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Obama and the Middle East: the end of America's moment

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public intellectual. Part III continues in much the same vein with a barrage of topical pieces all from early 2010 under the rubric 'Weekly Readings of the Crisis in Algeria'. These selections perhaps best represent what Addi in his introduction to the book calls 'academic journalism' (11) in that they are short reflections on current events (labour strikes, announcement that the country will erect a 5 billion dollar mosque, cases of ministerial corruption, a party leader's speech calling on France to apologise for the Algerian war). These are more ephemeral commentaries yet even in these does Addi demonstrate his knack for bringing insights from the academy into his weekly musings. This partnership of the academy and the press is an important enterprise that Addi has undertaken. At one point he relates an anecdote about a reader's appreciation of a favourite journalist. The reader tells Addi that 'When I buy *Le Quotidien d'Oran*, I pay five dinars for the newspaper and five dinars for Kamel Daoud' (273). Addi likewise gives the reader his five dinars worth.

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Obama and the Middle East: the end of America's moment, by Fawaz Gerges, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 292 pp., US\$28.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-230-11381-7

Since George W. Bush's ill-considered decision to invade Iraq in 2003, many academics have analysed and critiqued the foreign policy of the USA in the Middle East using the paradigm of a declining, over-stretched empire plagued by Imperial hubris. Yet, few analysts have succeeded in putting forth convincing descriptions of the process of American foreign policy formation, due to the difficulties of penetrating the inner workings of its staggeringly complex bureaucracies prior to the opening of the archives. In *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment*, Fawaz Gerges skilfully attacks the problem utilising methodologies which are commonly used in the study of the British Empire. By stressing the importance of 'mentalities' in policy formation and by identifying the many instances of institutional continuity between the administration of Barak Obama and those that preceded him, Gerges' approach follows in the footsteps of the prominent Oxford historians of Britain's moment in the Middle East – Wm. Roger Louis, Roger Owen, and Elizabeth Monroe. In his section on the ideological dimension of policy formation, Gerges asserts that American policy towards the Middle East since the onset of the Cold War has been set by a struggle between idealists vs. realists, globalists vs. regionalists, and Israel-firsters vs. Arabists. He casts Obama in the 'traditional foreign policy realist [camp], like President George Herbert Walker Bush (9)'. Given the surprisingly broad ambit of this line of enquiry, *Obama and the Middle East* constitutes a comprehensive, up-to-date history of American policy in the region since President Harry Truman – rather than simply a treatment of Obama's response to the Arab Spring.

Consequently, *Obama and the Middle East* is a useful teaching tool for professors of survey courses – although for teachers of North African history and politics it is relatively disappointing that Washington's policy towards North Africa is given a back seat, while policy towards the Near East is dealt with in much greater depth. The book raises big picture questions concerning America's long-term interests in the Middle East and North Africa, while problematising

America's 'special' relationship with Israel as hindering these interests. The book is not based on primary sources or interviews with policy-makers, rather, it elegantly summarises secondary literature and journalistic accounts in a highly readable fashion, making it accessible to the non-specialist. Despite its introductory nature, the book is filled with many novel insights – notably, that Obama's emphasis on repairing the US–Turkish relationship has made it the central pivot of US policy in the post-Arab Spring Middle East.

Gerges' grand narrative of American policy towards the region is, however, marred by his tendency to characterise America as formerly exercising a hegemonic influence over the Middle East. For example, '[in the new] multipolar world [of 2012] America neither calls the shots as before nor dominates the regional scene in the way it did after the Cold War ended. America's ability to act unilaterally and hegemonically, unconstrained by the local context, has come to an end (13)'. This perspective ignores that even in its supposed hey-day America never could actually bend the politics of the region to its advantage because its alliances with Israel and the oil producing states of the Arabian Peninsula could never be incorporated into a coherent Imperial system. Similarly, Gerges assumes that in the past, major US allies such as Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia bucked the desires of their people or their core national interests in order to preserve US support, whereas the new multipolar age is defined by an inability of America to exert coercion over its regional allies. Only the latter half of the equation is true: *Obama and the Middle East* is replete with examples of Morsi and Netanyahu simply disregarding Obama's statements and the President lacking the leadership skills or the carrots and sticks to compel them to modify their behaviour to suit American interests.

