

Reset: Iran, Turkey and America's Future

By

Stephen Kinzer, New York: Times Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2010. 274 pages (including notes, index, maps and pictures). \$26.00 hardcopy.

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Having used Stephen Kinzer's *All the Shah's Men* (2003) and *Overthrow* (2007) in classes on the Middle East and Iranian Politics, I eagerly awaited another work. Kinzer is a regular columnist for *The Guardian* and has also taught at Northwestern and Boston University. His books are generally well-written with sound research and involve a simple message: American foreign policy meddling has caused problems around the world, especially the Middle East, and those problems could have been avoided and/or the US can make up for past mistakes by following his prescribed remedy.

So far, so good. Had Kinzer stopped here, there would be little reason to pursue him any further. After all, is there any reasonable person who would not agree with at least part, if not all, of his contentions? Where Kinzer distinguishes himself is by offering thoroughly documented claims with lucid articulations based in sound reason. This is rare in deed.

In his latest work *Reset*, Kinzer begins with a vivid description of two parallel accounts of early (positive) US engagement in Iran and Turkey. Kinzer shows the reader early on that his roots are in journalism when he states, "A broken line of terrified schoolboys, laden with rifles and homemade grenades, crept through the streets of ancient Tabriz as dawn broke over the starving city" (p.1). Instantly, the reader has a mental picture of the social, political and economic landscape that provided a setting for American involvement. In fact, this is a common feature for all his books.

Later, Kinzer asserts his purpose with this book in that he "seek(s) to explain the past and then propose a way to reset American policy in the world's most volatile region" (p.15). In doing so, he will focus on Iran and Turkey but will also include an analysis of US policy towards Israel and Saudi Arabia. He warns the reader that his suggestions may be astounding yet they can lead to better policy options.

According to Kinzer, Iran and Turkey are natural allies in the Middle East because of their experimentations with democracy about 100 years ago. In Part I (pp.19-86), he details the early experiments of both states, but remains clear-eyed about the realities of what actually was taking place. He says of Iran, "This vibrant democracy, though, was only a shadow" (p.21). Eventually, these shadows would vanish as American foreign policy supplanted the British in the 1950s with the overthrow of Mossadegh.

For Turkey, Kinzer paints a picture that is compelling, if not altogether tilted. Here, he states, "Turkey's rebellion took shape in ways comparable to America's revolution 150 years earlier. Rebels banded together to overthrow British power. They formed illegal bodies to guide their struggle and produced a leader who combined military prowess with great personal charisma" (p.48). Still, Kemal, unlike Washington, was unable to garner widespread internal support for this new state. Kinzer notes about Turkish expectations, "They had fought the Independence War to expel foreigners, not to establish a republic. Few wanted it. Some considered the idea anti-Islamic" (p.59).

Interestingly enough, Iran and Turkey emerged through these conflicts with leadership pushing for the formation of modern, secular states. In his assessment, Kinzer claims that the policies of each new state "ripped the Turks and Iranians from their Middle Eastern roots and pulled them into the twentieth century while the people of other nations in the region remained trapped in tradition and obedience" (p.61). However, as both states chased modernity, they left behind a tradition of "autocracy and radicalism" that remain legacies for both (p.83).

Part II (pp.87-141) is entitled “Our Name has not been an Honored One.” It is a rapid-fire accusation of incompetent American foreign policy-makers with a slight nod to Cold War politics and further British intrigue. From the toppling of the Shah in Iran to the rise of Erdoğan in Turkey, this section provides a good summary (albeit with little depth) to the reader.

By 1980, “both Turkey and Iran broke sharply with their pasts” filling some with the “thrill of anticipation” and others “dread” (p.115). Thus, “Turks and Iranians became disillusioned with their authoritarian regimes” as they sought to restore and build upon the elemental democratic system once envisioned (p.138). But, Iran, unlike

Turkey, was unable to find a suitable alternative. According to Kinzer, “Iranians have embraced democracy just as fervently as the Turks” and continue to be the best hope for representational government in the Middle East (p.140).

Part III (pp.145-192) seems oddly out of place. In the two chapters that make up this part, Kinzer details the relationship between the US and Israel and Saudi Arabia. They seem out of place for at least two reasons: 1) many assertions need more support; and 2) US support for these states seems to contradict the points about limited support for Iran and Turkey. Was US policy interventionist and self-serving to long-term objectives in the region? Or was it supportive and inopportune to long-term objectives in the region?

The arsenal is brought out to describe US-Israeli relations as having little rationality. Everything from popular songs, books and films that appealed to Americans “for reasons that had nothing to do with politics” were offered as powerful proof of the unsoundness of US-Israeli policy (p.158). It is not that these things are not relevant. There is just more to US policy towards Israel than Americans getting weepy over a Paul Newman and Eva Marie Saint film or President Johnson’s “Bible-thumping aunt” and her apocalyptic warnings regarding the ultimate fate of Israel (p.159).

When it comes to Saudi Arabia, Kinzer is much more critical. In his mind, all US Presidents and their foreign policy advisors have forged policy that is now “wildly out of control” (p.178) and that has lulled Americans into a false sense of security. Only because of the September 11 attacks could Americans be shocked back to reality. Kinzer offers three steps that could transform US-Saudi relations: 1) pacify Iraq; 2) do not start any more wars in the Middle East; and 3) resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (p.184). Again, these would serve the American and Saudi interests, but also the region. Yet, Kinzer appears to contradict his earlier points by recommending a coherent, but unilateral American initiative to end hostilities between Jews and Arabs. While going on about his *realpolitik* solution for a multilateralist world, Kinzer offers an appraisal: “by imposing a peace accord on the Israelis and Palestinians, the United States would not be weakening its friends, appeasing aggressors, or rewarding enemies of freedom. On the contrary, it would serve its own strategic interests, guarantee a safe future for a close and valued ally, and give millions...(a) new life” (pp.190-191). It could also be seen by others in the region as intrusive and signal a return to interventionism.

By the time the reader gets to the fourth and final Part (pp.195-218), Kinzer has seemingly developed separate historical lines with alternating justifications for American foreign policy and the resolution of ancient conflicts. The last chapter is entitled “Where they come together.” And, Kinzer delivers here.

He is able to fuse together American foreign policy along with the interests of Israeli, Iranian, Saudi and Turkish policy makers. He is often quite specific and demonstrates his vast understanding of the complexities of Middle East politics. Also, he offers broad advice to diplomats, “...abandon the carrot-stick mentality, which may be appropriate for a nation of donkeys but not for dealing with a nation ten times older than their own” (p.216).

In short, Kinzer is often easy to criticize, but he is more difficult to contradict. If he is guilty of anything here, then it is thinking beyond the existing paradigm. And, if anyplace needed that type of analysis the Middle East does. Kinzer understands the realities of the Middle East, but suggests a way out of the malaise. He is not naïve, but daring. Anyone willing to accept some minor bumps in the road will be indebted to Kinzer for the ride.