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Nima Baghdadi

Florida International University, nbagh001@fiu.edu

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Soft Power or Hard Power: Rethinking the United States Foreign Policy in the Arab Middle East

Review Essay by Nima Baghdadi, Department of Politics and International Relations, Florida International University, nbagh001@fiu.edu

Cordesman, A. H. *Western strategic interests in Saudi Arabia*. London: Routledge, 2015 (originally published in 1987).

Saleh, L. *US Hard Power in the Arab World: Resistance, the Syrian Uprising and the War on Terror*. London: Routledge, 2016.

Wading through an ever-growing ocean of literature on the nexus of United States foreign policy and the Middle East can be unnerving. Scholarly works appear multifariously, and the older ones get pushed to the back and eventually into oblivion. With that in mind, along with a desire to reincarnate one such piece of older scholarship, this review essay presents a critical overview of the main arguments in Anthony Cordesman's *Western Strategic Interest in Saudi Arabia*, initially published in 1987, and Leyla Saleh's *US Hard Power in the Arab World*, published in 2016, both by Routledge.

What essentially distinguish the two scholarships from one another are the authors' demonstrably distinct worldviews, visions of international politics and foreign policy. Anthony Cordesman is a realist; his vision of politics is arguably Waltzian. Power for him remains mechanical, material, rational, and measurable. While he does see beyond the material military might of the actors he is interested in, he embraces the realist notion of states' immutable utilitarian behavior. For a realist like Cordesman, power, which has the same texture as threat, is ontologically needed for security. In this worldview, military or dual-use technology finds particular relevance, and a balance of military might—measurable in terms of weaponry sophistication and deployability in order to maintain a certain level of terror of sobering effect for essentially hostile neighbors—is mandatory. On the other hand, Saleh, interested in constructivism, believes that power and security have undeniable ideational layers to them. Her work demonstrates that she believes in the normative and ideational structures as much as she does in material structures. For her, culture, giving meaning to shared experiences and actions, becomes the bedrock of any conception of security. Norms and identities and a belief in a co-constitutive relationship between agents and structures are crucial for any constructivist. According to Emanuel Adler, socially constructed knowledge and ideational factors are constitutive ingredients of power that affect state interests and identities. This belief liberates constructivists from the narrow realist perception of power, which treats it as a simple function of material resources. Rather, constructivists believe that states' behavior is informed by the "logic of appropriateness" and the possibility of interest redefined as the result of intensive social interaction.

Anthony H. Cordesman's scholarship in *Western Strategic Interests in Saudi Arabia* concentrates on the interface of American security policy and military strategy in the Middle East in the 1980s. The author begins by laying out the historical, strategic context of the West's gravitation toward the region and the "pivotal role" (p.13) that Saudi Arabia plays in the West's increasingly complex interests in the region. Perhaps because Cordesman's primary focus was the state of affairs in the 1980s, his portrayal of historical strategic relations of Saudi Arabia with

the West appears hurried and unnuanced. The Persian Gulf region has been host to meaningful developments in Saudi's perception of 'self' and 'others' as early as 1920s, almost a decade before the official establishment of Saudi Arabia as a modern state. Unfortunately, missing from Cordesman's historical context is any discussion of almost a decade of developments that paved the way for the replacement of Britain with the United States in the Saudi's security calculations. The 1925 suppression of Sheikh Khazal's rebellion in Khuzestan by Reza Khan, facilitated by the British ambivalence in supporting their Arab ally—who had assumed the mantle of Arab nationalism in face of Tehran's growing power—had turned Abdul Aziz thoroughly skeptical of Britain and its willingness to deliver promises. Subsequently, Abdul Aziz decides to appease Iran unilaterally with the 1929 Treaty of Friendship. This decision came on the heels of Abdul Aziz's uncertainty about the fate of his rule in face of rebellious Ikhwan, Reza Shah's aggressive posture, riding on soaring Persian nationalist sentiments (which were essentially anti-Arab), and Britain's growing strategic interests elsewhere. Let's not forget that after First World War, the United States had presented itself as a benign alternative to French and British imperialism in the region, and Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Point Proposal was commonly cited by nationalists in their quest for self-determination. This was the regional context that offered a fertile ground for the growth of American influence in the region. To the dismay of the informed reader, however, Cordesman begins his presentation of regional history with a discussion of the 1933 oil concessions, without proper contextualization.

