

The New York Times whitewashes US imperialism in Middle East and contemplates ethnic cleansing

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The entirety of the August 14 print edition of the *New York Times Magazine* is dedicated to a series titled “Fractured Lands: How the Arab World Came Apart,” by Scott Anderson. The series is 60 pages long and includes detailed sketches of the lives of six people from various parts of the Middle East dating back to the years before the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, through the Arab Spring, the rise of ISIS in 2014-15, and the migratory outpouring from the war-torn region.

The magazine’s editor-in-chief, Jake Silverstein, notes in a foreword to the series:

“This is an issue unlike any we have previously published...the subject of this book is the catastrophe that has fractured the Arab world since the invasion of Iraq 13 years ago, leading to the rise of ISIS and the global refugee crisis. The geography of this catastrophe is broad and its causes are many, but its consequences—terror and uncertainty around the world—are familiar to us all.”

Silverstein concludes his editor’s note: “It is unprecedented for us to focus so much energy and attention on a single story and to ask our readers to do the same. We would not do so were we not convinced that this is one of the most clear-eyed, powerful and human explanations of what has gone wrong in this region that you will ever read.”

The publication of “Fractured Lands” has an objective significance. The presentation, the content and the tone of the series express the American ruling class’ sense that it faces a catastrophe of historically unprecedented proportions in the Middle East. When Anderson asks in his preface: “Why did it turn out that way?” he is asking on behalf of a ruling class that is dazed by the catastrophic outcome of its own reckless and shortsighted policies.

For the last 25 years, US imperialism has laid waste to a span of territory stretching several thousand miles from North Africa to Central Asia, leaving over 1 million dead. A new vocabulary of words like “shock and awe,” “extraordinary rendition,” “black site prison,” “disposition matrix” and “Terror Tuesday” has emerged as the language of the US wars. A significant portion of the region’s 200 million people has been left homeless or have fled for safe haven abroad. Next January, Barack Obama will leave office as the first president in US history to serve his entire two terms while the country was at war.

“Fractured Lands” is an apologia for the record of American imperialism. Its author has served as a war correspondent for 33 years and has worked for the *New York Times* for the last 17. He is a prolific, educated writer and recently published a historical book on the post-World War One imperialist carve-up of the Middle East. Whatever Anderson’s intentions, “Fractured Lands” is a “human interest” story that serves to justify “human rights imperialism” and pave the way for new wars.

“Fractured Lands” makes the argument that the nation-state system

established in the aftermath of the First World War failed to conform sufficiently to the various tribal, ethnic and religious divisions in the region. Anderson concludes that the collapse of the bourgeois nationalist governments in Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Libya proves the necessity for racial and ethnic groups to fill the political vacuum and fight among themselves to establish fiefdoms and zones of tribal influence. “Fractured Lands” acknowledges that this may involve ethnic cleansing. The author concludes by contemplating whether pogroms and genocide may be necessary to establish order in the region.

Whitewashing 25 years of imperialist war crimes

The series presents the lives of the six subject individuals and explains their stories of hardship and disaster. The reader sympathizes with these hardships, but the material is presented so as to portray the United States as a benevolent power whose interventions are meant to bring democracy and human rights, especially for religious minorities and women.

Anderson presents the story of Khulood a-Zaidi, a young Iraqi woman from Kut who was 23 years old when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003:

“Before the invasion, Vice President Dick Cheney predicted that Americans would be ‘greeted as liberators’ in Iraq, and his prediction was borne out in the streets of Kut on April 4. As the Marines consolidated their hold on the city, they were happily swarmed by young men and children proffering trays of sweets and hot tea. Finally permitted to leave her home, Khulood, like most other women in Kut, observed the spectacle from a discreet distance. ‘The Americans were very relaxed, friendly, but mostly I was struck by how huge they seemed—and all their weapons and vehicles, too. Everything seemed out of scale, like we had been invaded by aliens.’”

Anderson recounts that the Americans “quickly returned the city to something close to normalcy.” He continues: “The real work now was in rebuilding the nation’s shattered economy and reconstituting its government, and to that end a small army of foreign engineers, accountants and consultants descended on Iraq under the aegis of the Coalition Provisional Authority, or C.P.A., the American-led transitional administration that would stand down once a new Iraqi government was in place.”

The invasion forces brought in teams of “human rights advisers” who were tasked with overseeing “development projects to empower women in the Shiite heartland of southern Iraq.” Khulood became a beneficiary of this program, soon sent off to Washington to join the American

occupation's collaborators in drafting a new US-imposed constitution. When she returned, the young woman was, understandably, treated by her neighbors as a US spy.

Anderson waxes enthusiastically on this development in the abortive attempt by Washington to fashion a functioning puppet regime in Baghdad. He declares that "a new Iraq was being established, one in which democracy and respect for human rights would reign supreme. What's more, to consolidate this new Iraq, everyone had a role to play, not least the women of Kut."

Another Iraqi, Wakaz Hassan, is featured in the series. Anderson writes that Hassan "remembered hearing something about the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners at an American-operated prison—clearly a reference to the Abu Ghraib scandal—and then there was the time American soldiers searched his family's home, but those soldiers were quite respectful, and the episode passed without incident.

"I know others had problems with the Americans," Wakaz said, "but my family, no. For us, we were really not affected at all." Anderson states that the invasion brought many important advances in the realm of "human rights." For example, the US invasion established that 25 percent of parliamentary seats would be reserved for women.

