

Interview - Emma Sky

Written by E-International Relations

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Emma Sky is Director of Yale World Fellows and a Senior Fellow at Yale University's Jackson Institute, where she teaches Middle East politics. She is the author of *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq*, which was one of the New York Times 100 notable books of 2015, and Shortlisted for the 2016 Council on Foreign Relations Arthur Ross Prize, the 2016 Orwell Prize and the 2015 Samuel Johnson Prize for Nonfiction. Emma served as advisor to the Commanding General of US Forces in Iraq from 2007-2010; as advisor to the Commander of NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan in 2006; as advisor to the US Security Co-ordinator for the Middle East Peace Process in 2005; and as Governorate Co-ordinator of Kirkuk for the Coalition Provisional Authority, 2003-2004. Prior to that, Emma worked in the Palestinian territories for a decade, managing projects to develop Palestinian institutions; and to promote co-existence between Israelis and Palestinians.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

We are transitioning from a unipolar system to a multipolar one, with the Middle East one of multiple and competing spheres of influence. The Middle East has always had external hegemonies from the Ottoman Empire through colonial powers after WWI, through to the US and USSR after WWII, to the US after the end of the Cold War. As America cedes its role as regional hegemon, others are filling the vacuum.

A revanchist Russia seeks to weaken the US-led liberal world order by supporting Assad in Syria against the US-led coalition and by undermining the European Union by flooding it with refugees fleeing Russian aerial bombardment. Russia seeks to confirm its great power status. A rising and dissatisfied China pursues "one belt, one road" for the acquisition of minerals and energy. It is active across the Middle East building oil and gas pipelines and other infrastructure. It is developing a strong relationship, in particular, with Iran. A disruptive, defensive and aggressive Iran seeks to project power and expand its strategic depth by cultivating proxies such as Hezbollah across the region, portraying itself as the leader of opposition to US and Israeli domination.

A resentful and divided Turkey, although a NATO member, is moving away from the West and realigning with Russia and Iran. It seeks to prevent Kurdish autonomy at home and abroad. A newly assertive but incompetent Saudi seeks to counter Iranian expansionism by buying US weapons, supporting Sunni opposition groups and developing ties with Israel. A watchful and concerned Israel seeks to counter the threat of Iran and of terrorism by maintaining strong relations with the US, its military edge, and intelligence while probing for new alliances with others who share its tactical concerns.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I have come to better understand power, and how the powerful and powerless behave. Working with the US military brought about this learning. I was privileged to work with some impressive military leaders most notably Generals Petraeus, Odierno and Mayville. However, power is becoming increasingly diffused in the information era making it harder to lead and to govern.

How have your experiences in Iraq affected your view of foreign intervention? What circumstances

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would justify external intervention?

There are those who believe that we should never intervene; and those who believe that we can intervene better. I'm in the latter camp. What happens in the Middle East does not stay in the Middle East. Refugees and terrorists are not contained in the region. Therefore, we have to do something. But the question of course is, what? Our Civilian leaders have to assess what is in the national interest; what is the political outcome we seek; and whether we have the capability to make a difference.

We should never have invaded Iraq. The war has to be understood in the context of 9/11 and the American fear of another attack on the homeland. We intervened on the mistaken belief that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. But nothing that happened in Iraq after the invasion was inevitable. There were hopes of a world without Saddam Husseins and missed opportunities to create a better order. The Surge of 2007 was the only time in the whole war that we had the right leadership, strategy and resources. And it led to the defeat of al-Qaeda in Iraq, brought the civil war to an end, and all groups into the political process. It showed what is possible, that we do have agency, that we can shape outcomes when we are committed.

Sadly, many of the gains made during the Surge were lost due to the incoming Obama administration being more focused on implementing its campaign pledge to bring all the troops home – rather than on taking forward the hard won gains of the previous administration. The US failed to uphold the results of Iraq's 2010 national elections – and Iran found an opening to broker the formation of the government. Instead of marking the peaceful transition of power in a new democratic system, the 2010 election undermined confidence that change could come about through politics. In its rush for an exit from Iraq, the Obama administration gave up America's role of "balancer," of moderator, of protector of the political process, withdrawing its soft power along with its hard.

In your view, what are the key factors that enable effective external assistance in conflict resolution and institution building?

It's all about the politics. Too often we look for technical fixes to what are inherently political problems – and end up inadvertently enabling and encouraging kleptocracy. Relationships are everything. It is really important to invest time in listening to others, and in building consensus. It takes time. But it is critical to achieving unity of effort and to prevent different actors from working at cross-purpose.

What is your assessment of the May 12 elections in Iraq? Do the results give you any grounds for optimism for Iraq's immediate future?

These were the first post ISIS elections – so it was an achievement to hold them, and there was no violence. 7,000 candidates competed for 329 seats. However turnout was low – under 45% – indicating a rejection of process, parties and people – especially former exiles who have dominated since 2003. There was also concern about fraud, leading to demands for a manual recount. The political parties continue to negotiate over the formation of the next government. Sadly, there is little reason to believe that the new government will be able to address the issues of corruption and poor governance that continue to plague the country.

Do you think the September 2017 referendum on the independence of Kurdistan helped or hindered Kurdish aspirations?

The 2017 referendum proved to be a strategic setback for the Kurds. They lost control of disputed territory, lost influence in Baghdad, and strained relations with their closest allies. The Kurds need to focus on getting their own house in order. Young Kurds are disillusioned with their leadership and complain of corruption and mafia-like behaviour of the Kurdish parties.

What would your advice be to the US Government and military regarding Iraq and the wider region?

The US needs to stay engaged in the region. The US has national interests that go beyond combatting ISIS. Trump

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is a disruptor, the anti-Obama. He spouts "America First," an isolationist foreign policy with unilateral actions. His inclination is to throw others off guard, predictable in his unpredictability. He has pulled the US out of the Iran nuclear deal. There is no doubt that more needs to be done to push back on Iran's nefarious activities particularly its support for militias in Iraq and Syria. But Iran was actually complying with the nuclear deal. Trump is happy working with autocrats. But he should not forget that in 2011, youth sprung out into the squares and streets to protest injustice, to call for better government, to plea for opportunities. Unless regimes reform, the youth will rise up again in the future to demand dignity; and the next iteration of ISIS will find a foothold. The choice of either dictatorship or chaos is not sustainable.

You also worked for a decade in the Palestinian territories. Given recent events, do you think a two-state solution is still a feasible resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict?

Most Israelis and Palestinians still favour a two state solution – they just don't think it will happen. Many Israeli leaders have concluded that the cost of a deal with the Palestinians outweighed the benefits. The Palestinian leadership is weak, corrupt and divided. Faced with the common threats of terrorism and Iran, Israel and Arab countries are covertly cooperating – despite the lack of solution to the Palestinian situation and the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank making a two state solution increasingly unattainable. US aid to Israel – along with international financial support to the Palestinian Authority – maintains the status quo even as the number of Arabs between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordanian river overtakes the Jews.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Politics?

Go out and experience the world, read good literature and try to understand people. It is not enough to simply understand theory. The pace of change is speeding up creating new threats but different opportunities.