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BOOK REVIEW

Obama and the Middle East: The end of America's moment? by Fawaz A. Gerges, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 292 pp., ISBN 978-0-230-11381-7

Fawaz Gerges is Director and Professor of Contemporary Middle East Studies at The London School of Economics (LSE). He is an Arab-American citizen with expertise on US foreign policy, Middle East politics, social movements including Islamist groups, Arab–Israeli conflict, etc. Along with *Obama and the Middle East*, he is author of *America and political Islam: Clash of cultures or clash of interests (1999); The far enemy: Why Jihad went global (2005; 2009); Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim militancy (2006); and The rise and fall of Al-Qaeda (2011).*

In this book Gerges seeks to answer several questions mainly: Despite Barack Obama's idealistic rhetoric, how can his foreign policy be classified – transformational or realist? Has he stridden away from the Israel-first policy? Where does the Middle East rank on Obama's foreign policy priorities? How does his response to the Arab uprisings reflect the American engagement and position in the region? (25).

While attempting to answer these questions, this book employs an impressively informative and analytic literature on the stance of the United States in the Middle East. It is rich with reliable references and insightful quotations, in addition to a colourful and expressive terminology together with a reader-friendly style.

Obama and the Middle East displays the negative legacy that Obama has inherited in the region. Thus, it focuses on the American role in the central issues of the region which has generally tarnished the US policy in the region, namely: the position of the United States on the Arab–Israeli problem since the Second World War; the illegitimate and destructive War on Iraq under the fictitious pretexts of fighting Islamist fundamentalism therein, destroying weapons of mass destruction, guarding human rights and creating a democracy; the record of hostility with the Iranians; and the War on Terror. This legacy is compounded by a weakened economy and power on the international scene, an entangling heritage of Israel-first in US internal politics and an urgency of focusing on Asia-Pacific politics. These have impressed the main imprints on Obama's policy towards the region, and reflected a nearing end of America's moment in the region.

Gerges presents this work in an introduction, conclusion and six chapters. The first chapter presents the bitter American legacy since the Second World War that Obama has inherited in relation to: the Palestinian tragedy, the CIA ousting of Iran's nationalist Mossadegh, the Cold War logic, America's antagonism with Arab Nationalism, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and hostile relations with Islamic Iran. Chapter 2 highlights the tradition of presidential doctrines in the United States whereby American foreign policy and world view are articulated. While George W. Bush tried to force a

'freedom doctrine' that is supposed to forge social engineering of the Middle East, Chapter 3 presents Obama as anti-doctrinal, and thus a pragmatic realist exercising restraint. Chapter 4 writes of a gap in Obama's rhetoric and action regarding even-handedness in American policy towards Israeli-Palestinian peace (115, 127), meanwhile highlighting Benjamin Netanyahu's persistence in resuming illegal settlements in Palestinian territory. This chapter also highlights mechanisms of the decision-making of Israel-first American policy. Chapter 5 elaborates the increasing assertiveness of the three pivotal states of the Middle East: Egypt, with its unfolding revolution; Turkey, as a rising geo-economic and geopolitical regional power; and increasingly emboldened Iran. This is seen by Gerges as an indicator of a power vacuum or a deterioration of American power in the region. Chapter 6 deals with a subject on which Gerges is an expert, namely, the War on Terror. Obama is presented as a nuanced politician who understands the American psyche, realizes the huge economic drain ensuing from this war, displays a willingness to educate the public on the exaggerated fears, and cautions Americans against home-grown terrorism – bringing issues nearer to a realistic scale. Nevertheless, Obama invests in it externally and reserves for the United States the application of pre-emptive military force, though based on more cooperation, diplomacy and engagement (205). Obama has worked on rationalizing the terror away from gaining the hostility of more than one billion Muslims, notwithstanding the US drones or unmanned air raids during his first year of presidency outweighed those during Bush's two full terms (212). A 'gap […] exists between Obama's nuanced and rosy rhetoric and the political reality. There are structural continuities in American national security that Obama doesn't seem to be able or willing to change' (216–217).

In his conclusion, Gerges summarizes Obama's stance on the Middle East thus:

> His Turkey policy has shored up ties with a rising geostrategic power; his outreach to Muslims has been largely positive, though harmed by inconsistencies; his Israel–Palestine policy is a dismal failure; his Iran policy an uncertain gamble; his counterterrorism strategies technically successful; his goal of removing US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan has borne fruit; and his approaches toward the Arab awakening, a mixed bag. (235)

Gerges ends his book by commenting that Obama in his second term is free from the shackles of internal pressures, thus he has the opportunity to make 'bold moves in the region' (247).

