'The Struggle for Iraq's Future': 10 years after the invasion, chaos reigns: book review

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THE STRUGGLE FOR IRAQ'S FUTURE

Zaid Al-Ali

Yale University Press, $35

295 pages

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER/Special to The Oregonian

As a meeting of senior-level officials of the United Nations in 2008 to evaluate reclamation projects in Iraq approached its conclusion, an Iraqi said "Wait, we haven't discussed whether any of this has had any impact." The man leading the session replied, "We don't have the luxury to discuss impact."

Alas, in the decade since the United States overthrew Saddam Hussein, virtually no one, it seems, has come to terms with the impact of the invasion, occupation and the subsequent withdrawal of American troops on the lives of Iraqi citizens.

In "The Struggle for Iraq's Future," Zaid Al-Ali, who served as a legal advisor to the United Nations in Iraq from 2005-2010, tries to do just that. Al-Ali agrees with most critics that the decision of American policymakers to disestablish the Baath Party and disband the Army has had catastrophic consequences, leaving Iraq without a bureaucracy or any effective policing force. He focuses most of his attention, however, on Iraq's domestic politics, providing disturbing and depressing details about corrupt and incompetent Iraqi politicians "who are devoid of any ideology other than personal gain."

Obsessed with power, and willing to stoke sectarian tensions to retain it, he argues, they have ignored problems that threaten the country's existence: skyrocketing unemployment, deteriorating public services (electricity, water, and education), human rights abuses, and threats to the environment.

Iraq, Al-Ali demonstrates, is a powder keg. With 64 percent of its population under 24 years of age, a fertility rate far above the regional average, and a "state that has stopped trying to produce anything," he points out, the country relies almost exclusively on oil revenues. A relatively modest drop in prices "could precipitate a fiscal crisis."

Given the fragility of the government, the contempt for leaders, and sectarian conflicts, moreover, "the smallest spark could cause the simmering anger to explode."
Al-Ali hopes that a grassroots movement, akin in spirit to uprisings during the Arab Spring, will force change, perhaps in conjunction with the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2018 ("2014 is already a lost cause"). After all, opinion polls reveal that voters are looking for credible alternatives to the appalling status quo. They seem prepared as well to support changes in the constitution that would regulate political parties, allocate real power to the provinces, and provide independent commissions to audit government agencies, take criminal cases directly to the courts, rehabilitate government services and oil and gas policies.

And yet, although the stage may be set for reform, Al-Ali acknowledges, at the end of his timely and depressing book, that it will be "easier said than done," since the ruling elite controls the money and the army – and seems willing to do whatever it takes to silence dissenters.

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