

***Power, Faith, and Fantasy.  
America in the Middle East,  
1776 to the Present***

by Michael B. Oren, W.W. Norton & Company, 2007, 778 pp.

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Most Americans, including university students, have been educated to believe that U.S. involvement with the Middle East began with the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia in 1933 and developed further with the post-Second World War vicissitudes of Arab nationalism and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Michael Oren's remarkable book offers a paradigmatically different perspective, by providing a comprehensive 230-year history of a complex relationship that actually began with the founding of the United States in 1776 and continues to this day, with only one third of the book devoted to an overview of the post-Second World War era.

The book has many important merits, of which four stand out. First, it focuses consistently on the American experience through three major themes: power, faith and fantasy, often manifested in an unstable blend of all three at various times and places, first in North Africa, and eventually encompassing the entire region, including Iran. Second, Oren's book provides historical, political, diplomatic and cultural contexts to unfolding American relations with the region. In the process it emphasises the interplay of U.S. domestic and foreign policies and the crucial roles of U.S. presidents and of military, religious, congressional and communal leaders, as well as explorers and adventurers. Due regard is also given in each chapter to the viewpoints and policy rationales of other actors within the Middle East and among the Great Powers, especially Britain, France and Germany. Third, the book is well crafted and organised. It opens with a useful chronology of important dates and events, from 1776 to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Each chapter offers the reader a succinct introduction, followed by compelling analysis weaving relevant issues in with past and current policies and actions, and a concluding summary of key events, problems and dilemmas, responses and trends leading to future events. Finally, this is history at its best, well documented but rendered with flair and a lucid storytelling style, sometimes even suspenseful, that keeps the reader's interest constantly alive. In addition, the reader is treated here and there to fascinating findings, such as: the biblical motif that Benjamin Franklin proposed for the seal

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of the United States, the tradition that James Madison began of stationing Jewish diplomats in the Middle East, the Egyptian origins of the Statue of Liberty, the inspired creation of the Smithsonian museum in Washington as an antidote to the desolation of land and environment that explorers witnessed in 19th century Palestine and other parts of the Ottoman empire, and the lucky last attempt to find oil in Saudi Arabia at the end of 1937 that finally ushered commercial production.

### Power

On the theme of power, the book illustrates that, unlike European countries, the United States was initially ambivalent, using its military prowess only reluctantly, when challenged directly or when vital interests were at stake. Jefferson fought and finally defeated sea pirates from the Barbary Coast of North Africa in the 18th century who threatened US trade and seized innocent citizens for ransom. Teddy Roosevelt stood for freedom of American trade, generally sided with Anglo-French policies and intervened forcefully in Morocco on behalf of an American businessman captured by a Berber chief. But he also stood for minority rights, paving the way for future American support of independence movements against the Ottomans. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, the thrust of U.S. policies was often burdened and limited by competing goals. Protecting U.S. interests, American missionaries and businessmen, and promoting regional stability, did not easily fit with encouraging change, evangelical zeal and the pursuit of self-determination and democratic principles through which the American people viewed the world (David Porter refused to serve as American consul in Algiers in 1929 because of the French occupation). Michael Oren skilfully navigates the reader through the meandering course of U.S. attitudes up to the watershed events of the two World Wars. In the first war, President Wilson's refusal to align the United States against Ottoman Turkey (even in the face of the abhorrent massacres of Armenians) meant that the country that stood for the principles of freedom and democracy was practically absent when the fate of the defeated Ottoman empire was negotiated and decided upon by the victors, England and France, at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, widely acknowledged to be the source of many of the Middle East's current conflicts.

With the Second World War, the United States, beginning under the stewardship of President Franklin Roosevelt, became very much involved in the Middle East with the aim of guiding the region toward independence. In fact, after the Second World War, it became already apparent that the United States was gradually replacing

Great Britain as the most influential power in the Middle East. The United States, though, adopted an anti-imperialist role, reinforced by the perceived necessity to satisfy Arab nationalists in order to counter Soviet ambitions in the Cold War era. Thus the United States supported Nasser's coup in Egypt in 1952 and came to his rescue in 1956 from an Anglo-French-Israeli invasion, only to be disillusioned by Nasser's embrace of Soviet patronage and his pan-Arab radical attempts to destabilise the Middle East. The author succinctly analyses how the United States, with perhaps the best of intentions, became entangled in the labyrinth of Middle East post-war politics, including inter-Arab feuding and the 'insoluble' Arab-Israeli conflict.

