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Golden Boys, Bros, and Barbecues: Gendered Occidentalism and the Shaping of US Policy in the Middle East

Drawing on ethnographic and archival research among foreign policy elites in Washington, DC, this article turns attention to the affective gendered and racialized work that shapes US foreign policy. In particular, this article focuses on a form of strategic mimicry I call "gendered Occidentalism," which has been used by representatives of Persian Gulf states to gain entry into the US foreign policy establishment, and through it, the authoritative power to interpret the "Middle East" for their elite American counterparts. To make this argument, I examine both a historical and contemporary case study, showing the trajectory of this gendered Occidentalism and the ways Gulf policy elites have been able to adapt these affective techniques to align with the changing gendered and racialized norms of the DC establishment. Ultimately, this article considers a more dynamic geopolitical landscape in which less powerful states can—through the affective techniques deployed by their representatives—influence how a hegemonic state like the United States perceives and pursues in its interests abroad. [gender, policy, affect, diplomacy, Middle East]

> To many in Washington, the [Iranian] ambassador is the golden boy of the diplomats. . . . They say he can outdance, outlisten, outtalk and outkiss any ambassador in the capital.
>
> – Mitchell (1978)

> "[The UAE ambassador] has a little bit more of a bro-ish, frat-boy vibe to him," says one person who has dined at his mansion.
>
> – Grim and Ahmed (2015)

Seated in my usual spot in the far corner of the conference room, I looked around at the two dozen research assistants and interns—unlike me, most of them white men under the age of thirty—who similarly gravitate to the back of such DC think tank events; the ideal location to see but not be seen. With nearly all of the young men staring at their phones, I could tell the first panel of this all-day Middle East security conference had failed to impress them, as it followed the same tired format most of us regular attendees expect of such events. A group of experts—a combination of think tank analysts and former US government officials—had taken slightly different positions on a given security question, delivered with a kind of detached politeness meant to index objectivity in Washington's foreign policy circles. During the Q&A, a few of the big-name journalists and experts in the front of the room asked more probing questions, eliciting a moderately more interesting back-and-forth among the speakers.

With little hope that the second panel would be different, I was gathering my belongings to leave when the event organizers announced the arrival of the next speaker. The mood in

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the room instantly changed. The young people around me were suddenly sitting upright, craning their necks to get a better view of the low stage. Even the big shots in the front row seemed more animated than usual. The two college-aged men to my immediate right (Hill interns from the look of them) nudged each other excitedly. As the Emirati ambassador, Yousef al-Otaiba (or Otaiba, for short), walked on to the low stage dressed in his perfectly tailored suit and tie, one of the interns leaned toward his friend and whispered, "Bro, this dude is so cool." The other young man exclaimed "I know!" in a tone that made clear that he too was aware of the diplomat's "cool" reputation.

Over the next forty minutes, the young men's enthusiasm (along with the rest of the audience's) seemed only to increase as the ambassador spoke. Though the Gulf diplomat delivered his country's official line on Middle East security issues, he did so in an engaging, friendly, and informal register full of insider DC references that not only contrasted noticeably with the detached formality of the previous panel but also seemed to affectively appeal to his predominantly white male audience. Otaiba openly cracked jokes with the woman moderator. He called certain regional actors in the region "bad guys" and made sports analogies that caused most of the men in the room to laugh on cue. Even the ambassador's physical presence—leaning back casually with one ankle resting comfortably on his other knee and wearing a relaxed smile—exuded a kind of easy masculine confidence that none of the other speakers that day had pulled off. I also observed that while he spoke English without a trace of an accent, he occasionally dropped in a few Arabic phrases, often when he was making more polemical pronouncements about the region that should have raised the eyebrows of the more seasoned Middle East watchers in the room. Instead, the audience continued to nod along encouragingly, at least, visibly, untroubled by his more controversial statements. By the time the moderator opened up the discussion for questions, no one asked a single critical question.

It took me some time, observing similar events to this one, to gain a better sense of Washington's seemingly enthusiastic response to the Emirati ambassador. After all, I had seen many diplomats and government officials speak around town over the course of two years of ethnographic research within the US foreign policy community, with nowhere near the same kind of reaction. As I delved more deeply into the ambassador's story in Washington and compared it with those of other popular diplomats, both past and present, I arrived at the conclusion that Otaiba's influence in DC was not derived from his specific insights or authority as a formal government representative from the Middle East. It came, paradoxically, from his abilities to make many in DC—from the young Hill interns to the top policy experts—forget he was one. Despite being from a region most of the US foreign policy community still overwhelmingly view as strange, backward, and overtly dangerous, Otaiba feels reassuringly familiar. He is "cool" in their eyes, reflecting back their white, heterosexual male-dominated policy culture with ease, while drawing just enough attention to his personal connections to the Middle East (through his occasional use of Arabic, for instance) to lend authority to his regional assessments. Through his ability to connect affectively to his predominantly white, male, American policy audiences, he has been able to convince many in Washington that his interests in the region are largely the same as their own.

