

THE ARABIST MYTH

Accusing FSOs of controlling U.S. Mideast policy does nothing to advance our understanding of the Arab-Israeli issue

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AMERICAN POLITICS is remarkably transparent. The foreign diplomat in Washington who sends a regular report to his capital on the inner workings of the U.S. government has an easy task compared with his colleagues in other places. If there is a feud between the White House and the Pentagon, for instance, sooner or later it will be in the press. This makes the conduct of foreign policy difficult at times, but it is also one of our strengths, and, despite occasional excesses, we wouldn't have it any other way.

There is, however, a curious exception in the area of Mideast policy. A foreign observer might easily be misled if he or she believed what can be read in the papers, magazines of opinion, and even the scholarly journals about the existence of a mysterious cabal at the State Department. Jack Anderson, for example, reported on September 16 that "lately there have been signs that 'Arabists' have gained the ascendancy in the interminable search for a workable U.S. policy in the Middle East." *New Republic* editor Morton Kondracke, writing on October 1, reported that "the Reagan campaign wants it thought that Mondale... will cave in through weakness of character to Jesse Jackson and confirmed *arabisants* from the Carter State Department." In the Fall 1984 issue of *International Security*, Daniel Pipes noted the "homogeneity of the so-called Arabists at the State Department, as well as their legendary hold over department policy." In the November issue of the neoliberal *Washington Monthly*, David Ignatius tells us that the trouble with U.S. Mideast policy is that "the State Department 'Arabists' simply aren't a match for the pro-Israeli lobby and its supporters in the Congress."

Clearly, there is some disagreement about the effectiveness of these Arabists. The observers quoted here seem to regard them as a cabal, diligently working behind the scenes to guide U.S. policy in some particular, if undefined, direction. More to the point, if their intentions are undefined, so are the Arabists.

The origins of the word are innocent enough. In the Middle Ages, it referred to physicians in the West who had a grounding in Arab medical science. In more recent Anglo-American usage, an Arabist was a student of the language, on the model of hellenist, or

latinist. This is still the definition given in some dictionaries, but with time the term has taken on the extended sense of one who has experience of the Arabs, as well as a knowledge of Arabic. In the 19th century, it was applied to people like Sir Richard Burton and Charles Doughty, and later to such servants of empire as T.E. Lawrence. In that sense, the term belongs to the era of colonial expansion.

In the American political lexicon, however, the word has recently taken on a connotation that is primarily political, not linguistic. In an influential 1971 article in the *New York Times* magazine about State Department officers who had studied Arabic, Joseph Kraft suggested that because of their professional preoccupation with the Arab point of view, the Arab linguists at State had a built-in pro-Arab bias. The article went on to hint at worse sins, quoting a charge in President Truman's memoirs that some State Mideast specialists "were inclined to be anti-Semitic." This libel has stuck to the present day in some circles.

The most sweeping use of the term to date may be found in the recent memoirs of former Secretary of State Alexander Haig, *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy*. In the process of justifying his relatively understanding view of Israeli threats to invade Lebanon in the spring of 1982 (he insisted that Israel not act without provocation, he says, but seems to have accepted Israel's right to respond to terrorist attack with a full-scale invasion), Haig asserts that the foreign policy bureaucracy as a whole was "overwhelmingly Arabist in its approach to the Middle East and its sympathies." There is an unpleasant implication in the dangling phrase "in its sympathies" of a pro-Arab and anti-Israeli bias in the bureaucracy, but this is not Haig's main point. He means that the foreign policy bureaucracy tended to focus on the urgent need for a settlement based on U.N. Security Council Resolution 242, instead of on the creation of an anti-Soviet bloc with Israel as the lynchpin. In other words, Haig's definition of Arabist would probably encompass former Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter, and perhaps President Reagan too, since he approved the Mideast peace initiative of September 1982.

Is there a conspiracy at work in the State Department to push Mideast policy in a pro-Arab direction? The citations above indicate that at least a few people think there is. But this is a serious charge, and before accepting it as credible and accurate, we should examine the facts. (At this point the author must declare an

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interest, as he has studied Arabic and worked in Middle-east-related positions in the State Department.)

