



Fawaz A Gerges

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The Great Betrayal – Q and A with Fawaz Gerges on the struggle for political change in the Middle East

*In this interview with LSE Review of Books Managing Editor Anna D'Alton, Fawaz Gerges discusses his new book, **The Great Betrayal: The Struggle for Freedom and Democracy in the Middle East**, which explores the question of why political change has been so difficult to achieve in the region. Taking a historical-sociological perspective, the book examines key events from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire to the recent downfall of the Assad Regime in Syria and considers how ordinary people in the Middle East can achieve self-determination in the future.*

The Great Betrayal: The Struggle for Freedom and Democracy in the Middle East. Fawaz A. Gerges. Princeton University Press. 2025.

Where did this book come from and what is its focus?

One of the perennial questions asked by my students at LSE is, why has political change been so difficult to achieve in the Middle East? Why has there been political paralysis and economic stagnation? Why have the people of the Middle East have been systematically denied self-determination, political representation and effective government?

There is a big debate in International Relations and Middle Eastern studies about the causes behind the lack of social progress and political liberalisation. Some scholars attribute the political paralysis and social upheaval to the structural effects of the colonial (European) construction of the Middle East and continuing imperial policies of the United States. Others emphasise the divisive impact of prolonged geopolitical rivalries and forever wars and civil strife. A minority claims that culture, including religion and an Arab exception, is key to understanding the prevalence of autocracy and absence of liberal democracy in the region.

The more I thought about it, I realised that even though it's very difficult to provide a neat explanation for such a complex topic, I wanted to write a book that lays out a convincing systemic answer(s) to those critical questions.



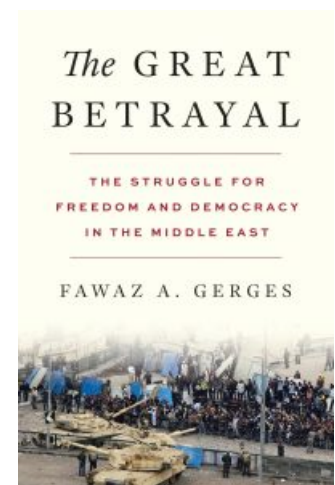
There is a growing body of scholarship that shows the detrimental effects of prolonged regional conflicts, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and wars in the Gulf, on state, society and politics in the region.



Your analytical framework identifies three forces that have shaped politics in the Middle East over the past 100 years. What are they?

I identify three dominant threads of interrelated issues that help make sense of why the Middle East has reached this low point after 100 years of nation-building and state-building. The first is external intervention – first, European colonialism of direct rule, then informal American imperialism. The second thread is deepening political authoritarianism, which can only be understood through the existence of a powerful partnership between external intervention and local autocrats. The third thread is the effects of prolonged regional conflicts.

There is a growing body of scholarship that shows the detrimental effects of prolonged regional conflicts, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and wars in the Gulf, on state, society and politics in the region. The effects of prolonged regional conflicts in the Middle East tend to be costlier, more enduring and resilient than on other regions in the world. This difference could be explained by the dearth of institutions in the Middle East and by the repeated and intense external intervention in the region's internal affairs.



You describe your methodology in the book as historical sociology. What does this involve?

FG: Historical sociology is a much more complex, dynamic and fluid approach than your typical political science theory. I utilise the scholarship of historians in order to make statements of general, theoretical nature about key historical events in the past 100 years. Historical sociology takes the local context very seriously, which I find useful because it allows me to use a two-pronged model of top-down and bottom-up, as opposed to one or the other. *The Great Betrayal* is not just about the ruling elites – kings, emirs and presidents. It's about the aspirations and fears and unfulfilled hopes of everyday people. I focus on the local agency and highlight the struggles of the people of the Middle East for self-determination and freedom.



The colonial powers deliberately created non-viable entities, both economically and socially. They did not invest in civil society, did not really support parliamentary democracy, even though they paid lip service to constitutionalism.



You discuss how Britain and France drew up the borders in the region. What made these states so fragile (politically, economically, socially, institutionally) from the outset? How then did the US's "informal empire" model carry on this legacy?

The Middle Eastern state system was invented by colonial Britain and France after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire post-WWI. They drew the borders and frontiers of the new states in order to promote their imperial interests. More than that, the colonial powers forced the organisation of the nation state on the people of the region. They also set up the political economy, security forces and a ruling elite, made up of notables, land owners, wealthy people, to do their bidding as well as maintain the illiberal status quo.

The colonial powers deliberately created non-viable entities, both economically and socially. They did not invest in civil society, did not really support parliamentary democracy, even though they paid lip service to constitutionalism. In fact, the whole idea of colonial Britain and France championing democracy was a façade veiling imperial interest. This helps to explain why people in the Middle

East are so cynical about the idea of liberal democracy. That's why the social forces that spearheaded the fight against colonialism in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, were anti-liberal, anti-democratic ideologies like pan-Arab nationalism and political Islam. These dominant ideologies were influenced by German and Italian fascist ideas, not because they were fascist, but because they were deeply opposed to British and French colonialism and domination of their societies.



