

Shortsighted Statecraft

Washington's Muddled Middle East Policy

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A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East. Lawrence Freedman. PublicAffairs, 2008, 569 pp. 29.95

Summary: Stopping three decades of unnecessary bungling.

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There is a feature of my seminars on U.S. Middle East policy at Princeton that I call "déjà vu all over again" -- with apologies to Yogi Berra. I ask students to assess the bungled efforts and missed opportunities of generations of U.S. diplomats and seek in them lessons for the future. They examine the hubris that drove the U.S. government to engineer the 1953 overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddeq's democratically elected government in Iran. This traumatic episode was conveniently forgotten by 1979, when National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski encouraged Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi to use force against the opposition, ignoring the warnings of U.S. diplomats on the ground in Iran that the shah's reign was doomed. Similarly, the United States forgot the lesson of the limited and United Nations-approved 1991 war in response to Iraq's aggression in Kuwait when it launched an ideologically inspired invasion of Iraq in 2003. Likewise, in 2006, Washington seemed to have forgotten the fiasco that followed Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Rather than learn from the past, Washington backed Israel's ill-advised attempt to deliver a knockout blow against another Lebanese foe, this time Hezbollah. My students and I conclude -- only half-jokingly -- that U.S. policymakers ought to take the class before taking office.

They should also read Lawrence Freedman's provocative new book, *A Choice of Enemies*, a sweeping overview of the United States' responses to foreign policy crises in the Middle East over the past 30 years. The book poses a crucial question: Has the United States' Middle East policy consistently failed since World War II, or have the region's problems become so entrenched that they are impervious to change? Freedman, a professor at King's College London, is best known for his writings on war and is an admitted novice when it comes to the Middle East. Nevertheless, he has assembled an impressive array of sources and presents them well in *A Choice of Enemies*.

Taking the dramatic events of 1979 and the early 1980s -- the Iranian Revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Camp David peace accords, Israel's invasion of Lebanon, and the rise of Hezbollah -- as his starting point, Freedman argues that a sea change occurred in the politics of the region, from secular Arab nationalism to Islamist-based politics. The United States, Freedman contends, failed to adjust: its policies were haphazard and self-contradictory, its officials spent more time arguing with one another than trying to understand what was happening in the region, and it chose enemies based on a shortsighted appreciation of what its own interests were.

Freedman is not optimistic when it comes to resolving the region's vexing foreign policy dilemmas. Toward the end of his book, he argues that the Middle East's problems cannot be solved and "must be managed or endured" instead. But coming after hundreds of pages about pain and suffering in the region and so many poor -- but easily avoidable -- U.S. policy choices, this conclusion is somehow comforting. Freedman seems to be assuring policymakers that these problems are not of their own making, thus absolving them of the responsibility to fix them. His temptation to give up is understandable to those who have studied or worked on the Middle East at any time during the past six decades. Nevertheless, Freedman's conclusion is odd given that the earlier chapters of his book make a compelling case that the United States' missteps in the Middle East have stemmed from ideological obstinacy, a failure to understand history, and often plain obtuseness. If such blunders lie at the root of the United States' policy failures in the region, why does Freedman argue for throwing in the towel rather than

repairing the policy process by recruiting experts, pragmatists, and those who have learned the lessons of the past -- and entrusting them with fixing the Middle East?

BEFORE THE THAW

Freedman recognizes the degree to which Cold War competition and a commitment to containing communism motivated U.S. policy and actions in the Middle East for decades. The Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union was so encompassing that it overshadowed and dominated the dramas of regional politics throughout the world. After World War II, the United States flirted with the idea of supporting decolonization and, for a short while, saw Gamal Abdel Nasser's revolution in Egypt as an opportunity to organize secular Arab politics in the postcolonial era and keep the region out of the Soviet sphere of influence. But this was a short-lived romance, and the hard realities of containment quickly discredited the idea that nation-states could remain nonaligned in an era of superpower competition. Washington saw Nasser's insistence on driving the British out of their base at Suez after 1952 and establishing Egyptian control over the Suez Canal not just as the logical consequence of decolonization but also as a dangerous opening for the spread of Soviet influence in the Middle East.

Nasser's revolution led to economic and social upheaval that had essentially bankrupted Egypt by the early 1970s. Nasser attempted to destabilize and overthrow conservative regimes, such as the Jordanian monarchy. His government went so far as to align many aspects of Egypt's foreign policy with that of the Soviet Union -- a price it was willing to pay in exchange for the massive amounts of Soviet aid that helped finance the Aswan High Dam and the arsenal Nasser needed to pursue his military adventures in Yemen. But the Soviets did not get much out of the alliance. Indeed, both superpowers should have learned early in the Cold War that their competition for regional allies yielded only meager payoffs.

Freedman, whose focus is on the past three decades, does not spend much time on this earlier period or on the crucial turning point of the Six-Day War. Historians have long debated whether there was a chance for peace after the war or whether the September 1967 Arab summit in Khartoum -- during which the Arab states refused to recognize Israel or negotiate peace with it -- pushed the conflict onto the path it has followed ever since. After June 1967, Israeli policy shifted from a politics of necessity -- securing its borders, integrating immigrants, and gaining international legitimacy -- to a politics of choice. As a result, internal debates in Israel since the 1980s have focused not on the country's survival but on the future of the territories the Israeli army occupies and the people it rules over. Freedman does not enter this discussion, and so his rehashing of U.S. involvement in the Arab-Israeli peace process after 1979, although adequate, breaks no new ground.

