

Geoffrey Wawro, Quicksand. America's Pursuit of Power in the Middle East, Penguin Press, New York 2010, 702 pp., \$ 37,95.



"Quicksand" is a book that subjects "America's pursuit of power in the Middle East", so the subtitle of this outstanding work, to a sober scrutiny. Hundred years of US involvement in that region did not bear fruit for the United States of America. On the contrary, the US is disliked by almost everybody in the region, not because of its freedom, as US president George W. Bush naively claimed, but because its double standards regarding Israel and Saudi Arabia. The author holds that the various US administrations followed doctrines that did not match with reality in the region. Wawro, therefore, wants not only to find out when the US got involved in the Middle East but also how American decision makers felt and reacted at every critical juncture of America's advance since this involvement. The author writes that our recent efforts to transform the Middle East have gone shockingly sour.

Geoffrey Wawro is a professor for Military History and director of the Military History Center at the University of North Texas. He has hosted many programs on the History Channel and taught for several years at the US Naval War College. He received his PhD from Yale university.

The book shows how US foreign policy affects almost everybody in the world. It deals with US involvement in the Middle East from the period of Woodrow Wilson presidency to the present. "Quicksand" plays out between two poles: Israel and Saudi Arabia. The first is supported at any costs for domestic reasons, the later for its almost inexhaustible oil reserves. "The birth of Israel and the discovery of vast pools of oil in Saudi Arabia in the 1930s focused American attention on the Middle East as never before, and wove the Middle East into US domestic politics. American strategy in the Middle East has been muddled and confused over the years because it has been addressed politically, not strategically."

At first sight, the explanation for the blind support to Israel seems astonishing and appears almost as a cliché: "Every president since Wilson has succumbed to the bluster of the Israel Lobby." Far from repeating a learned cliché, Wawro provides compelling evidence and arguments throughout the book that this exactly the case. Like him before, George W. Ball and Douglas B. Ball showed in their book "The Passionate Attachment. America's Involvement with Israel, 1947 to the Present" that the various US administrations succumbed to the pressure exerted by Israeli governments and their supporters in the US. Sadly, this book is missing in the bibliography.

The book starts with US support for Zionism and its aim to establish a "Jewish national home" in the homeland of another people, the Palestinians. Wawro mentions president Woodrow Wilson's uneasiness with the concept of a Jewish state and its reservations towards its establishment because his "Fourteen Points could not be squared with plans by European Zionists to take over Arab land in Palestine, and 'assimilationist' Jews in America – as in Britain and Europe – feared and resented the idea of a Jewish state anyway, for it reinforced the cliché of the 'wandering Jew' by implying that Jews were stateless." Wilson was lobbied by Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis and other leading Zionists who used a familiar argument, namely, "that the Jewish state would be a vital US ally."

The influence of what John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt called the "Israel Lobby", runs through several chapters of "Quicksand" like a red thread. Since massive Jewish immigration at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century into the United States, all US governments have supported the Zionist cause and after 1948 the state of Israel. He cites, inter alia, the controversy between Secretary

of State George Marshall and President Harry S. Truman about the Zionist project, whereby the latter explained to State department officials his conundrum: "I am sorry gentlemen, but I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious for the success of Zionism: I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents."

In chapter "Oil" the author shows how persistently King Ibn Saud opposed the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. Since the 1930s, the House of Saud had been denouncing the Zionists as "marauders" and "land grabbers", and the Americans "had never won the Saudis over to Washington's supportive position". Having shown restraint toward Roosevelt and Churchill, Ibn Saud let go out bitterness at the American ambassador: "If America chooses in favor of the Jews, she will have repudiated her friendship with us, and it will be proof that America is content to see the annihilation of the Arab race."

The author thinks that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was perhaps manageable before World War II, but after the war, it became "utterly unmanageable". One reason could lay in the permanent influence pro-Israeli pressure groups exerted upon the various US administrations. President Truman had his "White House backroom boys", John F. Kennedy had a "White House desk-officer for Israel". The British complained about the total apathy of the Johnson administration during the Six-day war, attributing it to the influence of the Rostow brothers who were close advisers on Israeli affairs.

The State department was always considered suspicious because of the influence of the so-called Arabists. This label would describe all who are critical of Israel's international behavior. During the George W. Bush administration, Ariel Sharon and Ehud Barak criticized the State department for being too friendly to the Arab states. The neocons forced Bush in and told him that Israel and the US are on the forefront in the war on terrorism and represent therefore crucial allies. The books shows how obsessed the Bush-warriors got with this view.

