

THE ARABISTS

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U.S. Ambassador, ret.**

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For the first 170 years of our Republic American diplomats were chosen on the basis of their education, political connections and, especially, their wealth. Consular appointments, until the early 1920's were often political plums. The post of Consul General in Marseilles was the most lucrative in the whole patronage system.

Diplomats were expected to speak French. They also had to pay the major part of their expenses while serving their country abroad. To do this they needed independent incomes. They were, nonetheless, frequently very good; wealth is not necessarily disqualifying. Some things haven't changed; with a Congress suspicious about the virtues of "entertainment" and skeptical of "cookie pushers" in general, a personal fortune is still useful.

Even in the immediate post WW II period there were few area experts. My Consul General in Strasbourg in 1955 had served in Montevideo, Sofia, Tokyo, Addis Ababa and Berlin—a typical pattern at the time. Second generation Americans, rare in the Foreign Service, were never assigned to the country of their parents' origin. Marrying foreigners was frowned upon but, when allowed, the diplomat would never be assigned to his wife's native country.

The system had its advantages. No one developed a "passionate attachment" to a foreign land; maintaining objectivity was automatic. There were also disadvantages; we had no substantial cadre of officers who knew exotic foreign languages or who had much experience or knowledge of any region or even of its most important countries, excepting Europe and perhaps Latin America.

After the Second World War our responsibilities grew dramatically and we could no longer defer to or rely on Britain or France. The weakness of the old system became apparent. Knowing little or nothing about great areas of the world, we found it difficult to make valid judgments on events abroad and impossible to influence them. The Foreign Service adjusted and made important changes; the State Department started paying travel expenses, some money was allocated to entertainment and eventually it started recruiting outside the Ivy League universities. The Department also decided it needed

to know more about countries where we had important interests and it started training area and language specialists.

Specialists in one important group of countries, the so-called "Communist Bloc," found themselves in a delicate position. The communists were our enemies and getting too close to them could blight one's career. They protected themselves from such potential charges by becoming personally and professionally hostile not only to the communist system but to the peoples of the region. They were successful in preserving their careers; they were less successful in advancing American interests. They consistently exaggerated the economic and military strength and hence the dangers of International Communism. Our consequent military build-up may have led to the bankruptcy of the Soviet Union but the cost to us of this misinterpretation of facts was also staggering. We will be decades in recovering.

Another group specialized in the Arab world; much later they came to be known as "Arabists." They saw the present and the potential importance of the region to the United States; they studied the language; they read the histories and political reports and they were impressed by the extent of the extraordinary favorable attitudes of the local peoples toward America. America was seen in the Arab world as the land of Washington and Jefferson and Lincoln and, especially, of Woodrow Wilson who preached the doctrine of self-determination. At the end of the First World War, Arabs thought they should be independent but if a mandatory power were to be imposed on them they requested that it be the United States. We declined, and our very refusal enhanced our reputation.

The Second World War ended with independence for all of the eastern Arab countries except Palestine, which was to have a different destiny. The State Department's initial opposition to the partition of Palestine had nothing to do with "Arabists"; there weren't yet any. It was because the Department saw that the United States had important interests in the Arab world and beyond that in the Muslim world which would be jeopardized by partition of Palestine, viewed throughout Asia and Africa as an Arab land and part of Dar al-Islam.

President Truman overruled his Department of State. He described the extraordinary pressure from the Jewish community and subsequently commented that he didn't have to worry about "thousands of Arab voters." He might have to today.

It has been common for American Presidents, even those who worked for peace in

the Middle East, to talk about how difficult it was to overcome an "enmity between Arabs and Jews going back thousands of years." They misunderstood this "enmity"; there was nothing on the scale of the English-French, the French-German, the German-Polish animosities. Furthermore, no country of Europe had a record of religious tolerance remotely as good as that of Arab Spain, Arab North Africa, Arab Cairo or Arab Baghdad. Arabs were appalled at the massacre of Jews by Europeans but thought that a Jewish homeland, if one were required after the second World War, should have been carved out of Bavaria or Lower Saxony.

There are, undeniably, strong racial antipathies today but they go no farther back than the first large Jewish settlements in Palestine 75 years ago. Arabs looked at the Jews as foreign intruders. Jews looked at Arabs, as they looked at the swamps, deserts and stones, as physical obstacles to be overcome.

Arabs thought it absurd to turn the clock back 2000 years and they were not prepared to abandon to European settlers lands which they had occupied for 100 generations. They never understood the peculiar nature of Jewish attachment to Jerusalem. They are beginning to now. And some Israelis are coming to accept the humanity of the Palestinians, to understand Muslim and Christian ties to Jerusalem—the city Arabs call al-Quds, the Holy city, and to understand that Arab love of Palestine is as strong as their love of the same land.

