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Book Review

Chaos & Caliphate: Jihadis and the West in the Struggle for the Middle East by Patrick Cockburn (2016, New York and London, OR Books, 2016, 426 pp., Paperback \$28.95, ISBN 978-1-68219-028-9)

Abstract

Not so long ago, Syria, Iraq and Libya were peaceful if repressive countries. Now each has descended into war, while the entire region of the Middle East and North Africa is racked by instability and violence. This has largely been brought about by western interventions which were either ill-considered or ill-motivated. Patrick Cockburn's book covers the whole of the century up to 2015, during which he has somehow survived as a Middle East correspondent for the (UK) Independent newspaper. This is a horrifying yet gripping account of those years, made up of his on-the-spot reports from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya, sewn together by later observations on the way events have unfolded since. Unreservedly recommended for any student of the MENA region or of why wars happen.

Reviewed by Steve McGiffen

Not so long ago, Syria, Iraq and Libya were relatively peaceful if politically repressive societies. Now, each has plummeted down the Human Development Index, partly as a result of brutal and highly complex civil wars. Afghanistan, which has been war-torn for even longer, has also seen an upping of the ante of armed conflict following the invasion by American and allied forces in the wake of 9/11. These wars were in fact in every case sparked by the intervention of western powers and deepened by the rise of ISIS and other terrorist groups and the continued involvement of powerful foreign states – the US and its allies, including a number of EU member countries; Russia; and Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) states, in particular the Gulf States, Turkey and Iran. Each of the wars can be broken down into ethnic, regional, and confessional conflicts which overlap and shift and can quickly become bewildering. Patrick Cockburn's book does not attempt to provide an antidote to the confusion and near-despair which tend to overwhelm any reasonably humane observer in the face of the horrors of recent (and not-so-recent) MENA history. In fact, it is one of the most depressing books I can remember reading, and in sections is utterly terrifying. Yet it is also a gripping and highly informative account of a descent into hell, one which I would recommend unreservedly to anyone with an interest in the region, or in the true nature of war. That Cockburn has been present at all of these wars and somehow survived a quarter of a century in which he has spent most of his time reporting from the region, and most of that spent in the field, makes the legendary nine-lived cat look relatively vulnerable.

Cockburn is not an academic, but a journalist, and an extremely good one who writes well and does not leap to conclusions. But he is also somewhat more than that, an astute observer who when he witnesses or hears first-hand accounts of intense and localized events – massacre, rape, the murder and torture of individuals, bombings by terrorists or from the air, the economic and emotional ruin of a man, a woman, a family, a town, an entire country – is able to fit them into a wider context. The context has grown (or decayed) from a global order originally established after the First World War. This was both modified and reinforced by the Second World War, and later by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since then, and particularly since the beginning of the present century, the general tendency of events has been towards a descent into global chaos. It is chaos which is nowhere more

pronounced than in the MENA region. It has incidentally made teaching International Relations a near-impossibly slippery task.

9/11 and the invasions of Afghanistan began the cycle of 15 years of mass violence which shows no sign of abatement. The events of 2011, dubbed the “Arab Spring” by the western media, offered for a short period a measure of hope for improvement, but quickly began to appear as simple additions to the chaos, leading in some cases to yet further intensification of violent conflict. Cockburn analyses the reasons why this is so, why the western interventions occurred and why they proved so disastrous, both in geopolitical terms and in terms of a human cost of which he never loses sight. The book is in large part a collection of the writer’s reports from the field, most of them written for the (UK) Independent newspaper. These are sewn together to good effect with linking pieces written as the book was put together. They begin in Afghanistan in 2001 with the military defeat of the Taliban government, returning to that country in a later section to look at the reasons for the Taliban’s return as a serious force.

As I write (October 5, 2016) the latest round of peace talks appears to have broken down, with the US having recalled its negotiators from Geneva. Patrick Cockburn is still reporting from the region, and his tone is one of increasing exasperation. He is held there to a degree by affection and sadness, particularly for Baghdad, until the coming of war a multiethnic city which had what he describes as a “a special magic”. All that has been swept away by a civil war “ which “the US and Britain have largely provoked.” (p144) The latest horror scenario is in the Syrian city of Aleppo, a regional capital with a population of over two million. It is held by ‘rebel forces’ and is under assault from ground forces of the Syrian national army and, of late, from the air, by Russia, while the US and some of its allies bomb other people in other parts of Syria in support of what Cockburn calls, “phantom allies”, the so-called “moderates”, whoever they are and whatever that means. So the image of Moscow protecting its oppressive friends is accurate enough, but hardly reflects a charge of complicity that Washington, snuggled cozily in bed with the butchers of Bahrain and their violently autocratic terrorist-funding friends in Saudi Arabia is in much of a position to make.

