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Introduction by Thomas Maddux

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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

In *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment*, Fawaz Gerges has evaluated the performance of President Barack Obama in directing U.S. policy in the Middle East during most of his first term in office. In contrast with Obama's predecessors whose evaluations might be ranked with George W. Bush receiving an "F", his father, George H.W. Bush, along with Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton receiving "C" grades for their pursuit of an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, Obama might currently receive a provisional "B" with warnings from Gerges that the final grade could be much lower if did not back up his idealistic speeches with more forceful pressure on the Israeli government to negotiate a settlement with the Palestinians and with more diplomatic and financial support for the struggling new regimes in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. Gerges recognizes the complexity of the pressures that Obama had to deal with in directing U.S. involvement in the Middle East which included the priority of withdrawing the U.S. from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and their drain upon U.S. resources, and the Great Recession of 2008 that Obama inherited. The President also recognized the importance of addressing other relationships with China at the top of the list. (234) The shift from post-Cold War unipolarity with the U.S. as the dominant global power to increasing multipolarity and accompanying resistance to U.S. preferences from both allies and adversaries shapes, according to Gerges, the underlying international environment that Washington under Obama and his advisers had to recognize in adjusting U.S. policies in the Middle East.

In a review of "America's Encounter with the Middle East: A Bitter Legacy" in Chapter One, Gerges emphasizes U.S. policy mistakes in the Middle East starting with Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower's application of a Cold War perspective "meant to deter the Soviet Union and safeguard access to Saudi and Iraqi petroleum" and support Israel after 1948. (30-31) "American officials looked at" the Middle East "from the outside in, through a globalist prism," asserts Gerges, in which "every issue, crisis, and country was rated by its relevance and importance to the struggle against worldwide Communism and by its ability to guarantee America's access to material and strategic resources, especially petroleum" (36). The regionalist perspective of U.S. officials familiar with the history, culture and concerns of Middle Eastern leaders such Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt recognized, as Gerges emphasizes, "how the European colonial legacy colored the attitudes of the rising new elite in the Middle East. U.S. officials ignored internal and local priorities and thereby turned potential allies into bitter foes" (42). Gerges highlights the continuing impact of a global versus regional perspective being dominant in Washington with Bush's "War on Terror" replacing the Cold War not only with Bush officials but also with Obama and his advisers. "In the official U.S. worldview, the menace of terrorism has replaced the Soviet threat," concludes Gerges, who also points to the replacement of the Cold War military-industrial complex with a new national security complex of immense size.¹

¹ Gerges cites a *Washington Post* investigative study of July 18-20, 2010 that concluded that the new secret national security complex "has become so large, so unwieldy, and so secretive that no one knows how much money it costs, how many people it employs, how many programs exist within it or exactly how many agencies do the same work" (209-210).

Furthermore, Gerges stresses the decline of Al Qaeda not only under the impact of U.S. military pressure but, most importantly, in the lack of Muslim support for Al Qaeda and its nonentity role in the Middle East democratic revolutions of 2011 and their discrediting of Al Qaeda's emphasis on terrorism, denunciation of democracy, and engagement in politics versus armed subversion. (221-224)

George W. Bush sets the stage for Gerges' assessment of Obama. By invading and mishandling the occupation of Iraq in 2003, Bush undermined the support he had received from Arab leaders and Iran over the September 11th attack on the U.S. and the ensuing U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. The absence of weapons of mass destruction, promoted Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to defend the Iraq war by launching a neoconservative "Freedom Agenda" of spreading democracy and capitalist values throughout the Middle East. "Blinded by seductively simplistic ideological slogans and lacking experience in international affairs..." Bush "plunged headfirst into a social engineering project that failed to take into consideration the region's complex social and political realities," (81) concludes Gerges, who also emphasizes that what Bush and his advisers ended up with in Iraq was a sectarian based political system led by Nouri al-Maliki, "more authoritarian and sectarian-based than democratic and inclusive" (86). At the same time they enhanced the opportunities for Iran to influence developments in Iraq and Syria.

As the reviewers note, Gerges is somewhat conflicted on Obama. What Gerges would prefer is a transformational leader who would reverse U.S. preoccupation with the war on terror, exert meaningful pressure on Israeli to negotiate a settlement with the Palestinians and end its occupation of territory since 1967, try to reduce the hostility and suspicions plaguing relations with Iran through negotiations rather than coercion, and provide meaningful economic support to the new Arab governments struggling to restructure decaying economies and build representative governments. Gerges, however, recognizes as Fred Lawson points out, that Obama faced many structural and political restraints that Bush's legacies reinforced. The involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan had to be winded down in such a manner as to minimize the domestic political repercussions as well as the impact on the Middle East and U.S. relationships. Gregory Gause notes Gerges emphasis on Obama as a realist and not the Wilsonian leader that Gerges preferred who would lead America in the Middle East on the "right side of every issue, but governed by sober-minded power brokers who understand the region, can get things done and will not mess up. That is not the Obama Administration," concludes Gause. Lloyd Gardner questions Gerges use of "realism" and "realist" with Obama and suggests that Gerges "seems undecided about whether 'realism' is good or bad."

