Jacobs, Matthew F.: *Imagining the Middle East. The Building of an American Foreign Policy, 1918-1967*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8078-3488-6; 317 S.

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The Middle East has long riveted and perplexed scholars and policymakers in the West. In his book historian Matthew Jacobs chronicles the perspectives of an informal American network of specialists on the Middle East from the period following World War I up to the Arab-Israeli War of 1967. Jacobs argues that the members of this network tended to focus on four major issues: religion, nationalism, social change, and the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian crisis. *Imagining the Middle East* is structured around these main themes, and provides a historical account of the development of this informal transnational network of academics, policymakers, and security officials. Jacobs intends his book to strike a balance between diplomatic history and cultural history, or as he says, an account „where ideas and culture matter in a policy-oriented way" (p. 12). He cites Douglas Little's *American Orientalism* and Melani McAlister's *Epic Encounters* as the two methodological models he aims to incorporate into his examination.

In the introduction, Jacobs argues that studying the informal network of experts on the Middle East offers an opportunity to „build upon David Engerman's notion of 'knowledge for, of, and as global power'" (p. 7). Jacobs also positions himself as a scholar of what McAlister has called a „post-orientalist" vision, which is displayed in his effort to foreground prominent thinkers, while contextualizing their ideas within a greater ideological configuration. Jacobs' account of American foreign policy in the Middle East raises questions about the process of knowledge production, and his book illustrates the challenges in reaching a consensus. He describes frequent disagreements that arose between members of the network, most visibly over the Arab-Israli-Palestinian question. One of Jacobs' main arguments is that this network of individuals and groups in some cases replicated an Orientalist framework, but in other ways moved on to different concerns, emphasizing modernization and the significance of the Middle East in the Cold War conflict.

Jacobs points out that prior to World War II, there were severe shortages of experts on the contemporary Middle East, and many Americans who wrote about contemporary events were originally trained as scholars of ancient Near Eastern civilizations. This concern is emphasized in the first chapter, which is an overview of the network of area specialists before and following the Second World War. In the second chapter, Jacobs investigates popular impressions of Islam that circulated in the network starting in the early 20th century. According to the author, many specialists employed essentializing logic to analyze the role of Islam in the Middle East. For example, some assumed that Arabs were more prone to follow dictators because of their inherently emotional nature. The question of Islam's role in politics became especially pertinent during the Cold War, as policymakers and strategists sought to understand whether Islamic societies would be susceptible to communist ideals. Jacobs suggests that although there were differences of opinion on this matter, by the late-1950s, most specialists agreed that the relationship between Islam and communism was less critical than the relationship between Islam and nationalism.

Nationalism and social change form the basis for the third chapter, which argues that there were three distinct phases of engagement with these issues on the part of American experts. While they first stressed Western influence on the so-called „awakening of the Arab nationalistic spirit," specialists in the network soon became concerned about the potential power of Arab nationalist leaders to attract the attention of the masses, and they thus sought to delegitimate them. By 1958, however, experts and policymakers took the approach that rather than cutting off ties, it was better to sustain diplomacy with Arab leaders like Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. Jacobs goes on to discuss modernization, a process many specialists thought should entail both Westernization and secularization, or in other words, „de-Arabization."

Jacobs' final chapter on the Arab-Israeli-

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Palestinian crisis is the most complex and engaging, as he describes at length the various ideological positions of members of the informal network. Here, Jacobs emphasizes the intricacy and range of viewpoints on this issue, indicating that the establishment of the Israeli state was not an inevitable outcome. According to Jacobs, a number of experts believed that the creation of Israel would work against American oil prospects and American political interests in the region. There were prolonged disputes about the question of Palestine beginning in the 1930s, and these disagreements continued, though perhaps in muted form, well after the UN plan to partition Palestine in 1947 and establishment of Israel in 1948.

Jacobs offers several compelling critiques of American specialists' shortsighted views on the Middle East. One example relates to the Palestinian refugee problem following 1948, when certain experts did not take into account the views of the Palestinian refugees themselves. Jacobs states, „the [Johnson] plan and its supporters portrayed the refugees as a problem for the Arab states and Israel to resolve using U.S. money, or suggested that Nasser or other Arab leaders could control the refugees" (p. 223). Thus, the thoughts and wishes of the refugees were not taken into consideration. A second critique appears in chapter three, where Jacobs argues that many specialists were remarkably inflexible in their perspective on modernization. Not only did they believe that social progress occurred in a linear fashion, but they assumed that steps toward modernity were universally applicable.

The author's critical assessments of these errors in judgement are fair and warranted, but the book doesn't fully address the question of American knowledge about the Middle East „for, of, and as global power" as Jacobs indicates in the introduction (p. 7). He could have elaborated on the theme of knowledge as a marker of global power. *Imagining the Middle East* is an important contribution to historical literature about transnational knowledge production nonetheless, and to the study of U.S.- Middle East relations in particular. Jacobs is successful in his attempt to combine policy and cultural analysis, though overall his approach prioritizes policy over culture. The bulk of the primary sources for the book were culled from manuscript collections and personal papers belonging to area specialists, as well government intelligence records and oral histories.

Imagining the Middle East offers several key lessons for present-day American policy in the Middle East. First, it serves to remind readers that the events of the past were hardly inevitable. Instead, they were often contentious and divisive. Second, Jacobs casts doubt on the American knowledge-gathering project as a whole. By providing so many examples of unsuccessful assessments of key issues in the region, he warns against continuing failures. It is clear from the book that in the absence of Arabic-speaking experts with significant cultural expertise in the region, area specialists tend toward conclusions that are simply false or reveal personal biases. This point is critical for all those with an investment in resolving enduring hostilities between the U.S. and the Middle East.

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