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## Gerges, Fawas A. *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

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New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.**

In the midst of so many books and reports produced on the topic in the past decade in the United States alone who would need yet another book. Though published three years ago, this is still the one book that any concerned policy maker must read it.

Professor Fawaz Gerges, a lifetime Middle-Easternist, has compressed in about 200 pages U.S. government sources as well as solid research from academia. But the best part of the book that makes it so convincing is his own interviews with former leading jihadi leaders in the Middle East, and his use of their writings in Arabic with loathing but candid confession of their miserable failure. What went wrong for the terror organization to fail is the major bulk of the book, and, thus, it is more about the fall than the rise of al-Qaeda.

Gerges is bending over backwards in successfully convincing his readers, especially, this Pashtun, that al-Qaeda is dead. But the multi-billion-dollar network of the national security complex and vested interests are even harder at work instilling the fear of terror in the heads and hearts of average Americans. Unfortunately, in the anti-terror frenzy, several the far-right racial and religious hate groups in the US have turned Islamophobia into a 'new anti-Semitism.' In the worldview of the so-called counterterrorism experts, including many US officials, 'Islamic' terrorism has replaced the Soviet nuclear threat. For many anti-Islam experts, al-Qaeda is also *al-faeda* (big business).

Gerges gives us solid reasons why al-Qaeda central had in fact collapsed way before the United States assassinated its terror chief, Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011 in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The monster that was destined to death even at its conception grew up only to shoot itself in the mouth by carrying out the horrific event of September 11, 2001. The strangest feature of al-Qaeda was that 9/11 was not inevitable if only the terror organization had remained what it was: a local or a regional training organization like several jihadi groups who fought and drove the Soviets out of Afghanistan.

With an introduction and conclusion and five chapters in between, the book deals more with the fall than the rise of al-Qaida. The Introduction shows how, in the aftermath of their 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden and his top commanders, worried for their personal safety, could neither run nor hide for too long as the Pakistani and other Muslim countries intelligence networks in the region were hunting them and handing them over to the United States.

The vast majority of Muslims, even those who were highly critical of the US foreign policy in the Middle East, did not support al-Qaeda before or after 9/11 for a simple religious and rational factor that United States, unlike the Soviet Union, the other superpower, had not attacked a Muslim country to justify Jihad. The fact that American intervention in the Balkans in the 1990s had saved millions of Muslims was not lost on the minds of Muslims.

In Chapter 1, "The Rise of Al-Qaeda," Professor Gerges informs us that Osama bin Laden, at his most glorious point in life, emerging as a winner of the anti-Soviet Jihad in Afghanistan in early 1990s had many doubts as to the right direction for the rest of his life. In fact, the CIA had "nicknamed bin Laden a 'good-gooder'" because he helped the CIA-operated jihad both monetarily and militarily. To the Saudi royal house he was know for his gratitude for the US support of the Afghan Jihad against "godless communism." (p. 48).

What turned bin Laden and many Saudi secular and religious leaders against both the US and Saudi Arabia were the US invasion of Iraq and the stationing of US forces in Saudi Arabia during the 1990-1991 Gulf War. He "vowed to expel US troops from the lands of the two holy

places---Mecca and Medina.” (p. 55). To the agenda of his World Islamic Front against the Judeo-Christian alliance he added one more place to liberate, Palestine, which resonates with more than one billion Muslims across the world. His deadly attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 and the *USS Cole* in October 2000, he was scheming to drag the US into a worldwide conflict with Muslims.

Gerges reminds us that even before the Clinton Administration hit al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan, Mullah Muhammad Omar and other Taliban leaders had warned bin Laden not to use Afghanistan as a staging ground against the United States. They severely restricted, if not completely closed down, his military training camps in Afghanistan, and warned him of consequences if he embroiled Afghanistan in a conflict with the United States.

In Chapter 2, “The Growing Rift”, Professor Gerges reveals that Abdullah Azzam, a leading jihadist theoretician in the Middle East, and a spiritual godfather to bin Laden, disapproved attacks on the United States. Al-Gamma al-Islamiya, the largest jihadist organization in the region, also openly rejected bin Laden’s hostility toward the US. While leading Muslim theologians condemned al-Qaeda’s terrorist attacks on innocent people, “in the US policy circles,” Gerges laments, “there existed little appreciation of the fact that neither Islam nor its religious texts would be useful in unlocking the ‘al-Qaeda riddle’.” (p. 77).

In the rush to 9/11, bin Laden was bent upon to punish ‘occupiers of Islamic sacred lands’. He did not listen to his own shura, council, which advised him against any action against the United States. He did not consult even Ayman al-Zawahiri, his second-in-command, whom he informed 24 hours before the attack. Most seriously, bin-Laden did not inform his Afghan host, Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, who had warned him against using Afghanistan as a staging ground against the West.

