

# Re-colonisation of the Middle East, Jihad in the West

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“A word of truth is worth more than the whole world,” said Alexander Solzhenitsyn once. Unravelling the truth in a labyrinth of shadows like the Middle East is no easy task. There, nothing is what it seems. Words, very often, do not mean what they really ought to. Neither do declared intentions. In the following analysis, the author seeks to elaborate a dictionary of use for the Middle East of the last six years, returning to words their authentic meaning.

Hassan H. has been unlucky. He was born a Shiite in Iraq. A qualified statistician, he was never able to work under Saddam Hussein's regime. Information, it is well known, is a state secret for the dictatorships. He dedicated himself to the limited tourism, awaiting the change of regime and the democratisation promised by the US administrations. Finally, with George W. Bush the marines arrived, and with them the journalists who told of the invasion as a victory. Hassan H. changed clients. He offered his services in the entrance hall of the Palestine Hotel and came to form part of the Televisió de Catalunya team as a fixer, those local guardian angels who accompany, guide and translate for foreign journalists.

Like the majority of Iraqi Shiites in those days of euphoria, he confused the enemy of his enemy with a friend. Democracy – he imagined – was just around the corner and, with freedom, the government of the Shiite majority, the end of Baasist oppression, progress, money and so on, although it would cost – he was not so ingenuous – his country oil concessions.

Hassan H. now tries to survive with his wife and three children in a suburb of a Scandina-

vian city. From there he has seen Saddam on television with the rope around his neck, but, for the first time, he has had to exile himself from Iraq. He had to leave behind all his possessions, house, car, landscapes, smells and tastes... in exchange for saving his life and that of his family. Just a year and a half after the invasion, a squad of insurgents went to his house to execute him. Collaboration with the Western media had made him a spy in the new bloodstained Iraq. But they did not find him. A little later all he could do was to flee with his family and a pair of suitcases through the Kurdish mountains towards Iran, and from there to Europe. In this way, Iraq has lost more than two million of its twenty five million citizens. Nearly two million more have been displaced by the conflict within the country itself. All of them deported, victims of the re-colonisation of the Middle East.

## From High Tech to Oil Companies

The tragedy began before 11th September 2001. The mass crimes of New York and Was-

hington were the trigger, but the weapon had been charged during the 10 previous months. The controversial electoral victory of President Bush meant a radical change in the political and economic interests that support the head of any American administration. The Clinton-Gore ticket had been nourished by the technology companies. It was the time of the Nasdaq Bubble and of economic growth, of the surpluses. The profits of these kinds of company increased with international stability encouraging investment and trade. It was the era of containment, of multilateralism and of the most ambitious attempt to solve the central conflict of the whole Middle East: the confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians.

The Bush-Cheney ticket was supported by the oil and military-industrial lobbies: the Texan oil companies and the contractors like Halliburton, presided by Cheney himself until the electoral campaign. Very distinct interests, if not contrary to those of the previous administration. Their profits were nourished by the conflict because it raised the price of oil and trade margins, because it consumed weapons and because it created the climate necessary to raise military budgets.

They were all men known from the previous Republican administration of Bush senior: Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, Wolfovich and Perle. But the Cold War – although dying – had obliged them to create an international consensus and they remained at the gates of Baghdad in 1991. Ten years later, with the United States as the only superpower, they believed the moment had come to dictate new rules. Iraq was a pre-electoral priority. All that was needed was the trigger for the final assault on what was recognised as the world's second largest oil reserves.

At the same time, the main American ally in the region, Israel, was proceeding with a similar ideological rearmament. Ehud Barak's labour mandate was exhausted at the end of 2000.

Barak had promised to close all the dossiers of the peace process, but was only able to achieve military withdrawal from Lebanon, and still without any agreement either with the Lebanese government or with Syria. A unilateral withdrawal that did not close this front which is still open today. Even more frustrating, the failure of his supposed "generous offer" to Yasser Arafat in the Camp David Summit of July 2000. The Palestinians did not accept a cutback in the application of UN Security Council resolution 242 which imposed on Israel the withdrawal from the occupied territories in 1967. A failure that erupted with the al-Aqsa Intifada two months later and opened the way to Ariel Sharon's electoral victory in February 2001.

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The new governments of the United States and Israel were not long to establish a tacit pact. Washington sought to strengthen control of the region and this involved the increase of Israeli hegemony in the area. Sharon would have complete freedom to retrace the whole of the peace process and annihilate the Palestinian uprising *manu militari*. The package included the accelerated construction in the occupied West Bank of the security fence or segregation wall, depending on who defines it.

At the height of the Israeli army offensive and of the suicide attacks with which the armed Palestinian organisations confronted it, Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda emerged, the final factor which unleashed what would be called, euphemistically, the "new Middle East".



