by journalist Greg Palast on the struggle between Big Oil and the US State Department down to roughly 1,500 words. America's bizarre relationship with the Wahhabist moguls of Saudi Arabia also has a torch shone into its murkier corners.

This book maybe short, but it's an indispensable primer for anyone interested in the power-play currently being fought out in the region. Strongly recommended.

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