

Review

Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present* New York, W.W. Norton, 2007, 672 pp

AFTER DEVOTING HIMSELF TO A penetrating analysis of the events during the narrow period of the Six-Day War, Shalem Center historian Michael Oren takes on the daunting task of describing the entire history of U.S. Middle East policy, which he dates back to before American independence. As in his earlier work, Oren has done a masterful job of surveying available documents and writing with a narrative flare that briefly put the 672-page tome on the bestseller list.

Given that so much of the media's attention, and substantive U.S. Middle East policy, is focused on Israel, it may be surprising to find that fewer than 100 pages of *Power, Faith, and Fantasy* discuss Israel, Palestine, or the conflict in any detail. Oren states that this was intentional because so much has already been written and relatively few historical documents are available for the modern period.

Oren's major contribution is in describing little known or unknown episodes in America's early connection with a region that was founded in large measure on fantasy and faith. Americans developed over the years a mythological and stereotypical image of the Arab world, shaped by images books and, later, movies such as *The Arabian Nights* and *Lawrence of Arabia*. The latter refers especially to Christian missionaries who unsuccessfully exported their faith and in many cases wound up as the interpreters and defenders of Islam and its adherents.

In the revolutionary era, Oren notes that the Middle East played a disproportionate role in Founding Fathers' decisions. He argues that concerns about pirates played an important role in the drafting of the U.S. Constitution. He seems to equate the Federalist Papers with an obscure work of fiction, *The Algerian Spy* in which Rhode Island is to be a base for Algerian operations, which influenced the constitutional debate and the decision to establish an American navy.

A little understood aspect of contemporary U.S. policy is the antipathy most Americans feel toward the people of the Middle East. Polls consistently show that Americans sympathize three to four times as much with Israel as with the Palestinians, for example, and I have argued that one reason U.S.–Israel relations are strong and will remain so is that Americans generally do not like Arabs or Muslims. Oren reveals that this hostility dates back to the 17th century, but never connects the animus of Christians toward Islam to the modern period.

Christian Americans took an interest in Hebrew long before most Jews did. Hebrew logos appear on the emblems of schools such as Yale, Dartmouth, and Columbia and the language was mandatory at colleges such as Princeton, where Oren James Madison majored in the subject. Ironically, a colleague told me that when working on his doctorate at Johns Hopkins twenty years ago, he was told that he could not study Hebrew to satisfy his language requirement.

As others before him, Oren documents the long history of American interest in restoring the Jews to Israel since the early 19th century, which in part was attributed to the Christian desire to facilitate the Second Coming. In making the case that prominent Americans, such as presidents, made sympathetic statements about the idea of Jews returning to their homeland, he overlooks their broader agenda.

Coincidentally, I was sitting next to Oren in the press center outside Gaza during the disengagement when he was editing the book and noticed he was using a well-known quotation by John Adams, the first American head of state to make a pro-Zionist declaration, “I really wish the Jews again in Judea an independent nation,” Adams wrote to Mordecai Manuel Noah in 1819 (after he had left office). I pointed out to Oren that this was misleading because, like others before him, he only cited part of the quotation and should read the rest. If he took my advice, he still chose to omit that Adams added in the letter to Noah that his real interest in the Jews’ return was more consistent with Christian theology and Jewish ideology. “I believe [that] . . . once restored to an independent government and no longer persecuted,” Adams continued, “they [the Jews] would soon wear away some of the asperities and peculiarities of their character & possibly in time become liberal Unitarian Christians for your Jehovah is our Jehovah & your God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob is our God.”

An interesting aspect of American history is the slow evolution in Zionist thinking that occurred between the First Zionist Congress, which was attended by only four North Americans, and the end of World War II. Emma Lazarus, the poet famous for the words she penned that are on

the Statue of Liberty, was apparently an active Zionist who faced resistance from Jews who feared charges of dual loyalty. Though the commitment to Israel is now embedded in American Jewish life, the Jewish community successful and the pro-Israel lobby influential, these fears of dual loyalty still linger as shown by the response to the Walt/Mearsheimer article and book and the Pollard case.