Over the years, scholars and policy observers alike have tried, in different ways, to make sense of the United States' "troubling alliances" with governments around the world that are as notorious for their human rights abuses at home as their violent interventions abroad. In the Middle East, both critics and supporters of American imperialism have sought to explain such alliances by emphasizing the geopolitical features of the region that have served US hegemonic interests through such alliances, from access to cheap oil to the fight against

terrorism (Bacevich 2017; Bronson 2008; Mason 2014). Other observers have focused on the "corruption" involved in sustaining these alliances, arguing, in essence, that Americans have "sold our souls" (Baer 2004) for promises of oil and arms deals to human-rights abusing regional governments or else succumbed to their well-organized lobbying efforts in DC (Freeman 2012).[1] Still, some have turned their attention to the personal friendships among top leaders in the United States and the region (i.e., Saudi Prince Bandar and the Bush family), which have purportedly bolstered these formal state alliances against domestic critique (Ottaway 2010).

Acknowledging that these various factors have contributed to the durability of such state-to-state alliances, I want to offer another, though complementary, approach to understanding them based on my years of ethnographic research and outreach within the US foreign policy establishment (hereafter, Establishment). In this article, I suggest looking at how these formal government alliances are further facilitated through affective practices enacted within the Establishment by viewing both the state as a site of "affective formation" (Muir and Gupta 2018, 10) and the relations among states as affectively mediated. In particular, I want to draw attention to a subset of such affective work I call "gendered Occidentalism," through which elites from the global South strategically mimic the gendered and racialized norms, biases, and subjectivities of their counterparts in the Global North in order to influence American or European policies for their own interests.

To this end, I will focus on the experiences of two government representatives from the Persian Gulf who have deployed the techniques of gendered Occidentalism to render themselves more "legible" to—and thereby influential within—the DC-based establishment. (Note: I use the designation Persian Gulf despite the controversy around this labeling, as it is the name that has been historically used and continues to be recognized by the United Nations and other international bodies.) Specifically, I will first examine the historical case of Ardeshir Zahedi, the last Iranian ambassador to the United States before interrogating the more contemporary example of Ambassador Otaiba, drawing from my ethnographic fieldwork in DC from 2014 until 2016. I also rely on oral histories, autobiographies, and newspaper articles, as well as more recent interviews, participant-observation, and leaked emails provided to journalists to further interrogate how Washington's foreign policy community has understood and responded to these two Gulf diplomats.[2]

Using these two cases, I make the argument that gendered Occidentalism is an important though largely unexamined technique through which foreign elites have been able to gain "epistemic power" in Washington, or the authority to shape how the US government understands and pursues its interests abroad—a point I will expand upon in a moment. This focus on epistemic power draws on my broader research on expertise in the US foreign policy community and aligns with the observations of other anthropologists of policy (see Mosse 2005; Tate 2015), who see "policy influence" as largely tied to the ability to control narratives and interpret "facts" on behalf of the state and international institutions. Scholars from other disciplines who have studied think tanks (Drezner 2017; Parmar 2004) have similarly concluded that the ability to shape ideas translates into clear forms of policy influence in the US context.

However, to understand this central argument, I must clarify several concepts. First, I use the term "Occidentalism" in this context not to index a counter-hegemonic response among Persian Gulf governments against the US's legacy of Orientalist policy or thinking toward the region. Nor do I rely on the term to set up an essentialized opposition between a mythical Orient and Occident (Carrier 1992). On the contrary, I view this Occidentalism as co-constitutive of historically mediated forms of Orientalism. Second, I contend that such Occidentalism represents a form of strategic mimicry, used by those deemed Other in the

logics of imperialism to exert influence on to those who seek to dominate them. Here I borrow from Homi Bhabha's conception of "colonial mimicry," which he explains as:

> The [colonial] desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. [. . .] To be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. [. . .] Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power. (Bhabha 1994, 122–23)

Through the discourses of mimicry, the colonized subject embodies those features of the colonizer that makes them more recognizable to the colonizer, but through imperfect enactments that ensure the hierarchies between the colonized and colonizer persist.

While the type of mimicry I observed in DC (and traced through archival sources) is no longer produced through direct colonial domination, it is still wrought through the effects of decades of American regional hegemony. I see the Gulf diplomats' gendered mimicry as defined by its slippages against the US policy elite. In Bhabha's terms, these Gulf state representatives use this technique to render themselves as *almost* the same as their masculine, heterosexual, white counterparts in DC, yet allow enough "Oriental slippage"—such as Otaiba's strategic use of Arabic phrases—to mark their own interpretations of the Middle East as "authentic" to a persistently racist US foreign policy community that maintains its superiority to those in the region they seek to dominate.[3]

Though many would treat this "mimicry" as a sign of internalized subjugation, Bhabha noted the ambivalence inherent in such mimicry, which could also be used by the colonized to exert their own demands within the oppressive structures of colonialism. Similarly, I view the two Gulf ambassadors' gendered Occidentalism as strategic in its ability to sway US policy opinions for their own means by not being fundamentally "critical" of the US empire, as both diplomats largely supported policies that reinforced US regional dominance.

