

Amerikan Grand Stratejisi: Obama'nın Ortadoğu Mirası [American Grand Strategy: Obama's Middle East Legacy]

By Çağatay Özdemir

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Although many actors, from regional powers to global powers, engage in grand strategy practices, the concept of 'grand strategy' is most closely identified with the United States. U.S. Presidents have put forward various grand strategies by taking into consideration regional conjectures, threats, aims, and domestic political developments. In this regard, Çağatay Özdemir's *American Grand Strategy: Obama's Middle East Legacy* addresses the reasons behind the preference for retrenchment as a grand strategy in Obama's era. Özdemir provides a framework of reflections on American domestic politics, and investigates how Obama's grand strategy was put into practice along the brittle fault line of the Middle East. One of the main arguments of the book is its explanation of the fact that while Obama came under criticism for following a "do nothing strategy," he actually pursued a grand strategy based upon a conjectural reality; in this context the diplomatic and economic instruments of the U.S. were integrated with a retrenchment-oriented grand strategy. According to the author, the main aim of Obama's grand strategy was to protect the global role of the U.S., just as the previous grand strategies preferred by Presidents of the U.S. in the post-Cold War era had done.

The book is composed of three chapters. In the first part, Özdemir examines the con-



cept of grand strategy in depth and frames the concept, which has been marked by some ambiguity in the literature. Özdemir states that the concept of strategy can be found in Ancient Greece; because of the shortcomings of the concept of strategy, the literature needs a concept such as grand strategy. The fact

that the concept of strategy is very intertwined with military activities and war has revealed the necessity of defining non-military activities, such as the economic, socio-psychological, and diplomatic tools used against the enemy. This situation stems from the fact that the only source of power of the states until the nineteenth century was military power; in the following period, states needed diplomatic, economic and social power. Such a change in the international conjuncture necessitated a new perspective. Hence, at the present time, the concept of grand strategy has been trying to satisfy such a necessity. In addition to specifying its difference from strategy, Özdemir also analyzes the different aspects of grand strategy in terms of foreign policy. At this point, Özdemir states that grand strategy serves as a map for how to use foreign policy instruments.

The second section explains the process that prepared Obama's grand strategy and the reasons this grand strategy was chosen. As the greatest success of the book, the author goes into the origins of the conditions that

shaped Obama's preference. Özdemir states that in the post-Cold War era, in which Washington was the only dominant power, primacy and cooperative security were preferred together as a grand strategy. However, due to the fact that the threats against the system could not be eliminated during the period of George H. W. Bush, this form of grand strategy didn't last in the long-term. Özdemir's most basic argument in this part of the book is that the core of the remaining heritage Obama inherited can be found in the traces left by Clinton and Bush in the international system. Therefore, the author underlines that the decisions taken and the developments during the terms of both presidents shed light on the grand strategy preferred during the Obama period.

The author persistently stresses that the international crisis caused, following Bush's grand strategy, the two unresolved wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the 2008 economic crisis occur as a result of these wars, were left for Obama to handle. Under Obama, Washington determined that the resources planned for military expenditures would be better used instead in solving the economic and social problems in domestic politics. The economic problems caused by the two wars and the social problems caused by the economic crisis caused Obama to prioritize domestic political issues. Özdemir argues that Obama aimed at the smart use of military power. According to Özdemir, the reason why Obama adopted a grand strategy separate from that of Clinton and Bush is that he sought to avoid long-term and overseas military operations that were a serious burden on the economy. Özdemir, however, states that this avoidance never changed the U.S.'s global goals, but rather changed its grand strategy to maintain its global leadership. The author concludes the chapter by underlining the fact

that Obama always kept his military position ready to intervene in all regions in order not to allow any power in Northeast Asia, Europe, or the Middle East to become a regional hegemon.

The last section covers how Obama's grand strategy leaves its trace in the Middle East region within the framework of the Arab Revolutions and nuclear negotiations, as well as the Afghanistan and Iraq cases. Özdemir also explores how the Israeli problem, which is a chronic problem of the region, is also affected by Obama's grand strategy. He explains how Bush's war on terror has been transformed with the influence of the grand strategy. Although each of these issues, which left their mark on the last 20 years of the Middle East, contains many different dynamics, Washington's retrenchment grand strategy is basically single-minded: to avoid military operations that would bring a new economic cost to Washington. For this purpose, Washington has aimed at minimizing the cost of military operations by conducting spot operations with drones and the Air Force or by allocating the cost to regional and global actors.

Another successful aspect of the book is that while it gives attention to classifying terms and focusing on various cases, the author does not ignore theoretical frameworks. According to Özdemir, during the Arab Revolutions, the possible political uncertainties that could emerge after the repressive governments have been removed, and their potential costs and risks, constrained Washington from seeking a new adventure. According to Özdemir, Obama's retrenchment grand strategy, which planned to load the cost of the fight against terrorism onto the U.S.' regional allies, ironically also included terrorist organizations as regional allies. Obama's Middle East policy, whose realistic lines were so clear, was op-

posed to a solution that would push the U.S. out of the equation, and committed to minimizing the cost for itself. To sum up, although the cost of the retrenchment grand strategy, which envisages the continuation of crises, was at the “least level” for the U.S., the cost to the Middle East was long-drawn out loss of faith in democracy, a coup plot in Egypt, long-standing civil war in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, and a geography that remains in the grip of civil war and terrorist organizations.

Another significant point is that the book also regards the consequences of the grand strategy. The grand strategy which envisages the continuation of the crises has alienated the United States from a strategic ally like Turkey, encouraged oppressive regimes, and led to U.S. alliances with terrorist organizations like the PKK/PYD. This has led to serious questioning of the liberal, democratic, and idealist line of the U.S. by the international community. The realist view of the grand strategy has undermined idealist principles like human rights, democracy, and fighting

against terrorism, and brought about many inconsistencies.

According to Özdemir, Obama left a Middle East where chaos is increasing in prevalence. While wars remained as a heritage passed on from Bush to Obama, from Obama to Trump civil wars remain. In other words, the ongoing crises that started in the Bush era were deepened during the Obama period, and subsequently inherited by Trump.

To conclude, Özdemir’s book is a great contribution to the literature approaching the American foreign policy of the Obama era on the basis of grand strategy. Thus, the author has made complicated and seemingly contradictory foreign policy decisions understandable. As stated in the book, all presidents have similar targets in essence, although their methods may differ. *Amerikan Grand Stratejisi: Obama’nın Ortadoğu Mirası [American Grand Strategy: Obama’s Middle East Legacy]* is indispensable for scholars trying to understand the essence of U.S. foreign policy.