

Commentary

VOLUME 88 NUMBER THREE SEPTEMBER 1989

Foreign Correspondent

FROM BEIRUT TO JERUSALEM. By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN. *Farrar, Straus & Giroux*. 525 pp. \$22.95.

Reviewed by DANIEL PIPES

LIKE many other Americans interested in the Middle East, I became aware of Thomas L. Friedman during the long, difficult summer of 1982. Not only did his reporting from Beirut for the *New York Times* stand out by virtue of its objectivity, but it had a sparkle and an insight lacking in other dispatches from that city; his stories explained the news at the same time that they reported it. Subsequent events made clear that I was not the only one to take notice of Friedman. He went on to earn fame and prizes for his reporting from the Middle East, and he has recently moved to Washington as the *Times's* chief diplomatic correspondent.

Between assignments, Friedman gathered up his observations of the Middle East into *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, a book whose title ex-

DANIEL PIPES is director of the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia and editor of *Orbis*, its quarterly journal. His most recent book, *The Long Shadow: Culture and Politics in the Middle East*, was published by Transaction.

actly sums up the contents, being evenly divided between "Beirut" (where he lived most of the time between mid-1979 and mid-1984) and "Jerusalem" (1984-88).

Friedman explains daily life in Lebanon during civil war in a way that helps make sense of that bizarre existence for anyone who has not spent time there. His vignettes neatly capture the contradictions of a world in which, because fighting erupts in only some places and at only some times, passers-by on one street will witness a raging gun battle while shoppers browse around the corner. After a car bombing in Beirut, the most frequently asked question is not "Who did it?" or "How many were killed?" but "What did it do to the dollar rate?" Likewise, "How is it outside?" refers not to the weather but to the security situation. Much as American radio stations offer information on the traffic, Lebanese radio stations compete for market share by providing the most timely and complete information on street conditions. One anecdote sums up life in that city. Friedman attended a dinner party on Christmas eve 1983, at a time when artillery salvos were landing nearby. The hostess put off dinner in the hope that things would settle down. Finally, seeing that her friends were getting hungry, not to mention nervous, "in an overture you won't find in Emily Post's book of etiquette, she turned to her guests and asked, 'Would you like to eat now or wait for the ceasefire?'"

Not unreasonably, Friedman is pessimistic about Lebanon. His view of the country's prospects is summed up by a psychologist at the American University of Beirut whom he quotes as saying that peace will come "when the Lebanese start to love their children more than they hate each other."

SURPRISINGLY, Friedman is nearly as pessimistic about Israel, a country whose deep internal divisions, he writes, must constantly be papered over anew for normal political life to go on. With more than a touch of hyperbole, Friedman foresees the possibility of Israel going the way of Lebanon:

If forced to confront the real and passionate ideological differences in their country . . . [Israelis] could end up like the Lebanese: arguing first in the parliament and then in the streets. To put it bluntly, asking an Israeli leader to really face the question, "What is Israel?" is like inviting him to a civil war.

In the Jerusalem half of his book, Friedman naturally devotes considerable attention to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Here too he is deeply pessimistic, portraying the contest as a brutal war for communal survival:

One side had knives and pistols; the other had secret agents and courts. While each constantly cried out to the world how evil the other was, when they looked one another in the eye—whether in the interrogator's room or before inserting a knife in a back alley—they said something dif-

ferent: I will do whatever I have to to survive. Have no doubt about it.

This frightful picture notwithstanding, Friedman proposes innovative guidelines for a solution. "The Palestinians must make themselves so indigestible to Israelis that they want to disgorge them into their own state, while at the same time reassuring the Israelis that they can disgorge them without committing suicide." To accomplish this nearly impossible task, Palestinians, in Friedman's view, have to adopt a two-pronged tactic, combining "the stick of non-lethal civil disobedience and the carrot of explicit recognition." Although Friedman is enormously critical of the Israelis, it should be noted that even he calls on the Palestinians to take the initiative; and until they do, he can see why the Israelis remain skeptical.

