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Review

Complex Effects of International Relations: Intended and Unintended Consequences of Human Actions in Middle East Conflicts

Ofer Israeli. New York: SUNY Press, 2020. 297pp.

Kenneth Christie *

Ofer Israeli, in this book, offers us an original and encompassing study of the complex effects of international relations, elucidating for readers the intended and unintended consequences of human action. And that is no simple task given the often-chaotic way that international relations seem to play out in real life. Hindsight, particularly in international relations is beneficial but not always conducive to change and how we make decision-making effective goes beyond how we see our national interests play out. Any effort to alleviate, change these disastrous outcomes in the post 1945 period would have been welcome but we can see there are appropriate and skillful lessons to be learned now and developed in practice.

Divided into four sections the book neatly layers the theoretical and then practical ways in which this happens. As Israeli argues, “the book explores the nonlinear dynamics

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of the international system and it tackles two main themes of *complex* effects with three subcategories: first, the complexity of unintended consequences, including rebound results and derivative products, and second the complexity of intended consequences including circuitous but intended consequences” (viii–x).

Many decisions made by the highest levels of state officialdom are often made under pressure cooler-like circumstances. These are often made with incomplete information and unknown outcomes. This book seeks to analyze these dilemmas and offers insightful perspectives into one of the most pressing problems in international relations. How can we carry out foreign policy in such changing circumstances?

Exploring the nonlinear ways in which the international system works, Israeli makes plain his interests in the subject. In the first part he is looking at the development of the “theory of international relations research” which argues that shifts in theory should give rise to new propositions and predictions. Secondly, he is looking at opportunities to address the empirical implications of the study. This latter aspect is assessing two things. Firstly, an attempt to explain these complex interactions retrospectively, and what he argues are the “unexpected and accidental” results of the U.S., Britain and other powers intervening in the Middle East from 1945 to now. Secondly, Israeli is looking at developing a complex-causal mechanism as he describes it that could have the practical application for practical foreign policy decisions of states whether future great powers or small and medium states.

Israeli argues this is important because it is a real contribution to international relations theory on the one hand and secondly, and even more crucial, because of the empirical applications of these and thus “help decision makers avoid some costly errors in the international arena” (x). In some ways this is to be welcomed, with international relations theorists being criticized for not being able to predict or foretell complex scenarios such as the end of the cold war for instance and the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is Israeli’s treatment of these complex events which aims to provide some way to assess, evaluate and implement policies which may reduce conflict and war with specific reference to the conflict prone Middle East. This is certainly a step forward from abstract theorizing to practical implications for statesmen and women seeking longer term solutions to conflict prevention and resolution.

The case studies are linked to conflicts in The Middle East of course, including the June 1967 Six Day war and what Israeli calls a rebound result in the 1973 war (of Yom

Kippur). I liked the case studies but felt they were limited and might have been expanded upon. It would be interesting, for instance, to see the unintended effects of non-conflict scenarios which relate to long standing conflicts in the Middle East as well; for instance, the recent peace “agreements” between gulf states and Israel which has went some way to normalizing relationships.

Moreover, few conflicts in the Middle East have such potential for undermining the social and political stability found in the region than the Saudi-Iran conflict and the schisms found within Islam. These types of large-scale macro-conflicts are not really touched upon in the text and perhaps a follow up expanding on different types of conflict and interventions would make this more interesting and reveal the complexities.

One of the things I like about the book is that it is extremely clear and articulate in its goals and purpose. This book flows seamlessly from one argument/account to another. And to some extent it really is about taming what seems like a chaotic conflict by introducing conflict resolution terms and working in negotiations. If this book brings Israel and Palestine closer to achieving this, then it will have been worth the effort. I would recommend the book for students and others interested in the international relations between states in the Middle East and it would be interesting to see the cases expanded on, regionally and on a global scale. However, Israeli offers a rich texture in the case studies he provides working through such an innovative and fresh perspective on the problem.