

## IMPERFECT STRANGERS

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# **IMPERFECT STRANGERS**

**Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle  
East Relations in the 1970s**

**Salim Yaqub**

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To "My Girls"—  
*Elizabeth Teare and Dorothy Teare Yaqub*

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## Introduction

“I can explain,” the young man was heard to protest, as bodyguards and onlookers wrestled him onto the steam table and pried the pistol from his hand. It was shortly after midnight on June 4–5, 1968, at the Ambassador Hotel in downtown Los Angeles. The youth had just fired at point-blank range into the back of Senator Robert F. Kennedy’s head, moments after Kennedy had thanked his supporters for propelling him to victory in California’s Democratic presidential primary. The stricken candidate now lay on the damp floor of the hotel’s serving pantry; he would die at a nearby hospital twenty-five hours later. “Let me explain,” the young man repeated. “. . . I did it for my country.”<sup>1</sup>

Amid the turmoil and grief following the shooting of Senator Kennedy, commentators puzzled over those words. Which country did the gunman mean? He was Sirhan Sirhan, a citizen of Jordan, born twenty-four years earlier in an Arab village on the West Bank, which was now under Israeli occupation. In the 1950s, he had emigrated to America and become a permanent resident. In a June 9 *Los Angeles Times* opinion piece, the journalist A.S. “Doc” Young assumed that Sirhan was claiming the United States as his country. On the surface, Young noted, this was an incongruous assertion.

Senator Kennedy had “sought [*sic*] to turn the country around, to aid the poor, save the cities,” and build “a democracy with equal rights and opportunities for all.” It was therefore “ironic that a man with the odd name of Sirhan Sirhan should shoot him, claiming: ‘I did it for my country.’” Or maybe not so ironic, Young decided after all. Given the violent impulses that had seized the U.S. body politic in recent years, resulting in the assassinations of the senator’s older brother, President John F. Kennedy, and of the civil rights leaders Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.—the latter gunned down just two months earlier—wasn’t Sirhan the perfect embodiment of the American spirit?<sup>2</sup>

A June 6 *Boston Globe* editorial saw Sirhan as acting on Jordan’s behalf—an assumption with equally nihilistic implications. “So it now develops,” the editorial observed, “that Sirhan Bechara Sirhan was a mad man, truly mad. . . . ‘I did it for my country. I love my country,’ Sirhan is said to have cried out as he watched Sen. Kennedy fall. And thus he proved his madness.” The *Globe*’s logic was hard to follow, but it seemed to turn on the fact that, just one year earlier, Israeli forces had occupied Sirhan’s native West Bank and physically negated Jordan’s claim of sovereignty over the territory. Consequently, “this deluded young Jordanian . . . is in truth a man without a country to love anymore.”<sup>3</sup>

The deficiencies in the *Globe*’s analysis—which, in fairness, appeared at a very early stage in the tragedy and was evidently composed even before Kennedy succumbed to his wound—would become clearer in the weeks and months ahead. Sirhan did show signs of mental disturbance, but the political motivations for his crime, while not explaining everything, were intelligible enough. The country he had lost was Palestine, not Jordan, and he believed it was still his to love, and avenge. In 1948, when Sirhan was four years old, the violence attending Israel’s creation had forced him and his family to flee their West Jerusalem home for the relative safety of East Jerusalem. Barred by Israel from returning to that home, the Sirhans found refuge in a one-room house in the Old City, sustained by rations from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. In 1957, they moved to Pasadena, California, where young Sirhan became fluent in English but never felt at home. From childhood he nurtured an abiding hatred of the Zionist movement that had uprooted his family and so many other Palestinians. The Arab-Israeli War of June 1967, erupting exactly one year before the fateful encounter at the Ambassador Hotel, humiliated the Arab world and further devastated Palestinian lives, intensifying Sirhan’s rage. As the first anniversary of the June War approached, and in hot pursuit of his party’s

presidential nomination, Senator Kennedy called for the immediate sale of fifty U.S. Phantom warplanes to Israel, making himself a specific target of Sirhan's wrath.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the facts supporting this political interpretation of Sirhan's crime were publicly available soon after the event, yet such a reading seldom informed mainstream American commentary. Editorials generally treated the murder as a senseless act, though there was some disagreement over whether the madness was limited to Sirhan or extended to a violent American society that had abetted his wild impulses.<sup>5</sup> Even this debate, some felt, granted the tragedy more coherence than it merited. In March 1969, *Newsweek* lamented that Sirhan's murder trial "has notably failed to explain, in any profound way, whatever meaning there may have been behind the Kennedy assassination. Perhaps, as Albert Camus has pointed out, the only way to understand such maniacally absurd events is to see the absurd itself as all the answer there is."<sup>6</sup>

