Interview - Fawaz A. Gerges

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Fawaz A. Gerges is Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and holder of the Emirates Professorship in Contemporary Middle East Studies. Gerges is the author of several acclaimed books, including *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?*; *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*; and *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*. He has written extensively on Arab politics and the international relations of the Middle East. His articles have appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Time*s, the *Washington Post*, the *Guardia*n and the *Independent.*

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

In the last four or five years – and particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2010 – there has been a fascinating focus on unruly, bottom-up politics, social movements and contentious politics. One of the most interesting trends for those studying the Middle East and International Relations (IR), is that scholars are now moving away from the usual traditional focus on diplomatic history, and top-down, high politics, and paying much more attention to these areas. Even though scholars were tackling the questions of low politics before the Arab uprisings, the aftershocks of the waves of popular uprisings in the greater Middle East have really generated an exciting repertoire of ideas about how to tackle questions of unruly politics, how to study a region in turmoil, and how to really understand social movements, how they become established, evolve, and mutate.

More and more young scholars are now focusing on historical sociology, which has always been the poor cousin of IR. Even though it goes back to Raymond Aron and Stanley Hoffmann, the IR literature has yet to fully engage with historical sociology. Some scholars, such as Fred Halliday and others, have utilised historical sociology and now young scholars are much more aware, equipped, and trained in historical sociology and its application to comparative politics, social and global history, and sociology. As a result, they can use it as a critical perspective to better understand international relations in the Middle East. In addition, there is more focus on the question of hegemony and how it relates, not only to Gramsci, but wider questions of hegemony and domination in IR. I receive and supervise an increasing number of dissertations which focus on historical sociology and hegemony.

What is really exciting about the fields of both IR and the Middle East is that there is no longer what you might have called an obsession with authoritarian politics. Authoritarianism was seen as the destiny for many states, particularly because most American-based political scientists put too much focus on authoritarianism and durable, enduring politics. However, the Arab uprisings have really taught us all that authoritarianism is not necessarily destined, and that social movements and bottom-up politics need to be taken very seriously. Structural analysis can really entrap all of us in very narrow and confining boxes. The most exciting development in my field is the epistemological rupture which has taken place, that runs in parallel with the psychological rupture – the turmoil, the contentious politics, the politically driven violence – all of that is generating new ideas and new concepts that help us understand Middle Eastern politics in comparative terms, rather than looking at the Middle East as a unique or special region.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I have learned not to take dominant concepts for granted and to really focus on ordinary politics and to take social

movements seriously. Most of my American, British, and French teachers and mentors were realists, who believe that realism is somehow the most explanatory concept in international politics. Most of them did not take ideology, identity, and culture very seriously. I have come to appreciate the importance of ideology and constructivism.

While I believe that IR concepts and frameworks are very important, I think that during my research experience, particularly the several years I have spent on the field (fieldwork is very important to me – I don't do cultural tourism), I have learned the importance of in-depth, empirical research. I strongly believe that any conceptual constructs and frameworks must be based on an in-depth, empirical analysis. As researchers, we need to understand languages, cultures, patterns, and history as they evolve and understand, not only the conceptual frameworks of our American, British, and French teachers, but also how concepts change and shift when they travel.

I have also learned that while interests matter a great deal, the questions of culture, identity, and ideology are also of great importance and should be taken very seriously. I don't think realism and constructivism need to be seen as mutually exclusive as the traditional divide within the field once claimed. My experience in the field shed light on the importance of bridging the divide between IR and sociology, as well as the division between the concepts of neo-realism and constructivism. For example, what the debate over leader rationality in regards to Iranian foreign policy shows – of course Iranian leaders are rational – is the importance of understanding the role of culture, ideology, and identity in the making of Iranian foreign policy. These factors should not be dismissed because they have a direct impact on how Iranian leaders justify and rationalise their policies to their domestic public.

Another important thing I have learned is that you can never really underestimate people's quest for justice, freedom, or liberation. These are not just slogans, but – for the millions of people in the region who have risen up against totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and autocracy – they are the rallying cries for justice, freedom, and *al karama* or dignity. These are universal ideas that really do transcend the Middle East. I am not referring to a simplistic notion of democracy or liberal ideas in a politicised sense, but to the fact that more than 60 or 70 years of authoritarianism and autocracy have not devoured civil society since, as we have seen, millions of people are rising up and calling for these universal ideas. Authoritarianism is not as important as some political scientists would like us to believe and if we look at the countries of the former Soviet Union or in the Middle East itself, we can see that civil society needs to be taken seriously.

