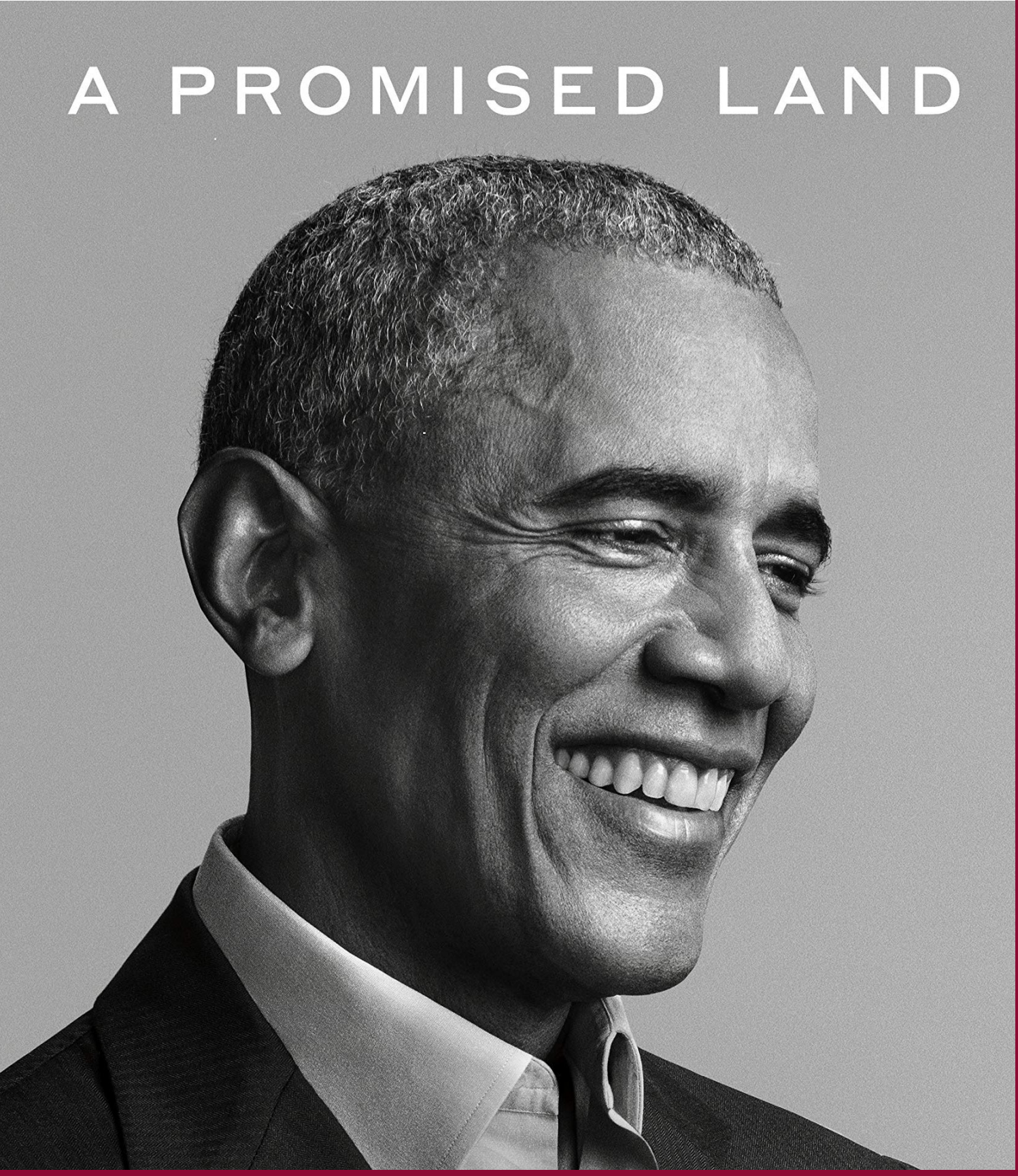

REFLECTIONS ON OBAMA'S NARRATION OF AMERICA IN THE MIDDLE EAST: NO "PROMISED LAND" FOR ARABS

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OPINION


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Narratives matter in politics, and the narratives of the powerful tend to reinforce their international supremacy. Barack Obama's latest contribution to the American presidential memoir genre will likely carry significance beyond a truthhood-falsity barometer we have grown accustomed to use with the epithets, statements, and Tweets of the sitting President Donald Trump that can tend to lean towards 'fake news.' Certainly, the commercial value of the 700-odd page tome, reportedly worth tens of millions of dollars combined with his wife Michelle Obama's own memoir, Becoming, released last year,[1] is striking. (Like--and unlike--the Clintons before them, the Obamas have become a brand.) Beyond the capitalist beneficence, however, any staying power of A Promised Land,[2] including whatever controversy it generates, rests on the story spun by the 44th president. What does he narrate about his political career, about the world of America and America in the world—especially the Middle East?

(Re)Constructing America's 'Middle East'

The policies of US presidents, especially those who serve two terms like Barack Obama and George W. Bush before him, become part of the 'structure' of asymmetrical power relations, revitalized (or not) dealings with dictators, and positions vis-a-vis Arab peoples. Indeed, the retelling itself becomes part of the policy, as power and knowledge intertwine repeatedly. Such narratives serve in justifying, explaining, and defending US uses and misuses of economic, military, and diplomatic power. The international hegemon, a complicated and complex web of actors, institutions, and viewpoints held together by some variant of what Obama calls the 'American idea,' tells itself to the world, in part through its former presidents. Here is one reason why Arab and Middle Eastern audiences will be especially attuned to Barack Obama's official perspective on the motivations and wrangling of his presidency. That the Arab Spring unfolded under his watch only piques readers' curiosity. And while President-elect Joe Biden, Obama's Vice President, has insisted that his presidency will not be a "third Obama term,"[3] the 44th president's narrative can offer clues about where Biden stood and the paths he might chart today. Generally, Obama seems to place him in the "Washington playbook"[4] school, a veteran Washingtonian with vast experience heading the Senate Foreign Relations committee.