To further clarify, I do not set out in this article to prove that governments from the Middle East have enacted gendered Occidentalism as an intentional state policy. Instead, I am interested in showing how skilled diplomatic representatives from two very different Gulf countries—operating during distinct though equally fraught periods of US-Middle East relations—have used similar affective techniques to become "trusted" sources of regional expertise for the Establishment, mediating how US policy elites ultimately view and treat this region. As David Mosse explains, when studying policy "what is usually more urgent and more practical is [understanding who has] control over the interpretation of events" (2005, 8). In short, through gendered Occidentalism, representatives from the Middle East have been able to skillfully gain control over the interpretation of events in their own region with their American counterparts.

Through this analysis, I am making several broader interventions. First, I am connecting to more recent anthropological research pushing back against Eurocentric understandings of "geopolitics" as something the United States and other Western states impose on the rest of the world (Al-Bulushi 2014; Dua 2019; McGranahan and Collins 2018). My study of two Gulf diplomatic actors operating in DC reveals a far more dynamic, competitive view of geopolitics in which policy elites from a region long dominated by US empire still exert influence on the hegemon. More particularly, I push back against problematic tropes about Gulf leaders that portray them as either passive recipients of US hegemony or as unsophisticated tyrants who rely entirely on gratuitous exchanges of money to exert their

influence. As Neha Vora notes, "Many representations of the Gulf ironically rely upon facile and Orientalist understandings of Gulf governments, people, and politics in order to argue against American neocolonialism in the region" (2015, 21).

Subsequently, my focus on the affective dimensions of this more complex geopolitical landscape builds on anthropological studies of affective governance, which have provided a much-needed corrective to studies of state power that continually overemphasize the place of rationality and formal politics (Mathur 2016; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Stoler 2007). Similarly, anthropologists of policy have revealed how policymaking is as rooted in forms of relationality and social obligations as it is in formal legal and political structures (Mosse 2005; Schwegler 2008; Tate 2015). As Janine Wedel explains, America's elites increasingly operate "through personalized relations within and across official structures, and act primarily based on loyalty to people, not organizations, to realize their goals" (2009, 15). Much of the anthropological work on affect and policy has focused on dynamics within states or in international institutions such as the World Bank or International Criminal Court (Clarke 2019). My study considers the affective dimensions that shape the formalized relations among states—moving even further beyond normative models of international relations and diplomacy that focus either on the "rational" negotiation of state interests or on the interpersonal relationships forged by those at the top of the state hierarchy. My research measures "policy influence" in much broader terms, showing how Otaiba's and Zahedi's power in Washington rested on their abilities to shape the wider "common sense" in DC about the region through such affective techniques—swaying not only the president's views of the region but also those of the Hill interns who aspire for such positions of power.

Finally, this study reveals that (hetero)sexism, combined with a particular brand of American Orientalism, is fundamental in understanding how such affective diplomacy operates in the context of the US empire. Here I look to the work of feminist international relations scholars (Cohn 1987; Enloe 2007; Peterson 1999; Tickner 1992) and feminist and queer theorists of the post-9/11 security state (Grewal 2017; Povinelli 2006; Puar 2007), who have demonstrated the centrality of (hetero)sexist and racist logics to the overlapping projects of empire and national security. Despite more recent critiques from women foreign policy elites of different backgrounds (Razavi 2021), the fact that the US foreign policy community remains overwhelmingly white, male, and heterosexual speaks to this reality (Jakes 2020). This homogeneity subsequently ensures the ontologies, epistemologies, and hierarchies that maintain the current system of foreign policy become naturalized, excluding all other approaches to global affairs (Cohn 2019). What my research contributes to these overlapping bodies of scholarship is to show how foreign elites use these gendered logics to serve their own sovereign interests. By pointing to a historical case study and more recent ethnographic observations, I also reveal a fluidity in the ways these logics are interpreted and enacted affectively, as representatives from two Gulf countries have had to shift the valences of their sexism and racism to align with changing norms within the Establishment's policy community in terms of how it views itself and the "Middle East."

The Seductions of Ardeshir Zahedi

"With concern for the American hostages foremost in American minds, the sophisticated and subtle seduction of high American officials, politicians and journalists by the shah's man [Zahedi] in Washington has almost been forgotten" (Meyer 1979).

The first time I heard anyone in Washington mention Ardeshir Zahedi was during a one-on-one meeting with a former Iranian diplomat who had worked for the shah. I was sharing some of my initial observations about DC's positive (and arguably uncritical) reception of

Otaiba and his regional assessments. Suddenly, the ex-diplomat interrupted my comments with frustration:

> Oh this childish love affair you see in DC with [. . .] Otaiba, it used to be the same thing with the shah and Zahedi. Just speak perfect English, throw big exclusive parties, throw your money around town, and suddenly you're the hottest thing in DC. To hell with the people of Iran. [Switching to Persian] Americans are simple. Make them feel at home and special at the same time, and they do what you want.

