

A Choice of Enemies - America Confronts the Middle East

Review of Lawrence Freedman's book

By [Jim Miles](#)

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A Choice of Enemies - America Confronts the Middle East. Lawrence Freedman. Anchor Canada (Random House). 2009.



The subtitle to this text carries an interesting choice of active verb, “confronts”. It signifies “coming face to face in hostility or defiance.” That alone brings to question the U.S. perspective, generally expressed in most U.S. media that U.S. intentions are generally positive or at best benign (“kind or gracious to inferiors”) and are done to assist the others involved within U.S. actions.

Preface

The preface and last chapter of Lawrence Freedman’s *A Choice of Enemies* expresses this same double standard of how the U.S. explains itself in association with whatever action it takes on a given issue. Freedman’s “amero-centric” viewpoint (with apologies to all the other citizens of the Americas not living in the U.S.) is clearly expressed in the preface and last chapter of the book. He writes that the wars, the confrontations are “not the result of avarice...nor for a want of beneficence,” but “with genuine conviction, commitments were made to work to improve the lives of ordinary people in the region.”

The U.S. is “not the first external power to struggle in this part of the world,” a part of the world that “contains multiple sources of tension.” The obvious disconnect here is that some of the major “sources of tension” happen to be all the imperial forces that have invaded and occupied the lands over that past couple of centuries. Yes, “the Middle East has lacked the economic and political integration that has worked to encourage more cooperative relationships in other parts of the world,” but again, that task becomes difficult with external empires fighting for control over the area, for resources, for guarding routes of transport, and for providing spheres of influence to control other empire’s interests.

For all its problems, it is not possible for the U.S. to ignore the area because “they get drawn back in” with oil listed as the first reason, its anti-western militancy as the second reason, and trade routes coming third (with much of that trade related to oil transportation). Once again, this only highlights a great disconnect between stated intentions and the geo-strategic reasons for being involved in the area. Freedman reflects on his subtitle and says

that the U.S. engagement in the Middle East has “appeared rather confrontational” but that the “aspiration is for complete harmony.” It can readily be argued that the confrontation is way beyond “appearances” and that the “aspiration” for harmony can only be interpreted as harmony within total dominance by the U.S. empire, an empire based on military control and resource extraction. The will of the people has never been of prime concern for U.S. political structures (inclusive of the government, corporations, and the military).

In the preface, and along the historical route traced by Freedman occur smaller “amero-centrism”. The 1991 Iraq war is seen as “necessary” although arguments for it have never been strong in my interpretations. He argues about the “supposed backing given to Osama bin Laden by the CIA” implying that this did not happen, but within context, the assistance provided by the CIA and the U.S. government for the mujahideen in general did indirectly support bin Laden as well as other insurgent “freedom fighters” as expressed by Reagan at the time. He argues speciously about the military aid to Israel being “dwarfed by the size of the Arab market,” without the context of the recirculation of petro-dollars to U.S. firms and limitations on degree of arms quality and support to the other markets.

The preface ends with the admission that “there have been some staggering misjudgments[sic]. At times policies have been decided without due care and attention, sometimes in panic and sometimes with a cavalier optimism.” The implication here is the old standby “Our intentions were good but, wow, did we ever screw up.” Unfortunately that is fully unrealistic, as the intentions of the U.S. empire have consistently been for the protection of resources and the deflection of other imperial interests away from those resources. Democracy, freedom, “aspirations” and “harmony” are only there to make the actions acceptable to the gullible public at home. The Middle East does not buy into it.

Last Chapter

The last short chapter reiterates the same message. Again ignoring the influence of outside empires in the region Freedman argues that the “continuity of the problems facing the Middle East...are too rooted in the institutional structures, power balances, and cultures of the region.” No direct mention is given to the various empires that have attacked the region, and tried to overlay it with their own structures of control and their own political boundaries to create their own spheres of influence. The same idea is expressed for the future as “the cards will be shuffled and new configurations of power will emerge, probably more as a result of internal upheavals than of external aggression.” I suppose that the new surge in Afghanistan, the attacks and manipulations in Pakistan, the continued occupation of Iraq, the threats and subversion being applied to Iran, the acquiescence to the settlement projects in the West Bank of Palestine are all “internal upheavals.” There is a distinct lack of logical connections to Freedman’s statements.

