

BOOK REVIEW: Khalil, Osamah F. *America's Dream Palace: Middle East Expertise and the Rise of the National Security State*.

By David Max Korzen

Just over one hundred years ago, the United States was an isolationist nation. Sheltered by oceans on each side, the young state remained comfortably detached from the messy politics of Europe and had only passing commercial interests in lands beyond, such as the Middle East.

What a difference a century makes.

Today, the U.S. foreign policy establishment is an amalgamation of universities with dedicated regional study centers, think tanks leaning in every direction and government bureaucrats working in both public and secretive agencies. Osamah F. Khalil's *America's Dream Palace: Middle East Expertise and the Rise of the National Security State* takes the reader on the circuitous journey of the development of Middle Eastern expertise in the U.S. He explains not only how we have arrived at where we are today, but the implications that this course has had on American foreign policy.

Although this is a book of history, it is not a study of any specific foreign policy decisions made by the U.S. Rather, the author paints a picture of how the government's need for Middle Eastern expertise has shaped the way the U.S. now interacts with the region. Starting with the negotiations at Versailles in 1919, the author describes Woodrow Wilson's bumbling attempts to gather Middle Eastern specialists to provide expert advice. This group, called "the Inquiry," was cobbled together from the ranks of the most prestigious American universities and included the most esteemed experts on Islam and the Middle East. Yet although these were the best and brightest brains the nation had to offer, the Inquiry suffered from a lack of expertise in modern history and colloquial language proficiency. This deficiency persisted during the inter-war period and during the Second World War many of these same experts would populate the fledgling intelligence service, the Office of Strategic Services.

The heart of the book truly opens up in the early days of the Cold War when the Soviet threat demanded a larger security apparatus. Khalil rightly delves into great detail on the origin of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). This crucial legislation, passed in 1958, provided federal funds necessary to spur the establishment of numerous academic centers devoted to the study of the Middle East throughout the U.S. Within just six years, Khalil points out, the number of students in the U.S. studying Middle Eastern languages increased from just 268 to 1,084.

This era also saw the growth in the ties between the U.S. government and two institutions in the Middle East; the American University in Cairo and the American University in Beirut. Financial support from Washington encouraged these two schools to take on the mantle of America's "sheet anchors" in the Middle East, providing soft power to the U.S. in the region. They provided opportunities for U.S. scholars to study in the region as well as impart Western ideals onto Arab students. Most importantly, the two schools acted as a check on Soviet attempts to spread their influence to the region.

This close relationship between the U.S. government and academia would become problematic over time, Khalil affirms. The need for universities to maintain scholarly independence was often at odds with the exigencies of Washington. This concern reached its crescendo in the well-documented 1985 scandal at Harvard University, where it was revealed that the CIA sponsored both an academic conference and a grant to produce a book on Saudi Arabian security issues.

Khalil documents that in this uncertain environment, new centers of expertise were growing in both size and influence in Washington. Think tanks, such as the Brookings Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, all began to join the discussion of U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East. These organizations were often fueled by private sources of funding, sometimes tied to Israeli-leaning boosters or oil-interests. Accordingly, although typically staffed with leading intellectuals, the insight produced by such think tanks were intentionally skewed. As Khalil notes, these experts were “often ideologically predisposed to ensure an alignment with U.S. foreign policy goals and interests.” (251)

Khalil alludes to the maturation of this process with the rise of neoconservative ideas in the post-Cold War environment, especially following the 9/11 attacks. He describes a sort of war of ideas between scholars in academia and the privatized knowledge of think tanks, with the latter force winning out in control of the national security narrative.

Discussions of bureaucratic and institutional peculiarities is hardly riveting material, yet Khalil’s treatment of this hefty topic is accessible and easily digestible. His narrative, dotted with clarifying anecdotes, is backed with exhaustive citations. The material within is detailed enough to be of value to a specialist, yet at the same time, the linear, chronological method of his work makes it approachable to a non-academic.

If there is any one audience best suited to benefit from this work, it is students new to the field of Middle Eastern studies. Understanding the reasoning behind the field is important, and grasping the symbiotic relationship between academia, think tanks and the halls of government is challenging. Yet comprehension of this is necessary so as to place research in regional studies in proper context. Certainly other texts such as Zachary Lockman’s *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, and Martin Kramer’s *Ivory Towers on Sand* all provide much of the same insight, but Khalil’s work is more easily accessible and avoids any ideological slant.

Well-researched and containing a breadth of sources, *America’s Dream Palace* provides the reader an in-depth treatment of the history of Middle Eastern Studies in the U.S. As with any good academic study, the reader is left to ask new questions. Khalil ends his work with tension present, as the fate of the field of Middle Eastern studies is still uncertain. He notes that regional studies in general are viewed with skepticism within academia and think tanks retain greater influence through better funding and access to the halls of power. The path forward for the development of future experts in the Middle East is not clear. Nevertheless, the reader is empowered with enough historical context to tackle that very question.