In pointing to structural constraints on U.S. policy from a dysfunctional domestic political environment as well as from the problems Obama inherited in the Middle East, Gerges suggests that despite the rhetoric of Obama as in his Cairo speech in 2009 and his preferences, "the reality of Obama's Middle East policy carried more continuity than change" (2). Gerges does qualify this at various points throughout his study and in his conclusion emphasizes that "the difference between Obama's competence and his predecessor's is night and day" (240), and "Obama has successfully moved the United States out of the ditch that George W. Bush left the country in" (247). Gardner endorses the

emphasis on continuity but suggests that Gerges' falls back too much on structural constraints although he does point out where "Obama has personally failed" such as his reluctance to take political risks and his limited attempts to engage with Iran. Gause suggests that Gerges' critique of the Obama administration has a "somewhat inconsistent quality" with Obama getting marked as a failure in translating his idealistic rhetoric into policy whereas on most specific issues Gerges "tends to give Obama fairly good marks" such as his relationship with Turkey and Premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Obama's backing away from the "war on terror" template.

Structural restraints are perhaps most evident on the Israeli-Palestinian issue to which Gerges devotes an entire chapter with emphasis on Obama's effort in 2009 to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict which was rejected by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, especially on the critical issue of a freeze on new Israeli settlements and housing on the West Bank and East Jerusalem, a necessary condition for the Palestinians led by Mahmoud Abbas to resume formal negotiations. Gerges points to what he considers Obama's initial mistake in appointing key advisers such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and others who belonged to what he calls the "Israeli First School versus those who advocated an evenhanded diplomatic approach" (17). When Abbas turned to the UN to achieve recognition of an independent Palestinian state, Gerges criticizes Obama's opposition and threat to veto action in the Security Council. (128-131) Gerges notes an increased Arab willingness to recognize Israel and even shifts by Hamas, the Palestinian group in control of the Gaza Strip, to accept a settlement if Israel withdraws to its 1967 borders and a referendum of Palestinians approves the settlement. (144) Noting the involvement of important interest groups and domestic political maneuvering on this issue, Gerges concludes that "despite the early promising months of the Obama presidency and its fresh rhetoric, structural-institutional continuity reasserted itself and co-opted Obama" (149). Lawson and Gardner agree on the reality of Gerges' constraints and, as Gardner points out, "the Obama Administration's willingness to take it on the chin from Israel," although most U.S. presidents have ended up back pedaling into the same corner on the Palestinian issue. Gause emphasizes this point that although Obama failed in his efforts with Israel "particularly given the ambitious agenda the President had coming into office," no U.S. president from Nixon to Clinton and both Bushes "has been willing and/or able to push Israeli leaders to do things that they did not want to do." In a recent Op-Ed article, Aaron David Miller, a Middle East negotiator for Republican and Democratic administrations, made a similar point that applied to both Israeli and Palestinian leaders: "true peace in the not-so-holy land is possible only when Israelis and Palestinians are prepared to pay the price on the issues that drive the conflict—borders, Jerusalem, refugees and security."²

Gerges finds Obama the pragmatic and cautious leader at work in response to the Arab spring. "The U.S. foreign policy establishment had not seriously considered or envisioned a post-autocratic Middle East," suggests Gerges, without mentioning neoconservative and Bush rhetoric on this issue, although the author does suggest that Obama initiated a review on this issue in August 2010. (105) Although Obama attempted, according to Gerges, to

² See Aaron David Miller, "Palestinian Upheaval," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 2013, A23.

both support the public demands for change and not abandon autocratic allies in Tunisia and Egypt, he ultimately supported the removal of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia. Gerges does note Obama's reluctance to extend his support to public demands in Bahrain or criticize Saudi Arabia's use of force to repress protestors in the important oil region. (189-190) Despite Obama's similar caution in response to the assault on the Libyan regime of Muammar Qaddafi, Gerges concludes that "Obama got it right" as his "low-key approach proved effective by keeping a distance from Libya's raging battles" (113-114). Whether Obama's similar approach on the uprising in Syria will be successful is intertwined with Iran's support for President Bashar al-Assad, Iraq's role as conduit for Iranian arms to Assad, U.S. reservations about the nature of the Syrian opposition to Assad, and the issue of Iran's intentions with respect to the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

Has America's "moment" in the Middle East come to an end? Gerges points to the global shift from a unipolar world dominated by the U.S. at the end of the Cold War to an "evolving multipolar world with multiple geoeconomic and geopolitical powers" (12) In the Middle East "we are witnessing the end of America's moment" as regional powers like Turkey and Iran exert increased influence and "people in the region will determine the political arrangements under which they live ... [and] America's ability to act unilaterally and hegemonically, unconstrained by the local context, has come to an end" (13, and 239-239). Gause challenges this depiction of U.S. decline by noting that what Gerges demonstrates is "how hard it is to manage the domestic politics of foreign states" in a post-imperial environment, and Gause notes a number of examples before and after 2009 where the U.S. could not change or control governments in the Middle East from Egypt and Israel to Iran and Syria and Iraq under its new regime. Furthermore, Gause suggests that the "United States remains the unchallenged extra-regional player in the region's affairs, with a vast Middle Eastern military infrastructure. It is allied with the region's strongest military power, Israel; its richest state, Saudi Arabia; and a rising regional force, Turkey." If a multipolar world continues to develop, the U.S. could benefit from this in a number of ways including, hopefully, development of more restraint against very costly and misguided crusades such as the Bush invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, the continuing conflict in Syria with reports of chemical weapons being used by the Assad regime, the involvement of Al Qaeda affiliated groups in Syria, the conflict with Iran over whether or not it is developing nuclear weapons, and pressure from Israeli leaders on President Obama to intervene in both Iran and Syria, ensures that the U.S. will remain engaged in the Middle East as a most significant power.