Your upcoming book is titled *Contentious Politics in the Middle East: Popular Resistance and Marginalised Activism beyond the Arab Uprisings*. How do you see the future of resistance and activism in the Middle East?

The book analyses the role and complexities of popular agency through the framework of contentious politics and social movement theory. The chapters in the book apply familiar questions raised by social movement theorists to the relatively under-researched case study of the Middle East after the uprisings: Why do some contentious politics emerge into social movements, while some of them fragment or are repressed? How and why do contentious politics differ? How have social movements changed, or been changed by, the political contexts within which they operate? How does contentious politics theory help us understand the recent events Middle East? Which are the limitations of contentious politics theory that these events have exposed?

Contentious politics are not just a slogan; they relate to serious social and political struggles, and multiple social and political structures. They will most likely be a dominant feature in the Middle East in the next two decades or so.

To what degree do you think the 2011 uprisings have helped or hindered future activism and resistance in the region?

First of all, it would be too simplistic and reductionist to try to measure the effects or results of the Arab uprisings after just three or four years. I think that what we have witnessed in the Middle East is a historical and revolutionary process that is as pivotal a moment as some of the great historical moments. If we look at the French or Russian revolutions, we can clearly see that deeply contentious historical processes can take time to produce results. The frustrating thing about the dominant commentary on the Arab uprisings is the reductionist view of an Arab Spring that

did not really blossom and was followed by a dark Arab Winter. This is not what happened in the region – what we have witnessed are not revolutions in the classical sense, but revolutionary moments, large-scale popular uprisings, which are the product of accumulated social, political, and economic grievances that have been in place for three or four decades. These uprisings are highly complex processes and, when considering them, we must also take into account counter-revolutionary movements and states, which are trying to either undermine, hijack, or sabotage the process, as we have seen in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Bahrain. They are the product of a great historical and social struggle, in which even civil wars are very normal. If we consider historical comparisons, we come to realise that what is happening in the region is not unique. Instead, the aftermath of great revolutionary historical moments tend to be very rocky, bloody, and violent, this all the more significant when there are counter-revolutionary movements and others battling new emerging forces.

To me, as a historian and a student of IR, these issues of fierce social and political struggles and raging civil wars remind me of the great struggles that have raged not only in Europe, but in Latin America, Asia, and many other parts of the world. This process will take decades to really produce results and I do not suggest that these will necessarily involve democracy. The idea of a transition to democracy, as discussed by many political scientists, is generally a reductionist way of looking at revolutionary historical movements. These processes might have setbacks and counter-revolutions might succeed, as we have seen in some parts of the Middle East. I think, however, that the most important thing to keep in mind is that what has happened is historical because it is the first time since the end of World War One that we have the people trying to take charge of their destiny and future, rising up against authoritarianism and defining their own history. It is a moment of self-determination and, probably for the first time, the focus is really on local politics, justice, and the questions of social and political development.

What we must keep in mind is that these historical moments are the painful birth pangs of a new order – the old order is dead, psychologically and also in terms of epistemology. If you read Gramsci, he will tell you that the shape and the character of the new order has not yet emerged. Instead, the ghosts of the past – such as tribalism and sectarianism, or parochial and nihilistic groups like al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State – are infiltrating the body politic. The body politic's immune system is down, and these groups are taking advantage of the vacuum of power and of the fierce social and political struggles to infiltrate the system. This is making it very easy for al-Qaeda to find bases in several places, such as Libya, Yemen, Syria, Iraq. However, these developments should not make us lose sight of the historical nature of what is happening in the Middle East now: a fierce struggle about the identity of the state. What is being questioned is the state and its sacredness: how secular the state should be, what about the separation of powers, the role of minorities, the role of women? It is in this sense that I believe a shift to democracy alone will not help solve all the problems; instead, there are many other relevant aspects that must be accounted for.