When it comes to the Middle East, Obama offers a number of well-worn profiles (*sharia'h*-obsessed Islamists,[5] brain-washable, violent youth[6]) and familiar narrations (sectarian angst,[7] cauldrons of instability) as he chronicles his time in office up to the spring of 2012, near the end of his first term.

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The book's content is suggestive, and so is its form. That this wordsmith ends the first volume of his presidential memoirs (Part II will follow) with the killing of Osama bin Laden is telling. In the closing chapter 27, Obama dramatically recounts the intelligence-military-diplomatic synergy, for him a tense and emotional sequence culminating in the "neutralizing" of a target (with the codename "Geronimo")[8] for whose ten-year manhunt the most powerful country in the world mustered its best and bravest. Replete with a precarious helicopter landing, as Bin Laden was "brought to justice" amid "audible gasps" by the National Security team onlookers and an understated "We got him" by the Commander in Chief,[9] the cinematic ending recalls the Hollywood version *Zero Dark Thirty*--exactly how much more factually exactly,[10] perhaps no reader will ever know. Here Obama ties the knotty thread running through the entire narrative, of missions, successes, and failures marked by the performance of the mightiest military machine on earth: the US armed forces.

The President who had campaigned on a platform decrying George W. Bush's "dumb war" in Iraq does not seem to glorify the US armed forces, with their technological-organizational-logistical acumen and synergy "that the US military does better than any organization on Earth"[11] any less than his predecessor. Neither does he appear disinclined to US militarism, in foreign policy (as in, "the prudent use of American power"[12]), or in domestic 'brownie points' variants of paying tribute to soldiers (such as visiting injured veterans at Walter Reed Hospital) and offering "support" to their families (including one of his wife's major initiatives as First Lady, "Joining Forces"[13]). Surprised at his Nobel Prize, he decides it is a "call to action."[14] This energy easily strikes on as mobilization in service of what reads as an unapologetic US supremacy, military first, human rights and democracy second.

