



BOOK REVIEWS

Looking Back to Look Forward

Asaf Romirowsky

MICHAEL OREN, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 672 pp.

The enormity of September 11th, the massive scale of destruction and loss brought about by calculated suicide hijacking and a desire to kill for the sake of killing, forced America to open its eyes and take a closer look at the Middle East. More than any other single event over the past few decades, 9/11 has been responsible for generating questions about the nature of U.S. involvement in the region.

That involvement is anything but new. Michael Oren's latest book, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present*, delves into America's relation-

ship with the Middle East since the American Founding. In the process, it systematically and effectively demolishes the myth that U.S. involvement in the Middle East is a modern phenomenon. Instead, as Oren illustrates, the entanglements of the Middle East stretch as far back as the Barbary Wars of the early Republic.

From then through the current quandary in Iraq, Oren argues, three themes have dominated every American encounter with the Middle East. The first is "power," defined by Oren as military force and economic influence. The second is "faith," and the clash between a deeply Protestant Republic and the Muslim Middle East. The last is "fantasy": the misperceptions and deceptions about the region that have inspired so many Americans, from businessmen to presidents.



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Some may be skeptical of this triumvirate. But those that are face the daunting task of finding another unifying theory for America's involvement in the region. After all, the U.S. consistently has provided the Middle East with advanced technology, democracy or mediation for peace, and supported a Jewish state as something that is both desirable and sustainable.

There are some foreign policy minimalists who would like to believe that hatred towards America, as well as American involvement in the Middle East, began when George W. Bush came to office, and that it will depart with him. Nothing could be further from the truth. Thanks to Oren's research, we learn that the notion of American support for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine was already being discussed in 1844, put forth in a best-selling book entitled *Visions of the Valley* that called for the United States to spearhead an international effort to establish a modern Judean state. The book was authored by one Professor George Bush, a direct ancestor of two later American presidents bearing the same name. This sentiment was also reiterated by Abraham Lincoln, who in his day said that "restoring the Jews to their national home in Palestine... is a noble dream and one shared by many Americans." Thus, support for a Jewish homeland represents one of the basic—and most enduring—elements of America's engagement with the region.

Others highlight the 1920s, when the American people became enamored with oil and demanded equal access to this precious commodity in the Middle East, then controlled by the French and British. Consequently, the U.S. government obtained a 23.75 percent share in

the Iraq Petroleum Company, marking a turning point for American business in the region. Some eight decades later, U.S. involvement in the Middle East has come to revolve ever more closely around this most precious of commodities.

Over the years, the fantasy notion of the Middle East as the romantic culture of veils and flying carpets became so ingrained in American pop culture, fashioned by stories like *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights* and Hollywood blockbusters such as "Indiana Jones" and "Hidalgo." But, as Oren explains, this fascination is hardly new. It has been over a century since the Middle East made Mark Twain famous when his collected dispatches from the Holy Land, *The Innocents Abroad*, became the biggest bestseller in America in the late 1800s. "It sold more books than the Bible," Twain characteristically quipped.

The United States emerged as a force to be reckoned with in the Middle East during the early twentieth century. But, says Oren, the three lenses—power, faith and fantasy—continued to apply. According to him, Woodrow Wilson's ambivalent reply to Arab and Zionist calls for self-determination after World War I, Harry Truman's rapid recognition of Israel three decades later, and every American reaction to a predicament in the Middle East, from Suez in 1956, the 1967 Six-Day War to the Islamic mayhem in Iran in 1979, were all viewed through one of these prisms.

This history matters a great deal. In order for America to become a better and more effective actor in the Middle East, it needs to understand how the region has played a definitive role in shaping American identity. The creation of the U.S. Constitution,

the making of the U.S. Navy, and the composition of the Star Spangled Banner all bear the indelible mark of America's encounter with the Middle East. And today, in the era of global terrorism and America's response to it, our ties to the region will only continue to increase. As such, Oren's is an indispensable work, one that brings vital historical understanding to how Washington interacts with that most turbulent of regions—and provides insight into how to establish a more stable and durable U.S.-Middle East relationship.



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