

Preface to the First Edition

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In the summer of 1974, at the age of twelve, I left home for a weeklong stint at a Baptist summer camp for girls. Camp Mundo Vista was situated in a beautiful wooded area near Asheboro, North Carolina. Having grown up as a Southern Baptist in a small town nearby, I was enthusiastic about the camp routines: daily Bible study; games and contests, including Bible drills in the time-honored tradition; plus swimming, crafts, and campfires. Our camp counselors were sincere young women from area colleges. We girls were completely infatuated with them. At night, they taught us to sing the upbeat, modernized hymns that were the hallmark of Christian youth activities in the 1970s. At the time, we had no sense that we were part of a larger cultural movement, as what would become the New Christian Right began to emerge from a peculiar combination of fundamentalist energy and the Jesus People's attention to cultural relevance.

I loved Mundo Vista. I loved the sincere, devout, affectionate female world we made there. But what I remember best about that summer happened on the last day. We were holding final vespers in the outdoor chapel, early in the morning. The counselors had decided to end our week at camp with a parade of nations; some girls would march around the chapel area carrying the flags of many countries, then they would line up in pyramid formation along the stepped rows of the chapel. With the light coming over the trees, the flag carriers filed in and took their places as the rest of us sang hymns. When the formation was completed, I looked up at the place of honor at the top of the pyramid. To my surprise, I saw not one, but two, national flags. There was, as I had expected, the American flag. And beside it, another. Confused, I asked one of my counselors what that blue and white flag was, up there on equal footing with the familiar Stars and Stripes. She responded in a reverential tone that nonetheless seemed to state the obvi-

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ous. That's the flag of Israel, she said. At that time, I didn't even know where Israel was, but from that moment on, I knew that it mattered and that, for Christians, it represented some aspect of our faith that the American flag alone could not signify.

Several years later, in my senior year of high school, I had a very different experience, but one that also involved an authority figure, my own enthusiasms, and a nation in the Middle East. It was sometime in the spring of 1980, several months after Islamic militants had taken American hostages at the U.S. embassy in Iran. I was not a particularly political teenager, but I had been captivated by the dramatic story of the hostages in the embassy as it played out on the nightly news. As the crisis wore on, I remember the increasing frustration, the genuine bafflement people felt: Iran was very far away; Islam was a mystery; and yet every night on the news we saw Iranians unleashing extraordinary, seemingly unmotivated anger toward Americans. Shortly after the embassy takeover, I took the first overtly political action of my life. Along with a few other friends, I began wearing a white armband to commemorate and support the hostages.

This expression of sympathy with the hostages was not a controversial act in my conservative small town. Almost no one, I imagine, would have disagreed with its intent. But those of us who did it signaled a certain kind of earnestness; we marked ourselves as sincere and civic-minded. Sometime during this armband-wearing period, our biology teacher took time out from class one day to give a short lecture on his views of how the United States should resolve the hostage crisis. "Simply tell the Iranians that they have twenty-four hours to release the hostages," he began. "If they don't, drop one nuclear bomb on one of their cities. Then give them another twenty-four hours; then drop another bomb." Pretty soon, he was sure, those hostages would be out of there. This hawkish little lecture in diplomacy was clearly addressed to those of us who wore white armbands; having signaled our concern, but not necessarily our militancy, we were invited to join in a solution that combined both. I remember feeling distressed. I was upset about the hostages and deeply interested in their fate, and I certainly didn't have a solution to the Iran crisis. But I knew, though I could barely articulate it, that bombing Iranian cities was not what I'd had in mind.

In each of these moments, a web of emotional investments, particular histories, and political assumptions intersected to establish the Middle East on my youthful cognitive map. In learning about the flag of Israel or the hostages in Iran, I assimilated not just bare facts but facts inevitably infused

with cultural values. Finding out about the Middle East meant learning—at the *same time* and in ways that cannot be fully untangled—how to respond to it, emotionally and politically, and specifically as an American. In both these instances, my knowledge developed from particular interests, and those interests in turn emerged from a web of cultural, political, religious, and economic realities that I did not control, and often was not even cognizant of. Although my ideas about the Middle East have changed considerably, I remain a product of the formative power of those encounters.

