

# The Arabists: The Romance of an American Elite

by Robert D. Kaplan, 1993

Reviewed by Richard B. Parker

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This is a study of American Foreign Service Arabists, i.e., diplomats who became Arabic language and area specialists and spent most of their careers working in or on the Middle East. Kaplan, a contributing editor of the Atlantic Monthly magazine, is variously described as a historian and as a journalist. The book is an expansion of an article published in the August 1992 Atlantic under the title "Tales from the Bazaar."

Kaplan is a frequent contributor to national publications other than the Atlantic, and his book *Balkan Ghosts*, also published in 1993 and dealing with the background of the current crisis in the Balkans, has been highly praised by most reviewers. Other notable recent efforts include an article in the 20 February 1994 New York Times Magazine titled "There is No Middle East" (in which he argues that the Balkans are part of the Middle East, and an article, "Bloody New World," in the 17 April 1994 Washington Post arguing that we are entering an era of "new-age primitivism" to which we will fall victim if we don't watch out. In a recent bulletin of the U.S. Institute of Peace he is mentioned as one of the participants in a meeting discussing Syria's role in the peace process, and is quoted as saying that the real threat to peace in the region is the phenomenal birth rate. He has a new book on Africa about to come out, and someone has told me that he claims to have visited either sixty or eighty countries in recent years. In short, like the Scarlet Pimpernel, he is everywhere all at once and is evidently a phenomenon we will have to reckon with on the mega-Middle East pundit scene.

As one of the subjects of *The Arabists*, I approach the task of reviewing the book with some concern that my comments will be considered self-serving. I have been persuaded to write the review by the editor's argument that as a former insider I am in a better position to judge the contents than outsiders might be.

Kaplan starts out by saying the book is neither pure history nor pure journalism, but a mixture of both. Elsewhere he says that he has tried as hard as he could to write a balanced story and that while he made mistakes, he wrote with malice toward no one. I believe he is speaking sincerely and that he has made an effort to be fair to most of us, but the book gives the impression that he came to the project with certain preconceptions and did not manage to shake them. The problem is that he tries to squeeze us into a mold that most of us do not fit, and while he is generous with favorable comments about us in some places, in others he repeats the unfavorable comments and stereotypes of our critics without giving us a chance to respond. This is balanced treatment of a sort, but, as he notes, Arabists have been much vilified. As a result, like Hillaire Belloc's frog, they are justly sensitive to epithets.

In any event, accepting Kaplan's good intentions, journalism triumphs over history in the end. This is not a serious book. Kaplan was looking for a story and he found one, but it is considerably more complicated than he makes it and his plausible account rests in part on errors of fact and on misperception. He writes well and the book is readable and full of information about a particular group of American diplomats who have played a role in U.S.-Arab relations and the Palestine problem. It should not be taken as authoritative,

however, because Kaplan has been careless about details, his portraits tend to be one-dimensional, and he has left out a good many prominent Arabists who would have affected his sample. He propagates a myth that a New England WASP elite that was emotionally involved with the Arabs dominated Middle East policy for thirty years after World War II without bothering to look at details which would have told him otherwise. A certain superficiality is, of course, unavoidable in a book of this length dealing with such a complex subject. It is regrettable none the less.

His thesis is that there is a clear spiritual connection over the years between the missionaries on one hand--the Eli Smiths and the Blisses and the Vandycks and so forth, who went out and founded the American University of Beirut (the AUB) and other institutions, who became partisans of an essentially anti-Maronite, pro-Sunni Muslim and Greek Orthodox worldview and who were unable to discern that history was leading inevitably toward creation of a Jewish state, which they opposed -- and the hard-liners on the Arab-Israel question in the Department of State on the other. Of the latter, Loy Henderson, in his capacity as chief of the Division of Near Eastern Affairs in the period 1945-48, was the leading figure and the prototype of the future Arabists, again according to Kaplan.

