

## America's Romance with the Middle East

*Michael B. Oren*

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

W.W. Norton, 2007, 672 pages.

*Reviewed by Alexandra Levy*

In the post-9/11 world, it is difficult to open a newspaper without finding an article pertaining to the Middle East: about the war in Iraq, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the theocracy of Iran, or any of the region's volatile and often violent nations. Before 9/11, the Middle East was not a region many of our generation knew or cared much about, and American foreign policy regarding the area was not at the forefront of the government's agenda. As Michael Oren documents in his brilliant *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present*, it is only quite recently that the United States began to take

an active interest in the region. Yet the influence of individual Americans on the Middle East, from explorers to missionaries to diplomats, is incalculable.

Power, faith, and fantasy. Oren convincingly argues that these three themes have guided American policy in the Middle East since our nation's inception. Power: promoting—or diminishing—American presence or influence. Faith: Christian proselytizing and the restorationist desire to have the Jews return to the Holy Land in order to hasten the coming of the End of Days. Fantasy: the dream of the Middle East as the land of milk and honey, with untold resources and unimaginable, entrancing beauty. Oren, who received wide acclaim for *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, writes in the introduction that no prior book had

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attempted to comprehensively cover the entirety of America's history with the Middle East, that previous works have only focused on specific chapters of its history. Oren's book is thus an important addition to Middle East scholarship. Reading of our interconnected history with the region generates an enhanced understanding not just of the history but of current events as well.

Oren clarifies what precisely signifies the "Middle East." The term "Middle East" was coined in 1902 by Alfred Thayer Mahan, a noted naval theorist. He defined the area as "the neck of land which joins Africa and Asia," including "Asiatic Turkey, Persia, Egypt, the basin of the Mediterranean Eastern." Americans have long idealized the Middle East, and Oren discusses this romanticization at length, including examples of literature and cinema that exemplify the fantasy. Many Americans were captivated by the Middle East—the land of beautiful, blushing women, the mystery of ancient monuments, the lure of strange garments and fantastic animals. Or so they thought. Many

of those who actually traveled to the region were repulsed by the poverty of the people, the maltreatment of women, and the empty desert.

Although many travelers published negative accounts of their journeys once back home, this did not stop an ever increasing flow of visitors eager to explore the Holy Land and the surrounding areas. Even more important than the tourists were missionaries. Decades before Theodore Herzl published his *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*), the idea of a Jewish nation in Palestine had become popular among some Christians, especially Methodists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians. The return of the Jews to Palestine appealed to some because they thought it would usher in the End of Days, while others saw it as just that "God's own peculiar people shall again be brought...to rebuild and worship in their own temple." Even Abraham Lincoln lent his support: "Restoring the Jews to their national home in Palestine...is a noble dream and one shared by many Americans."

Regardless of their particular

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motivations, the impact of the missionaries resonates today in a highly significant way—they established schools that would later become the Middle East's first universities, including the American University of Cairo and the American University of Beirut. It was through these universities that the concepts of nationalism and self-determination would first begin to infiltrate the region. Oren notes, "Fifty years after North African pirates prodded Americans into forging a federated and distinct United States, American educators were prompting diverse Middle Eastern peoples to unite into a unique Arab nation." Oren ascribes a great deal of power to the missionaries, yet most of the stories he relates end in failure, with the missionaries returning home bankrupt and with their families destroyed. Had Oren described in more detail how the schools established by the missionaries caused nationalism to seep into the Middle East, and had he traced their history through to their impact on contemporary students, his case for the longevity of the missionaries'

influence might have been stronger.

The book oscillates between the political aspects of America's relationship with the Middle East and its religious and cultural facets. America has had troubles in the Middle East since its birth. As soon as the Revolutionary War ended and American vessels began sailing the high seas, brigands from the Barbary states of North Africa began assaults on U.S. shipping, capturing ships and sailors. The heads of these nations would then demand absurdly high ransoms or bribes to allow ships passage. In order to repulse such attacks, America built up its navy. The United States Navy thus partly owes its birth to the Tripolitan Wars. The debate over how to respond to the raids of the Barbary pirates held an important place in the discussions of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, which was called to rectify the Articles of Confederation. Many representatives at the conference understood the need for a strong, centralized government in order to bolster America's power and prestige. Another interesting tidbit Oren provides concerns America's

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national anthem, which was originally composed for the heroes of the Barbary Wars, and was only revised after the War of 1812. Such stories emphasize the influence of our early history on modern times.

The most fascinating pieces of the history Oren relates are the many similarities between the past and the present. Reminiscent of the meager military support the US has been able to drum up from other nations to help in Iraq, Thomas Jefferson attempted to put together a coalition with European powers to battle the Barbary states, but he was unable to do so and the US was forced to fight alone. While evangelical support for Israel today is not solely, or even predominantly, based on restorationist ideals, some modern Christian support does stem out of the hope that the End Times will arrive assuming the persistence of a Jewish state. Cries of “Down with the Occupation” have greeted not just presidents in office after the Six Day War of 1967 but also President Theodore Roosevelt, referring to the occupation of Egypt by Britain. George W. Bush is considered by some

to be the president who has provided the greatest support, militarily, politically, morally, for Israel. One of his forbearers, also George Bush, wrote a popular treatise in 1844 calling for the return of the Jews to Palestine and an end to their religious and political oppression.

Oren’s book is a delight to read, thanks to his judicious analysis and most especially to the amusing stories that are scattered throughout. The U.S. military for a time attempted to train a Camel Corps, importing seventy-nine camels from various Middle Eastern countries to Texas. In 1878, Ulysses S. Grant decided to take a tour through the Middle East. Treated royally throughout, he happened to run into Mary, the daughter of Robert E. Lee, in Egypt. “A spirited woman, she refused to dine with her father’s former nemesis...Instead, she climbed to the top of the Great Pyramid and waved the Confederate flag.” While such anecdotes perhaps do not add to the reader’s understanding of the region, they do make for enjoyable reading and provide some relief from the stories of violence and sadness that

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permeate any history of the Middle East.

The book accomplishes well what it sets out to do: it presents a complete history of America's dealings with the Middle East. Oren's analysis makes clear the connections between the past and the present, and rightly leaves one wondering how future governments will respond to recurring challenges in the region. The reciprocal influence of the Middle East and the United States will not diminish with time, but the relationship will change, always in a state of flux, dependent upon so many variables, some evident, some that will become evident as time goes on.

We all know how the story ends: "9/11: the day the fantasy died." How the United States went from the backseat of politicking in the Middle East to daily interaction with the region is complicated, but Oren parses the history well. It was really only after World War II that the United States began to take an active role in the region, due to American support

for Israel, concern for stability as Britain and France pulled out of their former colonies, and the need for an ever greater supply of oil.

Oren closes the book with the hope that "By responsibly wielding its strength and consistently upholding its principles, the United States might yet transform its vision of a peaceful, fruitful relationship with the Middle East from fantasy into reality." This seems a curiously upbeat conclusion considering the degree of bloodshed the area has seen in just the past decade, and perhaps Oren himself is succumbing to fantasy. The delicate balance that America has had to take in the Middle East throughout its history continues to be driven by the quest for power, the faith of individuals, and the fantasy of the region.

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