Ofer Israeli

**Complex Effects of International Relations: Intended and Unintended Consequences of Human Actions in Middle East Conflict**

New York: SUNY Press, 2021, 310 pages.

Ofer Israeli of Israel’s Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya is a prolific scholar who has published two other books in recent years on International Relations (IR) and the Theory of War. This new book on “complex effects” within international politics further expands IR theory in this area using six case studies from the Middle East during the Cold War. His work challenges the dominant narrative on decision-making in this field that is commonly based on a linear cause and effect paradigm.

 The book urges IR scholars interested in Middle East historical crises to recognize how this new complex effects theory can contribute to our understanding of the past. Historians familiar with the case studies will find this work helpful mainly for sharpening their analytical processes and challenging conventional explanations of Middle Eastern events. For traditional historians working with specific archives, who often appear trapped in a Newton-like linearity of thinking, Israeli offers an alternative theoretical approach for explaining past events. However, there is a weakness in the main argument of the book in this regard, as I will show later.

The heart of the study is found in Chapters 2 and 3, the book’s best sections, in fact. Here, Israeli is highly successful in fully developing the theory of “complex effects” (Complexity Theory). He identifies two categories of nonlinear dynamics operating in IR: unintended consequences, that is, “rebound results” and “derivative products” arising from the anarchical state of the international system; and circuitous but intended consequences involving inevitable and foreseeable effects.

Israeli rightly argues that “the traditional focus of political science has been on the intended consequences of state actions” (p.18), providing dozens of examples to prove this point. However, he encourages readers to be more open-minded in analyzing consequences, defining “rebound results” as “human actions that turn to be detrimental or costly in a manner unanticipated by the policy actor” (p.18), proffering the case of Herz’s theory on the security dilemma of states as an example. The second set of consequences are “derivative products” that are positive, neutral, or negative outcomes, which Israeli considers “simply off the track” of the original plan, or indirect consequences, citing the balance of power produced by anarchy in international relations is cited as an example (pp. 24–25).

The author’s point about the circuitous complexity of intended results is an important one that demonstrates that applying linear processes to understand particular outcomes narrows our perspective. In practice, Israeli argues, “foreign policy manipulation is the effort of a group…to structure a situation in a manner that maximizes the chances of a favorable outcome” (p. 31).

Chapter 3 delves even deeper into the theory on complex causality in IR, examining how international affairs, ideas, emotions, the ripeness for systemic change that results from certain events, systemic consequences, and the plurality of outcomes that can emerge from a single action interact and combine. The conceptual framework developed in Chapters 2 and 3 may certainly prove of value to those analyzing foreign policy, international politics and security.

Chapters 4 to 9 examine six case studies, all from the Middle East during the Cold War, with Israeli drawing on three pairs to illustrate each of his discrete concepts. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss unintended consequences and “rebound results”; Chapters 6 and 7 focus on unintended consequences and “derivative products”; and Chapters 8 and 9 examine intended consequences. The case studies are based mainly on secondary published sources, which cannot adequately enable a deep and comprehensive analysis of what the decision makers/agencies expected to happen and how they subsequently assessed the consequences of their actions.

The first two cases examine the rebound results of both the 1967 Six-Day War and Israel’s *amimut* (ambiguity) policy about its nuclear program that helped prevent an arms race in the Middle East. Here, the author focuses on the association between the war and the later opening of Israeli-Egyptian negotiations with the involvement of the two superpowers. The second pair of cases examines unintended derivative products from the linkage between the 1973 War and the Israel-Egypt Peace Agreement on the one hand, and the decades-earlier Abadan/AJAX-Suez events on the other. Discussing “the circuitous nature of Operation AJAX,” Israeli shows how the British, in order to maintain their interests in Iran, manipulated the Americans into doing their dirty work by overthrowing Mosaddegh. With the last pair of cases, Israeli analyzes the intended consequences arising from two aspects of “the circuitous relationships between military results and the political outcome of the 1973 Yom Kippur War.”

Chapter 4 on the “rebound results” of the Six-Day War shows how difficult it is to actually apply the author’s theory. Israeli rightly recognizes that it was Israel that experienced the rebound result later in the 1973 war (p.76). However, his theory does not elaborate on how interactions between actors should be evaluated in terms of rebound. Is rebound a subjective term that depends on the actor? Moreover, his analysis of the road to 1973 reveals how Egypt’s humiliation in 1967 was not counteracted by successful peace initiatives. The author correctly acknowledges that Israel’s rejection of the UN’s Jarring Mission (1968–1971) and the U.S.’s Rogers Plan (1969-1971) may have encouraged Egyptian President Sadat to escalate his war plans, but is this sufficient to explain the decision and objectives of going to war? The author ignores the massive Soviet arming of Egypt and Syria, as well as the extensive planning undertaken by these two Arab countries in the years prior to the war. In this context, the successful “War of Attrition” from 1967 to 1970 that helped to rebuild Arab national pride as well as strategic cooperation and planning does not receive enough attention from Israeli.

In his conclusion, Israeli states that students of IR can “potentially discover the hidden side of policy choices, decision-making, and policy implications” (p.163), with his book, as it provides an analysis that affirms that “actions will result in several outcomes” (p.167). This is indeed an important contribution the book makes to IR scholarship, which will oblige writers to be more careful in the future and to adopt more rigorous theoretical approaches when examining causalities in the field.

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