

# In the Middle East, you will hear the worst story ever told

**For the award-winning Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif, the looming war in Iraq provides a tragic narrative of ancient enemies and bloody revenge, in which the most likely victims are her fellow Arabs**

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The two musicians seated on the rug on the low platform could have come from an illumination in a mughal manuscript. A tall window opened on to a mild October night and the passer-by outside would have heard, flowing out into the quiet Kensington street, the melody from the sitar, carrying with it the longings of all our hearts: English gents in black tie, and kids in jeans, a couple of dog-collars, white women in saris and Indian women in tailored suits. The book we were launching, William Dalrymple's *White Mughals*, tells a remarkable love story; a story of India before the Raj, an India where the newly arrived British mixed with the Indians. What today would be called "cultural exchange" took place until commercial interests got too big and politics took over; with them came segregation, rigidity and talk of "superior" cultures. In Leighton House, where the launch was held, Turkish and Persian tiles line the walls and paintings from the time of Burne-Jones hang companionably above them.

Later, we watched President George W Bush on television and my mother, from across the kitchen table, said, "All those cities that one associates with poetry, with art, now . . ." I let her sentence tail off. She's 75 and we're close to midnight. But the names loop through my head: Baghdad and Basra and Kufa, Kabul and Kandahar, Mazar-i Sharif and Jalalabad, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jerusalem.

In the morning, a Jordanian friend tells me a joke over the phone: "King Abdullah says to George Bush, 'You know, I watch *Star Trek* every day and there are white people and black people, Spanish, Chinese, every sort of people. But no Arabs. Why are there no Arabs?' And Bush says, 'Because it's set in the future, stupid'."

We have all feared - deep in our hearts - that it might come to this. It affects, infects, your every moment. My children are half Scots. Should I encourage them to forget their other half? My half? Forget Arabic, forget their family in Cairo and Alexandria? Forget Egypt and the Nile and Fairuz and 'am Ahmad in the grocery on the corner of our street? Should I plug them into MTV and save them?

In the streets of London, hundreds of thousands march against the war; peace demonstrations in Washington and San Francisco draw tens of thousands.

Analysts and commentators analyse and comment.

What is a novelist to do?

Martin Amis, writing last June, questioned the relevance of fiction in the post 9/11 days: "After a couple of hours at their desks, on 12 September 2001, all the writers on earth were reluctantly considering a change of occupation." More than 20 years ago, Philip Roth observed that "the actuality is continually outdoing our talents".

I open my e-mail to an appeal from the children of al-Khalil (Hebron) to be allowed back to school, a letter from a friend trying to help with the olive harvest near Ariel settlement on the West Bank, describing "armed settler militias that are seemingly out of control", an appeal from Radio Tariq al-Mahabba ("Road of Love") in Nablus to help keep it on the air because it is people's only method of communication after 100 days of curfew, an interview with Archmandrite Dr Theodosios Attallah Hanna . . .

It is impossible to close your eyes to the black spectacle mushrooming before us and concentrate on making things up. But novelists work with patterns, with the logic of an unfolding narrative, with the motivation of characters, with the telling detail. It's all there: the dramatic curve, the characters, the context. It's being written, but we can't afford to wait. So, for what it's worth, here's one novelist's interpretation of the narrative unfolding before us now and where it's likely to end.

Our narrative can begin, if you like, in March this year with US Vice-President Dick Cheney's unsuccessful attempt to drum up Arab support for a war against Iraq; or it can begin with the terrible events of 11 September 2001 and the ensuing "War on Terror". It can begin with the intifada of the Palestinians in September 2000, when they realised that seven years after the Oslo agreements they were further than ever from independence; or with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. At whatever point it begins, the narrative will keep harking back to the beginning of the 20th century: in the Zionists' choice of Arab Palestine as a home for the Jewish people and in the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War and the subsequent division of Arab lands by Britain and France. A carve-up that, through the British Mandate of Palestine, realised the Zionist dream. It will also take in the discovery of oil in the Arabian peninsula and the west's growing dependence on it during the course of the century.

Why attack Iraq now? In the US administration, as we all know, a rift has opened up between the vice-president and the Department of Defence on the one hand and the State Department on the other. This is generally presented as hawks versus doves. In fact, both departments seek to secure the USA's position as the

only global superpower for the foreseeable future. This through the strategic positioning of military bases and friendly regimes, securing oil and weakening or fragmenting potential rivals or threats. But while the State Department seems to favour working on the Palestinian issue, the Pentagon group takes the view that the road to "real" security and peace runs through Baghdad.

In 1998 Donald Rumsfeld, now the defence secretary, and Paul Wolfowitz, now his deputy, wrote to Republican leaders in Congress warning that with weapons of mass destruction, Saddam Hussein could become "the driving force of Middle East politics". In 2000, a report by Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, published by the Project for the New American Century, revealed that the Iraqi president is an excuse for action: "While the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein."