Opinion leaders in the Arab world, by contrast, had no difficulty making sense of Sirhan's act. Although Arab governments and newspapers immediately condemned the murder, some of the latter editorialized that the crime was an understandable, if regrettable, product of Palestinian dispossession. Jordan's *Al-Dastur* called Sirhan "a simple Palestinian who has lost his homeland and has not been able to make his complaint reach the heads of Americans because of the . . . walls erected by Zionist propaganda." Bullets were "his means of expressing his despair."<sup>7</sup> Over the coming months, elements of the newly ascendant Palestinian movement claimed Sirhan as one of their own. A Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) poster circulated in the spring of 1969 superimposed an image of a gun-toting guerrilla over a portrait of Sirhan, whom it called "a commando . . . not a murderer."<sup>8</sup> Sirhan's status as a Palestinian icon persisted well into the next decade. In 1973, when Palestinian militants seized the Saudi embassy in Khartoum, Sudan, taking two American and several other foreign diplomats hostage, their demands initially included the release of Sirhan, now serving a life sentence for Kennedy's murder.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, there were plenty of Americans who, from the start, grasped the relevance of Middle Eastern politics to Sirhan's crime. Yet many of them had an interest in downplaying the Arab element. Jewish and pro-Israel groups saw little advantage in drawing attention to the Palestinian cause, whose existence posed uncomfortable questions about the circumstances of Israel's birth. Most Americans of Arab descent, mortified by the killing and fearing retaliation, were understandably eager to disavow the perpetrator.



Figure 1. "Sirhan Bishara Sirhan: a commando . . . not a murderer," Palestine Liberation Organization poster, 1969. Art by Ismail Shammout (Palestine Poster Project).

"Sirhan was not thinking about us when he did this thing," an Arab American in Pasadena told a reporter.<sup>10</sup>

In Rapid City, South Dakota, a Lebanese American lawyer had a more personal reason to resent Sirhan. In 1968, James Abourezk had made his

first foray into politics, running as a Kennedy delegate in South Dakota's Democratic primary election, held the same day as California's. Kennedy won both races. "Our taste of victory on primary night . . . turned sour as we watched Robert Kennedy's assassination," recalled Abourezk, who in 1970 would be elected to the House of Representatives and two years later win a seat in the U.S. Senate. "I hated Sirhan for doing that to Bobby Kennedy. . . . He assassinated my hero."<sup>11</sup>

Still, some Arab American activists refused to disown the assassin. Like the Arab editorialists, they insisted that Sirhan's offense, while grave, was inseparable from his plight as an uprooted Palestinian. Abdeen Jabara, a young Lebanese American lawyer serving on Sirhan's legal defense team, wanted the defense to foreground the traumas Sirhan had suffered when Israel's creation forced his family into exile. Such a focus, Jabara believed, would serve the defense's agreed-upon strategy of seeking acquittal (or, failing that, a finding of mitigated guilt) on the ground of "diminished responsibility." But the chief defense lawyers rejected Jabara's recommendation. At trial, they touched only glancingly on Sirhan's searing 1948 experience, treating it as just one of several traumas the defendant had suffered during his life—an unconvincing "grab bag for the jury," Jabara later complained. Sirhan was convicted and given a death sentence, which was commuted to life imprisonment after the California Supreme Court voided all pending executions in the state in 1972.<sup>12</sup>

In far more pungent terms, Muhammad ("M.T.") Mehdi, an Iraqi-born activist based in New York, also cited Arab-Israeli inequities. "As we condemn Sirhan's act," he remarked shortly after the shooting, "so we must condemn the Zionist pressures which forced Senator Kennedy to support Israel wrongly against the Arabs." Sirhan's crime "reflects the frustration of many Arabs with American politicians who have sold the Arab people of Palestine to the Zionist Jewish voters." During the trial, Mehdi expressed his own displeasure with the apolitical defense strategy. At one point, he even petitioned the court, unsuccessfully, for permission to replace Sirhan's lawyers with a new legal team.<sup>13</sup>

Over the next dozen years, Abourezk, Jabara, and Mehdi would be ubiquitous figures in Arab-American politics—Abourezk the leading moderate (albeit with a militant temperament), Jabara the unflinching radical, Mehdi the provocative, incessant, and unswatatable gadfly.

If Arabs in America could opine about Sirhan, then so, too, could Americans living in the Arab world. Robert Fraga, a young mathematics professor at the American University of Beirut, was a charter member of Americans for Justice in the Middle East (AJME), a Beirut-based organization

formed shortly after the 1967 War to acquaint Americans back home with Arab outlooks on the Arab-Israeli dispute. Analyzing the ongoing trial for AJME's newsletter, Fraga cautioned that American handwringing over the senselessness of Sirhan's act served "to obfuscate the political motives for the crime." A guilty verdict was probably appropriate, he wrote, "but I would hope to see mercy" for the defendant, who "acted in accord with his own primitive and not-ignoble sense of right and wrong."<sup>14</sup> Although Fraga himself was to keep a low profile in the years ahead, AJME would, from its Beirut perch, be modestly influential in shaping Arab-friendly discourse in the United States.