Those familiar with the history of Iraq can only rub their eyes in disbelief as this propaganda figure is trotted out once again, as if the 25 percent of parliamentary seats reserved for the wives, sisters and daughters of the leaders of the various sectarian parties in the Iraqi parliament represents a gain for the country's women.

The idea that US imperialism's rape of the country was carried out in the interests of liberating its women is obscene. Whatever the crimes of the Iraqi Baathist government of Saddam Hussein, women in Iraq enjoyed the highest status and most rights of virtually any country in the region. The erosion of these conditions began with the first Gulf War of 1991 and continued under the punishing US sanctions that devastated the country's economy.

The war itself left over a million Iraqi women as destitute widows. In the wake of the US invasion, secular law guaranteeing equal legal and employment rights has been replaced by religious codes stripping women of all such protections. In the 13 years since the US invasion, women in Iraq have seen their status go from among the highest in the region, to among the lowest.

"Fractured Lands" employs similar distortions with respect to Libya. One young man, Majdi El-Mangoush, is portrayed by Anderson as brainwashed by false pro-Gaddafi claims that "US imperialism" was involved in the conflict: "Provided with this narrative, Majdi was not altogether surprised when, in mid-March [2011], Western alliance warplanes began appearing over Tripoli to bomb government installations. It seemed merely to confirm that the nation was being attacked from beyond." Majdi ends up switching sides, informing on pro-Gaddafi soldiers, and siding with the US-backed opposition.

By examining these events solely through the eyes of individuals who became unwillingly caught up in them, the *Times* magazine piece manages to completely obscure the responsibility of those who made the decisions that led to these wars and the resulting death and social devastation.

That those within the Bush administration who ordered an unprovoked war of aggression against Iraq, like those in the Obama White House who engineered first the US-NATO war for regime change in Libya in 2011, followed by the CIA-backed proxy war for regime change in Syria, are responsible for killing and maiming millions is deliberately excluded from the article. So too, it should be added, is the criminal role of the *New York Times* in propagandizing for these wars.

Anderson has also selected his subjects in a dishonest manner. The *New York Times* chose not to select the parents or children of those killed in the US wars as subjects in this series. Instead, it regurgitates the same propaganda it employed when the newspaper supported the US invasion

of Iraq over a decade ago.

The *New York Times* contemplates ethnic cleansing

In answering the question "Why did it turn out this way?" Anderson points to the collapse of the former bourgeois nationalist governments of the Middle East and the political vacuum created in their absence. Though Anderson minimizes the role of US imperialism in the region, he notes in his introduction: "While most of the 22 nations that make up the Arab world would have been buffeted to some degree by the Arab Spring, the six most profoundly affected—Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen—are all republics, rather than monarchies."

Anderson briefly traces the method by which the imperialist powers carved up the Middle East in the aftermath of the First World War. He points to the "divide-and-conquer approach" of the British and French, which "consisted of empowering a local ethnic or religious minority to serve as their local administrators" despite the fact that "just beneath the sectarian and regional divisions in these 'nations' there lay extraordinarily complex tapestries of tribes and subtribes and clans..." Curiously, he fails to note that these same methods have been employed by US imperialism, both in its dismemberment of Iraq and in its provocation of sectarian civil war in Syria.

Anderson concludes that the nation state is fundamentally incapable of expressing the interests of various national, ethnic and religious minority groups.

The article focuses particular attention on the Yazidi Christians and the Kurds. He interviews Azar Mirkhan, an ultra-nationalist doctor from Kurdistan. While Anderson is present, Mirkhan orders a peshmerga senior official to carry out a pogrom of Arab peasants in an area south of Mount Sinjar in northwestern Iraq. Mirkhan claims this is payback for the local Arab population's failure to prevent an ISIS-led massacre of Kurds.

Anderson contemplates what Mirkhan has done:

"Until a short time ago, Azar might have been derided as a xenophobe, even a fascist, for his radical separatist views. In seeing the results of ISIS's barbarism, however, and in contemplating the hatreds that have been unleashed across the Middle East in the past few years, some observers have begun to believe that his hard way of thinking might offer the best—or, more accurately, only—path out of the morass. The despair over how impossible it seems to reassemble the shattered nations of the region has caused an ever-increasing number of diplomats and generals and statesmen to consider just the sort of ethnic and sectarian separation that Azar advocates, albeit in less brutal form.

"Even proponents acknowledge that such separations would not be easy. What to do with the thoroughly 'mixed' populations of cities like Baghdad or Aleppo? In Iraq, many tribes are divided into Shia and Sunni subgroups, and in Libya by geographic dispersions going back centuries. Do these people choose to go with tribe or sect or homeland? In fact, parallels in history suggest that such a course would be both wrenching and murderous—witness the postwar 'de-Germanization' policy in Eastern Europe and the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent—but despite the misery and potential body count entailed in getting there, maybe this is the last, best option available to prevent the failed states of the Middle East from devolving into even more brutal slaughter."

That such lines could be published in the leading paper of American liberalism underscores the reactionary political climate cultivated by 25 years of permanent war. The "last, best option" consists of pitting populations against each other along ethnic and religious lines in an exercise of region-wide partition that would mean the deaths and dislocation of millions.

In fact, the policy promoted by the *New York Times* is already in place. Al-Qaeda, ISIS, the al-Nusra Front and other ultra-right wing Islamic groups have been utilized by American imperialism to destroy the old state-structure of the Middle East in an effort to subordinate the entire region to the interests of American banks and corporations.



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