The Middle East is evolving in its own way for a variety of reasons. First of all, it is not the same as Europe or Latin America. There are different social and political forces, and the role of culture is much more important than in many other countries, particularly the role of Islam. If you look at the Middle East itself, it has never really been independent – it was ruled by the Ottoman Empire for almost 500 years until 1918, then under direct colonialism from 1918 until the end of World War Two, then under militarism, which has done little to calm social grievances. It is because of developmental failure that Al-Qaeda and ISIS have been able to find a social base of support and expand in poor communities in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The politics and state institutions in much of the Middle East are broken; it is not just about abject poverty, but about developmental, institutional, and economic failure. For example, in the Arab world, with a population of between 240 million and 280 million people, on average 30-40% of the people live in poverty or below the poverty line (less than $2 a day), while unemployment among the educated youth is of 30-40%, creating a lock jam in the system with rising social classes of young men and women who cannot be integrated. There is also systemic corruption and a youth crisis (60% of the population is under 25 years of age) in one of the most insecure regions in the world in terms of food security. If we consider these factors, we can see that the after effects of the uprisings are not unique or unnatural, given the social and political situation, the broken politics, and lack of legitimacy.

If you ask me what the most glaring problems in the Middle East are today, I would not say the lack of democracy. I would say that it is the vacuum of ideas – there is no one big idea, there is no consensus on Islamism, constitutionalism, liberalism, or Marxism. Instead, there are multiple ideas that are competing, which only add to the

struggle for state identity, a struggle that will continue for some time before the dust can settle.

Do you think the type of resistance which the Islamic State (IS) is promoting is having an effect on other resistance either nationally or regionally?

I think this is a very important question because if we focus on the headlines or listen to commentators, we could easily think that the so-called Islamic State is much bigger than it is, and with much greater sway and muscle than it really has. In fact, this is precisely what ISIS wants us to believe, with its display of vicious violence and savagery, that it is a vanguard with the capacity to take over the entire region and that it speaks for the hearts and minds of many Muslims. In contrast – and I've written extensively on these social movements over the last 20 years – what the Arab uprisings have clearly shown is that although al-Qaeda is dangerous, it is in fact a tiny social movement. The millions of people who went out on the streets and rallied behind the ideas of justice, dignity, and freedom did not fly the flags of al-Qaeda or other extremist groups. In fact, these extremists movements were nowhere to be seen at the beginning of the uprisings, which tells us a great deal about where the middle ground of public opinion lies. Young and old men and women, professionals, working classes, and the agrarian poor used rallying cries and slogans that tell us a great deal about their aspirations, fears, and hopes.

What we see with, for example, the Islamic State is the rise of counter-revolutionary forces that have made major efforts to undermine the whole process started by progressive forces in the region. In addition, the maintenance of the authoritarian leaderships of Assad or al-Maliki, and the regional wars by proxy, have fed and nourished these particular counter-revolutionary groups. As the Arab body politic's immunity system weakens, the Islamic State and al-Qaeda – but also sectarianism, tribalism, and regionalism – are trying to go on the offensive. In contrast, what I also observe so far is that more and more people are coming to realise that groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, and other social epidemics such as sectarianism, present an existential trap for their community and society. I like to believe ISIS will not win this struggle and that it instead can serve as a catalyst for local resistances to rise up. The most effective means to delegitimise the ideology of ISIS and al-Qaeda is by a bottom-up approach, which mobilises local communities, mainstream Muslim public opinion, and activists. At present, such an approach is not easy because there are multiple social and political struggles taking place with the return of militarism and of former old classes trying to reassert themselves, but my hope is that the social epidemic that ISIS represents will trigger new forms of resistance.

The reason why your question is so important is because what ISIS, or the so-called Islamic State or ISIL, is really trying to do is hijack agency. This is a very important point to highlight. In order to hijack agency, ISIS portrays itself as the defender of the people, as a vanguard willing to deliver the need of the populace by violence, by blood, and by the sword. However, now it is also precisely ISIS's viciousness and savagery that is pushing more and more Middle Easterners to stand up, resist, and take back their agency. We are seeing it happen a little in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and other places, and I have no doubt that we are going to see the momentum increase as ISIS faces more setbacks on the battlefield in the next few weeks and months.

What, if any, impact has Morsi's ousting had on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Islamist movements elsewhere?