Jabara, Mehdi, Fraga, and like-minded critics believed that the United States wielded power in ways that caused dislocation and misery in the Arab world, a damning truth that Sirhan had tried, through his crime, to dramatize to the American public. It stood to reason that the United States should expect further repercussions—"blowback," a later generation would say—for its reckless policies toward the region. It fell to Mehdi, characteristically, to make this warning explicit. "If an American politician supports the [Israeli] invaders against the vanquished," he wrote in a book about the Sirhan case, "he has joined the rank of the invaders, and to the vanquished Palestinian, he is as responsible as the Zionist invaders" and should expect to be treated like them.<sup>15</sup> A more detached observer, surveying a broader Arab canvas, might have paraphrased Mehdi in this way: as the 1960s drew to a close, the United States was playing an increasingly decisive role in the geopolitics of the Middle East; Arab actors were keenly aware of this reality and growing less and less shy about letting Americans know how they felt about it.

In 1968 and 1969, mainstream American commentators had plenty of other urgent issues claiming their attention, and hardly any of them detected this ominous element in Kennedy's assassination.<sup>16</sup> That the tragedy should prompt a rethinking of U.S. Middle East policy simply did not occur to mainstream observers, and the small number exposed to the notion (mainly through Mehdi's writings) dismissed it out of hand.<sup>17</sup> Arab concerns and grievances would intrude on their awareness soon enough.

This book examines U.S. involvement in the Arab world over the dozen years following Sirhan's crime, a period spanning the presidencies of Richard M. Nixon (1969–1974), Gerald R. Ford (1974–1977), and Jimmy Carter (1977–1981) and roughly corresponding to the decade of the 1970s. Exploring the diplomatic, political, cultural, demographic, and psychological dimensions of U.S.–Arab relations, the book argues that the seventies were

a pivotal decade in the evolution of that encounter. In the 1970s, Americans and Arabs 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. It was also in those years that fundamental patterns were entrenched, establishing much of the tone and substance of U.S.-Arab relations as they have unfolded in subsequent decades. In the years since the 1970s, a peculiar irony has marked the U.S.-Arab relationship. 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. Domestically, 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 (though by no means all of them) have become more respectful of Arab perspectives on political and cultural issues. It is impossible to understand these more recent patterns without studying the events of the 1970s.

In that decade, Americans and Arabs came to know each other as never before. The decline of European power and influence in the Middle East, the increase in U.S. military and economic assistance to Middle Eastern countries, the growing centrality of the United States to Arab-Israeli diplomacy, and the expansion of U.S. trade with and investment in the region all dramatically raised America's profile in the Arab world (a transformation coinciding, ironically, with a relative decline in U.S. power and influence in most other areas of the globe). Meanwhile, the rise of international terrorism, the Arab oil embargo of 1973-1974, the related increases in the price of Middle Eastern oil, the growing visibility of "petrodollars" in American life, and rising levels of immigration from the Middle East forced ordinary Americans to pay closer attention to the Arab world.

Among both Americans and Arabs, the sense of growing mutual dependence called forth a range of responses. Some sought to rationalize that dependence through accommodation and compromise; others, to break out of it through confrontation and coercion. In the mid-1970s, many Arab actors seemed optimistic that they could parlay their new leverage into a broad accommodation with the United States, entailing a fuller integration of Arab nations into the global economy and a settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute on terms acceptable to the main currents of Arab public opinion. Important segments of the American political establishment, confronting the perceived limits of U.S. global power, themselves believed that such an accommodation was necessary.

Events in the second half of the 1970s, however, thwarted these hopes. The U.S.-sponsored peace process between Egypt and Israel, while enabling Egypt to recover the Sinai Peninsula, left Israel in possession of Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese lands, and so most Arabs angrily rejected it. Lebanon's vicious civil war absorbed the energies and resources of surrounding Arab countries, exacerbated rivalries among them, and thus eroded their strategic leverage on the global stage. At the end of the decade, a series of upheavals involving mostly non-Arab actors—the Iranian revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq war—deepened the Arab world's own polarization and instability, placing the hoped-for accommodation further out of reach. By the early 1980s, U.S.–Arab relations were settling into patterns that would persist over subsequent decades and into the twenty-first century: 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.

Although many of these circumstances were beyond Washington's control, U.S. policies sometimes exacerbated them. A case in point was the American approach to Arab–Israeli peacemaking. Over the half decade following the Arab–Israeli War of 1973, an international consensus emerged over the appropriate resolution of the Arab–Israeli dispute, a consensus that remains substantially unchanged today, despite the absence of a diplomatic process capable of realizing it on the ground. By the late 1970s, most of the world's nations favored a comprehensive settlement entailing Israel's withdrawal from all of the Arab territory occupied in the 1967 War, Arab recognition of Israel, and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The forging of this international consensus was a remarkable achievement, made possible by the ascendancy of an independent Palestinian movement that acquired international legitimacy with stunning speed and that, more gradually, moderated its national ambitions to make them compatible with Israel's existence.

