

The World According to Ben Rhodes: Hypocrisy in Obama's Foreign Policy

In a new book Obama's deputy national security adviser opens up about Pentagon interference in policy, Obama's political calculations and his own ignorance of the Middle East, as As'ad AbuKhalil explains in this review.

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Ben Rhodes' interesting new book, *The World as It is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* (Random House), should be widely read not because of the wisdom or moral message it contains but because it is an unintended, damning account of liberal imperialism.

The book suffers from an acute case of self-congratulation, sanctimoniousness and hubris. The author situates himself (along with Samantha Power and the young Foreign Service officers who worked in the Obama White House) among the liberal advocates of foreign policy. He does not include Obama in this group, and the latter comes across—despite perfunctory praise—as he really is: an unprincipled politician who unfailingly subordinates moral arguments to political calculations. When, for example, Rhodes brings up the issue of a “democratic opening” in Myanmar, Obama quipped: “no one cares about Burma in Ohio” (p. 174).

This response reminds one of the famous retort Harry Truman gave to his disregard for the Arab perspective in his handling of the creation of the Jewish occupation state in 1948.

The rise of Rhodes to become a key national security advisor to Obama is rather surprising. He was educated in English literature and creative writing, and does not have any training in foreign policy or Middle East studies. But Rhodes worked for (former representative) Lee Hamilton at the Wilson Center, and that propelled him to the foreign policy-making world as he was a key writer of the Iraq Study Group's report.

But as a speech writer for Obama, one strains to remember any memorable speech that he wrote, and Obama's best—according to press accounts—speeches (like those timid speeches on racial issues, which always fell short of outright condemnation of white racism) were actually written by Obama himself. Rhodes is no Ted Sorensen or Bob Shrum, yet he enjoys listening to and reproducing his own words.

The liberal imperialist stance reminds one, paradoxically, of the stance of neo-

conservatives: both use lofty ideals to marshal arguments for imperialist military intervention and hegemony in the affairs of other nations. Rhodes is so oblivious to the racism underpinning the liberal Western stance, that he assumes that human rights and morality is the thrust of his policy choices and those of his ilk. There is more than a tinge of racism in his treatment and references to Arabs, and his unabashed Zionism does not deviate from the traditional Zionist outright contempt for the Arab people.

Of all the reasons that Arabs had to revolt against cruel and oppressive regimes (the overwhelming majority of which are sponsored and armed by the U.S.—a small detail that is missing from this hefty book), Rhodes actually believes that it was Obama's speech in Cairo, (as if it is even remembered by Arabs except to mock its promises and its condescending hectoring to Arab people about the Arab-Israeli question and the need for Arabs to accommodate themselves to Israeli occupation and aggression) which inspired Arabs to undertake the various Arab uprisings in what has become—offensively—known as “the Arab spring.”

And of course a native informant is always available to legitimize the contemptuous views by the White Man: he cites the authority of a “Palestinian-American woman whom I knew casually” (p. 60) to support his claim that Obama's Cairo speech prompted Arabs to revolt, as if they had no reasons of their own. At least it was nice of Rhodes to admit that it was the U.S. government which handpicked the audience for the Cairo speech.(p. 59)

Ardent Zionism

Like all American officials who work on the Middle East, Rhodes (by his own admission) is an ardent Zionist who owns up to his past membership in AIPAC (p. 146). He considers U.S. support for Israeli occupation and aggression as the byproduct of “natural affinity for Israel” felt by “most Americans” (p. 57). But this foreign policy expert—by chance—fails to explain why the majority of public opinion in countries of the world—including in Western Europe—feels a natural affinity for the Palestinian people.

The discussion of U.S. policies toward the Arab-Israeli conflict within any U.S. administration is really an intimate debate among hardcore Zionists to see who can outdo the others in advancing the interests of Israeli occupation. Rhodes reports how Rahm Emanuel would refer to him as “ Hamas” (p. 56) when he did not think Rhodes was being sufficiently supportive of Israeli interests. This passes as an internal debate about the best options for U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

The book reveals more about the domineering role of AIPAC on all decisions undertaken by the Obama administration about the Middle East. Obama had to brief

Netanyahu about the Iran nuclear deal before he briefed Congress, for instance.