Cordesman argues that the Western reliance on a disrupted flow of oil from the Middle East at a reasonable price brings the political, economic, and military stability of the region to the core of Western interests. Yet he misses an opportunity to reveal the historical roots of these interests, instead focusing on the aftermath of 1974 oil embargo, which gives the false impression that the rise in significance of the oil fields in the Persian Gulf region is a far more recent phenomenon than it really is. The Western obsession with the Middle East oil predates the oil embargo by almost three quarters of a century. It was in the early years of the twentieth century that the British discovered the utility of oil for the oil-military complex. By 1912, the British Navy, in a transformational shift in its strategic calculations, was converting the fuel systems of its vessels from coal to oil so to outmaneuver the German fleets. This ambitious yet formidable decision redefined the significance of the Persian Gulf for the British altogether.

Moving forward, Cordesman uncritically makes the case for the intertwined fate of Al-Saud rule in Saudi Arabia and the West's vital interests in the region. In his portrayal of such a strategic partnership, Cordesman tends to be easy on foundational normative disparity between Saudi Arabia and the West. "Common commitment to private enterprise and to maintaining a stable balance of world trade" as seemingly seen in Saudi's "words and actions," Cordesman maintains, is enough for the West and Saudis to maintain close cooperation. He argues that there is no "major difference between Saudi Arabia and the West" and that the commonality of interests between the two actors towers over minor policy differences and disagreements (p. 14). Cordesman holds that "Saudi Arabia ha[d] backed the West in key policy thrusts" ; however, in international politics, neither coincidental alignment of policies nor puppeteered desirable policy outcomes essentialize any romanticized partnership. The United States was critical of Russia for decades before the rise of Hitler in Europe, which brought about an alignment of policies and then an alliance between the US and Russia for only a period of time. In the same vein, the United States' support of the authoritarian regimes around the world during the Cold War in pursuit of stability and containment of the Soviets was later replaced by another discourse in American foreign policy circles that supported democracy and democratization. In other words,

the alignment of policies between ideationally dissimilar states does not amount to normatively justified and unwavering commitments outside the functionality of the partnership. With that being said, Cordesman's effort to justify Saudi Arabia and rationalize the relationship between the West and the Saudi Kingdom beyond its scope and essence does not seem proper. The author never convincingly substantiates why "the Kingdom's politics and culture create a core of common interest" between Saudi Arabia and the West (p.41). It is difficult to understand how the author finds Saudi Arabia to be the center of "moderate Islamic forces" and what this notion has to do with the pro-West, anti-communist stand of Saudi Arabia. Cordesman does not empirically substantiate how "Saudi Arabia [consistently][supports] a policy of political and religious moderation." With similar apologeticism, Cordesman turns a blind eye on Saudi Arabia's "maintain[ing] relations with radical Arab states" (p.42), which he finds misunderstood in the West and, indeed, justifiable in light of Saudi's "limited population and relatively small armed forces" (p.42).

The persistent rule of Al-Saud family, the author argues, relies on political, military, and economic stability of the region, a condition that may assure the security of Saudi Arabia in face of the "360 [degree] threat" (p. 122) to the "free world's sources of imported oil" (p. 74). The author's indignant tone whenever the notion of "oil flow disruption" is mentioned clearly evokes the Western strategic mindset in the 20th century, specifically during the Cold War. As for the threats themselves, the author discounts Saudi Arabia's agency in identifying the threats posed to it—or at least the presentation of the threats insinuates as such. Unfortunately, Cordesman's references to the actual threats Saudi Arabia faces quite never receives any substantiation from the Saudi sources, and they are presented just as the West may have *thought* the situation to be. Cordesman enumerates these threats, but they largely boil down to "massive regional arms build-up...on all Saudi Arabia's borders" (p. 74). Unsurprisingly, a critique of the underlying reasons for the regional arms build-up is absent, and there is no discussion as to how some of the threats Saudi Arabia faces emanate from states who have been clients to the West's military technology. For example, Cordesman almost consistently evokes Iran's hostility towards Saudi Arabia without proper contextualization. He refers to the Iranian arms build-up as a threat to Saudi Arabia's security—and hence the region—but does not bother to bring into his analysis the fact that Iran, for many years before the 1979 revolution, was a beneficiary to the identical Western arms sale policies. Yet again, Cordesman's proposed remedy for Saudi's insecurity remains militarily in nature. This typical realist notion (*i.e.*, that arms build-up justifiably begets more arms build-up) is a predominant theme of Cordesman's book. The author's quick and effortless transition from underdeveloped discussion of threats and referent objects of security to characteristics, deployability, and efficiency of successive generations of weaponry (the author's strong suit) is unsettling.

