

# Misreading America's past in the Mideast

## Author's analyses mar his sweeping history

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*Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present* By Michael B. Oren

Norton, 778 pages, \$35

There is an important Chicago connection to the history of U.S.-Middle East relations that may be unfamiliar to many readers of the Tribune. Understanding this connection goes a long way in shattering a common myth about the Middle East as well as suggesting how the sagging reputation of the U.S. in this region--where for the first time the president of the United States is less popular than the prime minister of Israel--can perhaps one day be resuscitated.

At the end of World War I, the victorious Allies gathered in Paris to divide the spoils. Among the areas in dispute was the Middle East, in particular the Arab provinces of the defeated Ottoman Empire. The British and French had struck a secret deal in 1916 to carve up the region, but opposing their designs stood President Woodrow Wilson. He arrived in Paris and openly challenged British and French intrigue while expressing sympathy for the peoples of the region and their desire for dignity and national self-determination.

Wilson, an idealist in the age of imperialism, advanced a radical and controversial idea: The political future of the Middle East must be tied to the aspirations of its inhabitants. In pursuit of this goal he set up a commission of inquiry, later known as the King-Crane Commission, after Henry Churchill King, president of Oberlin College, and Charles Richard Crane, a wealthy Chicago businessman, philanthropist and future U.S. ambassador.

After traveling to the Middle East and canvassing public opinion, they issued a report that remains as relevant today as it was then. Two critical findings of this study were: (1) There existed strong opposition to the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine (where the population was 90 percent Arab) and only "force of arms" could achieve this goal, and (2) at the time, the U.S. was held in high esteem and was genuinely popular among Arabs and Muslims.

The King-Crane Commission revealed that if the people of the Middle East had to choose a global power to act as a trustee during a limited period of transition to self-rule, they would prefer the U.S. to rule over them. (What a difference 88 years can make). Admiration for America at this time was understandable. It flowed in part from the absence of U.S. colonial involvement in the region, but also from the first-class hospitals and educational institutions American missionaries had established there, and Wilson's support for self-determination, which resonated among the national elites in the Middle East.

In his new book, "Power, Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present," Michael Oren, to his credit, discusses the King-Crane Commission, but he does so in a decidedly partisan way, and this speaks to the value of this book and to its fundamental weakness.

Michael Oren is an American-educated Israeli writer and author of "Six Days of War," a widely cited book on the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. In this new volume he broadens his scope and attempts to write a comprehensive history of U.S.-Middle East relations that captures the full array of American engagement with the region--military, economic, political, cultural and philanthropic--from 1776 until today. Oren is seeking to fill a long-standing gap in the literature on U.S. engagement with the Middle East, where most studies have focused on the post-World War II period when America emerged as a global superpower. By contrast, Oren devotes almost three-quarters of his 600 pages of text to the period before 1945.

The themes of power, faith and fantasy link his narrative. Power refers to the projection of American military, economic and diplomatic muscle to protect U.S. interests in the region; faith speaks to the long-standing American missionary involvement in the Middle East; and the theme of fantasy refers to the romantic fascination of what the author calls the "ethereal montage of minarets and pyramids, oases, camels, and dunes" that has captured the American imagination.

Most readers will be surprised to learn of the depth and breadth of America's ties to the Middle East. By the mid-19th Century, Oren reveals, "the United States was second only to Britain in the number of its citizens visiting Egypt . . . and in Syria it was unsurpassed." We also learn about the difficult fate of American Protestant missionaries who traveled to the Arab world and the hardships they endured. The author tells the story of Samuel Marinus Zwemer, a 23-year-old evangelist from Michigan, a "hefty six-footer with blond hair and chiseled Nordic looks" who in 1890 may have been the first U.S. citizen to set foot in what is today Iraq.

The archival work of this book is impressive, and one is awed by the range of sources consulted and the information unearthed. But where the author stumbles is in trying to read into history lessons that can illuminate our current problems with the Middle East. This is best exemplified in Oren's treatment of the Barbary Wars.

The term refers to a 33-year-period of tension between the early American republic and

the corsair states on North Africa's Barbary Coast. American merchant ships were regularly attacked by Barbary pirates during this period, hostages were taken, and two brief wars were fought in the Mediterranean, in 1801 and 1815. Oren tries to suggest that these events were defining moments, not only in the history of U.S.-Middle East relations but for the internal cohesion and emerging national identity of America as well. He comes close to claiming that the Barbary pirates were forerunners of Al Qaeda and were driven by the same jihadi ideology. The implication is that we have been in civilizational conflict with Islam since the early days of the U.S. Oren takes this argument a step further and explicitly states his "objective is to enable Americans to read about the fighting in Iraq and hear the echoes of the Barbary Wars."

A more plausible interpretation is that the Barbary pirates were motivated by the same profit motive that drove American privateers and slave owners in the early 19th Century. The primary purpose was economic gain, enslaving and trafficking innocent human cargo simply to get rich. Those who pursued this type of activity--in both cases--would surely have invoked sacred scripture (the Bible or the Koran) as a way of giving moral sanction to their behavior. This does not mean, however, that they were primarily motivated by religious zeal rather than by the likely prospect of material gain.

The author also overstates the significance of the Barbary Wars in terms of the alleged threat they posed to the U.S. As Frank Lambert has written in his magisterial book on the topic, "The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World," the conflict with North African pirates was more a "sideshow" than the threat to "America's survival" painted by Oren. The real threat at that time came from European naval powers: the U.S. fought a quasi-war with France (1797-1800) and then against the British in the War of 1812. In Thomas Jefferson's words, the Barbary pirates were more a "petty" nuisance than anything else. Oren's clash-of-civilizations approach to the history of U.S.-Middle East relations, however, is the enduring leitmotif of his book.

The author's favorite quote is an observation by George B. McClellan, the famous Civil War general who traveled to Egypt in 1874. McClellan's observation, which Oren believes captures an enduring truth about the Middle East, is that the West could never understand Muslims " `so long as we ... judge them by the rules we are accustomed to apply to ourselves.' " This is a way of saying that Muslims and Americans are essentially different people, with separate values and little in common. In the Middle East, Oren suggests, paraphrasing the first American consul to Tunis, "power alone was respected and . . . in order to gain peace, the United States had no alternative but to wield it." While this may be music to the ears of neoconservatives, recent statistics suggest a different interpretation of our conflict with the Middle East.

A recent Gallup World Poll of Muslims in 10 countries stated that what they admired most about America, after its technological and scientific advancement, was its value system, specifically the values of hard work, liberty, basic freedoms, democracy and, yes, even gender equality. When asked what could be done to improve Islam-West relations, the most frequent replies were "demonstrate more understanding and respect for Islam," help with "economic development/jobs" and, critically, "stop interfering in our affairs."

The 1919 King-Crane Commission Report prefigured these findings, and Oren is to be commended for including a discussion of this oft-forgotten document, albeit from a partisan perspective.

In the end, "Power, Faith, and Fantasy" is a work whose primary value lies in chronicling the stories of American tourists, missionaries and soldiers who traveled to the Middle East for adventure, God and glory. With his readable prose, Oren adds to our awareness of the complex relations Americans have had with this region and the roots of interactions that go back to the beginnings of the American republic. The scholarly merit of this book is undermined, however, in part by the ideological biases of its author and by several factual errors that mar this otherwise engaging tome.

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