Participants:

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Review by Lloyd Gardner, Emeritus Rutgers University

For me, at least, Fawaz Gerges is best known for his excellent book, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (2009), in which the author attempts to correct the impression that Al Qaeda represents a majority opinion within the Muslim world, or, especially, that George W. Bush's pronouncement that they 'hated' Americans' because of their freedoms made any sense about Middle Eastern opinions on America's "Way of Life." Alas, as his new book looks at the world since Barack Obama's astounding rise on the American political scene and election to the presidency, the expected changes in Washington's outlook have not occurred. On the eve of his first visit to Israel, with a side trip to talk to Palestinian leaders, the mood among the Palestinians was essentially that of resignation, reflecting disenchantment since the early days of the Administration and the 2009 Cairo Speech that stirred such excitement about new beginnings: "He [Obama] can't be just an average person coming to listen — he knows the situation," said Sam Bahour, an Ohio-born Palestinian businessman and consultant. "We're beyond talk right now. If he comes and says good things and does nothing, it does damage."¹

In a very direct sense, that statement sums up what Gerges has to tell us in his new book. Obama has damped down the rhetoric, but has not changed the Bush policies. In some ways, the 2009 Cairo Speech suggested he intended to follow up on things his predecessor had said about Great Power responsibility for putting stability ahead of democracy promotion. But let us leave that complex argument for a moment. Gerges argues that the Obama Administration is more than weary of fighting big wars in the Middle East, and is desperately anxious to complete the pivot to Asia, where serious economic competitors challenge the substance of American power and prestige in direct ways. The author does not specify what military challenges emanate from China, in particular, but apparently the general feeling that the U.S. has lost military credibility encourages Beijing to be more forceful in its demands on neighboring states. And that, of course, constitutes the central irony or, better put, calamity caused by the attempt to force democracy on the Middle East (or better put, parts of the Middle East, for no one was calling for the overthrow of friendly regimes like those in Bahrain or Yemen.) As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton once explained, each case must stand on its own. There was no one size fits all policy. A policy that was supposed to promote a domino effect in favor of American interests, political and economic, wound up hurting those causes globally. But will the pivot to Asia ever be complete? After Gerges finished his book, the new drone bases established all around the area, some argue, represent instead a 'Pivot to Africa.'² How that will play out remains to

¹ Jodi Rudoren, "For Some Palestinians Wariness on Eve of Obama Visit," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2013.

² The debate is a new one, of course, and the recent critique of Obama's foreign policy, Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), argues that the pivot is essential in order to meet the challenges of serious competitors, China and even India. Nasr also believes that Obama made a mistake in not listening to Richard Holbrooke's advice on engaging Pakistan in the Afghan endgame. Another recent book by Mark Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2013), details the difficulties Washington has had formulating a Pakistan policy with a critical eye.

be seen, but it is too soon to tell if Obama's second term will really lead to significant changes in Middle Eastern policies, or to different weapons of choice.

Gerges tells us that he will emphasize the structural constraints on U.S. policy to explain the continuity from the Bush years (and before) and what Obama faced when he came into power. He credits Obama with wishing to end the war in Iraq in a face-saving manner, but stresses at the same time the Administration's hard fight to maintain a military presence in the country, right up until the last moment. The Iraqi President Nouri al-Malaki was willing, but the new Iraqi Parliament was not – unless the United States gave up its demand that its soldiers accused of crimes could not be tried in Iraqi courts. Aside from Gerges's arguments, it is hard to understand why Washington believed that Baghdad would ever yield on this point. Such a demand harks back to the days of extra-territoriality in China from the time of the Opium Wars down to the victory of the Chinese Communists in the revolution. It is the very essence of neo-colonialist thinking, as if the world had stood still since World War I and World War II.

But this episode in the sorry history of the outcome of Bush's Iraq War is only one of the many discussion points Gerges uses to demonstrate continuity between the presidents and the entire foreign policy establishment. While Bush and then Obama called for democratic changes in the Middle East (indeed one could put either president's name under some pronouncements in that regard), both were scared to death of what revolution could produce. Egypt was/is the perfect case. It was Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice who lectured President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt on his bad behavior toward political opponents, and Barack Obama who then attempted to reverse course to make it up to him – before the final showdown in Tahrir Square. After all, the U.S. had invested \$50 billion in the Egypt it knew and had relied on since the Camp David talks, and Anwar Sadat's rather brilliant conception of 'Nile Nationalism' to reassure President Jimmy Carter and Henry Kissinger, in order to pry open the coffers of D.O.D. military aid. Gerges does not give Sadat credit enough, I think, for using the Yom Kippur War to demonstrate that without some settlement of issues there would be never ending skirmishes and wars, while at the same time pulling back from the Soviet Union. Of course, it ended badly for him – as badly possible as it could with his assassination – but made the way easy for Mubarak's long rule.

Obama's 2009 Cairo Speech was supposed to signal a new beginning by admitting past mistakes -- a risky venture in the American political culture --; but, then, so had Bush in 2005 in London when he spread the blame around, suggesting that all the great powers had valued stability over democracy, and helped to bring about the threat of radical jihad. Rice and Bush got scared out of their democratic fantasies when Hamas won the election in Gaza; Obama then backed away from challenging Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu's attitude about Palestinian statehood at a time when he supposedly was hailing Arab Spring's promise. And so it goes. At times, however, Gerges wearies of stressing structural factors and really lays it on the line about where Obama has personally failed. Although getting Osama Bin Laden, along with the ousting of Gaddafi, had given the President a big lift, "taking political risks would go against his instincts as a politician par excellence" (136). Again, on Iraq, "Barack Obama inherited the mess, and his persistent efforts to maintain a military footprint in Iraq were met with widespread societal and political

opposition" (154). And on Iran, where he had pledged a fresh start instead of a closed fist: "According to leaked US diplomatic cables, the Obama administration's engagement efforts were half-hearted" (181). In all cases, the objects or targets of American policy, Gerges writes, "were unwilling to play by Obama's nuanced rules" (181).