Henderson, about whom Kaplan apparently has suspicions of anti-Semitism (among other things, he didn't like New York), is described as being about as different from missionaries as one could get and as having no special interest in the Arabs, their language, or their culture, "But he did have strong opinions about where the U.S. national interest in the Middle East lay, and these opinions happened to dovetail perfectly with those of the missionaries. This alignment of goals provided the template for the hybrid Arabist culture that would emerge in the 1950's" (p. 95).

Earlier on the same page Kaplan writes that Henderson, who had realized correctly that creation of Israel would buy the United States decades of trouble and expense, would turn out to be wrong about one thing: "The U.S. could indeed have it both ways, friendship with the Arabs and with the Jews. But not for three decades, as a consequence of Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy and reestablishment of relations with Egypt and Syria in the 1970s would this become clear."

Kaplan writes on page 98: "There could be no greater proof of the immeasurable distance between the State Department and the Jewish state than the fact that the very man who fought hardest to prevent its recognition was thought by his peers to represent the highest standards of their profession. Though nobody is absolutely sure when the term Arabist was first used in American in a pejorative sense to identify someone as politically pro-Arab, this new and negative definition essentially began with Loy Henderson, who did not speak Arabic and spent only two of his ninety-three years in the Arab world. Upon Israel's creation the State Department Arabists went out to the Middle East with the model of Loy Henderson uppermost in their minds, and once settled in their post overseas, they began to be influenced by the values of the local missionary communities."

There are numerous disputable factoids in Kaplan's construct, which is only summarized above. They include the dubious characterization of the missionaries and Arabists as being anti-Maronite. This is a recurring theme in the book. It may have been true of some older missionaries, but I have never encountered an anti-Maronite bias among my colleagues or among Americans in general and do not have one myself. The obverse of this is a characterization (on page 37) of the Maronites as "pro-Israeli." Kaplan appears to have swallowed one of the more superficial Israeli insights into Lebanon.

The missionaries and the whole AUB crowd, and their descendants, were generally opposed to the creation of Israel in 1948, I guess. Most Americans resident in the area at

the time were. I gather it had less to do with national interest or oil or anti-Semitism than with the feelings of sympathy for a people who were being treated unfairly by the world press and the great powers. In any event, of the various State Department Arabists Kaplan mentions, only one, Talcott Seelye, had an AUB connection, and the rest of us did not. I had very little to do with missionaries or AUB personnel during my career and did not look to either for political acumen in any event, although some of them were very interesting people. My 1951-53 service in Jerusalem was far more important in shaping my attitudes on the Arab-Israel problem. I believe my experience was typical for my generation of Arabists; we did not learn about the Arab world from the missionaries or the AUB.

The most serious error, however, is Kaplan's casting of Henderson as a role model for Arabists. He certainly was not that for my generation, and I do not know where Kaplan got the idea. I had barely heard of Henderson before I came back to Washington in 1956, when he was undersecretary for administration. I was already an Arabist at that point. My role model was Harrison Symmes, who was a year or two ahead of me. I have queried various of my colleagues, young and old, and none of them had Henderson in mind when they went to the area. He had blazed no trails in the Arab world and his name was not invoked among us as an authority on Arab affairs. Some of us realized that he had fought a battle against partition in 1947, but that was ancient history. He had lost, and there was no going back. He was wheeled back into battle in 1957 as a part of an effort to mobilize our Baghdad Pact allies to do something about Syria, but that didn't work very well. And then he disappears from the Middle East screen.

I know that he was highly regarded by people who had worked with him in the Division of Near Eastern Affairs, people like Evan Wilson and Gordon Merriam (one of the first Arabists with Raymond Hare and James Moose), and that he was a cult figure for some of the young men who had worked with him in Tehran, where he had done a magnificent job of dealing with the oil crisis, but they were not Arabists.