Chapter 3, “A Success and a Miscalculation,” brings out significant parts of the United States 9/11 Commission establishing the fact neither Afghanistan nor Iraq was involved in bin Laden’s heinous crime. In fact, it was not bin Laden, but Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, who had imagined the crime. The small group of Saudi, Yemeni and Egyptians pilots and their helpers who got training in the United States was mostly from Hamburg, Germany. Bin Laden, a “one-man show” in “absolute individual leadership”, ordered the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Bin Laden gloated that 9/11 attacks were a success beyond his imagination. But these were also an unimagined miscalculation. “Contrary to received wisdom,” Professor Gerges emphasizes, “September 11 did not turn out to be al-Qaeda’s baptism by fire, a force multiplier, a game changer. There was no mass following, no river of young recruits to rise up against the ‘impious’ pro-Western local rulers.... Bin Laden gained notoriety, but for the wrong reasons.” (p. 93).

Bin Laden could not believe the devastating response of condemnations he got from even anti-American mainstream Islamists such as Hasan al-Turabi, his Sudanese host and formerly head of the Islamic National Front, Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, Head of Hizbullah, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif Fadl, the former mufti of al-Qaeda, and most importantly Skaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian-born conservative cleric now based in Qatar, who commands over the heads and hearts of millions of Muslims in the Middle East and beyond. Ironically, even the al-Gamma senior leaders, who are spending their lives in prisons for allegedly assassinating president Anwar Sadat, condemned al-Qaeda’s attacks as violation of Islamic law (the Sharia), which bans killing civilians of any religion or nationality. “This goes to the heart of the question of whether al-Qaeda speaks for and represents the bulk of jihadis (much less the Umma) or, as I have argued, only a fringe.” (p.94).

In Chapter 4, "Decline and Fall", Gerges tells us how al-Qaeda's attacks rallied almost all Muslim states around the US. American effort to destroy al-Qaeda was not possible without help from Muslim countries. Pakistani authorities captured and handed over more than 400 al-Qaeda terrorists, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, the self-proclaimed architect of the 9/11 attacks. But president Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003 was "a godsend to al-Qaeda, allowing it to regroup, reorganize itself militarily, and decentralize its decision-making process." (p.105)

American occupation of Iraq "enraged millions of Arabs and Muslims," and Iraq became "a rallying cry for jihad against America, foreign invader." (p. 106). Both Bin Laden and Zawahiri despised Abu Musab Zarqawi, but embraced him for engaging US forces in Iraq. However, Zarqawi's mass slaughter of civilians turned the Sunni tribal insurgents against him. "The recent (2011) surge of al-Qaeda's attacks," observes Professor Gerges, "is in fact a product of rising dissatisfaction among Sunni Arabs who had been promised integration into the government."

But the recent (2014) surge of ISIL/ISIS or IS owes much of its force and ferocity to the repetition of the same blunder by the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. "Around 100,000 members of the Awakening Councils had been told that they would be given jobs in Iraq's security and bureaucratic services. Such integration has not yet happened." The US force surge succeeded in Iraq in 2006-7 because the Sunni Arabs revolted against al-Qaeda. These were "the same Sunni Arabs who had previously provided its members shelter and recruits. They could do so again." (p. 112).

Chapter 5, "Legacies and Aftershocks," deals with frustration of Muslims in the United States as the FBI frames young Muslim Americans in homeland terrorist activities. The same frustration is voiced in friendly countries like Pakistan and Yemen where drone US drone attacks have killed hundreds of innocent civilians, including women and children. US and NATO forces' night raids in Afghanistan have forced President Hamid Karzai issuing so damaging anti-US statements that sometimes shock his Western allies.

"It would be a mistake to dismiss Karzai's warning as the ramblings of an increasingly isolated, paranoid, and conspiracy-minded partner, as leaked US diplomatic cables portray him.... (American officials) must not dismiss his warnings that the US War on Terror---not only by special-ops forces but also by airstrikes and drones---is radicalizing the population more than it is truly defeating the Taliban and that the Taliban must be diplomatically engaged." (p. 186).

Professor Gerges concludes, "the fear of terrorism has not only taken hold of the imagination of Americans, but also drives government policy." The US War on Terror has first in Iraq, and now Afghanistan-Pakistan has "disillusioned and frustrated young Muslims who live in Western societies." (p. 197) Fighting terrorist should not create terrorism. Almost all groups who have taken to political violence against regional dictatorial governments have local causes of grievances.

The United States must work for the establishment of the Palestinian state. The veto power that Israel has over the US foreign policy in the Middle East is "a major contributing factor to the widespread Muslim hostility against the United States.... From Iran to Indonesia, America is held responsible for perpetuating the Palestinian predicament...and allowing Israel to occupy Palestinian territory. The Palestine-Israel conflict is the fundamental fault line in the Islamic arena, not just the Arab region, and the source of 70 percent (in my estimation) of tension and suspicions between Muslims and Americans." (205).

While I am not optimistic that any American official of any import will have the courage to seriously consider conclusions that Professor Fawaz Gerges has drawn from his lifetime

experience in the Middle East, I am sure any reader inside and outside the academia will definitely benefit from this book which I highly recommend.

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