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Agents of Their Own Destiny

Today, the ills of the Middle East are often blamed on colonialism, imperialism or ‘Satans’ great or small. Nonsense, argues the author.

By **NEIL ROGACHEVSKY**

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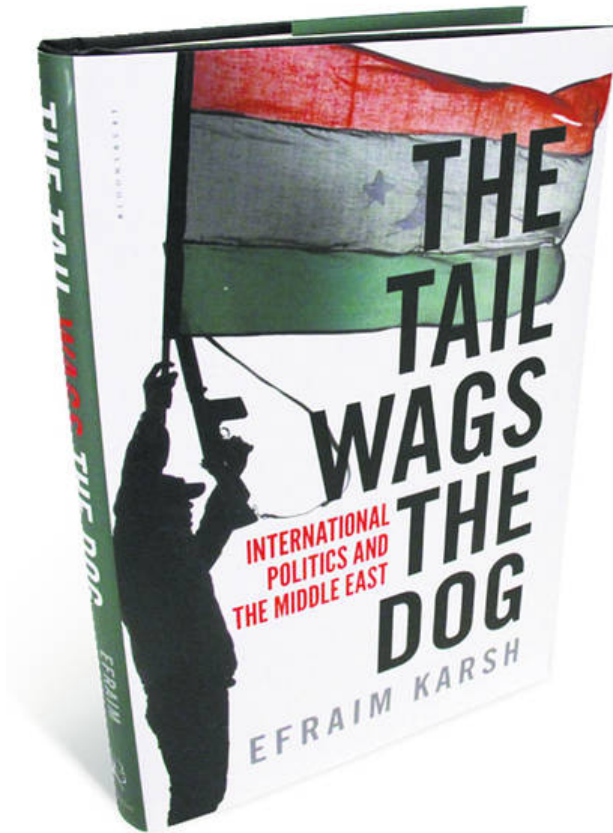
By 1947 the British, who had ruled mandatory Palestine since 1917, lost the will to remain. Their exhaustion was the catalyst for the 1947-48 war and the establishment of Israel. As Sir Alan Cunningham, the British High Commissioner, told the head of Jewish settlement, David Ben-Gurion, who would go on to become Israel’s first prime minister: “The British people are bloody fed up with the whole mess.”

After two costly wars, the disappointments of the misnamed Arab Spring, and the ever-worsening situation in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen, Americans can be forgiven for flirting with a similar sentiment today. No doubt some of the support for the feckless Iran deal stems from fatigue at the prospect of confronting another enemy in a region that seems to confound us.

In “The Tail Wags the Dog,” Efraim Karsh cautions against a total mental and literal withdrawal from the Middle East. Yet the author, a longtime professor at King’s College London now teaching in Israel, does propose a certain strategic humility: “Just as no foreign surgeon could have saved the ‘Sick Man of Europe’ (as the Ottoman Empire was famously known) unless he helped himself, so no ‘only remaining superpower’ can fix the Middle East’s endemic malaise,” he writes.

In his fast-paced history of British, American and Russian involvement in the Middle East since World War I, Mr. Karsh argues that foreign powers have had a much more limited impact on regional politics than is sometimes assumed. Success stories like the emergence of Turkey as a secular modern state in the 1920s was not due to British and French foresight but to the near-genius statecraft of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979 was the result of local factors seized upon by local players rather than American diplomacy.

Similarly, the sectarian violence currently engulfing the region is, at root, the product of religious and political divisions that foreign



powers have sometimes helped contain but have never resolved. Far from being the instruments of great powers, Middle Easterners have been “active and enterprising free agents doggedly pursuing their national interests and swaying the region pretty much in their desired

THE TAIL WAGS THE DOG

By Efraim Karsh
(Bloomsbury, 236 pages, \$28)

direction.”

Mr. Karsh’s account deserves credit for granting Middle Easterners their own agency. At a time when

the ills of the Middle East are so often blamed on colonialism, imperialism or “Satans” great or small, the author’s perspective is refreshing. (And in academic departments of Middle Eastern Studies, which remain in thrall of Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism, it can be close to heresy.)

One of the more persuasive sections of “The Tail Wags the Dog” concerns the founding of the Arab states in the aftermath in World War I, when, the story goes, the allied powers divvied up Arab lands according to their own imperial interests. Mr. Karsh shows that the creation of a unitary Iraq in 1921—often said to be the product of a Winston Churchill pen stroke—was in fact largely due to the

Hashemite Emir Faisal, who would become its first king. After having been expelled from Syria in 1920 by the French, Faisal, by hook and by crook, made himself the indispensable man and won Britain over to the idea of a kingdom of Iraq.

Faisal may have been expert at winning prominent backers to his side, but Mr. Karsh fails to ask why the British would be liable to trust men like Faisal in the first place. Indeed, Britain pioneered the approach of “doing business” with allegedly trustworthy clients while avoiding direct intervention in the local political process. It is an approach alive and well today in America’s relationship with Saudi Arabia. For good or ill, it has had a huge impact on the Middle East.

In attempting to counteract the dominant narrative of Middle Easterners as pawns of foreign powers, Mr. Karsh seriously underplays major developments in geopolitics and ideas. While he accepts that the fall of the Soviet Union was important, Mr. Karsh does not explain how the loss of this powerful patron caused entities like the PLO and countries like Syria to pursue public or private negotiation with Israel. Perhaps most surprisingly, the book barely grapples with the impact of the Iraq War or the Great Recession.

The author attributes the rise of Islamist politics in the Arab Spring to the fact that Muslim populations have been “unaffected by secularization and modernization.” But this proposition is powerfully refuted by the fact that parents and grandparents of today’s firebrand Islamists, whether in Europe or the Middle East, had far less trouble with the separation of religion and politics than their offspring. Islamism has been a reaction to modernism and secularism—in other words, to political and religious ideas that were foreign creations.

“The Tail Wags the Dog” does not succeed in proving that foreigners have been powerless to shape the Middle East, but it does effectively show how Westerners have been so often caught flat-footed by events there. Time and again we see diplomats and experts unable to anticipate war, coups-d’état and revolution. Perhaps the likes of Bernard Lewis could foresee what he called “the return of Islam” in 1976, but few others did. Most notably, Mr. Karsh shows how Washington had little idea that the “unrest” in Iran in late 1978 was a revolution and that the Shah could fall. In case you are inclined to blame Jimmy Carter, consider the fall of Hosni Mubarak in 2011, which should have been utterly predictable and yet was unanticipated. And why was the only name in the State Department rolodex under “Egyptian opposition” the untenable Mohamed ElBaradei? More recently, the “Jayvee team,” as President Obama described ISIS, has been, to say the least, outperforming expectations.

There is no denying that the Middle East is a bloody mess. But unlike

the British, we have no easy exit option.

Mr. Rogachevsky is a writer in New York.

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