It is certainly arguable, as Gerges implies, that Obama's critical choices may have been accomplished before he even stepped across the threshold of the Oval Office. He asked Robert Gates to stay on as Secretary of Defense, perhaps thinking it was a Kennedy-esque gesture towards a post-ideological era; he chose Hillary Clinton, whose approach the Democrats had rejected in primary showdowns over the previous year, as Secretary of State; he made Dennis Ross, a strongly pro-Israel figure, a close adviser on the Middle East, etc. And he rejected the one voice close to him from the policymaking elite during the campaign who called for real change in American Middle Eastern policy: Zbigniew Brzezinski. It is hard to argue that these choices were forced on Obama by structural concerns, unless it was true by default that he was as unprepared to be president, as had been his predecessor who for his first term had to be tutored by Vice President Dick Cheney. That might be the best explanation.

Concerning this question, it might also be wise to think about the problem of defining the terms 'realism' and 'realist.' Perhaps no word in the diplomatic historian's lexicon is more troublesome to pin down than 'realist.' Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice used to talk about 'muscular' Wilsonianism, attempting to bridge some gaps to make Bush's dream of democracy at the point of a bayonet somehow fit all the traditions of American foreign policy. Thus Bush was a 'realist' when he invaded Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein, and, when he discovered that Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) were missing, he was a 'realist' for arguing that without change in the Middle East, America would be condemned to repeat things like the invasion. In this treatment of Obama, Gerges seems undecided about whether 'realism' is good or bad. A few policymakers, like Presidents George H.W. Bush and even Ronald Reagan, are praised for realism by Obama and, to a degree, by Gerges, but always with qualifications. My impression is that the confusion stems from the effort to define a realist policy. Way back when George F. Kennan was considered America's prime realist, indeed the author of America's Cold War "Containment" policy pursued by the Truman Administration, the answer seemed to be that a realist was one who excluded all considerations of pursuing a 'moral' foreign policy and stuck to working to preserve the national interest. The problem was always selling that idea to the public. Realism in other hands means understanding the limits of policy, in other words, that ends and means must have some conjunction, or one was an adventurer. Thus realism was either hard-headed disregard for 'doing good,' or it was cautious, careful, and conservative. It could be both, of course, but being realist in the Middle East seemed to be supporting U.S. friends like Saudi Arabia, and opposing anything that would endanger them. Thus Obama was a realist when he patched things up with Mubarak after the Bush assault on him for not being democratic; and he became a non-realist in Israeli and Saudi Arabian eyes when he decided that Mubarak had to go, and essentially forced the Egyptian military to choose between the United States and Mubarak. One may well ask whether there can ever be agreement on what is a realist foreign policy, or who is or is not a realist. Perhaps we

should put a moratorium on the use of the term, and with Rhett Butler's closing comment to Scarlet, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

Now Gerges allows that much that is confusing about Obama's policy and the question of realism is partially explained because of what he calls "the politics of terrorism" that "fetter" him. Yet he asserts that Obama "does not seem able or willing to change." Is it really both? When the United Nations challenged the legality of Predator drone attacks, all the objections fell on "deaf ears." Instead, Obama went to Afghanistan to say that the soldiers there were performing a service that was "absolutely necessary, absolutely necessary to America's safety and security" (217). Well, he could hardly have done otherwise when addressing soldiers who risked their lives every day, but Gerges's point is that by making the trip he set himself up for exaggerations that limit his freedom. This may not be the best example from the many the author uses, but it is well worth considering as typical of the way policymakers box themselves in and then wonder why it is so difficult to change approaches to a more rational level of discourse, and describe situations as they really are instead of pretending there is always 'progress.' Garry Wills, in a brilliant book, *Nixon Agonistes*, once discussed the penchant of American policymakers for offering "Square Deals," "New Deals," "Fair Deals," etc., and posing the question, "When do we ever get down to the game?"³ The same might be said about policymakers' almost desperate reliance on the word 'progress' to stave off serious thinking about policy. And thus the question might be asked, progressing to where? There is a vast literature, of course, about the difficulty of exiting wars – however ill-conceived – once the original commitment has been made. But no one seems to learn the simplest fact that wars are far easier to begin than to end.

Gerges is rightly concerned with the Obama Administration's willingness to take it on the chin from Israel, after having promised a new beginning in the Cairo speech on the Palestinian quest for statehood. No president has really attempted to undertake that mission since Dwight D. Eisenhower stood out against the occupation of Egyptian territory after the Suez crisis. Kennedy tried for a time, but Johnson moved in the opposite direction, in large part, one feels, to try to save his mandate at home as he fought an unpopular war in Vietnam. Once the Seven Days' War in 1967 ended, the United States had not simply the burden of Israel, but also at least the advantage of a powerful military ally in the Middle East. Now even that advantage seems unusable as America's moment in the Middle East passes.

President Dwight Eisenhower had been frustrated by President Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and tried for a time to build an Islamic religious alliance against Communism – but actually against Nasser's Pan Arab dream -- with Saudi Arabia as the U.S. ally in creating such an alliance. He also had the fantasy of building a Buddhist alliance against Communism in Vietnam, until someone explained to him that Buddhists were pacifists. By the time we get to George W. Bush, the argument is that some all-powerful group in the Middle East has actually built a religious alliance *against the U.S. instead*. Until the United

³ *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man*. The most recent edition is Mariner Books, 2002.

states frees itself from such delusions, Gerges's hopes for the President's second term will not be realized.

