



# The Education of an Arabist

*One Foreign Service officer discovers that specialization is not without its perils as he faces the problems of skeptical superiors and hostile special interest groups.*

By CURTIS F. JONES

I entered the Foreign Service in 1946, much impressed by the word coming out of Washington that the postwar diplomat would be a new breed—not the effete Ivy Leaguer of former years but a concerned public servant who would mix freely with other nationalities and speak their languages like his own. Having received some wartime instruction in Moroccan Arabic, I became an Arabic language officer, never dreaming that the time would come when the appellation of Arabist would acquire faint opprobrium, and those who held it would face automatic exclusion from the formulation of U.S. policy in the Mideast.

I soon discovered that the acquisition of an exotic language is a lifetime endeavor, fraught with formidable linguistic and sociological obstacles.

The Arabist in the U.S. government must work within a bureaucracy made up largely of people unattuned to the special difficulties of learning an exotic tongue, people who do not always appreciate that fluency is a mercurial quality that fluctuates with the speaker's exposure to the language.

There is only one way to gain fluency in a language, and that is to speak it—morning, noon, and night. The language student needs access to native speakers friendly enough to admit him or her to their inner circle, where easy banter replaces stilted formalities. But here again the Arabist is handicapped, this time by the Arabs themselves. For most of them, fluency in English is important not only to their prestige but sometimes their financial security as well. Arabists who hope a social gathering will provide an opportunity to chitchat in their newly learned, ex-

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otic tongue must take care or they will spend the evening listening to Arabs practicing their English. Small wonder that some Arabists end up more fluent in French, which is still favored by some upper-class elements in North Africa and the Levant.

My own progress in Arabic owed much to the friendliness of evening get-togethers in places such as the Cafe della Posta in Tripoli, Libya, and the Bayt al Hadid in Port Said, and to the fortunate introduction of tennis into the Mideast by the British. In many countries where the political situation was volatile or relations with the United States were strained, the local citizenry shunned U.S. diplomats except in the most innocent of circumstances, such as on the tennis court. In this relaxed ambience, it was possible—without ever broaching sensitive topics—to get a subliminal feel of the local situation and sometimes to intercept information of immediate utility.

## Court Uprising

If I learned nothing else, I suspect the hours I spent on the court were vindicated one day in September 1961, when a casual tennis acquaintance stopped me on a Damascus street to murmur that it was time “you Americans helped us to get rid of these Nefertitis.” It was the third year of the Syrian-Egyptian union, and the “Nefertitis” to whom he alluded were the Egyptian officials Nasser had sent north to rule the Syrian region of the United Arab Republic. Taken with other straws in the wind, this brief conversation emboldened Consulate General Damascus to send a cable alerting the department to the possibility of an imminent anti-Egyptian uprising in Syria. Two weeks later, elements of the Syrian army revolted, Syria seceded from the UAR, and Con-Gen Damascus had accomplished that most difficult of feats in the realm of

political analysis—a near-term prediction that proved correct.

Those two decades following World War II were the halcyon days for the practicing Arabist. The calving of each new mini-state from Britain's crumbling Mideast empire was cause for the creation of another U.S. diplomatic mission. While Russian-language officers stood in line for jobs in Moscow and gratefully accepted postings along the Soviet periphery, each new graduate of the Foreign Service Institute's Arabic program could choose from a variety of stimulating assignments in a flock of exotic countries.

But all was not peaches and cream. As early as 1948, I began to suspect that my chosen path as an Arabic specialist was not without obstacles—some of which were my own superiors. That year I was winding up a tour in Ethiopia and expecting to study Arabic at the FSI in Washington, when the legation at Addis came up for inspection. The inspector had strong views on my plans. An old Mideast hand, he had been trained in the pre-war days when the department sent its language students to oriental language school in Paris. There he had studied classical Arabic in the traditional way as a dead language and never learned to speak any of the living dialects. This frustrating experience had convinced him that no one American-born and bred would ever speak Arabic well enough for diplomatic purposes; one could carry on social conversation, but in official dialogues native interpreters would still be necessary. Why then, he asked, did I propose to waste my time and the taxpayers' money at FSI?

