

They tried every bad idea of the 20th century

Amir Taheri

In a speech in Washington on February 26, 2003, U.S. President George W. Bush spoke of his hopes that a change of regime in Iraq would herald a new era in which the Arabs in general join the worldwide democratisation movement that began with the fall of the Soviet Empire over a decade ago.

Some critics of the administration's policy on Iraq were quick to dismiss the president's "pious hopes", arguing that the Arab culture and, indeed the Islamic civilisation, was not yet prepared for so momentous a mutation. The fact that the administration was still debating whether or not to let the Iraqis rule themselves after the fall of the present regime, was cited as a sign that Bush was not sincere in his promise of democratisation for the Arabs.

What is certain, however, is that the Arab world is in a state of crisis, and that change in Iraq could trigger broader and, hopefully, deeper changes throughout the so-called 'Arc of Crisis' that spans from North Africa to the Indian Ocean. Although it is too early to envisage the shape of a future Iraqi state, it is clear that we are witnessing the end of a certain model of statehood developed in several Arab countries during the 20th century.

The model was presented under a range of labels, including "qawmi" (nationalist) and "ishtiraki" (socialist) or, sometimes "nationalist-socialist". Most of the states where the model developed had come into being in the aftermath of the First World War and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. In every case, Britain and France, the two European colonial powers that had inherited the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, played the central role in shaping the new states.

These new states, at times described as "Sykes-Picot" offspring, were almost invariably shaped as instruments for protecting and/or furthering some specific strategic interest of the colonial power concerned. Iraq, for example, was created around the oilfields of Mosul and Kirkuk. The Egyptian state's task was to help protect the Suez Canal. Lebanon was carved out as a state to safeguard the interests of the Christians of the Orient under French protection. Transjordan was a British military outpost with the task of keeping an eye on the Arabian Peninsula to the south and east, and providing a base for intervention in the Levant.

The new state was built around an army created by the colonial power largely for policing purposes. In almost every case the newly created army relied on ethnic and religious minorities to constitute its officers' corps. In Iraq, Assyrian, Turkmen, Kurdish, Farsi, and Arab Sunni Muslims, provided the backbone of the British-made army from the start. In Syria the French favoured the advancement of officers from

the minority Alawite community. In Transjordan, Bedouin, Circassian and Chechen fighters provided the bulk of the officers' corps. In Egypt, many senior officers had Turkish and Albanian ethnic backgrounds.

With the advent of decolonisation movement, the newly created army-based Arab states lost their original function. Anxious to protect its position of power and privilege, the military elite gradually adopted the nationalist discourse. In practice, however, it did not join the struggle for independence until the colonial power concerned had indicated its readiness to withdraw.

After independence, the Arab military elite found themselves without a clear role. They decided to assume a new role by seizing power in a series of coups d'état. Armies that had been created as instruments of colonial domination re-defined themselves as standard-bearers of Arab nationalism. The excuse they found for their intervention in politics was the Arab defeat at the hands of the newly created Israeli state in 1948. The Arab military blamed their poor performance on incompetent or even treacherous political leadership, and vowed that, once they are in power themselves, they would restore the lost Arab honour.

The series of coups, begun in Syria in 1948, continued with the seizure of power by the army in Egypt (1952), Iraq (1958), Yemen (1960), the Sudan (1962), and Libya (1969). Even newly independent Algeria soon fell under military rule (1965). In most cases the military overthrew a traditional type of regime, often in the form of a monarchy backed by tribal structures.

Because the traditional system of rule had based its legitimacy on Islam and tribal loyalties, the new military regimes adopted nationalism and, in some cases socialism, as central themes of their political discourse. The nationalist theme was doubly attractive because it cut across religious divides and thus legitimised rule by officers who subscribed to creeds other than mainstream Sunni Islam. The socialist theme appealed to the urban poor and the secular intelligentsia that wished to distance itself from tribal and "feudalistic" social and cultural structures. The army's direct assumption of power led to a gradual militarisation of Arab politics in which force was regarded as the main source of legitimacy.

The military rulers did what they knew how: wage war. They began by waging war against civil society with the aim of destroying within it all potential sources of alternative authority and legitimacy. They disarmed as many of the tribes as they could, and executed, imprisoned, exiled or

bought most of their leaders. In some cases, such as the series of anti-Kurd campaigns in Iraq between 1932 and 1988, operations launched by the state reached the level of genocide. Operations that amounted to what we now know as "ethnic cleansing" were also conducted against Coptic Christians in Upper Egypt and Jews and Persians in Iraq. (At one point almost a fifth of Baghdad's population had been Jews. By 1968, however, only a handful had remained, all others having fled to Iran, emigrated to Israel or been put to death by successive military rulers. In 1972-73 Saddam Hussein conducted the biggest "ethnic cleansing" operation in Iraq's history by expelling over 600,000 Iraqis to Iran on the grounds that they might have had Persian ancestry.)

Next it was the turn of religious authorities to be brought under state control and deprived of the independence they had enjoyed for over 1000 years. Traditional religious organisation such as Sufi fraternities, esoteric sects, and charitable structures were either infiltrated or dismantled. The new state assumed control of the endowments (awqaf) property worth billions, depriving civil society of its most important economic base.

The army-based state also annexed the educational system, nationalising thousands of private Quranic schools, and dictating the curricula at all levels of schooling. The traditional guilds of trades and crafts, some with centuries of history, were also attacked and disbanded. Political parties and cultural associations did not escape that destructive urge. In the 1950s some of the newly independent Arab countries were home to genuine political movements representing the various ideologies of the 20th century. By the end of the 1970s all, including parties such as Baath, that were nominally in power in Syria and Iraq, had been destroyed.

The elimination of the independent press, the ownership and control of all radio and television networks by the state, and the vast resources allocated to "information" ministries, enabled the new Arab regime to stifle dissident voices and impose its version of reality.

Evolving towards a totalitarian model the new army-based Arab state embarked upon a wholesale nationalisation programme. In some cases, such as the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956, the plan clashed with the remaining interests of the former colonial powers and led to war. In other cases, such as land reform in Egypt in the late 1950s and the seizure of small businesses by the first Baathist regime in Iraq in 1963, the result was economic dislocation and widespread hardship for the most vulnerable strata of society.

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