In one of more successful chapters of the book, Cordesman builds upon the 1985-1986 Saudi arms sale crisis to demonstrate the difficulty of navigating waters between commitments toward Israel and the Arab world. In early 1985, President Reagan's intention to support Saudi Arabia with the sale of the latest military technology, "modernizing its...inventory of 60 F-15C/Ds to reflect the changes...made in the U.S. Air Force" (p. 16), was challenged in Congress. In these years, the US Congress, due to the efforts of the pro-Israel lobby, was polarized over the question of whether the United States should keep its strategic ties with Saudi Arabia or Israel. Congress' campaign against the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia was successful, and President Reagan had to notify King Fahd that it would be impossible for his administration to secure Congressional support for the package sale. Cordesman argues that "taking sides" in such

matters pertaining to strategic relationships turn out to be costly. He maintains that Saudi Arabia's decision to turn to Europe to obtain its strategic demands not only cost the United States in its strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia but also resulted in the loss of billions of dollars in arms exports (p. 227). When Cordesman discusses the costs of Saudis turn to Europe for obtaining what they needed for their security, it raises the question of whether the United States (if Cordesman is accurate in capturing the reality of the time) was interested in Saudi's security or simply in keeping the clientelist relationship between Saudi Arabia and the American military-industrial complex.

Overall, *Western Strategic Interests in Saudi Arabia* remains highly unbalanced. On the one hand, the strategic and security context for policy choices remain underdeveloped, unsubstantiated, and replete with unwarranted speculations, yet on the other hand, the depth, details, and subtleties in Cordesman's discussion of strategic interactions are outstanding. A persistent problematic trait throughout the book was the author's hasty navigation between the two realms of security and strategy. Cordesman's uncritical back and forth on his assumed chains of causality between the two realms leaves readers wondering how certain strategic calculations came to predominate. Another undeniable trait of this scholarship was the author's voice. Cordesman assumes an unreserved partisan voice in rationalizing strategic relations with Saudi Arabia and an uncritical advocacy of Al-Saud rule. This might have been due to Cold War exigencies and the difficulty of relinquishing the Manichean view of the world; nevertheless, the book would not pass as an enjoyable read for today's more critical eyes.

Leyla Saleh's *US Hard Power in the Arab World*, published in 2016, is an "explor[ation] of new empirical terrain within a novel framework of analysis" (p. 2). It brings not only a fresh perspective to the study of US foreign policy but also an authoritative utilization of constructivism to the study of international politics. Saleh is fascinated with what is often ignored in the discipline's mainstream ontological and epistemological biases: "existence and persistence of ... popular agency" (p. 2), which she beautifully portrays with her writing style and carefully chosen words. Saleh argues that the timely emergence of what she refers to as "indigenous soft power" (p. 4) in Syria should intrigue rethinking the exclusivity of soft power to the purview of Western elites. She asserts that the "indigenous, popular soft power of Syria's revolutionaries, as they struggle to attain freedom and dignity domestically while asserting their voice in international politics" (p. 2), is a force to be reckoned with. Therefore, she constantly bears in mind "the people" as she explores "the intersections of American foreign policy and Arab politics" (p.2).

Saleh questions the utility of Joseph Nye's theoretical framework in the Arab world. According to Nye, soft power (as opposed to hard power) is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (p. 9). In the third chapter, Saleh presents a critique of the tenets of Nye's theoretical framework, which attests to Saleh's command of Nye's thoughts on power and its limits. Saleh's text examines the power that stems from a country's culture, values, and domestic practices and the perceived legitimacy of its foreign policies, themes that were completely absent in Cordesman's scholarship. Citing Nye, Saleh establishes that governments typically utilize their so-called "public diplomacy" in order to muster resources needed to softly influence other nations by "propagating their messages." Saleh reminds us that Nye believes that "public diplomacy and soft power" can potentially be "strategically more advantageous than hard power" (p. 10). Departing from Cordesman's view of foreign policy, Saleh adheres to Nye's arguments about the utility of soft power, a model that she believes better corresponds to the realities of international politics. She further sees a dynamic in the interplay of

soft and hard power in US policy discourse towards the Arab world that constitutes an important contribution to the study of foreign policy.

