

Mideast rules to beware of

I like reading Friedman, he is lively and has a synthetic mind, but I think he is wrong on this one, hence my response to his

Mideast Rules to Live By

THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN, NY Times 20/12/06

For a long time, I let my hopes for a decent outcome in Iraq triumph over what I had learned reporting from Lebanon during its civil war. Those hopes vanished last summer. So, I'd like to offer President Bush my updated rules of Middle East reporting, which also apply to diplomacy, in hopes they'll help him figure out what to do next in Iraq.

Rule 1: What people tell you in private in the Middle East is irrelevant. All that matters is what they will defend in public in their own language. Anything said to you in English, in private, doesn't count. In Washington, officials lie in public and tell the truth off the record. In the Mideast, officials say what they really believe in public and tell you what you want to hear in private.

Maybe one should start to learn a Mideast language before assessing the gap between public and private speech. That rule is incorrect. Consider the number of taboos in the way people have to speak, principally because of the brutal rule of the local despots— it's hard and costly to criticize in public a king or president.

Rule 2: Any reporter or U.S. Army officer wanting to serve in Iraq should have to take a test, consisting of one question: "Do you think the shortest distance between two points is a straight line?" If you answer yes, you can't go to Iraq. You can serve in Japan, Korea or Germany - not Iraq.

I fail to understand this syllogism. Does that mean that a reporter or a US army officer needs to be irrational before serving in Iraq, because Iraqis are irrational, or because US foreign policy is ?

Rule 3: If you can't explain something to Middle Easterners with a conspiracy theory, then don't try to explain it at all - they won't believe it.

Maybe one should start explaining how American foreign policy works, which is not simple. Then it might be easier to deal less with conspiracy theories.

Rule 4: In the Middle East, never take a concession, except out of the mouth of the person doing the conceding. If I had a dollar for every time someone agreed to recognize Israel on behalf of Yasir Arafat, I could paper my walls.

Why should one get a concession from the person who doesn't have power in the first place ? This was true for Sharon as it was true for Arafat. Try to get a concession on Iraqi policy from Bush by asking Obama.

Rule 5: Never lead your story out of Lebanon, Gaza or Iraq with a cease-fire; it will always be over before the next morning's paper.

This is true of all civil wars because of the nature of fissiparous command structure. What announced ceasefire held during the Yugoslav wars of Milosevic, Tudjman and their hirelings ?

Rule 6: In the Middle East, the extremists go all the way, and the moderates tend to just go away.

Maybe the great Western reporters of the Middle East should respond with a mindshift of their own, and ask themselves why they cannot lead with a story that has no blood in it. When Mr Friedman writes about moderates, which is rare, it's always with a big sigh. You need to get over the sigh, and start understanding how difficult it is to be heard over Muqtada or Usama's voice when theirs only dominates the media .

Rule 7: The most oft-used expression by moderate Arab pols is: "We were just about to stand up to the bad guys when you stupid Americans did that stupid thing. Had you stupid Americans not done that stupid thing, we would have stood up, but now it's too late. It's all your fault for being so stupid."

Absolutely not. The most used expression by moderate Arab pols is: since you like us so much, why don't you support us openly against your allies Mubarak, Zein al-Abidin, Fahd, Sharon ? Let alone your newly or soon to be found allies Qaddafi and Asad.

Rule 8: Civil wars in the Arab world are rarely about ideas - like liberalism vs. communism. They are about which tribe gets to rule. So, yes, Iraq is having a civil war as we once did. But there is no Abe Lincoln in this war. It's the South vs. the South.

Sistani is no Lincoln, it's true, but he has less blood on his hands. Support Sistani, and Barzani, and Rifaat Chadurchi, and Talibani, and Mehdi abd al-Hadi, and Muhammad Bahr al-Ulum, and

the Khu'is who were murdered by Muqtada, and Hasan Chalabi, let alone Ghanem Jawad, Zaynab Suwajj and Amal Kashef al-Ghata'. North, South and Center Iraqi moderates must get together for a political solution in Iraq. How about involving them in an expanded Baker-Hamilton commission ?

Rule 9: In Middle East tribal politics there is rarely a happy medium. When one side is weak, it will tell you, "I'm weak, how can I compromise?" And when it's strong, it will tell you, "I'm strong, why should I compromise?"

In the Middle East, extremism trumps moderation, see rules 6 and 7. The question is one can help reverse this. Then looking for compromise will be less hard to find.

Rule 10: Mideast civil wars end in one of three ways: a) like the U.S. civil war, with one side vanquishing the other; b) like the Cyprus civil war, with a hard partition and a wall dividing the parties; or c) like the Lebanon civil war, with a soft partition under an iron fist (Syria) that keeps everyone in line. Saddam used to be the iron fist in Iraq. Now it is us. If we don't want to play that role, Iraq's civil war will end with A or B.

Another set of oxymorons, with grave consequences. C is what we had in thirty five years of Saddam civil war (1968-2003). + two invasions (22 Sep 1980, 2 Aug 1990). A is a call for outright ethnic cleansing of Iraq Sunnis called for by some extreme Iraqi Shiites, B is recipe for what brought to the current disaster...

Rule 11: The most underestimated emotion in Arab politics is humiliation. The Israeli-Arab conflict, for instance, is not just about borders. Israel's mere existence is a daily humiliation to Muslims, who can't understand how, if they have the superior religion, Israel can be so powerful. Al Jazeera's editor, Ahmed Sheikh, said it best when he recently told the Swiss weekly Die Weltwoche: "It gnaws at the people in the Middle East that such a small country as Israel, with only about seven million inhabitants, can defeat the Arab nation with its 350 million. That hurts our collective ego. The Palestinian problem is in the genes of every Arab. The West's problem is that it does not understand this."

If one tries going through a check point on the West Bank, it becomes unnecessary to come up with collective psychology about humiliation. I have a related, personal question for Mr Friedman: where was he when the Sabra and Chatila victims sued Sharon in Belgium, he who won a Pulitzer over reporting on Sabra and Chatila ?

Rule 12: Thus, the Israelis will always win, and the Palestinians will

always make sure they never enjoy it. Everything else is just commentary.

Maybe it's time to understand that victory is meaningless for Israelis if Palestinians are defeated, and vice-versa.

Rule 13: Our first priority is democracy, but the Arabs' first priority is "justice." The oft-warring Arab tribes are all wounded souls, who really have been hurt by colonial powers, by Jewish settlements on Palestinian land, by Arab kings and dictators, and, most of all, by each other in endless tribal wars. For Iraq's long-abused Shiite majority, democracy is first and foremost a vehicle to get justice. Ditto the Kurds. For the minority Sunnis, democracy in Iraq is a vehicle of injustice. For us, democracy is all about protecting minority rights. For them, democracy is first about consolidating majority rights and getting justice.

We have great punditry making all kinds of subtle distinctions between good governance, human rights, rule of law, democracy, judicial independence, popular representation, free elections. Now we have the great divide between justice and democracy. A further achievement in understanding ME politics by the ultimate connoisseur.

Rule 14: The Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi had it right: "Great powers should never get involved in the politics of small tribes."

Pretty non-sequitur from the previous, but never mind. Kamal Salibi also contributed great, subtle works, and subtlety is needed to understand the Middle East, as it is to understand the US, Africa, Europe and all matters human.

Rule 15: Whether it is Arab-Israeli peace or democracy in Iraq, you can't want it more than they do.

This may sound true, but it is inoperative as a rule, for what does it mean ? Should the US simply pull out from Iraq and turn its back on Israel-Palestine ? Can it be as simple as a bunch of Middle East irrational individual and groups not wanting peace or democracy ?