When Rumsfeld came to office in the current administration, he appointed Richard Perle (a director of the right-wing *Jerusalem Post*) as chairman of the US Defence Policy Board. In 1996, Perle had co-written an advisory paper for Benjamin Netanyahu (then new Likud Prime Minister of Israel), calling on him to break with Oslo and reassert Israel's claim to the West Bank and Gaza.

The other quarter preparing for war is the Israeli government. Raanan Gissin, an aide to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, was reported by the Associated Press as saying, last August, that Israel was urging US officials not to delay a military strike against Saddam Hussein.

On the last school run of the week, on Friday afternoon, I switched on the car radio and caught Andrew Motion mentioning the "sliver of ice" in the heart of every artist that makes him or her able to fashion art out of the saddest things.

Yes. But every night, private and public losses mingle; I dream of my husband, who died last year, and of Nasser, who died 30 years ago, and wake with a cold fist tight around my heart. The book I'm writing on Cairo is on hold. How can I write about my beloved city when my friends in Ramallah, Nablus and Bethlehem are under curfew in theirs?

Why does Sharon want war on Iraq? Why now? Speaking in London two months ago, Azmi Bishara, an Arab member of the Knesset, warned against talking of "transfer" - the deportation of Palestinians. Once you talk about something, you make it closer to happening. I share that caution, but "transfer" is now openly discussed. And Sharon is on the record as saying that Israel's "dirty work" is not yet done and that he is not afraid of doing it. He has been doing it, in Qibya, in Beirut, in Sabra and Shatila. As the US started to bomb Afghanistan, he moved his army into the West Bank and Gaza.

If this were a novel - let me use that sliver of ice - Sharon would be waiting for an

extraordinary circumstance under cover of which he would start driving people out of the West Bank, out of Jerusalem. But he needs somewhere to drive them to. And maybe he also needs a justification.

Did he hope that the war in Afghanistan would provide it? Within hours of the attacks of 11 September, he rushed to identify the terror the USA had just suffered with the "terror" Israel was enduring . Was he paving the way then for his final solution? But the Taliban caved in more quickly than anyone had expected, and the huge and diverting spectacle of the war in Afghanistan was over too soon. A war on Iraq now could give him the cover he needs. It could also provide him with the locale of the banishment. He cannot use Sinai; southern Lebanon is guarded by Hezbollah. Jordan - a friend of the US - already has a huge Palestinian population and would be destabilised by more. How about driving the Palestinians out through Jordan and into a compliant Iraq?

It is likely that the story Israel tells about itself does not allow for it to relinquish the West Bank. Under the premiership of Yitzhak Rabin, the step was discussed - and he was murdered for it. For if the claim of Israel to the land of Palestine is biblical, then it is a claim not to Tel Aviv and Haifa but to Judea and Samaria.

Indeed, it's a claim to "Eretz Yisrael", which stretches from the Euphrates to the Nile. Hence Israel has talked peace but built settlements, has talked stopping terror but demolished houses and torn up olive groves. This is why it has to dehumanise the Palestinians, to speak of a society in the grip of fanaticism, of a cult of death. In a recent interview in *Ha'aretz*, the Israel Defence Force chief of staff, Moshe Ya'alon, described the Palestinians as a "cancerous manifestation" - although Ehud Barak, the former prime minister, demurred at this and said they were more like "a virus".

This is why it is possible for the pro-Israeli writer David D Perlmutter to publish a piece in the *Los Angeles Times* last April, saying: "If in 1948, 1956, 1967 or 1973 Israel had acted just a bit like the Third Reich, then today Israelis would shop, eat pizza, marry and celebrate the holy days unmolested. And, of course, Jews, not sheikhs, would have that Gulf oil."

An interesting plot complication here arises from the fact that Israel is indeed a democracy - for its Jewish citizens. And so there are Israeli characters who stand like heroic figures against the current. The wise Rabbis for Peace, who believe in the equality of all men. The soldiers who refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories. Scholars such as Ilan Pappé or the historian and one-time deputy mayor of Jerusalem Meron Benvenisti, who warned in *Ha'aretz* of "the possibility of a mass transfer of Palestinians in case of war in Iraq". Architects who have spoken of the "vertical" occupation . The members of Gush Shalom who ran an ad last month to tell the world that "in the imminent chaos created in the Middle East in case of war, Sharon hopes to implement his old scheme to expel the Palestinians from all of Palestine. For this end, he is ready to inflict a disaster

upon all of us."

Can these people influence the plot? So far, it seems not. And their calls to their countrymen appear to have gone unheeded. A telling phrase in a recent article by David Grossman in the *Guardian* says, "The Palestinians begin their timeline for the conflict in, at the latest, 1948, when the state of Israel was founded.

Israelis, for the most part, place the starting point of their timeline at September 2000 [the beginning of the intifada]." A crucial difference. But the dissidents add tragic depth to our narrative. And they can provide justification for an outside power to refuse to implement Sharon's plans.

