

Power, Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present

Michael B. Oren

A review essay by Ric Smith

If you have ever wondered how and why the United States became so entangled in the Middle East, and why it is that issues so geographically distant from American shores have come to have such an influence on US strategic and foreign policy, then you will surely welcome Michael Oren's *Power, Faith and Fantasy*. And if you have assumed, as Oren says many Americans do, that its been all about the Arab-Israeli conflict and access to oil, and a post World War II phenomena, then this scholarly work will reshape your thinking.

As its subtitle indicates, *Power, Faith and Fantasy* traces the United States' involvement in the Middle East from 1776 to the present. While reminding us that the term "Middle East" was not used until 1902 (and first by that pre-eminent American naval strategist, Admiral Mahan), Oren defines the region as ranging from Morocco to Turkey and Iran. He quickly makes clear that, differences among these countries notwithstanding, from an American point of view the synergies across this broad sweep of geography have always been significant.

From almost the moment when the United States won its independence American merchant ships forfeited the protection of the British navy from attacks by Barbary pirates in the Mediterranean. Oren contends that when delegates met in Philadelphia to draft the US constitution, they were spurred on by the need to confront North Africa. And he notes that when, in 1794, Congress finally voted to create a navy, it was to be one that was "adequate for the protection of the commerce of the United States against Algerian corsairs". Thus the Mediterranean squadron was the new navy's first formation and, now as the Sixth Fleet, is presumably its longest serving.

From there the narrative runs through two centuries in which, it seems, no American President was spared a Middle East crisis of one kind or another. Some sought to be active in the region, others sought to avoid it but had activism forced upon them; few benefited from the experience politically, and several were diminished by it (including in our own times Carter and Bush the younger).

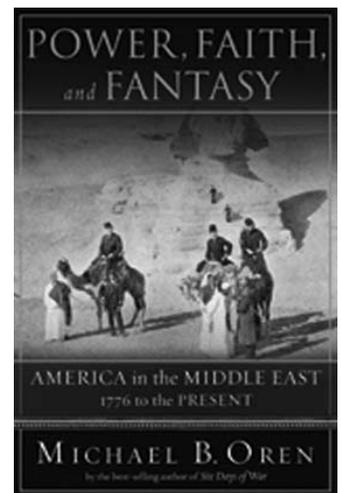
It is to explain this costly fixation that Oren offers the headings 'power', 'faith' and 'fantasy'. The emphasis within the mix varies over time, but the three elements are ever present over the 230 years of his narrative. It was of course with the absence of power – to combat the pirates and their sponsoring kingdoms – that the story began. But the early lessons about the need for a judicious mix of military, diplomatic and financial power were well learned. If power was first used to protect, rescue and evacuate American citizens, it was soon deployed to advance American

commercial interests, and in time of course it came to be used to support the United States' grand global strategies and, eventually, to try to reshape the Middle East in ways friendlier to America.

As to faith, as early as 1819 Protestant missionaries sailed for Palestine with a mix of motives that ranged over time from saving Moslem souls to reasserting a Christian presence in the Holy Land and even to 'restorationism', a project which predated Zionism in aiming to 'promote Jewish colonisation in Palestine'. While remarkably few Moslems were ever converted, the faith imperative nevertheless had a positive legacy in the many American educational institutions that the missionaries established across the Middle East. As late as 1937, Oren tells us, the United States was spending more on education in the Middle East than on drilling or searching for oil. These endeavours in turn supported the grander project of enlightening and democratising the region – a project that endures to this day, with sadly little product.

Under his fantasy rubric, Oren offers a fascinating account of how Americans have for so long been beguiled by romantic notions of the Middle East – tales about the mystical Orient, Arabian nights, the seductive seven veils, Aladdin and his lamps, the colourful *casbahs* and spicy *souks* have persisted in American literature and public perceptions across all but the most recent generations. Travelling writers – Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Lew Wallace (who served as ambassador to Turkey) and Lowell Thomas among them – songsters (*Stranger in Paradise*), exhibitionists and circus performers (*Little Egypt*) all played their parts in developing and sustaining the myths. And of course since the 1930s Hollywood has run a sub-industry in Middle Eastern movies – images of Valentino, Casablanca, Lawrence, and the Biblical blockbusters have been imbued in America's pop culture.

Whether they derive from power, faith or fantasy, it is worth noting here some of the enduring legacies of the American involvement in the Middle East – like the expressions 'manifest destiny' and 'my country right or wrong'. The Statue of Liberty, carved in the likeness of an Egyptian woman, was intended originally to stand at the entrance to the Suez Canal to signify *Egypt Bringing Light*



to Asia, but was brought to New York instead when its Egyptian sponsor was bankrupted. The US Army's Camel Corps, inspired in the Middle East, was shorter-lived, though the American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem has endured, for which many Australians, ADF personnel among them, have had reason to be grateful.