I would have liked Oren to expound on the 1830 agreement between the Ottoman Empire and the United States. This agreement was accompanied by what apparently was the first U.S. arms sale to the region and illustrates that from the earliest days of U.S. efforts to influence the region, arms were viewed as a carrot, an idea that remains central to State Department thinking today as illustrated by the multi-billion dollar arms deal proposed in 2007 for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.

In addition to arms sales, the U.S. has an even longer record of military intervention in the region. Contrary to the view that all U.S. military activity in the region is predicated on securing oil supplies, American troops first began fighting more than a century before oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia. They fought in North Africa in the Barbary Wars, were deployed during the British invasion of Egypt, and after the kidnapping of an American in Tangiers.

The U.S. government also showed an interest in the security of Jews in the region from these early days. Oren notes that the first U.S. Ambassador to the region, David Porter, protested to the Sultan in 1840 over the Damascus blood libel, setting a precedent for extending U.S. protection to Middle Eastern Jews. Porter, he says, also introduced arms and U.S. technology to the region and helped solidify the U.S. image as a regional power on a par with Europe. This is an overstatement as he demonstrates later, because the U.S. did not act aggressively in the region for another century, seeing it more as within the sphere of influence of the British and French.

Oren focuses much attention on the role of missionaries, the principal exponents of the faith part of the title, but concludes that while they were successful in opening schools, they were never successful in converting Muslims. He never explains why or how the opposite seemed to occur—that Americans returning from the Middle East became the Arabists who interpreted the region and tried to convince American decision-makers to slavishly devote themselves to the well-being of Muslim potentates. In 1882, for example, Oren notes that after the British assault on Egypt, Elbert Eli Farman, the U.S. consul at Alexandria became one of a “growing number of American diplomats who sympathized with native nationalism and abhorred European imperialism. He also subscribed to the romantic

image of the liberty-loving Arab.” This experience, which could have been elucidated upon further, is crucial to understanding the Arabist mind set and the State Department’s tendency toward clientitis.

Curiously, Oren found that when the State Department created its Department of Near Eastern Affairs, none of the staff spoke a Middle Eastern language. He also documents the history of ignorance and lack of foresight in the region typified by the State Department’s disinterest in Saudi Arabia at the time of the conquest of the Arabian Peninsula by Ibn Saud.

He devotes much space to Turkey and the Armenian genocide. This is particularly timely given the uproar over Anti-Defamation League Director Abraham Foxman’s initial refusal to label the atrocities a genocide and the subsequent turnaround. The ADL, like Israel, finds itself in the difficult position of not wishing to ignore the mass killings that preceded the Holocaust while not offending Turkey, Israel’s closest ally in the Muslim world. At the time of the killings, the U.S. was also silent, fearing alienating an ally and risking its economic interests. Oren argues that America was unwilling to stop the genocide or to attack Turkey in World War I, because it would put missionaries at risk. The failure to go to war was a major reason the U.S. would have little influence in the region afterward.

In a brief discussion of the Palestine issue, Oren writes there was near universal opposition to the Balfour Declaration, yet Wilson endorsed it. As in other parts of the book, he ably reports the historical events, but does not adequately explain them. It is not clear why Wilson promised Louis Brandeis he would be sympathetic. He never explains Wilson’s postwar policies. He notes that the press reports of Turkish atrocities hardened the public’s animosity toward Islam and Turkey, but that the missionaries and others were enamored with Arab nationalism and were hostile toward Zionism. Wilson made the “curious” decision to send Henry Churchill King and Charles Crane to investigate the postwar situation, knowing that Crane was an anti-Semite and that King was hostile to European and Zionist objectives. Oren suggests Wilson was now influenced by the missionaries, but does not indicate why the arguments of these non-politicians suddenly took precedence over political considerations.