The priority for any responsible party in relation to the situation in Syria must surely be to bring the civil war to an end, beginning with a ceasefire and the negotiations which that would make possible. The same applies to the other smoldering and burning conflicts covered by Cockburn, none of which has been resolved. He would surely agree, but can hardly be optimistic, given what he has witnessed and continues to witness. No solutions are offered in this book, but that is not intended as a criticism. For wars to end, powerful people must first of all want them to end, and such people appear very thin on the ground, either in the region itself or in any of the countries which have taken it upon themselves to intervene there. There must be a structural solution to the problems which caused the war in the first place, such as the oppression of the Sunni people in Iraq and Syria, which has led, as Cockburn notes, to widespread if sporadic support for (or at least acceptance of) ISIS, even from people who strongly disapprove the group’s methods.

Instead of solutions being explored, the current war in Syria threatens to spread, reigniting violence in neighboring Iraq and perhaps – in a chilling scenario, in Turkey, it neighbor to the north. Turkey on the one hand and the Gulf States on the other are each allies of the US and hostile to the Syrian government, yet have also an increasingly techy relationship with each other. Then there’s Israel, whose relationships with its neighbors are never stable. On the other side of the fence sits Iran, another

power which would love to establish a regional hegemony, even if that appears at present a distant prospect.

For some time it has been evident that Syria is experiencing not just one war but at least three: firstly, the developing struggle between different opposition factions; secondly, it provides the Syrian theatre of a regional conflict between Iran and Syria, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and Qatar on the other, with Turkey as a complicating factor; and thirdly, there's what makes it globally dangerous, the fact that it's looking increasingly reminiscent of the Cold War's proxy wars, though it is also clear that this is complicated by the waning of the power of Russia and, if to a lesser extent, of the US too. Neither can control what world once have been its proxies. Though each of the region's violent conflicts has its own characteristics, this triple nature – civil, regional, global – applies to some degree in every case.

Meanwhile, Patrick Cockburn continues to report from the region, providing a corrective to the farrago of lies emanating from the mouths of the leaders of the various foreign powers involved, and in particular the strange fantasies which characterize the United States' major contribution to this propaganda offensive. It is to the credit of the editors of *The Independent*, a mainstream news source in a NATO member state, that they publish these reports, as well as the excellent work of their other Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk.

In the book's concluding chapter Cockburn counts eight wars being fought in Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa, though he includes Nigeria's Islamic north and does not include the sputtering violence in Sudan. "The latest addition to the list," he says, "is the renewed Turkish –Kurd armed conflict, which joins civil wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Somalia and north-east Nigeria." (401) This seems an underestimate, as at least some of these conflicts include processes which might be identified as separate wars, though closely related. As he quotes "Anthony Cordesman, a military expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington" as having said, what we are dealing with is not a chess game in which all pieces are either black or white, but "three-dimensional chess with nine players and no rules."

Steve McGiffen is an Associate Professor of International Relations at the American Graduate School in Paris. He has a PhD in US political history, a subject he has taught at the University of Manchester, England and the UK's Open University. From 1986 to 1999 he was political assistant to a Member of the European Parliament, after which he joined the secretariat of the European Parliament's United Left Group, representing the Socialist Party of the Netherlands, for whom he continues to work as a translator and occasional consultant. His books include Globalisation (2002), The European Union: A Critical Guide (2005), Biotechnology: Corporate Power vs the People's Interest (2006), Poisoned Spring: The European Union and Water Privatisation (2009, with Kartika Liotard), and a historical novel, Tennant's Rock (2001). His most recent publication is "European Neighbourhood Policy: Path to Democracy or Road to Co-option? Dynamic versus Passive Revolution in the Arab Spring" in Osha, S (ed) The Social Contract in Africa (Pretoria, Africa Institute of South Africa, 2014)