

Article Critique:

A New Map of the Middle East by Michael Petrou

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By

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Michael Petrou's August 2014 article in *Maclean's* deals primarily with the disintegration of Iraq in the post-Sadaam era, especially as regards the Kurds. Some of what he writes of has connections and application to the wider Middle East area, especially other areas which are experiencing similar disintegration such as Syria, Libya and Yemen.

The article begins with the statement "While Iraq is being torn apart by violence, the Kurds are moving to carve out a homeland, once and for all" (Petrou, 2014, p. 30). He then quotes Feisal al-Istrabadi, a former Iraqi ambassador to the United Nations who returned to Iraq from exile in the United States after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. He states "None of my aspirations for the country post-2003 have come to pass, and my worst fears and my worst nightmares have all been exceeded" (Petrou, 2014, p. 30). Istrabadi also stated "I always used to say it's incumbent on the Arabs of the country to build a state the Kurdish rank and file actually want to be part of. In fact, what we've done is build a state that even the Sunnis of Iraq don't want to be a part of" (Petrou, 2014, p. 31). Petrou proceeds to note that Iraq is already unofficially split into a Kurdish north, a Sunni center/west, and a Shia south and that what is regarded as a nightmare for some is advancing the dreams of a separate Kurdish state (something they have been longing for since the end of World War I in 1918).

Petrou also interviews an Iraqi Kurd named Hassan from Sulaymaniyah who would like to see Kurdish independence, eventually. He also quotes from Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani, David Romano (co-editor of *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East*), Steven Cook (of the Council on Foreign Relations), Denise Natali (of the National Defense University), Rep. Eliot Engel (of the U. S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs

Committee), and Patrick Skinner (former CIA officer now with the Soufan Group) about Kurdish aspirations for independence as well as possible barriers, benefits and outcomes it could bring.

What You Need To Know

There are three areas that one would need to be familiar with to get the most out of this article (and to begin to understand developments in the Middle East in general): Historical, Religious and Ethnic. All of these factors play a key role in the development of events in the Middle East, both in the past and in the present.

Historical

For most people alive today the nation of Iraq and its surrounding territories (Turkey, Syria, Jordan, etc.) have existed for their entire lives and they don't imagine them not being there. The fact that these borders were created in the wake of World War I and did not take into account any of the facts on the ground about the people who live there and their relationships (or lack thereof) with each other escapes them completely. That much of this area (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Arabia, Yemen) had, until 1918, been part of the Turkish Empire and that it was divided up without regard to the ethnic or religious makeup of the effected population is not known to the majority of readers (Erlich, 2014). It is like trying to explain that before 1870 the nation of Germany (which has similarly existed for the entire lives of everyone alive today) did not exist, that it was previously made up of a collection of independent territories, ruled by a variety of counts, dukes, princes, kings and bishops.

Even further back in history the areas of the Eastern Mediterranean were the seat of some of the earliest civilizations (Sumer, Akkad, Egypt, Nubia, Phoenicia, the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Hittite Empires) and was subsequently encompassed in the Achaemenid Empire and that of Alexander the Great and then divided between the succeeding Empires of the Ptolemies of Egypt

and the Seleucids of Syria and then the Romans and the Persian-based Parthian and Sassanian Empires. But what could such ‘ancient history’ have to do with today? As they say ‘old sins have long shadows’ and, especially in a region where the predominant loyalty is at the tribal/clan level feuds, grudges and rivalries can have deep roots and continue for a long time similar to the Hatfield and McCoy feud in the United States, only on a larger, longer and deeper scale. The appearance of religious unity under the general banner of Islam hides a multitude of divisions, hatreds and rivalries whose roots go far back into the past, often even to pre-Islamic times

Religious

The majority of readers of *Maclean's* (and other Western news magazines) are likely unfamiliar with the diversity of religious affiliation in the Middle East. That there are fundamental differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and that other religious groups exist in the region are often overlooked or not understood by many readers. That substantial Christian minorities (primarily Coptic in Egypt, Nestorian in Iraq, Maronite in Lebanon) and other groups such as B'hai, Druz, Yezidis and remnants of Zoroastrians is often overlooked and the entire population regarded as Moslem.

Baker's 2014 article “Unholy Choices” relates how the Christian minority groups have often supported strong-man rule to avoid persecution by Islamist groups, supporting Sadaam, the Assads, Mubarak, etc. He also cites the last (1914) census of the Ottoman Empire as showing that Christian groups made up approximately 25% of the population of the Ottoman territory, whereas these same territories today have only 5% minority Christian groups. The situation is the same with the Yezidis, many of whom have immigrated to Germany or elsewhere in Europe (some from Armenia and Georgia have moved to Russia) to avoid persecution as well as seek opportunity (Henne & Hackett, 2014).