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Obama was perennially plagued by "nativist" suspicions (birtherism,[15] a pet narrative of Donald Trump doubting Obama's Hawaiian delivery), accusations that he might be less than patriotic (the Reverend Wright debacle of the 2008 campaign, during which he duly distanced himself from his former pastor[16]) or 'soft' on terrorism (the botched attempt to shut down Guantanamo[17]). It is as though this first black president seeks to set the record very, very straight. I am no less violent than the roster of white, establishment commanders in chief that came before me. I see the Middle East as no less of a "troubled place," to paraphrase Edward Said, than did they. In fact, Obama uses a number of such stereotyping phrases to describe the region: "scary but manageable" before 9/11;[18] "dysfunction of the Middle East"[19]; wondering about "another Middle East war"[20]; invoking "problems in the Middle East"[21]; and musing on the eve of the 2011 uprisings "where the next major Middle East crisis would most likely occur."[22] He hardly fails, that is, to live up to Orientalist and Orientalizing expectations.

Idealism vs. Realism

Obama attempts to frame himself as defender of what he calls the "American idea": "what the country was, and what it could become," combined with "the notion that America was the greatest country on earth."[23] This American exceptionalism—a tempered form, perhaps, of 19th century "manifest destiny" infused with historically genocidal ideologies and practices—persists in an almost unbroken form among US presidents. For Obama, the American idea or "idea of America" is apparently propelled by "individual determination" that yields collective aspirations and successes spanning some mix of democracy, freedom, equal opportunity. Yet, recurring theme of the book is how Obama tangles with the actualities, strains, and tradeoffs of US leadership, such that the presidency modulates his idealism, injecting him and his policies with a healthy dose of "realism."

That his two terms are often characterized as manifestations of the failure of the US foreign policy leadership in a Middle East may not cross the mind of readers meeting him for the first time in these pages. Perhaps that is why he spends most of the enormous volume recounting in painstaking detail his domestic battles. The American Recovery

and Reinvestment Act, bailouts that he claims saved the US economy, Keynesian style, after he inherited a recession. The relatively progressive Affordable Care Act in healthcare, dubbed "Obamacare" by naysayers, the "DREAM Act" to formalize the status of undocumented immigrants, a bill that did not make it past the Senate. Democrats vied endlessly with Republicans to transform "Yes We Can" from a campaign slogan to some modicum of material improvement in the lives of Americans. The subtext, of course, is a self-styled contrast with his successor, Donald Trump, and the "genuine populist surge within the Republican party"[24] and its base, foreshadowed by the rise of the Tea Party and the underqualified, Sarah Palin, 2008 presidential candidate John McCain's vice-presidential nominee, later a Fox News commentator.

His administration saw many "firsts" and novelties: the US's first African American president with a Muslim father to boot, a flock of young Washington outsiders running the White House, not to mention protests and revolutions calling for democratic change in the Arab world —Yet Obama's narrative confirms the cliché that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Unabashed Militarism

Somewhat paradoxically, the Nobel Laureate Obama did not steer US foreign policy toward a peaceful course. Indeed, one clear theme in the book is the justification and defense of US militarism, especially vis-a-vis the Middle East-so long as the 'right' wars are waged, and the "prudent" operations conducted. We see in fact a valorization of the US military, thus contributing to the hyper-militarism of US foreign policy, reinforced by and reinforcing what some argue routinizes militarism even "at home."[25] For the Middle East, —such an engrained war-making culture seems to amount to a view that soldiers and security personnel can for the most part do no wrong. (Trump's recent pardon of the Blackwater perpetrators of a 2007 massacre in Iraq[26] is a well-publicized example of institutionalizing military impunity, albeit to much uproar.) Even, if warmongering commanders in chief get their geography mixed up (Iraq instead of Afghanistan, according to Obama), soldiers remain a symbol of unbounded 'service,' giving, sacrifice, in the name of American ideals. Even opposing Bush's war in Iraq, writes Obama, "I'd always been careful to distinguish between my views on the war and the appreciation for the sacrifices of our troops and their families."[27]