The falsehood of the author's human rights position is revealed by his references to Arab regimes. His ostensibly passionate concern for the victims of repression seems to be confined to Syria and Libya—conveniently the only Arab regimes not aligned with the U.S. government, although Muammar Qadhafi was a dictator honored by all Western governments in his last years in power. Hillary Clinton met and praised the head of his secret police while she was Secretary of State (not mentioned by Rhodes, obviously).

The book talks at length about the so-called "Arab Spring", but there is not a word about Bahrain or Yemen (or Jordan or Morocco). The pro-U.S. dictatorships (which are the bulk of Arab regimes) are not mentioned at all in this book which leaves the reader with the impression that the entire Arab world was living in democratic bliss with the exception of Syria and Libya. Rhodes, even as a key staffer on the National Security Council, has yet to learn about the uprising in Bahrain. But noticing it would expose his hypocrisy and the moralistic inconsistency of the Obama's White House.

Rhodes only mentions the suffering of the Egyptian people after it became clear that Hosni Mubarak could no longer cling to power. He says that key Obama administration officials, including Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, argued in favor of bolstering Mubarak. Obama—as Rhodes recounts—was not as enthusiastic because Obama was not friends with Mubarak as he was the Jordanian despot, King Abdullah.

According to Rhodes, Former CIA director John Brennan was explicit in his belief that Arabs were "not ready for democracy" (p. 106). Rhodes' bias in only expressing opposition to despots (and even elected leaders such as Yasser Arafat) who are not aligned with the U.S. becomes transparent when he describes a tour he made of a Saddam Hussein palace.

"There was still on display gifts that Saddam had received from admirers like Yasser Arafat and Muammar Gaddafi," Rhodes writes. As is widely known by people who know the region—the author excluded—Arafat never gave expensive or precious gifts to world leaders. He was known in fact to only give small replicas of Jerusalem or the Aqsa Mosque. Gaddafi's relationship with Saddam was often frosty. Surely, the author should have noted that those who were far more generous in showering Saddam with precious and valuable items were pro-U.S. despots, such Gulf monarchs and Jordan's King Husayn, whose friendship with Saddam was legendary, and whose son, the current King of Jordan, was one of Saddam's son `Uday Husayn's closest friends.

That Rhodes didn't know this indicates political bias. But then again, maybe

U.S. occupation soldiers (or local Iraqi cronies) looted the expensive gifts in the wake of the U.S. invasion and left behind the cheaper gifts from Arafat and Qadhdhafi.

Investment in Dictatorship

Rhodes even makes an argument in favor of U.S. support for dictatorship (although he dares not name the dictators). He euphemistically calls such U.S. support "investment." And he believes that the "return" on such investment is "worth it, even if we occasionally suffer losses, embarrassments, and moral compromises". (p. 45). His boss came to office with an unapologetic, imperialist view of the world and with distrust of the liberation capacities of people in developing countries lacking "mature institutions" (p. 47). It is the same, old argument of past colonial powers.

One learns from this book that the U.S. military, since at least Sep. 11, now makes key political decisions that are constitutionally part of the powers of the civilian commander-in-chief. Presidents, especially Democratic presidents who are always perceived to be soft on war and defense, feel compelled to follow the wishes of the generals when it comes to troop deployment or redeployment. (p. 74) The military often leaks to the press its displeasure about presidential decisions or inclinations to force the hand of the president, as they did in the case of Obama and the increase in the number of troops in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the intelligence agencies offer opinions and revisions to Obama's draft speeches. (p. 50)

Rhodes' and Obama's ignorance of Arab affairs is on display throughout the book. Here is their theory of the underlying causes of tensions between the U.S. and world Muslims: that Muslims have been quite unhappy with "a McDonald's down the street and American pop culture on their television." (p. 53). Both men would be quite surprised that Muslims do enjoy meals—available even with Halal meat for those who are sticklers about religious rules—at McDonalds.