Fawaz Gerges has given us a readable, opinionated and passionate critique of American policy in the Middle East. The readable part is an excellent element. The book really is a pleasure to read. The opinionated part makes it interesting, but also opens Gerges up to numerous questions and counter-arguments. The passionate part leads him into occasional intemperate and sometime contradictory assertions. The overall package is provocative and stimulating, but in the end I think that he exaggerates his case about America's failure in the region. The inability of the United States to direct or control the uprisings of the Arab Spring is evident, but basing a conclusion about the decline of American regional influence on that inability sets a very high bar. No outside power has been able to direct the domestic politics of Middle Eastern states in any reliable way for some time. That the U.S. cannot do so now is not so much evidence of American decline as it is yet another manifestation of the hopelessness of neo-imperial dreams in a post-imperial world.

Gerges evokes the classic study by Elizabeth Monroe of Great Britain's "moment" in the Middle East in his subtitle.¹ It is an apt comparison. Like Britain in its moment, the United States since 1989 has had no peer competitor in the region. It has been the dominant external power. It has had a considerable military presence in the region. But where the comparison falls down is in terms of London's and Washington's comparative influence in the domestic politics of regional states. Inter-war Britain had a dominant influence in the domestic politics of Egypt, Jordan and Iraq; it directly controlled mandate Palestine (though that was no picnic) and the crown colony in Aden; it was the formal protector of the smaller Gulf states; and through the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company it was a major player on the Iranian domestic scene.

The fifty years between the beginning of World War II and the end of the Cold War changed politics in ways that made that kind of imperial control unfeasible even for superpowers, as the United States would find to its regret during its misbegotten Iraq adventure. So when Gerges points to the Arab Spring as evidence for the decline of American power in the region, he is not really demonstrating the end of an American moment. He is simply highlighting the latest example of how hard it is to manage the domestic politics of foreign states. Washington could not stop its client in Egypt, Husni Mubarak, from losing power in 2011. But it could not stop its client in Iran, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, from losing power in 1979, either. America was powerful enough to oust Saddam Hussein, but not powerful enough to construct a post-Saddam Iraqi order to its liking. Earlier, in the 1950's and 1960's, its efforts to change governments in Syria and Egypt came a cropper as well. We remember the rare successes, like the Mossadeq coup of 1953 in Iran, but tend to forget the failures. When Gerges says of the Arab Spring that "[t]he United States had never been in such an awkward position: it was unable to influence the course of events in the Middle East" (107), he is exaggerating.

¹ Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East, 1914-1956* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963).

So is the American moment in the Middle East over? If one defines it as Washington's successful arrangement of the domestic politics of regional states, that moment never really started. The Iraq debacle and the Great Recession have certainly reduced American power, both regionally and globally. But the United States remains the unchallenged extra-regional player in the region's affairs, with a vast Middle Eastern military infrastructure. It is allied with the region's strongest military power, Israel; its richest state, Saudi Arabia; and a rising regional force, Turkey. It is hard to imagine that any of America's regional enemies could use force against a regional American ally successfully. An attempt to replay a 1990 scenario, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, would be met with a similar American-led international military response. The prospect is so far-fetched it is hard to think of a realistic scenario where a regional power would challenge the United States militarily. Iran's success at extending its regional influence is not because of its military prowess, but because it has been successful at finding allies in the domestic politics of weak Arab states, like Hizballah in Lebanon and most of the politicians in Iraq.

The American moment is not exactly over, if we understand American interests in the more limited way that they were defined in the 1990's. The George W. Bush administration, in its combination of hubris and fear after the 9/11 attacks, simply overestimated how powerful the U.S. was and extended American interests beyond American power to achieve them. Gerges does a good job at taking that effort apart in Chapter 2, though that is as easy as shooting fish in a barrel. He rightly points out that the Iraq War was part of a larger ideological effort to remake the politics of the entire region. He could have gone deeper into the roots of that effort, into the misdiagnosis of the origins of the 9/11 attack. Rather than seeing it as a lucky punch by an extremist fringe group, Bush and Cheney chose to read the attack as a symptom of a much deeper regional malady that could only be cured by rearranging both the regional balance of the Middle East and the domestic politics of the countries there. The 'freedom agenda' was not simply a cover for more traditional great power goals like securing oil supplies. It was a major part of what drove America's regional strategy in the 2000's, the most serious strategic blunder the country made since Vietnam. Gerges is wrong to pin the entire blame for the disaster on the neoconservatives, though they surely bear their portion. This diagnosis was shared by a number of prominent American liberals, like Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, who channeled their inner Woodrow Wilson to support a war that they saw as necessary to bring good government to the Arab world. If it had been only the neo-cons who supported the war, America would not have fought in Iraq.

I think that Gerges' passion gets the better of him in his critique of the Obama Administration's Arab-Israeli policy. Don't get me wrong. He is right that it has been a failure, particularly given the ambitious agenda the President had coming into office. But his failure to get Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to halt the building of Israeli settlements in the West Bank or to restart Israeli-Palestinian negotiations is not evidence of a recent decline in American power. No recent American president has been willing and/or able to push Israeli leaders to do things that they do not want to do. President Bill Clinton followed Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in the Oslo process; he did not lead him. Clinton accompanied Prime Minister Ehud Barak on his frenetic outreach toward Syria and

the Palestinians in the late 1990's, but refused to push Barak beyond where Barak was comfortable going. Another American president and secretary of state (George H. W. Bush and James Baker, for instance) might have had the skill and gumption to push Barak that extra few steps he needed to seal a deal with Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad in 2000, but Clinton stepped away at the crucial moment. That was when American power really was at its height, both in the region and in the post-Cold War world, before the Iraq fiasco and the Great Recession. So Obama's failure to achieve progress on Israeli-Palestinian talks really is not an indication of American regional decline. It is just par for the course. Gerges' anger at American policy on the Arab-Israeli issue might be justified, but it leads him to conclusions about American power that go beyond the evidence.

