

**What Really Went Wrong:  
The West and the Failure of Democracy in the Middle East  
Author: Fawaz Gerges (Published in 2024)**

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**BOOK REVIEW**

With the Israeli war on Gaza and the long-term turmoil in the Middle East, “*What Really Went Wrong: The West and the Failure of Democracy in the Middle East*,” a book written by Fawaz Gerges, examines the role of the West, especially U.S., and their disastrous foreign policy, in causing instability in the Middle East. In 330 pages and 11 chapters, Fawaz Gerges elaborates in this book on the historical context, suggesting that what is behind the present-day chaos in the Middle East significantly emanates from historical precedents.

The author suggests that instability in the Middle East is not rooted in factors such as ancient hatreds, tribalism and chronic series of violence, and inherent conflicts in the region. This was the narrative which many Western scholars and policymakers have assumed in their scholarly works. According to Gerges, the instability is mainly because of America’s dreadful foreign policy decisions, especially during the period of Cold War and its constant interventions in the region that have left such a lasting chaotic legacy.

The author further contends that the Cold War confrontation between the two rivals (the U.S. and the Soviet Union) is to be blamed for turning the Middle East into a battleground for proxy conflicts, which amplified the legacy of ‘dysfunction’ left by European colonialism. During

the Cold War, Washington became obsessed with countering the rising communist ideology of the Soviet. Uncle Sam strategically exerted efforts to establish Pax Americana and secure access to cheap oil. The governments in the Middle East have been supported by the U.S. and if they agreed to cater to the actual interests of the U.S. and keep the oil extraction and exportation flowing. Due to their commitment to serve American interests, these countries did not get the chance to develop at their fullest. The resources were rather spent on achieving military and security objectives. The real motive of the U.S. was to build such an empire without directly ruling these countries. Such a scenario made it harder for the Middle East to develop in a fair manner, which ultimately diminished the chance for the region to attain lasting peace.

Building on this perspective, the author moves on to analyze some of the key flashpoints in the region, including those that “sowed the seeds of discontent, hubris and subsequent conflict.” Such flashpoints include the episode of 1953 CIA-sponsored coup against the Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and the U.S. confrontation with the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the mid-1950s. The author uses those two prime examples to reinterpret the history of the Middle East and challenge the counter-narrative popularized by Western scholars. The Author believes that the political troubles, especially in Iran and Egypt, were the leading cause behind the decline of modern secular ideas in the 1950s and 1960s. Instead, the region witnessed the rise of religious groups that started to gain more power in the Middle East. All the popular and independent leaders were directly or indirectly replaced by those who were more aligned with the interests of the West. According to Gerges, the effects of these changes still impact the region today.

The author argues that due to these two pivotal events the U.S. was initially viewed more positively and optimistically in the region. Peoples in the Middle East were expecting a time of

freedom and prosperity after getting rid of the dominance of European colonial rule. However, the U.S. acted in the same manner by forming an “informal empire” in Middle East. The U.S. influenced the region through its powers and policies like how Europeans had done before, which in effect established the same as colonial rule. The author cites the political scientist Atul Kohli, who defined “informal empires” as an “alliance in which elites in the imperial country allow elites on the global periphery to share economic growth in exchange for establishing stable but ultimately subservient governments there”.

Gerges details how the U.S. has used various tactics to gain control over the region, such as influencing the local leaders, establishing military bases, carrying out military actions, and enforcing international sanctions. This negatively impacted the people of the region. In the chapter entitled “Mossadegh, Nasser, and What could have been,” the author discusses the two events side by side. He depicts them as the most transformational and consequential events to the region’s subsequent trajectory, including the ouster of Mossadegh in the year 1953 and American propagandist move against Nasser that further led to the Suez crisis of 1956. These events subsequently triggered a chain of reactions alongside counter reactions that changed the Middle East’s complexion. However, they also undermined the relationship of the U.S. with the people in the Muslim world. It might not be inaccurate to argue that the most popular and progressive nationalist leaders like Mossadegh and Nasser were branded as ‘disguised communists’ because of their assertions of independence and their pursuit of modernization. The major preference of the U.S. was to back ‘authoritarian strongmen’ with the vision of ‘stability’—a policy that Gerges argues persists in the region today. The West view that Islam and Arab culture were incompatible with democracy was spread to the fullest.

In answering the hypothetical question of what if the U.S. had not overthrown Mossadegh, the author highlighted that more of a democratic Iran would have evolved, likely at peace with herself and serving as a prime example for its neighbors. The American hostility toward Nasser in Egypt, although not a democrat but a secular nationalist leader whose intent was to modernize his own country and pursue a more independent path, also had damaging consequences. It overall changed regional dynamics and shaped various issues related to war and peace. The author also argued that how Nasser retaliated by turning toward Moscow for arms and against all those Arab monarchs who joined the U.S. alliance, which in turn led to the Arab Cold War. Lost in this entire process was the balance and equilibrium in the region, which was followed with geopolitical rivalries that eventually dashed hopes of unity and economic integration regionally. According to Gerges, “America’s imperial overreach and Cold War crusade ignited and escalated geostrategic rivalries in the region.”

Overall, the author emphasized in the book that the current situation in the Middle East might have been drastically different only if the U.S. had been more tolerant in terms of execution of its policies to the other of countries with more differing views and has not prioritized its own economic interests over those of the interests of people at national levels. The author has also pointed out that the unwavering support of the U.S. for Israel has deeply affected the region and ultimately contributed to its instability, as can be dramatically seen in the ongoing crisis in Gaza.

This book is an essential reading for anyone interested in understanding the compelling conflict in the Middle East and critically re-evaluating the impact of modern history on today’s Middle East.