IT IS PROBABLY TRUE that during the 1960s, the State Department and the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian affairs played a central role in the formulation of U.S. Mideast policy, and State as an institution tended to identify the national interest with what used to be referred to as an "even-handed" approach. This policy was intended to set the Arab states and Israel on roughly the same footing and sought to position the United States in the middle as an impartial arbiter. The high point of this approach was perhaps the 1969 Rogers Plan (named after then Secretary of State William Rogers), devised in NEA. But the Rogers Plan is the textbook example of the limits of a Mideast policy made in the State Department without the full support of the White House. Undercut by then National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger and opposed by Israel, it collapsed.

In 1971, however, a new broom arrived in NEA in the person of Joseph Sisco, a career civil servant with a background in U.N. and Soviet affairs. Sisco did not speak Arabic, nor had he lived in that region, but he did have a very keen sense of the domestic political environment in which Mideast policy was made. Shortly after his arrival, a number of able officers with area expertise who found themselves uncomfortable with his methods left for greener pastures overseas. With Kissinger as secretary of state, the NEA bureau flourished as an institution. He used its expertise effectively, if idiosyncratically, but Mideast policy ceased to reflect the advice of the old hands. Given the changed environment, this was probably inevitable in any case. During the next few administrations, the United States stopped striking the pose of an impartial referee, and, by the time of the Camp David phase, became engaged as a full partner. In the Carter and Reagan years, it shifted from supporting the maintenance of an Arab-Israeli arms balance to supporting Israeli military superiority. It was a new ball game, with policy made in the White House, not the State Department.

Peter Grose, director of Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, provides some useful perspective in his new book, *Israel in the Mind of America*. He writes that "a new breed of diplomat had taken charge in the 1970s. No longer was NEA a backwater of the State Department; its officers were among the most dynamic and competent—and politically sensitive—of any in the Foreign Service. They enjoyed an access to the White House that few others in the department could claim. They had freed themselves from the bigotries of earlier generations; propagandists occasionally dusted off the old image of 'State Department Arabists'—or even anti-Semites—but the description no longer fit."

Grose suggests that there was some validity to the image in the bad old days. Whether or not that is true, the point is that the Arabist charge obviously ceased to have any basis in fact years ago—if it ever did. The last decade of U.S. Mideast policy has seen the shuttle diplomacy of Kissinger, the high-wire performance by President Carter at Camp David, and

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the agony of Lebanon, all played out to a rapt audience in the United States and abroad. In the torrent of words written about the Mideast during this period, by insiders and outsiders alike, there is not a shred of evidence for the Arabist conspiracy theory based on a split between the State Department and the White House.

Nevertheless, this anachronistic notion has had a long life, and, even today, serious and reasonably well-informed people continue to repeat it. It may well fill a need in American political life, especially for American supporters of Israel. They want to believe that U.S. support for Israeli policies is always in the national interest. But from time to time, they are disappointed by the direction American policy takes. In the last three administrations, for instance, efforts have been made to sell advanced weapons to Arab countries despite Israel's bitter objections. President Ford announced a "reassessment" of Mideast policy to signal U.S. displeasure with Israel. President Reagan announced a Mideast peace initiative that Israel opposed. For many Americans who care deeply about Israel, the explanation for these actions cannot be that U.S. interests sometimes conflict with Israeli policies. Instead, someone must be giving the president bad advice, and the logical candidates are those faceless bureaucrats at the State Department—always a convenient scapegoat for policies that displease one interest group or another.

IRONICALLY, SUPPORT FOR the Arabist thesis also comes from some on the other side of the argument: those who think U.S. policy has been too favorable to Israel for the good of U.S. interests in the Arab world. They cling to the illusion that there is a group of objective area specialists in the State Department who stand as a bulwark against a policy dictated by politicians obsessed with electoral concerns. But while the pro-Arab group laments the supposed outgunning of its imaginary bureaucratic champions, supporters of Israel believe the Arabists are a formidable force that often comes out on top.