Struck by the diplomat's words, I began delving more deeply into Zahedi's history. The more I did so, the more parallels I began to uncover between Washington's historical treatment of the Iranian diplomat and its contemporary response to Otaiba.

In this section, I will focus on how Zahedi used and adapted the affective mimicry of gendered Occidentalism to gain Washington's trust, affection, and ultimately the epistemic power to shape its thinking on Iran during his two terms as ambassador to the United States from 1960 to 1962 and then later from 1973 to 1979. Once again, by focusing on these two distinct periods, I show how gendered Occidentalism was not a static set of techniques, but one that uniquely adapted to the gendered norms and expectations of the Establishment.

Entry into the Masculine Aristocracy

Zahedi arrived in DC during his first term as ambassador not only as a foreigner representing a country few Americans knew anything about at the time but also as a decided outsider to what Robert Dean (2003) has called the "Imperial Brotherhood" of the Kennedy administration. As Dean points out, the Kennedy administration was comprised of a group of men educated in the same boarding schools and elite Ivy League universities, served in similar military units, and joined all-male social clubs in DC. Though educated in the United States, Zahedi had studied at a state university in Utah and could hardly call upon a network of old East Coast friends to gain access to this masculine aristocracy.

As such, Zahedi was forced to find other ways to win their favor. He writes in his autobiography:

> Most Americans, even Senators and Representatives of Congress, didn't know Iran well, and, for the most part, were not in touch with any Iranians, and this in practice had a big [negative] effect on the relationship between Iran and the U.S. [. . .] In this way, I decided to personally get to know representatives of Congress, even those who did not have a supportive opinion of Iran and develop a friendship with them. (Zahedi 2010, 138)

He goes on to describe how he tried to cultivate such friendships by hosting regular social events, including lunches and dinner parties for US officials, explicitly to sell his version of Iran to them. His advantage in these social interactions was that the Americans had little knowledge of Iran, and therefore relied wholeheartedly on his assessments of what was happening in his country, while he was more familiar with American culture and values. He used this knowledge to set up social events that appealed to the desires and tastes of his white male American policy counterparts, such as hosting popular barbecues, while offering enough exotic, Orientalist attractions, such as beautiful Iranian dancers, to further entice them. All of this enabled him to perform the delicate balance of mimicry

that made him a comfortingly familiar but also uniquely interesting party host against the homogenous backdrop of early sixties DC.

This early set of social events were so successful in bolstering the Iranian diplomat's epistemic power that many journalists, government officials, and others in DC openly deferred to the ambassador's assessments of Iranian domestic and regional dynamics even when other actors from the country directly contradicted them. For instance, when a group of Iranian student activists disrupted one of Zahedi's parties in DC to protest the shah's tyranny, the *Washington Post* referred to the demonstration as a "melee" (1961, A13). A few months later, another journalist for the paper interviewed the student protestors but ultimately deferred to Zahedi's narrative that it was these student protestors (not the shah) who failed to represent the needs of Iranian students (Gustaitis 1961). At another event commemorating the shah's "success" in overthrowing the democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, in 1953,[4] a journalist in attendance uncritically accepted Zahedi's pro-monarchist, anti-Communist framing of the coup as a given. Instead, she focused on the "gossamer orange scarves float[ing] on the agile wrists of an Iranian student moving in the ancient dances of her country" (Martin 1961, B4), which she contrasts later with the "hot Spanish music" played on the terrace.

Beyond his parties, Zahedi similarly relied on his young wife, Shahnaz (the shah's daughter), who appealed to the Establishment's gendered and racialized desires, to gain further acceptance within DC. Nearly all of the American coverage of the couple I found from this time focus on Shahnaz's beauty and "surprisingly" Western looks and tastes. A *Los Angeles Times* piece observed Shahnaz "looks at first glance more French than Persian" (Evans 1961, M11), which was no doubt meant as a compliment to the half-Egyptian, half-Iranian woman. The next year, Shahnaz was featured in *Vogue* as one of "The Young International Beauties," alongside a number of young women from across Europe's elite—cementing her appeal as foreign yet sufficiently "white" woman.[5] At the same time, I would argue Zahedi's marriage to Shahnaz was also instrumental in confirming the diplomat's heterosexuality. Since the McCarthy era, fear of homosexuality had become intimately linked in the United States with fears of communism, in what became known as the "Lavender Scare" (Dean 2003). It is likely that Zahedi felt additional pressures to establish his heterosexuality, given pervading racist, Orientalist beliefs about the supposed depravity and innate homosexuality of the "Oriental," which dominated early Cold War American thinking (Shibusawa 2012). More broadly, Zahedi had to align with the gendered social expectations of men—in these elite policy circles, which to some extent persist today—that encourage homosocial bonding in ways that are explicitly and negatively contrasted against homosexuality. As feminist international relations scholar V. Spike Peterson, explains, "The modern state's juridical and productive power denies male homosocial sexuality in favor of male homosocial politics" (1999, 43).