His desire to make his larger case about declining American power and his strong preference that Washington support democratic movements in the Arab world at times combine to give his critique of the Obama Administration a somewhat inconsistent quality. Overall, he gives the President pretty bad marks: "Obama singularly failed to translate his hopes and promises into concrete policy." (234) But on the specifics (other than the Arab-Israeli issue), he tends to give Obama fairly good marks. He takes Washington to task for not being more supportive of the transitions that have come in the Arab Spring, saying that "Obama has not invested enough political and financial capital in assisting" the new governments. (242) Just a few sentences later he says that the president is "right to keep a low profile and allow the people of the region to take ownership of their destiny" (242). He gives Obama high marks for his development of the bilateral relationship with Turkey but criticizes him for moving away from his earlier policy of engagement with Iran, which Gerges liked. He praises Obama for moving away from his predecessor's "war on terror" template, but then criticizes him for "how little has actually changed" (215).

In the end, Gerges was bound to be disappointed by Obama. He rightly identifies the President with the realist tradition of American foreign policy, closer to George H. W. Bush than to his son. It is hard to fault a realist, though, for not being more supportive of the messy democratic transition in Egypt or of democratic movements in places like Bahrain, where the U.S. has a naval base. It is easy to understand why a realist would want to 'pivot to Asia,' given the rise of Chinese power and the enormous American economic interests in the Pacific. America's 'moment' in the Middle East might be over, but that is less because America's power has declined and more because a sober assessment of the costs and benefits of nearly 10 years of intense American military and political focus on the region led a new president to pull back from it. Gerges wants an America that is driven by Wilsonian goals of democracy and justice, involved in the region on the right side of every issue, but governed by sober-minded power brokers who understand the region, can get things done, and will not mess up. That is not the Obama Administration.

Books designed as instant commentaries on world affairs are usually written by journalists or public intellectuals of one stripe or another. So it is a rare treat to have a critical overview of current relations between the United States and the Middle East penned by such an authoritative scholar as Fawaz Gerges of the London School of Economics and Political Science. The firm foundation upon which Professor Gerges's assessments of the Obama administration's policies toward the region rest is evident in the extensive collection of footnotes, which refer to archival records, a broad range of newspapers in pertinent languages, and a variety of academic writings.

Gerges starts out by advancing four analytically distinct arguments to explain U.S. policy toward the Middle East. First, Washington's successive initiatives toward the region tend to be driven by shifts in the global and regional distribution of power. This factor has become more pronounced over the last half-decade, with the steady diminution of American capabilities and influence in the international arena. As Gerges points out, "in a multipolar world America neither calls the shots as before nor dominates the regional scene in the way it did [immediately] after the Cold War ended. [Consequently,] America's ability to act unilaterally and hegemonically, unconstrained by the local context, has come to an end" (13). Arguably the most pressing strategic problem that faces the Obama administration is how to adjust its objectives and ambitions to match the overall downturn in U.S. capacity and prestige. Proponents of 'power cycle theory' remind us that such moments constitute crucial turning points in the political-economic trajectory of all great powers.¹

Second, Gerges claims that American policy toward the Middle East is profoundly shaped by political culture. "Of all the regions in the world," he asserts, "the Middle East elicits exceptionally reductionist views anchored more in ideology and perceptions than reality. Americans' general ignorance of the region and their stereotypical opinions take a toll of farsighted diplomats and politicians alike" (24). It is therefore to be expected that U.S. decision-makers will systematically misinterpret regional events and adopt policies that are out of step with realities on the ground. Third, and closely related, Washington's posture toward the region is heavily affected by the expressed interests of well-positioned backers of the State of Israel; "the success of ...the Israel-first school lies in shaping public opinion in the United States about the Middle East and in restricting the general parameters of the foreign policy debate" (24).

Fourth, and more broadly, U.S. policy-makers find themselves hamstrung by both the constitutional separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches of government and persistent rivalries among components of the foreign policy bureaucracy. "Now presidential policy in the Middle East, more than in any other region, is hampered by institutional and bureaucratic politics, as well as domestic politics; they are a deadly, toxic mix. There is an inherent flaw in the system that rewards conformity and groupthink and

¹ Charles F. Doran, *Systems in Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

penalizes diversity of thought and open debate" (24-25). All four of these arguments get adduced at one time or another to explain aspects of recent U.S. dealings with the region. The present administration's failure to re-energize talks between Israel and the Palestinians, for instance, is initially attributed to the fourth factor: President Obama finds himself "the willing victim [?] of a dysfunctional American political system that fetters the hands of [all] presidents" (115). A bit later on, though, one learns that the activities of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee have played a significant part in the matter as well (117-118).

Moreover, when the text gets down to cases, three additional lines of argument enter the picture. U.S. policy turns out to be determined by an overriding interest in maintaining the flow of Gulf hydrocarbons to global markets (108). It also grows out of the psychological attributes of Barack Obama as an individual: "The Obama team," Gerges remarks, "has consistently measured every Arab uprising [during 2011-12] by whether it plays into Iran's hands, an *obsession* that has led America to squander precious time and resources on a threat that has failed to materialize in any significant way" (110, emphasis added). Likewise, the President's tardy endorsement of the 2011 uprising in Egypt "speaks volumes about Obama's muddled and unbalanced approach to the region. Caught off guard by the Arab uprisings, he hesitated and then sought to position the United States on the winning side" (175). In addition, interpersonal relations between the President and members of his senior staff have had a direct impact on policy outcomes: Washington's response to the 2011 uprising in Libya is traced to attitudes held by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, "who often prefers stability to risky interventions, [but nevertheless] decided at the last minute to support a military intervention" to protect the beleaguered rebels in Cyrenaica (112). Even though Gerges concludes that in this case, "Obama got it right" (113), it looks very much as if it were instead Secretary Clinton who made the correct call and dragged the White House along with her.

