

SORBY, Karol Jr. *Iraqi Politics in the Shadow of the Military (1936 ó 1941)*. Dresden: Weltbuch Verlag GmbH, 2014. 163 p. ISBN 978-3-906212-11-1

The Middle East constantly resonates in the world's main news media and the events that occurred there (and still occur) ó are subject to researches, analyses, comments as well as serious scientific papers. This is especially the case in connection with the threats this region seems to bring about our lives. Many events we witness today e.g. in Palestine, Iraq, Syria or Lebanon ó can be traced back not just to the harsh enforcement of the interests of superpowers, but also to the internal development of those still transforming societies.

The author, PhDr. Karol Sorby Jr., PhD belongs to the younger generation of Slovak Arabists and historians, actively working on the grant-based tasks at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Slovak Academy of Sciences since his PhD-studies in 2004. He has already proved his erudition in numerous scientific studies published in his native Slovak language, as well as in English. Apart from that, he also published the monograph *Arabi, islám a výzvy modernej doby* [The Arabs, Islam and challenges of modern times, 2007], he is author of the miscellany of synthetic studies *Arabský svet v premenách času* [The Arab world with changing times, 2009] and co-author of the monograph *Blízky východ v medzinárodnej politike, 1971 ó 1990* [The Middle East in international politics, 2011]. The reviewed monograph has been compiled within the VEGA 2/0141/12 grant project and its high standard is proved by the fact that it has also been published in English by a renowned international publishing house abroad.

The subject of this study is a kind of *probing* into recent history of the Middle East, especially Iraq, where contemporary Arab society has developed. Over centuries of Islamic history, historians used to describe the Arab people (i.e. the nation) as a part of a large Islamic community. Following World War I and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, real contours of a secular view of the statehood of Arabs started to crystallise ó so far artificially divided into various colonial enclaves. This way led to the forming of Arab nationalism, mainly in reaction to the Turkish nationalism (Pan-Turkism), later turning into Pan-Arabism. The whole region saw social changes and the topic of national liberation became a significant part of it. According to the author, nationalism became a fundamental political manifestation of social changes in the Middle East. This analysis-framework is relevant not just for the Middle East, but also for other regions, in the West as well as elsewhere, since we all live in a world constantly challenging traditional ideas and relations and nationalism often provided the simplest answers to the burning problems of the local population.

The study is organically based and rooted in the author's previous scientific studies. The explored period was rather special by its nature, since following the designation of the British-Iraqi Agreement in June 1930, the Iraqi elites expected Iraq to become members of the international community the very same day, i.e. as an *independent* state. In this way, Iraq entered an interim period, which finally ended in 1932. Of course, this Agreement significantly restricted Iraq's sovereignty especially in foreign relations and Britain still retained (in line with that Agreement) extensive competencies, making Iraq still a dependent territory. Most of the Iraqis, especially the Nationalists, however hoped to get rid of that undesired dependence on Britain in the foreseeable future. In his article, the author shows the struggle of the individual interest groups within the elites, making their way to power within the monarchy, giving us some understanding of the rather difficult role of the king, who had to *buffer* the contradictory pressures, while keeping the *modus vivendi* with Britain.

In that paper, the author covers an interesting and less known period of Iraq's development in the late 30s of the recent century, when several high ranking officers of the Iraqi army began to take interest in politics. We ought to say that they realised that strengthening the position of the army as the protector of national and state interests ó provides a good starting point for that. The most influential officers, enthused by the ideology of Pan-Arabism, became idols for numerous younger officers. They took their lessons from the development of neighbouring countries, especially Turkey and Iran, which were governed by military dictatorships. In their view, the authoritative form of government provided the most effective possibilities of unifying the crumbled Arab countries and of modernising a backward society as a constitutional democracy. In autumn 1936, army troopers led by lieutenant general Bakr Sidq entered Baghdad, overthrew the government and opened an era of open army-interference within politics (p. 29).

The author points out correctly that the strongest influence on the Iraqis was the authoritarian regime of Mustafa Kemal, since Turkey, as an Islamic country, with which they had a common history and similar problems ó constituted a more attractive example, than e.g. European countries. Interesting is also the personality of İsmet İnönü, who was an ideological partner of Bakr Sidq, being since the coup till Bakr Sidq's assassination the Iraqi prime minister. In this period, the regime was affected to some degree by the left-wing concepts of the *İsmailî*-group, where also Shia-representatives got involved (p. 34). Based on the fight between Arab nationalists and particularises, the author convincingly explains the standpoint of the individual groupings striving for power, also showing that the young king Ghazi (1933 ó 1939) was virtually only a kind of *background actor*.

The author divided Iraq's historical development into three chapters. The first chapter *Prvý vojenský prevrat na Blízkom východe a vláda prevratu, 1936 ó 1937* [The first military coup d'état in the Middle East and the coup-government, 1936 ó 1937], the second *Irak v predvečer druhej svetovej vojny, 1938 ó 1939* [Iraq at the advent of World War II, 1938 ó 1939] and finally the third chapter *Smerovanie k novej britskej okupácii*

Iraku, 1940 – 1941] [Towards the new British occupation of Iraq, 1940 – 1941]. This paper is complemented with supplements (the pedigree of the monarch's family; a review of Iraqi governments in the subsequent periods); an extensive bibliography and a nominal index + glossary. Based on the logical argumentation, the author provides a convincing explanation of causalities, also considering the time-aspect and taking a chronological approach. We ought to emphasise that apart from the documents published, he broadly exploits memoirs-literature and cited works extensively using scientific papers of Arab as well as European provenance. This contributes significantly to the objectivity of that work. In his publication, the author uses consequent scientific transliteration, which increases the text quality as to the correct reading of Arabic names and designations.

In that well argued and erudite work with its vastly broad source-base, Karol Sorby Jr. reliably guides the reader through a tangle of numerous historical events towards a good summary of the historical development in Iraq, which – in spite of its geographical proximity – is not very known to the common reader. By its standard and elaboration, this work undoubtedly provides new views on the events in Iraq of that particular period, showing the fate of a country, the people of which had to face both, extremely unfavourable political conditions, as well as conditions of living over the recent decades. It would be gratifying to see this work issued soon also in Slovak.

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