
BOOK REVIEW

Strange Bedfellows

Salim Yaqub. *Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arab, and U.S.-Middle East Realties in the 1970s*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017. 464 pp. \$35.00.

“The post-Cold War era began a decade early in the Middle East” (338). These are the most thought-provoking words in Salim Yaqub’s deeply researched and sprawling history of American encounters with the Middle East. *Imperfect Strangers* opens with the June 1968 killing of Robert Kennedy by Sirhan Sirhan, a Palestinian sympathizer, and the book reaches an even more dramatic denouement with the September 1982 massacre of Palestinian refugees by Lebanese militiamen, allied with Israel, in Sabra and Shatila. This arc of destruction is not coincidental, according to Yaqub, but a direct consequence of a new pattern in American relations with the Middle East: “strategic alignment between the United States and Israel, escalating terrorist attacks by nonstate Arab actors, repeated U.S. military interventions in the Arab world, and rising anti-American sentiment in the region” (8).

Imperfect Strangers is strong on the complex twists and turns that caused this destruction, and various other developments. The causal logic turns on one missed opportunity and one particularly manipulative figure. The missed opportunity was the abandoned American effort to negotiate a comprehensive Palestinian-Israeli territorial settlement. Secretary of State William Rogers pursued this goal during President Nixon’s first term, but Yaqub argues that the president sought to strengthen Israel and weaken the Palestinians after early 1972, convinced that major changes in Middle East geopolitics would undermine his emphasis on great power diplomacy with Moscow, Beijing, Tehran, Riyadh, and soon Cairo.

Domestic politics also pushed the president in the pro-Israeli direction, according to Yaqub. He quotes an infamous passage from H. R. Haldeman’s diary, recounting Nixon’s explanation for increased American military aid to Israel: “we can’t have the American Jews bitching about the plane deliveries. We can’t push Israel too hard to have a confrontation We must not let this issue hurt us politically” (51).

Yaqub is fair to Nixon, despite this and many other documented outbursts. He carefully describes the president’s uncertainty and ambivalence about

American policy toward the Palestinian-Israeli dispute during his first term. For Yaqub, the consistent personality pushing against a comprehensive settlement, and for the empowerment of Israel as an American proxy, was Henry Kissinger. By 1972, Yaqub writes that “Kissinger was riding high”—he had secured a dramatic opening to China, established cozy relations with Soviet leaders, and he was cultivating collaborators among Middle East heads of state, particularly the Shah of Iran, the leaders of Israel, and soon Anwar Sadat of Egypt (51). Yaqub argues that for the next decade Kissinger regularly showed favoritism to Israel and prejudice against the Palestinians. He built a new American system of dominance in the Middle East on the backs of suffering Palestinians. And he acted forcefully to make sure that no one else helped the Palestinian political cause. This is a damning portrait of Kissinger’s geopolitics.

Iran, Israel, and Egypt became the pillars of American influence in the Middle East. Washington used these allies to counter the oil leverage of the Gulf states, diminish the regional influence of the Soviet Union, and disempower non-state challengers, particularly Palestinians. Close personal relations between Kissinger and regional leaders, many of them dictators, created surface stability at the cost of more repressive policies on the ground. This geopolitical callousness reached an apex during the Lebanese Civil War—covered very well by Yaqub—when the United States simply watched, and perhaps implicitly encouraged, sectarian violence. Kissinger commented that the thousands of deaths in the Lebanese Civil War had “broken the Arab united front,” and it was “working out well” (226).

Yaqub does not only chronicle these violent effects of U.S. policy; his book catalogs some of the reactions, both abroad and at home. In the Middle East, Yaqub treats the attacks on American power as asymmetric responses by a lethal combination of indignant residents and manipulative political-religious leaders. Immediately after describing Kissinger’s callousness toward civilian deaths in the Lebanese Civil War, Yaqub recounts the murders of the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon (Francis E. Meloy), the U.S. embassy economic counselor (Robert O. Waring), and Lebanese bodyguard and driver (Zuhair Moghrabi). Palestinian leaders condemned these killings at the time, but Yaqub tells us that the perpetrators were “linked to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine” (226). Yaqub clearly does not excuse the murderers, but his analysis shows a link between American support for violence and the evident blowback.

This is one of the main, often unstated, plot lines of *Imperfect Strangers*. Aggressive and biased interventions by American leaders in the Middle East enhanced short-term U.S. national interests, but provoked resistance and reprisals from actors in the region. The cycle of violence was sparked, according to this reconstruction, by decisions in Washington, followed by brutality in the Middle East, and then “terrorism” against Americans and their allies. U.S. intervention on behalf of allies (especially Israel) encouraged repression (particularly of Palestinians) which provoked resistance (from diverse groups of non-state actors). In the case of the Black September Organization (BSO)’s murder of two

American diplomats in 1973, U.S. Ambassador to Sudan Cleo Noel and Chargé d’Affaires George Curtis Moore, Yaqub is explicit about this causal chain. He quotes the U.S. ambassador to North Yemen at the time, William R. Crawford: “Terrorism and [the] loss of American lives are the price we pay for the abandonment of even-handedness” (119).

