

American Raj



By Jim Miles

American Raj: Liberation or Domination? – Resolving the Conflict Between the West and the Muslim World. Eric S. Margolis. Key Porter Books, Toronto, 2008.

In a wide-ranging and thorough overview of essentially the Middle East, but also the rest of the Muslim world, Eric Margolis' recent work *American Raj* should become a first source of information on current events in the Muslim world. It is not encyclopaedic in trying to fit in all the details about people and events, and other works dig deeper into specific areas and ideas, but it is comprehensive, covering all the main themes, ideas, places, and personalities that have shaped the area over the last century. More importantly as compared to a more narrow focus, Margolis shows the linkages and cross-currents between events that are often seen as disparate unrelated items in the west – other than being classified as “terrorist.”

Terrorism is the theme provided by the western media, but as viewed from the perspectives (and there are many, it is not a monolithic system of beliefs or structures) of the local populations, the theme becomes imperial domination for resource control and power vis a vis other empires and religions. From Morocco through northern Africa, from Israel through the now better known countries of the Middle East extending into South Asia and the complications of a nuclear Pakistan, from the Balkans and the northern Caucus regions of Chechnya to the African Sahel, there is a wide range of Muslim belief (think of Christianity as a comparison and the many sects and divides that are involved within it, and how they frequently battle with one another) and a wide range of

secular belief that the west generally remains ignorant of.

Margolis reveals this world of variety, the inner turmoils, and the differing views from one nation, one group, to another. Superimposed on this native range of variety and difference are the western imperialists, formerly with France and Britain in the lead, now with the U.S. and its right wing western supporters (Canada, Australia mainly), in the lead and France and Britain following along trying to regain some remnant of their former imperial power. China remains quietly active on the eastern edges. Along the northern edge, the resurgent Russian state is fully involved with both its own "terrorism" and with the intrigues and plots of the others in trying to control their unruly southern neighbours.

And what makes them unruly is the very presence of the forces of empire in the first place. The common thread, the unifying idea behind the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and also the separate (although not separately seen by western media or governments) moderate and secular hatred and despol of the U.S. and its allies is a combination of occupation and religious intolerance. Combining the natural differences of the region, its developed internal animosities (e.g. Shia vs. Sunni, Persian vs. Arab) with the controlling effects of the imperial powers, and the whole region is a complete mess of plots and counterplots fuelled mainly by U.S. dollars and military support for the vast majority of all governments in the area.

Palestine

At the centre of it all lies Palestine, not the centre of the Middle East, but the centre of the band of control of Muslim nations extending from Western Africa through to East Asia. It is also the centre, the primal 'cause celebre' of Muslim antagonism towards the U.S.

Margolis comes by his views naturally. His mother "a

brilliant, fearless woman of volcanic temper and fierce determination" was a journalist covering events in the Middle East. In 1953, only five years after the Palestinian Nakba, she "predicted that unless the Palestinian refugee problem...was resolved in a fair humanitarian way, it would come to poison the then warm relations between the Muslims and Americans." In his own turn, Margolis wrote a week before 9/11, "America's strategic and economic interests in the Mideast and Muslim world are being threatened by the agony of Palestine, which inevitably invites terrorist attacks against US citizens and property." Not really a prescient statement as attacks had already been occurring, most notably on the USS Cole, on U.S. embassies in Africa, and on U.S. marines in Beirut.

So what of Palestine? The issues are far from resolved and will be difficult to resolve although the actual answers may be quite easy (see below). One of the dominant themes underlying the ideas and actions of the Middle East in all areas is how the U.S. controls in one way or another, by varying means of money manipulation and military sales and clandestine (the CIA is ubiquitous in this account) and overt military operations, all but three of the governments in the area: Syria, Iran, and the Hezbollah in Lebanon. At the other end of the scale are three governments that are fully supported by the U.S., fully involved within U.S. military and monetary manipulations, and somewhat secretly, but really being no secret for those aware of events, fully involved with Israel in maintaining the status quo in Palestinian territory: Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Palestine receives lip service and comparably paltry sums of money from the governments in the area, but there is no real effort on the parts of the neighbouring governments to disturb the status quo that keeps them in power.

