

Grand Delusion - The Rise and Fall of American Ambitions in the Middle East

A Book Review

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It should be obvious that U.S. policy in the Middle East is now losing influence. Steven Simon's new book "Grand Delusion - The Rise and Fall of American Ambitions in the Middle East" purports to cover the era from Jimmy Carter (mostly as it leads into Ronald Reagan's presidency) to the current Biden administration. In his writing for the most part he highlights the bad decisions and illogical thinking of most of those presidents concerning the Middle East. Unfortunately he starts off with a major flaw: after a brief presentation on the policymakers acting in the best interests of the U.S. based on its "exceptionalism, frontier mythology [and] invulnerability as a continental power" he states, "Yes, we meant well and our anger was righteous."

Unfortunately for that argument, meaning well relates only to a particular sector of the U.S. – big oil and big money (the two are one and the same) – and righteous anger is really self-righteous anger displaying a holier than thou attitude in face of way too many contradictions. It comes back to the saying, "What you do speaks so loud I cannot hear what you are saying," and what the U.S. is saying by its actions is that our military and economic power are intended to rule the world in our favour. Freedom and democracy are reduced to rhetoric and propaganda in face of U.S. support for Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and the use of covert and overt military support for anyone interested in overthrowing a

government not aligned with the U.S. (too many to enumerate here).

Morals

He follows that introductory statement up with “the book avoids moral judgements about the key players, although it should provide the context for the readers to make up their own minds.” Unfortunately it does neither. Moral judgements abound, and context is often lacking, especially for events preceding his focus and for contemporary events with Russia, China, and Iran and Saudi Arabia in reshaping the Middle East and the entire global context.

His first moral lapse is with the Shah of Iran who he believes “genuinely sought to lift his country’s quality of life but failed” because of the “king’s dilemma: the tragic reality that reform empowers opposition that can then be suppressed by violence.” But the real kicker is his statement, “You cannot do good without doing evil.” The “king’s dilemma” is a falsehood probably contrived by some ancient kingly nobles arguing in their reasoning to kill off their enemies and stay in power. But to then add his own token twist destroys his argument.

Yes, you can do much good without even entertaining evil, but it seems to be an admission that for all the good democratic elections in the world that went against U.S. interests, some kind of war or rebellion that involved murder and mayhem (Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Patrice Lumumba in the Congo (Zaire), Mossadegh in Iraq, Arbenz in Guatemala, Pinochet in Chile....) was required.

Further to morality, he discusses the “lack of moral clarity” in foreign policy during the Reagan administration, a president of “deep if not universal compassion.” It makes one wonder then why Reagan was a strong opponent of unions, talked about “rugged individualism” in the Ayn Rand dislike for altruism kind of thinking (“Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps”), and continued support for the CIA operations in Central America. Reagan’s actions fit perfectly within the “what you do...what you say” paradigm.

Simon discusses Bush Jr.’s “moral vacuity” – with which I cannot argue, but supposedly he was not going to write about morality. He says the U.S. mission to protect the Syrian Kurds had “moral and strategic obligations” for the military. In the final chapter on Biden he mentions the “profound ethical challenge” he had to navigate in Syria, and while the word “moral” is not used, the very definition of ethical is “relating to moral principles.”

While Simon does not fill his writing with “moral” discussions it certainly has an influence on his perceptions of events, retaining the overall impression that these years were filled with ill-considered actions based on a false rhetoric.

Political history and context

Having said all that, it is a reasonable precis of U.S. interventions in the Middle East in the period under discussion without presenting anything revelatory or brand new. It would be a good place for an introductory overview of the era and place, keeping in mind the author’s typical view of U.S. intentions compared to what was actually done.

So what of the context? First off, remember this is written from a U.S. perspective, one that sees the country as a necessary buttress against evil in the world, the “exceptional” nation,

and whether the author upholds these beliefs are not, he is marinated in its propaganda and carries it with him. There are two other big misses that cannot be filled by a book of this scope.