Short of the Palestinians taking up both civil disobedience and explicit recognition, Friedman foresees no real change in the status quo. He calls the *intifada* an "earthquake," but he cannot imagine it solving the basic impasse:

Israelis will be interested in hearing what Arafat and the Palestinians have to say as a nation only when the Israelis feel that they have no choice but to make a deal with the Palestinians as another nation on the land. A person is interested in the terms of a deal only when he feels he has to make a deal. The *intifada* has not . . . exerted enough internal pressure on Israelis, or offered them enough incentives, to convince a significant majority that they can and should share either power or sovereignty.

One of Friedman's strong points as a writer is his ability to convey complex problems simply and pungently. His expression "Hama rules" (referring to that Syrian city's destruction by the Assad government) has entered the vocabulary. Then, using the imagery of a couple falling in love and learning about each other's families, he explains the process of mutual discovery between American Jews and Israelis during the mid-1970's:

American Jews suddenly found themselves exclaiming to Israe-

lis, "Hey, I fell in love with Golda Meir. You mean to tell me that Rabbi Meir Kahane is in your family! I went out with Moshe Dayan—you mean to tell me that ultra-Orthodox are in your family! I loved someone who makes deserts green, not someone who breaks Palestinians' bones." Israelis eventually found themselves equally aghast and exclaiming, "Look, American Jew, just because we are dating doesn't mean you can tell me how to live my life. And anyway, American Jew, if we are in love, then you should move in with me."

But if Friedman excels at the journalistic insight and the apt quote, he is in the final analysis unable to transcend the limits of his craft. His proximity to the scene of action means he gets the larger context wrong. Thus, his assertion that "the PLO under Yasir Arafat was the first truly independent Palestinian national movement" ignores twenty years of the Arab High Committee under Hajj Amin al-Husayni.

The same superficiality extends to Friedman's treatment of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although the hostility of the Arab states toward Israel remains the heart of the Arab-Israeli problem, there is hardly a word about it in *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, which suggests that the conflict is nothing more than a bilateral confrontation between Palestinians and Israelis. Friedman's restricted vision may reflect the fact that the Palestinians are more prominent in the daily news coming out of Israel; but a book needs to be more than a compilation of news dispatches. His implication that the communal contest is the real problem reveals a shallow understanding of eight decades of Arab-Israeli strife.

Finally, Friedman's highly emotional relationship with Israel biases his views of that country. He confesses to having grown up thinking of Israel in mythic, heroic terms; he then charts the progress of his disenchantment, the final stage of which occurred in September 1982, at the time of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. When official Israel obfuscated the role played by Israeli armed forces in

failing to prevent the massacre of Palestinian Muslim Arabs by Lebanese Christian militiamen, a grievously disappointed Friedman "buried . . . every illusion" he ever held about the Jewish state. Actually, however, Friedman continued to be haunted by what he calls illusions, and he still labors under their sway. Their effects can be traced in the intense mix of affection and anger that suffuses his writing about Israel, so unlike his Olympian reports from Lebanon. When, for example, he refers heatedly to "Jewish power, Jewish generals, Jewish tanks, Jewish pride" as Menachem Begin's pornography, he may be revealing more about his own fantasy life than Begin's. He still feels tied to Israel, and therefore—in some unarticulated way—responsible for what Israelis do.

WRITING in 1987, my colleague Adam Garfinkle observed that "the new tradition of the New York Times's foreign correspondents writing long, anecdotal, and lyrically styled books on the subject of their most recent assignments" has filled the niche once held by 19th-century travelogues. Both genres emphasize first-hand experience; both serve as adjuncts to scholarly literature; and both offer severe reductions of complex political and cultural realities. Thomas Friedman has produced one of the better specimens of this usually blighted form, even if he fails to transcend its journalistic roots.