THE UNFORSEEN TSUNAMI

Freedman's strong suit is his focus on what he calls "the second radical wave" of Islamist politics, which emerged during the 1979 Iranian Revolution and displaced Nasser's secular Arab nationalism as the dominant political force in the region. Interestingly, both Islamism and Nasserism shared three important traits: vehement anticolonialism, a deep animosity toward Zionism, and ideological origins in Egypt. It is how they diverged, however, that has made all the difference. Political Islam represents far more than a way of ordering politics; it demands a fundamental reorientation of the organization and governance of all societies in which Muslims live.

The United States has had numerous interactions with Islamist actors. Not all of these experiences have begun badly, but all have ended badly. In the case of Iran, the fallout continues to pollute relations with Washington to this day. The United States did not much concern itself with the ayatollahs during the 1953 coup; in fact, the ayatollahs largely supported the U.S. effort to remove Mosaddeq from power. After that, however, Iran's Islamic clergy became increasingly radicalized, notably after the shah expelled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini from Iran in 1964. Still, U.S. policymakers failed to take this development seriously. As late as 1978, cables from the U.S. embassy in Tehran needed to identify Khomeini for readers in Washington, who were unfamiliar with him or his standing among the growing Iranian opposition.

Freedman makes much of U.S. policymakers' lack of historical understanding, as well as the bureaucratic infighting that resulted in a near-total breakdown in dialogue and policy coordination between the State Department and the National Security Council in the run-up to the shah's departure. He also provides refreshing reminders, here and throughout the book, about the competing priorities of Washington decision-makers. In

1978 and 1979, as the shah was weakening and his regime was collapsing, President Jimmy Carter was mostly preoccupied with the Israeli-Egyptian peace process. Referring to this and other episodes, Freedman points out that historians have the luxury of sorting out events neatly into separate chapters, but policymakers do not. Caught in the swirl of events and committed to the preconception that the Iranian regime was stable and capable of weathering the storm, they opted to maintain the status quo rather than abandon the shah or reach out to the opposition.

Three other "second wave" Islamist upheavals followed closely on the heels of the Iranian Revolution: the mujahideen's anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, the emergence of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the rise of Hamas in Gaza. In all three cases, U.S. policymakers overlooked or underestimated the Islamist threat, or were too busy with other matters to give it the attention it deserved. In Freedman's eyes, Washington's reactions to these developments represent crucial moments in U.S. policy in the region. Freedman shows in great detail how the United States' responses were haphazard, driven by short-term thinking, and prone to the same push and pull of bureaucratic infighting that had afflicted Washington's responses to earlier, non-Islamist threats during the Nasser era.

By the 1990s, U.S. policymakers finally did recognize the threat of Islamism, but they treated it largely as a terrorism problem and failed to see the deeper significance: that radical Islam was replacing secular nationalism as the most powerful political ideology in the region. On this point, Freedman's analysis is not as biting as might have been expected, especially given the setbacks suffered by the United States in recent years. U.S. support for the Afghan mujahideen blew back in a storm of terrorist strikes against the United States starting in the 1990s and culminating in the 9/11 attacks. Freedman should have had more to say about the Clinton administration's failure to understand the depth and the danger of the threat and its hesitant and tepid responses to the first terrorist attacks.

FRIENDS AND FOES

Freedman has provided an expansive yet tightly written overview of a complex topic and made good sense of it. *A Choice of Enemies* will likely become required reading in university courses on U.S. policy in the modern Middle East. The book will also serve the policy community well by making sense of a region that has in the past defied the best efforts of so many busy and conflicted decision-makers.

But Freedman leaves several overarching questions unanswered: Are the Middle East's problems -- poverty, a resistance to globalization, terrorism, violence -- endemic, or can an outside power such as the United States stimulate the kinds of positive reforms that could lead to political freedom, democratic governance, and economic equality? Will territorial and political compromise yield a two-state solution in Israel and Palestine, or has the conflict become a religion-based existential fight to the death? Should the president of the United States continue to personally invest valuable time and power in trying to resolve this conflict, or should Washington remain content with basic conflict management? And most fundamental, has Freedman's "second radical wave" so completely engulfed Middle Eastern politics that it is only a matter of time before it sweeps the remaining secular regimes away?

The current U.S. administration clearly lacks the energy, interest, and vision to confront these questions. As a result, the next president will face fundamental decisions in the Middle East -- whom to choose as enemies and whom as friends -- almost immediately on taking office. The differences between the remaining presidential candidates on whether Washington should engage Tehran without preconditions -- and the larger question of the role of diplomacy in projecting national power -- make the issues raised by Freedman even more meaningful. "Choosing enemies," Freedman writes, "is an art and not a science, and one that usually takes place in confusing and ambiguous circumstances." The problem is that the next president will not be able to hide behind the excuses Freedman offers for the United States' past policy failures.

If U.S. policymakers read Freedman's book and agree with his conclusion that the Middle East's problems cannot be solved, the United States is in trouble. The Israeli-Palestinian impasse, the sectarian conflict in Iraq, and the prospect of a nuclear Iran are serious problems that must be addressed; they cannot simply be "managed or endured."

The alternative is to learn from the past: instead of seeing the Middle East through an ideological lens, the next administration must rely on agile and nuanced diplomacy and engagement based on hardheaded U.S. interests.

Washington can accept the region for what it is and still work tirelessly in an attempt to craft lasting solutions to seemingly intractable problems.

Strong U.S. leadership in the Arab-Israeli peace process can make a difference. A coherent strategy in Iraq can be formulated so as to disengage and withdraw U.S. forces, instead of pursuing the illusion of a "victory" that remains undefined after more than five years of war. And although engagement with Iran will not instantly end Tehran's nuclear ambitions and ongoing support of terrorism, it is surely preferable to waiting until military action becomes the only option available. Smart, sustained diplomatic engagement may make the challenge of choosing enemies -- and bolstering ties with friends -- much easier for the next president.

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