I doubt that any Arabists were involved in the decision to honor Henderson by naming a conference room after him in 1976 (which occasioned Kaplan's comment above about the gap between the Department of State and Israel). I further doubt that his service in the Near East division was a factor taken into account in that decision. He was honored for a lot of other things in his record.

Elsewhere (p. 87), after discussing Truman's horrified reaction to the Holocaust, Kaplan writes: "Of course, emotional responses to the Holocaust in Europe need not have affected one's attitude toward the situation in the Middle East. But such emotional empathy not only affected political attitudes in 1947 and 1948, but, as it would turn out, allowed an insight into what was then unfolding in the Middle East, a development that State Department officials appeared not to grasp. The sheer magnitude of the Holocaust had unleashed a historical process -- of which the mass movement of Jewish refugees from Europe to Palestine was only a part -- that made the birth of Israel simply inevitable. For most this was plain to see, but not the Arabists."

If one sees the hand of God in all that happens, then everything can be explained in retrospect as having been *maktub*, but if you do not share that belief there was nothing inevitable about the creation of Israel. As Arthur Koestler said in *Promise and Fulfillment*, "Israel is a freak of history." That the United Nations General Assembly voted to partition Palestine in 1947 was due in large part to American pressure. Responsibility for this rests with Harry Truman, who was responding to Zionist political pressure on himself (about which he complained bitterly). Judging by Franklin Roosevelt's private remarks shortly before his death, had he lived until 1947 we might have had a different outcome, although he too might have succumbed to Zionist pressures.

To continue the thesis, Kaplan seems to believe that the Arabists dominated U.S. policy on the Palestine issue until the coming of Joseph Sisco to the Bureau of Near Eastern South Asian Affairs (NEA-the successor to the old Near East division) as assistant secretary in 1969. Sisco allegedly broke up the nest of old-boy Arabists in NEA by sidelining Rodger Davies, the senior deputy assistant secretary, to Greek-Turkish Affairs and by exiling me, the United Arab Republic country director, to Morocco as deputy chief of mission. After that NEA was run by people more sympathetic to Israel and less encumbered by Arabist intellectual baggage. The transformation was made even more radical by Henry Kissinger, who became immersed in Middle East matters after the war of 1973 and whose shuttle diplomacy, as noted above, proved that one could be friends with both the Arabs and the Jews at the same time. Under the benign influence of their successors and the "democratization" of the Foreign Service in the 1980s, Jews and other ethnics were admitted to the Arabist ranks, and today policy on the Palestine issue is much sounder and freer of the WASP prejudices of the past, although some of the Arabists are still whining about favorable treatment of Israel.

Kaplan's thesis is supported by the fact that today U.S. policy on the Arab-Israel issue seems to be run largely by two Jews Dennis Ross of Policy Planning in State and Martin Indyk, the ex-AIPAC point man, in the White house -- and this has been accepted with alacrity by the Arabs, just as they accepted Kissinger. And why not? Education of American Jews to the intricacies of the Arab-Israel problem has always been one of the first requirements for progress on that issue, and the emergence of Jewish Arabists has been one of the more encouraging developments of recent years.

The first problem with this exposition, however, is the implication that for three decades the Arabists dominated policy on the Arab-Israel question. If ever there was a body that was frozen out of the serious policy decisions it was the Arabists, who were regarded with suspicion by their American colleagues as well as by American Jews and other supporters of Israel, whose predominant influence in Congress and the White House on the Palestine issue has been well documented. Not only were the Arabists a fringe group within a Department of State that was itself largely powerless on this issue, but they were afraid to speak out for fear of being accused of anti-Semitism. Furthermore, the oil companies, which figure in some accounts as allies of the Arabists, were afraid of a Jewish boycott and refused to take positions that might expose them to criticism. That was not an unreasonable stand on their part, but it severely limited their influence.