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Aside from this confusion as to whether or not the Arabists control U.S. policy, the conspiracy theory lacks plausibility. How have the hundred or so Foreign Service officers who have studied Arabic at one time or another in their careers managed to influence Mideast policy when Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan have all taken a considerable interest in the subject? The number of officers with Arabic training who are actually in policy positions can be counted on one hand. Furthermore, the pro-Israel lobby is supposed to have a certain clout in Washington and could be expected to bring these bureaucrats to public attention if they really are frustrating the will of the people and elected officials. Surely the politicians who seek the support of the Jewish community so passionately when they are running for office would not let the bureaucrats obstruct their intentions. On the other hand, if we suppose with the pro-Arab lobby that the Arabists wage a gallant but constantly losing fight, how do they continually survive to fight again?

Daniel Pipes's article, noted briefly above, is a serious attempt to come to grips with these questions, and his thesis seems likely to be influential in neo-conservative circles. Pipes argues that career bureaucrats have a disproportionate influence over Mideast policy because the Arab-Israeli conflict is a foreign policy issue that cuts across the ideological divide separating liberals and conservatives. As a result, even in an ideologically homogeneous administration, there will be divisions at the political level between those who favor a pro-Arab policy and those who favor a pro-Israel one. The effect of this, according to Pipes, is that "the power of careerists increases relative to that of political appointees." From there it is only a short step, easily taken, to believing in the State Department Arabists (in the political sense) and their legendary hold over department policy.

This model, however, does not explain why the pro-Arab group would always win policy battles, as the "legendary hold" suggests. Nor does it leave any room for considerations involving the national interest or pressures in the real world brought by real Arabs and Israelis, as opposed to their proxies in the

Washington bureaucracy. It is, nevertheless, an improvement on raw conspiracy theory.

It is true that NEA is now the only area bureau at the State Department headed by a career officer. In fact, the incumbent, Richard Murphy, is one of that handful of officers in policy positions who have studied Arabic. But the reason for this situation—remarkable only in the context of the creeping politicization of the foreign policy apparatus—is not that there is an ideological stand-off within the administration as far as the Mideast is concerned. That has not prevented political appointees from being put in other positions where there is no clearly defined consensus within the administration—arms control and Central America, to name two. Why has NEA remained relatively immune from political intrusions, despite the sensitivity of the issues and those justly celebrated domestic political considerations? It seems unlikely that officials at the political level have not taken an interest in Mideast personnel. Perhaps there are other explanations for what might appear to be a surprising state of affairs.

Indeed, Pipes has this argument more or less backwards. It is in large part because the interest of politicians in Mideast policy is so all-consuming, and the domestic political stakes so high, that NEA has not been seeded with political appointees. This is not to say that the State Department's Mideast hands are uniquely competent and knowledgeable. Years of 12-hour days and six- or seven-day weeks in an atmosphere of frequent crisis occasionally produce bad advice and lousy decisions, and even bureaucrats sometimes have axes to grind. But Foreign Service officers are relatively more willing to subordinate their own views to those of their political masters than are outside appointees from what has been called the "professional elite" of foreign policy experts from the universities, the think tanks, and the foundations. For a variety of reasons—a sense of duty, the desire to be at the center of things, institutional ambition—Foreign Service officers are more reliable and discreet than outsiders, whose object is often to vindicate an ideological approach, enhance personal credentials, or gather material for a book. Senior FSOs generally have the classic bureaucratic virtues of pragmatism, reliability, and discipline, and in the overheated environment of Mideast policymaking these are the qualities secretaries of state want in their advisers. The fact that these career diplomats are often willing to work killing hours and frequently have a useful amount of institutional memory, not to mention competence in the often complex subject matter, is a bonus. As for the predominance of career officers among ambassadors to Mideastern countries, no explanation is needed. Terrorism may be the last ally of the career Service.