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In fact, Obama was quite gung-ho about killing in his so-called 'war against al-Qaeda.' Re-labelling Bush's "War on Terror" did little except improve appearances. He claims that he was so insistent on capturing (killing!) Bin Laden so that he could puncture the illusion of superhuman terrorists: so that Americans and those around the world could see "that these terrorists were nothing more than a band of deluded, vicious killers—criminals who could be captured, tried, imprisoned, or killed."[28] This attempt at defanging the terrorist bogeyman in the public imagination, so to speak, did little if nothing to de-militarize American foreign policy, or tone down what critics see as its neo-imperialist military interventions. Obama in fact hid behind the guise of legality to personally authorize American killings of suspected terrorists, venturing on a slippery slope shrouded in secrecy with little oversight. He personally oversaw a "kill list," where he ordered the trigger pulled (or drone deployed), as a New York times investigation revealed. This authorization came after a "nomination" process where his military and counterterrorism advisers suggested who should be killed next. The President, then, did not waver from what had become the US's interminable, understated counterterrorism rampage (for instance, undercounting civilian casualties) in the US and in the Middle East. In fact, the former University of Chicago Law School professor-turned-president quietly, through extensive legal acrobatics, "had preserved three major policies--rendition, military commissions and indefinite detention" that since the Bush years had fomented scathing criticism on human rights grounds.[29] This included, of course, killing US citizens "Al-Qaeda cleric" Anwar Al-Awlaki and Samir Khan in September 2011. Readers get no apology for Obama's notorious drone warfare. Commencing only 3 days after his inauguration, Obama ordered a total of 542 drone strikes during his tenure in the White House, killing "an estimated 3797 people" in what became a hallmark tactic of his presidency.[30] He did his fair share, that is, in the accumulation of "direct deaths" estimated in November 2018 as somewhere between 480,00-507,000 in the US-led wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan after 9/11 (a number that excludes, for instance, casualties in Syria)[31]-all likely conservative estimates. And how does he narrate this personalized killing

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spree that spanned his presidency? Young men like the three Somali pirates killed by US forces upon hijacking Captain Richard Phillips aboard his ship in 2009 apparently inspired mixed feelings for Obama. He knew that across the Muslim world, he writes, "millions" of such men had been "warped and stunted by desperation, ignorance, dreams of religious glory" that propelled them to violence. American messianism rears its head: "I wanted somehow to save them" through education or employment, he confesses. Realities get in the way of their salvation, however: "the world they were a part of, and the machinery I commanded, more often had me killing them instead."[32] His ambivalence belies a convoluted mix of an almost (neo)colonial savior complex whose flip side is unbridled violence against the Other. "Their world" is to blame, as is the unfortunate (for them!) reality that he is at the helm of a "machinery" that could not be on the same side as unruly Somali, Iraqi, or Afghan youth. Through such binarism, Obama seems to delink the Arab or Muslim Other's pathologies from America's imbrication in the manifold problems of poverty, marginalization, despotism that plague the Middle East. So, we are left astounded: it is *their fault* that he must kill them?

That US militarism remains an untouchable bastion of its foreign policy, underpinning its nationalism (where is it 'civic' when the military takes center-stage?) is no surprise. Yet Obama's confirmation and unblinking justifications of US militarism—rendered more direct, more personal, more efficient under his watch, perhaps--should not escape Middle East readers and observers. Arab (and all) readers may rightly view Biden's election as a refreshing departure from Trump's less suave, chauvinist style and policies, but they should perhaps disabuse themselves of the notion that Obama's former Vice President is likely to de-militarize US foreign policy.

