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The Model for Iraq was Ireland, 1692, Divide and Conquer as Imperial Rules

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Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh's revelations that the Israeli government is encouraging Kurdish separatism in Iraq, Iran, and Syria should ring a bell for anyone who has followed the long history of English imperial ambitions.

It is no surprise that the Israelis should be using the tactic of "divide and conquer," the cornerstone policy of an empire that dominated virtually every continent on the globe save South America. The Jewish population of British-controlled Palestine was, after all, victim to exactly the same kind of ethnic manipulation that the Israeli government is presently attempting in Northern Iraq.

Following the absorption of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the British set about shoring up their rule by the tried and true strategy of pitting ethnic group against ethnic group, tribe against tribe, and religion against religion. When British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour issued his famous 1917 Declaration guaranteeing a "homeland" for the Jewish people in Palestine, he was less concerned with righting a two thousand year old wrong than creating divisions that would serve growing British interests in the Middle East.

Sir Ronald Storrs, the first Governor of Jerusalem, certainly had no illusions about what a "Jewish homeland" in Palestine meant for the British Empire: "It will form for England," he said, "a little loyal Jewish Ulster in a sea of potentially hostile Arabism."

Storrs' analogy was no accident. Ireland was where the English invented the tactic of divide and conquer, and where the devastating effectiveness of using foreign settlers to drive a wedge between the colonial rulers and the colonized made it a template for worldwide imperial rule.

Divide and Conquer Revisited

Former Israeli Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon and Menachem Begin normally take credit for creating the "facts on the ground" policies that have poured more than 420,000 settlers into the Occupied Territories. But they were simply copying Charles I, the English King, who in 1609 forcibly removed the O'Neill and O'Donnell clans from the north of Ireland, moved in 20,000 English and Scottish Protestants, and founded the Plantation of Ulster.

The "removal" was never really meant to cleanse Ulster of the Irish. Native labor was essential to the Plantation's success and within 15 years more than 4,000 native Irish tenants and their families were back in Ulster. But they lived in a land divided into religious castes, with the Protestant invaders on top and the Catholic natives on the bottom.

Protestants were awarded the “Ulster privilege” which gave them special access to land and lower rents, and also served to divide them from the native Catholics. The “Ulster Privilege” is not dissimilar to the kind of “privilege” Israeli settlers enjoy in the Territories today, where their mortgages are cheap, their taxes lower and their education subsidized.
The Protestant privileges were a constant sore point with the native Irish; although in fact, most Protestants were little better off than their Catholic neighbors. Rents were uniformly onerous, regardless of religion.

Indeed, there were numerous cases where Protestants and Catholics united to protest exorbitant rents, but in virtually every case, the authorities successfully used religion and privilege to split such alliances. The Orange Order, the organization most responsible for sectarian politics in the North today, was originally formed in 1795 to break a Catholic-Protestant rent strike.

Ireland as Imperial Laboratory

The parallels between Israel and Ireland are almost eerie, unless one remembers that the latter was the laboratory for British colonialism. As in Ulster, Israeli settlers in the Occupied Territories have special privileges that divide them from Palestinians (and other Israelis as well). As in Ireland, Israeli settlers rely on the military to protect them from the “natives.” And as in Northern Ireland, there are political organizations, like the National Religious Party and the Moledet Party, which whip up sectarian hatred, and keep the population divided. The latter two parties both advocate the forcible transfer of all Arabs Palestinians and Israelis alike to Jordan and Egypt

Prior to the Ulster experiment, the English had tried any number of schemes to tame the restive Irish and build a wall between conquerors and conquered. One set of laws, the 1367 Statutes of Kilkenny, forbade “gossiping” with the natives. All of them failed. Then the English hit on the idea of using ethnicity, religion, and privilege to construct a society with built-in divisions.

It worked like a charm.