First of all, let me stress that I do not view the Muslim Brotherhood as a progressive force or as a social movement that was really at the forefront of the Arab uprisings. Secondly, I do not see them as a terrorist-inspired organisation, as some people would like us to believe. I see the Muslim Brotherhood as a reactionary, ultra-conservative, social movement that joined the uprisings belatedly and tried to utilise them in order to consolidate its power in Egypt and other places. This is exactly where, I think, the Muslim Brotherhood committed some of its major mistakes because, by not supporting the protests from the onset, they failed to connect with the young men and women who were at the forefront of the uprisings and to build a broadly based coalition with them. In fact, what they tried to do from day one was to silence and to shift the struggle from the streets to the voting boxes because this is where they believed they had the organisational ability to win. They subsequently made deals with the military and other reactionary forces, for one reason: gaining power.

What happened in Egypt, and to a smaller extent in Tunisia, told us a great deal about the agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is not interested in a pluralistic democratic society, but mainly in gaining power, maximising its interests, and maintaining the status quo, while only making minor changes in aspects of morality, religion, and piety. These actions and visions led to the general revolt of millions of Egyptians against the Muslim Brotherhood. Unfortunately, this revolt was then used and abused by the military to disenfranchise the Muslim Brotherhood and to try and de-activate the social struggle on the street.

There are a few major issues which we need to think about when we talk about Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood. Firstly, unfortunately, the Muslim Brotherhood has not really engaged in any kind of soul searching following the removal of Morsi from power. Despite everything that has happened, it has yet to produce a self-critical document that accounts for some of the mistakes that were made by the leadership and the old guard of the group, which are highly conservative and reactionary and dominate the decision-making process.

Secondly, if we have not seen self-reflection it is mainly because the Egyptian government is going in for the kill by not only trying to clamp down on the Muslim Brotherhood, but to really destroy it once and for all. I do not think it will succeed because if we look at what happened between 1954 and 1970 with the popular and charismatic Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who fought tooth and nail to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood, we can see that he failed to do so. This is a movement that has flourished on victimhood and, in a sense, on victimisation and persecution. In fact, when Muslim Brotherhood leaders left prison in the 1970s, they were able to rebuild the movement on a much bigger scale, so I very much doubt that the Egyptian government will be able to put an end to the Muslim Brotherhood. It has been the most powerful social movement that is deeply entrenched and that nourishes on a religious diet that sustains its rank and file.

The third, and most important, point that we should take into account is that the clamp down against the Muslim Brotherhood has ultimately played into the hands of more violent elements like al-Qaeda and ISIS. Extremist violent groups have used the removal of the Brotherhood from power, despite it being elected, as an argument to discredit democracy. In this sense, I think that the brutal clampdown on the Brotherhood has provided ideological ammunition to the militants of groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, and has even helped them gain a great deal of recruits.

Finally, I think what many of us fear is that as the clampdown increases and intensifies, there is a real danger that more and more members of the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood, who renounced violence in the late 1960s, will join militant and extremist elements. There is a real danger that this could happen and, if it does, in the next two or three years we might see the development of a greater and more dangerous and deadly insurgency in Egypt, similar to the one in the 1990s.

How would you define the current relationship between Islam and nationalism? Do you see a shift in this relationship in recent years?

The long struggle between secular nationalists and Islamists in the region has left deep scars on the Arab body politic and had far-reaching repercussions on state formation, institution building, and relations between rulers and those who are ruled. In fact, it is fundamental to understanding contemporary Arab and Muslim politics. This ideological and cultural divide between the nationalists on the one hand, and Islamists on the other, is a major cleavage across the Middle East and beyond. Far from being either straightforwardly binary or inevitable, the struggle between the nationalists and the Islamists is complex and power, not ideology, is the driver.

I think your question on Islam and nationalism is very important because, despite the current violent upheaval in Egypt between the Muslim Brotherhood and the authorities, over the last 20 years or so we have seen a pattern emerging among Islamists in places such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Jordan that I call for the nationalisation of the Islamist movement. When I was interviewing Islamists in the 1990s, they took great pride in telling me that they had become Egyptianised. What the mainstream Islamist movement did was try to embed itself in the local context, which is what I mean by nationalisation. The process started in the mid-1990s, and soon more and more Islamists groups came to realise that the only way for them to survive and really win hearts and minds of the local communities was to blend in with them.