Yet the 'kill list', the expanded drone attacks, and even the story of finally 'getting' Osama bin Laden where Obama situates himself as reining in the War on Terror, is unconvincing. The US is actually an important part, instigator perhaps, of much of Middle East violence. Not just via its military-industrial complex, but also via cultural tropes that Obama too, and not just Bush who initially proclaimed the War on Terror a 'Crusade', perpetuates. Who can forget when President Obama, in his 2016 State of the Union speech, described the "transformation" in the Middle East as "rooted in conflicts that date back millennia"[33]? Obama in fact ended up re-expanding the War on Terror with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, launched in 2014. True, this time the coalition included many Arab participants. The point here, though, is that since the Cold War, raging violent conflicts within the Middle East is not without clear and traceable US fingerprints. From the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to the series of Gulf wars and Iraq, to the successive iterations of the War on Terror, the US has a finger—pulling triggers, bankrolling the guns, dropping bombs, building bases, stationing troops, launching drones—in every violent conflict in the region. It was disingenuous in 2016, just as it is disingenuous now, to cast the Middle East as a perennially violent region, outside the remit and the reach of the United States of America.

Arab *Dictatorship and Democracy*

Part of the package of US policy in the Middle East, of course, laid bare and rejected by revolutionary publics in the 2011 uprisings, has been its support for dictatorships that serve US interests. Obama does not shy away from this topic. In service of counterterrorism, deterring enemies, and safeguarding oil, "we'd made autocrats our allies."[34] Yet he betrays an express disdain for Arab dictators, acknowledging the instrumentalism of US support for authoritarian leaders from King Abdullah to Ali Abdullah Saleh to Hosni Mubarak. Reports highlighting human rights abuses did not escape the attention of US presidents. However, "the Saudis would deliver a vital tip" about an impending explosion that would harm a US naval base, for instance, "and those reports would be relegated to the bottom of a drawer."[35] The US kept them around, in other words, for their counterterrorism and stability-enhancing credentials—a game Arab autocrats learned all too well, especially since the War on Terror.

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Obama's attitude towards Arab dictators borders on a utilitarian derision. Leaders across the region, including King Abdullah of Jordan "feared the possibility of protests engulfing their countries," vocalizing an "expect[ation]" (albeit through "more sophisticated language" than that of the Saudi monarch) that the US would back "stability" (as "Bibi," too, wished).[36] (The US, of course, ultimately obliged, not least through its acceptance of Sissi's coup in Egypt in 2013.) He admits that he "would continue to work with the… 'corrupt, rotting, authoritarian order'…that controlled life in the Middle East and North Africa."[37] Shorn of any transformative, messiancic illusions, Obama claims he wanted to at least "encourage progress" towards democracy in the Arab world.[38] He and yet the portraits and vignettes he portrays in the Arab world are most 'human' when it comes to dictators, especially Hosni Mubarak. As Mubarak dug in his heels and refused to budge, the US withdrew support—but not without "military-to-military outreach" by the US to Egypt's intelligence services and army that would outlast Mubarak, says Obama.[39] The US eventually stood with the Tahrir protestors who "appeared to be disproportionately young and secular"[40] - meant as a naïve complement, it seems. In fact, Obama does not much conceal his apprehensions about the Brotherhood. Despite acknowledging the movement's enthusiastic engagement with politics, he writes that regional powers' distrust of the Islamist group, combined the "organization's fundamentalist philosophy made it both unreliable as a custodian for democratic pluralism" and a likely obstacle for the US's relationship with Egypt.[41]

It is notable that the humanizing elements of his narratives seem reserved not for protestors and the marginalized masses (except for the young woman shot in Iran's Green Movement the year before), but for an ousted autocrat. Obama seems almost sad for Mubarak, the aging unseated by a popular revolution: "I pictured him there, sitting in lavish surroundings [in Sharm el Sheikh], a dim light casting shadow across his face, alone with his thoughts."[42] On the other hand, Arab 'people' are almost nowhere to be seen as full human beings, with concrete hopes and fears and disappointments and dreams that could have been highlighted in such a presidential narrative. In Obama's book, it is as though any promise of democracy in the Arab world has died. Throughout

