

BOOK REVIEW

War of necessity, war of choice: A memoir of two Iraqi wars, by Richard Haas, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, 2009, 336 pp., US\$27, ISBN-13: 978-1-4165-4902-4

Memoirs are usually self-serving documents for their authors. They rarely show the whole picture, even from the perspective of the writer. Richard Haas's latest book is no exception, although one must acknowledge the muted tone of justifications of doubtful decisions that had direct consequences on the lives of many.

The book is a relatively short one, less than 300 pages notwithstanding the notes, annexes, and index. It is made up of nine chapters evenly divided except for Chapter 5, 'The Clinton Interregnum', being understandably the shortest! The first four chapters are devoted to the first Iraqi war, the last four to the second Iraqi war under another President Bush.

In his book, Haas tries to show the difference between a war of necessity and a war of choice. The former is exemplified by the first war in Iraq in 1991. The latter is illustrated by George W. Bush's invasion and occupation of Iraq. A Western reader can easily embrace the argument as it is done simply. However, the logic is faulty, at best, for all wars are avoidable unless a direct and imminent danger threatens the security of a country and when diplomacy has little chance of thwarting the conflict. Having said that, it is not clear by any means why the first war was one of 'necessity'. True, Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait and had to get out, but what Haas fails to indicate is that from the moment Saddam invaded the oil emirate US diplomacy was focused on a *military* solution rather than a diplomatic one. The various United Nations resolutions obtained and calling for an Iraqi withdrawal were just the building blocks for an argument justifying war. One may rightfully argue that Saddam Hussein disregarded such resolutions, yet there have been many instances where similar resolutions have been ignored with no military consequence to the offending party, Israel being a case in point. Even though diplomatic action was underway, the Bush Administration took actions to double the number of troops to be committed and tried to hide the fact from their partners, lest they balk at supporting the United States (pp. 97–98). The argument that Iraq failed to comply with such resolutions gave the supposed legal basis and presumed legitimacy for military action in both wars. Haas, on many occasions, states clearly the fear of the Bush Administration that Saddam Hussein would play it smart and would not do something new that provoked outrage (p. 80). Ample evidence is available that King Hussein's efforts at preventing the war and reaching a peaceful withdrawal from Kuwait were thwarted by US pressure on Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Only a terse sentence on page 59 shows that 'the Saudi-hosted meeting between Iraq and Kuwait produced nothing', without any explanation. But then, Haas seems to suggest that war was the Saudis' wish to weaken Saddam Hussein and not just obtain his withdrawal (pp. 79–80).

The first war on Iraq fails to meet the standards of a war of necessity. Alan Greenspan had written in his memoirs that 'the Iraq war was largely about oil',

whereas Haas's contention is that US interest in Iraq or the Persian Gulf could (or for that matter, *can*) be reduced to oil (p. 76). Yet, he states that 'the region would also matter if oil did not, for reasons to do with terrorism, Israel, nuclear proliferation, and humanitarian concerns, although absent oil and oil's importance it would count for much less' (p. 76).

There is nothing in the first three chapters showing why Iraq's invasion of Kuwait would warrant a military response from the international community, whereas Israel's repeated invasions of Arab territories never led even to a sanction at the United Nations, much less an endorsement of censure by the United States. The double standards in evaluating threats to vital interests are obvious. Israel's invasion of Arab territories has greatly destabilized the region and has fostered real threats to the international community by the emergence of attacks on strategic interests in the region as well as in the United States. Of particular interest is the following excerpt:

I found it difficult to understand (and still do for that matter) why so many in Congress, among the pundits, and in the nation writ large were so opposed to this war. What the Iraqis did in their invasion and absorption of Kuwait violated several of the most basic building blocks of the international order, including the primacy and essential sanctity of the nation-state and the idea that force is not to be used to settle disputes except in the most narrow of circumstances, which clearly did not apply to Iraq's action. (p. 111)

Israel's existence was based on the invasion and occupation of other people's territory, and whose expansion was built on annexing and absorbing the bulk of Palestine, the Golan Heights, the Shab'ah farms, and Jerusalem, and not to forget the denial of the right of return of Palestinians. All these actions do not seem to warrant a forceful implementation of United Nations resolutions in the eyes of US and Western diplomacy. The United States has consistently thwarted the implementation of Resolutions 242, 338, and 425. The latter was implemented by the force of arms and resistance to Israeli occupation of Lebanon. In any regard, US credibility has been shattered and will not be restored with the kind of arguments developed by Haas or others.

In the second part of the book, the author tries very hard to explain the inadequacies of the Bush Administration's decision to go to war. Though he never explains why and how the decision was made in the summer of 2002, he tries to put a positive spin on it. He did list his misgivings about going to war and believed that there were reasonable alternatives. Yet, he was not adamantly opposed to it. Although he would have preferred not to go, he was more concerned about how to do it. In the end, he does acknowledge that he did not resign over Iraq (p. 247) nor did Colin Powell. He states that there are two reasons for resigning from public office:

The first instance when resignation is warranted is when a person fundamentally disagrees with a major issue. ... In the case of Iraq, although it obviously constituted a major issue, and although I disagreed with US policy, my disagreement was not fundamental. (p. 247)

He resigned in fact because he lost many arguments in the Administration and found himself more often than not in the position to defend them publicly when he disagreed with them privately. This honesty is to be commended when he could have been sanctimonious about the war and draped himself with moral outrage.

The book is not entirely clear about the thought process of the Bush Administration. Though he voices criticisms about policy, Haas never explains the process of

decision-making nor the motivations or the rationale of Bush's decisions. Other works by other aides have been more explicit. Haas's reluctance to characterize the various key players in the Bush Administration is commendable (a no-tell policy), but it does *not* shed any light on the real persona of decision-makers. He is very neutral about Bush, Cheney, Rice, and Rumsfeld. He is very respectful of Powell, quite fond of Scowcroft and admiring of Baker. There are no juicy bits about their idiosyncrasies or character flaws.

Haas does make a point of exonerating Israel from urging the Bush Administration to attack Iraq. He expresses his surprise at Mearsheimer and Walt's attack on the Israeli lobby's role in that respect (p. 207). From his own perspective, Haas believes that the:

Israelis did not share the administration's preoccupation with Iraq. Actually, it was just the opposite. The Israelis I met with feared that Iraq would serve to distract the United States from what they viewed as the true threat, which was Iran. I asked one of Sharon's closest advisors why they didn't voice this point of view. Following a shrug and a smile, he said, 'We know how important this is to some of our friends, and we don't want to upset our friends'. (p. 207)

What Haas seems to have missed is that in the strategy of containing Iran (as part of the 'Axis of Evil'), a show of strength and resolve in bringing regime change in Iraq would give Iran food for thought. Had the occupation of Iraq gone in another direction than it has taken, who is to say that the US might not be occupying parts of Iran now?

By and large, the Haas account of his years at the White House and the State Department do not reveal any particular piece of information that was not made public elsewhere. He shows his admiration for the elder Bush and his team and is less than impressed by Bush Jr. The musings about policy issues could be of interest to a student in foreign policy but do not reveal the intricacies of interagency relationships and political infighting within an administration. The outsider would understand even less how policy is made, how it is discussed, and how it is adopted and articulated. That would have been a useful exercise. In the end, the reader may not retain much of the book, except its provocative title with which many would be hard pressed to disagree.

Ziad Hafez
American University of Beirut, Lebanon
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