
The Great Leap Backward

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REVIEW OF BARRY RUBIN

The Tragedy of the Middle East

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These are troubled times in the Middle East. Sadly enough, though, they have been troubled for years now. The distress signals have just gone unnoticed or have simply been overlooked. Instead, we have appeased and enabled. We have bargained and conceded. And, ultimately, we have ignored. It took the magnitude and shock of Ground Zero to finally awaken us and point our attention to the regional despair. The warning signs, however, were apparent as early as the 1979 hostage crisis at the American embassy in Tehran and the 1983 Marine Barracks bombing in Beirut. Later came the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia, the 1998 attacks on the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salam, and the 2000 strike on the USS Cole in Yemen. Together, these incidents signify the anguish of people disappointed by the failed promise of democracy. Unable to address their political frustrations and economic iso-

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lation domestically, they have resorted to exporting their antagonisms abroad. For Pax Americana, whose proponents are struggling to understand the root cause of such terror, one reality is clear: no longer is complacency sufficient in the American regional enterprise. A thorough assessment of regional ebbs and flows has become an imperative in directing our future Middle Eastern policy.

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, there has not been a lack of such analyses. In one of the more successful efforts, Dr. Barry Rubin's latest book, *The Tragedy of the Middle East*, deconstructs the root causes of the region's malaise. Rubin, the Director of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA)

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Center of the Interdisciplinary Center in Herziliya, Israel, and editor of the *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, has been a voice of reason on Middle Eastern affairs. His proximity and presence in the region have further enhanced the precision of his analysis.

In *The Tragedy of the Middle East*, Rubin describes the recurring political failure on the part of Arab and Iranian leadership that culminated in the volatile decade of the 1990s. With no other options or excuses to delay reform, leaders of the region were forced to confront issues of economic liberalization and political change. Reforms promised to placate the tensions brewing on the streets of Cairo, Damascus, and Tehran. However, in appeasing the masses with long overdue political and economic development, Middle Eastern leaders realized that they were slowly eroding their own power bases. In this vein, their two steps forward were compromised by ten steps backward as each leader invoked such age-old excuses as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, anti-Americanism, and the threat to Islam in order to preserve stranglehold at the helm of his respective domains.

By the year 2000, according to Rubin, the Middle East had taken a "great leap backward." Choosing to reject the option of peace and Ehud Barak's end of conflict proposal, Arab leaders opted to save their regimes instead of the lives of their people in a backlash against reform. Realizing that a final, conclusive peace with Israel would force Arab governments to confront internal problems, they ducked out of a decisive commitment. As articulated by Rubin, "If, indeed, peace with Israel and other big changes actually occurred virtually every regime would be in serious trouble.

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What excuse would they have for continued dictatorship? What rationale would they have for high military spending? How could they continue to stem the rising tide of demands for better living standards, more democracy, social change and economic reform?" Instead of addressing these issues, many leaders in the region have returned to longstanding policies of coercion through "demagoguery, ideology, populism and external conflict." Not willing to accept responsibility for the rising expectations amidst declining standards of living, they resorted to

mobilizing support through emotional appeals. In turn, this has evoked fear of Western and Israeli threats, conspiracy theories, and even the remnants of any past "-ism" to rally the people. As Rubin states, "this was the Catch-22 of Arab politics: Nothing can be done until Palestine is liberated or U.S. influence is expelled, or until unity comes for all Arabs or Muslims, and since these things have not happened, then the desperately needed steps to solve the Arabs' problems must be postponed."

This being the reality of the day, Rubin guides the reader through historical background to put his current analysis in context. Dividing the post-World War II era into three periods—past, present, and future—Rubin shows how history ravaged Arab expectations. Pan-Arabism promised a monolithic Arab force that would expel Israel and the United States from Muslim lands. However, after five military defeats at the hands of Israel, the loss of a Soviet ally, coups and political strife in the region, the Iran-Iraq War, and even the Gulf War, it is no surprise that people are disillusioned. The reaction to these failures has only heightened Arab anxieties as the region's "hereditary dictators" suppressed not only the growing Islamic radicalism, but also any other movement that proved threatening to the status quo. Such repression, amidst the flourishing Israeli state, has exacerbated public disenchantment such that most observers perceive the Middle East as a region wrought with violence and political instability. Rubin notes, however, that with the exception of Yemen and Sudan, no Arab leader has been overthrown since 1970, and, as a result, the above policies of scapegoating and diversion have been successfully maintained.

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Perhaps these regimes have survived such recurring tragedy due to the rent dependency created by the region's only enduring positive—oil. Since its discovery in the early twentieth century, oil has served the region as both a blessing and a curse. The overflowing availability attracted an imperial presence, which in turn led to a series of nationalizations and finally the use of oil as a weapon of persuasion both within the Middle East and abroad. Since the 1967 Six-Day War, the Gulf monarchies have provided financial assistance to such domains as Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and Syria, who were not equally blessed with abundant natural resources. Even during the Gulf War, Egypt and Syria received hundreds of millions of dollars for their tacit support of the American coalition against Iraq.