Having established his heterosexuality during his first tour in DC, Zahedi was able to shed his image as the husband of a princess—as the couple divorced a few years later in London—to instead become the playboy of Washington when he returned again in 1973.

1973–1979: The Playboy

Comparing the coverage of Zahedi in the sixties with that of the seventies, I was immediately struck by how much more overtly sexualized the representations of Zahedi became in the American press during his second term as ambassador. Soon after returning to DC in 1973, Sally Quinn, of the *Washington Post*, wrote:

> [Zahedi] lifted his glass and proposed another toast. "This toast would not be complete if I didn't drink to the most important people here tonight," he said in a heavy Persian accent, "to all the beautiful roses, the ladies, who grace my tables this evening." He pursed his lips in a kissing gesture, held his glass aloft, then took a seductive sip of champagne. "God," said one of the beautiful roses at the next table, "that guy could charm the pants off you if you weren't careful." (Quinn 1973, L1)

In another piece, Helen Smith, of the *Atlanta Constitution*, explains, "His nose is too prominent, his teeth are uneven, his black hair is receding at the temples, and deep lines etch his strong face [. . .] and yet so compelling is the total charm of Ardeshir Zahedi [. . .] that you feel as if you're in the presence of a handsome god" (1975, 3B).

I would assert that these (mostly women) journalists' heightened focus on Zahedi's sexual appeal not only reflected the ambassador's changed marital status but also shifting gender and sexual norms within the Establishment at this time. After all, this was the time period when Henry Kissinger was known as a swinging bachelor, as notorious for his womanizing as his realist views of foreign policy. The Iranian government seemed ready to exploit this fact. In one infamous state visit to Iran, the shah had a belly dancer openly seduce Kissinger, much to the American statesman's open delight (Shaw 1972). Meanwhile, in Washington, Zahedi was trying to "seduce" the Establishment, hosting even more lavish parties for US politicians than during his previous tour in DC. Such events brought politicians in close contact with American celebrities, from professional sports heavyweights like Redskins coach George Allen to singers like Barbra Streisand to Hollywood actresses like Elizabeth Taylor (with whom the ambassador was famously rumored to be having an affair). Thus, even among the powerful circles of DC, Zahedi was a star; a man to be envied for his ability to befriend other interesting men and seduce the most beautiful, famous women in American society. Celebrity biographer C. David Heymann writes:

> People were still talking about the night Clare Booth Luce, Marlene Dietrich, and Pamela Harriman rose to their feet and began emulating the undulating movements of the nubile belly dancers engaged by Zahedi for the occasion. Or the party at which a dozen influential male lobbyists were "entertained" by an equal number of high-priced party girls, similarly supplied by the embassy. (2004, 270)

In other words, Zahedi was celebrated for helping Washington fulfill its own Orientalist fantasies by having Hollywood actresses take on the role of the seductive Eastern belly dancer, while also supporting DC's long-established practice of hiring women sex workers as a means of further cementing homosocial bonds among men.

During his second tour, Zahedi further enacted this gendered Occidentalism by downplaying those aspects of his racialized and religious identity that could hinder his social acceptance within Washington at this particular moment in history. In all of the American coverage of Zahedi's time in Washington, I could only find one mention of his Muslim background. Instead, most of the media representations focused on his connections to "ancient Persia"—a discursive pattern that reflected Iranian forms of Islamophobia and anti-Arab chauvinism that ideologically underpinned the shah's modernization projects at the time (Moallem 2005). Furthermore, such discourses fed into growing anti-Arab sentiments developing within the US foreign policy community at the time, given the 1973 Arab oil embargo, the Arab states' war with Israel, and the emergence of various strands of

"radical" Arab politics, particularly among Arab-Americans and Palestinian activists (Hagopian 1975; Hottinger 1973). With his decidedly "Persian" identity, Zahedi reinforced the Establishment's growing anti-Arab racism during this period. In this and others ways, Zahedi was able to enact the core mimicry of gendered Occidentalism, performing his heterosexual masculine identity in ways that were familiar enough to appeal to his racist, sexist, white, male counterparts but also subtly reminding them that as someone "from" the Middle East, his views of the region and its people carried more weight and legitimacy.