Again, Yaqub does not apologize for violence by any of the many state and non-state actors that he chronicles in close detail. He is quite explicit in his revulsion toward the carnage and the attacks on innocents. Yaqub does, however, condemn those who refuse to recognize the links between geopolitics and terrorism. He sees destructive blinders in the narrow sanctimony of statesmen like the U.S. ambassador to India at the time, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whose comments absolved the United States of any responsibility, encouraged more violence, and presaged more extreme American anti-terrorist militancy in coming years. Although Moynihan recognized the growing role of the United States in the region, he treated Americans as pure victims and the organizers of violent resistance as dark criminals. Referring to Salah Khalaf, one of the BSO leaders, Moynihan cabled from New Delhi: “If we know his whereabouts, I hope by now the son of a bitch is missing a few front teeth” (119).

This belligerent language encouraged the kinds of binary judgments between good and evil, with accompanying racial prejudice, that reinforced the most violent elements of American policy. Throughout *Imperfect Strangers* this becomes evident. The book begins with Nixon’s ambivalent views of the region, but by the end of the narrative Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan had firmly set American power against the Palestinians and other non-state actors.

Yaqub is particularly critical of the Camp David Accords, signed in 1978. Carter considered them his greatest accomplishment for facilitating peace between Israel and Egypt, but Yaqub reminds readers that the cost of this bilateral agreement was continued conflict in the region between the states favored by the United States and the groups excluded from the discussion. He explains that the U.S.-brokered accords “contained no credible provisions for ending Israel’s occupation of remaining Arab territories and thus for resolving the wider conflict. The Arab world recoiled in anger, both at [Egyptian leader Anwar] Sadat for leaving his fellow Arabs in the lurch and at Washington for encouraging this abandonment” (240).

Carter’s triumph froze the region in permanent war, with increased militancy against American actors and their Arab collaborators. Camp David and related policies motivated a radical Egyptian group, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, to assassinate Sadat in October 1981. A new cycle of terrorist hijackings and other attacks on American assets occurred in the same period. Reagan’s anti-terrorist hardline was a reaction to these conditions, which in turn motivated increased attacks on Americans in Beirut and other cities. The cycle tightened and the violence spread.

There is a bright part to this sad story. Yaqub shows, in greater detail than any other book that I have read, how the violence in the Middle East activated

the growing Arab-American community of citizens in the United States. Yaqub writes: “Largely because of the immigration reforms of the mid-1960s, which permitted a marked increase in immigration from ‘Third World’ countries, Arab-American communities grew rapidly in the 1970s. This population growth, combined with the political ferment sweeping the Arab world, including the Arab diaspora, after 1967—combined, too, with the political and social protests animating American society at the time—encouraged a new assertiveness among Arab American activists” (10).

Thanks in part to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which opened American borders to non-traditional immigrants, the Arab-American population in the United States grew from 500,000 at the act’s signing to more than one million by 1980. These new arrivals became embedded in urban communities (like Los Angeles and Detroit), and they entered universities and the professions in large numbers. They even began to exert influence in national politics. Yaqub writes at length about the outspoken activism of James Abourezk, an Arab-American politician from South Dakota, elected to the House of Representatives in 1970, and then the U.S. Senate in 1972. He was one of many new Arab voices in mainstream American society.

Yaqub does not contend that Arab-Americans overcame all the legacies of prejudice against them within the United States; that was obviously not the case. He argues that Arab-Americans succeeded in adding their voices to the mainstream mix of opinions on politics, culture, and religion in American society. Through the hard work of groups like the Association of Arab American University Graduates, which included a young Edward Said, and counter-narratives, particularly a group of “Arab-friendly” novels, public depictions of the Middle East widened to include more attention to Arab and Muslim perspectives (195). This was particularly true on university campuses and in major commercial cities. A wider perspective also filtered into the mainstream media where Jewish and Arab figures became more common than before for American television viewers.

Yaqub’s point about Arab-American assertiveness and acceptance in many parts of American society is powerful. It is the part of his book that other reviewers have found most innovative and impressive.¹ Arab-Americans became more central to American society in the 1970s due to their numbers, their achievements, and the growing U.S. fascination with the Middle East. Familiarity bred both contempt and acceptance, and the uneasy mix between the two reactions, often within the same people, fueled political controversies from the “Abscam” FBI investigation of corrupt congressmen to the Iranian hostage crisis. American domestic politics became more multicultural and international; Americans remained largely ignorant of the Middle East, but no longer indifferent.

1. See the reviews of his book by Victor McFarland, Adam Howard, Melani McAlister, Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut, and Osamah Khalil in *Passport* 48 (September 2017), 12–23.