Apart Israel, "Qicksand" demonstrates that almost all US administrations were driven by the ideology of "Oilism", as a small chapter of the book indicates. Both Bush administrations were filled with individuals from Big Oil. The best known of those are Dick Cheney and Condolezza Rice. A clear difference between these administrations was their approach towards the State of Israel. James Baker was said critical of Israel. Recent administrations have been extremely submissive to Israel, as reflected by the respective conduct of US Vice-President Joseph Biden and his Israeli hosts. While trying to appeal to Israel's good will, saying: "Good to be at home!", when arriving in Israel, Vice-President Joseph Biden was met by an announcement by the Israeli government to further increase the illegal colonisation of East Jerusalem with 1,600 housing units, a policy contrary to US declared wishes. President Obama too, was brought in line, after he started demanding a total stop of Israel settlement policy. Prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu made Obama look like a fool when he presented himself at the annual AIPAC convention with his arms over Nancy Pelosi's and Harry Reid's shoulders. Did this scene not illustrate to President Obama that the Israeli prime minister had the US Congress in his pocket?

Secretary of State James Baker demonstrated a far tougher stance when dealing with Israel. He literally dragged the government of then Prime minister Yitzhak Shamir to the peace conference in Madrid in 1991. In a phone call, he reportedly told him: "When you are ready for peace give us a call", and gave him State's telephone number. Under the younger Bush nothing similar has happened. The Bush senior's approach to Iraq after the Gulf war was more level-headed. He stood up against all opposition when it came to what he considered as vital US American interests. Going all the way to Baghdad to topple Saddam Hussein was not for him an option. At that time, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and Norman Schwarzkopf then opposed regime change in Iraq, writes the author.

Geoffrey Wawro draws particular attention to a policy paper called "A Clean Break. A new strategy for securing the realm" written by Douglas Faith, Richard Perle and David Wurmser and his wife Meyrav, as

a recipe for the first Netanyahu government to get rid of Saddam Hussein and stop the so-called peace process. They argued for the use of force instead of persuasion. Their radical ideas were introduced into the elaboration of US foreign policy when Perle and Faith became high-ranking officials in the Bush junior administration. From the first day of this administration, regime change in Iraq became its top priority. What distinguishes the older from the younger Bush was the latter's affiliation with the Christian Right which had allied itself with the neocons and formed the "New Right", writes the author.

Wawro describes in the Chapters "Ajax" and "Great Civilization" the US involvement in Iran and why it has failed. His concluding observations regarding Iran are very disappointing, they could have been written by one of the many biased pundits inside the Washington beltway. "The Iranian security forces today are taking their cues from the shah and SAVAK (the secret police of the shah regime L.W.); because the shah was so gentle, he fell."

The author then surprisingly cites "Iran's curious animosity toward Israel" – at the time of the Shah Iran and Israel were friends – "as it makes Israeli pre-emption or massive retaliation all but inevitable". The author does not mention the US double standard towards Israel's huge nuclear stockpile and Israel's refusal to adhere to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). To show how dangerous the current Iranian president Ahmadinejad is, he quotes him as having said: "Israel should be wiped off the face of the map." Wawro is apparently unaware that this quotation is false. The Iranian president said: "The Imam said this regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time", as correctly cited by the New York Times of October 30, 2005. To call for Iran to become part of the solution and not part of the problem in Iraq and Afghanistan confuses cause and effect. Not Iran created the mess and must get out of these countries but the US occupier and its other "willing executioners".

Summarizing the book, one can come to the conclusion that Israel is not an asset but rather a liability for US foreign policy in the Middle East. General David Petraeus, commander of CENTCOM, hinted at a hearing before Congress to a central problem US troops are facing in the region. To get out of the Middle Eastern morass and become a real "honest broker", the US must side with the "Wretched of the Earth", the Palestinians, and ram through a fair agreement that must, inter alia, include a complete withdrawal from all territories occupied in 1967. It must ultimately lead to a viable state, not a bantustan. Wawro demonstrated to what extent the Muslim mind is occupied by the Palestinian question. Ignoring it any longer, the US would have nowhere to go in the Middle East.

"Quicksand" narrates history in a lively manner. The book is impressively written and filled with a lot of references and quotes not only from archives but also from biographies of former politicians and works of other historians. However, the analytical side leaves to be desired. The book's findings could partly be used as a guide to get out of the Middle Eastern quicksand. But all the indications emanating from Obama show that his administration is too weak to make a U-turn in America's Middle Eastern policy. He may be regarded a "prisoner" of an imperial power structure that allows only those people to reach the White House who will serve the Empire's interests. If the US doesn't learn wickly, quicksand may turn into quagmire. Once you get stuck in it, you are lost. "Quicksand" could be an eye-opener to the more soberly thinking US American policy makers. A translation of the book in all major languages is highly recommended.

Ludwig Watzal

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