Ultimately, by pointing to Zahedi's use of gendered Occidentalism to gain epistemic power in Washington, I am not dismissing the geopolitical dynamics of the region at the time, which undoubtedly made Iran an invaluable, though deeply flawed, regional ally for the United States in the 1970s (Alvandi 2014). Rather, by looking closely at Zahedi's experiences and reception in Washington, I am pushing back against the US policy community's own conception of geopolitics as an objective, rationalist calculation about US interests in the Middle East. Instead, the shah's government found a receptive audience in Washington willing to accept Zahedi's interpretations of what was happening inside Iran and the wider region, precisely because Zahedi knew how to perform DC's own shifting sexism and racist attitudes (particularly against Arabs). The American foreign policy community's understanding of what *constituted* their interests in the Middle East was mediated by a regional representative for whom they had developed deep affection and trust, precisely because of his strategic mimicry of their own heterosexual desires and racialized prejudices.

Zahedi's reliance on gendered Occidentalism during this critical period in US-Iran relations—fueled by infamously lavish parties, beautiful women, and a seductive host who appealed to the gendered, racialized, and sexual desires of the DC community—further helped members of the Establishment turn a blind eye to the abuses and brutality of the shah, even as opposition to the monarch was rapidly growing inside Iran and in the diaspora. As a US-based journalist would later write, "Ardeshir Zahedi skillfully courted the Washington establishment. By a dazzling feat of political legerdemain, the Shah kept the eyes of official Washington focused on him alone, as if the rest of Iran didn't exist" (Wade 1979, 1282).

Washington Bros: Gendered Occidentalism in the Present Day

"I mean, you've got to admit. What he's saying, it just makes sense," the middle-aged white woman leaned in to whisper in my ear. Taken aback by her comment, I stared at the woman for a moment, unable to respond. Here I was at yet another think tank conference in DC, hearing Emirati Ambassador Yousef al-Otaiba deliver comments. Just as I had observed before, the audience at this event seemed wholly impressed by the diplomat, laughing along with his jokes and nodding their support for his policy recommendations. While I had grown accustomed to such responses, I was surprised by the woman's open endorsement for the ambassador, given that he had just told the audience that the best way to deal with Middle Eastern "extremists" was to force them on a plane and take them back to the region, where their governments could put more "pressure" on them to reform. After her response, I looked around the room to see if anyone else was taken aback by the diplomat's euphemistic call for rendition and torture. Most continued to nod along unfazed. Later, over lunch, I asked the woman, who worked for one of the largest private US consulting firms, to explain her support for the ambassador's ideas. She said, "I mean, he knows better than us how to deal with extremists, doesn't he? And he just makes sense."

At the time, I was confused by her statement. Did she mean the ambassador's support for torture was somehow rational in some Machiavellian understanding of the ends

justifying the means? Or was she signaling instead that the ambassador's words were "legible" to her, not just because she understood his words but also because she was reassured by how familiar he felt to her, despite being from the same society as "those extremists." Later, after my meeting with the former Iranian diplomat (who had worked with the shah, mentioned earlier) prompted me to look further into Zahedi's case, I began to lean toward the second interpretation. While most of my DC interlocutors have explained the United States' ever-growing closeness to the United Arab Emirates over the past decade in the usual "geopolitical" terms (i.e., balancing Iran or fighting terrorism), I became more attuned to the affective work at play in cementing these alliances. Returning to my central assertion in this piece, the end goal has been to give diplomats like Otaiba epistemic power—or the authority to interpret the region ("he just makes sense")—for the wider Establishment.

As with Zahedi, I would argue that gendered Occidentalism has become one of these affective strategies, though adapted to the contemporary moment. Thus, instead of being enamored by "swinging bachelors" who refer unabashedly to women as "roses," Washington has become a city dominated by "bros": the frattish, white, privileged, heterosexual male figure known for his misogyny and racism. During my fieldwork, many of my interlocutors liked to refer to large swaths of DC as "bros," including many of the young white men working as congressional staffers and the older "lobbying bros" that dominate the social scene in DC. The bro figure, it should be noted, is not isolated to any particular political party.[6]

In this milieu, DC's nickname for Otaiba, "Bro-taiba" (Grim and Ahmed 2015), confirms their collective embrace of his gendered and racialized positionality. I heard everyone from former Pentagon officials to rising journalists use the nickname at events around town. Given the intensity of Islamophobia and Orientalism that has dominated Washington's thinking toward the Middle East since 9/11, their nickname indexes the effectiveness of Otaiba's deployment of gendered Occidentalism. Unlike the case of Zahedi, I was able to observe how this gendered Occidentalism influenced the DC policy community in real time. Though I never interviewed Otaiba, I heard him speak at many policy events around DC, similar to the two I have recounted here. I also tracked press coverage of his social and diplomatic life in Washington and heard secondhand accounts of his "off the record" discussions with many of my interlocutors.

