

BOOK REVIEW

Defeat: why they lost Iraq, by Jonathan Steele, London, I.B. Tauris, 2008, 294 pp., £20.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-84511-629-3

When leading Western publications post rave reviews of a book about Iraq, it might attract the attention of many. When Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize winning economist, says that Jonathan Steele's book on Iraq, *Defeat: Why They Lost Iraq*, is 'a splendid contribution', that does get my attention. Being a trained economist myself, and an admirer of Sen, his words carry weight with me. In the Middle East, one is usually quite wary of Western books about the Arab world in general, and Iraq in particular. Most such publications are written for self serving purposes. In the case of Iraq, most books written post 9/11 offer some form of rationale for military intervention in Iraq. Such writers have either little experience about the region, its history, its language, and its traditions, or have never even bothered to set foot in the country and take a first hand look at the subject they are studying.

This is not the case with Steele's book. He is a veteran writer about international affairs and a landmark figure in the respected British daily *The Guardian*. He is also a frequent commentator for the BBC and CNN. In short, he has the credentials for credibility. In the case of Iraq, he has travelled to the country eight times between 2003 and 2007 on assignments for *The Guardian*, staying about a month each time. This does not make him an 'expert' on Iraq as lesser commentators would unscrupulously claim, but it does give him a better grasp of things he observed that fellow 'embedded' reporters failed to report. His approach is fresh, mixing anecdotes with solid analysis based on published and well known sources. Reading him, one cannot but be impressed by his grasp of Iraqi history, culture, and traditions. He obviously did his homework.

But the book is not about displaying his 'expertise' on the subject. First and foremost, he is 'reporting' and commenting on what he saw. Second, he has tried to analyse and understand the aberrations he observed, a feat that very few fellow 'experts' bother to do, relying on their preconceived ideas, if not their own prejudices, alone. Steele does present a fair and objective assessment of the situation in Iraq. But the main purpose of the book is stated quite bluntly in the opening sentences: 'it is an explanation of why George W. Bush and Tony Blair lost their war, and were bound to do so.' Two stark conclusions (if you are an American or British): the war has been lost and it was preordained, so to speak. The reason is that decision makers failed to take into account the complexities of Iraqi society. Indeed, the title of the first chapter, 'Iraq without Iraqis', suggests that Iraq was viewed as an empty space, or should have been. If there were natives, it would have been most appropriate for them to withdraw. The joke quoted at the beginning of the first chapter encapsulates the mind-set of US decision-makers. Indeed, Bush's meeting with Prime Minister Maliki in Amman in November 2006 was to discuss ways of ending the country's pervasive insecurity. The joke was to establish a timetable for Iraqis to withdraw from Iraq. And as matter of fact, the author notes the depopulation of Iraq, as more and more Iraqis (those who could) were leaving the country to escape the threat of physical insecurity.

The most obvious fact that the US and British decision-makers failed to recognize was that Iraqis distinguished between getting rid of a dictatorship and being occupied. It is not that the decision-makers did not know about what was lying ahead. Steele notes that American and British officials did receive expert advice about the complexities of Iraq yet ‘much of the rhetoric from Washington appeared to depict Saddam’s regime as something separate from Iraqi society.....All you had to do was to remove him and the 60 bad men around him’. Experts wanted to get across that this perception was incorrect, and that the regime was strongly embedded in Iraqi society. The Iraqi regime had, over 30 years, transformed the political and social landscape, so removing the regime was tantamount to creating a vacuum—so it is no surprise that it would be occupied by Islamists, and that is what happened. Also, little attention was given to Iraqi nationalism and the insistence on presenting Iraqis as groups of Sunnis, Shi’ites, and Kurds was a deliberate occultation of it.

Suspicion towards foreign invaders is deep rooted in Iraqi society, as well as in Arab society throughout the Middle East. Steele reviews the wider context of Arab attitudes to Western intervention in the Middle East, from the Crusades to the present day. In fact, ‘Iraqis and other Arabs do not view the invasion of Iraq in isolation, as do many Western policy makers; it was only the latest in a long history of assaults on Arab and Muslim dignity’.

If not knowing the facts about Iraq was bad enough, the behaviour of US decision-makers in Iraq and in the US about the conduct of the occupation was much worse. New mistakes compounded earlier ones, causing total deadlock. Even worse is the fact that such mistakes were responsible for the emergence, development, and blossoming of Iraqi resistance movements (euphemistically called ‘insurgents’). Sunni and Shi’ite resistance movements arose out of well founded suspicions about US intentions in Iraq. Steele makes a solid argument that, had the US decided to withdraw shortly after the fall of Baghdad, much of that ‘insurgency’ would not have arisen. He argues that ‘Bush’s refusal to contemplate an early withdrawal and set a timetable for a full pull-out was entirely consistent with the neoconservative imperial ideas’. It was the

cancer that undermined the occupation from the first day. It aroused Iraqi suspicions. It ignited nationalist anger and produced the insurgency. It reminded Iraqis of their long history of living under foreign rule. It affronted their sense of dignity. It made many Iraqis feel uncomfortable about taking senior jobs with the coalition. It turned Iraq into a magnet for jihadis from across the Muslim world, as well as for Al Qaeda terrorists’.

