

Book Review
By
Majid Mahmood

Sami Moubayed, *Syria and the USA: Washington's Relations with Damascus from Wilson to Eisenhower* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013) 200.

Sami Moubayed has written a fascinating history of the United States-Syrian relationship during the first half of the twentieth century. The role of the US in the Levant during the 1910s–1950s has received relatively little scholarly attention, a neglect that is not entirely surprising. For most of that period the US exhibited little interest in Syria or the broader Levant. American leaders, including President Woodrow Wilson, grudgingly acceded to British and French claims in greater Syria, Iraq, and Palestine. It was only in the aftermath of World War II, toward the closing years of Moubayed's narrative, that the US hesitantly took on a great power role in the Arab east, endorsing independence for Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, and taking its first tentative steps in support of the newly established state of Israel.

Seen from the vantage point of Washington, Damascus was a minor capital, largely insignificant, its presence registering only when regional conflicts or global crises brought it briefly into the limelight. It was not until August 1952, six years after the country became independent, that the US appointed an ambassador to Syria. As Moubayed's thoroughly researched account makes clear, however, the perspective from Damascus was quite different. From the Syrian vantage point, Washington loomed large, its presidents and representatives were objects of fascination, its policies endlessly parsed and debated. Washington's influence and intentions were invariably seen as consequential, if not existential, for Syria, whether for good or, as Syrians increasingly came to believe as the Cold War unfolded, for ill.

Moubayed highlights in particular the many turning points at which the Syrian-American relationship, now deeply fixed in mutual mistrust and enmity, might have developed in more positive ways. He notes the expectations President Wilson created among Syrian nationalists with his Fourteen Points; the hope that Syrians placed in the recommendations of the King-Crane Commission of 1919–1920 favoring Syrian independence; and the sympathy shown by American diplomats

during the interwar period for Syrian nationalist aspirations. Time and again, however, Syrian hopes and expectations were not realized. The advantages that Moubayed believes would have accompanied a closer relationship between Washington and Damascus never materialized. Instead, Syrian perceptions of America's pro-Israel bias, Washington's preference for the conservative, anti-communist monarchies in Jordan and Iraq, and its meddling in Syria's tumultuous domestic politics pushed US-Syrian relations toward antagonism and mutual hostility that have defined the relationship between the two states for the past 50 years.

In recounting this narrative of opportunities lost, and the costs that Moubayed believes both the US and Syria have paid as a result, he both summons up an imagined counterfactual history in which the two states enjoyed the benefits of a close and collaborative partnership—a history in which the US and a democratic Syria find common ground in resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict while advancing the security and economic development of the entire region—and suggests that it may not be too late to make up for lost time. In this, Syria and the USA: Washington's Relations with Damascus from Wilson to Eisenhower strikes a familiar tone. It is one in a long line of "if only" tales about the needless price that America has paid, and the price it has imposed on Syrians and other Arabs, for its flawed policies in the Middle East. To his credit, Moubayed does not overlook Syrian complicity in shaping the US-Syrian relationship. He conveys effectively the instrumentalism and self-serving ambition of the Syrian leaders who had their own agenda in seeking to draw the US more deeply into Syrian affairs.

Yet Moubayed's frustration is directed principally toward the American officials who failed to recognize Syria's potential and treated its leaders with cavalier disdain. Ultimately, however, the counterfactual history that Moubayed's narrative suggests is too elusive to be compelling. By the 1950s, the conflicting strategic interests that drove Syria and the US to become adversaries were too powerful, US' influence in the region too limited, and the advocates of a closer relationship too weak, to imagine that these conditions could have been overcome if only the US had taken a different course. Published as Syria spiraled into a brutal civil war that has torn the country apart, the diplomatic maneuvering and political jockeying that Moubayed captures so successfully have been overshadowed by the violence and massive destruction of a conflict that has produced the worst humanitarian disaster since World War II.

With Syria's survival as a state in doubt, and with the crushing burdens of post-conflict reconstruction still ahead, Moubayed's account might be seen as no longer relevant, but this would be a mistake. How the US responds to the Syrian conflict will be pivotal in shaping US-Syrian relations in the twenty-first century. To date, the legacies of antagonism and mistrust, whose origins Moubayed documents, have carried the day in defining the US response to Syria's violent collapse, leaving future historians to consider whether this era, too, will be remembered as a missed opportunity.

*Majid Mahmood is an
Associate Research Officer at CISS*