THE RESULT HAS BEEN a generally happy marriage of convenience between the Foreign Service and secretaries of state. Since Kissinger's time, assistant secretaries in NEA have all been FSOs, with the exception of Harold Saunders. Under Secretary Haig, there was some back and forth between NEA and political appointees

in other bureaus who were inclined to Haig's view of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a secondary matter. Since then, however, the chain of command has run from the president through the secretary of state, and on to the assistant secretary for NEA. The appointment of a series of presidential emissaries has complicated the picture, but relations between the bureau and the National Security Council staff have generally been close, despite the endemic rivalry between national security advisers and secretaries of state. This arrangement has meant that decisions made at the political level can be implemented with a minimum of bureaucratic fuss and relative dispatch. The papers are done, the telegrams are sent, the foreign ministers set straight, confidentiality is maintained, and the trains, metaphorically speaking, run on time. And even when there is no policy at all, as occasionally happens, to no one's surprise the illusion that one exists is sustained more or less credibly. Foreign Service officers are known for their flexibility in such circumstances.

Like other marriages, this one has required a degree of adjustment on both sides. Naturally, it is the Mideast experts who do most of the adjusting, which is as it should be. To serve the secretary and give him the kind of advice he needs, they must be aware of the political constraints under which he operates. They will not be of much use, nor last long, if they persistently urge adoption of a policy the political traffic will not bear or provide briefings that imply that the national interest is being sacrificed on the altar of expediency. If this goes on for long, the secretary will find other advisers. There will be times, of course, when the policy approach that plays best in domestic terms is damaging to the national interest, and sometimes this will have to be said, even if the advice is not always followed. Ideally, there should be a creative tension between the political elements of an administration and the career bureaucracy, in which both sides learn something and adjust to the other point of view, and the product is a sensible and politically sustainable policy. This depends, however, on the two unequal partners both keeping their side of the bargain—something that does not always happen. Nevertheless, this model of a sort of symbiotic relationship between the politicians and the bureaucrats is closer to reality than the unlikely notion of a pro-Arab cabal with disproportionate influence on innocent politicians.

In a sense, perhaps, the Mideast specialists at State do have a degree of potential influence by virtue of their access and the trust they have gained over the years. But it is highly circumscribed, limited, and derivative. Career Mideast specialists who would advise politicians are themselves well advised to keep firmly in mind that they are of value not primarily because of their unique expertise, but because of their discipline and discretion. Nobody elected them, and they are not the only people in Washington who can tell Likud from Mapam, and Abu Ammar from Abu Nidal. At the same time, though, one must guard against the danger of becoming just another Washington hired gun. This is not an easy balance to strike, and different people deal with the conflict in different ways.

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The Arabist myth is not simply unfounded, it is highly mischievous. It falsifies the terms of the Mideast debate by adding an element of character assassination to an issue that is already heated enough. For people who should know better to perpetuate—even for polemical purposes—the notion that unnamed Arabists in the State Department are undermining U.S. policy toward the Mideast does a disservice to American supporters of Israel by exploiting old fears that have no place in today's society. It is deeply divisive.

The less prevalent view that attributes a beneficial influence to a pro-Arab group at State is even worse. The Arabs sometimes convince themselves that U.S. Mideast policy is the product of an ongoing "Zionist conspiracy"—a modern version of the ancient anti-Semitic libel. The notion that the only institutional barrier to a policy dictated by the Israeli lobby is a group of Arabists in the State Department—a misconception not limited to Arab circles—is a corollary of that conspiracy theory, and just as mistaken.

We will continue to debate our purposes and objectives in the Mideast. There is much to criticize in U.S. Mideast policy, and if we have learned anything from recent history, it is that we cannot sustain a consistent foreign policy approach—in the Mideast or elsewhere—without a domestic consensus. The choices ahead are likely to be difficult ones, and the terms of the debate need to be widened and deepened if we are to avoid unpleasant shocks. The U.S. relationship with Israel may be in for some hard times, and the Arabs may have some unpleasant surprises in store for us. The Soviet Union, meanwhile, waits to pick up the pieces. A lot of passionate ink will continue to be spilled on both sides of the debate, which is fine. Americans care too deeply about the issues involved to delegate the management of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the U.S.-Israeli relationship to foreign policy mandarins whether they be in or out of the State Department. Individual officials in policy positions are fair game for criticism. Nevertheless, there should be limits. Even when the polemics fly, we should leave out the hoary myth of those State Department Arabists. □