For instance, a journalist who works on Middle East security issues explained how she saw Otaiba and the UAE policy operatives in DC as being more "sophisticated" than the Saudis: "The Saudis just throw a lot of money around town. And their guys [in DC] are easily identifiable because they are so bad at disguising the official Saudi line. But Otaiba is smarter. He knows how Washington ticks. You know?" I heard many of my interlocutors repeat these claims, arguing that Otaiba's political savviness was born of his "deeper understanding" of American culture and political system, starting from his years studying at Georgetown University, followed by a fellowship at the National Defense University, and ultimately cemented as ambassador to the United States since 2007. Even those in DC who see his influence as dangerous for the United States seem unable to deny his affective power. As a former Hill staffer told me:

> Otaiba would meet with Senators and others, and they would be eating out of his hand by the end of the discussion. He'd crack jokes and you'd be looking at your boss, like, "Seriously, did you just hear him admit to god knows what kind of awful thing?" But that's how good he is.

In a *Huffington Post* piece titled "His Town," the two journalists referred to Otaiba as "the most charming man in Washington: He's slick, he's savvy and he throws one hell of a party. And if he has his way, our Middle East policy is going to get a lot more aggressive." Later in the piece, the journalists quoted a former top Defense Department advisor, Matt Spence, as saying Otaiba's "been remarkably effective for two reasons: it's clear he's speaking on behalf of the [Emirati] government when he's talking and he's very accessible" (Grim and Ahmed 2015).

I would assert that Otaiba's "accessibility" is shaped by gendered Occidentalism. Thus, as with Shahnaz Zahedi, Otaiba's wife has been useful in this regard. Paralleling the coverage of Shahnaz from fifty years earlier, Abeer Otaiba is often represented as a fashionably "modern" beautiful woman and a loving mother and wife. She serves as the perfect companion not only to establish her husband's heterosexuality but also his subjectivity as a sufficiently (though not entirely) Western man. For instance, a feature on Abeer in *Vogue Arabia* included:

> The couple is renowned in their circle for their barbecues by the pool. "Yousef is a grill master and we are known for serving the best burgers in town," she smiles. Her Lebanese in-house chef always makes ma'amoul, with guests often texting her in advance to request the date-filled biscuits. If they feel so comfortable with her, Al Otaiba attributes it to being one-half of a "young, laidback, cool couple." (Minthe 2018)

Once again, here is the contrast between the slightest Oriental touches (ma'amoul) and the most American of tastes and traits (barbecues and cool couples). And though Abeer is given a more contemporary treatment than Shahnaz, with focus on her fashion company, this piece and others disempower her in familiar Western tropes about Muslim or Arab women (Abu-Lughod 2013), even when paradoxically attempting to show her as strong and independent. Nearly all of the coverage of Abeer is in fashion or lifestyle magazines. Like other wives of prominent Arab leaders in recent years, she is not treated as a "serious" foreign policy voice in her own right by Westerner commentators. Instead, she is valued for her business savvy and embrace of consumerism in contrast to the masses of "oppressed" women in her region (Sukarieh 2015).

For his part, the ambassador has also had to counter Orientalist tropes about Arab/Muslim men being against women's empowerment. In an open letter he published to his daughter, Samia, he tells her he hopes she will be a strong Arab Muslim woman (Otaiba 2017). On multiple occasions in DC, I heard Otaiba talk about the importance of women's rights across the Muslim world, particularly as an antidote to "extremism." At one such event, I sat with an acquaintance who works on gender issues in the Middle East for the US government. When I expressed concern that the audience was once again failing to push back on the ambassador's comments, particularly when he failed to mention the continued problems Emirati women face, she brushed aside my critiques. "Look at least he's trying to have these conversations as an Arab man," she told me. "I think that's progress, right?"

However, Otaiba's most effective technique in undermining the image of the patriarchal Arab Muslim man has been to play up his own "bro"-ish image—ironically, with all of its own misogynistic, heteronormative connotations. After his private emails were leaked to the press in 2017, journalists revealed the ambassador's penchant for high-end sex workers and Vegas trips with former Georgetown classmates to pick up (in his own words) "dumb" women. Some of these trips took place just a year before becoming ambassador (Grim 2017). Leaked pictures of the younger Otaiba show him sitting at a restaurant with his

arms around an exotic dancer or hanging over the shoulders of his male friends, reflecting images of homosocial bonding deeply familiar to a younger generation of white men in Washington. As Winifred Tate (2015) found in her work on US drug policies, Colombian forces and American political elites often cemented their relationships through these kinds of overt homosocial performances that at once reinforced their heterosexual masculinity and allowed for greater familiarity with (and trust in) one another.

Many of my interlocutors—across the political spectrum—confided that they found Otaiba's images so deeply familiar that they actually increased his credibility and epistemic power. A right-wing think tank expert who works on security issues in the region told me she thought any backlash against Otaiba would be "hypocritical considering half of Washington has photos like this." Even self-proclaimed feminists in the Establishment, who rejected the misogyny of the ambassador's actions and words, essentially made the same claims, arguing that his indiscretions were (sadly) not newsworthy by DC standards. Even if they did not like his actions or words, his particular performance of hypermasculinity made him feel more accessible and familiar.