I was not then in a position to enlighten the inspector with the knowledge that within ten years several of the graduates of the FSI Arabic program were to prove him wrong. I could only assert my belief that Arabic study would make me more useful to

the department and my work more meaningful to me. But upon my return to Washington, I learned the inspector had marked me down for studying Arabic to escape the “real work” of the Service, such as keeping the accounts and issuing visas.

## Regional Change

By 1967, however, the course of events in the Mideast had created another, more serious problem for the Arabist. Conservative Arab regimes were gradually giving way to forces less wedded to the West and less in awe of the great white fathers in London and Washington. Ill-conceived CIA and Defense Department interventions in Arab affairs had eroded the Arabs' traditional tendency to absolve the individual U.S. diplomat of responsibility for his government's unpalatable policies. But above all, growing Arab resentment was focused on the unique relationship between the United States and Israel. As a result, American Arabists have been subjected to a constant barrage of condemnation of U.S. policy; have been frequently shunned by citizens of their countries of assignment; and have had to cope with the ever-present risk of terrorism, for which some of our colleagues paid the ultimate price in Khartoum and Beirut. But there is one hazard of purely American origin: the gradual evolution of “Arabist” from appellation to epithet.

The U.S. commitment to the survival of Israel has been an article of faith for every administration since the Jewish state was founded. It has been rationalized on various grounds: moral obligation to guarantee the Jewish people a refuge from persecution; strategic interest in maintaining a strong point along the frontier between the U.S. and Soviet spheres of influence; economic interest in shoring up an ally

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that can help prevent Arab oil from falling into hostile hands; political advisability of preserving a stable democracy in an anarchic Mideast. Above all, however, the U.S. commitment to Israel arises from the simple fact that the survival of Israel is of overriding concern for an influential and articulate segment of the American electorate.

This is not to say that the Arabs are blameless. On the contrary, Arabs have bleated about Western duplicity while some of their own sold prime Palestinian farmland to Jews; they dithered in seeking a diplomatic solution until Israel became a fact; they exploited the real victims—the Palestinian refugees—as political pawns; they have looked to the West for assistance because their own effort to bring Israel down has not had any visible effect; and they have prated about Arab unity in the midst of perennial discord.

In early years, the United States pursued its pro-Israeli policy with relative impunity, and doubtful FSOs were dismissed as harmless eccentrics. But then Arab leverage over the United States began to assume significant proportions: first, because of rising Western dependence on Mideast oil, and second, because of the Western need to prevent the strategically located Mideast from falling into Soviet hands or, worse, from precipitating military confrontation between East and West.

Under these irresistible pressures, the Carter and Reagan administrations began to respond favorably to Jordanian, Egyptian, and Saudi arms requests and, without publicly admitting it, the United States took its first painful steps away from the traditional relationship with Israel. The defenders of that relationship launched a counterattack, and the Arabists now seem designated for promotion from eccentrics to scapegoats.

Never having dealt with the Arab-Israeli question, I had been slow to form an opinion. However, the 1967 war forced me to address the problem. Obviously, the future of Israel had to be predicated on the assumption of

eventual Arab-Israeli reconciliation. In my own mind, I gradually came to the conclusion that no such reconciliation would ever be achieved. In the Mideast of the future there would be room for Jews, but not for a Jewish state.

The brilliant Israeli victory of 1967 produced in Israel and the United States a euphoric hope that Arab-Israeli peace was now at hand. But in the Arab world it only intensified resistance to Israel and resentment of the United States. Believing the time had come for dissenters to speak out, I took advantage of my status as principal officer of a small post—Consulate General Aden—to circulate my uncanonical views by cable to other Mideast posts and the department. I also resolved to take every opportunity to speak with interested Americans, whatever their status and opinions.

