

**SALIM YAQUB, *Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East Relations in the 1970s* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016). Pp. 464. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN 9780801448836.**

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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. In Salim Yaqub's prodigiously researched, engagingly written, and highly original book, *Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East Relations in the 1970s*, the complex interactions between the United States and Arabs, from Middle East high diplomacy to US university campuses, popular culture to political activism, were beset by contradictions. Whether in oil crises, international terrorism, or US support for Israel, global events propelled Americans and Arabs into one another in frequently antagonistic situations. But it was also a time when, partly through the enthusiastic public diplomacy of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, Americans viewed individual Arabs more favorably than ever before. Moreover, Arab Americans worked tirelessly to bring themselves into the center of American society in important ways. According to Yaqub, the pattern stuck. "In subsequent decades, as in the 1970s, America's troubled relations with the Middle East made life difficult for Arab Americans, sometimes exceedingly so, but they resisted in ways that gained them strength and visibility," he argues (345).

The era that journalist Tom Wolfe memorably labeled the "Me" Decade<sup>1</sup> was, Yaqub contends, also "a pivotal decade in the evolution" of US-Arab relations. It was a period in which Arabs and Americans "came to know each other as never before." They "became an inescapable presence in each other's lives and perceptions, and members of each society came to feel profoundly vulnerable to the political, economic, cultural, and even physical encroachments of the other." But, the book argues, a "peculiar irony" that still characterizes the relationship became entrenched in the 1970s. "In the realm of foreign affairs, we have seen extraordinary and often escalating

antagonism between the official policies of the United States and much of Arab society,” Yaqub notes. On the domestic scene, however, “Arab Americans and Muslim Americans have been increasingly recognized as a permanent, if highly contested, part of the American community, and important sectors of the U.S. intelligentsia . . . have become more respectful of Arab perspectives on political and cultural issues” (7).

In fact, *Imperfect Strangers* is a major addition to a growing corpus of work that focuses on the complexities of the political, cultural, and international dynamics of the decade. Historians have increasingly come to recognize the significance of the long 1970s, sometimes derided as a decade defined by economic malaise, disco, and dodgy sartorial choices. Sandwiched between the tumultuous 1960s and the go-go 1980s, the 1970s initially seemed destined to be remembered as a decade when “nothing much” happened, to paraphrase Daniel Patrick Moynihan.<sup>2</sup> That is certainly no longer the consensus view.

Recently, scholars have focused on the intersection of American politics, culture, and economics in the 1970s,<sup>3</sup> while others have embarked on ambitious world histories.<sup>4</sup> Yet others have concentrated on the nature of American power, and specifically the way in which tightened economic straits drove a reconception of American power on the world stage.<sup>5</sup> And yet as early as 1981, Roger Owen called the 1970s “undoubtedly the most dramatic and important years in recent Middle East history”—a bold characterization, indeed, considering the decades of wars and independence movements that preceded them.<sup>6</sup> *Imperfect Strangers*, by contrast, combines the granular approach that so often defines diplomatic history with the temporal sweep frequently favored by cultural and social historians.

Like so many of the best recent works in the history of American foreign relations, Yaqub’s book traverses the boundaries between political, diplomatic, cultural, and social history. On that count alone, *Imperfect Strangers* is an important addition to American diplomatic history and the study of US engagement with the Middle East. But perhaps more significantly, *Imperfect Strangers* introduces a provocative new element into the (relatively) small corpus of work that sits at the nexus of American domestic affairs and Middle East diplomacy. To the extent that this intersection has been analyzed, it is often essentialized in works on the “Jewish lobby” and America’s Middle East policy, or more generally the relationship of American Jews and Israel.<sup>7</sup> *Imperfect Strangers* takes readers beyond this frustratingly narrow analytical paradigm and begins to redress the

historiographical imbalance. Yaqub takes his analysis beyond traditional party affiliation and Right-Left/Republican-Democratic political debates. Instead, he offers a nuanced analysis of the relationship between domestic ethnic interest groups and American foreign policy, both in its formulation and execution. In doing so, he successfully highlights the fluidity between US domestic and foreign affairs and helps demonstrate why American foreign policy cannot be fully understood without careful consideration of the operational environment in which it arises.

Previous works have examined the way in which knowledge and perceptions of the Middle East have been developed and spread inside the United States. Zachary Lockman and Osamah Khalil, for example, focused on the intersection of national security interests and the development of regional knowledge in the American academy and government.<sup>8</sup> Matthew Jacobs assessed the multifarious influences that shaped American elite understanding of the Middle East from the First World War to the Six-Day War.<sup>9</sup> Nathan Citino's impressive new work on American modernization in the Middle East elucidates the way in which debates inside American intellectual circles made their way into policy and, ultimately, had a genuine impact on the ground in the region.<sup>10</sup> Douglas Little touched on some of the same themes as Yaqub, conceptualizing the way in which the American imagination interacted with the development of policy toward the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Christison has looked more narrowly at evolving American perceptions of Palestine, whether at the popular or official level.<sup>12</sup> However, the gold standard of works that focus on the interaction of US imagination, interests, and Middle East policy remains Melani McAlister's *Epic Encounters*.<sup>13</sup> In my view, McAlister's book remains the seminal assessment of American social, cultural, and political influences on perceptions of the Middle East and the development of US policy, but *Imperfect Strangers* seems destined to rank alongside it in importance.