The second problem with this narrative is that while there undoubtedly have been enormous changes in our vision of the Arab-Israel problem over the past twenty-five years, those changes have come about more because the Arabs and the Israelis have changed their perspectives than because of anything new and different that Americans did. This is not to diminish the accomplishments of Kissinger, or the efforts of Joseph Sisco, but it was the 1973 war and Sadat's decision to play the American card and his visit to Jerusalem, not shuttle diplomacy, that changed the givens. These were Sadat's initiatives, not ours, and the 1973 war, which broke the logjam, came in part because Sadat was frustrated with American unwillingness to take him seriously, in spite of urgings by Arabists Donald Bergus and Michael Sterner that we do so.

The third problem is that there was no purge of Arabists in NEA by Sisco. Davies, after five years on the Arab-Israel problem, was sick of it and wanted to get out, and I left NEA of my own volition because I did not like working for Sisco and did not enjoy his confidence. While I would not have blamed him for exiling me, since I opposed much of what he was doing, he did not do so. He asked me to stay and I declined. He would not let me leave until I found a successor. We finally settled on Michael Sterner. Talcott Seelye, who is certainly as hard-core as I am, remained for another two years as director of Northern Arab affairs (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan) before going off to Tunis as ambassador. This is

pretty unimportant today, but it is important to Kaplan's thesis, and he has overlooked the factor of personal desires and career plans in this case.

Another piece of the mosaic that doesn't fit is Kaplan's statement on page 124 that Sisco was the first non-Arabist to head the bureau. The only Arabists who preceded him were Raymond Hare and Parker T. Hart. The others -- George McGhee, George Allen, Henry Byroade, William Rountree, Lewis Jones, Philip Talbot, and Lucius Battle--had (except for Byroade) some experience in the area, but could hardly be called Arabists.

On page 169 he says. "The relationship between the American president and the Jewish community now (1969) loomed larger than the relationship between Arabists and their personal connections in the Levant." In fact, it had done so almost from the day Harry Truman became president, if not before, and it had nothing to do with Sisco or Kissinger or anyone else in the Nixon administration. It had long been a fact of life that all Arabists recognized. As Evan Wilson commented in *Decision on Palestine* (p.60), "the early months of the Truman presidency represented the last time that the Department of State exercised a dominant role in our Palestine policy".

Back to the title, who or what is an Arabist? Does it include people who spent their careers, or much of them, in the Arab world but never learned the language, or never made a serious study of it? Or should it be confined to people who made a serious study of the language and of the history and culture? In my view, it is meaningless to apply the term to someone who does not speak and read the language. To do so is rather like calling someone who has never jumped out of an airplane a paratrooper.

Others disagree, and the author is free, of course, to work from his own definition. Kaplan uses the term rather loosely and somewhat inconsistently to include or not to include people like Alfred Atherton, who made no claim to be an Arabist but who is described at one point as an "NEA type cum Arabist" (p.124), and since he is not one of those designated as "hard-core" on page 170, the inference is that he is a soft-core Arabist. Talcott Seelye, William Stoltzfus, Andrew Killgore, Parker Hart, Loy Henderson, and I, among others seem to be hard-core. Richard Murphy, on the other hand is a "new breed, of nonbaggage, non-Arabist Arabist," a lite version of Seelye, Parker, Stoltzfus, Killgore, Sterner and others according to Kaplan (p.169). At this point Sterner seems to be hard-core, although I would have classified him in the soft-core category, given the role he played as a peace processor in the 1970s.

Although Kaplan repeatedly makes the point that one should not think in terms of an Arabist stereotype because we are all different, he still puts stereotyped labels on us. Thus, he quotes "renowned political philosopher" Francis Fukuyama as saying that we "represent the most exotic and controversial vestige of the East Coast Establishment, an elite within an elite, who have been more systematically wrong than any other area specialists in the diplomatic corps [sic]. This is because Arabists not only take on the cause of the Arabs, but also the Arabs' tendency for self-delusion" (p.7). Fukuyama obviously knows little about the Middle East or Arabists.

