

Four Decades of Middle Eastern Disaster: The Proximate Cause

Counter-factual history is really hard. If World War II hadn't happened, one could easily imagine it being replaced by a global thermonuclear war in the 1960s. But the history of proximate causes is much easier. Let A, B, C, and D be highly specific major events. A good historian can credibly determine that A caused B, B caused C, and C caused D, so if not for A, D almost certainly wouldn't have happened. The assassination of the Austrian Archduke caused World War I, which caused the rise of Marxism-Leninism and Nazism, which caused World War II, which caused the Korean War, which caused Kim Jong Un to be the present dictator of North Korea. This doesn't prove the world today would be better-off if Princip's assassination had failed; something worse could have happened instead. But we can still chronicle the path of history's dominoes.

My favorite recent example: almost all of the Middle East's disasters over the past four decades can be credibly traced back to a single highly specific major event: the Iranian Revolution. Let me chronicle the tragic trail of dominoes:

1. In late 1977, political resistance to the Shah comes into the open, with demonstrations, civil resistance, and strikes. Rather than crushing it with an iron fist as you'd expect, the Shah is indecisive, erratically mixing conciliation with brutality. By 1979, Iran is officially an Islamic Republic under the dictatorship of Ayatollah Khomeini.
2. Smelling revolution-induced weakness, Saddam Hussein attacks Iran in 1980, starting the Iran-Iraq War. The war drags on until 1988, killing roughly a million people.
3. During the Iran-Iraq War, Kuwait lends Iraq \$14B. Afterwards, Hussein pressures Kuwait to forgive the debt, and Kuwait refuses. This leads to an unraveling of relations and ends in Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.
4. The U.S. organizes an international coalition to expel Iraq from Kuwait, culminating in the Gulf War. Part of the deal: the U.S. gets military bases in Saudi Arabia.
5. Iraq is defeated and becomes an international pariah, but Saudi dissidents, most prominently Osama bin Laden, are outraged by the U.S. military presence in the land of Mecca and Medina. In 1996, bin Laden issues a fatwa calling for the U.S. to leave.
6. Bin Laden tries to give his fatwa teeth by calling for and organizing terrorist attacks against the U.S., culminating in the events of September 11, 2001.
7. The same year, the U.S. responds by giving the Taliban (the rulers of Afghanistan) an ultimatum to hand over bin Laden and his whole organization. When the Taliban refuses,

the U.S. invades. Though victory is swift, it is far from total. The war continues to this day, though the body count is lower than you'd think – Wikipedia counts under 100,000 cumulative deaths in a country of over 30M.

8. In early 2003, the U.S. invades Iraq as well. While the U.S. government does not officially accuse Hussein of involvement in the 9/11 attacks, the wartime hysteria silences most domestic opposition. Years later, Bush's CIA director concedes that they knew of no actual al Qaeda-Iraq cooperation.

9. After a crushing military victory, the U.S. swiftly loses the peace – unsurprisingly, since the Bush team made almost no plans for the post-war era. Civil war breaks out, mostly calming down by late 2008, when the Bush Administration agrees to remove all U.S. forces by 2011. Body counts vary widely, but all are much higher than Afghanistan's. Obama tries to renegotiate a delay but fails.

10. While there's no blatant link between the Iraq War and the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, chaos in post-war Iraq is crucial for the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the long length of the civil war in Syria. ISIL soon begins launching high-profile terrorist attacks around the world and sharply aggravates the Syrian refugee crisis.

11. And here we are.

While you could quibble with a few of my points, the basic story is pretty clear. But notice: If Cassandra had foretold the future of the Middle East in 1977, she would have seemed totally crazy to the entire world. "One wishy-washy dictator is going to cause *all this*?! Yeah, right."

All of which makes me wonder: Which thinkers in the 70s came closest to predicting what actually happened? The Cassandras may already be dead, but it would be nice to know their names.