The divisions were finally codified in the Penal Laws of 1692, divisions that still play themselves out in the streets of Belfast and Londonderry. Besides denying Catholics any civil rights (and removing those rights from Protestants who intermarried with them), the Laws blocked Catholics from signing contracts, becoming lawyers, or hiring more than two apprentices. In essence, they insured that Catholics would remain poor, powerless, and locked out of the modern world.

The laws were, in the words of the great English jurist Edmund Burke, “A machine of wide and elaborate contrivance and as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment and degradation of a people as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man.”

Once the English hit on the tactic of using ethnic and religious differences to divide a population, the conquest of Ireland became a reality. Within 250 years, that formula would be transported to India, Africa, and the Middle East.

Sometimes populations were splintered by religions, as with Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in India. Sometimes societies were divided by tribes, as with the Ibos and Hausa in Nigeria. Sometimes, as in Ireland, foreign ethnic groups were imported and used as a buffer between

the colonial authorities and the colonized. That is how large numbers of East Indians ended up in Kenya, South Africa, British Guyana, and Uganda.

It was “divide and conquer” that made it possible for an insignificant island in the north of Europe to rule the world. Division and chaos, tribal, religious and ethnic hatred, were the secret to empire. Guns and artillery were always in the background in case things went awry, but in fact, it rarely came to that.

It would appear the Israelis have paid close attention to English colonial policy because their policies in the Occupied Territories bear a distressing resemblance to Ireland under the Penal Laws.

The Israeli Knesset recently prevented Palestinians married to Arab Israelis from acquiring citizenship, a page lifted almost directly from the 1692 laws. Israeli human rights activist Yael Stein called the action “racist,” and Knesset member Zeeva Galon said it denied “the fundamental right of Arab Israelis to start families.” Even the U.S. is uncomfortable with the legislation. “The new law,” said U.S. State Department spokesman Phillip Reeker, “singles out one group for different treatment than others.”
Which, of course, was the whole point?

Imperial Blowback

As the penal laws impoverished the Irish, so do Israeli policies impoverish the Palestinians and keep them an underdeveloped pool of cheap labor. According to the United Nations, unemployment in the West Bank and Gaza is over 50 percent, and Palestinians are among the poorest people on the planet.

Any efforts by the Palestinians to build their own independent economic base are smothered by a network of walls, settler-exclusive roads and checkpoints. It is little different than British imperial policy in India, which systematically dismantled the Indian textile industry so that English cloth could clothe the sub-continent without competition.

Divide and conquer was 19th and early 20th century colonialism’s single most successful tactic of domination. It was also a disaster, one which still echoes in civil wars and regional tensions across the globe. This latter lesson does not appear to be one the Israelis have paid much attention to. As a system of rule, division and privilege may work in the short run, but over time it engenders nothing but hatred. These polices, according to Lt. Gen. Moshe Yaalon, foment “terror,” adding, “In tactical decisions, we are operating contrary to our strategic interests.”

The policy also creates divisions among Israelis. Empires benefit only a few, and always at the expense of the majority. While for example the Sharon government spends $1.4 billion a year holding on to the territories, 27 percent of Israeli children are officially designated “poor,” social services have been cut, and the economy is in shambles.

By playing the Kurds against Syria and Iran, the Israelis may end up triggering a Turkish invasion of Kurdish Iraq, touching off a war that could engulf the entire region. That Israel would emerge from such a conflict unscathed is illusion.

Divide and conquer fails in the long run, but only after it inflicts stupendous damage, engendering hatreds that still convulse countries like Nigeria, India and Ireland. In the end it will fail to serve even the interests of the power that uses it. England kept Ireland divided for

800 years, but in the end, it lost.

The Israelis would do well to remember the Irish poet Patrick Pearse's eulogy over the grave of the old Fenian revolutionary, Jeremian "Rossa" O'Donovan: "I say to my people's masters, beware. Beware of the thing that is coming. Beware of the risen people who shall take what yea would not give."

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