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# Conflict and War in the Middle-East, 1967-1991: Regional Dynamic and the Superpowers

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*Conflict and War in the Middle East, 1967–1991: Regional Dynamic and the Superpowers.* By Bassam Tibi. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993. Pp. 253. \$39.95.)

*Reconstruction and Regional Diplomacy in the Persian Gulf.* Edited by Hooshang-Amirahmadi and Nader Entessar. (London: Routledge, 1992. Pp. 306. \$59.95 cloth.)

The two books under review here take substantially different approaches to Middle East politics. The first book attempts to examine the region by use of theory as well as empirics, whereas the second is primarily empirical in nature. The latter explains Middle East politics primarily from the regional perspective, and in particular, from Iran's vantage point, whereas the former places regional politics within the broader context of world politics.

Bassam Tibi uses systems "theory" in order to examine the interplay between regional dynamics and great power interests during the Middle East wars of 1967, 1973, and 1990–1991. In Tibi's view, world politics is composed of separate ideas or subsystems such as the Middle East, which are suitable units of analysis. These areas, which are delimited based on their structural interconnectedness and the degree of intensity of cooperation between actors (36), exhibit a degree of autonomy and a degree of integration in the global system.

Tibi deserves praise for attempting to study the Middle East from a theoretical perspective. The dearth of theory-oriented work on the region is unfortunate. Tibi's ability to draw on diverse literatures and on international relations writ large is also impressive and adds much to the book as does his effort to place Middle East war and conflict in historical context.

At the same time, the book has weaknesses. First, systems theory, which should be distinguished from Kenneth Waltz's systemic theory of neorealism, is much less a theory than an approach. By most standards, a theory is an internally consistent set of empirical generalizations which allow for some level of prediction. Systems "theory," particularly as it is applied in this book, does not generate predictions of any kind.

Tibi devotes two lengthy chapters to the systems approach. Yet, the approach is applied loosely and it is not fully clear that his empirical insights derive from it. The reader is left wondering at times what the systems approach reveals which otherwise would be elusive.

Second, his primary and secondary themes, while well-founded, are not particularly remarkable. Tibi argues that Middle East conflicts have their "own regional dynamic, while at the same time being incorporated into the global state system" (1). He laments what he perceives as a propensity to view these conflicts from the global perspective without giving due attention to key regional factors. For instance, he observes that few students disentangled the Arab-Israeli conflict from the competition prevailing between the superpowers and implies that many scholars saw superpower competition as the cause of regional war (3, 15). Yet, while he reminds us of the importance of regional dynamics, his point here is not altogether

lost on scholars. At a minimum, a stronger case should have been made that scholars have neglected the regional perspective.

The secondary theme of the book is that, contrary to expectations, great powers have difficulty controlling weaker states. This theme certainly has merit, but it also has a rather extensive pedigree in the international relations and Middle East literature. Tibi would have done well to present his theme in that tradition.

In empirical terms, Tibi does put Middle East conflict in both a regional and global context which is useful, albeit dated in certain sections. However, he tends at certain points to exaggerate the level of regional interconnectedness. For instance, he observes that the fact remains that the 1990–1991 Gulf crisis is “part and parcel of the overall regional structure of conflicts in the Middle East” (178).

One wonders what this means in practical terms, particularly given the fact that the etiology of the Gulf conflict, as the author himself observes, had little to do with other regional conflicts. Tibi observes that the “link between armed conflict in the Gulf and the other Middle Eastern conflicts begins with the fact that all Middle Eastern boundaries were drawn along colonial lines.” Yet, while this might be common to regional conflicts, it does not explain how they relate causally. And it is precisely this point that the reader seeks to understand not only because the author introduces it in his empirical account but also because it is relevant to his own systems approach.

In contrast to Tibi’s work, the edited volume by Hooshang Amirahmadi and Nader Entessar takes a nontheoretical approach to Middle East politics. It focuses on the themes of Islam and revolution, economic destruction and reconstruction of Iran’s economy, Iranian-Arab relations, and the superpowers and Iran. The editors put together an interesting, well-grouped, and informative set of essays by Keddie, Linabury, Norton, Amirahmadi, Ehteshami, Ahrari, Entessar, Milani, and Mesbahi.