I am currently writing a book on the revival of the nationalist Islamist civil war, in which Gamal Abdel Nasser, in the 1950s, raised questions about power, such as who should really be in charge of the political process and what is the identity of the state? Now, whether we talk about Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, or other places, what is currently happening is also a struggle about the identity of the state between proponents of the secular nation-state on the one hand, and Islamists on the other, who believe that the sacred should have a greater role in politics. In many ways, the Arab uprisings triggered or even re-triggered the civil war that began in the 1950s and early 1960s. The two representatives or spokespeople of this war were Nasser, who represented the nationalist state, and Sayyid Qutb, who represented the Islamist movement. This struggle has been raging since the 1950s, and many within the Islamist movement of the 1990s didn't realise that they needed to shift focus and change ideologically. Many Islamists were really trying to theorise, call, and advocate for the nationalisation of the Islamic movement. This process has witnessed a major setback and we are now again seeing major struggles between Islamists and nationalists. In fact, in Egypt, it is as violent or more violent than the struggles that already took place in the 1950s or 1960s.

Recently, former MI6 agent, Alistair Crooke argued that the US was immobilized as a result of the increased violence in the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Would you agree with this assessment? To what extent is there a proxy war and does this signify a step back from the Middle East by Western policy makers?

Again, I think that to understand the regional war by proxy, or the regional wars by proxies, we must look at the context in which such developments are taking place. The irony with Iran and Saudi Arabia and their current involvement in the region is that they are both counter-revolutionary powers. On this issue, analysts have up to now mainly focused on Saudi Arabia, by describing it as a counter-revolutionary power that has fought hard to preserve the old order of Hosni Mubarak and Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh. In a way, it is correct to point out that Saudi Arabia wants to protect the status quo, but so does Iran. Iran, a revolutionary state, which calls itself an Islamic state, has sustained its support for the Assad regime, not for the Syrian people's calls for revolution.

This brings us back to the questions about the causes of setbacks, civil wars, and turmoil in that with two leading regional powers, trying to preserve the status quo on their own terms, progressive revolutionary forces are even more besieged and forced into a defensive position. Also, what we now have is a fierce, new cold war in the Middle East between Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia and Shia-dominated Iran. This new cold war between the two regional powers is not about identity or ideology, but about interests, supremacy, and power; it is about who dominates the Persian Gulf and the Eastern part of the Arab world. This regional cold war has sectarian connotations and, as I argued earlier, this is part of a struggle over identity and the Arab state (whether secular or religious). The situation is complex because it plays out on two levels: on the one hand we have Arab-Arab and Islamic-Islamic civil wars in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and on the other we have two regional powers locked in a struggle for power. In addition, these Arab-Arab civil wars and Islamic-Islamic civil wars are nourished and sustained by this fundamental fault line between Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia and Shia-dominated Iran. That particular rivalry, even though it is about power and not ideology, has taken increasingly sectarian tones, pouring gasoline on the spreading fires in the Arab Middle East.

In many ways, we need to relate the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia to the Arab uprisings and to the struggle between counter-revolutionary forces and the new progressive forces that are trying to establish a new system. These new forces call for the establishment of a system that is not based on authoritarianism, autocracy, sectarianism, or tribalism, which will not be an easy one to win. Looking at Obama's plight to reach an agreement with Iran on its nuclear programme, it is easy to see how his stance is motivated by the desire to end the state of institutionalised anonymity between Iran and the United States since the 1980s, but also to deactivate the sectarian mine fields in the region. The Americans are very anxious about the sectarian civil wars raging in the region. I think the dominant view of the Obama administration is that an American-Iranian agreement could play a major role in influencing the opinion and the views of the Iranian leadership, which in turn could see Iran play a more positive role in the region.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Politics?

I am a student myself and I majored in IR, history, sociology and politics. My teachers and mentors were, whether you are talking about James Rosenau, John Vincent, Avi Shlaim, Charles McClelland, Adam Roberts or Stanley Hoffman, the leading scholars in IR with diverse conceptual backgrounds. My humble advice to IR students would be – don't be entrapped in your own disciplinary boxes, open up your mind and borrow from other disciplines. The most important challenge for all of us, students of IR, politics, and historical sociology is to take the interdisciplinary approach and research seriously and borrow from other fields to tackle challenging questions of internal, regional, and international politics. I would also advise students to keep trying to narrow the divide between area studies and disciplines. In fact, I would encourage them to not only bridge this divide, but also to utilise interdisciplinary concepts and to embrace the challenge of utilising both the social sciences and humanities to expand the boundaries and the frontiers of knowledge within our field.

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This interview was conducted by Jane Kirkpatrick. Jane is an Associate Features Editor of E-IR.