No stable democracies in the Middle East after six years of wars. Photo: Daily life in Iraq, after a terrorist attack (Contacto Agency).

He was an old acquaintance of the American intelligence services when the Cold War was being fought in Afghanistan. One decade later he had become the new version of evil.

Curiously, the Palestine cause had only appeared tangentially in the ideological literature of Al Qaeda until after the attempts of 11-S. When Bin Laden defended the liberation of the Holy Land, or the Holy Sites, he always referred to Saudi Arabia and Mohammed's cities: Mecca and Medina. The media and social impact achieved with the attacks on two of the great symbols of American power took Al Qaeda to an attempt to appropriate the main reference of the Arab causes, an inexhaustible source of agitation and popularity: the Palestinian issue.

The crimes of New York and Washington finally facilitated the delimitation of two well-defined sides. Everything would be placed ac-

ording to the new confrontation dynamic. Without nuances. Everyone was in combat formation. All that was needed was the battlefield.

### From Iraq to Iran

First it was Afghanistan. A pariah regime, refuge of Bin Laden himself and paradigm of the most reactionary Islam, it was a facilitator of consensus, especially immediately after the panic and horror generated by 11-S. But Kabul was only the waiting room of Baghdad, and along the way the Bush administration would lose its credibility with most Western allies, not to mention the so-called moderate Arab regimes, opposed from the start to any military adventure in Mesopotamia.

The fabrication of the new *casus belli* was too clumsy, and its execution excessively risky in a region of always precarious balances. Everyone knew that Saddam Hussein's regime was no threat to anyone except his own people. That after 12 years of the most drastic trade sanctions since the creation of the UN, the country was exhausted. That the scarce chemical or bacteriological weapons that could have eluded a decade of United Nations inspections could not represent any appreciable threat. Moreover, there was the probability – now confirmed – that the change of regime imposed after an invasion could undermine the Iraqis' already very precarious quality of life.

But there was oil. Under Saddam's regime, Washington already controlled its supply through sanctions and the "oil-for-food" programme. The right of veto in the Security Council allowed the United States to maintain the blockade and, at the same time, acquire a large part of the crude oil authorised for export. There only remained the direct military assault on the oilfields. The risks were enormous, and have been excessive given that the war has impeded expanding the extraction. But the struggle itself has generated an alternative business. It has already cost the American taxpayer half a billion dollars, directly injected into the military-industrial complex and the infrastructure, service and security contractors, headed precisely by Halliburton, the old company of the most powerful vice-president in the history of the United States.

Moreover, the most ideological administration since "McCarthyism" had another, perhaps priority, objective: to re-colonise the Middle East, put the whole region under its political tutelage, as the British and French Empires had done 90 years ago, at the end of the First World War. The secret Sykes-Picot agreements of 1916 divided the Middle East between the two European powers, responsible for the drawing of the frontiers that today are

still destabilising the region. Washington now sought to stabilise it for its own ends, replacing within the Western orbit those regimes that had evolved against its interests and those of its ally-gendarme, Israel.

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The sudden victory in the first phase of the Iraq War, that of the invasion, quickly transformed the euphoria into imprudence. Already before arriving in Baghdad, the then Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, committed the indiscretion of publicly indicating the next regimes to "democratise": Iran and Syria. Instinctively, both countries went on the defensive. They remained expectant until the fall of their archenemy Saddam Hussein, but the alternative seemed to them even more dangerous. A triumph of Washington would put them in the first line, and with around 150,000 American soldiers at the doors of their borders with Iraq. It suited them for the United States army to get bogged down in Mesopotamia.

Bush's proconsul in Baghdad, Paul Bremer, inadvertently collaborated. A new folly: he disbanded the Iraqi army, leaving 300,000 armed men unpaid and motivated to move on to guerrilla warfare. With the army, the whole state, the structure of Sunni hegemony created by the British Empire in the 1920s, came tumbling down. A system where the minority imposed its rules on the majority Kurds, and above all the Shiites, who amounted to 60% of Iraqis.

The Shiites have filled the vacuum. Especially their clergy, almost the only opposition civil organisation that managed to survive the ferocious Baasist repression. Of the diverse political-religious movements, the most pow-

erful is the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, now the first party of the country. It survived the dictatorship thanks to the refuge offered by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Its 20,000 armed men constitute the most powerful private militia of Iraq. With them, Teheran has fully entered the Iraqi problem. The battle for control of the region has completely changed parameters. The neoconservative propaganda about the “new great Middle East” has fallen into oblivion. The “democratisation” has ceased to be a priority, even as the rhetorical instrument it always was.

### From “Democracy” to the Jihad

After almost six years of wars, the Middle East has no new stable democracy. And the international community, again led by the United States, has boycotted the result of the only Arab elections held with minimally officially sanctioned guarantees. In 2006 the Palestinian territories voted, in spite of the occupation and under strict international control. Tired of internal corruption and of the weakness in the face of the occupation, they opted for change. The Fatah nationalists lost, substituted by the Islamist Hamas. Israel, of course, was not happy with the results, and managed to interpose its three conditions, then unequally defended by the so-called Quartet (the USA, EU, Russia and the UN).

