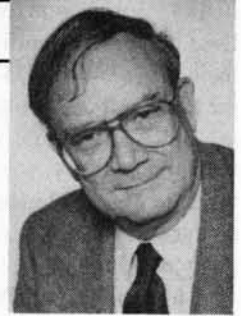


Interview: John Cooley



The U.S. is being repaid for its mistakes in the Mideast

John Cooley is the author of the recently published book Payback—America's Long War in the Middle East (Brassery's U.S., Inc. McLean, Virginia \$19.95). He is now an ABC News reporter, and has covered the Middle East and North Africa since 1957, including for the Christian Science Monitor from 1965 to 1978. He has been a foreign correspondent fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a senior associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He was a member of an ABC News team that won an Emmy Award in 1990 for a documentary on the downing of Pan Am 103. He was interviewed in Washington, D.C. by William Jones on Dec. 6.

EIR: What was your purpose in writing this book?

Cooley: The book was an attempt to look at American policy in the Middle East over the last 10 years, since the fall of the Shah. It opens with my interview of the Shah in September 1978. I try to show how a series of U.S. policy blunders, misperceptions, failure to follow through, to understand local situations, led to one payback after another.

The hostage situation, both the Teheran diplomatic hostage capture and that crisis and the subsequent hostage crisis in Lebanon, began really with the capture of David Dodge, the president of the American University of Beirut. . . . For me, the whole offensive of the Khomeini revolutionaries in Lebanon was part of a concerted campaign by the Khomeini regime . . . against the American cultural presence in the Middle East.

The American University of Beirut has been a force for good in the Middle East ever since it was founded as a Syrian private college back in the 1860s. Its influence has radiated all over the area. Its alumni are members of cabinets, academic people, people who have influence and power, professionals. It was, among other things, an ally of the Arabs in their drive to end Turkish domination in the area toward the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

The Iranians probably regarded it as an ally of Arab nationalism as well as an American presence. They object to both, of course. The Persian-Arab conflict is one of the fundamental conflicts in the Middle East for the last 2,000 years, and will probably continue being that. At the same time, they wanted the Americans out, and that meant the university. They kidnaped staff members, professors, they murdered

university President Malcolm Kerr in January 1984. In every way, they tried to make life impossible.

The American University in Beirut, I'm glad to say, survived and is still operating to this day. It took a hit two weeks ago when there was a big explosion on campus, which may have been the same people, the Hezbollah, a pro-Iranian group. But I think the period now of that type of hostage-taking is closed.

Not to say that terrorism is at an end . . . but, for the moment, Iran and Syria, especially Iran, who in some ways were responsible for this, have decided, for quite different reasons in each case, that it is much better to have a good relation with the United States and the West. So Iran has ordered an end to hostage-taking. They had a little trouble enforcing it quickly. They had to get the United Nations machinery going to crank up deals with the Israelis and others. But this whole complicated process, which began last June with the release of John McCarthy and the Israeli prisoners in the south of Lebanon, is coming to a climax. . . . It's good that it's over.

EIR: It's interesting the way you expressed the importance of the American University in Beirut as a target for terrorism because of its role as a transmission belt for western values. In recent years, there has been a wave of fundamentalism, partially promoted by the United States. Carter National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski attempted to create an Arc of Crisis of fundamentalist countries surrounding the Soviet Union, and certain forces in the U.S. played a role in overthrowing the Shah and promoted the Khomeini phenomenon. Do you see this shift of support to fundamentalist regimes as a blunder in U.S. policy?

Cooley: I think the mistakes come from not understanding it. In the first place, we were plugged into the Shah, and he was plugged into the United States, and neither were talking to the other forces in the country. We didn't understand what was happening in Iran.

One reason we didn't understand it was because of the purpose of the American presence in Iran ever since World War II, when Harry Truman and the U.N. machinery had to expel the Soviet Union from northern Iran, where they had set up two rump republics in Kurdistan and Azerbaïdzhân run by the Red Army and by local communists. That was the

first big post-World War II crisis in the Cold War in 1946. Ever since then, until the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the main thrust of the U.S. presence in Iran has been to monitor the Soviet Union. . . .

But, in so doing, we almost totally ignored the revolutionary forces that were building up in Iran, particularly the fundamentalist religions of the Shiite variety, which became contagious after the Iranian revolution. This began to have repercussions all over the Muslim world, as far as Indonesia. And not only in the Arab world, but in India, in Pakistan. Wherever there were large, or majority Muslim populations, there were sympathetic movements. Although the Shiite movement began in Iraq, it was spread to Iran by the Shiite clergy from Najafa and the holy cities in Iraq. The farther you got from Teheran, the more sympathy there was for it and it was stronger, where people didn't understand what it was all about. Even in Morocco, people would say, "We are for Khomeini, and we don't like King Hassan." They didn't know what they were talking about. Most of the Moroccans didn't understand what Shiism was in a theological sense, since they were Sunni Muslims themselves.