As fate would have it, however, the outlines of this comprehensive settlement first emerged during the tenure of secretary of state Henry A. Kissinger, who strongly opposed such a scenario and pushed instead for bilateral agreements between Egypt and Israel. Egypt's removal from the conflict, Kissinger calculated, would ease pressure on Israel to conduct a full withdrawal to the 1967 lines. The Egyptian–Israeli process came to fruition in the Camp David Accords during the presidency of Jimmy Carter. Although Carter himself hoped that Camp David would lead to agreements

on other fronts, this did not happen. The Israelis returned the Sinai Peninsula, but Egypt's neutralization allowed them to tighten their hold over the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and parts of South Lebanon (these last areas occupied after 1978). The Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement sharply reduced the likelihood of another full-scale Arab-Israeli War, and indeed none has occurred since 1973. But it also allowed Israel's occupation of other Arab lands to continue indefinitely, intensifying anti-American sentiment among Arabs and further destabilizing the region in ways that later invited U.S. military intervention.

Decisions by Arab actors, too, contributed to the rising mutual antagonism. On the whole, Arab positions on the Arab-Israeli dispute were more conciliatory than American commentators recognized at the time (or since). Yet even moderate Arab leaders were capable of actions that reinforced the worst stereotypes of Arab violence and fanaticism. PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, who after 1974 was increasingly open to an accommodation with Israel, sometimes acquiesced in grisly attacks on Israeli civilians by Palestinian factions. In 1975, the PLO and several Arab states persuaded the United Nations General Assembly to declare Zionism "a form of racism and racial discrimination." While the arguments for the resolution were more cogent than American and Israeli observers acknowledged, the passage of such a measure was hardly conducive to an Arab-Israeli peace settlement, an outcome favored by many of the Arab governments supporting the resolution. Ordinary Americans could be forgiven for concluding that Arabs were not ready for peace.

Less directly, the manner in which some Arab governments wielded the oil weapon helped to destabilize Arab politics and foreign relations. The oil embargo and price hikes goaded industrialized societies to seek out non-Middle Eastern sources of oil, to develop alternative forms of energy, and to implement conservation schemes. By the early 1980s, such measures, though halting and incomplete, had significantly reduced the market share of oil-producing Arab states, causing economic and geopolitical dislocations that would, years later, nourish extremist politics that exacerbated U.S.-Arab antagonism.

Also fueling that antagonism were the dynamics of the Cold War rivalry in the area. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Soviet Union's profile in the Arab world, like that of the United States, rapidly ascended. The Soviets offered increased military and economic aid to Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, while stepping in to assist newly proclaimed radical regimes in South Yemen and Libya. But after 1971 Egypt, the most influential Arab state

and the centerpiece of Soviet strategy in the region, drifted away from the Soviet camp, and by the late 1970s it had become a U.S. ally. Egypt's defection dealt a crippling blow to Moscow, which over the same period, and partly consequently, lost influence with some of its remaining Arab clients as well. The Soviets' diminished status became clearer in the 1980s, when the United States was able to build up forces in the area, and sometimes intervene militarily, without undue fear of Soviet reaction. But such behavior did encounter fierce indigenous resistance, to which Washington responded with redoubled military measures, provoking further resistance and thus perpetuating the vicious cycle.

Ironically, even as the hopes for U.S.-Arab accommodation dwindled in the second half of the 1970s, Americans of Arab descent were achieving unprecedented visibility, and a measure of acceptance, within the United States. 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—and combined, too, with the political and social protests animating American society at the time—encouraged a new assertiveness among Arab American activists. Joined by Arab students and residents, and by sympathetic non-Arabs (including U.S. expatriates in Arab countries, such as Americans for Justice in the Middle East), activists like Abdeen Jabara and M.T. Mehdi denounced Zionist ideology, promoted positive images of Arab culture, and sought sympathy for Arab positions in the Arab-Israeli dispute.

In the early 1970s, these efforts had little impact on general American attitudes, but after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, which focused Americans' attention on the region, Arab American figures and groups began receiving a more respectful hearing in the mainstream media and public institutions. Newspapers and magazines "discovered" Arab Americans and noted their newfound activism and influence. Now ensconced in the U.S. Senate, where he served from 1973 to 1979, James Abourezk provided news outlets with a steady supply of quotable eviscerations of U.S. Middle East policies. In 1975, president Gerald Ford met with a delegation of Arab American leaders to solicit (and then, admittedly, ignore) their views on the Arab-Israeli dispute. The growing recognition of Arab American perspectives was accompanied, in some elite discourses, by more nuanced presentations of Arab society, culture, and politics. In academia, in business, in middle- and high-brow journalism, and within mainstream African American politics (as distinct

from Black Muslim and Black Power circles, from which sharp challenges to U.S.–Middle East orthodoxies had emanated for years), there was a new receptivity to Arab and Arab American views and aspirations.

