

The Neo-Colonialists: Sun Not Setting on Mid-East Empire Soon

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AG - Patrick Seale - What clearer evidence can there be of the breakdown of international order in the region than the two colonial wars which continue to rage in Iraq and Palestine, without the international community being able to bring the aggressors to their senses? In both theatres, the United States and Israel continue to act with the greatest impunity.

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Colonialism Continues to Flourish in the Middle East

Patrick Seale

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Patrick Seale discusses the status of 21st century Colonialism in the Middle East: While the United States and Israel dominate the region, Russia and Europe have little mediating impact on events; and, the hostility of the downtrodden -- mostly Arab, mostly Muslim -- grows.

The most striking feature of the Middle East today is the total absence of a balance of power. As a result, the powerful continue to pursue their goals without restraint while the weak and down-trodden hit back as best they can. Violence and counter-violence, terror and counter-terror, have become routine and death is an everyday occurrence.

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With hindsight, one can see that the present dismal state of affairs is largely the product of two main factors and two minor ones. The first main factor is no doubt the collapse of the Soviet Union some fifteen years ago and Russia's relative absence from the Middle East scene ever since. Major Arab states like Egypt, Syria and Iraq -- as well as the Palestinian liberation movement -- never fully recovered from the loss of their Soviet sponsor.

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Buoyed by soaring oil and gas revenues, Russian President Vladimir Putin is now attempting to regain some influence in the region, notably in the crisis over Iran's nuclear programme. But, with Russia still convalescent, he knows he needs to act with caution to avoid arousing America's aggressive Cold War sentiments, always close to the surface.

In the old days of the Soviet Union, Moscow's backing for the Arabs was never totally satisfactory but, even in its imperfect form, it imposed some restraint on both Washington and Tel Aviv. The wholesale destruction of Iraqi and Palestinian society over the past decade and a half by sanctions, wars and colonial settlement could not have occurred had there been some form of international counterweight to American and Israeli power.

The second major factor which has shaped the Middle East in recent years has, of course, been the ever-closer American-Israeli alliance, to the extent that Israel and its friends in the United States have managed, to an astonishing extent, to shape American policy towards the region in an anti-Arab and anti-Islamic direction.

The United States has paid a very heavy price for this bias which has aroused the hostility of much of the Arab and Muslim world. The 9/11 attacks against New York's twin towers and the Pentagon -- symbols of America's financial and military power -- were only the most spectacular manifestations of a world-wide, if loosely-structured, resistance movement, which seems certain to strike again if the U.S. continues on its present course, as it seems set to do.

The minor factors which have led to the lack of any sort of a balance of power in the Middle East have been the incapacity of the European Union to forge a united policy towards the region, matched only by the endemic weakness and divisions of the Arab world. By their inaction and their cowardice, the Europeans and the Arabs share a great responsibility for the ongoing tragedies in Iraq and Palestine.

In spite of clear evidence of failure in Iraq, President George W. Bush says American forces will stay at least until 2009, if not beyond. As Iraq slides towards civil war he continues to talk of victory. Unwilling to assume responsibility for the catastrophic war, Bush seems determined to turn over the problem to his successor. Meanwhile, there are persistent rumours that, far from seeking to end its occupation, the United States is building permanent bases in Iraq.

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Israel, too, is in no hurry to end its brutal occupation of Palestinian territories. Ehud Olmert's Kadima, the centre-right party widely expected to win most seats at Tuesday's general elections, claims it wants to bring about "two states for two people." But the fractured and besieged Palestinian rump it envisages bears no relation to the sovereign, independent and viable state the Palestinians dream of achieving.

There will not be much left on which to build a state once Israel completes its separation wall, secures the Jordan Valley, isolates Jerusalem from the West Bank, annexes the large settlement blocs, as well as what Kadima's programme describes as "Holy Jewish and important national sites." Hebron is no doubt one of these.

Some commentators have hailed the emergence of Kadima as marking the end of "Greater Israel." The evidence points in an altogether different direction. Olmert was Ariel Sharon's deputy. He may lack Sharon's bull-like determination, but he remains faithful to his legacy.

Israel's policy, under Olmert as under Sharon, remains one of crushing Palestinian national aspirations -- of breaking the Palestinians' will -- and of colonising and cantonising what remains of Palestinian territory.

Meanwhile, the Israeli army kills Palestinians every day without a second thought -- or a whisper of reproof from the international community -- and demonises as "terrorists" anyone who dares resist its occupation, including the democratically-elected Hamas government.

Colonialism in the Middle East continues to rule unchecked.

Patrick Seale is a leading British writer on the Middle East, and the author of *The Struggle for Syria*; also, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*; and *Abu Nidal: A Gun for Hire*.

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