

# Dusting Off A Forgotten History

## Michael Oren

*Ari Wisch*

**M**ichael B. Oren is a Senior Fellow at the Shalem Center, specializing in the diplomatic and military history of the Middle East. He is the acclaimed author of *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* and *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present*. A graduate of Princeton and Columbia, Dr. Oren has taught at Harvard and Yale and received fellowships from the U.S. Departments of State and Defense and from the British and Canadian governments. He has also been a Lady Davis Fellow of Hebrew University and a Moshe Dayan Fellow at Tel Aviv University. He has testified before the U.S. Congress on Middle Eastern affairs and has briefed the White House.

**Kedma:** In writing *Power, Faith, and Fantasy*, what surprised you the most about what you learned about American relations with the Middle East?

**Oren:** A couple things. The impact of the Middle East on the making of the U.S. Constitution was a big shock to me and the degree to which the Middle East was instrumental in motivating the creation of the U.S. Navy. The impact of American faith on U.S.-Middle Eastern relations: the missionary movement, the achievements of the American missionary movement, the ramifications of their achievements for subsequent Middle Eastern history. For example, the creation of the American University of Beirut, which has become the gem of the Arab nationalist movement. I'm not saying there's a direct connection between

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Nasser and the American University of Beirut. Among the first graduates of the American University of Beirut are two Syrian Christians who went to Egypt and established the nationalist press. The fact that America played such an instrumental role in securing the independence of so many Middle Eastern states, the connection between missionaries and the Saudi family. Every day almost, there was some bit of information that made me sit up at my desk and say “Oh my God, who would have thought?”

**Kedma:** It seems that particularly now, with the Walt-Mearsheimer thesis, there’s an assumption which has gone relatively unchallenged in the diplomatic and scholarly community that the U.S.-Israel alliance is not within the American national interest. What are your thoughts on that?

**Oren:** On that? There are many thoughts. First, I believe it’s a deeply flawed and – I believe – anti-Semitic book. I think that it’s anti-Semitic insofar as that the flaws are so deep that they would not be committed by these two preeminent scholars unless they were driven to it by some type of hatred. There is no discussion of the many times where Israel’s influence on Congress failed, not the least of which is the consistent inability of Israel’s supporters in this country to get the United States to move to recognize Israel’s capital. There’s no discussion of the Arab lobby, of the oil lobby. There’s no attempt to interview any people who are involved in this. There’s no citation of diplomatic documents. I mean, it’s amazing that in a book on American foreign policy there’s no reference to documents of American diplomacy. And of course, there’s no discussion of the very great positive value of the American-Israel relationship, not just for Israel but the United States, which includes everything from far-reaching cooperation in intelligence sharing, the war against terror, developing advanced missile systems, to hosting the Sixth Fleet at port of call in Haifa, to training American servicemen in anti-terror, to economic cooperation; it’s quite vast. And then, finally, there’s no discussion of what the American people feel there should be in the relationship with Israel. According to Walt and Mearsheimer,

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it's as if foreign policy is made in some rarefied tower and American opinion has no bearing on that. We know from polls taken by the Gallup organization that upwards of 70% of all Americans favor very strong ties with Israel, so what is that about? Is that about the Israel lobby? No, it has to do with many factors, including the fact that Americans look at Israel as a democracy which shares America's ideas, and the fact that America is a very faithful country. Many people go to church here, they read their Old Testaments and they see that God promised this country to the Jews and they believe it.

**Kedma:** You mentioned that there is a lack of attention to diplomatic documents and declassified files. One of the strengths of your work is your use of archival materials. Why do you think that there's been relatively little attention to [the general history of] American foreign relations with the Middle East until your book? You list several works but...

**Oren:** There's no comprehensive book. There's a vast syllabus of books dealing with America's involvement in the Middle East, but there was no comprehensive book to tie it all together. And that's what I set out to do; a rather daunting task.

You would be surprised how many books about the Middle East which you would consider seminal books have yet to be written. There's no comprehensive history of the Sinai campaign during the 1956 War, there's no comprehensive history of the 1973 War, there is no comprehensive history of Israel's War of Independence. What I mean by comprehensive is a book that's based on Arabic sources, Hebrew sources, British, and American sources, really comprehensive. You have books like Benny Morris's books about the '48 War and it doesn't use Arabic sources, Avi Shlaim doesn't use Arabic sources.

**Kedma:** When you were writing *Six Days of War*, were you able to access Arabic sources in Egypt?

**Oren:** Yes. There were memoirs which were very important, but some of the

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most important sources I had in Arabic were documents that I bought on a black market. I was able to purchase some of the Syrian war records, the Jordanian war records, and some interesting protocols from Egypt. It's long and arduous to try to do this but the rewards are manifold.

**Kedma:** Are the archives open in these countries?

**Oren:** No. I'm now supposed to buy documents from the Jordanians on '48.

**Kedma:** Is '48 your next project?

**Oren:** I think '48 will be my next project, but it's a comprehensive history. It will be a four to five year project; the book will be 700-800 pages. It's in the funding stage now.

**Kedma:** What led you to choose it as your next project?

**Oren:** It's not just my next project but also probably my magnum opus. It's a seminal event, certainly in modern Jewish history; it's a seminal event in modern Middle Eastern history, and it's the least understood and most widely forgotten event. People don't understand how this conflict began and why it began, and it's very important to take readers back to it.

**Kedma:** How did your service as a soldier in the Israeli military help you understand warfare?

**Oren:** I think it helped me reach an understanding that warfare is almost understandable. It's incomprehensible, the fog of war – that war does not proceed according to nice graphs and timetables; much of it is chaos. It gave me a dedication to the simple soldier I often write about. In the Six Day War book, I wrote about simple soldiers' experiences, not just commanders.