By the time I entered the Foreign Service in 1954, Israel was well established. The State Departments' opponents of the partition of Palestine had retired. "Arabists" were being trained and their task was to try to maintain and improve relations with Arabs—Christian and Muslim—and with non-Arab Muslims. Our interests in the Arab world had become obvious and it was equally obvious that they should not be jeopardized.

After 1945 the world shifted rapidly from coal to oil which quickly became the world's primary energy source; it will remain so until 2020 and perhaps well beyond. Like it or not—and we didn't—most of the world's hydrocarbons were in the Arab world; and much of the remainder was in other Muslim countries.

I was in charge of the State Department's energy office from 1967 to 1973. It seemed to me that we were headed toward disaster. Our foreign policy was so pro-Israel that we alienated the Arabs; yet our energy policy, such as it was, made us dependent on the Arabs for oil. I proposed a series of measures to decrease our oil imports, to conserve energy and to increase production of a variety of sources of domes-

tic energy. Nothing was done. The "Arabists" in the field were no more successful in getting the United States to adopt a more balanced policy in the Middle East.

Israel's friends argued that there was no problem; oil was plentiful and would grow ever cheaper. "Arabs must sell the oil; they can't drink it" was the mantra; "we can do what we want to the Arabs and there will be no adverse consequences." We then went through two "oil shocks." We eventually recovered. The cost was high but not high enough to make a permanent impression. We hear the same old arguments today: "Relax; enjoy the Arabs' cheap oil. It will last forever."

Israel has had mixed relations with American presidents and its prime ministers frequently clashed with them. The Israeli prime ministers felt, with good reason, that they need not fear either the State Department or the White House as they controlled the American congress. Contributions to the elections of Congressmen were (and are) substantial. They were also the most cost-effective operation in the history of American politics. For every dollar given to a Congressman, Congress votes a hundred dollars—or more—of American taxpayers' money for Israel.

Even more important was the creation of the myth that any opposition to Israel meant political death. The "Israelists" cite three cases: William Fulbright, Paul Findley and Charles Percy, who, they claim, they destroyed. Every member of Congress knows the Israeli Lobby's version of the fate of these three men and will tell it to you whenever you try to discuss the Middle East. In fact, these cases were not unalloyed Israeli victories; there were other equally valid explanations for the defeat of all three. And there are convincing counter-arguments; when a President Eisenhower stands up to Israel his election is not compromised; when a Senator Chafee is attacked by the Lobby and does not recant, he is re-elected with a large majority.

Israel as the American "strategic ally" or "strategic asset" in the Middle East was always a travesty. Israel was in no way able to stem the spread of communist ideology in the Middle East or elsewhere in the third world; even less would it have been able to hold off a Soviet military incursion into the area. But Congressmen needed to accept this myth; they could not admit that they were voting billions of American taxpayers' money to give to a wealthy Israel only because they were afraid of the pressure of the Israeli Lobby; personal pride required another excuse. But it bore no scrutiny and no American president, excepting perhaps Ronald Reagan, believed it. Middle East enmity to America came largely from our support of Israel. Had we followed a balanced, "even-

handed" policy in the Middle East, there would have been little if any danger from communist or Soviet subversion.

Israel never confused the relationship. It had its own interests and they were frequently quite different from those of the United States. We were important to Israel as the wielder of the veto on Israel's behalf in the United Nations, as an inexhaustible and friendly milk cow and as the supplier of intelligence and military equipment. At times Israel provided us information on the Soviet Union and other countries. This was highly sensitive and was never discussed in public until Israeli Prime Minister Begin himself boasted publicly of passing on to the United States information acquired by its agents in the USSR.

When Israel wanted more information than we gave, it engaged Jonathan Pollard and his associates to steal secrets from us, not general information which Pollard claimed we should have given to Israel anyway but specifically targeted documents which, at times, were on subjects not even remotely connected with the Middle East. What Israel did with this information has not yet been revealed by the Pentagon but Secretary of Defense Weinberger said Pollard did "more damage to the United States than any other spy in our history."

Last year a campaign was launched to free Pollard. Contributions to this campaign were tax deductible under American law, giving a new dimension to the word *chutzpah*. Prime Minister Rabin asked President Clinton to release Pollard but Clinton, on the unanimous advice of his security and legal advisers, refused.

This was actually the second time Clinton imposed his will on the Israeli. The first was when he told the chain-smoking Rabin that cigarettes were forbidden in the White House.

Israel has always disliked the American State Department and reserved a particular venom for the "Arabists," a term which its American supporters seem to have introduced. The "Arabists" insisted that American interests in the Middle East must take precedence over those of any other country. We might have emotional ties to Israel; we certainly had a moral obligation to support the continued existence of Israel, but we had no real interests there. This was not a unique insight. It was shared by almost all officials in the State and Defense Departments and the CIA. The State Department's "Arabists" sin was in taking the lead against those who argued that Israel knew the Middle East better than we did and we must yield to Israel's arguments on what was

best for it and for us.

