



Kitap Tanıtımı/ Book Review

Understanding of Iraq: the Whole Sweep of Iraqi History, from Genghis Khan's Mongols to the Ottoman Turks to the British Mandate to the American Occupation

William R. Polk; Harper Perennial, 2006.

Reviewed by Mehmet Rakipoğlu

This book was published in 2005 by William R. Polk. It has 240 pages. Polk has drawn the road to comprehend the politics and history of Iraq. . He has tried to give a complete “portrait” of Iraq as it exists today, which make his readers to evaluate the key historical and current events in the history of Iraq. He has tried to give answers of many questions such as: What were the historical roots of conflicts in Iraq since Genghis Khan to American occupation? What was the role of external powers in Iraq? What were key factors that affected the Iraqi politics? How can we understand those events of Iraqi history today?

He firstly problematized the history and war at Iraq, then analyzed those key developments to construct a historical construct of reality of Iraq. He started his book with very basic description of Mesopotamian civilization, which led the content of the book with a narrative of various civilizations, wars, coups and modern Iraq. It is one of the significance of this book, which carries a comparative narrative and analysis of target events with same credentials of other relevant books and authors including historians. Author of the book is an expert on Middle Eastern affairs, who is also known as a scholar of Arabic language. He was appointed by *President Kennedy* to the member of *Policy Planning Council* on Middle East in 1961. Therefore, he is distinguished with his 60-year career of diplomatic

and academic intimacy with Middle Eastern affairs, which grant him authority on the target themes including history of Iraq. According to Polk, one can't comprehend precisely Iraq and Middle East without knowing historical background of the region. Iraq is at the forefront of Middle Eastern countries to be examined for understanding of regional politics. The civilizational heritage and strategic location of oil reserves are the key elements that demonstrate the significance of the country. Historically, Iraq possess a series of violence except in the period of Ottoman rule. The Iraqis lived under the authority of different powers. And the struggle for sovereignty continued from the Obeyes to the Americans in this geography. The influence of the civilizations that had previously lived in the lands where the Iraqis lived on today still continues. Different ethnic, religious and cultural structures are evidence of this effect. The use of the titles "*Asset King*" of the Assyrians, "King of the World" of the Babylonians, "*Single Leader*" of *Abdulkerim Kasım* and "*Brave Chief*" of *Saddam Hussein* show how active geography is in politics. Practices based on oppression and coercion was implemented in Iraq, led by more authoritarian governments, far from the representative government. Saddam's politics for Kurds and politics for excluding Turkmen from politics are examples of this. On the other hand, Iraq, which was exposed to the British occupation after the Ottoman Empire, was later exposed to the US' occupation and the influence of groups emerging in response to these occupations in the internal politics of the country still continues. Reactions to occupations do not lead to the unification of different groups within the country, which is a negative reflection of occupations on Iraqi politics. The radicalization of some groups against the occupation has also adversely affected the increasing stability in the terrorist region. The democracy that America wants to place in the post-occupation Iraqi domestic politics with *Jay Graner* does not fully cover Iraq. This prevented the establishment of a "national army" in Iraq where the US could cooperate. The US, therefore, failed to establish a working state mechanism in Iraq. The 2004 Constitution under US control carries similarities with the 1922 document on British control. The Sunni / Shiites dissociation in the country has increased because the content of the constitution is empty. The Bush administration proved that the region did not really understand the region when accusing the most secular regime of Iraq of terrorism.

The author of this book discusses why Iraq is important and how Iraq

became a state in the introduction of the book. The US invasion of Iraq has led to a loss of reputation that is difficult for the United States to regain (p.1). Washington administration accused Iraq of supporting 9/11. This was unfounded. Later, Polk said that Iraq was under despotic rule, which was true. The cheapness of Iraqi oil and the explanations of Wolfowitz reflect different dimensions of occupation. According Polk, Iraq is an artificial state founded by the British at the end of the First World War. (p.6) At the Ottoman Empire, it was separated from the province of a vassal. Approximately one quarter of the paper depends on the river systems of life in Iraq, which is favorable to agriculture. The importation of most of the consumed products has made the country poor. But first, the oil exploration facility opened in Kirkuk and afterwards the reserves throughout the country changed the power of the country. Polk also discusses the specific nature of Iraq. What makes Iraq different from other countries is that the answer to the question lies in the history of Iraq.

The aim of the book is conversant of the narrative that how the forefathers of Iraqi people came to Iraq and how they created “civilization” there. He explores the transformation of agricultural activities and how people shaped their activities by adapting in the geographical and climatic conditions of the region. Religious and political divisions are the most important factor in shaping the contemporary Iraqi society. The protracted hesitation and incompetence of Iraqi people from politics attracted occupation of the region (p.26). The legal system, which became famous with Babylonian King Hammurabi, also corresponds to the period of primeval Iraq. Since the rule of Muslims at Iraq, the local population has detailed knowledge about Islam. There is an analogy between Saddam and Sargon, the first statesman on the scene of history, to establish a system based on the inner core. (p.31) Balance of power of the region was changed with the power of the Assyrians. The harsh climate affected the level and magnitude of social and military construction. According to the Assyrians, submission was to be a pet (p.33). Therefore, they prefer to fight and capture the real assets rather than some inferior gain. It is significant to be noted that Saddam Hussein marginalized Shias and Kurds in Iraq. Even, the destruction of the Assyrians by the Babylonians brought a new change in Iraqi politics. The author has tried to trace some linkages between Persian and Iraqi culture. The credit goes to Persians, which gave name to the country as Iraq. Moreover, they overthrew the foundations of the land property system

(p.36). The mentioned that such developments were showing that Roman Empire experienced the greatest defeat of its history. (p.38) since then, the Birth of Islam was a shattering development that changed the course of history of Iraq forever. Second chapter of the book is conversant of role of Islam and Muslims in Iraq. Arrival of Islam in Iraq changed its social, economic and political values peacefully. People of the country adopted it forever without any compulsion. (p.60)The author mentioned a considerable part of historical effects of Turks, Mongols and others on Iraq.