At the same time, I would contend that Otaiba influence in DC is not simply because he mirrors Washington's dominant sexism and racism but also because he has the mastered the essence of mimicry, presenting himself as the "same but not quite." Thus, as much as he is seen as a bro in a city of bros, he also understands that his views on the Middle East are largely taken seriously when he carefully reminds his interlocutors that he is "still" a Muslim, Arab man. Returning to the opening vignette of this article, I noticed immediately how his use of Arabic allowed him to signal his regional "expertise," in a context in which there were fewer visible markers to draw upon. At other times, he has played with visual representations to reflect this mimicry. One photo that was widely circulated in DC is of him in a white traditional thobe surrounded by Western women in revealing dresses—a visual reminder of his ability to be both bro and Arab at the same time. The ambiguity rooted in this mimicry is what makes Otaiba such an effective, trusted expert on the Middle East within the DC Establishment.

Ultimately, with the accessibility that comes from this gendered Occidentalism, Otaiba has played a tremendous role in shaping the Establishment's views of problems in the region far beyond the UAE's borders—from the civil war in Syria to Iran's nuclear program to supporting the ongoing assault on Yemen. There have been minimal critiques in DC of the Emirates' human rights abuses at home and its expansionist foreign policy in the region. I interacted with government officials, think tank experts, and other policy "influencers" who relied entirely on the official Emirati interpretation of events on the ground—a further reflection of his epistemic power in Washington. As a male think tank expert who served at high levels in both the Bush and Trump administrations explained to me, "In places like Yemen where I can't go myself and talk to people, I'm bound to trust an ally like the Emiratis to interpret the facts on the ground. I know it is reliable stuff, you know?" He went on to explain that his trust was further facilitated by his personal feelings for Otaiba, which had been fostered over the years at social events and dinners around DC and in the region. Describing Otaiba as a "really funny and decent guy," this expert connected his seeming affection for Otaiba to his trust in the Gulf diplomat's assessments of the Middle East.

Conclusion

By focusing on the affective strategy of gendered Occidentalism, as wielded by different Gulf representatives in the past and present, I have tried to shed light on the subtle techniques of power and influence that other countries, including those long dominated by the United States, have had on the global hegemon. By reflecting the Establishment's

problematic gendered and racialized norms and biases, Gulf diplomats such as Zahedi and Otaiba have been able to develop closer relationships with the policy community and, through them, the epistemic power needed to interpret the politics of the region on their behalf. In this way, gendered Occidentalism helps to push back against views of the US empire as a bounded state apparatus immune to foreign interferences. Furthermore, it draws attention to the informal, affective nature of international relations, on the one hand, and the deeply racialized, classed, and gendered hierarchies that underpin the practices of diplomacy, on the other hand. The implications of these findings clearly extend far beyond the Persian Gulf and the Middle East, as many in the Establishment have tried to frame the issue of "foreign interference" during the Trump administration as an exception or aberration to the norm. This study helps to reconsider this narrative, showing how through the forging of social relationships, everyday exchanges, and forms of mutual intelligibility rooted in classed, racialized, and gendered performances, governments outside the United States have been able to influence how Washington understands and enacts its power abroad.

Notes

1. Such narratives about the pernicious effect of foreign money—particularly from governments in the Persian Gulf—became especially popular American policy circles during the Trump administration, as the business interests of the Trump family became blatantly intertwined with their diplomatic agenda in the region (Bazzi 2019). Similarly, the Biden administration's more recent decision not to take legal action against Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, despite his proven role in the brutal murder of Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, has refueled these kinds of accusations (Wright 2021).
2. I point out here that gendered Occidentalism is not an affective technique solely used by diplomats from the Persian Gulf or the Middle East more broadly. I could readily have pulled from contemporary and historical examples from across East Asia or Latin America. However, the focus of my broader research has been on US-Middle East policy debates. I selected these particular Gulf representatives because of the ways my contemporary DC interlocutors made the parallels between the two men clearer for me. Additionally, within the Establishment, the influence of "Gulf countries" on US policy is often problematically reduced to their financial wealth—a narrative I problematize in this article.
3. In this way, my conception of Occidentalism is also distinctive from the Persian concept of *gharbzadegi* (often translated as "Westoxification"), which Iranian intellectual Jalal al-Ahmed famously developed in the 1960s to describe Iranians' sickly fascination with all things Western during the period of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last shah of Iran. Unlike gharbzadegi, I am suggesting this gendered Occidentalism serves as a technique of power for Gulf representatives as they navigate their complicated relations with the United States.
4. According to declassified documents, it has since been definitively proven that the CIA played a key role in overthrowing Mossadegh. See: Byrne 2013
5. To understand the complexities of race in Iranian and Iranian-American communities, see Maghbouleh 2017.
6. Most recently, the "Bernie Bro" emerged as a particular figure. "The defining feature of the Bernie Bro is his gender identity; he has come to stand in for a loud, fervent millennial male supporter tainted by misogyny" (Albrecht 2016, 509).

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