



Jeremy Salt. *The Unmaking of the Middle East: A History of Western Disorder in Arab Lands.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. 468 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-25551-7.

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Vignettes for a Post-Orientalist World

This book, in the author's words, was written "most urgently for the general reader who feels the need to know more about the Middle East than the mainstream media are able or willing to tell" (p. 1). His ambition, however, is to change the fables and morals we tell about the Middle East, and in this he makes partial progress. *The Unmaking of the Middle East* provides a series of provocative vignettes describing Western imperialism. The book promotes the idea of a central, unifying, and recurring paradigm used in the Middle East by different European nations, a sense of cultural affinity and ideology as the building blocks of European Orientalism.

Jeremy Salt posits that European national interests in the Middle East are empathetically predicated on shared cultural icons—Enlightenment ideas, a historic awareness of Judeo-Christian culture, and Western science. Although the book opens with the first modern encounter in 1799 between France and Egypt, the twentieth century is the period of emphasis. The main theme is the continuity of Europe's application of a Western perspective, regardless of nationality, in its attempts to bring civilization to the region. Although Salt recognizes differing national and cultural flavors as the ideological focus shifts from civilizing mission to freedom and later to democracy, the cultural glue of the Western civilizing mission is the transference of Western ideas and science to receptive Middle Eastern regions, which will transform barbarism into civility.

Salt dismisses the oft-repeated anecdote about Winston Churchill and a few specialists creating the modern nations of the region at a conference in Cairo, countering a one-time decisive action with a long-term occupation and dissemination of Western cultural ideas. His insight is that the degradation of these models by the greed of imperialism and ideology transforms aspirations into evil gifts. In turn, these mutant archetypes become the cast from which nations were born and developed—the true unmaking of the modern Middle East.

Salt presents his perspective in four sections. The first is a short essay on culture, science, and the Western civilizational ethos. The second is a description of the unintended consequences of European civilizing efforts in the Mandates, which introduces the cultural ties that will bind the United States to Western goals. The third focuses on the American dilemma of needing friends and allies for the Cold War: it was leery of Israel's policies, yet lacking solid alternatives to supporting the new nation. The last section is a quick overview of events in the Persian Gulf since 1988. The book is not a monograph, but rather a series of episodic illustrations of his thesis.

The most illuminating portions of the book are sections 2 and 3, where Salt addresses well-known episodes and creates a fresh, robust reconsideration by using regional and local sources and biographies. One example is his depiction of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. It is not described through the players and actors

of World War I protagonists, but rather begins with the Balkan Wars of 1812-13 and does not end until 1923 with the revisions of the Treaty of Sevres at Lausanne. In this context, he places the Western-named Armenian genocide within a context of an extensive series of Turko-Armenian massacres. This will certainly be a cause for contention, but it is thought provoking and should lead to wider research focusing on more sources and documents. The sources used for this chapter also rely on Salt's earlier work *Imperialism, Evangelism, and the Ottoman Armenians, 1878-1896* (1993).

Each chapter in section 2 offers attractive possibilities for rethinking events in the region outside of the orthodox description suggested by textbooks of the modern Middle East. Repeatedly the sources are a mix of international, biographical, contemporary, and social documents, moving away from policy papers or personal letters and diaries of officials appointed to the region. The departure from a foreign policy perspective permits a shift from a Eurocentric analysis to one focused on the regional identity and national definition, as indicated by the leaders of the countries under discussion. In this view, Rashid Ali al Gailani is an Iraqi patriot, not a saboteur of the British war effort, nor a petty, greedy, power-hungry colonel. The transformation offers a more Iraqi-centered history of the nation's past.

Section 2 concludes by introducing the United States to the issues through the United Nations' decision to recognize Israel and Palestine as two separate regions, one as a nation-state, the other in tutelage to become one. The final chapter highlights the well-known conflict between foreign service professionals and President Harry Truman's people to recognize Israel, but Salt presses the acceptance of Israel as a continuation of the Western Judeo-Christian cultural heritage rather than the beginning of a policy meant to fulfill American postwar aims. Salt's pursuit of a continuous civilizational mission from 1799 to the present dismisses other possibilities. The American promise to support Israel in 1947 may have been predicated on a cultural sympathy for the Jewish people and state, but the evidence in the American archives is more multicausal than indicated by this chapter. It could also have been the first strategic move in a policy to further democracy in the Middle East, deny the Mediterranean to the Soviets, and encourage economic growth in the area.

