Middle East

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To cite this article: Ray Takeyh (2019) Middle East, Survival, 61:2, 218-224, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2019.1589100

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2019.1589100

Published online: 19 Mar 2019.

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Covert Regime Change: America’s Secret Cold War
£33.00/$39.95. 330 pp.

‘Regime change’ is a dirty word in key sectors of Washington today. The very idea conjures up memories of the Iraq War, which almost everyone in the US foreign-policy establishment supported but then came to regret. Yet regime change was a favourite tool of American policymakers during the Cold War. The results, as the book Covert Regime Change demonstrates, were uneven.

The Cold War was a unique and perhaps exceptional period in international history. Two superpowers, both imbued with universalist ideologies, confronted each other, but war was not an option given the shadow of nuclear arms. This made espionage and intrigue all the more important.

Of all the Cold War’s covert operations, the 1953 coup in Iran stands as a defining moment. It is one of the few Cold War plots for which American officials have apologised. The complexity of the event, and the role of domestic actors, have been swept aside in favour of the simple-minded narrative that America overthrew a democratically elected government and thus somehow helped usher in a theocratic state two decades later. The author naturally explores this issue, but stays within the narrow confines of the existing historiography.

Among the United States’ regime-change enthusiasts was none other than George F. Kennan, the father of containment. Kennan’s role in formulating early covert plots has been largely airbrushed from his legacy, yet he was one of the individuals responsible for sending Albanian exiles back to Albania, one of the Cold War’s darkest chapters. The exiles had no chance, as British double agents had informed Joseph Stalin of their plans. Even if they hadn’t, it remains doubtful that these interventions would have had any chance of destabilising the Soviet empire.

The American intelligence services were occasionally successful. Washington’s support for Solidarity in Poland and other Eastern European democratic dissidents helped sustain movements seeking progressive change. But these were indigenous forces that the US had not created, and that could not have succeeded solely on the basis of US support. Moreover, author Lindsey O’Rourke demonstrates that, in many cases, America’s support for regime change backfired and helped produce unsavoury governments that rejected its values.

It remains difficult to assess the true value of covert plots. When they succeed, that success can often be attributed to many factors beyond the control of the
CIA. When they fail, the opprobrium is real and the costs all too evident. Still, *Covert Regime Change* is a valuable book that sheds light on an important issue. As America once more recoils from using its armed forces, the temptation to rely on covert operations will increase. Perhaps some cautionary advice is needed.

**The Shah, the Islamic Revolution and the United States**


Dariush Bayandor, a former diplomat in the shah’s foreign ministry, has taken a stab at unravelling the Iranian Revolution. The result is an important and honest appraisal that adds to our understanding of how a formidable monarchy came crumbling down in 1979. Bayandor promises in his preface to produce an account that is ‘apolitical and non-judgmental’, and he largely honours his pledge. Even more importantly, unlike many other functionaries of the Pahlavi state, he avoids any reliance on conspiracy theories to explain the revolution. It has been a favourite trope of many Iranian exiles, including the shah himself, that the CIA was responsible for the overthrow of the monarchy. Thankfully, Bayandor puts this canard to rest.

In the 1970s, there were many indications that Iran was a country in crisis. The disorder was chronicled by academics and foreign intelligence services alike, who noted youth alienation, middle-class discontent, rampant corruption, an uneven distribution of wealth and a religious revival that made Islam central to the evolving opposition. Yet somehow the monarch and his defenders overlooked the urban guerrillas fresh from the universities who were determined to terrorise the elite. By the mid-1970s, even the shah seemed concerned, initiating a ham-fisted liberalisation programme that unleashed societal forces which would eventually overwhelm his system. All this is adeptly recounted by Bayandor.

The author next turns to the actual revolution. All the critical events are here: the initial murmurs of protest in 1978; the Cinema Rex fire that was instigated by the Islamists and blamed on the monarchy; the Black Friday massacre in September whose casualty figures were exaggerated by the foreign press to the detriment of the shah; and finally the confusion of the Pahlavi state. Iran’s formidable army turned out to be a paper tiger controlled by generals who did not wish to use force. The intelligence service (SAVAK) turned out to be good at surveillance but poor at predicting the coming storm. All of its files pertaining to the revolution, as well as the cabinet deliberations of the shah’s last two prime ministers and military high command, have been published by the Islamic Republic, and might have helped round out the story if they had been among the vast quantities of Persian sources consulted by Bayandor.
Many of the Carter administration’s papers, meanwhile, remain under lock and key. While it may be regrettable that the Islamic Republic is more open about these matters than the US government, the perspective of the uncomprehending Carter White House may not be that important. Americans like to make everything about themselves, but the revolution seems to have been a domestic Iranian drama that for once was impervious to foreign manipulation.

Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy

Dilip Hiro is one of the most prolific scholars of the Middle East, and there is little that escapes his notice. In this volume, he takes an in-depth look at the new cold war that is brewing in the region. The resulting analysis may cover familiar ground, but the book is still a welcome addition to the literature.

The Middle East is a region that constantly divides against itself. During the Cold War, the region fractured along ideological lines, with conservative monarchies led by Saudi Arabia contesting the radical republics led by Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt. It is telling that this competition was ended in 1967 by Israel, which humbled the radicals in the Six-Day War. As Israel laid waste to the armies of Egypt and Syria, Nasser decided to sue for peace and make amends with the Saudi monarchy that he had spent a decade demonising. The Iranian shah was a minor player in all this, but still sided with the monarchies. He also hated Nasser and conveniently blamed him for many of his country’s internal problems, even though there was no evidence of Egyptian support for Iranian dissidents.