By contrast, popular and commercial media (television shows, advertising, adventure literature, and the like), as well as some politically motivated elite discourses (such as the journals, newsletters, and pamphlets of pro-Israel groups), continued to rely on hostile portrayals of the Arab world. Indeed, such portrayals grew more negative in the second half of the 1970s, as international terrorism and the energy crisis took a firmer hold on the public imagination. But this challenge only goaded Arab American activists to become more sophisticated and organized in their media critiques, and they did occasionally persuade popular media outlets to soften their anti-Arab caricatures.

The simultaneous unfolding of these two broad trends—U.S.–Arab hostility and Arab American acceptance—was not merely ironic; the relationship was causal as well. The diplomatic maneuverings that widened the political rift between the United States and the Arab world also had the effect of humanizing Arabs to American audiences. Henry Kissinger's efforts to push Middle East peacemaking onto a bilateral Egyptian-Israeli track, and to persuade other interested parties to give his diplomacy a chance to succeed, required enormous expenditures of time, energy, and political capital. Kissinger spent hundreds of hours in Arab countries. He learned and spoke Arabic phrases, physically embraced Arab leaders, and treated Arab nations as major players on the world stage. These gestures not only flattered Arab leaders (and bought Kissinger the time he needed to launch the Egyptian-Israeli peace process) but also helped to create a somewhat more favorable image of the Arab world within the United States. The pattern was repeated with the culmination of the bilateral process in the late 1970s: Camp David transformed Egypt into an American ally and thus encouraged Americans to view Arabs more positively; by outraging the rest of the Arab world, however, it deepened the geopolitical estrangement.

Focusing more squarely on the domestic American scene, we see a similar dichotomy in the growing importance of petrodollars, which allowed some Americans to gain a deeper understanding of Arab societies while causing others to become more resentful toward them. After 1973, oil-rich Arab states invested extensively in American properties and institutions, laying the basis for economic, cultural, and educational exchanges and for the establishment in American universities of centers and programs devoted to studying the Middle East. At the same time, the rise in Arab investment fueled populist and nativist fears that wealthy Arabs were “buying

up America” and gaining a chokehold over the economic, political, and cultural life of the country.

During the 1970s, in sum, global, regional, and domestic circumstances forced Americans and Arabs into unprecedented proximity with one another. This growing intimacy encouraged attitudes of animosity and acceptance that would characterize U.S.–Arab relations in subsequent decades and, indeed, persist into our own era. Drawing on the insights and techniques of diplomatic, political, cultural, and immigration history, *Imperfect Strangers* explores the emergence of this crucial and troubled relationship.

As a glance at its notes will reveal, this book relies heavily on the scholarship of others. Situating it in relation to that scholarship, however, is no simple task. On a very general level, *Imperfect Strangers* resembles studies by Bruce Schulman, Laura Kalman, Daniel Sargent, Thomas Borstelmann, Judith Stein, and others who see the 1970s as a pivotal decade in the evolution of U.S. political, diplomatic, financial, economic, demographic, and cultural history.<sup>18</sup> On another level, also quite general, my work draws inspiration from such historians as John Dower, Naoko Shibusawa, Paul Kramer, Mark Bradley, Frank Costigliola, Petra Goedde, David Engerman, and Mary Ann Heiss. These and other scholars have produced multidimensional studies of modern U.S. relations with particular countries, works that combine informed analysis of official diplomacy with imaginative explorations of the cultural, social, intellectual, and psychological realms that have shaped, challenged, complicated, and illuminated that diplomacy.<sup>19</sup>

In more specific and substantive ways, this book is also clearly indebted to the now voluminous literature addressing aspects of U.S. involvement in the Arab world in the 1970s. Some of these works focus on particular episodes or interactions occurring in that decade;<sup>20</sup> others survey longer time periods that include the seventies.<sup>21</sup> Some analyze U.S. relations with particular countries or groups; others cover U.S. policies regarding much or all of the Middle East.<sup>22</sup> Most of this scholarship centers on official diplomacy; a small but expanding corpus explores the social, cultural, intellectual, and demographic dimensions of America’s encounter with the Arab world or the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> My own book draws deeply on works in all of these categories. But because its focus, scope, and arguments are so particular—idiosyncratic, some may say—it is difficult to relate them, as a whole, to any single historiographical position or theme in the literature. My general approach, then, is to engage with individual historiographical issues as they arise in the narrative, rather than make overarching claims at the outset.