**Kedma:** Has there been anything that you've learned since you wrote the book that you wish you could have put in there?

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**Oren:** Yes, I've learned more about some of America's arms sales to the Middle East in the nineteenth century. I've learned about different American missions in the Middle East, another American mission in the 1940s to explore the depth of oil reserves in the Middle East, which was interesting and I'd like to have put in. You're up all the time learning, all the time you've got something that makes you say, "*Damn*, how come I didn't know that a year ago?" It's a source of really endless fascination for me. Even though I dedicated three and a half years without almost a day off to this book, it remains a source of unending fascination for me.

**Kedma:** This year is the fortieth anniversary of the 1967 War. Tom Segev has a new book and there have been some articles in the popular media, such as *The Economist*, which have tried to "problematize" the war. What are your thoughts on these arguments?

**Oren:** The *Economist*, *The New York Times*, Tom Segev, have all averred that the Six Day War was in fact a loss for Israel because of the occupation and because of the settlements. I think those are shortsighted observations and basically they're wrong. Yes, Israel did inherit a problem of occupying Palestinians, the settlements, everything that comes with this, the Intifadas. On the other hand, we have peace treaties today with two of the three of our most avid enemies, and those peace treaties would have been impossible without the '67 victory. We would not have peace with Egypt and Jordan. We would not have a strategic alliance with the United States, which is a historic alliance, the strongest alliance the United States has ever had, but our alliance didn't exist in 1967. Israel fought the war with French arms, not with American arms. And most poignantly of all, what was the alternative to Israel's victory? That's what Tom Segev doesn't ask, what *The Economist* doesn't ask, *The New York Times* doesn't ask. What if Israel had lost the war? What would be a greater disaster for Israel? Nobody asks that question. I have a good sense that if Israel lost the war, we would be talking about Israel in the past tense, not the present.

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**Kedma:** What is your perspective on the politicization of Israel Studies and Middle Eastern Studies in general?

**Oren:** I think that it's a disaster. The field of Middle Eastern Studies in this country has been devastated by politics. It's interesting, because my own education spanned two eras. I started in the '70s as an avowed Zionist studying Arab history and Arabic language and never felt any political problems at all. Politics never entered the classroom. Never. It was considered deeply politically incorrect to introduce politics into the classrooms. Then in the late '70's, early '80s, something happened and the situation changed profoundly. What the change can be ascribed to is Edward Said's book *Orientalism*, which turned out to be the single most influential book in the American humanities for the last 30 years. It's a fascinating book, because historically, it's bunk. Basically, the thesis is that the study of the Middle East was used as a tool by imperialists to conquer the Middle East – and the greatest Orientalists, the greatest scholars of the Middle East, were Germans, Hungarians, and Americans who had never conquered a bit of the Middle East. So it's a completely indefensible thesis, it's demonstrably false. So how did this become such a huge book? It becomes a huge book because it resonates among a generation of American scholars who grew up in the 1960s, who were extremely critical of their own culture and very defensive and rather guilt-ridden about the developing world, and they embraced the book. They embraced the sequoia of self-doubt which the book planted in the innermost courtyard of academia, which basically turned the West's most laudatory quality, which is its inquisitiveness about other civilizations, into something sinister. So our very curiosity about other societies is a source of shame for us. And the only way you can cleanse yourself of that shame is by bending over backwards to take the side of the other – in this case, the Middle East. So the approach is that first of all, you can't have anything critical about Arab society, about Islamic society. The blame has to be placed on the shoulders of the West, of the United States, and Israel. And that becomes the criteria of successful scholarship. Today, there are no towering scholars of

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Middle Eastern studies. You can find many books on the Arab-Israeli conflict that either don't use Arabic or don't use Hebrew sources. How many books would you find on Chinese history that don't use Chinese, or Japanese history that don't use Japanese? You would be laughed out of the field. But in Middle Eastern studies what determines a work of scholarship is not simply what's in the book in terms of its research, but the political stance that it takes.

**Kedma:** Do you think that in the drive to get away from this notion of "Orientalism" people are taking a much less respectful and less authentic look at the Middle East by not considering Middle Eastern voices and Middle Eastern sources?

**Oren:** I think it's strange, and this is the harshest thing I can say. Books like Tom Segev's book are racist. They're not racist against Israel. They're inaccurate and disingenuous about Israel and harmful to Israel, but they're not racist. They're racist to the Arabs. They're racist to the Arabs because they do not accord the Arabs an independent personality and political dynamic. The Arabs exist in these books as sort of two-dimensional props for Israel's morality play. In Segev's books, for example, there's no huge demonstrations in the Arab world to throw the Jews into the sea, there's no inter-Arab rivalries, there's no propaganda radio. There's nothing, they don't exist. And what are you saying about the Arabs? They're not really human beings, they don't deserve to be fleshed out as human beings in history because they're just props. And I think it's just an egregious...it's inimically condescending, prejudicial.

**Kedma:** What would you recommend to students at Penn who are interested in learning more about the history of the Middle East?

**Oren:** Well, I'm sure you have good intro courses, that's one way to do it. There's no substitute for actually going to the region. If you have the ability to go spend a summer in Cairo, spend a summer in Cairo...it'll be the hottest summer you've ever spent. Spend a year in Israel. If you haven't been to Israel,

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get on Birthright and come to Israel. But whatever you do, whatever books you read, including my book, question. Be inquisitive, take nothing at face value. We're dealing with a highly dynamic, controversial subject, and no one has the last word. I'm always challenging my own assumptions. I'm always learning things anew.

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