

## UNDERSTANDING IRAQ

William R Polk

I B Tauris, London New York 2006

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On the face of it this is a history book *par excellence* and one that, according to the book's subtitle, offers 'The Whole Sweep of Iraqi History from Genghis Khan's Mongols to the Ottoman Turks to the British Mandate to the American Occupation.' But is this really what we want when the need of the hour appears to be a speedy end to the bloodletting on the streets of Baghdad and beyond? We may not want it but once initiated we are hooked. Polk has made it his task to turn his vast horizon into a giant jigsaw puzzle and then go back to define and colour each piece. The effect is profoundly instructive.

Understanding Iraq is suddenly a priority for the West, not so much because of Iraq's economic and political importance, which has been a constant since the days of Saddam Hussein and earlier, as because of the West's need to frame Iraq within its own confused and confusing *zeitgeist*. The startling variety of interpretations of the Iraq project since the 2003 invasion, dished out by academics as well as politicians, shows no apparent sign of jelling into any coherent form. As this is written, the slaughter of the innocent continues with increasing ferocity, alongside a tendency in the world's media to paint the Iraqis as a

blood-thirsty lot incapable of peaceful coexistence, let alone democratic rule. Polk delivers many important correctives along the way in the pages of this concise book, chief amongst those being the idea of Iraq the artificial state. His 'sweep' of Iraqi history puts paid to the notion, bandied about in the highest of places, that the West somehow created Iraq and now, toy-like, risks breaking it.

A lot of his analysis, which has drawn fire from America's 'anti-liberal' activists, is really meant for an American audience ill-served by the national curriculum. For that vast majority this is a history primer plain, simple and potentially influential. More interesting in view of ongoing events is the 'what now' element in his narrative. Prescience apart, Polk presents two likely consequences of the West's failure, observing that 'the longer the war in Iraq continues the more it will resemble the statement the Roman historian Tacitus attributed to the contemporary guerrilla leader of the Britons. The Romans, he said, "create a desolation and call it peace."'

The first of these after-effects outlined by Polk is already there for all to see — Iraq and its society physically wounded and farther than ever before from a sustainable, free and peaceful future.

The second is the impact on America which, he predicts, will be 'angry, dispirited, and less democratic than today while internationally it will have lost much of the moral force that throughout its history, from the very Declaration of Independence, has been its most valued and most potent asset.'

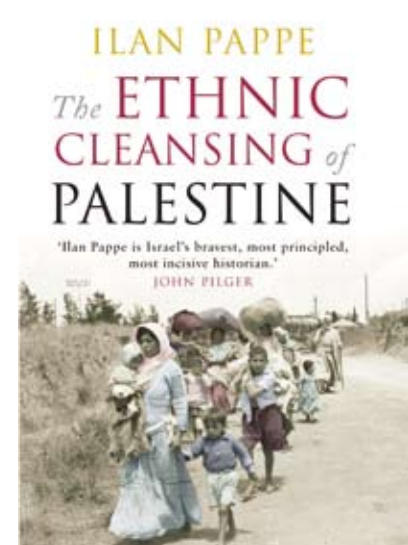
While staying in Iraq is unacceptable, the West's exit may take different forms — a gradual collapse of any regime propped up by western means, with a forced or voluntary withdrawal or a breakdown of order soon after a pullout. Polk compares these scenarios with Vietnam and sees a phased drawdown as merely a 'fig leaf to hide defeat.' The key prerequisites of a voluntary withdrawal, which may lend the process some respectability, are a gradual release of America's 'lock on the Iraqi economy,' an end to wilful disposal of Iraqi oil revenues and return of Iraqi oil to the international marketplace, *ie* outside the stranglehold of an American monopoly.

What of the security situation and how can that be resolved and peace restored?

'If an American administration could be as courageous as General Charles de Gaulle was in Algeria, when he admitted that the Algerian insurgency had "won" and called for "a peace of the brave," fighting would quickly die down as it did there and in all other guerrilla wars.' This aspect of Polk's analysis may verge on overoptimism, however, mainly because of the complexity of Iraq's ethnic and religious make-up. What he suggests certainly is a better option than all others — yet clearly least likely to be chosen.

Of all future scenarios, the one most compelling and one that keeps recurring in public consciousness is of an Iraq reverting to autocratic rule under a saviour figure. That ironically is also the scenario in which Iraq is most likely to survive in one piece till such time as democratic aspirations fired up by recent experiments mature into a sensible way forward.

