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The Arabists: Romance of an American Elite. - book reviews

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In *The Arabists*, Robert D. Kaplan examines American Arabists from the missionaries of the early republic to the foreign service officers who stumbled into the Persian Gulf War of 1990. By "Arabists," Kaplan means those "men and women . . . who read and speak Arabic and who have passed many years of their professional lives . . . in the Arab world" (7). By definition, Arabists sympathize with Arab interests.

Kaplan examines two broad groups of Arabists. He begins with the missionaries and educators who exported American religious and educational values to the Middle East before 1945. Kaplan praises the heroism of their "American frontiersmanship," which "carv[ed] out America's destiny on truly holy ground, with neither the help nor the hindrance of the American government." The author also studies Arabists in the Foreign Service after 1945. Convinced that Zionism threatened US. interests, dozens of diplomats trained in Arabic battled presidential support of Israel and endured criticism by White House officials, members of Congress, and citizens who accused them - unfairly, Kaplan thinks - of anti-Semitism. After 1967, Arabists lost power because political realities compelled presidents to suppress them, and the closure of embassies in Arab capitals hindered their careers. They continued to lose ground in the 1980s, notably because they advocated friendship with Iraq long after circumstances discredited such a policy.

Kaplan insightfully explains how postwar changes in the Foreign Service also weakened the Arabists. Diversification in race, gender, class, and regional origins produced a new generation of experts who lacked the social status of the veterans, eschewed dissent in order to safeguard their careers, and learned Hebrew to gain perspective on Israeli interests. Moreover, security concerns insulated embassy personnel from Arab street culture. By 1990, Kaplan believes, Arabists had become an endangered species.

Kaplan enlivens his narrative with sketches of dozens of Americans who fitted the Arabist mold. Some of his subjects are private citizens, such as Daniel Bliss, "the quintessential Protestant missionary" of the nineteenth century (32), and Bayard Dodge, who as president made the American University of Beirut "in a political-cultural sense, more influential than either the British or French governments in the Middle East" (73). Most of Kaplan's subjects are diplomats of the postwar era. They range from Loy Henderson, who stubbornly opposed Harry S Truman's support of Israel, to Jerry Weaver, who masterminded the evacuation of Jews from famine-stricken Sudan in the middle 1980s.

Kaplan empathizes but does not sympathize with his subjects. He finds Henderson's judgments about Israel "incredibly prescient" (89), and endorses the argument of one Arabist that recognition of Israel ended a century of U.S.-Syrian friendship. At the same time, the author criticizes the Arabists for oversimplifying Israeli policy and suggests that some were more loyal to the Arabs than conditions warranted.

The Arabists is encumbered by certain flaws. Its presentist focus and use of contemporary jargon will limit its longevity. Its neglect of archives, paucity of footnotes, and slim bibliography of secondary sources will curtail its usefulness to professional historians. Kaplan's foray into British Arabism pales beside the scholarship of Edward Said. On the other hand, Kaplan excels at discussing the making of U.S. foreign policy in the field beyond Washington. Readers will enjoy a rare view of unofficial and official diplomacy made and executed in the universities, streets, and embassies of the Arab world.

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