In March of this year, Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia proposed a peace plan that included full normalisation of Arab relations with Israel. President Bush endorsed the plan at first, but Cheney and Rumsfeld argued that fighting terror meant supporting Sharon. On 4 April, Bush said that "moral clarity" required an attack on terror in all its forms. So far, it seems that the Pentagon is winning the day. And the Pentagon is, by this analysis, not merely "hawkish" in promotion of US interests but committed to the ambitions - the world-view - of Israel.

And it is Pentagon officials who we find liaising with possible replacements for Saddam Hussein's regime. One possible leader, admired - we are told - by Richard Perle, is Ahmad Chalabi. Chalabi is an interesting character: some 20 years ago he set up - with the support of (then Crown) Prince Hassan of Jordan - the Petra Bank which collapsed with debts of some \$57m, leaving Chalabi a wealthy man. It was said that two warrants were out for his arrest, the standard Interpol one and one personally signed by King Hussein. It was also said that he evaded these warrants by hiding out in south Lebanon. A few years ago, he relaunched himself as the head of the Iraq National Congress, one of the various groups that have set themselves up as "Iraqi opposition in exile". The INC is funded by the CIA. At an INC meeting with Pentagon officials in Washington last July, Ahmad Chalabi appeared hand in hand with his sometime mentor Prince Hassan, who, in a recent interview in the Israeli paper *Yediot Aharonot*, failed to make a single mention of a Palestinian sovereign state.

Flash back to a death-bed scene: King Hussein of Jordan, days from his end, flies to the USA. Then, in a letter to his brother, he removes him from the succession. And the prince accepts the removal of the kingdom which had been practically guaranteed to him from birth. What was the prize big enough for this to happen? Was it oil-rich Iraq - but with a couple of million Palestinians thrown in? The Israeli terrorism expert Ehud Sprinzak says that the US goal in Iraq is to create a "united Hashemite kingdom" out of Iraq and Jordan's "Sunni areas".

It was reported that, in the wake of the 11 September attacks, George Bush consulted with the scriptwriter for *Diehard 2* on how to deal with Arabs and terrorists. Perhaps in the script Bush is shooting now, the US, backed by Britain,

will blaze into Iraq and come out (at the cost of an "acceptable" number of American and British dead) having smelted that country into a docile Hashemite kingdom with Chalabi as prime minister, and a fully Jewish and contented Israel.

These two "beacons" would then proceed to spread democracy and the principles of the free market in the surrounding Middle East, while the rich oil fields of Majnoun and others start to pump their millions of barrels through the pipelines - disused since 1948 - to Haifa.

There is another script being written by the Reverend Jerry Falwell and the American Christian fundamentalists so cynically courted by Benjamin Netanyahu. Ed McAteer, a founder of the Moral Majority and known as the godfather of the Christian right, says: "I believe that we are seeing prophecy unfold so rapidly and dramatically and wonderfully, and, without exaggeration, [it] makes me breathless." For the rest of this narrative and an account of Armageddon, see the Book of Revelations.

A realistic, humanly penned novel, however, would portray a panorama of war and destruction, men and women carrying their children, their old and their bedclothes and struggling across borders, a new cycle of terror and guilt. The entire Middle East may not erupt immediately, but its rulers, supported by the US, will have to use more fire and iron to keep their people down. Desperate anger will express itself in desperate acts and the war that Bush has prescribed will indeed last for generations and spread across the world. The people in the dominant countries, in the US and the UK and Israel, who dare to question or talk of causes will be criminalised. Fascist measures will eventually be used to control their societies. It will take a library of novels to do justice to the Arab, American, Israeli, British - the millions - the fragmented global community of broken hearts.

There is an alternative ending. The US administration and Tony Blair heed the voice of their people. The UN says "no deal" to the "tough" new resolution on arms inspections. The inspectors fly in and Iraq allows them to do their work.

Israel (in the spirit of saving it from itself) is pushed to an international negotiating table - in the UK or Europe. The world tells it that it has to pull out of the Occupied Territories. Not in 2004. Now.

UN or international forces are flown to the West Bank and Gaza to protect the Palestinians, oversee the withdrawal and help in securing Israel's borders. The Palestinians have their state. Israel is secure within its pre-1967 borders. The refugee issue is on the table for negotiations towards a workable just solution. The anger of the Arabs and the Muslims is dissipated. Oil flows uninterrupted to America. With the thorn of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict removed from its heart and the US the friend it once seemed to be, the Arab world can turn its attention to development and democratisation. Sharon falls and a more thoughtful and human prime minister leads his country. Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, et al have

to save their dreams of world domination for another day.

The minor characters and chorus can walk off the page and live ordinary, uneventful, human lives. They can go to book launches in beautiful houses and listen to sitars or flutes or saxophones, and when sadness does come to them may it be only that sadness of the unavoidable - rather than the colossal sorrows we are about to bring on ourselves.