

RASHID KHALIDI, *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009). Pp. 308 \$25.95

In *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* author Rashid Khalidi offers a compelling alternative history of America's role in the Middle East during the Cold War. Utilizing a wealth of recently unclassified Soviet and American state records, Khalidi skillfully maneuvers around Cold War rhetoric to uncover the underlying strategic concerns that drove Soviet and American policy in the Middle East during their nearly five-decade long global struggle. Khalidi rejects traditional historiography that tells the story of the Cold War in the Middle East solely in terms of U.S. attempts to contain Soviet influence. Rather, he aims to "alert readers to the damage and dangers imposed on small countries and the vulnerable peoples of the Middle East by the ill-advised grand designs of the great powers" (Khalidi 2009, xiv). Furthermore, he argues that the "grand designs" of the great powers were not driven by ideological but rather strategic considerations, which fueled regional conflicts and severely stunted the growth of democratic and civil institutions in the Middle East (Khalidi 2009, 103).

Khalidi begins his history of American hegemony in the Middle East by outlining how great power politics exacerbated existing regional cleavages and provoked war. He contends that the Middle East was a prime target for penetration by global superpowers because of the region's geostrategic importance and oil wealth. To illustrate the degree to which the Middle East was ensnared in great power politics Khalidi points to three protracted and bloody conflicts; that between the Arabs and Israelis, the 1975-1990 war in Lebanon, and the Iran-Iraq War. He argues that the United States and Soviet Union escalated each of these conflicts through the supply of arms, funds, and in some cases direct political and military intervention, in support of regional proxies, whose overall success or failure they saw as directly related to their prestige.

In addition to viewing the Cold War as a catalyst for regional conflict, the author blames foreign intervention for the lack of democratization in the Middle East. He points out that many areas of Africa, Latin American, and Southeast Asia were at the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century synonymous with, "arbitrary, autocratic, or otherwise undemocratic governance" (Khalidi, 2009, 160). Whereas today many of these regions boast flourishing democracies, the Middle East stands out for its near complete lack of democratic growth. The author rejects the ill-informed and ahistorical idea that the lack of democratization in the Middle East is the result of something inherent in Islam. Rather, he claims that the Cold War has contributed to the retardation of democratic development in the region in two distinct ways. First, the exacerbation of regional cleaves and conflicts, "has led to a strengthening of the executive authority at the expense of other branches of government and the expense of the citizenry and its rights" (Khalidi 2009,

163). Secondly, Khalidi calls attention to the fact that, beyond simply creating conditions adverse to democracy, the United States has blatantly sabotaged democratic governments in the region. His two most potent examples being the 1953 CIA supported overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh and the rigging of the 1957 parliamentary elections in Lebanon at the behest of Lebanon's pro-Western president Camille Chamoun (Khalidi 2009, 195).

In the final section of *Sowing Crisis* Khalidi examines America's post-Cold War role in the Middle East. He contends that despite the fact that great power conflicts provoked war and undermined democracy in the Middle East, they nonetheless provided for the establishment of stable parameters for conflict resulting in largely "compartmentalized" conflicts that had little impact on the region as a whole. However, those parameters largely collapsed along with the Soviet Union in 1991 and as a result, today the United States operates as the world's sole superpower. Khalidi goes on to contend that during the eight years of the George W. Bush presidency the United States, "disdained, degraded, and ignored" the forms and institutions of international law in the name of a global war on terrorism, which has largely replaced Communism as America's penultimate bogeyman. He warns that if this war is continued in the form that it was initiated following September 11, 2001 the U.S. may well face "a series of campaigns longer and certainly bloodier than the Cold War" (Khalidi 249, 2009).

*Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* is impressive in breadth of historical fact and rich interpretation. Khalidi's ability to place the events of the Cold War into the wider context of Western Imperialism and the nationalism born as a response makes *Sowing Crisis* a valuable and refreshing addition to existing Cold War historiography. Furthermore, Khalidi's keen understanding of the myriad regional complexities at work in the Middle East and his utilization of recently declassified American and Soviet state records makes *Sowing Crisis* a must read for students, scholars, and policymakers alike. However, despite his keen knowledge of the regional complexities Khalidi's failure to give regional actors appropriate agency for their role whether negative or positive, in the shaping of events, is a shortcoming of the work.

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