One such opportunity came in Beirut in 1969, when *Newsweek* correspondent Mike Kubic invited me to dinner to discuss the Arab-Israeli question with columnist Joseph Kraft. Like all other pro-Israeli Americans to whom I have spoken, Kraft was shocked by my views. I stressed that they were personal and shared by few if any of my colleagues. Nevertheless, in April 1971 he came back to Beirut, asked me for a briefing on the State Department's Arabists, and posed questions apparently designed to sniff out my corporate bias against Israel.

The product of his interviews with me and other Arabists was "Those Arabists in the State Department," an article in the *New York Times Magazine* of November 7, 1971. Kraft was relatively kind to all Arabists but three: Richard Parker, "the most pro-Arabic [*sic*] of the Arabists"; Robert Munn, "the Arabist reputed to be the most hostile to Israel"; and "Curt Jones, the chief political officer in Beirut and one of the most ardent supporters of the Arab side in the quarrel with Israel." Kraft argued that all Arabists instinctively view the Arab world as an opportunity and Israel as a problem and so tilt in a pro-Arab direction. But, he concluded, they do not constitute any threat to the formulation of sound foreign policy because they have been moved out of top policymaking jobs.

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He was prescient on that last point. Insofar as the Arab-Israeli controversy is concerned, the two key positions in government are the Mideast slot on the National Security Council staff and the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. No Arabist has occupied the NSC job in recent memory. The last Arabist to run NEA was Parker T. Hart, who had an interim appointment in the winter of 1968-69.

This situation is not necessarily reprehensible. It is clearly desirable that top policymakers believe in the policies they implement—just as officials who don't like standing policies should have the courage to say so. No credit should attach to those officials of the Johnson administration who later confided that they were secretly opposed to the involvement in Vietnam all along. If it is true that Arabists have suffered a blanket exclusion from the two most attractive career opportunities in their field, they can take consolation in their high visibility at the next level down—as deputy assistant secretaries in the department and as ambassadors in the field.

Even I have no grounds for complaining that my career was blighted by devious forces working behind the scenes. As an open critic of established policy, I could hardly expect assignment to a policy desk. Yet, my maverick views did not prevent the department from appointing me as director of the Office of Intelligence and Research for the NEA area in 1971, nor from subsequently promoting me to FSO-1.

But that did not last. In 1973 the department sent a group of us to discuss foreign policy with school and university groups in Utah. In my presentations I combined a synopsis of contemporary Mideast policy with a statement of my own reasons for considering that policy defective. My remarks elicited frowns from only one or two people in my various audiences, but they evoked a spirited rebuttal from two of my colleagues on the tour. I was not sent out on more speaking trips, and some months later the director of INR asked if I would be interest-

ed in returning to the field as an ambassador—country of assignment unspecified. I declined and not long afterward I chose to retire.

Looking back on 29 years as an FSO I have no doubt that my Arabic specialization made my work more interesting to me and my political judgments more useful to the department. I am convinced that the benefits of language specialization outweigh the risk of localitis that some observers claim to discern. But there is a fine irony in the fact that so many FSOs who were encouraged to learn Arabic to equip themselves for America's heightened responsibilities in the Mideast should now come under the suspicion that the study of that same language has tainted their objectivity.

Of course, every American harbors special concerns for his or her ethnic origins. U.S. officials are customarily separated from jobs in which their private loyalties might become engaged. In the U.S. approach to the Arab-Israeli question, however, it sometime seems that the roles have been reversed. The standard of performance has been set in response to the desire of the special interest group—the Israeli lobby—and it is the group that comes from all sections of American society—the Arabists—that is suspected of disregarding that standard. Granted, the Arabist has a vested interest in cordial Arab-American relations, but the department's cadre of 100-odd Arabists is a product of effort to build a Foreign Service in which all segments of the American body politic are fairly represented. This group would seem better qualified than a special interest group to make an objective determination of U.S. interests in the Mideast. To suspect them as a group of slighting the national interest for personal convenience goes beyond the limits of cynicism to the point of misjudgment.

It seems only sensible that if an Arabist subscribes to current Mideast policy, sound personnel practice would suggest that he or she be eligible for a policymaking position. Even more to the point, if a majority of Arabists should ever come to distrust that policy, the administration would be well advised to re-examine it. [