This, of course, made the Arabists dangerous from Israel's perspective. If the American public were ever to concentrate on America's interests, then its one-sided support of Israel and its alienation of Muslims would end. The Israelists tried and are still trying to confuse America's interests with those of Israel. Any opposition to Israeli actions, they say, is treason to the United States. They have written articles and even books about the wicked "Arabists" who, it must be admitted, were guilty of the charge levied by the Lobby of insisting that Israel's interests were not those of the United States and that its actions frequently were harmful to us.

The Lobby and its spokesmen have been successful to a point. The battle, in fact, seems to be over; Israel seems to have won. Its forces in the United States have neutralized the "Arabists", as defined by the Israelists. There are essentially none left in the State Department. There are those who know the Arab world, who have learned the language well but, with only a few exceptions, they have also learned that the secret of survival and promotion is the same as it was among the old Soviet specialists: be anti-Arab, be skeptical of anything Arab. Under no circumstances show sympathy or understanding of any Arab position. Win favor by telling anti-Arab jokes.

Not even the most fervent "Israelist" argues that today's State Department is anti-Israel. President Clinton evidently decided, as most Presidents do, that the Israeli Lobby represented a monolithic American Jewish community and he wanted no trouble from it. Ignoring the fact that the majority of American Jews want a lasting peace in the Middle East and believe Israel should compromise with the Arabs, Clinton gave the Israeli Lobby exactly what it wanted. The top officials he named to the State Department and the White House to deal with Middle East matters have spent much of their professional lives working for Israel. It is a national scandal that the person responsible for Middle East affairs in the National Security Council emigrated from Australia to Israel and from there came to Washington where he worked for the Israeli Lobby, becoming an American citizen only a few days before assuming his position in the White House. Not even the most gullible newspaper editor could think he could be objective on the Middle East, yet not a single scorching editorial on the subject has appeared in a major American newspaper. It is not hard to imagine the reaction if a Palestinian who had been closely associated with Hamas had been assigned to that position.

We might assume that the Israeli government is greatly pleased. It is not! These

American officials do not represent the Labor government; still less do they reflect the views of the Israeli peace camp. Prime Minister Rabin is correct in considering them beholden to the Israeli far right and, as such, in treating them, as do the Arabs, as irrelevant to the peace process. The United States could still play a major role in the peace process but unless it gets a new Middle East team in the State Department and the White House it almost certainly will not.

But that's not the whole story. In a way it has been the old Arabists who have won. Since the brutal Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 American attitudes toward the Middle East have changed. Americans were impressed by the fervor of the Palestinian intifada. Most Americans now understand that Israel has no monopoly on justice or righteousness. Most understand that America has real interests which are quite different from those of Israel. Some understand the cost of Israel to the United States; some even believe that the staggering annual subsidy to Israel should end.

More important, the long term goal of every Arabist, a just peace in the Middle East, with guarantees for the security both of Israel and the Palestinian state is at last becoming possible. There are enough Israelis and Palestinians who have decided that the maximal goals of each side cannot be attained, that all sides would benefit from peace and that those who would derail the process, whether they be from Islamic Hamas, Jewish Likud or the Likud's Lobby in Washington must not be allowed to sabotage the move toward compromise and peace.

I am not sure that the Arabists can take much of the credit or, from the Lobby's perspective, the blame for this development. Perhaps we can; we talked about a "just peace" longer than anyone else, certainly longer than almost any Israeli or Palestinian. It would be pleasant if this subject could some day be studied by some one other than an Israelist.

It might even be published; whether it would be distributed is another matter. When an obscure journalist with little experience in the Middle East and no respect for facts writes a book on "The Arabists", he is widely reviewed and he appears on almost every television news talk show. It would be good to have a view from another perspective, a study of how much Israel and its American agents have cost and have hurt the United States. Fortunately, we have it. George Ball, the wisest and most literate of foreign policy practitioners in the last two generations, with his son Douglas wrote the book. It was published in 1992 but then disappeared from general view. Of the major American

newspapers and magazines only the *Washington Post* reviewed it. The reviewer, one of Israel's foremost apologists, didn't much like the book but, as he could find no errors or distortions, he devoted his essay to a personal attack on George Ball. So much for the freedom and the objectivity of the press.

Arabists understood the importance of the Arabs to America; some even liked the Arabs personally. But they could never be accused of dubious loyalty, of placing Arab interests above those of the United States. It was not the "Arabists" but the "Israelists" who demonstrated the importance and the validity of George Washington's and George Ball's admonition that Americans should beware of a "passionate attachment" to any foreign country.