Two interpretive issues, however, are sufficiently broad and recurrent to merit mention here. The first concerns Henry Kissinger's post-1973 Arab-Israeli diplomacy, a subject of ongoing debate. Some scholars credit Kissinger with establishing a diplomatic foundation that has underlain most subsequent U.S. efforts at Arab-Israeli peacemaking.<sup>24</sup> Others stress the ephemeral nature of his achievement, noting that a lasting peace, especially between Israel and the Palestinians, remains elusive.<sup>25</sup> Each claim is half-right. Kissinger did leave an enduring diplomatic legacy, but it was a legacy of managing the Arab-Israeli conflict, not of attending to its underlying causes. Egypt's neutralization (the central objective of Kissinger's Arab-Israeli diplomacy) made it extremely unlikely that another full-scale Arab-Israeli war would occur, but it also diminished the prospects for addressing other Arab grievances and thus for achieving ultimate reconciliation. Similarly, the incremental peace process that Kissinger pursued did become the standard pattern of U.S. Middle East diplomacy in later administrations. What few historians have grasped, however, is that Kissinger *deliberately* designed that process to enable Israel's indefinite occupation of Arab land, a function it served in later decades, whatever his successors' intentions.

The second issue concerns the status of Arab Americans within the U.S. body politic. Some scholars of Arab American life have advanced a "de-assimilation" thesis, arguing that, whereas Arab Americans assimilated relatively easily into American society for much of the twentieth century, geopolitical trends taking hold in the 1970s threw that process into reverse. Increasingly, these scholars argue, the dominant society associated Arab Americans with alarming behaviors emanating from the Middle East, such as extortionate oil pricing and international terrorism, and treated the community as an alien and unwelcome presence. Many Arab Americans responded by rejecting assimilation and retaining, or forging anew, bonds of allegiance to their region of origin.<sup>26</sup> *Imperfect Strangers* grants the force of the "de-assimilation" thesis but argues that it tells only half of the story. The international and domestic politics of the 1970s did form a disturbing and sometimes frightening mix that caused many Arab Americans to seek solace, security, and purpose in their Arab identity. Those very circumstances, however, also goaded Arab American activists to engage with the dominant society to seek a redress of grievances, or at least some better public understanding of their concerns. Whatever the outcome of such efforts (and successes were rare and modest), they did afford many activists a greater sense of participation and belonging in the nation's civic life. De-assimilation was just one response to the disorienting experience of being Arab in America; another was redoubled assimilation.

These two interpretive issues are linked in an argument presented above: that Kissinger's diplomatic exertions, while fortifying the Israeli occupation, also modestly enhanced the Arab image within the United States, an outcome of some benefit to Arab American political activism. This claim is indebted to Melani McAlister's broader observation that, since World War II, U.S. Middle East policy "has vacillated between two poles: distance, othering, and containment define the first; affiliation, appropriation, and cooptation constitute the second." McAlister goes on to argue that the affiliating approach predominated in the early postwar decades, only to give way to "distance" and "othering" in the 1970s. While I share McAlister's conclusion regarding the general hardening of U.S. policy in the 1970s, I am struck by the persistence of the softer mode—and by its ironic symbiosis with the harder one.<sup>27</sup>

Readers will note that much of the book is devoted to the Arab-Israeli conflict. This prominence entirely reflects the priorities of historical actors at the time. The struggle against Israel was *the* consuming issue for politically aware Arabs, whether they were government officials, opinion leaders, or ordinary people. That struggle was also central to Arab American activists and to non-Arab Americans who shared their outlook. Even the Lebanese civil war, as we shall see in chapter 7, underscored the priority of anti-Zionism within Arab American activism. To be sure, there were fundamental disagreements within this general anti-Zionist orientation, the chief one pitting those calling for the dismantling of Israel against those open to a diplomatic settlement that left it in existence. But virtually all agreed that Israel's creation had been calamitously unjust to Palestinian Arabs, that Israel's subsequent behavior had been oppressive and belligerent, and that U.S. Middle East policy was scandalously one-sided.

Washington, too, treated the Arab-Israeli dispute as the most important policy challenge it faced in the Middle East—mainly because the Arabs themselves were so preoccupied with the issue and because some of them had turned to Moscow for help. Of all of the region's flash points, this one seemed most likely to spark a potentially catastrophic superpower confrontation. Moreover, following the Arab oil embargo of 1973–1974, U.S. policy makers believed that any resumption of large-scale Arab-Israeli hostilities would be accompanied by another, more crippling embargo. The centrality of this dispute was evident in the terminology prevalent at the time. When government officials or diplomatic reporters spoke of "the Middle East conflict," or used similar words, it was universally assumed that they were referring to the Arab-Israeli dispute. If they meant a different Middle East conflict, they needed to specify it.

I have decided, then, to give that conflict similar prominence in my book. Another historian could make a different choice. An equally valid approach would be to concentrate on topics that received far less official and public attention at the time than they would in later decades—such as international terrorism, political Islam, evangelical Protestantism, gender relations, the politics of the Persian Gulf, and the state of Arab civil society—as a way of unearthing the roots of current concerns. Most of those subjects do appear in the book, but usually only at moments in the narrative when they rose to the top of Washington's Middle East policy agenda or became major public issues in the United States. A central preoccupation of this book, after all, is the interaction of official foreign relations with recurring themes in public discourse.