But Brzezinski's Arc of Crisis was real. It radiated from this center in Teheran, and that's been one of the main themes in the last 10 years. And the U.S. has tried to cope with it in various ways, mostly ineffectually. And we have been paid back for our lack of foresight, in not seeing it coming in the first place and trying to deal with it, like in Lebanon, with military means. . . .

I guess there were probably lessons there which will be remembered. Syria and Israel wanted to be the dominant power in Lebanon, but Israel was only able to hold onto a southern slice of Lebanon, which they still have, calling it a security zone, and their allied vassal army still operates there. Instead, Syria has become the dominant power in Lebanon, and Syrian hegemony over Lebanon has resulted, I would contend, from many of these American errors.

EIR: You mention in your book the Israeli connections to the Iranians.

Cooley: This is very important, and it goes back to Biblical history. There's always been a very special relationship between Israel, ancient and modern, and Persia. It goes back to the Babylonian Captivity and Cyrus the Great. The Jews in Palestine were to some extent rescued from the oppressions of the kings in Baghdad by the Persians. And the Persians oppressed the Jews much, much less—although I wouldn't say they didn't at all—but less than the Babylonian kings did. There was a special relationship set up. There were ancient Jewish communities in Persia from earliest times and Israel's concern about getting the Iranian Jews out of Iran after the Islamic Revolution of Khomeini, which was openly anti-Jewish—I don't like the term anti-Semitic, since that would also mean anti-Arab—but anti-Jewish, as well as anti-Bahai and anti-Christian. The Israelis felt it an urgent neces-

sity to get these people out, and the first Israeli arms deals with revolutionary Iran were aimed at that.

As early as October 1980 when the Americans were still hostages at the embassy in Iran, Israel was, through intermediaries, primarily France at that time, selling Phantom spare parts, tires, other military equipment. And there was a secret Israeli military training mission in Iran even then in that otherwise hostile environment.

EIR: When was this?

Cooley: In 1980. Within a year of the revolution, there were Israeli military personnel in Teheran. Very few and very discrete, low profile.

Their common enemy, they felt, was Iraq, and Israel always felt that not only Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which was especially feared, but even prior to Saddam Hussein, Iraq was one of the big military threats facing Israel. Iraq was the only Arab state which did not sign the 1949 armistice with Israel after Israel was created. Iraq participated in all of the Arab-Israeli wars, except the Suez War in 1966, in some way or another, with token forces, and with considerable forces in 1973 on the Syrian front. They helped their Syrian adversaries to contain the Israeli counter-thrust after the first Syrian advance on the Golan Heights in 1973.

So, Iraq has always been seen by Israel as a dangerous adversary. And in the Middle East, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. The Iranian-Israeli connection is thousands of years old. It's had its ups and downs and its interruptions. But just as Israel cultivated other states which were not Arab states, but were possible adversaries who could help contain the Arabs, such as Turkey and Ethiopia down in northeast Africa, in the same way Israel operated with respect to Iran.

EIR: Do you think the Israelis were lobbying to encourage U.S. action against Iraq?

Cooley: I don't know the answer to that. It's possible. Iraq broke diplomatic relations with the U.S., as did most of the Arab states, in 1967 with the outset of the '67 war, the so-called June War. Relations with Iraq were not restored until 1984. The Iraqis sent signals to the United States. Saddam Hussein was now becoming top-dog in the Baath Party, effectively the dictator of Iraq. His people sent signals, through intelligence channels at first, and then through overt diplomatic channels, that they needed a better relationship with the U.S.—commercially and otherwise.

The U.S. responded in 1984. . . . There was help; there was intelligence information shared. Here you had a very unfortunate situation. The covert part of the U.S. government was going against official administration policy in making secret arms deals with Iran, while the State Department was sending people around the world to try to stop the flow of arms to Iran from our allies. On the other hand, you had one part of the U.S. intelligence establishment helping Iraq and another part helping Iran. Left hand and right hand doing

different things. A ridiculous situation. Absolutely incredible!

EIR: What has been the effect of the Persian Gulf war with regard to the U.S. presence in the Middle East?

Cooley: Well, that's spinning out now. We aren't going to know for a while. We accomplished the main task of getting Iraq out of Kuwait. That had to be done.