In short pointed sentences, Steele summarizes the situation in Iraq. Much of his reporting is about incidents, mistakes and miscalculations, as narrated to him by Iraqis and American and British officials. There is a vast reservoir of anecdotes supporting the central theme of his book—that the whole endeavor was doomed from the start.

A most interesting chapter is chapter 8 where Steele examines the sectarian violence that has overcome Iraq. He states that ‘among Western politicians and in the media, the prevailing view was that Iraqis were playing out “ancient hatreds”’. However, most Iraqis took a contrasting line, and he quotes Iraqis who said they ‘never used to know or care whether our neighbours or friends were Sunni or Shia’. As for the Arabs/Kurdish divide, they would tell Westerners that they had been always aware of their different traditions. However, ‘among the country’s Arab majority, national consciousness outweighed the sectarian issue of Sunni or Shia’.

Some blamed the Americans for provoking tensions in order to weaken and divide Iraq. Others blamed Al Qaeda and its jihadi supporters, who followed the extreme Salafi doctrine that sees all Shi'is as infidels. 'They came to Iraq to kill Shias for collaborating with the Americans to usurp the Sunnis' right to rule'.

Steele tries to navigate through these dangerous waters and resorts to a brief history of Iraq. Thus, though the Sunni-Shi'a divide has existed for fourteen centuries, it originated in the power struggle that led to the murder of Imam Hussein in Kerbala in 680CE. One must note that at that time, Shi'ites were those who followed the fourth caliph 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the cousin, son-in-law, and one of the earliest companions of the Prophet, in his opposition to Mu'awiyya Ibn Abi Sufian, the then ruler of Damascus and of a rival clan to 'Ali's. The appointment of Mu'awiya's son, Yazid, as caliph inaugurated the hereditary tradition of transmitting the caliphate to the eldest son of the reigning caliph. It was not by any means a religious conflict, but a raw political struggle over various 'legitimacies'. Steele interjects that, 'in spite of this bloody start, sectarianism has only been used as a political weapon during rare periods of Iraq's history. For most of the time it was not a source of hostility or violence but simply a cultural and social fact of life, and often a mark of class. Sunnis tended to be landlords, and therefore richer and more able to give their sons education'. Steele is to be commended for pointing out this fact, in stark contrast to the party line peddled by the US administration and subservient media in an attempt to shift the responsibility for sectarian violence to Iraqis themselves, much as the current explanation of the failure to make political progress is that it is 'Iraqi made' and not because of the occupation.

Steele points out that, in the last years of the Saddam regime, sectarian tensions did rise, but the problem was exacerbated from 2005 onwards by three main factors. First, the Iraqi constitution was drafted under US 'guidance' and gave provinces the right to form federal districts and claim autonomy from Baghdad. The fact that this right was advocated by Abdel Aziz al Hakim, head of the (Shi'ite) Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and enthusiastically endorsed by the Kurds, was a main factor in raising sectarian tensions. One must not conclude however, that all Shi'ites wanted to embrace this right, and the Sadrists (a large Shi'ite group) were among the opponents of the federalization of Iraq, along with the Sunnis. The second factor the rise of Shi'ite death squads within the Iraqi police and security forces. These squads targeted Sunnis almost exclusively, which led to the third factor: the shift of focus of attacks by Al Qaeda from Americans to Shi'ites. The horrific attacks claimed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi on Shi'ite civilians did contribute to the heightened sectarian tension.

In the final, aptly titled, chapter, Steele discusses the 'farce of sovereignty'. Iraqis, whether directly appointed by the Americans or elected, never had real power or genuine freedom of action. The purse strings were held tightly by the US, which had the military clout to enforce the policies it wanted. Steele concludes that delays in transferring sovereignty were, and still are, a major blunder. He also argues that sovereignty has to be genuine and this cannot take place unless there is 'full American troop withdrawal'. Iraqis turned against the Americans and the British because of the way the US forces operated. 'They created resistance by their own excesses'. The dramatic ending of Steele's book is telling:

Defeat was inevitable once the USA decided to stay in Iraq after April 2003. The goals that Bush and Blair set for themselves in Iraq—democracy, stability, security—may be

reached one day. For the sake of millions of Iraqis who have lost loved ones under the occupation, or who were forced to flee abroad, one must hope so. But these goals can only be achieved by Iraqis. They cannot be imposed through the barrel of a foreign gun.

Ziad Hafez

Email: zhafez@gmail.com

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