One of the strongest chapters in Saleh's book is dedicated to a critical literature review that seeks to explore "the interaction between international and transnational actors and domestic political change in the Arab Middle East" (p. 20). She critically analyzes the sources categorized in constructivist literature on norms as the hinge for the interaction of domestic, international, and transnational levels of analysis; United States civil society and democratizing initiatives in the Arab Middle East; Syria's designation as a "rogue state" and its "subsequent exemption, if not exclusion from the US soft power efforts in the region"; and eventually the literature on the nexus of US foreign policy and democratization. The literature in this chapter, Saleh argues, demonstrates the limitations of the "War on Terror package of US foreign policy" (p. 13). Saleh maintains that "[r]eading...cumulative US efforts as self-consciously articulated 'narratives' of soft power allows us to untangle their relationship to hard power, assessing them in the broader context of how US grand strategy in the War on Terror is 'told' to the world" (p. X). In this narrative, she finds a careless or deceitful obscuration of soft and hard power, and she demonstrates in the chapter afterward why this obscuration accounts for the failures of the US foreign policy on this front.

The haziness of the boundaries of hard and soft power in American foreign policy toward the Arab Middle East makes attempting to firmly delineate such boundaries prone to failure. To illustrate this, Saleh builds on Agamben's "state of exception" (p. 13). Saleh makes a fascinating argument supported by proper reasoning and evidence that the "intertwine[ement] of violent and nonviolent methods" (p. 13), either by design or default, elevates the course of normal politics to a "state of exception." This occurs, she maintains, because the conceptual boundaries between what it means to wage a war and what it means to build a state become imprecise. Saleh argues that what is jeopardized in this conflation and consequent confusion is the American soft power ethos in the face of "bottom-up... resistance not just against the local authoritarianism but also against the global power dynamics" (p. 13). Saleh proceeds with adding another conceptual/theoretical layer to her critique of US foreign policy. She brings in Edward Said's critique of orientalism and Doty's postcolonial thoughts to argue how the concept of "smart power"—which, according to Nye, is meant to be a combination of both soft and hard power "in an effective strategy"—only serves to perpetuate "unequal and...irreconcilable cultural binaries through distinctions... couched in... the putatively neutral language of universal liberal culture and norms" (p. 47). Saleh masterfully navigates between points and particulars to suggest that a state of exception, characterized by tarnished conceptual boundaries of soft and hard power, has been an integral component to the US foreign policy and the War on Terror narrative over the years, across both the Bush and Obama administrations.

The author continues with a rigorous critical analysis of the US foreign policy discourse from early 2011 through late 2014 in an attempt to capture the Arab Spring and the creation of anti-ISIS coalition. For the majority of the work, Saleh provides empirical support for her arguments by analyzing the official discourse as reflected in government texts. She found this method the most suitable for the broadly constructivist approach, which is predicated on the constructivist tenets that agents and structures are mutually constitutive and that state interests are not immutable, unlike what Cordesman believes. Eventually, however, Saleh relies on "interview data and the revolutionary discourse" to examine a neglected aspect of the Syrian uprising, the revolutionaries' engagement with the United States. She believes that Syrian revolutionaries sometimes use "popular public diplomacy" as a preemptive measure against the

West. In her strong last chapter, Saleh makes the case that the timeframe between spring of 2011 through later in the same year (before the revolutionaries decided to bear arms for self-defensive purposes) was an interesting phase during which the “revolutionaries exhibited momentous power in the foreign policy arena monopolized by Assad’s credibility-seeking narrative” (p. 140). She argues that in this period, Syrians exercised an “indigenous soft power” meant to inspire the West to offer assistance with their quest for emancipation from the yoke of Asad’s regime.

In conclusion we can differentiate the two scholars along two lines. First, Cordesman’s work is overwhelmingly partisan, not necessarily meeting academic standards, and representing an “Orientalist” view of politics in the Middle East, but, on the other hand, aside from Saleh’s passionate effort to debunk some of the Orientalist mythical interpretations of politics in the Middle East—which sets the undertone of her work—one can hardly identify any such biases in Saleh’s incorporation of facts, narratives, and analysis. Second, Cordesman’s approach to political analysis, in line with much of the scholarship informed by positivist epistemology, remains elitist, top-down, and predicated on a perception of the state and society that views and treats the two as one monolithic whole; however, Saleh’s take on the state-society relations is more nuanced, and representing post-positivist ethos. The agency that Saleh assigns to “people” and the emphasis on potentials such an agency can have for international politics is a direct challenge to the elitist notion of politics that either disregards any agential role by people or perceives that agency neatly subsumed in the state’s policies. Finding an ideal balance between hard and soft power will continue to be a daunting task, necessitating an understanding of a complex dynamic of multiple actors, forces, layers of meaning and aspects of behavior on a case by case basis. This renders any universal prescription that would suit all political exigencies across time and space impossible.