Long Shadows

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Long Shadows or National Pragmatism…. A wise Chinese philosopher once said: if you walk a mile with history, it takes twenty minutes; if you walk without history it takes two hundred years. The more the problems of the Middle East and the Levant are discussed the more important the long shadows of history seem. Just how does one balance out the causes that have contributed to the violence in Iraq. How much is history or sectarianism or greed or grievance or a power vacuum desperately requiring filling or Arab idealism or Shi’ite revenge? The weight that one has to give to the murder of ancient leaders has to be measured against contemporary politics and press manipulation. Perhaps, we can allocate a significant weight to unfinished business left over from the Ottoman Empire just as apologists for African violence blame, rightly perhaps, French, British, Belgian nineteenth century colonialism.

Or is the violence in Iraq thoroughly modern with the historical shadows a convenient cover? For Turkey’s part, as B.B. Coskun’s argues in her article “Turkey’s Iraq Policy on the Brink of Civil War”, has a vested interest in a united Iraq on her doorstep in order to avoid any possibility of a separate independent Kurdish state. It also happens that Turkey has the strongest, biggest and most disciplined army in the region. Instability does not augur well for the future. So far Turkey has pussy-footed around US policy in the region. That may not go on forever.

Another article this month is very much in the tradition of EH Carr, the founder of International Relations and English language historian of the Russian Revolution. Maxim Barbashin argues that the failure to understand the true nature of ethno-political conflict arises from the failure of academics and commentators generally to distinguish between information and knowledge and thus failing to develop theory rather than be submerged in ideology. There is too great a tendency for donors and other agencies to set the frame of research and so prevent a real comprehension of the complexities and causal patterns that determine the course and outcomes of ethno-political conflict.