The new Palestinian government had to recognise Israel, renounce violence and fulfil past peace agreements. All conditions equally unfulfilled by Israel in respect to the Palestinians since the signing of the Declaration of Principles in the White House on 13th September 1993. Once again a double standard was used to measure this old conflict.

In this context of frustration and Palestinian economic misery – one third of the population depends on increasingly more rationed

international aid –, Hamas raised the stakes five months after the elections. It captured an Israeli soldier in an attack through a tunnel under the Gaza border. Three weeks later, the Lebanese Hezbollah amplified the provocation with the capture of another two Israeli soldiers at a point still not precisely determined on the Western border between Lebanon and Israel.

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This new indication of the permeability between the different conflicts in the Middle East would lead to the first confrontation between the United States and Iran. A first sounding out through their respective allies and in the territory of a third country, Lebanon. 34 days of war in summer 2006; nearly 1,500 dead, approximately 10 Lebanese for each Israeli. Hezbollah understood the magnitude of its challenge, unapproachable without the consent of its Iranian mentor and arms supplier. The Israeli escalation, initiated with the bombing of Beirut international airport, would have been unthinkable without the green light of its own American mentor and arms supplier.

Despite Washington’s constant deferments until the proclamation of the cease fire, Israel did not achieve its objectives: to destroy Hezbollah, eliminate its Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and liberate the soldiers. The adventure of the Party of God cost Lebanon dear, but Hezbollah remains the most solid formation of the country, and has restocked its arsenal calculated at 14,000 rockets and missiles. Four months after the war, the United States Congress bipartite commission known by the names of those in charge, Baker-Hamilton, gave a veneer

of realism to the Bush administration and urged it to begin a phased withdrawal from Iraq, at the same time opening direct negotiations with Iran and Syria on the conflicts in the region.

First there was an attempt at denial with the sending of more troops to Iraq but, in March, American, Iranian and Syrian representatives sat at the same table in Baghdad, together with delegates from other neighbouring countries. It was the most explicit recognition of the leading role that Teheran had acquired in Iraq after the fall of Saddam; the acceptance that with Iran there was a lot to be negotiated: from an American way out of the Iraqi problem, to the evolution of the Arab Israeli conflict. Without forgetting the Iranian nuclear programme, which is one of the main concerns of the United States and, of course, Israel.

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After the first Lebanese round, all options remain on the table. Washington has opened a window in its military wall, but is increasing the threat with the deployment of a second air-sea group in the Persian Gulf. Teheran guarantees that it wants to negotiate, but also threatens with the acceleration of its uranium enriching programme of dual use: civil and military. It seeks to make it as profitable as possible. The case of North Korea has shown that nuclear weapons are a shield against any foreign aggression attempt, and that, once possessed, rich economic compensation can be obtained. Iran maintains similar objectives with its nuclear programme: it seeks a guarantee of non-aggression in the face of the American military deployment behind almost all of its borders, the lifting of economic sanctions and entry into the World Trade Organisation. Lastly,

but no less important, it claims the status of regional power.

It also has much to offer. Together with Egypt, it is the most socially cohesive country of the region, with most demographic potential and with greatest stabilising power. Iran holds undisputed political and religious leadership in the area of Shiite majority, under which lie the biggest oilfields; an arc that goes from Lebanon to the north-eastern region of the Arabian Peninsula. It also shares a common enemy with the United States: the jihadist Sunni groups of the ultraconservative Wahabit school, like those that make up the Al Qaeda network of Saudi origin, the Afghan-Pakistani Taliban and other similar Maghrebian Salafist movements, increasingly more infiltrated and active in the West where the third generation of the jihad is growing, that of the invasion of Iraq.

Terrorist attacks like those of 11th March 2004 in Madrid or those of 7th July the following year in London are the cruellest demonstration of the failure of the “war against terrorism”. The world is less secure because the fracture between the countries of Muslim majority and the West has widened. Within the democracies themselves, the infringement of liberties by antiterrorist legislation and the increase in Islamophobic prejudices have exacerbated the social break-up. In the suburbs of the great Western cities, above all European, with significant Muslim communities, the domestic alienation and the daily massacres in their countries of origin have created a conflict of loyalties. The rhetoric of democratisation is perceived as an attempt at ruthless re-colonisation, funded, moreover, by their own taxes.

There are no liberties in Iraq, but the country has become a new front in the Holy War, a school of martyrs-suicide attackers, a meeting point of globalised Islamists, some of whom are in transit from or to the West. Democracy is not exported with bombing raids, but the bombing raids bring the jihad closer.