### Faith

In approaching the themes of faith and fantasy, Michael Oren displays the full range of the historian's craft, to include cultural history and its underlying drives of religion, literature, myth and fantasy. He provides a fascinating account of America's religious impulse in the Middle East, initially confined to close identification with the Jews and eventually embracing their return to Palestine, their ancestral land of the Bible, through an increasingly popular Restorationist movement. Gradually, American evangelism blossomed into full scale missionary activity throughout the Ottoman Middle East. Having failed to convert a single native, missionary activity metamorphosed into a large network of educational programs, including many schools and institutions. It led to the establishment of American universities in Beirut and Cairo and Robert College in Istanbul. Against many odds and dangers, American missionaries had an important impact on the region's evolving modernisation and a lasting legacy of institution-building in education, health and welfare. Professor Oren, however, points out quite persuasively that unlike their European counterparts these missionary activities were never a proxy for colonial designs. They were rather the product of religious and cultural fervour and a desire, perhaps unconscious, to introduce the 'American Way' to the people of the Middle East, including its egalitarian ideals. Thus a group of Civil War veterans went to Egypt to promote the concepts of patriotism and citizenship, build an army and establish schools. The author claims that 'the army they helped create became the leading force for the liberation and modernisation of Egypt and remained so for well over a century' (209).

There were also many travellers to the Middle East, driven by Arabian Nights-type fantasies in search of the exotic, and others who, like Mark Twain and

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Herman Melville (Palestine), were more impressed by the misery, brutality and backwardness of the region. Certain missionaries and travellers, like some of those Civil War officers in Egypt, eventually becoming dismayed by Middle Eastern realities, came to view Islam, in the words of General Loring, as a religion 'born of the sword,' 'opposed to the enlightenment' and that 'crushes out all independence of thought and action.' The general added his hope (echoed by contemporary Muslim reformers) that 'some Arab Luther' would emerge to end the inculcation of hate (198). And, during the Second World War, General Patton, anticipating much of the current criticism of traditional Arab societies (such as in the 2005 Arab Human Development Report) observed that 'the utter degradation of women was the outstanding cause for the arrested development of the Arab' (464). These observations reflected lessons of experience of the Middle East, rather than borrowed European prejudices. Fundamentally and especially after 1918, American leaders and educated public opinion tended to be anti-imperialist and sympathetic with Middle Easterners as victims of European colonialism who could greatly benefit from American-supported self-determination to help them join the free world in commerce and prosperity.

### Fantasy

In the realm of fantasy, the book provides a rich tapestry of Americans' image of the Middle East landscape and its peoples, especially through the role of movies from the 1920s onward, about exotic desert life and the sensual noble savage, of which many variations on Valentino's sheikhs, Ali Baba, Casablanca, all the way to Lawrence of Arabia, Khartoum and animated cartoons such as the recent Disney's 'Aladdin.' I myself, growing up in Benghazi, Libya, was almost convinced by the romantic image that American movies with Italian and Arabic subtitles conveyed of the people around me. As noted by L. Carl Brown in his essay 'Movies and the Middle East': 'The American popular image of the Middle East was largely a transposition of the American frontier motif where real and fictional characters merged...Yet, it must not be overlooked how the American popular image of the Middle East also drew upon prevailing European (especially British) sources,' referring to the European Romantic movement exemplified by Byron, Delacroix and various other 'Orientalists.' [1] Against this broad canvas of the American imagination, Oren also shows a serious cultural effort on the part of America, demonstrated through the gigantic World's Columbian Exposition which opened in Chicago in 1893, and in which the Middle Eastern pavilions proved to be the most popular. While 'mythmaking,' Oren points out, 'may have been the Midway's

major accomplishment ... the fair's organizers never lost sight of their original, educational goal. Along with more mundane amusements, they sponsored nearly six thousand lectures on an ambitious range of economic, social, ethical, and religious topics. Many of the nation's foremost speakers participated...' (305).

The same can be said of Michael Oren's magisterial work, which has amply fulfilled its ambitious educational goal of 'recovering the pivotal past' in many topics of the history of America in the Middle East. It provides the reader with a broader, balanced, often amusing, and more profound understanding of the subject than previously available. For those who now think that America's moment in the Middle East is beginning to pass, *Power, Faith and Fantasy*, is a reminder that, notwithstanding ups and downs, the United States and the Middle East have become inextricably interdependent through a multifaceted relationship, deeply anchored in the history of the United States since its very founding.

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### References

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### Notes

[1] Lewis, Leites, and Case (eds.) 1985.