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Book Review | International Relations



INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

America's Middle East: The Ruination of a Region. By Marc Lynch. New York: Oxford University Press, 2025. 304p. doi:10.1017/S1537502728106666

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In the opening of the preface to Marc Lynch's important new work, the author acknowledges that he began writing the book "in a moment of rage" in response to US support for Israel's genocidal onslaught against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, what he recognizes as just one of a number of tragic missteps in US Middle East policy in which administrations of both parties have ignored the broad consensus of political scientists specializing in the region.

I am writing this review as the United States is entering the fourth week of its war on Iran, and I, too, am filled with rage. It would be hard to find any political scientist specializing in the Middle East who believed that the Iranian regime would easily collapse, that it would not be able to utilize a dangerous retaliatory capability, or that it could not effectively close the Strait of Hormuz.

Similarly, whether it be in regard to the invasion of Iraq, support for Israel's wars and occupation, or the backing of Arab dictatorships, policymakers of both parties have largely dismissed our warnings that, even putting aside the important moral and legal issues, such short-sighted policies make the region less stable and actually harm long-term US interests.

This is perhaps the single most important work focusing on US Middle East policy in recent years. It is quite readable and suitable both for area specialists and those without extensive knowledge of the region.

Lynch is a professor at the Elliot School of International Affairs at George Washington University, has worked at two prominent think tanks, has served in a policy role in presidential campaigns, and has advised presidents and other top officials. Over the years, policymakers of both parties have had plenty of opportunity to consider the counsel of him and other Middle East scholars. Outside of climate scientists, it is hard to find a field in which the urgent advice of specialists has been so routinely ignored.

While largely free of the ideological baggage of some critics of US Middle East policy, Lynch does not hold back in this volume. Perhaps, at this point, it is not surprising that even a sober, professional, and well-connected scholar like Lynch now feels obliged to critically analyze US policy in ways that at one point would have come across as strident, particularly in a book with a major academic publishing house. At this stage, however, it is quite appropriate.

And, in part because he is something of a Washington insider, he is able to offer a structural and comprehensive analysis of decades of failed policies.

The book's title, "America's Middle East," underscores how US primacy has fundamentally shaped Middle Eastern politics in the 35 years since the Gulf War. Lynch certainly does not blame the United States for everything and fully acknowledges how local actors have contributed to their own problems, yet he notes how Washington does share responsibility in many cases by dominating, sustaining, and shaping the environment, which makes such misrule possible.

Lynch outlines how in the three and a half decades since the United States achieved primacy in the Middle East, it has done little to bring greater justice, stability, democracy, or sustainable economic development to the region. Indeed, more often than not, it has done just the opposite.

He recognizes how, despite pro-democracy rhetoric, the United States depends on autocratic allies to advance its agenda. He also notes how US policies have helped create terrorists faster than we can kill them.

While Lynch observes both how Bush's invasion of Iraq and a number of Trump's policies have represented the worst manifestations of the US role in the Middle East, he emphasizes that there has been much continuity as well. Both Republican and Democratic administrations have supported repressive autocratic governments, threatened war with Iran, supported Israel's wars and occupations, and pushed for normalization between Israel and Arab states while ignoring the fate of Palestinians.

Indeed, Lynch observes how, even under the Democratic administration of Joe Biden, the United States was virtually alone in the United Nations blocking resolutions calling for a ceasefire, attacking the integrity of the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice, supporting Israel's seizure of additional Syrian territory, backing Israel's war on Lebanon, and providing massive amounts of arms to enable that far right government to continue killing with impunity. This policy, supported by the Democratic leadership in Congress, severely damaged US standing in the world, weakening US leadership on Ukraine and other foreign policy priorities by exposing the lie to the claim that US foreign policy was rooted in support of international law and a rules-based international order. Meanwhile, at home, the Biden administration's attacks on student anti-war demonstrators as allegedly being "anti-Semitic" helped pave the way for the Trump administration's crackdown on higher education.

Lynch is honest and bold enough to recognize the underlying racism in US policy, which assumes the rights of Israeli Jews are more important than those of Palestinian Arabs, acts as if Arab peoples are okay with corrupt autocratic rulers, and believes that Arabs and Iranians welcome US sanctions and military intervention. As Lynch says, "they are seen as problems to be solved, audiences to be manipulated, assets to be mobilized, subjects to be studied ... anything but people to be treated as