*Imperfect Strangers'* roughly chronological narrative loosely alternates between U.S.-Arab relations abroad and the place and activities of Arab Americans inside the United States. It begins with the 1968 assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy by Sirhan Sirhan, a Palestinian displaced by the establishment of the state of Israel. The suggestion is that this act of violence represented the first time that violence stemming from Middle East conflicts had been visited upon the United States. Nevertheless, the foreign and domestic strands of the narrative are slightly disconnected from one another initially.

However, from chapter 5 (“Scuttle Diplomacy”) onward, Yaqub artfully weaves together his analytical threads into a rich tapestry.

Much of the first half of the book indulges in that favorite parlor game of diplomatic historians: assessing the influence of Henry Kissinger on regional events.<sup>14</sup> Kissinger’s shadow shades all studies of American foreign relations in the decade and *Imperfect Strangers* is no different. Yaqub contends that during the first half of his first term President Richard Nixon did try to bring some “evenhandedness” to American positions on the Arab-Israeli dispute by addressing Arab grievances more directly than had his immediate predecessors. The resulting ill-fated Rogers Plan, and the domestic backlash it provoked, however, helped nudge the administration toward a general acquiescence of Israeli positions. Just as significantly, Nixon effectively ceded control of his Arab-Israeli policy to Kissinger, who, Yaqub argues, would go on to leave a permanent imprint on the conflict.

*Imperfect Strangers* expands on Yaqub’s earlier critiques of Kissinger and the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>15</sup> The major contention in this work vis-à-vis Kissinger is that “Kissinger *deliberately* designed” the post-1973 process of shuttle diplomacy “to enable Israel’s indefinite occupation of Arab land, a function it served in later decades, whatever his successors’ intentions” (13). His meetings with Arab leaders while he negotiated the Sinai I and II agreements might have helped project an image of an ecumenical statesman, but in truth “the relentless thrust of his diplomacy was to sideline the Palestinian issue and maximize Israel’s retention of Israel’s occupied land” (147). By making this case, Yaqub broadens the traditional analysis that Kissinger’s efforts were designed primarily at excluding the Soviet Union and placing the United States at the center of the diplomatic forum. He also pushes back against the common contemporaneous analysis that Kissinger boosted the Arabs at the expense of Israel. While he extracted “some modest Israeli concessions,” Yaqub notes, “Kissinger engineered Egypt’s effective removal from the Arab-Israeli conflict, vastly increasingly the likelihood that Israel would indefinitely retain major portions of the territory it had seized in 1967” (146). The negotiating strategy was “surreptitious by design,” enabling Kissinger to labor tirelessly and often brilliantly to construct a diplomatic framework that fortified Israel’s occupation of Arab land” (152, 181). Yaqub sums up Kissinger’s achievements thusly:

Through feints and subterfuges, through exertions at once shamelessly self-promotional and personally draining, Kissinger had eased the Soviets to the sidelines, persuaded Arab oil producers to lift their embargo . . . and pacified Syria just long enough to pull Egypt out of its confrontation with Israel and into a U.S.-brokered dialogue with that country (181–82).

All of this came at a time when broad international opinion supported Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 war borders and the establishment of a Palestinian state. Kissinger's diplomatic acumen, then, blunted any such push.

As with any treatment of Kissinger's role on American diplomacy, does this run the risk of focusing too much attention on one individual? I do think that rather too little attention is paid to Sadat, whose mercurial nature makes any clear-cut conclusions difficult to come by. More could have been made of the way in which Sadat took chances—some rewarded, others not—in his drive to secure a close relationship with the United States and, as a fortuitous by-product, a peace with Israel. To that end, Yaqub is also fairly hard on the late 1970s Camp David Peace Process, framing it predominantly as the continuation of a US-supported strategy to abet Israeli annexation rather than as an opportunity to sharply limit the chances of a potentially ruinous interstate war (and, yes, both things can be true at once). Nevertheless, Kissinger sits squarely at the center of the diplomatic story of the Middle East story for the better part of the decade. Not just impossible to ignore, he was quite often the driver of events.

The fine-grained analysis of the first stages of the Lebanese Civil War is masterful (208–38). Yaqub has taken an enormously complicated conflict and clarified the way in which local actors, coalitions, and outside powers contributed to the tragedy. The assessment is particularly innovative in the way in which Yaqub traces how the conflict redounded to debates inside the Arab American community.

Indeed, *Imperfect Strangers'* integration of Arab American actors into the history of American foreign relations, and its mapping of international events onto domestic debates, is really the standout contribution of this work. The role of Arab Americans inside the US polity is something that is only beginning to gain attention.<sup>16</sup> In *Imperfect Strangers*, the illumination of the rivalry that pitted the

National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA) against the Association of Arab American University Graduates (AAUG) helps demonstrate that far from a monolith, Arab Americans were themselves engaged in a highly contested discussion about group identity and political involvement that did not necessarily map along the lines of religion or national origin.