Rhodes' ardent Zionism permeates the pages. He even admits that during the preparation for a major campaign speech for Obama he recommended "going easy on Israeli settlements" (p. 55). Worse, Rhodes (the humane liberal) urged Obama to avoid even using the word "occupation" in reference to...Israeli occupation. (p. 58). In other words, Rhodes holds the same position held by Trump's current ambassador in occupied Jerusalem.

The author seems to cover up at least part of Israel's role in making U.S. Middle East policy. He talks about the Saudi king urging Obama to support Mubarak (he reveals that the king compared Egyptian protesters against Mubarak to Al-Qa'idah, Hizbullah, and Hamas (p. 102)), but Rhodes does not mention

Netanyahu in the same vein (his role on Egypt was reported at the time by *The New York Times* and other U.S. media). In fact, there is more than a tinge of ethnic disparagement in his references to Palestine and Palestinians.

While noting that Netanyahu sat in the Oval Office and lectured Obama on the Israeli position on the “peace process”, Rhodes says he “was familiar with the emotions” of the Israeli leader. He reports matter-of-factly about the “heroic Israel of the 1960s and 1970s”—presumably referring to Israeli wars of aggression, attacks on Palestinian refugee camps, and the bombing of schools and civilians in Egypt during the War of Attrition.

Rhodes reproduces verbatim the Zionist and racist myths about Israel: “Jews building a nation in the dessert, fighting off Arab armies, led by towering figures like Golda Meir, who seemed both indefatigable and profoundly just.”(p. 145) Rhodes is still ignorant of the industriousness and farming energies of the Palestinian people throughout history, and he still operates under the discarded—and since academically discredited—clichés of classical Zionism. He does not know that his “just” Golda Meir ordered bombing of refugee camps and presided over an occupation state.

Furthermore, in describing the Palestinian territories, Rhodes makes that racist distinction (which has been regurgitated since the days of Herzl) between Europeanized Jews (as if Sephardim Jews don’t count) and the inferior Arabs. Rhodes writes: “Israel from the air resembles southern Europe; the settlements looked like subdivisions in the Nevada desert; the Palestinian towns looked shabby and choked off.” (p. 201). Rhodes also accepts Israel’s “security concerns” (p. 201) (which have historically served as justifications for wars and massacres), and attribute them to “a history of anti-Semitism that continues to the current day”—and not to the resistance against occupation. Does that mean that successive Israeli invasions of Lebanon and the various massacres in Palestinian towns and refugee camps was an attempt by Israel to eradicate anti-Semitism?

Hypocrisy on Syria

But the true nature of the hypocrisy of liberal interventionists of the Obama administration appears in Rhodes’ treatment of the Syrian war. Here, he pats himself on the back, repeatedly, because he consistently urged a U.S. war in Syria with a more muscular support for Syrian rebel groups—without much regard to their ideologies.

Shockingly, Rhodes appears as an advocate for al-Nusra (the official branch of Al-Qa`idah in Syria), as David Petraeus was, and admits he was “against those who wanted to designate part of the Syrian opposition—al-Nusra—as a terrorist

organization. Al Nusrah was probably the strongest fighting force within the opposition, and while there are extremist elements in the group, it was also clear that the more moderate opposition was fighting side by side with al Nusrah. I argued that labeling al Nusrah as terrorists would alienate the same people we wanted to help, while giving al Nusrah less incentive to avoid extremist affiliations," he writes on p. 197.

One would be curious to see the reactions of families and friends of Sep. 11 survivors to this callous passage by a senior official of the Obama administration (who was recently hired by Obama in his retirement). This foreign policy expert is making an argument that there are moderates and extremists within an organization which sprang from Bin Laden's movement and which continues to pledge allegiance to Bin Laden and his ideology. Rhodes even harbors hopes that this Syrian branch of Al-Qa'idah can be steered in a moderate direction.

This book serves as an indictment of the liberal interventionists in the Obama administration. Those were people whose thirst and zealousness for wars on Middle East countries (provided their despots are not clients of the U.S.) match the thirst and zealousness of the neo-conservatives of the George W. Bush administration. Rhodes never explains to his readers why his fake, humanitarian concern for the welfare of the people of the region never extends to people suffering under Israeli occupation and the repression of pro-U.S. despots.

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