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the memoir, the personal and the political often converge for Obama. His daughter Malia "asked me what I was going to do about tigers,"[43] prompting a narrative turn to his determined if ultimately wan campaign for climate change legislation in the face of Republican obstructionism and Third World leader evasions at the Copenhagen summit. He invokes his mother's battle with cancer, magnified by overwhelming healthcare bills in the long saga of the Affordable Care Act.[44] Yet such vignettes linking the man and the president are absent when it comes to the Arab world. On his visit to his "father's ancestral home" in Kenya as a presidential candidate, where he repeatedly encountered "thousands … chanting my name," he and his wife took the HIV test to assuage local fears and encourage detection and treatment.[45] He even "kicked a soccer ball around with a handful of local kids" on his visit to Brazil.[46] Is there no parallel experience with Arab crowds or Arab children he considers worth recounting? Are Arabs any less human, one wonders?

Limits of US Leadership?

If Obama seems blind to 'the people' in the Arab world, he equally seems to absolve the US of responsibility for all that has gone wrong in the Middle East. The failure to reach a peace plan in Israel-Palestine at the end of the day is attributed to the insincerity in peace talks he half-heartedly hosted Netanyahu, Abbas, Egypt's Mubarak and King Abdullah before the Arab Spring. He muses over "the pantomime of it, their lack of resolve" as they met at the White House for negotiations.[47] Comments like "Palestinian leaders too often missed opportunities for peace"[48] are not unexpected of both sides, embodied in Netanyahu (we can detect an absence of personal warmth towards the leader) and Mahmoud Abbas (a man portrayed as largely without personality and corrupt. It is interesting that Obama claims he, uncharacteristically for a US president, was criticized for "my expressions of concern for ordinary Palestinians."[49] Yet, as he frames it, as a Black man, he identifies (morally and personally, based on his mother's stories to him about the Holocaust's horrors, or a trip with Elie Wiesel to Buchenwald, etc.). "I believed there was an essential bond between the Black

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and the Jewish experiences--a common story of exile and suffering," he writes.[50] But situated within the trajectory of US defense of an occupying, colonizing Israel, this link he draws almost smacks of one-sidedness. In fact, Obama abandoned his commitment to Palestinian statehood. His perspective can be compared with other Black theorists and activists including Angela Davis[51] and Cornel West. Both have publicly declared, at some cost to their public personas,[52] their solidarity with Palestinian emancipation and rights and even the BDS movement.

NATO's bombing of Libya as Gaddafi threatened massacres against protestors, also features in Obama's account of his foreign policy accomplishments. In this first volume of his memoirs, we reach only the swift, initial ' victory' of what came to be mockingly called America's 'leading from behind.' He insists on the rightness of his decision to unleash limited military campaign in the North African country—which failed to secure the country from chaos by either pro- or anti-Gaddafi forces, not to mention the death of US envoy Christopher Stephens. Obama's telling not only reveals almost an economic, burden-sharing logic: how he sought to divvy up responsibility (military, political, diplomatic) with the Europeans, but also how domestic ratings and polls and partisan conflicts color his decision-making on foreign policy. This complicated tangle of course comes with the territory of democratic governance--despite foreign policy decision-making remaining relatively undemocratic, concentrated in the hands of the president and his advisors. Yet it is important for Arab audiences to recognize the complexities of domestic and international politics-all the while as each president of the United States, in his own way, eagerly and decidedly commits himself to preserving American supremacy in the world.

On a tour to East Asia where he appreciated that formerly colonized people and governments "remained respectful of American power," he reflects on a success story where, as he tells it, coaxing countries in the ways of economic liberalism can be the secret to maintaining US supremacy as smoothly as possible. Capitalism is key. "Follow

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our lead, liberalize your economies, and hopefully your governments and you, too, can share in our prosperity."[53] Obama may have been accused of betraying American exceptionalism and apologizing for America on his Berlin tour, but he embraces it and the defense, often military, of 'the American idea' full throttle. Everything else comes second, including relations with Russia, Germany, France, and of course the Arab world. Yet the contours and pathways to maintaining American dominance in the world differ, ultimately conditioned by a domestic political radar.