The third section begins with the Suez Crisis, and then depicts the slow binding of US-Israel policy over the next three decades. Beginning with 1948, working through the disillusionment of Suez, and the resur-

gence of confidence brought about by victories in the 1966 Arab-Israeli War, Israel became America's partner in the region. As the years passed, democracy and Cold War needs allied together to make Israel the best ally for American stability. Particularly, a globally engaged United States worried about larger problems than the emerging national identity of the Middle Eastern nations. Contraposed to this growing confidence in the alliance with Israel, Salt discusses the diplomatic concern regarding Israel's nuclear development. Again presidential preference contradicts institutional policy by suggesting a political willingness to be ignorant of nuclear weapons and their development. Salt implies that this example is well understood by present-day nations who willingly swear to use nuclear power solely for peaceful means while proceeding with war-making capabilities.

The sources used in both these sections are international. Salt presents a solid mix of British, Turkish, Arabic, and American works. The use of biographies, news articles, public papers, and journal articles is where he is most successful in moving the narrative about the Middle East to potentially new interpretations. It also brings the issue of historiography to the fore. Over the last two decades, American foreign policy scholars have sought a more international perspective, stressing use of two or more archives, doing research in other languages, and visiting and studying different cultures. But within our individual national contexts, we remain more familiar with American and Anglo-American scholarly work in the region. Salt forces one to engage Turkish and Arabic documents and news articles and reconcile them with our British and American sources. Salt enriches our discourse with these added sources, but we now need to become more familiar with the historiographies and narratives of these added sources. This could change the way we tell the tale of the Middle East and it will certainly widen the conversation.

The final section recounts the Gulf wars and the present-day occupation of Iraq. In this section, the sources are contemporary and overwhelmingly journalistic. The shortage of recent government documents to confirm or deny these positions is to a degree unavoidable. But Salt's argument remains clear. The desire to civilize barbarians, the cultural empathy with Judeo-Christian ideas, and the sympathy between the West and Israel are policies inherited from a Western ideology. A complaisant acceptance of these ideas has led the United States to an ideological impasse. The implicit question asked is will the United States follow in the footsteps of its European counterparts, or can it break away from

historical precedent and offer hope for change? Can the United States represent the ideal of democracy while denying the rights of Palestinians? Can the fight against Islamic terrorists end once Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda are caught? Can the United States support Israeli land acquisition while promoting the creation of Palestine? Can the United States afford to pursue all these aims and trade petroleum peacefully? Salt's implication is that policy and wars that counter the principles of the Enlightenment, of natural rights, of market trade, and of democracy breach the sacred trust that Western civilization meant to bring to the region, and poses a pivotal identity question for the country built on those principles. Can the United States survive ideologically "as the last best hope of earth" if its central truths are self-evident in some lands, but obscure in others?

Salt offers a provocative argument that the misdeeds of the civilizing nations have created this morass, which is unmaking the modern Middle East. His book tests the

working paradigm of Middle East foreign policy by forcing new sources and new stories into the debate. The incorporation of Turkish and Arabic sources shakes up established perceptions and permits new starting points for research and assessment, most particularly to aid in identifying what may be hegemonic or even Orientalist bias. While his intent is to return agency to the Middle East and its people, his reliance on Western ideas and culture as the active ingredient for the developmental flaws of the region limits the success of his effort. West-blaming agency as a reaction to East-blaming agency may be a necessary stage in moving us toward a more analytical, and perhaps less culturally fraught, understanding of the meaning of the twentieth century in the Middle East, but it remains an incomplete view. Salt, nonetheless, offers wonderfully critical thoughts that can help introduce a whole new series of questions, and bring some very serious consideration of the role of culture on policy into the interpretation of Western-Middle Eastern relations.

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