

But Bustani converted in the 1840s after the missionaries had put considerable pressure on authorities to allow them and their converts to operate freely, and the Ottomans had recognized Protestants as a protected group. In Bustani, Makdisi sees a truly new creature of the clash between American

and Ottoman culture, as Bustani came to advocate tolerant education for the varied religious groups represented in Syria, and coexistence of these people as equal subjects in non-sectarian political community.

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## U.S. Foreign Policy and Islamist Politics

By *Ahmad S. Moussalli*

Florida: University Press of Florida, 2008, 225 pp., ISBN 9780813031491.

"I argue that the vast majority of Islamist movements do not pose a real threat to the West and its interests," Ahmad S. Moussalli asserts in his latest book, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Islamist Politics*. Taking this idea as his starting point, the author confronts one of the key questions for the future of the Middle East region: whether to include – or exclude – Islamist parties as protagonists and interlocutors in regional and international policy. This question has been raised in American and western debates in general since the 1990s. But the pressing need to give a coherent response to this dilemma has become more urgent in the last few years. The experiences of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza have revealed the need for resolution, as well as the contradictions that result from any endeavour to find solutions to the conflicts and crises affecting this important part of the world. Therein lies the broad interest of this book, which seeks to demonstrate that the construction of Islamism as a threat to the West has been created above all "by the media, academia, policy makers, and strategists, as well as Muslim regimes and Israel." Further,

Moussalli argues that this media construction deliberately leaves aside any real, on-the-ground analysis of the many different Islamist parties, whose evolution and trajectories tend to show their diversity, their social integration and their progressive adaptation to democratic dynamics.

Moussalli rightly notes that the problem with the image of Islam as a source of fear and threat is that it has long been established and reiterated as the west's dominant perception of Islamism, whereas it is in fact a narrow view, based on choices made by the media to depict supporters of the most fundamentalist discourse, or the most radical and extremist sectors. Put another way, extremist views get media attention. The overwhelming application of this criterion for choosing Islamic actors to portray in the media conceals or silences the fact that most Islamist parties are situated in the enormous central area usually hidden between fundamentalists and the people of violence.

Moussalli, sharing conclusions long held by a minority of fellow academics, gives prominence to the trajectory and evolution

of reformist Islamist parties – a path that is very different from the fundamentalist and extremist offshoots. Reformist Islamism, Moussalli argues, represents the emergence of a new political generation that is also part of the experience of modernisation; it is therefore linked to the many social and political changes being experienced by Muslim societies today. In fact, observation of the kinds of behavior prompted by Islamic assertiveness in the political arena shows three interdependent features that social sciences consider to be modern: the progressive autonomy of the individual, the individualisation of social actors, and the increased participation of women in public life. Consequently, reformist Islamists move away from ahistoricist views in which Islam is perceived as a timeless system that reinforces societal immobility. On the contrary, they tend to be very concerned with socio-educative matters and with the search for references of their own to retrieve a positive and affirmative image of themselves. They expect the West to treat them with recognition, but they are not constructing the recovery of Islam against the West.

In chapter 3 of his book, “The Context and Ideologies of Islamist Politics,” Moussalli draws attention to a very significant factor of analysis: Islamist diversity and the importance of analyzing each case within its national context. He concludes: “the moderate Islamists constitute the majority of the Islamist movements,” while he shows how “these movements have been created largely as responses to internal socio-economic and political conditions.” That is, they have a local and autochthonous *raison d'être*. Any co-arising critique of the U.S., he says, is a consequence not of deeply-

embedded anti western views, but rather of American policy in favor of Israel and its support for regional authoritarian regimes, not forgetting the impact of the invasion of Iraq, which has produced a wide anti-American social feeling, not only on the part of Islamism.

Consequently, Moussalli proposes that we “rethink U.S. strategic interests and come up with new policies.” In the light of the recent election of Barak Obama, who has expressed a desire to introduce new parameters into American policy towards the Middle East, some of the author’s proposals deserve to be emphasized. In general terms, Moussalli advises that the U.S. ought “to stop postulating a cultural or religious threat or a global Islamic enemy, and instead to try to locate and solve problems within their immediate contexts.” To recover the U.S.’s image, Washington ought to “reduce the [use of] arbitrary and brutal force and uphold the rule of law” (which it seems Obama has already initiated within the framework of the “war against terror”) and “to predicate political participation of both Islamists and secularists on renouncing the use of violence.”

The author gives particular importance to the role of Iran and Turkey in the new Middle-Eastern context. With regard to Iran, he argues, the United States needs to shift from reactive to proactive. Iran must be a key component in the future stability of the Middle East and the Gulf region. Moussalli therefore proposes a new regional order that integrates Iran. With that aim, he suggests using the strategic move of favoring Iran’s entry into the World Trade Organization, which to date has been obstructed by the United States.

Turkey “should also be included in a new regional order and should not be used only to counter the influence of Iran and Syria. Alliances such as those between Turkey and Israel, on the one hand, and Iran and Syria, on the other, increase security risks for U.S. interests and the parties concerned.” Although Moussalli leaves this point implicit, it is certain that Turkey is showing great potential to be among what we could call the “new mediators,” capable of fulfilling a key role as interlocutor with all participants to resolve Middle Eastern conflicts. Turkey is an indispensable me-

diator between Israel and Syria, respected by Iran and, as the Gaza crisis has shown, an irreplaceable mediator between Hamas and the international community, as well as an interlocutor between Arabs and Palestinians. We should not forget that Turkey was the only country present at both the summits in Qatar and Kuwait. All in all, this book is a welcome addition to the literature on foreign policy and religion in the context of U.S. - Middle Eastern relations.

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## **American Ascendancy and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region**

**By W. Taylor Fain**

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This book examines the shifting balance of power between two western allies in the tumultuous Middle East. British interest in the Persian Gulf increased significantly during the nineteenth century, since the region functioned geographically as a liaison between the Mediterranean and the Indian subcontinent. Britain's political domination of the region began in the 1820s, culminating in the Treaty of Maritime Peace of 1853, which created the system of trucial states along the Arabian coast. The treaty secured the political and economic stability of the region, which was vital for the maintenance of Britain's Indian trade routes. British influence in the Gulf continued uninterrupted up until the period immediately following WWII. The post-war period not only

brought about the demise of the old modes of imperialism but also gave way to the rise of new international political actors like the United States and the Soviet Union. The US entered the region as a powerful actor after the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia, and later extended its domination over other regions in the Middle East. W. Taylor Fain's study focuses on “the Persian Gulf region” and analyzes diplomatic relations between the US and Britain from the 1950s to the 1970s. For Fain, this period of power politics witnessed how the interests of the two Western powers overlapped, and especially how they conflicted. Put more elegantly, “this book underscores the fragility of the vaunted Anglo-American ‘special relationship’ during the Cold War” (11).