Of the deferred topics mentioned above, religious affiliation perhaps merits further discussion. Given the centrality of that theme to U.S.-Arab relations since the 1980s, some readers will wonder at its minimal presence in this study. There are countless ways in which religious identity was important to political actors in the 1970s, but it is less relevant to the story *I* am telling. For most of the decade, and with just two significant exceptions—the Lebanese civil war and the general inclination among American Jews to support Israel—religious affiliation was not a broadly defining issue in political relations between Americans and Arabs. Most Arabs were Muslim and most Arab Americans Christian. Arabs and Arab Americans alike, however, offered critiques of U.S. policy that owed much more to pan-Arab solidarity, or to broader political values such as the right of self-determination and the sanctity of human rights, than to religious identity. Similarly, while many American Jews identified with Israel, and many more American gentiles respected this stance, relatively few Americans in the 1970s publicly portrayed the U.S.-Arab encounter as part of an age-old contest between Christendom and Islam.<sup>28</sup> The Iranian revolution of 1978–1979 and the seizure of Mecca's Grand Mosque in 1979 did unleash Islamist forces that would profoundly shape U.S.-Arab relations, but those impacts were still some years in the future. Much the same can be said of American Evangelical activities in and around the Middle East, which were just starting to capture international attention at decade's end. These and similar events appear in my account more as harbingers of a troubled future than as elements of a recurring theme.

Some readers may question my use of the adjectives “pro-Arab” and “Arab-friendly” to describe certain American activists and commentators. Both terms, which I treat more or less synonymously, signify an attitude of sympathy for some core assumptions harbored by nearly all politically

aware Arabs at the time: that Israel's creation and subsequent behavior were a terrible injustice to the Arab people; that the Western powers, including the United States, had ridden roughshod over Arab political rights; and that America's political and media establishments were insensitive to Arab concerns. Like Arabs themselves, pro-Arab or Arab-friendly Americans were hardly monolithic in their views—they often disagreed over what to *do* about the various inequities—but they were united in their acceptance of the core assumptions. My terminology aims to capture those commonalities without assuming consensus on every issue.

I should similarly explain my use of the words “moderate” and “radical” in discussing Arab, Arab American, and pro-Arab political outlooks. These terms refer to the character and degree of change that historical actors sought to achieve, and to their level of acceptance of existing power realities. When it came to the Arab-Israeli conflict, a “moderate” typically advocated an Israeli withdrawal from all of the territory occupied in 1967 and an opportunity for Palestinians to exercise sovereignty on a portion of their ancestral homeland; he or she might further argue that such objectives were compatible with U.S. geopolitical interests. A “radical” typically called for the dismantling of the Zionist enterprise, for its replacement by a democratic state representing all of Palestine's inhabitants, and also, perhaps, for the defeat of conservative Arab regimes seen as impediments to political and social progress; such a figure would likely regard the U.S. government as a dangerous adversary. My use of these terms implies no moral or political judgment about the rightness of either course. I am not suggesting that moderates were more reasonable, or radicals more principled, than those taking different approaches. I am simply outlining the two main ways that Arab, Arab American, and Arab-friendly actors challenged the status quo. The categories are archetypes: some figures combined elements of both approaches; some gravitated, over time, from one to the other (usually from radicalism to moderation).<sup>29</sup>

Before we get on with our story, some scene setting may be helpful. Chapter 2 provides brief historical background on Arab American communal and political life; here follows a quick survey of key international antecedents. In the early post-World War II years, Britain and France—especially the former—were the dominant outside powers in the Arab world. Britain had protectorates on the Arabian Peninsula, a large naval presence in the Persian Gulf, and military bases in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Libya. France had protectorates in Tunisia and Morocco and a major colony in Algeria.

In the 1950s and 1960s, mainly as a consequence of indigenous nationalist pressures, the positions of both European powers steadily eroded. Britain relinquished its bases in Egypt and Jordan and was violently ousted from Iraq. In 1968, confronting fierce local resistance in and around the Persian Gulf and empty coffers back home, the British government announced that it would withdraw its military forces from the Gulf region and relinquish control over its Arabian protectorates by the end of 1971. France, meanwhile, had been obliged to grant independence to Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, in Algeria's case after a bloody eight-year war.<sup>30</sup>