Paradoxically, Oren’s observations become more questionable as he enters the modern period. For example, he writes that Roosevelt was impervious to Zionist pressure because he could count on the fact that American Jews were traditionally liberal and democratic. This is incorrect. In the early 20th century, Jews’ loyalties were split and the Republican candidates in 1916 and 1920 received the highest percentages of the Jewish vote of the

20th century, 45 and 43% (compared to 39% for Reagan). In the 1920 election, the Democratic candidate received only 19% of the Jewish vote while the Socialist received 38%. It was the New Deal—sometimes pejoratively described by its opponents as the “Jew Deal” because of the number of Jews in FDR’s administration that converted Jews to what has become overwhelming support for the Democratic Party.

When Oren finally discusses the issues surrounding partition (nearly 500 pages in), he has little to add to the well-worn history of the Truman administration. The analysis is also weak and faulty. He argues, for example, that politics drove Truman’s decision-making while noting the British Foreign Office in the 1930s argued Jews had no influence. He correctly observes that Truman received conflicting advice from his advisors, with influential cabinet members such as his secretaries of defense and state, James Forrestal and George Marshal, opposing a Jewish state, and his political advisors such as Clark Clifford lobbying for partition and recognition of the new state, but does not adequately explain how Truman chose from these competing arguments. For example, Marshal, his most influential foreign policy advisor, adamantly opposed his policies on Palestine, but Truman ignored him on almost every decision related to Palestine.

Oren writes that Zionist pressure alienated Truman and contributed to his decision to embargo arms to the Jews, but this is far-fetched. Truman naively hoped to avoid bloodshed and did not want U.S. weapons to be used in any bloodletting. The embargo was imposed on both Jews and Arabs (though its practical impact was far greater on the Jews) and motivated more by the Defense and State Departments’ desires to undermine partition than presidential pique.

Politics certainly played a role in Truman’s thinking and the Zionists drove him crazy, but he ultimately believed in their cause as I have argued that he decided among the competing views of his advisors based more on ideology than politics (*The Water’s Edge and Beyond*, New Brunswick, 1991).

The book is full of historical footnotes and curiosities, which is its strength and its weakness. Many are fascinating such as the story of Mark Twain meeting Theodor Herzl, but frequently they are tangential or unrelated to American policy. The book could have been significantly shorter if many unnecessary details had been edited out. The prologue, for example, offers a long story about the first American to explore the Middle East that contains lots of interesting but mostly irrelevant details. He attributes “enormous” impact to John Ledyard’s exploration of Egypt because it was the first meticulous report of a land previously only known to Americans

from the Bible, but the evidence he presents does not show this influenced U.S. policy toward the region.

Oren attaches significance to often minor characters (e.g., Patrick Hurley, who was sent by Franklin Roosevelt to study nationalist movements in the Middle East in 1943 and wrote a report that was ignored) or incidents that make for diverting vignettes that had no real impact on U.S. policies and actions, which do not necessarily reflect the broader themes he wishes to elucidate. The details show the depth of research involved in the work and give characters life, such as his description of a missionary becoming ill with dysentery. Oren also tends to engage in Bob Woodward-like recreations of events that seem either invented or embellished for dramatic effect, as when he writes “under the punishing Sudanese sun, an Egyptian officer paused to drink from the Nile. . . . Kneeling, he cupped his hands beneath the water and raised them to his encrusted lips. . . .”

The last 100 pages could have been omitted. Oren introduces the last section of the book on the last six decades by saying much has already been written and there is limited documentation to add original research. He then proceeds to prove the point by doing little more than superficially highlighting selected events of the period.

Oren has produced an impressive survey of America’s long history of the Middle East and illustrated how fantasy, faith, and power have been important features in the interaction between Americans and the peoples of the region. It is well-written and researched and while it is analytically weak, the book offers a response to the Walt/Mearsheimer school of thought by showing the influence of the Arab lobby, dispelling the myth that the pro-Israel lobby is the root of all U.S. Middle East policy evils, and documenting that the U.S. engagement with the region began long before there was an Israel or Israeli lobby, and before oil and the Arab-Israeli conflict became the obsession of policymakers.

