Ofer Israeli

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

New York: SUNY Press, 2021, 310pp.

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 develops IR theory in this area through six case studies from the Middle East during the Cold War. His work challenges the dominant narrative in this field on decision making that is based on a linear cause and effect paradigm.

The book urges IR scholars interested in Middle East historical crises to demonstrate how such new complex effects theory can add to our understanding of the past. Historians very familiar with the case studies will mainly find it helpful for sharpening their analytical power and challenging common explanations of Middle Eastern events. Traditional historians working with particular archives often appear trapped in a Newton-like linearity of thinking and Israeli offers them an alternative theoretical approach to 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 to be found in Chapters 2 and 3, the book’s best sections. In them, Israeli shows his considerable ability to develop the theory of “complex effects” (Complexity Theory). He identifies two categories of nonlinear dynamic at work in IR: unintended consequences, “rebound results,” and “derivative products” that spring up from the anarchical state of the international system; and circuitous but intended consequences that involve 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. He, however, encourages the reader to be more open-minded in analyzing consequences. “Rebound results” are defined as “human actions that turn to be detrimental or costly in a manner unanticipated by the policy actor” (p.18), for example the case of Herz’s theory on the security dilemma of states. The second consequences are “derivative products” that are positive, neutral, or negative outcomes which are “simply of the track” of the original plan or, in other words, can be characterized as indirect consequences. 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 understanding particular outcomes as the result of linear processes narrows our thinking. 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 develops the theory on complex causality in IR even further, 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 six case studies in Chapters 4 to 9 consist of two for each discrete concept. Chapters 4 and 5 are on unintended consequences and “rebound results;” Chapters 6 and 7 are on unintended consequences and “derivative products;” and Chapters 8 and 9 are on intended consequences. The case studies are based mainly on secondary published sources. This means that the observant reader will find that they are deficient in both the analysis of what the decision makers/agencies expected to happen and how they afterwards assessed the consequences of their actions.

The first two cases examine the rebound results of both the 1967 Six-Day War and also Israel’s nuclear *amimut* (ambiguity) policy that has helped prevent an arms race. The second pair of cases examines unintended derivative products of the relation between the 1973 War and the Israel-Egypt Peace Agreement on the one hand, and the relation between the Abadan/AJAX-Suez events on the other. The last pair of cases examining intended consequences in relation to two aspects of “the circuitous relationships between military results and the political outcome of the 1973 *Yom Kippur* War.” In the first of these case studies, the author focuses on the relation between the war and the renewal of Israeli-Egyptian negotiations, with the involvement of the two superpowers. In the second on “the circuitous nature of Operation AJAX,” the author shows how the British, in order to maintain their interests in Iran, manipulated the Americans into doing their dirty work by overthrowing Mosaddegh.

Chapter 4 on the “rebound results” of the Six-Day War shows how difficult the author’s theory is hard to apply, however. Israeli rightly states that the rebound result of the 1973 war was such from an “Israeli perspective” (p.76). This is not elaborated in his theory of how interactions between actors should be evaluated in term of rebound. Is rebound a subjective term that depends on the agency? Moreover, the analysis of the road to 1973 explains how Egypt’s humiliation in 1967 was not counteracted by successful peace initiatives. The author is right in pointing out that Israel’s rejection of the UN’s 1968-71 Jarring Mission and the US’s 1969-1971 Rogers Plan may have given Egyptian President Sadat encouragement 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 planning these two Arab countries undertook in the years prior to the war. 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 providing analysis that affirms that “actions will result in several outcomes” (p.167). This is an important contribution the book makes to IR scholarship, something which will oblige writers to be more careful in future and to adopt more rigorous theoretical approaches while examining causalities in the field.

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