It is easy for Obama to blame bankers for the housing crisis and recession, supporting legislation such as "Dodd-Frank" so as to appear to be taming Wall Street amidst American public anger after 'bailout' fatigue. Why can he not direct the same kind of critique (disingenuous as it may read) to the arms companies and lobbies, to the administration of US military bases from Japan to the Arab Gulf? There may be more taboos in international politics and foreign policy than in domestic politics, it turns out. (We all recall the hubbub over Jimmy Carter's book *Peace not Apartheid,* lambasted for allotting too much righteousness to Palestinian grievances.) Obama can try to distance himself from the '1%' by sympathizing with the drudgeries of the middle-class and their tax burdens, but he cannot distance himself from the US and its positionality in the international architecture of *global* capitalism and military power. And it is this complex web of historical, cultural, ideational and ideological, military, and economic *structures* of the US-led, global (dis)order, steered by the actors and agents of successive American presidents, that is the recurring puzzle of US foreign policy in the Middle East in particular. Ideas and discourses (the 'audacity' of Obama's 'hope,' as he puts it) count for a great deal, but they may be more likely to reinforce dominant material-ideational configurations than challenge them, especially when espoused by the powerful. It could never be all about Obama—but neither are hierarchies (the US in the world) immutable, inevitable.

What if….and What Next?

Also striking in the book is what reads as Obama's near-denial of his Muslim roots. In his famous Cairo speech in 2009, he spoke very briefly and in a roundabout way of a personal link to the Muslim world: "I'm a Christian, but my father came from a Kenyan family that includes generations of Muslims."[54] Similarly, in this memoir he writes, for instance, of his "Muslim-sounding name."[55] In actuality, his middle name Hussein is not "Muslim-sounding," but indisputably Muslim. It is not just any name, but the name of the Prophet's grandson, familiar to Muslims everywhere. For countless Arabs

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and Muslims, what has been memorable about Obama are his almost unclaimed Muslim origins, almost unseen in this book. To readers, years after his presidency, what appears to be a sidestepping, or at the very least a lack of interest and even cultural-civilizational homage to this part of himself, is remarkable. What exactly is Obama suppressing? What is he so afraid of in this quasi-Freudian abnegation? The most powerful man on earth comes through as almost disempowered in some respect: almost an "emperor (president) with no clothes". Everyone sees exactly what he is reluctant (or unable) to acknowledge, metaphorically speaking of course. From his Muslim name to the US's problematic presence in the Middle East even under his watch, the unsaid in Obama's memoir may be as significant as the explicitly narrated. It is here that the book's title remains ambiguous: whose "promised land"? What is it that Obama is restoring? What kind of restoration is he constructing or narrating? Has he delivered Americans to the promised land, or failed to? What about others across the world, Arabs and non-Arabs, people of all faiths, initially enthusiastic about the "hope" his election to the presidency symbolized? There is a kind of constructivism that permeates the book. The world Obama narrates is also socially constructed by its writer's experiences, half of which he seems to have relegated to a zone of silence or silence.

One might imagine the unfolding of somewhat different scenarios during Obama's presidency: Rather than boasting of funding Israel's notorious Iron Dome,[56] what if Obama, recognizing the "clout" of AIPAC's on lobbying American presidents and politicians[57] had decided to halt military aid to Israel? What if he had insisted on Palestinian statehood, rather than resigned himself to the expected impasse reached by Netanyahu and Abbas? What if he had (and we still have not heard his version of the story yet) not sanctioned Sissi's coup against Egypt's first elected President? What if he had made US military and development assistance to US "allies" in the region, or the sale of US arms, contingent on meaningful reforms in human rights and democratic governance? What if he had taken more seriously, in a more sustained fashion, the Arab Springers' clamoring for freedom, dignity, and social justice?

