

The Ambiguous Foreign Policy of the United States toward the Muslim World: More than a Handshake. Oualaalou, David S. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016.

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Undeniably, history of the Middle East consists of social upheavals, tribal tensions, diplomatic challenges, bloody wars and economic opportunities. Consequently, history of the Middle East testifies to the struggles of conquerors and decline of empires, continuing Arab-Israel conflict and the current rise of terrorism. Such challenges made the region politically and socially unstable and an unpredictable region, which represents many security challenges.

In *Ambiguous Foreign Policy of the United States toward the Muslim World*, the global affairs analyst David S. Oualaalou, looks into an account of the US foreign policy in the Middle East over the past six years. The book is divided into eight chapters. The common theme of these chapters is the foreign policy of the US in the region.

Oualaalou highlighted that in 2010, when the wind of change generally branded as “Arab Spring” started to blow the region, the slogans of freedom and democracy were chanted in the streets of Tunisia. The trend of the Tunisian people was followed by other countries, too. The vigorous demonstrations started in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain and other Gulf and African countries. This uprising culminated in bloody civil wars, total chaos and turmoil in the region. The circumstances led to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has now emerged as a growing threat to the international peace and security.

After taking stock of various issues in the Middle East, Oualaalou considers the role of the US in the Middle East. Oualaalou argues that with the change of politics and society in the Middle East, the US foreign policy became stagnant and stubborn. The changes took place in the Middle East have devised policies that demand new solutions. The current chaos in Syria

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and Yemen and latest conquests of the ISIS has transformed geopolitical calculations in the region. However, Oualaalou criticises that the US foreign policy lacks the vision to forecast the ramifications of aforesaid changes. The political leadership in the US idealistically speculates that the US can enforce western values to make Muslim world secular. Oualaalou recommends that the US needs to adopt flexibility and effective strategy, in fact, a significant shift in approach if it has to uphold both its leadership as well as credibility in the Muslim world.

This book constructively critiques and objectively evaluates the current US strategy to initiate a debate about the US foreign policy towards the Muslim world. Oualaalou also questioned the judgment of the US foreign policy makers and contends that the US has no coherent policy to tackle the current challenges.

At a time when the US confronts with challenges in the region, Oualaalou's book evaluates where the US has gone wrong. Self-explanatory title of the book reflects firsthand knowledge of the Muslim world. Written in good faith, the book suggests the US to entirely refurbish its policies to secure its interests and also because as a major player in the region, its policies have a significant bearing on the lives of the millions of people of the region. Thus, despite being critical, the author does not want the US to take a back seat.

Oualaalou discusses in detail the ingress made by both Russia and China in recent years under the pretext of economic interests. China has received a favourable status due to its non-interference in domestic affairs of other countries. Russia's cooperation with Iran and Syria, coincidentally two countries that happen to oppose the US, is based on pragmatism, yet, seems to be working quite well. Taking a realist perspective on the situation, Oualaalou fears that this may harm the US interests. He advises the US to win the support of the people and leaders in the region before China and Russia firmly entrench themselves. The author sees the position in zero-sum terms still seeing the US as the sole power in the region. He also provides a list of dos and don'ts for the US. Oualaalou mentions that the burning question 'to intervene or not to intervene' has no simple answer, both courses have its implications and forbids the use of force and another military venture as it would sign a death knell for the US and the region.

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Oualaalou displays an appreciative understanding of few issues, predominantly, democracy and the role of Islam in the region. For some reason, Oualaalou considered the Arab Spring as a critical juncture in the Middle East politics, where the people have demanded social justice and freedom. Unfortunately, the consequence was not acceptable to the US and annoyed with the rise of Islamist parties in the elections. Oualaalou notes that it is hard for the US to acknowledge that given the choice between democracy patterned on western style or religious interpretation, Muslim societies would choose for the later. It is because that the US lacks understanding of the local culture and belief system. He advised that the US must acknowledge that democracy is a long and tedious process, requiring a multi-dimensional approach, especially more so when the regional countries are not ready to embrace it as yet.

The author rightly evaluates the situation in a broad perspective as he discusses strategic interests and concerns of major regional and extra-regional players in the region and also their inter-relationship. He reflects upon Iran and Saudi Arabia and the power play between them. He concisely evokes the US policies under various administrations beginning with President Wilson's era and elucidates foreign policy compulsions as well as its failures over the years, most notably failure to constrain Israel on many occasions. In recent years, the two outstanding blunders made by the US are invasion of Iraq and inaction in Syria, Oualaalou added.

Though, towards the end of the book, the author mentions that the US is taking a reality check and adjusting to the multipolar world. The book has its strengths and shortcomings as well.

In terms of short-comings, Oualaalou's linkage between Islam and tribalism lacks sophistication. Tribalism is not true for all countries across the Muslim world. Loyalty is not confined to the tribe but can be patterned along ethnic, linguistic and sectarian lines.

In a typical current affair analysis manner, where the developments overtake the writings, the developments have turned the analysis a bit out dated, for instance when Oualaalou states Turkey could serve as a model for all countries in the region. Also, the layout of the book is confusing as chapter five provides a brief background of the countries – Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain, Egypt, Turkey and Iraq. Had this chapter come in the

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beginning, it would have provided background information on these countries that are discussed throughout the book.

The book provides a deep insight into the changing circumstances in the Middle East and makes a critical analysis of the shortcomings in the US policies towards the region. This book is a good read for the policymakers in the US as it provides realistic recommendations. The book is equally useful for students of international relations, members of academia, scholars or a general reader for that matter.