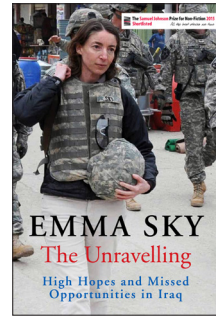


Book Reviews

The Unravelling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq



By Emma Sky

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Reviewed by Squadron Leader Matthew Smith

Biography: Squadron Leader Matthew Smith is an RAF engineering officer, currently serving with XV(R) Squadron (Tornado GR4) at RAF Lossiemouth. He studied at King's College London under a Dowding Fellowship graduating in 2016.

Introduction

The Unravelling is a unique, honest and detailed memoir of one woman's experience working side by side with the military and political elites charged with rebuilding Iraq following the 2003 invasion. The account aims to describe the challenges faced by the Coalition in conducting post-conflict nation building and how the overthrow of an authoritarian regime can lead to state collapse and conflict. In addition, The Unravelling seeks to demonstrate the limitations of external influence on foreign affairs, but also where such actors may be able to exert positive influence.

Emma Sky, a British national and currently a senior fellow at Yale University's Jackson Institute, has huge experience in working in the Middle East having worked for the British Council in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank as well as with Palestinian NGOs. Initially opposed to the war, she was presented with an opportunity to deploy to Iraq as an administrator following the dismantlement of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime. Envisaged only as a short term appointment, Sky saw this as her chance to 'apologize to Iraqis for the war, and to help them rebuild their country'. Sky tells her story in four parts, initially charting her time with the Coalition Provisional Authority in Kirkuk in 2003 before serving twice as Political Advisor to

General Ray Odierno, first during the United States' troop surge in 2007 and then during the drawdown of Coalition forces between 2008 and 2010. Sky concludes with a chapter on her visits back to Iraq after the withdrawal and the subsequent rise of Da'ash.

Sky offers a singular insight into the complex circumstances faced by the Coalition and its struggle to come to terms with alien cultures and ideologies. Sky writes in an easy and informal style although the intricacies of Iraqi society and the pace at which the narrative darts between locales and actors can make the objectives and affiliations of the multitude of protagonists difficult to follow, the glossary of political parties and militias is a welcome aid. The human perspective that Sky provides is particularly engaging. Establishing herself as an essential intermediary between the politico-military elites of the Coalition and Iraq, Sky talks of the friendships she formed and intertwines the narrative with vignettes that demonstrate the impact of the war on everyday Iraqis from all backgrounds. In addition, her place at the heart of the Coalition during the surge period offers a different angle on this often controversial strategy.

Sky's account of her time as Kirkuk's Governorate Coordinator describes a region in chaos, with minimal governance and security provision entirely entrusted to the US Army. Sky is critical of the Coalition's decision to dismantle Saddam's Baathist party, claiming it left a yawning hole in the ability of the Provisional Authority to govern the nation. With no means of improving the situation at her direct disposal Sky integrates herself into the only body of power in the province, the 173rd Airborne Brigade under the command of Colonel William Mayville. She describes them as idealists committed to a cause that they have utmost faith in; however, she also sees an organisation that is constrained in its thinking, compartmentalising Iraqi citizens into rigid groups and lacking the nuance of mind to fully appreciate the sectarian dynamics fracturing Iraqi society. With Sky's expertise and Mayville's flexibility and resources they are able to make considerable improvements to the lives of Kirkuk's citizens. It is this respectful but authoritative approach that Sky asserts can allow foreign actors to win the trust of local populations and thus forms the bedrock of the nation building process.

The success of her partnership with Mayville leads to her being personally selected by General Odierno to be his Political Advisor during his time overseeing the implementation of the Surge. She describes how she guided the hand of Odierno, and that although they became extremely close she found occasion to strongly oppose policies she perceived to be detrimental to the reconciliation process. Sky contends that the surge period, allied with a change towards more reconciliation focused and population centric tactics, changed the strategic calculus of the various warring factions and thus created a stable security environment for the political process to move forward. She describes herself as leaving Iraq after the surge in a state of euphoria, optimistic that despite the disastrous internal conflict, created and enflamed by Coalition miscalculation, there existed hope that Iraq may rise as a secular democratic state.

The third period in the book recounts Sky's time as personal advisor to Odierno during the Coalition withdrawal and describes the transformation of her post-Surge euphoria into

sadness, anger and fear. Sky argues that for reasons of political expedience, the new Obama regime was prepared to accept the political status quo by backing the incumbent president, Shia strongman al-Maliki, rather than uphold the results of the 2010 election which had favoured the outwardly secular but predominantly Sunni Iraqiya party. It was this betrayal of democratic principles by American political elites that Sky claims lead to the failure of the reconciliation process in Iraq, allowing al-Maliki to consolidate his grip on power and crush Sunni hopes for an inclusive government. Her compelling argument is substantiated by the testimonies of the senior Sunni, Shia and Kurdish representatives that have come to view her as a friend. The disenfranchisement of the Sunni population, Sky argues, left the door open to the radical Da'ash group to establish itself as the defender of Sunnis across the region.

Sky's passion for the people of Iraq and her commitment to influencing the Coalition's approach to the conduct of nation building, counter-insurgency operations and reconciliation is conveyed strongly throughout her narrative. It is an account that will appeal to academics wishing to gain the perspective of an authoritative interlocutor, beholden neither to the military or political apparatus. But, it is also a story that is accessible to a wider audience seeking to understand the roots of the current schisms in Iraqi society. Whilst some of her views may be contested by some, her final conclusion that the West was left with nothing to show for all the blood and treasure invested and that it is likely no one will be held accountable will find few dissenters. The Unravelling is a sobering read, but it is infused with optimism for what might yet be accomplished if a common ground between faiths can be established and if the tainted political system can be reformed.

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