For a time, oil revenues were able to mask economic mismanagement and fiscal profligacy. But with the decline of oil revenues in the early 1980s came the glaring reality of regional disparity highlighted by the lack of economic development. What surfaced then, and has been further underscored in the *2002 Arab Human Development Report*,¹ is the region's blatant economic and social regression. Once poised to lead the Third World out of economic morass, the Middle East now trails every region except Sub-Saharan Africa. With little GDP or income growth, Middle Eastern countries are further behind due to a population explosion. This indicator alone increases the development challenge, as it is harder today to provide adequate housing, education, health care, and employment. Hence, these economic obstacles have only added to each regime's domestic political problems. And again, the government response has been to

divert public attention from the troubling day-to-day challenges with policies of smoke and mirrors.

Adding fuel to the regional fire is Middle Eastern governments' reaction to the blooming Islamic presence. Rather than address the demands of the people

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who have ultimately resorted to expressing themselves through nihilistic violence, the region's leaders have instead answered their call with repression. In response to U.S. concerns regarding Islamic radicalism, each regime uses the Israeli and American presence in the region, rather than domestic troubles, to explain rising tensions. Moreover, these regimes justify their use of emergency powers, which restrict civil liberties, as an effective mechanism to contain

further Islamic insurgencies. In reality though, this tactic serves not only to silence any opposition, but also to maintain the future of "hereditary democracy." Rubin best describes this vicious circle:

The Arab regimes' own failure and the towering barrier that their system posed to development helped to promote Islamism as the only acceptable alternative. In a terrible irony, though, these same states simultaneously used the existence of the Islamists as an excuse for not moving toward greater democracy, free speech, or human rights. Here are most vividly seen the paradoxes posed by the rise of Islamist movements. They could not solve the problems of the Arab world, but they could not make the problems of the Arab world unsolvable. They could not bring victory to the Arab world over the West or Israel, but they could block good relations and peace. They could not replace the Western model of development, but they could discredit it. While posing as the solution, the Islamists in fact greatly intensified the problem.

Given this framework, Osama Bin Laden himself is portrayed as the new "decade challenger," similar to Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1960s, Yasser Arafat in the 1970s, Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1980s, and Saddam Hussein in the 1990s. Like the "alchemists" who came and went before him,² Bin Laden is trying to force his vision that he believes will benefit the region. And yet, according to Rubin, this vision will not prevail because, similar to those of other "decade challenges," it fails to address the fundamental problems of economic destitution and political repression in the Arab world.

Rubin explains this circular predicament through examples and anecdotes typical of most Arab regimes. What remains curious to the reader is his insistence

on including Iran in the analysis. Iran, especially since the 1979 revolution, has espoused anti-Israeli and anti-American rhetoric similar to that seen in the Arab world. One could claim that the Iranian people have been subject to similar manipulative tactics of deflection and deception. However, unlike in the Arab world, Iran has a nascent democracy; ushered in with the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997, Iranians have been pushing the envelope of reform. And, although the clerical hold on power has been steadfast and has managed to restrain the reformist challenge, the existence of a political evolution in Iran does refute Rubin's assumption of a monolithic Muslim presence in the region. Some might claim that what has emerged in Iran is, in fact, the last gasp of a dying theocracy. In the Arab world though, there seems no end to the political stagnation.

Hence, Rubin, like many Middle Eastern experts, finds himself at a loss in prescribing the proper treatment to cure these malignant regimes. At the same time, his analysis wisely recommends the self-critical, reflective approach that will in turn lead to change. By recognizing failed patterns, future policies regarding the Middle East can attempt to redress the region's deeply rooted problems. Specifically, in trying to right what has gone so dreadfully wrong, proponents of Pax Americana must not resort to accommodating the region's leaders. Doing so will perpetuate the malaise that led to the September 11 attacks. If anything, we should be aware that these leaders are, as Rubin says, "tigers satiated on a rich diet of distracting wars and, crises, misinformation and ideas permitting no contradiction, rewards and punishments, the manipulation of nationalism and religion, the cultivation of hatred and deflection of blame onto others, the promotion of paranoid fear, and hopes for utopia." They are the ones responsible for the tragedy of the Middle East. Allowing them to continue to feast while their people famine will further bring damage at America's expense.

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By recognizing and unraveling the challenges that lie ahead, Barry Rubin has done a worthy service. His is a realistic account of the Middle Eastern predicament—one that should be read by politicians and Middle East experts alike. For, in preparing for the future, the past undoubtedly serves as the best roadmap for reform. ■

NOTES

1 United Nations Development Program, *2002 Arab Human Development Report*, <<http://www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr/>> (accessed November 23, 2002).

2 Rubin describes the region's leaders as "alchemists" who use their power to manipulate the people. "And so it [is] only logical that about every ten years some alchemist blows up the Middle East in an experiment trying to prove that these ideas work."