Jewish (outside of Israel) and Zoroastrian populations in the Middle East have drastically decreased over the past years. The Jewish population in the region was estimated to be around 851,000 in 1948, but had fallen to circa 7,500 by 2011. Similarly, the Zoroastrian population of Iran has fallen to around 25,000 (Institute for Curriculum Services, n.d.). Many have immigrated to North America, Europe and India, some with the assistance of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (Wikipedia, 2014).

Ethnic

Ethnic differences in the Middle East are easily overlooked by the average reader, especially as a large proportion of the Middle East speaks primarily Arabic in some form. Even groups that don't speak Arabic are often regarded as if they did due to the similarities of religion (Islam) and dress. Attempting to explain the different ethnic groups in the Middle East is similar to attempting to describe that the stories of King Arthur relate to the conflict between the British and the English (terms which are now often viewed as synonymous).

Even to many of the people of the region the ethnic difference has become subsumed in a form of Stockholm Syndrome, where the conquered peoples of Iraq (outside of Anbar province, whose people are Arab), western Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Egypt have come to regard themselves as in some way Arab (ex. the current name of Egypt: United Arab Republic) and have adopted the religion and language of the conquerors and come think of themselves as part of that group, although they are still underneath the same population that has been there all along (i.e. the existing population was not displaced by a gigantic influx of surplus population from the deserts of Arabia) (Haldon, 2010). Some groups, such as the Yezidis (due to their religion and Kurdish association) and the Kurds (due to a strong ethnic pride) have maintained their own cultural traditions, although the Kurds did adopt (primarily) Sunni Islam (Mohamed, 2014). The

Persians also maintained aspects of their own culture by preserving their own language (Farsi) and adopting the Shi'a form of Islam rather than the Sunni form which predominates in most of the surrounding areas.

One means by which this religious imperialism happens, which is often overlooked is by coopting the holy sites of the preexisting population. Catholic and Orthodox Christian groups did this in many places and Islam did it as well, at the Kaaba in Mecca, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and in many other places at a minor scale (Aslan, 2006). An example of this is shown in the remains of a temple erected at Luxor by Ramses II which were discovered while doing restoration work on a mosque which had been created by coopting an existing Coptic church which had coopted the temple (Stanek, 2007). This had also been done by earlier groups such as the Romans and Greeks, but usually through syncretism between their gods and the native ones; except in instances such as the Seleucid Antiochus IV of Syria and the Roman emperor Caligula's efforts to covert the Jewish temple in Jerusalem to their own uses.

Ignorance is Bliss

Many readers continue in blissful ignorance of developments abroad and in the Middle East in particular. C. J. Werleman's 2014 article "Clueless: America's Ignorance of the Middle East will Shock You" points out that 63% of Americans can't locate Iraq on a map and even government and political leaders cannot define the difference between Sunni and Shi'a Moslems or tell whether groups such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, Hezbollah or Hamas were associated with the Sunni or Shi'a branch of Islam. Other findings of the 2006 National Geographic-Roper survey cited by Werleman included that 20% of young Americans think Sudan is in Asia and 48% believe India is a Muslim country. Fox News' Jesse Watters did a segment in 2014 on ISIS where he interviewed 20 people about the ISIS threat and response. Only two respondents had

any distinct idea about what ISIS was, while one thought he was talking about the Egyptian goddess and one thought he was referring to the Ice Bucket Challenge for ALS. Other segments he has done have also shown an alarming lack of knowledge of or interest in subjects of national or international importance. Blame for this level of ignorance can likely be laid, at least in large part, at the feet of the educational institutions which are failing to provide relevant (and interesting) information about the topic to their students (those who are paying attention, anyway). A study by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations found that most teachers (in its sample anyway) had little or no knowledge about the region and lacked the materials to teach about it or answer questions (Werleman, 2014). With this level of lack of knowledge someone reading about this topic would be completely lost (and bored).

Conclusion

Maclean's is a Canadian news magazine, so its readers are at least supposedly interested in keeping current on the news, although what constitutes news can be a subject of debate. There is local, national, international, entertainment and social/society news and not all readers are interested in all topics. The ongoing lack of focus on topics relating to this region both by individuals and in education, despite the ongoing conflicts in the region and involvement of the United States in the region for over a decade is alarming and does not bode well for having an educated audience capable of understanding articles such as these (and making decisions based thereon).

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