In comparison – and particularly after the advent of al-Jazeera which opened the air waves to views in contradiction to standard Arab governmental or U.S. based propaganda – the

people of the Muslim world saw the savagery and violence placed on the Palestinian people and reacted in anger to that. Anger's direction spread far and wide, with two foci, the U.S. and the local national governments. The anger has only increased over time as the U.S. arrogantly and foolishly invaded Iraq and Afghanistan where they are still mired in more occupations that will not be resolved until the occupier leaves or all the natives are dead or fully acquiescent (the latter not 'bloody' likely).

Only one short chapter discusses Palestine. It is all that is needed as other sources cover it in much greater depth. Margolis' main point is the symbolism to the rest of the Muslim world as to how the U.S. is fully in line with Israeli interests, and how the Arab and Muslim countries operate with an obvious double standard towards Palestine. Margolis pulls no punches laying this double blame, "the Muslim world is so busy directing its anger and desire for revenge over Palestine against the western powers that it fails to face its own heavy responsibility for the continuing tragedy of Palestine" as "many Muslim nations...mistreat their own people with even more brutality." From all that anger rises the Islamic fundamentalists who are attempting to not only rid the area of the U.S. presence, but also attempting to rid the separate nations of their U.S. supported client governments.

Oil and the Ummah

The British pretension of its civilizing and Christianizing missions, and the U.S. pretensions of democracy, rule of law, and globalizing free trade are great for their own internal consumers. Those ideals are readily seen through by the people who suffer under the rule of imperial ambition for a combination of resource control (mainly oil, but also gas and other natural resources) and cheap controlled labour markets.

As much as Palestine is the 'cause celebre' for the people and the direction of their anger, the root of it all is also

understood to be the U.S. hegemon attempting to own and control the resources of the area, denying them to the ummah or community to which they belong. Israel is seen as the local hegemon, supported by the U.S. and almost invincible with its nuclear arsenal and delivery systems (the recent Hezbollah victory over Israeli forces notwithstanding). Other local governments, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia as the heavyweights, are fully compliant with Israel and U.S. intentions, enriching their elite and their cronies at the expense of the general population. Saudi Arabia has received much attention and scrutiny after 9/11 with oil money flowing both directions for financial reasons and military reasons.

The ummah is far from unified. Different nationalities and different sects have different views of the way the world is or should be dealt with. With oil as the underlying cause, and Palestine as the symbolic cause, the unifying anger has risen and spread throughout the regions.

Terrorism

What the U.S. government and media sees as terrorism is truly a wide-ranging, fractured and disparate set of ideals and actions within the focus against the U.S. and other occupying forces. Much of it is not terrorism but remains local insurgencies, or local battles, internecine retribution, drug lords and warlords looking for their own power and enrichment. That has given credence to those who call for the 'civilizing' power and 'democratizing' power of empire and occupation, without understanding that those many smaller battles are emphasized, aggravated, and often supported by the occupying powers (much in the way of CIA dollars again).

Margolis shows how al-Qaida, the Taliban, "terrorists" are not a unitary group but each have their own divisions and problems, and many of the above mentioned warlords and drug lords are classed within the convenient media catch-all of "terrorism." The fullest irony is of course the U.S.

involvement via Pakistan of the development and then abandonment of the mujahideen against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Al-Qaida (the base) at the time was a very small group more focussed on local problems (Kashmir in particular) than on warring against the U.S. The Taliban, supported by the Pakistan government as a force for stabilizing Afghanistan, were in negotiations with the U.S. up to four months before the U.S. invasion. The U.S. is constantly viewed through Margolis' reporting as using double standards and double crossing, denying open channels of communication that could resolve issues once the military mindset is taken with the idea of forthcoming action (think Iraq, as well as the Taliban, and now consider what may be forthcoming in Pakistan).