At one level, neither of the two occasions I have described from my own life can fairly be described as “representative” of a larger American relationship with the Middle East. The particular history of a Southern Baptist girl in 1974, for example, would have been quite different than that of an elderly Jewish man in Chicago, though each of us might have been thinking about Israel. And the meanings of Iran in 1979 might vary considerably if one were an African American soldier training for a hostage rescue mission or a young Iranian student working in his dorm at a Midwestern college, while two other drunk students stood outside the door shouting anti-Iranian slogans.¹ Still, both these occasions in my life were exemplary in one sense: they indicated the complex forces at work in how people learn about the world that is not immediately around them.

This, then, is a book about the cultural politics of encounter. It focuses not on the literal, face-to-face meetings that happen in travel or at borders but on the ways in which people in the United States have encountered representations of the Middle East that helped to make it *meaningful* to them. Myriad types of representations—from news reports to films to popular novels—have influenced the understandings that Americans have had of their own “interests” in the region. Culture matters in these understandings because cultural productions played a significant role in making the Middle East meaningful to Americans, particularly after 1945, when the United States dramatically expanded its political, economic, and military power in the region. This book examines the links between cultural artifacts, national and religious identities, and U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. In particular, it explores two factors, the presence of oil and the religious claims to the region, that have made the Middle East central to U.S. nationalist and expansionist discourses.

The book looks beyond the history of Jewish-American and Arab-American affiliations with the Middle East to explore the meanings of the region for audiences not generally assumed to have an obvious affinity with its inhabitants. In fact, American engagements went far beyond those par-

ticular connections. Popular, general-audience representations of the Middle East frequently mobilized its historical and religious significance to serve as narratives of American national identity. And these narratives were consistently concerned with issues of racial and gender differences within the nation. Representations of the Middle East simultaneously figured the United States in relation to its "outside" (in terms of international power relations) and in relation to its "inside" (the diverse and hierarchical construction of identities within the national borders). At the same time, conceptions of the Middle East have also been employed by communities and groups that are not the "general" audience (often presumed to be white) for popular culture or news accounts. In particular, some African Americans have been interested in the Middle East, less for reasons of "national interest" than for the ways in which its religious and cultural heritage might be used to assemble and understand black identity itself. Thus, representations of the Middle East have been and continue to be a site of struggle over both the nature of U.S. world power and the domestic politics of race, religion, and gender.

In exploring the cultural politics of U.S. interests in the Middle East, I have two primary interests of my own. The first is both historical and political: in the years since the Iran crisis, my early experiences have been translated into an intellectual commitment to analyze the terms under which the United States has constituted itself as a global superpower in the postwar era. The second is methodological, and yet also political: with few exceptions, the study of American opinion about the Middle East either has been narrowly framed through the analysis of various opinion surveys or has used a mass communications model to study negative stereotypes. In the process, scholarship has often assumed one of two stances—either American interests are determined by a rational choice model, in which policymakers and the public interact to determine the objective needs of the nation; or "interests" are determined by a manipulative ruling class that injects the population with stereotypes and propaganda in order to obtain its assent to official policies. A more subtle investigation will counter both these views, by suggesting that "interests" and "consent" are constructed in highly complex ways, and that multilayered investments in the Middle East have been mobilized by very different people living in the United States. In pursuing that track, I want to highlight the significance of cultural production in the making of interests. The politics of culture is important, not because politics is *only* culture (or because culture is *only* politics), but because where the two meet, political meanings are often made.

Marx once famously argued that people *do* make history, but not in circumstances of their own making.² While I do not believe that analysis alone can dismantle the relations of power whose history I partially explore here, I am convinced that, without that analysis, we are likely to misread the ways in which power works. Those of us who are struggling to imagine a different world need to understand much more about the circumstances not of our own making. The cultural history of interest is one place to begin.

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