

Saltzman Lecture Report

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Choosing Enemies and Friends in the Middle East

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Sir Lawrence Freedman's lecture, "Choosing Enemies and Friends in the Middle East", which coincides with his recent book *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East*, focused on the political complexities of the Middle East, and in particular, on the three turning points in the 1970s that are still relevant for U.S. policymakers today: (1) the Israeli-Egyptian peace accords at Camp David, (2) the Iranian revolution, and (3) the Afghan revolution and the subsequent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Freedman introduced an idea that he calls the two radical waves of the Middle East to put these turning points in context. The first wave was a nationalist-socialist movement, called "Nasserism" and personified by former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. The second wave was "Islamism," which Freedman distinguished from Islam in that Islamic precepts provide a political guide and calls for the reinstigation of the caliphate. This second wave, exemplified by groups like Muslim Brotherhood, was viewed as an anti-communist ideology. One fact, notes Freedman, that prohibited an understanding of the full implications of this second radical wave was the initial belief that this was much

better in Cold War terms than the first radical wave.

The first turning point, the Camp David agreement, was important because they debunked the anti-Zionist ideology at the heart of Nasserism. In addition, the agreement did not aid the Palestinians. Future Palestinian leaders like Yasser Arafat, who had dallied with the Muslim Brotherhood, committed themselves to Nasser Saddam Hussein after the Camp David agreement, believing that they were keeping the flame of this particular radicalism alive. Finally, the radicalization of Muslim Brotherhood grew in strength after the agreement. While Nasser had used Muslim Brotherhood to break the grip on Egyptian politics of the old leftist society, there was a radical element that Sadat did not understand, and he set in motion within Egypt and the wider Arab world a reenergization of this particular strand of Islam.

But more important than the Camp David agreement, suggests Freedman, was the Iranian Revolution. Until 1978, Iran, along with Saudi Arabia and to a lesser extent Israel, had been the pillar of U.S. policy in the region. The Shah of Iran had been put in place by Great Britain and the

U.S. after Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh sought to nationalize petroleum assets in the 1950s. Contrary to some, the Shah's overthrow was not entirely due to President Jimmy Carter's strong insistence on human rights; in fact, in anticipation of this agenda in 1976, the Shah did liberalize a bit (only to pull back soon after) and Carter was satisfied with the attempt. Carter even called the Shah "an oasis of stability in a turbulent region" during his 1978 visit to Tehran. Throughout that year, however, things went from bad to worse – although the Americans did not anticipate the overthrow of the Shah as November estimates suggested that the Shah would hold on to power. Hence, the Shah's exit came as a complete surprise in January 1979.

Initially, Freedman notes, this development did not lead to a complete collapse of U.S. relations with the regime, which was a coalition of two different radical traditions: members of the Mossadegh's old National Front party, who came from the first radical wave, and Ayatollah Khomeini, who came from the Islamist wing. Khomeini was at first thought to be a figurehead, but ultimately became an influential political force. His influence was seen through the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran. Leftists had seized the embassy in February, but Khomeini's people pushed them away and seized the embassy in November 1979, holding it for a year. Freedman asserts that Khomeini's motive in this move was getting rid of Carter (which is evidenced by the hostages only returned as Reagan was being inaugurated); as he calls it "reverse regime change". The move's influence on the 1980 Presidential election created a sourness in U.S.-Iranian relations that exists to this day.

Thirdly, the Afghan revolution in 1979 was "a civil war between two different radical traditions". The Soviets sought to maintain the leftist government that

overthrew the monarchy in 1973. Their invasion into Kabul, however, "reinforced the Cold War" and led to what some would call the "Second Cold War." What is important about this event is that Americans backed the Islamist Mujahedeen through Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, just months after the fall out with Islamists in Iran. Of additional importance is that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia established links with the Mujahedeen as a result. In particular, Pakistan tried to control the groups, giving resources primarily to religiously minded Islamists. These actions also created the expectation that Pakistan could control what was going on in its own backyard.

The effects of these events were far-reaching. Iraq, which was initially a friend of the U.S., became its next enemy. Iraq is a country that illustrates the intersection of all the different aforementioned tendencies. Until the late 1970s, Iraq was in the anti-Zionist, radical camp. Saddam Hussein used the combination of Camp David and the Iranian revolution as the reason to make himself president. He used the Camp David agreements to isolate Egypt and present Iraq as the leader of the Arab World. Additionally, he tried to capitalize on the disorganization going on in Iran after the revolution to take back what he had lost and gain the support of other Arab governments, who feared the spread of Iranian influence. He also gained American support, specifically diplomatic support. But this period also illustrated the divisions within U.S. policy towards the region. The U.S. sided with Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War only to become its enemy during the Gulf War.

Another effect was the Palestinian problem. After having been pushed out of other Arab countries through the 1970s and 1980s, the *intifada* developed within the Palestinian territories, but was independent of the Palestinian Leadership Authority

leadership; it was during this time that Hamas began to develop. Then Arafat backed Saddam Hussein after the invasion of Kuwait. As a result, the only way Arafat could get back in the game was through negotiation, which explains the origin of the Oslo process and the peace treaty.

Bringing the story to the present day, Freedman explained that all of these factors came together during the Bush administration in what he called "a perfect storm". The Oslo process came to a dead end in 2000, leading to tense and more violent Israeli-Palestinian relations. Chaos following the Soviet withdrawal of Afghanistan left the Taliban in charge in a sanctuary for Al Qaeda. Conservatives in Iran were reasserting themselves in Iran, which was moving closer to a nuclear bomb. And questions about the viability of containing Saddam Hussein continued.

The Bush administration's approach to these problems, according to Freedman, was to take them all on without distinguishing between them. In addition to the Afghanistan issue, which it could not have avoided after 9/11, it took on the Iraqi problem and didn't try to deal with the Palestinian problem. The administration also missed a chance to work with the Iranians, who were incredibly helpful in the aftermath of Afghanistan, labeling Iran part of the Axis of Evil.

The point of his book's title, Freedman says, is that the administration did not make a choice of enemies. Al Qaeda, Iran, and Saddam Hussein were not at all ideological company; they were all opposed to each other in some way. But the U.S. picked them all as enemies and got overextended as a result.

Where does this leave U.S. policy going forward? Freedman believes that the U.S. should be able to draw down in Iraq, but

the big choices that are being faced are Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Iran likely has the most options available, but the Bush administration believes that the U.S. should negotiate after main concessions have been made, so little headway has been made. Negotiations, however, do not always have to lead to anything – what's important is that they take place so that if opportunities arise, the conversation can continue. There is a real problem with Iran, with its nuclear side and its support for Hezbollah. It is a radical force in the region and the U.S. has not found a way of dealing with it.

Little room for deal-making exists with Afghanistan and Pakistan, though. Afghanistan will remain fragmented for a long time, which is daunting because Pakistan is a nuclear power. With Pakistan, the problem is not that Pakistan is turning Islamist but rather that it is hard to hold together the Pakistani state. Plus, as Freedman points out, it's very hard to see whom you're dealing with. Although you say you need order and stability, that's not in itself a policy. It's an aspiration, and a difficult one in these circumstances. The danger is that that will be seen as so difficult, it will be put on a back burner while deals are done elsewhere as situations get much worse.