Sajid Rizvi



## THE ETHNIC CLEANSING OF PALESTINE

Ilan Pappé

Oneworld, Oxford 2006

313pp. Hardback. £16.99

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ILAN PAPPE, historian and senior lecturer at Haifa University, is Academic Director of the Research Institute for Peace at Givat Haviva educational institute and Chair of the Emil Touma Institute for Palestinian Studies, Haifa. With those impressive credentials and three well-received weighty books behind him, Pappé is well positioned to lob a grenade such as this one into the

twin worlds of Middle Eastern studies and politics, borrowing from the 1990s Balkans tragedy to draw very uncomfortable parallels and to evoke memories of the Holocaust from an entirely different angle. Not surprisingly brickbats have abounded, both online and in print, but Pappé is unlikely to be dismissed — or wished away — that easily.

Pappé's book should shock and shame the academic world, which has pontificated for long and yet failed to deliver on this important topic, for well over half a century an important part of Palestinian oral history. As for the politicians, the revelations accompanying the recent anniversary of the Suez invasion reaffirm that concealment still is the name of the game, till it's all exposed in one way or another. The fact that Ilan Pappé reveals what was there for all to see and yet somehow was rendered invisible really should come as no surprise. The real surprise comes in his detailed discussion of the scale of and high-level complicity in that ethnic cleansing.

The book's summary points to the fact that, since the Holocaust, it has been near impossible to hide large-scale crimes against humanity, and few modern catastrophes are concealed from the public eye. And yet, one such crime, the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians in 1948, was erased from the global public memory. This we now know to be the case, but with one important qualification. While it has been impossible to hide postwar atrocities, it has been increasingly possible to ignore them on a large scale, as we have learned from Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda. Increasingly, too, sophisticated news management has played a part in public consciousness or reaction to all recent instances of mass killings. Professor Ilan Pappé is about to have personal experience of that himself: it would be interesting to see how the book is received in communities most closely associated with the beginnings of the state of Israel and the chief players in both its early development and the genocide cited by Pappé.

The point to remember vis à vis the revelations in this book is that Israel and its Arab neighbours cannot go on in the current framework of some war some peace. Israel's latest débâcle in Lebanon should be a lesson both for Israel and

the West, which backed the project with hope that it would help crush Hezbollah but instead ended up exacerbating instability in both Lebanon and Israel. If tomorrow there is further experimentation in Gaza, Syria or beyond, a 'clean' outcome is far from certain. If however coexistence is to be the way forward then a quest for 'truth and reconciliation' is a *sine qua non*. For a West that wants Turkey to come clean on the Armenian massacres during the First World War it is important to recognise, and encourage Israel to acknowledge, that terrible things were done to Palestine's native citizens in the process of Israel's birth.

Pappé cites historical Israeli sources, even as Palestinian witness testimonials remain abundant, to describe how the Palestinians were wronged. The evidence cited by Pappé confirms that 'transfer' — a euphemism for ethnic cleansing — was part of the original strategic plan for consolidation of the new state. A wider admission that that was so would be a modest but welcome start. But can it be forthcoming soon and can those responsible still be punished? Lessons from the experience of Bosnia and Herzegovina are not encouraging but at least the former Yugoslavia has slumped back into some sort of coexistence, while the Israel-Palestinian impasse continues to produce bursts of deadly conflict, at huge costs to the innocent who are caught in the middle. And as Pappé points out, a peace process in the Middle East that 'so totally ignores the heart of the matter' has scant chance of moving forward.

Pappé argues strongly for 'retrieving from the oblivion' the unresolved question of acceptance and admission of 'the simple but horrific story of the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, a crime against humanity that Israel has wanted to deny and cause the world to forget.'

Retrieving that story from Israel's erased memory, he writes, 'is incumbent upon us, not just as a greatly overdue act of historiographical reconstruction or professional duty; it is, as I see it, a moral decision, the very first step we must take if we ever want reconciliation to have a chance, and peace to take root, in the torn lands of Palestine and Israel.' The key requirement then is to see Pappé's urgent plea as a clarion call for common-sense to prevail. **SR**



## LEBANON, LEBANON

Edited by Anna Wilson

Saqi Books, Beirut London 2006

256pp. Paperback. £10

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Two months after the cease-fire in Lebanon, Saqi came out with this anthology both to draw attention to that terrible summer and its impossible consequences for the population and to bring into print some of the first responses to the war. The anger and disgust of the international community over the failure to secure a cease-fire is reflected in Harold Pinter's opening poem, *American Football*. Elsewhere, novelist John Le Carré asks: 'So answer me this one, please. If you kill a hundred innocent civilians and one terrorist are you winning or losing the war on terror?' Gritty art works by Mohamed Rawas, Madi and Simone Fattal command attention alongside paintings by displaced children. And from Blake Morrison, *As of today, the peace process will be intensified/through war. These are safe bombs, and any fatalities will be minors...* It is not often that a publisher responds to an unfolding tragedy with such a diverse and effective offering as this anthology, which was published mainly to raise awareness of the plight of displaced children and to raise funds for them. A full list of authors who contributed to *Lebanon, Lebanon* is at <http://www.saqibooks.com>, where the book is available for sale. **SR**