

Malevolent incompetence

Chaos and Caliphate

Jihadis and the West in the Struggle for the Middle East

Patrick Cockburn

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The first striking thing about this book is that the author survived long enough to write it. Cockburn has spent nearly 20 years, mostly in the Middle East, reporting in countries where one of the few things the warring parties agree on is that Western journalists are probably spooks, and are thus worth killing.

This book (400 plus large, trade format pages) is constructed from Cockburn's original dispatches, plus notes and diary entries from the war zones as he followed the consequences of the American foreign policy in the Middle East and Afghanistan. The chapters follow the chronology: the imposition of sanctions on Iraq (and about one million deaths as a result; a UN-sanctioned atrocity); the invasion of Afghanistan and the initial overthrow of the Taliban; the American-led assault on Iraq in 2003 and the ensuing civil war; the overthrow of Gaddafi and ensuing civil war; the attempt to do the same in Syria and ensuing civil war. Finally Cockburn gets to the rise of ISIS, which he spotted very early on, and the present chaotic situation with Saudi Arabia and Iran funding proxy armies and NATO member Turkey assisting ISIS and attacking the Kurds (who are fighting ISIS).

The major theme here is this: as happened in the former Yugoslavia, if your reference group – family, tribe, community – are threatened, it doesn't take much for mutual mistrust between communities to turn to paranoia and then killing. Cockburn describes it happening again and again as the Americans (with occasional British support) intervened, got it wrong (though what would getting it right look like?) and learned nothing from their previous failure.

You don't need to be familiar with the large cast of characters and groups which come and go through the story to follow Cockburn's account. Even though I know little about

this field other than what I have skimmed in newspapers, it is a fascinating but depressing read, a series of slow-motion horror shows punctuated by the ubiquitous suicide bomber. At the end of which it still isn't clear to me if the Americans *intended* to smash-up the Middle East and trigger all these wars (some neo-cons and the Israeli right certainly hoped they would), or if they simply stumbled into it after the initial idiotic 'liberation' of Iraq blew up in their faces.

In the publisher's flyer that accompanied the book there are two comments about Cockburn. At a British Journalism Awards ceremony in 2015 someone said that 'the Government should consider pensioning off the whole of MI6 and hiring Patrick Cockburn instead'. The second is a quote from one of Sydney Blumenthal's e-mails to Hilary Clinton when she was Secretary of State, that Cockburn 'was almost always correct on Iraq'. Both quotes point to another of Cockburn's themes, which is implicit, rather than explicit: the apparent failure of American and British intelligence. I have to write 'apparent' because, with the exception of the invasion of Iraq, where we have seen glimpses of the intelligence and may get more when the Chilcot report finally gets published, we haven't seen what that intelligence said. I have no idea how accurate British intelligence on the region has been (or even if there was any), or what the Joint Intelligence Committee produced for the politicians.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union a cadre of pols and military have appeared in the USA who took seriously Karl Rove's notorious claim that, as the only remaining super power, America could 'make its own reality'. One of the consequences of this has been the corruption of the intelligence system: careers are now made by telling those in the hierarchy above you what they want to hear. Not that this hasn't had opposition. Karen Kwiatkowski was a US Air Force officer who saw the intelligence process manipulated by the neo-cons in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and began writing about it anonymously, while still serving, and openly when she quit.¹ In 2007 a National Intelligence Estimate on

¹ See for example <<http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/KWI403A.html>>.

Iran was held up for a year while the Bush regime tried to get it changed to fit their policy.² And last year it was reported that a group of US intelligence officers formally complained that their reports on ISIS and al Qaeda in Syria were being altered by those above them, to make them fit the White House line that US policy was succeeding in Syria.³

A good intelligence service should be a candid friend, as Sydney Blumenthal was for Hilary Clinton when she was Secretary of State; as the late Maurice Oldfield was for Prime Minister Harold Wilson, warning him of the danger and futility of joining America in Vietnam;⁴ and as the MOD's Defence Intelligence Staff was prior to the invasion of Iraq, warning that the evidence on weapons of mass destruction was flimsy at best.⁵

If the candid friend role has become difficult for the intelligence services of the USA faced with the neo-con Yahoos, it is a different problem for those of a middle-ranking ally like the UK. In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, despite knowing better, most of the British intelligence/foreign policy system went along with the prime minister who was, in turn, desperate to cling to the Americans. There is no evidence that there has been any British dissent from the American line since then. So great is the British state's subservience to the

2 <<http://www.ipsnews.net/2007/11/politics-us-cheney-tried-to-stifle-dissent-in-iran-nie/>>

3 <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/09/exclusive-50-spies-say-isis-intelligence-was-cooked.html>>

This is not a new problem. Sam Adams was a CIA analyst who saw that the Agency and the US military were consistently underreporting the strength of the opposition in Vietnam and blew the whistle on it, destroying his career in the process. See <<https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol50no4/a-review-of-who-the-hell-are-we-fighting-the-story-of-sam-adams-and-the-vietnam-intelligence-wars.html>>.

4 Oldfield's friend, the late Anthony Cavendish, told me this story in the late 1980s. For Tam Dalyell's version of the same story see his obituary of Cavendish at <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/anthony-cavendish-intrepid-intelligence-officer-who-fought-terrorism-in-the-middle-east-8531488.html>>.

5 <<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/may/20/intelligence-government-exaggerate-iraq-dossier>>

Americans, it is almost inconceivable that the prime minister would not support American foreign policy; and so, with an independent British foreign policy largely precluded, what is the point of having British intelligence services?

Robin Ramsay