The U.S. desire for overt direct control of the resources is really the source of many of the problems. They are very poor at considering consequences to their actions, very poor at reading histories about the lost cause of empires in any area, but also within the Hindu Kush, and very poor at recognizing their own ignorance and arrogance towards the people of the areas they occupy.

Solutions

As Margolis points out, the economies of the area are very much based on resource extraction as demanded by the west, but a more pastoral sustainable economy would exist if it were allowed to be, but that too goes against the fundamentals of "free market globalization" and against the rising forces of population growth demanding food supplies. Given that, in order to survive economically and politically those resources would have to be sold to foreign countries regardless of the nature of the local government. One of the solutions is then rather obvious – get out and buy the oil on the free market as U.S. politicians and media are endlessly promoting. This of course will cause the price of oil to increase rapidly – to its true market value, now greatly enhanced by 'peak oil' and

rising demand. This again highlights the double standards of empire – free market for us, but not for you.

The primary solution remains Palestine, as for the Muslim world it is “the icon of its own failings and premier symbol of western oppression.” This “intractable” conflict has “pitted the two primary victims of western racism, Jews and Muslims, against one another,” whereas before they had a much more natural affinity for one another than they did for Christianity. Currently Palestine is “a giant self administered outdoor penal colony, whose air, land and maritime links to the outside world...remain under permanent Israeli control.” It is only the U.S. that can solve the problem as only they have “the power to push Israel into the final land-for-peace settlement that a majority of Israelis know must be made but whose politicians lack the courage and strength to deliver.” Margolis explores many parameters of solutions to the Palestine conflict and as he turns to other solutions he says while “the outline of a solution is simple and plain to see; its execution exceptionally difficult.”

Other solutions are not so difficult.

Two: Iraq and Afghanistan – get out, simple plan, simple execution.

Three: Muslims and terrorism – do not conflate the two. Terror is in the hands of the occupier, not the occupied and the angry rhetoric from the Islamic fundamentalists is no different than the fiery rhetoric of Armageddon and apocalypse coming from the Christian right. Many, perhaps most, of Islamic charities are just that, charities, and not supporters of terrorism. Part of that plan would be to lose much of the ignorance and arrogance that fuels the empire’s view in the media.

Four: “Stop sustaining authoritarian regimes across the Muslim world.” Allow democracy to prevail as you so often yelp about

in the media. Assuredly the first results would be some form of Islamic government in most nations, but Islamic law is no more or less democratic than Christian law, and can be within its own culture as fully democratic (if not more so under the different cultural parameters) as secular law in the west.

Five: lower the U.S. military “profile” in the area. This is Margolis’ weakest argument mainly because of a single statement about the U.S. retaining its bases in the North Pacific. A double standard: I would think that if he asked the Koreans, Taiwanese, and the Japanese (the people, not the compliant governments) the response would overwhelmingly be to have the U.S. go home. It is not up to the U.S. to remain the world’s police force – if the Muslim nations can work it out in their own way, so too can the Asian nations of the Pacific. Don’t just lower the profile – work towards removing it. Simple solution, hard to execute.

New Beginnings

The American Raj is so far alive and well under the Obama government, peopled as it is by many former Clinton advisors and still obviously under the sway of the AIPAC lobby that stopped Charles Freeman’s appointment as chair of the National Intelligence Council (and his apparent Saudi ties – as if that really mattered much in the House of Bush, House of Saud era).

A good starting point for any solution is education, and Margolis’ writing is one of the best bets I have seen as a basis for this process. Comprehensive, entangling, clearly written, a strong perspective from years of experience comparing reality with rhetoric, American Raj is an excellent start for anyone wishing to understand the many inter-related ideas and forces that shape the U.S. empire’s actions in the Muslim world.

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contributor/columnist of opinion pieces and book reviews for The Palestine Chronicle. Miles' work is also presented globally through other alternative websites and news publications.