Elsewhere (p.48) Kaplan calls obsession with the Arabs a defining Arabist trait. I would admit that we are obsessed by the Arab-Israel problem, at least part of the time, but in my experience we think a lot about of other things as well. Obsession and interest are different things, and Kaplan seems to have them confused.

On page 101 he quotes Richard Crossman, who finds that Arabists are like bird-watchers, who have a remote and direct way of looking at one. Like the bird-watcher, the Arabist has

found an inner tranquility. Kaplan finds this trait in many of us and it has made me worry why I am not inwardly more tranquil like the others.

Most importantly, the Arabists are blissfully unperturbed about seeing Israel in only the simplest stereotypes (p.127) and they carry a lot of unfortunate intellectual baggage. I suppose some Arabists are ignorant of the Israeli political realities, but I would not put any of the hardcore fellows he mentions in that category. We are, however, skeptical about the use of those realities as an excuse for doing or not doing something the government of Israel has decided on for reasons of its own. The doctrine of *ein brera* (no alternative) has gotten quite a workout in the past fifty years.

As for intellectual baggage, I often find myself in serious disagreement with my former colleagues, both philosophically and substantively. I find little unanimity among us about the facts of the 1967 war, for instance, or about the role we should play in retirement. Without polling them, however, I think we would probably agree on certain core beliefs that we held when on active service. One is that while we are glad the Jews finally have a state of their own, we regret that it was created at the expense of the Palestinian Arabs, and until something is done to right the injustice that was done to the latter there is unlikely to be a stable peace. This belief has become attenuated in recent years as it becomes evident that the Palestinians may settle for considerably less than half a loaf, but the game has not been played out yet. Another is that while there is no question that Israel is here to stay and that there is no reason why we cannot have friendly relations with it as well as with the Arab states, the special nature of our relationship has led us in directions which are healthy neither for the United States nor for Israel -- the progressive weakening of the U.S. position on settlements, on Jerusalem, and on nuclear proliferation, for instance. A third is that Israel's interests and America's are often parallel, but they are not always the same. The Israelis have shown themselves able to take decisions in the light of their own national interest when that runs counter to ours, and there is no reason why we should not do the same -- as we have on some occasions. A fourth is that while we have no illusions about the Arabs (and they should have none about us), we have important interests in the Arab world that should be protected and that are often as important as domestic political considerations. When there is a conflict between the two, strong political leadership is needed to resolve it. Finally, there are issues of principle and legality involved -- of human rights and international obligations which we are forever dodging in favor of expediency, in spite of our ringing declarations and UN votes to the contrary. Kaplan seems to feel that it is naïve of us to believe in principle and the rule of law. Perhaps he's right, but policy without principle is dangerous. I don't think any of these should be put in the category of "anti-Israel", but I am sure that is how they would be regarded by many of Israel's supporters.

Talking to former colleagues I find that most have found statements about themselves in the book that are untrue or misleading or taken out of context. For instance, Kaplan writes that I have "ugly caricatures of Begin done by Arab artists" on my study walls. The caricatures are in fact of me, not Begin, and how did he know they were by Arab artists and not Israeli if he didn't ask me about them? He says that Seelye left the Foreign Service because he was not offered a promotion when in the fact he left to take advantage of an increase in the retirement pension. He reports as gospel a fictionalized version of obscene language attributed to Robert Paganelli in Damascus which Paganelli has denied using. He says that David Newsom recommended that we force our way through the Straits of Tiran in 1967, which Newsom does not believe he did. Marshall Wiley finds Kaplan misconstrues a remark of his as justifying Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, and so forth.

All of us are recognizable from Kaplan's descriptions, but the lines are often blurred. This would not be bothersome were it not that such books tend to take on the character of an authoritative text in the minds of the public, and of students in particular. Thus, Jim

Anderson, a respected journalist, reviewing the book for the February 1994 *Foreign Service Journal*, thinks the pre-Gulf war portion of the book reaches the level of "the definitive history" of the rise and fall of an important part of the American diplomatic establishment".