These questions are not intended as an exercise in wishful thinking. They might instead be important to pose for Arab audiences who should and must recognize consistently that US 'leadership' (alongside the colonial and imperial aspirations of France, the UK, Russia, etc.) are imbricated in its decades-long struggles with dictatorship and economic/political dependency. Dictators' scrambling to keep apace with societal outrage and tumult, most dramatically in the Arab Spring, is matched and perhaps complemented by the many faces of US interventions. Certainly, much is left untold (e.g. the destructiveness and human toll of the US's terror-chasing in Yemen). None of us is naive enough to expect Obama to reveal everything. When Obama insists that unlike what some people believe, the US "is not a grand puppet-master whimsically pulling the strings of the countries with which it does business,"[58] he is not coming clean as much as he is setting up a straw-man argument. Of course, international politics is more complicated. Even Arab dictators (let alone societies and their peoples) possess their own agency. Yet no status quo-no attempt to regain 'stability' and 'order' by recalibrating dictatorships or calling "red lines" in what prove to be illusory threats (e.g. Syria) can be upheld without the US.

As Trump prepares to leave office, discussions in Washington on the extent and effectiveness on the US exercise of military force around the world, especially the Middle East have intensified. Leon Pannetta, former CIA director and Obama's second Defense Secretary, sounds a note of caution against what he casts as too intense criticism of militarist US policy. The debate over the 'endless wars' has raged in Washington for months, prompted by Trump's promise not to carry on 'endless wars.' A new collection of essays by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies plays an almost jingoistic tune. "Deployment" of US troops, admits Pannetta, is an option of "last resort" and cannot be done in haste. Yet "withdrawal," too (whether principled or pragmatic) should be subject to the same scrutiny, he continues. "some withdrawals can be… deleterious to our national security" when executed too quickly and flexibly.[59] Another analyst writes that withdrawal from Iraq under Obama stemmed from an "appealing but misguided belief that America could declare victory and go home, leaving the troubling Middle East behind." He reminds readers that the number of US troops in the Middle East has already been reduced considerably in the years since 9/11: "Only about 22,000 American troops in jihadist war zones my mid-2020."[60] His warning begs the question of what constitutes a 'jihadist war zone,' exactly? Is it any place where a high concentration of Muslims resides? On the other side, some expert commentary has emerged under the banner of 'restraint,' as the new Quincy Institute stresses. Here are calls for US officials "to pursue

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more feasible objectives" in foreign policy, to avoid the catastrophes borne by "endless wars in places with no strategic value." This point of view, expressed by scholars such as Stephen Walt, advocates "more diplomacy and less coercion", greater mutuality between the US and other countries, enhanced by a US that practices what it preaches when it comes to democracy and human rights.[61] The Quincy Institute advises an incoming Biden administration to implement a dramatic "drawdown" of US troops in the Middle East, re-activate the JCPOA in Iran, reduce arms sales to Saudi Arabia and Gulf states, resetting US foreign policy in the direction of "engagement [as] peaceful cooperation among peoples--not war or domination."[62]

The question is, in retrospect: where does Obama seem to fall in this debate? He tries to have it both ways, it seems. On the one hand, he makes clear that he is no isolationist and no naïve pacifist. Rather, as president he directed US troops and military spending and drone attacks to settings and missions he saw as screaming for attention: Af-Pak (Afghanistan and Pakistan as a conjoined terrorist-hunting zone), the hunt for Bin Laden, etc. The US-induced death toll under his watch continued in the region. The 'right' war of Afghanistan is one he prioritized over Iraq (initially), and yet US military presence there has agonizingly endured in what has become the longest war in US history. It cannot be said in good faith that Obama de-militarized US foreign policy by any means. Nor did he minimize, by action or inaction, by leadership or a lack thereof, the US's outsize and ultimately destructive interventions in the Arab world.

It turns out, then, that at least one bit of conventional wisdom is actually true. Decried by many, the US's primacy in Middle Eastern affairs did not change under the Trump administration and is unlikely to veer off course much under a Mr. 'Nice Guy' Biden, known to be sympathetic to Zionism. Palestine remains at the center of Middle East politics, if the Arab Spring and the normalization that is part of the counter-revolution tells us anything. Acknowledging and understanding this dynamic, in retrospect or in interpreting current happenings, is at least one way to wield an albeit minimalist agency. Obama writes, and Arabs alongside others can read—'read back,' that is.

Endnotes

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