Likewise, Yaqub makes productive use of the personal papers of Senator James Abourezk (D-SD), who emerged as Arab America's "outstanding moderate—an acerbic moderate, but a moderate nonetheless" when he arrived in the Senate in 1973, to detail his role in shaping debates inside the community (82). Abourezk never sought to position himself as a spokesman for the community, but the timing of his arrival in the upper chamber, "combined with an enterprising approach to public relations, [created] a substantial audience for Abourezk's views outside the Senate chamber, not just among Arab Americans but in the national media as well" (82). Indeed, any examination of contemporaneous news reporting will show Abourezk's significant role as a go-to source for comment on American Middle East policy.

What was the overall experience of Arab Americans, then, in the '70s? In Yaqub's view, the pattern had emerged by the middle of the decade: "Policy disappointment coupled with a measure of societal acceptance; such was the emerging, and ironic, pattern of Arab American political life" (172). The interaction of external and domestic realms in the 1970s "produced a sort of double movement: contentious international events that alienated Arab Americans and made their position in American society seem more precarious were often accompanied by, and sometimes inseparable from, developments that mitigated those very processes," he contends (344). In the first pattern,

Arab American activists revolted against what they saw as a deplorable status quo and thereby gained strength, cohesion, experience, and visibility. . . . In the second pattern, U.S. officials—even while pursuing policies that antagonized most Arab American activists—forged alliances with Arab actors or performed rituals of inclusion that had the effect of creating some Arab-friendly space at home (344).

As an example of this binary, Yaqub notes that the spectacular surge in "petrodollars nurtured pro-Arab constituencies and provoked nativist

hostility; there is indeed nothing simple about this story" (345). Accounting for this complexity, the "rhythm and peculiar logic" of the US-Arab encounter is indeed challenging, but Yaqub proves himself more than up to the task (348).

In a book as rigorously researched and effervescently written as this, it might be somewhat persnickety to register any quibbles. Yet, Yaqub's analysis could have benefited from an assessment of the gradual increase in Arab American groups presenting their views on Capitol Hill beginning in the late 1970s. The simple act of Arab American advocacy groups being invited to appear and enter into the permanent record their views on, for example, arms sales to Arab countries or US positions in the Arab-Israeli dispute represented an important acceptance of political equality. I would have liked to learn who was behind such invitations. Aside from Abourezk and Rep. Paul Findley (R-IL), which members of Congress and their staff felt sufficiently confident to buck political pressure and invite Arab American views on such matters of national security? Moreover, to what extent was it related to the growing Saudi lobby on Capitol Hill? Additionally—and this is something I have wrestled with, but never quite answered, in my own research—could the relatively heightened Arab profile in the United States have translated into US political pressure on the Palestinian issue in the mid to late 1970s? Particularly during Jimmy Carter's term, was a historic opportunity missed not just because of Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin's ideology and stubborn negotiating tactics, but also because it was a moment when the American public might have tolerated a harder administration push for a Palestinian state?

Regardless, this is a highly innovative, important, and entertaining book, filled with details about not just top-level diplomacy, but Hollywood films, best-selling books, the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, and more. It is, or will soon be, required reading for any scholar of US foreign relations in the 1970s, as well as the evolution of post-Second World War American Middle East policy.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Tom Wolfe, "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening," *New York Magazine*, 23 August 1976, <http://nymag.com/news/features/45938/>.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Nicholas Lemann, "How the Seventies Changed America," *American Heritage* 42, no. 4 (July/August 1991): 39–49.

<sup>3</sup> Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010); Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Roger Owen, "The Arab Economies in the 1970s," *MERIP Reports* 100/101 (October–December 1981): 3–13, <https://www.merip.org/mer/mer100-101/arab-economies-1970s>.

<sup>7</sup> Examples include Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism* (New York: Times Books, 2012); John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); and Seth Tillman, *The United States in the Middle East: Interests and Obstacles* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> Osamah F. Khalil, *America's Dream Palace: Middle East Expertise and the Rise of the National Security State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Zachary Lockman, *Field Notes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United States* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Jacobs, *Imagining the Middle East: The Building of an American Foreign Policy, 1918–1967* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Nathan J. Citino, *Envisioning the Arab Future: Modernization in U.S.-Arab Relations, 1945–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Kathleen Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Jussi M. Hanhimäki, "'Dr. Kissinger' or 'Mr. Henry'? Kissingerology, Thirty Years and Counting," *Diplomatic History* 27, no. 5 (November 2003): 637–76.

<sup>15</sup> Salim Yaqub, "The Weight of Conquest: Henry Kissinger and the Arab-Israeli Conflict," in *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969–1977*, eds. Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).



<sup>16</sup> Hani J. Bawardi, *The Making of Arab Americans: From Syrian Nationalism to U.S. Citizenship* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014); Pamela E. Pennock, *The Rise of the Arab American Left: Activists, Allies, and Their Fight against Imperialism and Racism, 1960s–1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).