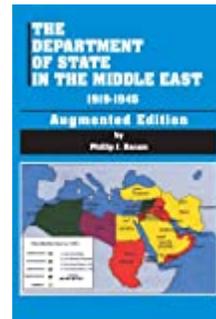




**Phillip J. Baram.** *The Department of State in the Middle East 1919-1945.* Augmented Edition. Jersey City: KTAV Publishing House, 2009. xlii + 343 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60280-122-6.



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## Has Foggy Bottom Changed How It Looks at the Middle East?

There is a theory posited by some scholars, as well as some American Jewish communal leaders and many Israelis, that the dangers facing the United States today are quite similar to those America faced at the advent of World War II. In global terms, these people suggest that the threats posed to the United States and the West today by Iran and its leader President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad are analogous to the dangers the world faced in the 1930s from Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. In fact, some people suggest that just as the world ignored the growing Nazi threat as it developed prior to the outbreak of war in September 1939, so too today America and its allies are ignoring and deluding themselves about the threat presented by a potentially nuclear Iran. They argue that just as the world appeased Hitler the world today believes that it can talk Iran back from the brink of developing a nuclear bomb. In large part, this appears to be the rationale as to why after over thirty years Phillip J. Baram's *The Department of State in the Middle East 1919-1945* has been republished in an augmented edition. The only clear difference between this edition and the original one pub-

lished in 1978 by the University of Pennsylvania Press is a brief five-page preface added by Baram as well as some maps. It is in the preface that the author suggests the relevancy of the book's republication.

At its core, this book is a very good description of the conduct of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East from the end of the First World War until the end of the Second World War. It is thorough and extremely well annotated. Admittedly, given the nature of the region and the issues of the time, the book contains only a limited discussion of U.S. policy until Franklin Delano Roosevelt came to power; in fact, most of the focus of the volume is on the politics of the Roosevelt years leading up to and during World War II. It describes the nature of the State Department culture and its general biases at the time and how they influenced foreign policy decision making. This is true both with respect to the character of the policymakers as well as the substance of U.S. policy.

Substantively, it addresses the development of the key regional issues from the time of the Versailles Treaty

focusing especially on the subjects of that period which are still relevant today: oil, religion, Palestine/Israel, and national interest versus independence. Based on the documents and resources available when Baram wrote the book in 1978, he does a fine job explaining Roosevelt and the State Department's operations as well as their vision of a postwar Middle East. The only specific criticism in terms of source material is that perhaps Baram relies too heavily on diaries; memoirs; government reports and documents; and autobiographies, which by their nature are self-serving and need to be vetted better against alternative sources.

The most curious question is why this book was republished in an augmented edition and not as a revised edition. There is an abundance of documentary material and archival sources that have been opened as well as secondary analyses that have become available since the book was first published. In addition, it is fascinating to recognize how the State Department has indeed changed since 1945. Such progress and development are of both an organizational as well as an ideological nature and deserve recognition, specifically when considered against the earlier period.

Historians are always rightly concerned that they present and interpret the past correctly. Their goal is to make the past explicable to the reader. At the same time, they try to present a guide to understand and correlate the past with the present and even the future. In this regard, it seems that Baram's augmented edition does not give the reader the benefit of British Foreign Office, Home Office, and the Justice Ministry records that have been opened since the book was first published. Similarly, insights available since the opening of documents

from the former Soviet Union also are not introduced. The same must be said for the abundance of secondary books that continue to pour out, especially about World War II, the Middle East, and the Roosevelt era.

There remain today, as there were in that period, many foreign policy practitioners in the State Department who possess many of their predecessors' biases, which are manifest on human rights issues, foreign aid, and pan-Arabism. To be sure, there are still those who enter the Foreign Service or are selected for high-level appointments in the State Department because they are members of the "old boys club" and/or are traditional Arabists. What is truly remarkable today is that from the level of secretaries of state to the lowest Foreign Service officers, Foggy Bottom today is flowing with women, minorities, and Jews at all levels and in all places of critical decision making, even related to the Middle East. This becomes even more obvious when Baram observes that back in the 1920s to 1930s the State Department had Arabic-language speakers but no one who spoke Hebrew or Yiddish; something that is not the case today.

On its merits, the original book had much value and was duly recognized at the time. Baram in his new preface makes some presumptive statements, draws some brief conclusions, and admits to making some quick political judgments. For example, it seems inappropriate just to make some quick, dismissive assertions about the inappropriateness of America's continuing balancing act between Saudi Arabia and Israel within contemporary U.S. Middle East policy. Too much has occurred in the region and in the nature of U.S. foreign policy decision making to permit one to extrapolate as the author would wish.

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