For a reader to truly understand the contextual position of the presentation, an understanding of history going back to the First World War, the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the followup to the secret Sykes-Picot agreement, and the power of the Balfour letter, all mismanaged at the Versailles peace discussions (1919). The second miss is at the opposite end of the story, where Simon's understanding of the Middle East and the U.S. position appears to be relatively weak concerning events between Russia, China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

Israel

Israel is presented within the overall political context, but by omission the reader can not truly understand how the Israelis arrived at where they are, and more importantly, how they now treat the Palestinians under occupation. The settlements are the main point of discussion, and while they present a roadblock to any peace agreement – as Simon argues by creating a non-contiguous Palestinian area of 'control' – that is as far as he goes. Part of this is due to the contextual misses presented above, the other part is simply by ignoring the situation on the ground in Israel as it has existed over the past several decades.

A critical read of U.S. foreign policy in the region necessitates an understanding of the creation of the Israeli state and its ongoing colonial settler policy. Beyond that it needs to get into the nitty-gritty of the occupation – the house demolitions, the extra-judicial killings, the restrictive imprisonment of political actors (administrative detentions), the road blocks, the illegality of the 'fence' and the settlements, the torture and retention of children, the use of weapons of war on an occupied population, essentially the ongoing nakba and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.

Overall, a true understanding of the Middle East cannot be complete without understanding the history of Jewish immigration and Israeli settlement in an already inhabited space. But it goes beyond Israel and yet still includes Israel today as a key player in the current global shift in power structures.

Into the future

Most works that write history up to the moment the work is published, including as many contemporary elements as possible, always seem to suffer from the very lack of hindsight needed to make a decent ending or conclusion. Simon's work surmises prospects for the future of the Middle East and the U.S. role there.

Simon does discuss the role oil plays in his discussion, but never gets to the bottom line: the petrodollar. The U.S. does not need Saudi or Iranian oil, what it needs is for that oil to be sold using US\$, the so-called petrodollar. The oil embargo by the Saudis during the Yom Kippur war (1973) led finally to the Saudis agreeing to sell their oil only using the US\$ for its transactions, and as everyone needs oil, all countries were brought into and under the financial control of the U.S. Part of this also included the U.S. going off the gold standard created by the Bretton Woods agreement (1944) and having huge inflationary and debt pressures caused by the Vietnam War (context matters).

There is a bouquet of misses concerning the Middle East and Simon's conjectures about the future – some of them are simply time related to publication date, but the main ones are simply not seeing – or being wilfully ignorant of – the reshaping of the global financial structures. By weaponizing the US\$ in its over-use of sanctions, the U.S. has given energy to the Russia-China engagement, and with Russia's reaction to events in Ukraine, a large portion of the "rest of the world" simply ignore the sanctions – extraterritorial – the U.S. has tried to apply to Russia.

There is no discussion of the Shanghai Security Organization and Iran's accession to that, along with the eighty or so countries waiting to sign up to the BRIC's agenda and financial plans (the BRIC's Bank and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank). Russia has signed deals with Iran involving military and agricultural supplies; China has a five hundred billion dollar trade agreement over many years with Iran. The Saudis are supporting Russia indirectly by not acceding to Biden's wishes to keep oil prices low and is selling some of its oil to China in yuan, openly stating it does not have to limit its oil sales to the US\$. Syria has been accepted back into the Arab League under the auspices of Saudi Arabia, while the U.S. still has a military on the ground extracting Syrian oil. All this needs to be accounted for in order to even attempt to contemplate what might happen next in the Middle East.

There is no real telling by anybody as to which way Israel will go. With an ultra-right wing fundamentalist government in place they are having problems with their own Jewish population along with a more unified Palestinian population resisting their occupation. It is anybody's guess as to whether they will ditch the U.S. after extracting all they can from it and then join up with the growing power of the BRIC's and Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. In the meantime, the violence of their occupation, while slowly growing in global visibility, is at the same time perhaps a symptom of generally being ignored by the mainstream media as U.S. internal problems continue along with their growing domestic and foreign financial problems.

A mixed read

While Simon's "Grand Delusion" does provide a good political background to events in the Middle East within the last forty-five years, it lacks relevant context. The moral issue is excusable in that most U.S. writers are so imbued with their own societal "exceptionalist – intentions are good" perspective that it becomes normal to expect it.

An interesting read in a backhanded sort of way, leading to some good discussion points by its omissions and perspectives.

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