Although *Imperfect Strangers* describes positive and negative historical dynamics, the latter seem most powerful. In Yaqub's telling, the United States became a more aggressive actor in the Middle East during the 1970s, favoring Israeli and select Arab leaders, provoking violent reactions that led to the terrorist attacks of the 1980s, 1990s, and September 11, 2001. Arab-American voices became more prominent in American society, but their presence remained deeply controversial, and their influence failed to reform U.S. foreign policy. They might have had the opposite effect, triggering more militaristic "civilizational" rhetoric.

The strength of Yaqub's deeply researched account is also its shortcoming: the narrative has many compelling components, but they do not always hold together. When and how did Arab-Americans affect U.S. policy-making? And how did evolving U.S. policy change Arab-American views, which were already highly critical of Washington's biases in the region? Yaqub shows that international policy and domestic politics were in conversation. After reading the book, it remains difficult to characterize this relationship, its meanings, and its legacies.

The clearest plot line in Yaqub's analysis is his criticism of biased U.S. policies toward Israel, his sympathy for the suffering of Palestinians, and his disdain for those he sees as most responsible, especially Henry Kissinger. These well-founded judgments appear on almost every page. In some ways, they hold the book together. Yet, the alternatives remain difficult to see. Was a comprehensive and even-handed settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict possible in the 1970s? What would it have looked like, and how could the United States have brokered it?

These crucial questions, which many Arab-Americans and others asked at the time, are difficult to answer even after reading Yaqub's more than 340 pages. That is because the analysis of the other major state and non-state actors in the Middle East is so thin. Readers learn very little about the motivations of leaders in the region, their populations, or the broader influences upon their actions. Yaqub's book is focused on the United States, and that is appropriate, but his judgments of the consequences of American actions are difficult to assess without more attention to the other actors. The structure of *Imperfect Strangers* gives the United States primary agency, it treats challengers as reacting to the United States, and it then criticizes American leaders for contributing to more of the same. The presumption is that the United States could produce different outcomes—maybe more peaceful and just outcomes—if it acted differently.

The point here is not to criticize Yaqub for writing an American-centered book. That was his goal and he has succeeded in opening many insights through this detailed and innovative approach, as indicated above. The limitation of Yaqub's approach is that it assigns responsibility to the United States and presumes better policy alternatives without laying out what they might have been. A very large literature, which is also critical of the United States, offers reasons to be skeptical that a comprehensible settlement or American even-handedness would have eliminated the region-centered reasons for violence in the Middle East during the 1970s. In addition, a large literature, which is also critical of

Henry Kissinger, questions how influential Kissinger really was for the evolution of the Middle East. These studies do not supersede or contradict Yaqub's account; they deconstruct what is a perhaps inflated assumption of the primacy of American diplomatic and domestic politics. Amidst civil wars and energy crises that the United States did not control, American options were more heavily constrained than Yaqub often allows.²

Imperfect Strangers is also a healthy corrective to exaggerated assumptions about the influence of religion on foreign policy. For Yaqub's key actors—politicians, diplomats, intellectuals, artists, and social activists—religion was not a key motivation, or even a powerful rationalization. In fact, many of the Arab-Americans profiled by Yaqub were Christian, not Muslim. Geopolitics and domestic politics dominate decision-making in this account.

Of course other scholars have emphasized religious influences as sources of ideas, fears, and networks of influence. As Daniel Hummel shows in an important forthcoming book, religious ideas and institutions created strange but influential bedfellows between American evangelicals and Israeli leaders in the 1970s.³ Similar connections might exist among Islamic theologians and various Middle East dictators.⁴ Yaqub does not see these religious networks of influence because he includes few religious figures in his study.

No book can include everything, and *Imperfect Strangers* covers more than most studies of U.S.-Middle East relations during this period. Yaqub's analysis elucidates many of the dynamics, rooted in geopolitics and domestic politics, that drove rising conflict. His book is absolutely essential for understanding how the United States emerged as a multicultural Middle East hegemon. His book longs for policy alternatives, but it remains limited by its own biases and curious commitment to the American primacy that it so eloquently criticizes. Perhaps that is the best we can expect from talented scholars, like Yaqub, who are embedded—as we all are—in such a highly politicized moment for American and Middle Eastern politics.

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2. Among the many excellent books on this period, analyzing the complex motivations and influences on various American and non-American actors, see James R. Stocker, *Spheres of Intervention: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Collapse of Lebanon, 1967–1976* (Ithaca, NY, 2016); Craig Daigle, *The Limits of Détente: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969–1973* (New Haven, CT, 2012); Joanne Randa Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power* (Princeton, NJ, 2016); Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (New York, 2015); Christopher R. W. Dietrich, *Oil Revolution: Anticolonial Elites, Sovereign Rights, and the Economic Culture of Decolonization* (Cambridge, UK, 2017).

3. Daniel G. Hummel, *A Covenant of the Mind: American Evangelicals, Israel, and the Creation of a Special Relationship* (Philadelphia, PA, forthcoming 2018).

4. See, among others, Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge, UK, 2005).