Using the methodologies of Imperial History, Gerges sheds light on the tug of war of forces among the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department, Congress, and America's regional allies which has shaped Obama's policy towards the Middle East far more than the President's lofty rhetoric or his genuine desire to recast America's relationship with the Arab world after Bush's myriad failures. In identifying these key structural constraints that have prevented the President from actualising his rhetoric of partnership with the peoples of the Muslim world, Gerges highlights exactly why Obama's dream of a radical re-alignment of America's position in the Middle East could never have been actualised, given the electoral considerations and cabinet personnel during the President's first term. This approach explains the administration's hesitation towards Egypt in February 2011. Gerges shows that policy was moulded by the competition between the diverging world views of 'the traditional foreign policy establishment [i.e. Hillary Clinton and her husband's former advisors like Dennis Ross]' who sought to uphold the status quo and 'West Wing staff, [like Dennis McConough and Samantha Power, who] worried that if Obama did not step up pressure on Mubarak . . . he would be on the wrong side of history (165)'. Amidst these internecine struggles, Gerges shows America to be like a giant ocean liner headed towards an iceberg: the new captain knows he must change direction, but the ship has far too much momentum to respond quickly, especially while stake holders in the engine room [Congress and the Clintonians] insist that the present course must be maintained.

This dynamic is at the core of Gerges' clear-sighted analysis of Obama's policy towards the Arab Spring: America's ties to Ben Ali and Mubarak as pillars of stability and protectors of America's regional interests were simply too deep and too ingrained in the mentalities of the Washington establishment for American policy to shift rapidly and coherently in response to the events in North Africa in 2011. Gerges asserts that Obama saw the writing on the wall earlier than his Clintonian advisors – and was ready to abandon Mubarak and Ben Ali, but that his decisions were nonetheless 'driven more by a realist assessment of national interests than an idealist desire to promote democracy (106)'.

On Libya, Gerges correctly points out that ‘Obama got it right (113)’, but states that he did so as a result of his ‘anti-doctrinal doctrine’. For Gerges, the small success in Libya is not enough to compensate for Obama’s myriad failures in the rest of the region, primarily those on Israel–Palestine, which he traces to the President lacking both will and a coherent strategic doctrine. In *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future* (2013 and also with Palgrave Macmillan), I put forth the contrasting viewpoint that Obama’s decision to work through regional actors and help the European powers lead in their own backyard *is the essence and genius of Obama’s Doctrine*. Moreover, both the President’s enemies and supporters understand that US actions in Libya are a product of Obama’s novel strategic ‘doctrine’. In fact, in January 2013, the Obama Doctrine appears to be the guiding principle underlying America’s behind-the-scenes support for the French intervention in northern Mali.

In the final analysis, Gerges paints Obama as fundamentally unable ‘to discard the two dominant prisms – oil and Israel – through which America views the region (107)’. Furthermore, Gerges writes that ‘the Obama administration’s approach in the Middle East reflects a vacuum in global leadership, a vacuum that is weakening the ability of post-autocratic governments to overcome the structural economic and institutional challenges they have inherited from autocratic rulers (245)’. Although Gerges castigates Obama for ‘not investing enough political and financial capital in assisting transitioning Arab societies in the development of their shattered economies and institutions (242)’, Gerges is not an advocate of massive Western-led capacity building programmes in the region. He praises Obama for not meddling in the internal politics of the post-revolutionary North African states and avoids any mention of the possibility of ‘a Marshall Plan for the Arabs’, presumably doubting that an America in decline, led by a President with a predilection for compromise, could successfully enact such an agenda.

Given the evidence of the last four years presented by Gerges and what it reveals about Obama’s ingrained character it is difficult to be overly optimistic about the emergence of a radically new direction in the second term. Nonetheless, Obama’s assertive appointments for his new cabinet positions – especially the courageous and admirable choice of Chuck Hagel – provides a glimmer of hope that Obama’s first term ‘status quo’ Middle East policies may have been the product of electoral calculations and are likely to be recalibrated. Additionally, as Gerges notes, Obama’s willingness to abandon decades of American practice and work with Islamist actors across North Africa is highly encouraging. In his second term, Gerges counsels Obama to ‘shed his political inhibitions and escape the trappings of special interest groups and . . . to realign US foreign policy with progressive and democratic voices in the region and translate his rhetoric into concrete policies (247)’. Yet, not wishing to delve into the hypothetical and assuming that American power in the region is irrevocably declining, Gerges stops short of considering that such a re-alignment could not only safeguard America’s real interests in the Middle East, but could also harmonise those interests with the various rising regional powers and, therefore, halt its supposed ‘Imperial decline’.

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