Oren's three explanatory themes apart, several others run through the book. One is what I might call the 'consular theme'. It was, as we have noted, the need to protect Americans abroad that drove much of the early US government involvement in the region, and Oren chronicles just how often over the succeeding two centuries United States power, and especially its military forces, are called on to rescue or evacuate its citizens, albeit often from situations of their own making.

Oren's account reminds us that America's history in the Middle East is replete with incidents of its citizens being seized as hostages or kidnapped. As early as the late 18th Century policy makers were anguishing about whether to pay ransoms: sometimes they did, including with arms that were later used against Americans, sometimes they did not, lives were lost and the Administration duly condemned; sometimes rescues were attempted, though most failed; and often there were demands from an indignant Congress or public for retribution, which was indeed meted out on occasions. The debates on these issues then were not remarkably different from those of today.

If some of the issues of this kind that Oren recounts from the 18th and 19th centuries are redolent of 20th Century experience, so too is the public rhetoric about them in America. The condemnation of North African pirates and their sponsors as 'inhuman' and 'barbaric', and the relating of these characteristics to their Moslem religious beliefs, is almost at one with some of the rhetoric of recent years.

Among the strategic-level themes that weave their way through *Power, Faith and Fantasy* is the continuing Middle Eastern rivalry between the United States and various European powers. For much of the time it is matter of European mercantilism, imperialism and pragmatism being in tension with American idealism, anti-colonialism and support for nationalist movements. We are reminded in this context that, because President Wilson refused to declare war against Turkey in 1917, the United States was excluded from the cynical Anglo-French carve up of the Ottoman Empire that followed the war. Roosevelt took the lesson. In July 1945, he flew directly from Yalta to a meeting with King Saud aboard the *USS Quincy* in the Great Bitter Lake, having told Stalin and (a disquieted) Churchill of his intention only at the last minute. And as late as the early 1950s, Nasser was seen as a friend of Washington, if not its creature, reflecting the different Middle East agendas of the United States on the one hand and the UK and France on the other which culminated in their disastrous split in 1956. Of subsequent trans-Atlantic differences, suffice here to say that they have persisted.

We note also through Oren's account the shifting emphases of American interest. The pursuit of enlightenment which marked the post World War I period and the support

for anti-colonialism and nationalism were still evident in the 1950s, but by the mid 1960s the underlying preoccupation was with the Middle East as a factor in the Cold War (with Israel seen as a Western bulwark against Soviet influence). By the 1980s, and especially following the disaster in Iran in 1979, the perceived conflict between US interests and Islam was emerging as the fixating principle. By the time this view was seemingly validated by the events of 11 September 2001, Arabic – we are told – had replaced Russian as the principal foreign language of the US intelligence agencies.

In all this, we are reminded often that, enmeshing as the Middle East was for US policy makers, there were always many who were ambivalent about aspects of their country's involvement in the Middle East. The State Department's Near East Affairs bureau was notoriously wary, especially about supporting Israel's creation, and many strategists also foresaw the challenges that the creation of Israel would bring. Presidential attitudes have varied too, on this and other issues in the region, but in the end Oren's mix of power faith and fantasy has usually prevailed.

Oren's account of the last 40 years in this intriguing history is necessarily less well supported by official documents, but his chapters on this fraught period remain objective and insightful as well as helpfully succinct. Among other things, he reminds us that for all the United States has invested in plans for a resolution of the Arab-Israeli dispute, in the end the two most productive negotiations – between Sadat and Begin in 1977 and the Oslo process in 1993 – were both undertaken without American involvement until Carter and Clinton, respectively, were called on to provide ceremonial endorsements of their outcomes.

What lessons might Australians take from Oren's impressive work? The first is a sound understanding of what drives American policy makers' preoccupation with the Middle East and an acceptance that, frustrating as that might be for those who would hope to see Washington focus more on other parts of the world, there is a reality that is undeniable – and unlikely to change. The second is that, try as we have at different times over the past fifty years, even we cannot turn our backs on the Middle East. History records how often we have deployed our forces there. And while east of Bombay the guns have been silent for a generation now, the region from Pakistan to the Mediterranean will remain for generations to come a cauldron in which security issues of global import will continue to boil.

The quality of the Jerusalem-based Oren's research is reflected in his 80 pages of endnotes and his 48-page bibliography. Yet his book, informative and insightful as it is, remains eminently readable, detracted from not at all by his arresting use of arcane words like purlieu, steeve, adipose, irrefragable and ursine. ♦

Michael B. Oren *'Power, Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present'*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, casebound and jacketed, 775pp., RRP \$US35.00.