As a whole, the book effectively presents Iran’s view of and position in regional and international politics. This is useful. For instance, we do not often think of Saudi Arabia as threatening Iran, but Entessar points out why Iran is legitimately concerned about the Saudi military buildup (218–19). Inasmuch as this is accurate, it has significant implications for Arab and American regional policy toward Iran.

However, the book also often mirrors Iran’s view on regional security without doing enough to convince the reader of its merits. Amirahmadi and Entessar make the point that regional security arrangements need to be made to obviate future outside military intervention which *invariably* will lead to disastrous consequences (4). But why is this so? While it is clear that, all other things being equal, nonintervention is preferable to intervention, it is not a maxim that interventions produce disastrous consequences. Would the region have been better off had Iraq’s aggression in Kuwait not been checked by the U.S.-led alliance? Iran itself, which condemns outside intervention, greatly benefited from U.S.-led action.

In any event, if outside intervention is counterproductive, then what might a regional security arrangement look like? Entessar argues that Iran should be integrated into Gulf security arrangements which so far have been based on American cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), consisting of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain (221). But this raises the critical questions of whether Iran (which has been viewed as part of the regional security problem) can now become part of its solution, and how it might be integrated. The book could do more to answer these key questions. In particular, the reader needs to be more convinced that pragmatists in Iran are in a substantially stronger position than “radicals,” and that Iran’s relations with regional states and with the United States are strong enough to make Iran’s inclusion in a regional security framework sensible.

The book does rightly point to the improvement in Iran’s relations with regional states from 1989 to 1991 (144), and to Iran’s increasing pragmatism (chap. 2), but this makes Iran’s August 1992 annexation of the strategic island of Abu Musa all the more perplexing. Abu Musa had been jointly administered by Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) under an agreement concluded in 1971, until Iran annexed it and took control of two neighboring islands, the Greater and Lesser Tunbs. This act cast some doubt on Iran’s role in regional security.

The chapters by Keddie, Linabury, and Norton do a good job of explaining the impact of Iran’s revolution. Keddie asks why Iran has been so revolutionary in history, and applies an interesting, implicit comparative approach to answer this question. But the reader seeks to know more about which causes of revolution are most important and how they interact to produce revolution. Linabury examines Khomeini’s legacy and impact regionally, whereas Norton explores the link between the Iranian revolution and the Lebanese Shi’a community. These two chapters, which take a macro- and micro-level approach respectively, are complementary and highly useful, particularly given the growing importance of Islamic fundamentalism.

Amirahmadi’s two chapters on Iranian economic destruction and reconstruction offer an informative, competent overview of the impact of the Iran-Iraq war on Iran’s economy and of Iran’s attempt to revive its war-torn economy. However, more analysis of the interplay between economics and Iran’s foreign policy is needed. For instance, Amirahmadi observes that Iran is advocating economic cooperation over balance-of-power politics (137). If accurate, this point has serious implications for American and Arab policy toward Iran, and thus deserves more attention.

Ehteshami’s chapter 6 traverses familiar ground, but does offer a sense of the evolution of Iranian politics toward increased pragmatism. Ahrari’s chapter 7 assesses the role of the GCC in Gulf security, whereas Entessar proposes a framework for regional stability. These chapters, however, were written prior to Iran’s annexation of Abu Musa, which as noted earlier, casts some doubt on Iran’s regional intentions.

The concluding chapters by Milani and Mesbahi examine Iran's relations with the superpowers. Mesbahi observes that American and Soviet misunderstanding of the religious component of the Iranian revolution undermined their foreign policy toward Iran, and Milani asserts that America displayed an "institutional inability to adjust quickly to revolutionary change in the third world" (256). Both points are probably true, but one wonders whether a more intelligent American policy toward Iran could have prevented the clash between America and Iran. If not, then the problem lies not only with the United States but elsewhere as well.

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