This turns out to be quite a lot of causal variables, and students of international relations might well wish that the book had settled on two or three to structure the analysis in a more coherent fashion. But it is yet another theme that receives the most sustained attention throughout the text. As a close and astute observer of domestic politics in the Arab world, Gerges repeatedly notes that actions taken by the United States elicit disappointment, alienation, and hostility across the region, thereby reinforcing the secular decline in American power and prestige. As early as June 1967, one can discern "a causal link between Washington's strong ties with Israel and increasing Muslim [sic] societal hostility toward the United States. On the whole," Gerges continues, "Arabs transferred their antagonism toward Israel to America and imposed the present on the past, viewing their relationship with the superpower through the Palestine-Israel lens" (53). Further antagonism resulted from the massive U.S. military build-up in the Gulf following the 1990-91 war and the continuation of economic sanctions against Iraq after the fighting came to an end (64), the practice of "extraordinary rendition" of suspected terrorists and their largely unregulated imprisonment at Guantanamo Bay (85), President Obama's belated recognition of the new leaderships in Tunis and Cairo (108), his "reluctance to openly side with [Iran's] Green Movement" combined with "his vigor in imposing sanctions against the

regime" in Tehran (158), and so on. It becomes increasingly hard to fathom how the United States has any standing left in this corner of the world.

Can the situation be remedied? The current President's psychological make-up leaves Gerges skeptical: "He was not disposed by sentiment and training to pursue a transformational foreign policy against the wishes of the dominant foreign policy narrative. It is no wonder then that Obama often retreated when faced with internal and external challenges to his policies," as for example by Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu (235). At the same time, "America's current dysfunctional political culture imposes severe constraints on [the President's] ability to pursue an evenhanded approach toward the Palestine question, which remains an enduring and preeminent issue" in the region (ibid.). Meanwhile, "a global redistribution of power has curtailed America's freedom of maneuver and exposed its relative decline. ...America is neither feared nor trusted to act rationally and wisely to preserve world peace. Although Obama has labored to rebuild trust lost during the Bush years, the genie is out" (238). Up and coming regional powers like Turkey, Iran and Egypt no longer defer to Washington's wishes and interests.

There is, however, one bright spot. The Obama administration has succeeded in constructing a working partnership with the pragmatic Islamist government of Prime Minister Recib Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey (242-243). It remains to be seen whether the blossoming strategic connection between Washington and Ankara can be sustained, and can provide U.S. policy-makers with access to new forms of leverage in Middle Eastern affairs.

At the outset, the H-Diplo Roundtable Review editors could not have chosen more [better?] qualified academics to review my book, *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?* Lloyd Gardener, F. Gregory Gause III, and Fred H. Lawson critically assess the book's arguments and throw further light on the dilemmas and challenges facing U.S. foreign policy in the region. Before I respond to their specific points, I want to say a few words about the context of the book and to summarize its major premises and hypotheses. In contrast to books designed as instant commentaries on world affairs, *Obama and the Middle East* situates and contextualizes President Barack Obama's Middle East policies within America's historical encounter and bitter legacy with Arab and Middle Eastern societies from the end of World War II until the present. I examine this relationship from both ends – the inside-out and the outside-in – to show its evolution and complexity and to isolate the key factors and variables that help us make sense of American foreign policy.

As Obama begins his second presidential term, this book takes stock of his foreign policy approach thus far towards the Middle East. It lays out four big arguments. First, Obama's foreign policy in the Middle East has demonstrated more continuity with the past than real change. While shifting his approach significantly from that of his predecessor, George W. Bush, Obama has adopted a centrist–realist approach towards the region, consistent with the dominant U.S. foreign policy orientation. Lloyd Gardner is correct in saying that I neither define the terms 'realist' and 'realism' nor take a clear position on whether 'realism' is good or bad. The idea was to compare and contrast Obama's foreign policy with that of his predecessors and not to zero in on the various meanings of what a realist foreign policy is, which is in itself a challenging intellectual exercise. For Obama, who has compared his foreign policy to that of George H. W. Bush, realism means understanding the limits on U.S. foreign policy and avoiding taking unnecessary risks in the international system. His approach to the Syrian conflict is a case in point. Despite vehement criticism by the right and the left of Obama's reluctance to intervene directly in the war-torn country and stop the bloodshed, he has repeatedly stressed the limits of U.S. power and the risks inherent in direct intervention there. That is in a nutshell what defines Obama's realist policy – it is cautious, risk-averse, and conservative, and some would go further and say that it is amoral.

