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Iraq: Sanctions and Wars

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The Gulf region has never been off the radar screen of international politics. Great power intervention has been a historic fact of the region. Imperial Britain's withdrawal from the region in the 1970s, found its immediate replacement in the form of the United States of America. From the standpoints of geo-strategy, geo-economy and geo-culture, the region acts as a magnet for the international community, particularly the great powers. Of the latter, the United States of America has been ubiquitous in the form of military, political and economic penetration in the regional states.

The book under review covers contemporary developments starting with Iraq's declaration of war against Iran in 1980 down to the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq in April 2003. Nearly a quarter of century of Iraq's national life is subsumed in this volume. This period covers cataclysmic changes germane to Iraq, impacting the region and in turn affected by the developments radiating from Iraq.

Iraq: Sanctions and Wars is a slim volume, containing six chapters. Chapter one is a historical overview of Iraq covering its twentieth century history (alongwith the ancient and medieval profile). In this chapter, the author has inadequately covered the Ottoman connection with the country. The Ottoman interregnum in Iraq's history acts as a catalytic agent for subsequent history. The Mongol's razing to the ground of Baghdad, the seat of Abbasid Empire was ironically revisited by their modern-day counterparts, the Americans and the British.

Chapter Two deals with Iraq's imposed war in Iran, which lasted nearly a decade. The decade long war brought a total ruination of the two zealous combatants. The economic devastation that followed the war made Iraq to look for some economic succour: such a search made Iraq look toward Kuwait, alleging that the latter was siphoning off its oil deposits while its war with Iran was in progress.

Kuwait's adamant posture further irked Iraq, which culminated in its war against and occupation of Kuwait. The developments following this occupation form part of chapter three. The response of the United Nations to the Iraqi aggression, and its subsequent endorsement of the US-led coalition (as a manifestation of collective self-defence) laid the foundation for subsequent dynamics.

The liberation of Kuwait from the clutches of Iraqi occupation by the US-led coalition was followed by devastating, comprehensive economic sanctions imposed by the Security Council of

the United Nation that lasted for more than a decade. The sanctions regime led to the avoidable death of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi people, in particular its children. Chapter Five surveys this aspect of Iraq's national life under the sanctions regime. In this chapter, the author brings out these issues in vivid detail. To cite one of his assertions:

No one doubts the effect of economic sanctions which have reduced this rich country (Iraq) the only Arab country in which populations, resources and education are in a really favourable balance and which has few gross disparities between the rich and the poor, with a fairly stable political system, and a hard-working population into an impoverished country with a hungry, angry and desperate population (pp.103-104)

Many such graphic details abound in this volume. Keeping in mind that the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq had the authority of the Security Council, would it be wrong to assume that the latter was responsible for all the devastation that the sanctions regime heaped on the hapless Iraqi people, children in particular? Did not the sanctions lead to genocide, since the targeted people were Iraqis? In what ways was the Iraqi nation responsible for the actions of this Satanist state? To the reviewer, the answers to these questions are implicitly answered by the author affirmatively. Further, the author's dedication of his work to "the heroic people of Iraq" testifies to the aforesaid implied answer.

Chapter six gives an account of the Anglo-American aggression and subsequent occupation of Iraq in April 2003. Unlike the Kuwait war, the 2003 war against Iraq had no legal sanction from the United Nations. This time, the joint Anglo-American action had a few supporters from the international community. In this chapter, the author rightly delineated at length, the structure of the Bush administration in which the stranglehold of what is called the 'neoconservatives' paved the way for the Iraqi disaster. The strategic dimension of neoconservative vision vis-à-vis this region is in the process of unfolding which will have far-reaching implications beyond the region.

In this volume, the author has provided a balanced analysis of the subject, without sacrificing his critical acumen. The regime of Saddam Hussein is analysed without losing sight of its societal milieu.

The regime's achievements in the social sector were noteworthy the author argues. Significant progress was made in education, health, and women's status. Any future historian of Iraq will have to take cognizance of these factors while seeking to obtain a comprehensive portrait of the Saddam regime. For that to happen, a considerable period has to elapse.

The author Dr. Aftab Karnal Pasha, has all the credentials to write a work on Iraq, reinforced by his earlier production of country-specific studies on the region, both in his capacity as an editor and a co-editor. He has written on the region very abundantly.

A few words on the stylistic aspects of the book are in order. The structure of each chapter does not contain sub-captions. For any reader, the purpose of ready reference to a specific detail, this mode of organisation is not of much help. The first-time uses of acronyms are not given their expanded version. It is a hurdle in reader's momentum. Faulty punctuation marks leave a

disconcerting effect on the reader as well. In comparison to the wide coverage of issues in the volume, the author's bibliography is thin and inadequate. Daily news media (Western and Indian) and secondary source (books) abound in the book. A significant omission by the author is the absence of a concluding chapter. Any concluding chapter enables a reader to know the substance contained in a book in a capsule form. Further, it enables prospective writers to explore untouched areas. Be that as it may, the reviewer considers Dr. Aftab's work as a worthy addition to his proliferating corpus of books on the region.

To the reviewer, the author's closing sentences are timely textured and are demonstrative of his rightly reposed confidence in the strength of the Iraqi nation to overcome its gravest adversity in its history. To quote the author:

"The world has seen the awesome power of the US (United States of America) and most (sic) are frightened... It may be Pax-Americana now, but every Iraqi killed, injured and suffering would propel the Iraqis one day to wake up and when they muster courage... they will find out the truth. US invasion of Iraq is a wake up call for the struggling people as it is a short-term gain for the US. In the final analysis, the Iraqis will take their destiny in their own hands sooner rather than later. From the chaos, a new Saladin may emerge ... and change the future of Arabs" (p.142)

If the unfolding resistance of the Iraqis against the occupation forces is anything to go by, the author's optimism, as contained in the aforesaid annotation, is not at all misplaced.