The great tragedy of American politics is that following World War II the United States forfeited its global liberal leadership and vision for the world and took up the Imperial mandate of its European allies



Beyond the lack of social and economic viability, there is a widespread sentiment held by many in the Middle East that the colonial powers really never exited the region, they planted a military fortress in its heart through the creation of the state of Israel, which many Arabs (and Middle Easterners) view as an extension of the colonial west.

After Britain and France came the US and other powers who increased their influence on politics in the Middle East, particularly during the Cold War. Do imperial politics still operate in the region today? Do you see continuity between, for instance, the Balfour Declaration (1917) and the Abraham Accords (2020)?

After World War I, US President Woodrow Wilson championed self-determination. The great tragedy of American politics is that following World War II the United States forfeited its global liberal leadership and vision for the world and took up the Imperial mandate of its European allies. The US prioritised national and economic security as well as the fight against Soviet communism Union and partnered with domestic authoritarians in the Middle East and beyond. Washington's overarching strategic goal was to roll back Soviet communism and to force newly decolonised

countries to open up their economies to global capital and finance. Although paying lip service to human rights, the rule of law and self-determination and sovereignty, in reality US leaders opposed these principles at the altar of realpolitik and uninterrupted access to cheap oil and energy. America's support for Israeli settler colonialism at the expense of Palestinian self-determination and Middle Eastern autocrats is a case in point.

What's distinctive about President Donald Trump is that he does not veil his rhetoric like his predecessors. He does not pretend to care about the self-determination of the Palestinians, or the Iraqis, the Syrians, or the Kurds; he does not preach about the rule of law and human rights, let alone democracy; he makes clear that all he cares about are economic and financial advantage and arms sales. That is why Trump was instrumental in bringing about the Abraham Accords in 2020, normalising relations between Israel and some Arab regimes – that is top-down normalisation – ignoring bottom-up, reconciliation between Israel and its Palestinian neighbours which requires granting the Palestinians self-determination. Hamas's bloody attack on Israel on 7th October 2023 was a reminder of how the politics of the past still haunts the politics of today. Needless to say, the killing of civilians is a non-starter for me, an absolute non-starter. But Hamas's attack forced the world to reckon with the plight of the Palestinians as a subjugated people and the idea of Israel as a settler colonial state, though this recognition has not deterred Israel from destroying Gaza and killing more than 51,000 Palestinians so far.



My conclusion is that the region's future will ultimately be determined not by domestic authoritarians and their superpower patrons, but by a growing population of Arab and Muslim youth who demand to be treated as citizens as opposed to subjects.



To turn now towards the present and the future, the book focuses on the agency of ordinary people in the Middle East. You look at the Arab Spring in the

2010s in countries like Libya, Egypt, Tunisia and you look as well at the Assad regime's rapid downfall in Syria in 2024. What do these moments tell us about what ordinary people in the Middle East want, and what is possible?

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Think of how many obituaries were written about the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010-2012 and 2018-2019. In Syria, many people had declared Bashar al-Assad a winner of the 13-year war. They had written off the agency of the Syrian people. But in December 2024, in less than two weeks, the Syrian people toppled one of the most brutal dictators in the Middle East. What had kept Bashar al-Assad in power between 2011 and 2024 was not only his own prowess but the support of external stakeholders: Russia and Iran. Once the external support disappeared, or waned, Bashar al-Assad regime fell like a ripened fruit. My book's hypothesis is that the powerful partnership between local autocrats and the Great Powers explains why the people of the Middle East have been systemically denied political representation and freedom.

My view is that unless there is a paradigm change, few of the regimes in the region will be toppled, and in those cases with bloodshed, a bloodbath like what happened in Syria. A titanic change won't happen overnight – look at Europe. Think of the Westphalian or state system, which emerged in 1648. It took Europe almost 300 years from 1648 till 1945 to see real political change and social progress, and in that period we witnessed the greatest crime in world history, the Holocaust, which took place here on our doorstep in the 1930s.

My hope is that political change in the Middle East will not take 300 years, because the world has fundamentally changed, thanks to our foundation of knowledge, the information revolution, new media, technology and transnational links and networks. My hope that it will take a couple of decades to begin the process of political transition from political authoritarianism to gradual pluralism. There is no magical wand one can wave to institute change – institutions must be built up brick-by-brick, and the nature and extent of change will depend on the social and political contracts between rulers and citizens.

Note: *This interview gives the views of the author and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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About the author

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Fawaz A. Gerges is a Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science and holder of the Chair of the Contemporary Middle East. He was the LSE's inaugural Director of the Middle East Centre from 2010 until 2013. Gerges's latest book is *The Great Betrayal: The Struggle for Freedom and Democracy in the Middle East* (Princeton University Press, 2025). His books have been translated into many languages.

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