Even as European power receded, Arabs had to contend with what they almost unanimously regarded as another Western intrusion. The forcible establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine in 1947–1949, with the crucial diplomatic assistance of the United Nations (UN), embittered and traumatized Arabs everywhere, especially as it resulted in the uprooting of a settled Palestinian Arab society. Thwarted in their military efforts to prevent Israel's creation, the Arab states refused to recognize the new state and, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and credibility, proclaimed their determination to liberate Palestine from its Zionist usurpers. Over the next two decades, Egypt and some other Arab countries substantially built up their militaries, but these were no match for Israel's armed forces, which prevailed in nearly every subsequent skirmish. Such circumstances deepened the popular anger in the Arab world, a sentiment increasingly directed at the United States. After all, Washington had prodded the UN to serve as Israel's midwife and was, from that point on, virtually committed to maintaining Israel's existence and security. Although U.S. military aid to Israel was minimal for some years, it became more generous and conspicuous in the early to mid-1960s. In light of this record, even pro-U.S. Arab governments—in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, and elsewhere—had to be circumspect in their public embrace of the United States, especially as they faced withering criticism from self-described “progressive” or “Arab nationalist” regimes in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, as London and Paris disengaged from the Arab world, Washington and Moscow grew increasingly assertive there. Since the 1950s, the United States had proclaimed an interest in preserving the independence and integrity of Middle Eastern countries and had provided modest military and economic assistance to West-leaning governments in Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Libya, the last of which hosted a U.S. Air Force base. In 1958, U.S. marines landed in Lebanon to support its beleaguered government against combined domestic and external Arab nationalist pressures.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, a small U.S. naval force patrolled the Persian Gulf, and a consortium of American oil companies called the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) dominated the extraction and marketing of Saudi Arabia's enormous petroleum reserves, as well as furnishing much of the kingdom's physical infrastructure. Over the same period, the Soviet Union provided arms and economic aid to left-leaning regimes in Egypt, Syria, Algeria, and Iraq and, after 1967, to the Marxist government of newly independent South Yemen. In international forums, the Soviets staunchly supported Arab countries' diplomatic claims against Israel.<sup>32</sup> (The United States, too, was formally at odds with Israel on some key issues but seldom buttressed these stances with concrete action.<sup>33</sup>)

Heightening the superpowers' interest in the region was the growing importance of Arab oil, located mainly on the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula and in North Africa. In the early postwar years, the world had experienced an oil glut. In the 1960s, however, rapid industrial development generated a sharp increase in global demand for petroleum, much of it met by stepped-up production in Arab oil fields. The United States itself consumed relatively little Arab petroleum, but Japan and the Western European countries, in whose prosperity and stability Americans had a vital stake, depended overwhelmingly on oil from that quarter. The Soviets, too, were increasingly concerned about oil supplies. Most of Russia's untapped reserves lay in frozen Siberia and thus were difficult and costly to extract. Moscow's moves to improve relations with Baghdad in the late 1960s partly reflected a desire to gain access to Iraqi crude.<sup>34</sup>

The Arab-Israeli War of June 1967 drastically altered the region's geopolitical landscape and created new diplomatic, strategic, and psychological realities that would dominate Middle Eastern politics, and thus U.S. interactions with the Arab world, for years to come. In six days, Israel crushed its Arab enemies, seizing the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt, the Golan Heights from Syria, and the West Bank from Jordan. The defeat was especially disastrous for the Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza. Most now found themselves under Israeli military occupation; tens of thousands more were driven from their homes, joining the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who had become refugees in the late 1940s. The 1967 War and its early aftermath accentuated the Cold War rivalry in the Middle East. Almost immediately, the Soviet Union began rebuilding the shattered militaries of Egypt and Syria, which vowed to win back their lost lands. Without abandoning its own Arab clients (primarily Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Lebanon), the United States replaced France as Israel's main

arms supplier, a move in keeping with president Lyndon B. Johnson's strong attachment to the Jewish state. In retaliation for Washington's pro-Israel stance during the war, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and some other Arab states severed diplomatic relations with the United States.<sup>35</sup>

Following their victory, the Israelis insisted that any defeated adversary seeking to recover lost territory must first recognize Israel and commence direct, bilateral negotiations with it. They also said they would not return to the pre-June 1967 borders. The standard Arab position was that Israel must withdraw immediately and unconditionally from all of the captured territory, and honor "Palestinian rights" in some (often unspecified) way, before there could be any thought of recognition or negotiation. The implication was that Arab states *would* deal with Israel if it met these demands, and some Arab diplomats said so in private. Hardly any political leaders, however, were willing to endorse this quid pro quo publicly and plainly.<sup>36</sup> Broad segments of Arab opinion adamantly opposed Israel's existence, and rejectionist leaders and commentators were prone to vilify the advocates of compromise, so such reticence was understandable. But it allowed Israelis to claim that Arab society as a whole was unready for peace and that Israel was therefore justified in holding all of the occupied territory as a guarantee of its own security.<sup>37</sup>

These, then, were the experiences and issues that defined the U.S.-Arab relationship as Sirhan made his way to the Ambassador Hotel. His ghastly act failed to draw that relationship to the forefront of the nation's consciousness; such awareness still lay a few years in the future. What the murder did do was deepen the disarray within Robert Kennedy's Democratic Party, heighten a yearning for calm among the American electorate, and thus brighten the prospects of another presidential aspirant, a Republican promising to restore "law and order" at home. Former vice president Richard Nixon eked out a narrow victory in November 1968. He took office the following January expressing concern about the "powder keg . . . in the Middle East," by which he meant, of course, the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>38</sup> But the new president's approach to those animosities, at once devious and vacillating, would do little to dampen their explosive potential. Americans would yet hear the echo of Sirhan's fatal shot.