The second argument is that from the issue of Palestinian–Israeli peace to Afghanistan, Obama's conduct testifies to the structural–institutional continuity of U.S. foreign policy. More than in any other region in the world, presidential policy in the Middle East is hampered by institutional, bureaucratic, and domestic politics. America's dysfunctional political culture has imposed severe constraints on Obama's ability to pursue an even-handed approach towards the enduring and preeminent Palestine question. This line of argument does not deny the role of agency and the significance of the imperial presidency. Far from it. In fact, I show that in the first few months of his administration, Obama pursued an ambitious foreign policy agenda toward the Middle East, particularly on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and Iran, a policy that challenged the dominant

institutional-bureaucratic narrative. But when Obama faced stiff resistance to his policy, he caved in. The structure reasserted itself. This does not mean that Obama's personality (his timidity in particular) did not play an important factor. My argument is that the political system, including Israel and its friends, was the independent variable, the driver behind Obama's retreat. As a politician, Obama, together with senior aides, must have calculated that the costs of carrying out his ambitious agenda – exerting real pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and educating the American public about the need for rapprochement with Iran, would outweigh any political benefits. As to Obama's critical choices and key appointments on the Middle East before his inauguration, there is no mystery there. Obama and his close advisors knew that Dennis Ross, a senior director in the National Security Council, and U.S. negotiator with Israel, would get the seal of approval from Israel and its supporters at home, while former Secretary of State Zbigniew Brzezinski was a political liability. It was that simple. The structure is neither destiny nor it is set in stone but it exerts considerable influence on every ambitious politician in the White House.

Third, despite Obama's lofty rhetoric about a new start in relations between the United States and Muslim countries, the Middle East does not rank very high on his agenda. Putting America's fiscal house in order and renewing its long-term economic strength have been Obama's priorities. From the outset, Obama has been shifting U.S. foreign policy priorities away from the Middle East to the Pacific and Asia where he and his aides believe that America's future lies.

Finally, *Obama and the Middle East* argues that the U.S. finds itself in a similar position to that of Great Britain after the Second World War, at the beginning of the end of its hegemonic moment in the Middle East. The beginning of the end of American hegemony in the region stems from internal and external causes, including an awakened public opinion in the Middle East, the emergence of geostrategic and geo-economic regional powers with assertive foreign policies, America's relative economic decline via other rising powers and the high costs of war, and the shift in U.S. foreign policy priorities to the Asia-Pacific region. In his review, Gregory Gause takes me to task for exaggerating the case about America's failure and decline in the region. Most of his review is designed to show that far from declining, "the United States remains the unchallenged extra-regional player in the region's affairs, with a vast Middle Eastern military infrastructure." Gause misses my point about America's relative decline. I made it crystal clear throughout the text that although the U.S. has declined relative to other rising geostrategic and geo-economic powers in the international system, it remains the dominant power economically and militarily and will be so for at least two decades. The real decline has less to do with America's material power than with other measures of power that are as important as hard power, if not more so.

From the outset, President Obama and his senior aides have been cognizant of America's relative decline and the harm that the 9/11 wars have inflicted on the US ability to influence the course of events in the Middle East. Obama has repeatedly stressed the limits of U.S. power and the need to pursue a cautious, conservative policy in the region and the need for multilateralism and coalition-building. The 9/11 wars have sapped the will of the U.S. and have been costly in blood and treasure (more than \$4 trillion in direct and indirect

costs). Moreover, the moral and political sanding and status of the United States has suffered a major setback worldwide, not just in the Middle East. The Obama foreign policy team believes that the U.S. overextended itself in the Middle East far and beyond what American vital interests required. There is also a relative consensus that the future lies in the Pacific and Asia, not in the Middle East or even in Europe. This perception helps to explain the Administration's gradual disengagement from the Middle East and the pivot toward the Pacific Ocean region. It is no wonder then that Obama has been reluctant to get engaged in Libya or Syria and has not invested much political and financial capital in the post-Arab Spring countries. The Middle East is no longer a priority on the U.S. foreign policy agenda and the Obama administration has steadily shifted its focus to other theatres.

There is more to declining U.S. influence in the Middle East than imperial exhaustion. It is a documented fact that the 9/11 wars intensified societal resistance to the United States throughout the region. Anyone who researches social and political movements in Middle East countries, as opposed to circulating with the ruling elite, will encounter hostile attitudes to U.S. foreign policy and a willingness to resist American encroachment. An awakened public opinion, which is a by-product of the large-scale Arab popular uprisings, will change the dynamics of U.S. relations with Middle Eastern societies and will fetter America's hands. The age of contentious politics - social protest, collective action and revolt - will wrack both the internal politics and international relations of the Middle East. What is unfolding before our eyes is the birth of a new order that will likely have critical implications internally and externally. For example, the Obama administration had no choice but to withdraw all U.S. troops from Iraq because of internal resistance by leading social and political groups in Iraq and despite the tacit consent for the presence of those troops of the Nouri al-Maliki government. Despite repeated complaints by the Obama administration, Iraq (a country that the U.S. liberated) continues to facilitate the transfer and flow of men and material to Damascus. In fact, the Tehran-Baghdad road is the blood line of the Bashar al-Assad regime. If this does not show weakening of U.S. influence, I plead guilty to exaggeration.

The emergence of geostrategic and geo-economic regional and global powers with assertive foreign policies is another factor that limits U.S. influence in the Middle East. Although America's unipolar moment was buried in Iraq's shifting sands, it is difficult to say how long it will take for the nascent international system with multiple power centres to consolidate. One thing is clear: the United States faces internal and external resistance to its hegemony in the Middle East and elsewhere. The U.S.-Russian rivalry in Syria is reminiscent of the Cold War era.

In his thorough review, Fred Lawson puts his finger on a critical shortcoming in the book - quite a lot of causal variables (six in all) are advanced to explain U.S. policy toward the Middle East. Lawson is correct. I should have isolated two or three variables to structure the analysis in a more coherent way. The truth is that I was more concerned about fleshing out my arguments than about presenting a neat and a precise account of the casual variables. The historian in me won over the International Relations specialist.

Finally, if I had had the fortune to read the three critical reviews before the book went to press, *Obama and the Middle East* would have gained in analytical depth and conceptual rigor.

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