

PolicyWatch #1216 : Special Forum Report

The History of U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Featuring Michael Oren
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On March 9, 2007, Michael Oren addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. A historian and senior fellow at the Shalem Center in Jerusalem, Dr. Oren authored the recent bestseller [Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present](#). The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

The United States was born as a naval trading nation, and, two centuries before the oil boom, 20 percent of this trade was with the Middle East. The early American presence in the region was mainly in North Africa, where trading ships sailed to export American goods and to import carpets, nuts, and figs; along with these came fashion and even some architectural ideas. The trade routes to North Africa were also the hunting ground of Barbary corsairs, and European nations paid these pirates to protect their traders from attack. Some U.S. officials, such as Thomas Jefferson, opposed this sort of bribery and insisted that the United States build a naval force to protect its interest in maritime freedom. Meanwhile, John Adams spoke for those who preferred payoffs to building a navy. In the end, the former view prevailed -- and one of the arguments for the new U.S. Constitution was that a stronger federal government was needed to raise funds for just such a naval force.

From that early period until today, the American presence in the Middle East has revolved around three themes: faith, fantasy, and power. Power -- whether military, diplomatic, or economic -- is the pursuit of tangible American interests in the Middle East. This pursuit began right at the creation of the United States, and the complications associated with such an enterprise became apparent almost immediately. The first American hostage crisis occurred as early as 1787, when more than a hundred sailors were held captive by Algerian pirates. Meanwhile, nearby Morocco was the first foreign country to recognize U.S. independence in 1777, and one of the first treaties made by the new U.S. government was with the Bey of Morocco. Finding the right balance between friendly and adversarial power relations with Middle East players has challenged American leaders ever since.

The second theme, faith, emerged from the colonial legacy established by Puritans and other Christians seeking refuge from religious persecution. These Christians nevertheless wanted to impart their own faith to an unbelieving world. Generations later, the new United States viewed itself as a nation created not for its own benefit alone, but for the benefit of all humanity. Hence the notion of the "city on a hill" -- a shining example of freedom, morality, and human rights for all the world to see. The founding fathers agreed on this principle, looking back to the Old Testament and finding a God who spoke directly to his people, in their own language, promising to rescue them from exile and restore them to the Holy Land. Quite a few religious American settlers appropriated those promises and considered themselves the "new Jews." Some also believed that the return of the Jewish people to Palestine would make the country "bloom like a rose." For example, John Adams once wrote that he wished 100,000 Jewish soldiers would march to Palestine and reclaim it as a Judean kingdom. Similar sentiments found elaborate expression in the bestselling mid-1800s book *Valley of the Vision* by George Bush -- ancestor of the two modern-day presidents.

The theme of fantasy became apparent in the illusory and mystical images of the Middle East engraved in the minds of many Americans, who saw it as a realm of unrivaled romance and exoticism. This is the imagined

Middle East of the black-clad nomad with his flowing robe, galloping out of the desert on a white steed, picking up some innocent woman and taking her to his tent. It is the mythical image of the *Thousand and One Nights*, of Scheherazade and flying carpets and gleaming minarets. From the very early days of the republic, well-known Americans traveled to the region in search of this chimera.

For example, John Ledger, a close friend of Thomas Jefferson, gave a glimpse in his memoirs of how the Middle East looked to Americans. Although he was disoriented by locals talking in strange tongues and astounded by their bizarre ways of dressing, he found one group of "natives" -- the Bedouin -- to be very admirable. To him, they seemed to love liberty as much as Americans did, given their hatred toward the oppressive hand of the Ottoman Empire. He even suggested that if a rising power like the United States helped free the Bedouins from imperial rule, they would become a democratic people.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, thousands of Americans tourists were traveling to the Middle East. Herman Melville was greatly disappointed -- as he expounded at length in voluminous diaries -- by the region's reality compared to its imaginary allure. Mark Twain had a similar reaction, with almost nothing good to say about either the Middle East or the Americans he encountered there. Faith met fantasy -- and came up short -- in Twain's travel notes from the region, published under the title *Innocents Abroad*. The book recounts the tales of "restorationists" who went to Palestine as early as 1818 in order to teach local Jews how to farm. Such missionaries also founded colonies in the hope of re-creating a Jewish state. But Twain found them all perilously close to ruin.

In the twentieth century, U.S. policy toward the Middle East often involved the intersection of faith (whether in a democratic or religious mission) and power politics, with mixed results. During World War I, Theodore Roosevelt insisted that the United States would be disregarding its ideals of democracy and human rights if it did not declare war on the Ottoman Empire as it had done with the other two Central Powers. President Woodrow Wilson's refusal to do so was a fateful decision. When the guns fell silent, more than one million troops from Britain and France were stationed in the Middle East -- but not one American soldier. As a result, the United States had no role in the new Middle East controlled by the French and the British.

At the same time, Wilson hinted to one confidant that he relied partly on his Christian faith in endorsing Britain's November 1917 Balfour Declaration -- which for the first time put a major power on record in official support of the Zionist project of establishing a "Jewish National Home" in Palestine. Similarly, faith in democracy helped move the United States to support the liberation of the Middle East from British and French colonialism following World War II.

Faith once again trumped power in 1948, when Harry Truman -- privately comparing himself to Cyrus, the Persian emperor who permitted the Jews to return to Judea from Babylonian exile -- took pride in helping to re-create a Jewish nation by making the United States the first country to recognize the state of Israel. He did so, however, only for these reasons, rather than in response to the entreaties (which he resented) of both Jewish lobbyists and his one lifelong Jewish friend. This illustrates how modern-day U.S. support for Israel is part of a long history of popular, partly faith-based sympathy for Jewish restoration to the Holy Land -- and of support for the spread of democracy in that region. This history is almost as long as that of the United States itself.

Today, many Middle Easterners are unaware of this history, not realizing that the United States has long enjoyed multifaceted and mutually beneficial relations in the region. Although its policies, perceptions, and motives have sometimes been a bit muddled, the United States has done vastly more good than harm in the Middle East over the course of more than two centuries, in unexpected ways that often foreshadowed some of this century's most complex challenges.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by David Pollock.

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