Hiro chronicles how, despite all their differences (particularly when it came to oil policy), the two monarchies managed to get along and cooperate against common foes. All this changed with the advent of the Islamic Republic. Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the theocracy, had as much contempt for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf’s princely class as he did for America. His most consequential move was to seek to undermine these regimes by backing their local opponents. The Gulf rulers paid him back by financing the Iraqi war effort against Iran, before falling victim to Saddam Hussein’s aggression themselves.

The acrimony between the two states has occasionally been reduced through diplomatic mediation. Two Iranian presidents – Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami – and at least one Saudi ruler, King Abdullah, tried to mend fences. The two sides sporadically signed agreements of cooperation and trade pacts. There were official visits, and King Abdullah even entertained the purchase of a summer home on the banks of the Caspian Sea. But all this came to
nought. The region today is too divided and too disorderly for the two leading Islamist states to keep their competition in check. As the region fractures along sectarian lines, it is hard to see how this rivalry will end. Hiro’s book may touch on many familiar themes, but it serves as a useful reminder of past experience at a time when a new cold war is developing in the Middle East.

**Lords of the Desert: The Battle Between the United States and Great Britain for Supremacy in the Modern Middle East**  

As the United States seeks to relieve itself of its Middle Eastern burden, historians are once more revisiting the theme of imperial displacement – how one empire comes to replace another. The Middle East’s history as a contested terrain between an aspiring America and an exhausted Britain is too prominent a case study to overlook. Despite its sensationalist title, Barr’s *Lords of the Desert* is a judicious and well-written account that revisits all the familiar episodes but does so with verve and good humour.

It must be stressed that for America’s Cold War planners, the British Empire in the Middle East was a useful barrier to Soviet infiltration. The United States never thought of the Cold War as a battle it could wage on its own, and desperately needed allies to pull their own weight. Still, the two sides had many disagreements over the Middle East. The British looked with scepticism on Harry Truman’s support for Israel, even though foreign secretary Ernest Bevin initially thought of Mandatory Palestine as an important outpost for the far-flung empire. It was only after Zionist resistance that London handed its charge to the United Nations, which was hardly prepared to deal with such an intricate matter. The United States was not responsible for Britain’s eviction, but Whitehall continued to nurture its grievances.

No one was more in favour of Anglo-American harmony than Dwight Eisenhower, a man who first liberated Europe and then, as commander of NATO, safeguarded it from the Soviet Union. But Eisenhower appreciated the arrival of post-colonial nationalism and the need for Britain to make its own adjustments. The more clever functionaries in the Foreign Office saw this too, but Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden were loath to relinquish their imperial aspirations. Eden’s Suez folly in 1956 was the true end of the empire. In an age of superpowers, a middle power like Britain could not expect American acquiescence as it colluded with France and Israel to invade a sovereign country under false pretences.

As the author demonstrates, after Suez, Britain remained a Middle Eastern power, but only in the Gulf. The Arab sheikdoms had their own interpretation
of nationalism and much preferred Britain to their menacing neighbours to the north. By the mid-1960s, Harold Wilson’s Labour government was too beset by currency problems and the demands of the welfare state to sustain its Arab ramparts. The empire was finally relinquished because of domestic deficits. The British experience may hold an important lesson: fiscal indiscipline at home inevitably erodes global standing.

**Challenged Hegemony: The United States, China, and Russia in the Persian Gulf**

*Challenged Hegemony* attempts to chronicle the rise of China and Russia in the Middle East. There is much in this account that is sensible and judicious, yet too often its reasoned arguments are marred by unnecessary theorising and stylistic inelegance. Political science can be a tedious discipline, even when it stumbles on a good idea.

The authors present a history of Russia’s, China’s and the United States’ involvement in the region, in which Moscow and Beijing gradually increase their presence and seek commercial opportunities. China appears to have taken the wisest course, keeping its military away from the morass of the Middle East yet reaping benefits from the region’s turbulence. The clear winners of America’s war in Iraq are the Chinese energy firms that are busy exploring Iraq’s oilfields. Meanwhile, US sanctions on Iran mostly keep that country’s oil out of international markets, allowing China to purchase it, often at a discount given the seller’s desperation. As for Russia, the country’s imperialist instincts seem to have prevented it from becoming a successful mercantile power. Moscow’s involvement in the Syrian civil war has definite costs, but the benefits are not always evident. Why does Russia need military bases in the Levant? How does its enabling of a regime that is responsible for war crimes enhance its reputation either in the region or further afield?

The authors most trenchant, if understated, criticism is aimed at the United States. During the Cold War, successive American presidents proclaimed the Middle East as vital to the containment of the Soviet Union. Its strategic location and oil reserves made it indispensable to winning the war. Yet America’s actual military presence in the region was negligible. Iraq proved to be the trapdoor that plunged America into the Gulf. Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait led to the dispatch of half a million US troops and a series of security agreements with the Gulf states, which resulted in a massive US military presence that quickly seemed permanent. America’s boldest misadventure in the region
was to come with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 – an attempt to refashion Iraq’s stubborn politics through the use of force. It is hard to identify any benefits for the US of that invasion, which cost thousands of lives and trillions of dollars. The region is more disorderly than ever before, and Americans are experiencing buyer’s remorse.

Perhaps one day, Russia and China will make detrimental mistakes of their own in the Middle East. Russia seems more susceptible to imperial hubris, while the leadership in Beijing appears too level-headed and too amoral to concern itself with the region’s political culture. The Chinese came for oil and care for little else. Should Russia repeat America’s mistakes, East Asia’s rising star will surely be the beneficiary.