Directly, or through quoting others, Gerges presents Obama as a 'politician par excellence' (136) with nuanced approaches and nuanced rhetoric, yet with a gap between his 'idealistic rhetoric' and 'actual policies, solidly anchored in new realism' (161). Gerges sees that in office Obama has displayed more continuity than real change (233). Though Gerges sees that Obama 'governs by consensus at home and by the national interest abroad' (235), he perceives that his stance on the Palestinian issue has compromised American national interest (237). By 2012, Obama's 'retreat from evenhanded diplomacy, and a triumph for the Israel-first perspective' (148) became evident. Moreover, Gerges finds that Obama's 'antidoctrinal doctrine' no longer reflects reality and is entitled to harm American interests in the region (110). For example:

> The Egyptian case speaks volumes about Obama's muddled and unbalanced approach to the region. […] Far from being strategic and comprehensive, the policy is tactical and selective. Obama's foreign policy priorities are elsewhere in Asia, particularly in China, America's global rival. (175)

Gerges quotes Brzezinski, an official who backed up Obama's presidential bid, lamenting: 'He doesn't strategize. He sermonizes' (176). Consequently, Gerges concludes that during his second term Obama has the chance to be free to adopt a more assertive stance in the region.

I would like to employ the material presented by Gerges in this book, together with his insights, to come up with a corollary of his work which might seem at first glimpse a counterargument. This book review attempts to show that through his actions and policies in the Middle East, Obama has proven to be employing an 'America-first' rather than an 'Israel-first' policy. To this end, the commentary will proceed with Obama's position on Israel's suggestions to strike Iran. Obama expresses the willingness and readiness of the United States to do the job itself upon its own discretion. Gerges writes:

> As the drums of war grew louder in Israel, in interviews and speeches before and after Netanyahu's visit to the White House in March 2012, Obama tried to quiet the loose war talk, while arguing that he will order the US military to destroy Iran's nuclear programme if economic sanctions fail to compel Tehran to shelve its nuclear ambitions. (185–186)

He also writes: 'Obama told the *Atlantic* that both Iran and Israel should take seriously the possibility of American action against Iran's nuclear facilities' (188). Gerges quotes Obama (2007, 66): 'Our policy of issuing threats and relying on intermediaries to curb Iran's nuclear programme, sponsorship of terrorism, and regional aggression is failing'. In this sense, Israel is losing its role of providing superpowers with services in the region, similar to the role it assumed when it destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor regardless of the then non-existence of a state of war between the two countries.

In the same vein, the stance of Obama vis-à-vis the deterioration in Turkish–Israeli relations can be viewed. Gerges writes:

> Obama knows that US influence in the region rests on stable relations with rising geoeconomic and geopolitical powers such as Turkey. He has rebuffed policy advocates in Washington who view the US–Turkish relationship through the narrow Israel Lens. (199)

Meanwhile, acquiescing to the Saudis finding their own path regarding their intervention in Bahrain (109), while signing the largest arms deals by the United States worth US$60 billion (110), seems beneficial to the United States both ways. Here Iran is playing the conventional role of Israel as a scarecrow in the region that drives the Arabs into such arm deals. Here I shall use Gerges words: 'In the view of the Gulf ruling elite, Iran has replaced Israel as the new enemy' (182). Meanwhile the Americans are checking the power of Iran through the continued severe economic measures against it.

When it comes to the regression in America's position vis-à-vis Israel, whereby it is seen that 'Netanyahu can challenge Obama and defeat him', or that it is tragic and consequential strategically that 'Netanyahu is the alpha dog in the relationship with president Obama' (138), there is much to be said. I would venture to give a parallel view to Gerges's perception that 'By giving priority to the war on terror and Asia, Obama allowed Netanyahu to prevail' (141). It can as well be seen that by working on putting an end to the War on Terror, and playing down its rhetoric associated with a clash with Islam, Obama has relieved the United States from a futile confrontation, meanwhile neutralizing the Israeli association with this American alleged War on Terror – and consequently legitimizing their war on the Palestinians. Moreover, by

moving attention to Asia – a more lucrative endeavour to the Americans – it becomes debatable that the Americans have lost. Looking at the American intermediation in the almost depleted Palestinian issue, at the moment, seems meaningless given: the Israeli fait accompli confiscation of land which leaves the Palestinians two insignificant parts of Palestine geographically and politically divided, together with the insistence of Netanyahu on extra seizure of land. Netanyahu's 'steadfastness' has rendered the game of intermediation in the Middle East useless. Regardless of the potential outcome of these negotiations for the Arabs, by Obama turning back on the issue and looking eastwards, Israel has lost its role as the agent requiring US intermediation.

Given the literature and insight of this work (*Obama and the Middle East*), one may perceive a diminishing Israeli role in the region vis-à-vis the American superpower in terms of being a mercenary, scarecrow or agent of intervention; meanwhile, the United States is shedding the negative inherited legacies and playing the international game in a more efficient, and rather legitimate, way. Though Obama has not coined for himself a doctrine, he stated: '[Mine is] an American leadership that recognizes the rise of countries like China, India and Brazil. It's a US leadership that recognizes our limits in terms of resources and capacity' (233). This continuity that Obama's politics suggest (233) need not eclipse a real diversion in the overall trajectory, though a nuanced one, whereby what we may be witnessing is a change in America's policies in the Middle East, rather than its 'end' in the region. Again, I would like to suggest that Obama as presented in this book can very well be, rather than an 'Israel-first' advocate, an 'America-first' president.

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Reference

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