Acceptance of Shiism as official religion at the time of *Shah Ismail's* and *Yavuz Sultan Selim's* rose controversy over Iraq (p.68) Turks won the *Battle of Chaldiran* and prevented the deepened the existing Sunni-Shiite conflict. It remained a limitation of this rule that economic development of the Iraqi people was not speedy it was expected. This rule led Shiites to get together and to be effected by Zoroastrianism. It is a significant development that Iraqi tribal structure transited from semi-nomadism to settlements. The author has highlighted that Iraq became important for foreign powers particularly for British Empire, which controlled the country to save its passage to British India, but Napoleon's occupation of Egypt in 1798 gave more importance to the country (p. 72).

The third chapter of the book is conversant of Iraq under British rule. The reasons why British had a priority to control Iraq were; containment of "Pan-Islamism", occupation of oil and energy resources, and controlling of the trade route to India (p.76). In this part of the book, the special role of *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Sheriff Hussain of Mecca* is very dramatic to make British Empire as a shareholder of the region. British Empire gave an extraordinary attention to Mosul. (p.86)The author has put light upon the critical role of British establishment in Iraq since 1914 to 1958, where it intervened in Iraq politics for adapting a modern structure of the state. It modernized the national army of Iraq, where majority soldiers and officers belonged to Sunnis and Iraqi Turkish ethnicities. (p. 94).

The fourth chapter discussed "*Country of Coups*" in Iraq, where the author had explained some security and diplomatic initiatives including the Baghdad Pact to counter the influence of Soviet Union and military coup oriented movement of *Free Officers* in Egypt in 1952. Although, a lot of efforts were done to prevent the country from military coup it was exercised in 1958. (p.113) Overthrown of monarch through military coup started the

decline of British influence in the country. Later on, the coup administration transformed into authoritarian structures. The influence of democracy and politics on the identity politics of the late Ottoman Empire also has been examined in this section of the book. The influence of patriotic nationalism on the *Country of Coups* in Iraq is seen from *Abdulkerim Kasim* to *Saddam Hussain* (p.119). The fact that these socio-political developments were secular in their nature, which their basis on ethnicity instead of religion.

The fifth chapter of the book has talked about the history of Iraq since 1991 (Gulf War) to post-2005. The author had explained that US remained active in Iraq since 1991 war to till date. It is significant that Iraqi attacks on Kuwait (p.156) made the position of US as legitimate to intervene in the region. Although Iraq claimed that Kuwait had been an artificially detached imperial state since the 1980s (p.162), but the misunderstanding and deception of Saddam led to Iraq under American threat.

The sixth chapter contains the author's estimations for future of Iraq. He has tried to answer of the question that how Iraq will continue as relevant to other countries in the world. Polk organized this on contemporary history of Iraq. He criticized to the Bush Administration and its failure behind military option for intervention in Iraq. Finally, he mentioned future prospects and key recommendations for American legislatures and executives for peace in Iraq.

Among the shortcomings of the book is the lack of detail in some points about Iraq. The author claimed of traveling almost every corner of Iraq's geography and gained detailed information about the country. Therefore, must have given some more details about oil politics, Kurdish issue, and difference between the role of USA and British in Iraqi politics. It must be noted as one of the limitations in the content of the book that it carries only one page about the Assyrian Empire, which does not provide details about the target empire as some other books can be consulted for fulfilling such kinds of deficiencies in information and content such as Catherwood's book titled "Churchill's Folly"; Dodge's book titled "Inventing Iraq"; and Tripp's book titled "A History of Iraq". It is one of the limitations of references and footnotes of the book, which have not been observed as wider, standardized and comfortable for its readers. It may be another limitation to be noted that the author can speak Arabic and Turkish languages, but he had misrepresented and mistranslated certain terms, concepts and information

related to Islam in the target languages. The author has mistakenly defined the term *Mujahid* as a militant while explaining the concept of jihad in the note section on words and writing. Actually, the literal meanings of Mujahid means who does struggle. So, it is a very narrow approach to restrict the concept to recognize it just as a militant or warrior. Second mistake; Polk said that Muslim scholars of the fiqh do not reflect over Qur'an. As Polk said that "Muslim scholar considered that if you ponder upon Qur'an it would be an empty effort or perversion". (p.25) But in reality Fiqh means deepening in science. So, if any Muslim scholars said that what Polk argued it is contradictory with Islamic understanding and also Qur'an. Because Allah said many times ponder upon Qur'an, think about it.⁸ It may be another misconception of the author that he has recognized Prophet Muhammad (*Peace Be Upon Him*) as a materialist person until his age of 25. (p.36) Similarly, migration of Prophet Muhammad (*Peace Be Upon Him*) from Mecca to Medina has defined as an escape of him that which is not reflecting the truth (p.39). It must be recognized as the biggest misconception of the author that he wrote Islam as the *religion of Arabs*. (p.42) With these limitations, the reviewer feels hesitation to recommend this piece of writing as a good book to understand Iraq from past to present.

⁸ Holy Quran, an-Nahl-17, Surah the Honey Bees Verses 17, Ya Sin-62, Surah Ya Sin Verse-62.