

BOOKS IN BRIEF

**The Unmaking of the Middle East:
A History of Western Disorder in Arab Lands**
by Jeremy Salt. University of California Press, 2008.

Jeremy Salt offers a historical overview of the Middle East in which the region, correctly, is presented as a geopolitical construct of the West. From this premise, Salt proceeds to attribute nearly all the region's ills to its modern beginnings. This unrelenting focus, though it helps Salt present a guide to Western (and especially American) mistakes and missteps, seems driven by a desire to overturn the intellectual hegemony of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, who have defined the region as backward and prone to violence. Salt's approach means the book will please those who already agree with the arguments presented in it and leave everyone else unmoved.

**Suicide Bombers in Iraq:
The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom**
by Mohammed M. Hafez.
US Institute of Peace, 2007.

This study, written before the collapse of Al Qaeda in Iraq—and before the American co-optation of the Sunni insurgency, which was instrumental in bringing about that collapse—drives toward a conclusion that suicide bombers would prove to be a force that could defeat the military of the world's only superpower. Hafez was in good company in coming to this conclusion; before the United States changed its strategy, American defeat appeared to be a natural endpoint.

Hafez turns out to have been in error. But this does not erase the insights contained in this important and valuable analysis of a form of insurgency which, Hafez rightly argues, will find practitioners in other conflicts, as it already has in Afghanistan.

**Freedom's Unsteady March:
America's Role in Building Arab Democracy**
by Tamara Cofman Wittes.
Brookings Institution Press, 2008.

It has become conventional wisdom that democracy promotion in the Middle East is more suited to historical research than to contemporary policy. Case in point: President Bush's Freedom Agenda, which was to be launched with fanfare from a peaceful and secure Baghdad, and was to spread from there throughout the Middle East, is already a historical curiosity. Wittes heroically argues in this short but comprehensive (and readable) volume that the conventional wisdom is wrong, that the new "realism" that has now gained strength in Washington regarding US relations with the region still needs to allow room for democracy promotion. Indeed, only an unrealistic foreign policy would do otherwise.

The Forever War
by Dexter Filkins. Knopf, 2008.

The Forever War is a series of vignettes—snapshots of the people Dexter Filkins has encountered covering the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for *The New York Times*, accounts of the trials of war that they and he have endured. The book has no main narrative; instead, the chapters simply come in chronological order, each self-contained.

This is a grim, dark book. Death is present on nearly every page, portrayed in graphic but never sensationalist prose. One grasps that war can only be understood by those who have endured it. Filkins sketches minimalist portraits of Afghans, Iraqis, and American soldiers; he allows the sparsest descriptions to illuminate the reality of life under the Taliban, Saddam Hussein and, in the end, the Americans. The result is a stark, harrowing masterpiece of war reporting. ■