While accepting the “unpredictability” of the Middle East, Freedman also indicates there is an “unpredictability” from the U.S. based on its short cycle of presidential elections. That simply serves as an excuse for the rather predictable and confrontational manner in which the U.S. has acted in all its spheres of influence throughout its history, from the genocide of the native population through its continental conquests then its quests overseas. The unpredictability that does arrive comes from ignorance, arrogance, and opportunism, more recently expressed in the new “contingency” force design for the military (contingency – uncertainty of occurrence).

The difficulties the U.S. is having in the Middle East are discussed as appearances. For the U.S. as “an outside power...Its motives will always be suspect.” The U.S. has “spoken at times as if they have a civilizing mission.” The latter, in a strange spurious twist of argument, is blamed on the Middle East itself (sort of like the Israelis blaming the Palestinians for the occupation and its violence) as “there is something about the region that lead outsiders to act in ways that reflect the region’s own mores and practices.”

I’m amazed that such an ignorant statement, such an illogical statement could be made.

No, quite the opposite, although the people in the region are not saints, they act the way they do significantly because of the outside influences, the importation of influences of supporting ruthless regimes, dictators and autocrats, influences of military violence and torture which have been the main vehicle of foreign interventions in the region.

And again, smaller items appear that are interpreted strictly by the “amero-centric” viewpoint. An argument that perhaps Mossadegh should not have been “dealt” with, but that may have not been a “real historic choice, for the nationalists were hardly masters of good governance.” Ahh, yes, those nasty popular and democratically elected socialists who wanted to control their own resources, nasty bunch not allowing us – well the British at the time, same difference – to have our oil resources.

Other sentences just don’t make sense: “The rhetoric of good and evil, the polarizing demands of “with us or against us,” the insistence on one strategic imperative above all others are undermined by the complexity of regional conflict and the interplay of forces.” Does that mean that the rhetoric is undermined, that the rhetoric would be okay if the region were not complex?

Freedman’s final statement is a wonderful piece of more double talk. The U.S. must “revive their diplomatic skills...work with the local political grain without losing a sense of purpose and principle...encouraging a positive engagement with the rest of the world.” Yes, the U.S. must revive their currently confrontational diplomatic skills, but also must revive some fundamental principles of human rights, and most certainly, the U.S. should change to a positive engagement with the rest of the world – yet somehow I do not think this is the intended interpretation of the statement. His final word, “If the region is to advance...” the U.S. will have to “make the right choices” but so will the “people of the Middle East.” They already have, they want the U.S. to go home. Will the U.S. make the right choice?

The rest of the book – works

Well, the rest of the book, surprisingly, works. It is not the best work on the Middle East and is based on research mainly from other book sources, a compilation of historical information rather than first hand research. But Freedman does provide a reasonably good political overview of events concerning the Middle East with most references coming from western sources.

In an area that has huge geostrategic interest, Palestine and Israel, A Choice of Enemies works well. From my research over the last several years, the chapters on Palestine – “Camp David”, “The Intifada”, and “Return to Camp David” – are well balanced and accurate. While there are many other references that could have been utilized, the chapters on Palestine

give a generally accurate picture of Palestine/U.S./Israeli relationships, in particular around the time of the first intifada.

There are some problems along the way in similar veins as the Iraq war and Mossadegh statements made above, but the overall information, the general presentation of the flow of events reads quite well from all the sources that I have read – many of which are listed in Freedman’s bibliography.

There are no new ideas here, but for a lay person wanting a general overview of trends in the Middle East this is a reasonable source of information on how the various U.S. administrations worked their way through the complexities of the Middle East. The reader needs to read the book aware of the “amero-centric” view expressed at the beginning and the end, but they could also do well to simply ignore those passages and get on with reading the rest.

Jim Miles is a Canadian educator and a regular contributor/columnist of opinion pieces and book reviews for [The Palestine Chronicle](#). Miles’ work is also presented globally through other alternative websites and news publications.

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