Although I can't prove this, I believe that the war could have been avoided, if certain actions had been taken diplomatically, which were not taken or were not completed in the first few days after the Iraqi invasion. From Aug. 2 to, let's say, Aug. 9 when Saddam announced the annexation of Kuwait, I think there was a window of opportunity for diplomacy. Now whether President Bush had decided on war at the very beginning with [Prime Minister] Mrs. [Margaret] Thatcher when they were both in Aspen, Colorado, as some people think, or whether he had not definitely made a decision until Desert Shield was well under way in the winter, I don't know. We may never know.

But there were signs, I think, pointing to the inevitability of that war. Saddam, in a way, wanted it, incredible as it sounds in view of what happened. But don't forget that Saddam used to say, and he said it several times to visitors during the period when he was holding thousands of foreigners hostages in Iraq, hoping this would deter military action against him, that if he physically survived this crisis, if he stayed in his chair throughout the conflict, he would win. And he did. He stayed in his chair. He's still there. And it's going to be a source of endless problems to us. . . .

EIR: Some people feel that President Bush and others coaxed Saddam Hussein into an invasion. Do you think that this was the case?

Cooley: Again, it was left hand and right hand. . . . Now, with regard to April Glaspie, in her famous meeting with Saddam on July 25. . . . She still did say, and she doesn't contest this, that the Iraq-Kuwait border problem and the oil production problem, which were the two main irritants between Iraq and Kuwait, were affairs which the Arabs should settle among themselves and it was not a U.S. concern. If there was a green light, or if anything she said was interpreted by Saddam as a green light, it must have been that. I don't think there is any escaping that. . . . What she admittedly said was, in my opinion, enough to give a green light.

EIR: Do you think the situation is any safer now? Or are we simply looking at the calm before the storm?

Cooley: I think you have to separate categories here. I don't think . . . that we will immediately normalize relations with Iran. . . .

Syria is different. Syria was our ally in the Gulf war, for their own reasons. Hafez al-Assad has just been reconfirmed for another seven years in power. He wants to hold on to it.

He cannot allow any large degree of real democracy if he wants to maintain that power. He and the military people who have kept him in power have given Syria a relatively stable, uninterrupted period of government since 1970. Before that there was a coup every six months. It's in his interest to cooperate with the United States, up to a point.

Whether Assad will be willing in these Middle East peace talks to compromise enough to make any progress with the Israelis is questionable. . . . Neither the Syrians nor the Israelis seem willing to abandon their old rigidity towards each other. The Syrians are the only Arab group, with whom the Israelis have had virtually no, or very, very few secret, clandestine contacts all these years. All the years the Israelis were saying, "We want to negotiate openly with each Arab state," in reality they were negotiating in secret. They even negotiated with Abdel Nasser through American intermediaries. And then the spectacular move of Sadat and his trip to Jerusalem. With King Hussein the Israelis have had secret talks for years and years. They don't have this kind of thing with Syria. It's a particularly keen hatred, or rather, mistrust about the whole Syrian-Israeli relationship.

Assad says now that he wants all of the Golan Heights, which he lost in 1967. The Israelis say there is no way they are going to give back anything. Both positions are much tougher now than they were a few years ago. There was talk of compromise at various times, that the Israelis might pull out of part of the Golan Heights, that the Syrians might return to demilitarize the area. But we haven't heard that for a long time.

Henry Kissinger was trying to do something like that back in the '70s. That's when he developed a great respect for Assad as a shrewd and cunning negotiator. He used to say, during the days of his shuttle diplomacy, when I was covering the area, "In Syria, all I have to do is talk with the boss. When I go to talk with the Israeli cabinet members, I see 15 different ministers and get 16 different opinions that I have to deal with." I don't know to what extent that is still true.

EIR: Maybe Kissinger simply prefers dealing with dictators?

Cooley: I think he does. He seems to find it simpler.

For the Arabs, the big problems are the settlements. They see the West Bank and Gaza, especially the West Bank, covered wall-to-wall with asphalt. Before there can be any self-rule, there will have to be some mechanism that can reverse this. More than half the land has now gone to the Israeli settlers. That's going to be a very tough issue. There are also a lot of settlements on the Golan Heights. The Israelis even have industrial and farm establishments there that they're not going to give up easily.

[Secretary of State James] Baker has been devoting almost all of his time to the Middle East, the whole past year. They have neglected the Pacific Rim and Africa. The only other thing they've been able to watch is the Soviet Union, trying to keep [Mikhail] Gorbachov in some kind of position.