Meanwhile, Daniel Pipes in the 15 September 1993 *Wall Street Journal* has what is surely the most paranoid review to date. He comments that "as the Arabists cohort at State became increasingly dominant, it also brought strange prejudices to the government...Bound up in their own small world, Arabists lacked the imagination to understand either the U.S. or American interests abroad. They loved a pristine Middle East and regretted its modernization. Against all evidence, Arabists quixotically sought to show the essential harmony of Western and Arab-Islamic culture.' They loathed Maronites and Greek Orthodox Christians, the French and Iranians. Most of all, they hated Israelis."

It is noteworthy that Kaplan's grant from the Harry Bradley Foundation of Milwaukee, which enabled him to write the book, was administered by the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia, which was directed by Daniel Pipes until 1993. Kaplan says in his foreword that the Institute gave him help whenever he needed it but otherwise gave him the intellectual freedom he needed to reach his own conclusions. I have no reason to doubt that, but if Pipe's review indicates what he got from the book, and given that he is no friend of either Arabists or Muslims, one wonders whether he may have influenced Kaplan's interpretations of what he saw and heard, or whether Kaplan merely reinforced his already well-established prejudices. In any event, we can be reasonably sure that the Pipes version of Kaplan's history will be what many neo-conservative American Jews will believe, and they will cite Kaplan as their evidence.

The book is full of minor factual errors of a less personal nature which I will pass over as unimportant to Kaplan's thesis, although they reveal a certain sloppiness about fact-checking. One of them is important, however. He cites Bernard Johns as the first African-American Arabist, when in fact that distinction goes to Terence Todman, who was twenty years John's senior in the Foreign Service. Kaplan makes much of the new ethnicity and diversity among the Arabists that began with Sisco and Kissinger. Todman was studying Arabic long before Kissinger came to State. This is not a definitive history.

All of the reviews that I have read except Pipe's take exception to Part III, "Debacle," which deals with U.S. policy toward Iraq and the Gulf war. Kaplan puts an unfair burden on April Glaspie, the ambassador in Baghdad in 1990, who is made responsible for Saddam Hussein's misjudgment of U.S. reaction to the invasion of Kuwait. This is rather like shooting the piano player. Glaspie certainly did not write the music. She had delivered repeatedly to the Iraqis expressions of U.S. concern about Iraqi intentions toward Kuwait and had good reason to believe that those messages had arrived. It is true, as she is the first to admit, that she misjudged Saddam's intentions, but so did everyone else, including the other Arabs, because what he did bore the earmarks of a last-minute, personal decision which went contrary to all of the accepted wisdom about Arab behavior.

To expect her (as pundits seem to), in the absence of instructions, to deliver a warning to the Iraqis that we would use force if they moved against Kuwait is to misunderstand totally the limits on action which bind all ambassadors. Although he is careful to avoid saying so himself, the implication of Kaplan's discussion is sexist -- it was a mistake to send a woman to Baghdad; we should have had someone like Loy Henderson there. (Parker Hart, who is quoted as saying that, does not remember doing so, but all of our memories are faulty.) Unfortunately, Glaspie has never been allowed to put her case fully before us. We have seen some of the record, but not all, and we have not heard much of the background. Kaplan says she refused to talk to him, but she was under orders not to from Margaret Tutweiler, Secretary Baker's confidante and assistance secretary for public affairs. She is

still under wraps. Kaplan calls the performance of a succession of Arabists at Baghdad a disgrace. The real disgrace was the cowardly behavior of the Baker team at the Department of State when the crisis broke.

It is in moments like that, betrayed by Arabs and Americans alike, that the Arabist must contemplate seriously the merits of following or not following an often thankless career. I sometimes regretted doing so and more than once swore never to go back to the area, but it gave me an intellectual challenge and a lifelong interest that has brought some warm friends and personal satisfaction and, who knows, maybe some inner tranquility, as Kaplan says. Who could ask for anything more?

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