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Review by Paul Chamberlin, University of Kentucky

In his article, “Diplomacy as counter-revolution? The ‘moderate states’, the Fedayeen and the State Department initiatives toward the Arab-Israeli conflict,” James Stocker poses the question: How did the ‘moderate’ states – Jordan and Lebanon – impact the formation of the Rogers Plan and the Rogers Initiative? These were the two of the Nixon administration’s major initiatives in the Middle East, the first sought a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli Conflict, the second aimed at bringing an end to the Israeli-Egyptian War of Attrition. His answer is that they had a considerably greater impact than many scholars realize. Stocker’s piece reminds us that the Arab-Israeli conflict was far more complicated than the two-way contest implied in the name. Indeed, from the very beginning of the conflict, the Arab side contained a large and disparate set of actors: Egyptians, Syrians, Palestinians, Lebanese, Jordanians, Iraqis, Saudis, to name only a few. Of course, politics within these Arab nations was never monolithic, with rival factions jockeying for power both within and outside of state governments. Thus it was that U.S. peace initiatives in the Arab-Israeli conflict struggled to address a range of concerns. The author rightly identifies a tendency in the existing literature on U.S. diplomacy to focus on the main belligerents, Israel, Egypt, and Syria, especially during the Nixon administration. As a result, comparatively less attention has been paid to pro-Western states like Lebanon and Jordan. While recent works by scholars like Nigel Ashton, Avi Shlaim, and myself have begun to address this gap in the literature, more work remains to be done.¹

As Stocker explains, the ‘moderate’ states found themselves in an awful situation. Both Jordan and Lebanon leaned toward the West in the era of Gamal Nasser’s ascendency, but they were clearly Washington’s junior allies in the Middle East. The largest allocations of aid and the best weapons systems arrived not in Amman or Beirut but rather in Tel Aviv. Moreover, some of this very equipment would be used in bloody reprisals on Jordanian and Lebanese territory, Israel’s answer to attacks from Palestinian guerilla fighters. However, officials in Washington recognized that those same guerillas posed the greatest threat to the moderate regimes in the Arab world, not Israel. This proved to be a surprisingly difficult situation for all parties involved.

The author argues that the U.S. State Department was determined to come to the rescue of America’s embattled – if junior – allies in the Eastern Mediterranean. Much of the impetus for U.S. diplomacy between 1969 and 1970 came from this desire to relieve pressure on Jordan and Lebanon by smothering the revolutionary potential of Palestinian guerilla groups in their territory. “The Rogers Plan and the Rogers Initiative were, among other things,” Stocker writes, “passive counter-revolutionary attempts to defuse internal tensions within these countries” (17). Stocker has also drawn attention to the important roles of Amman and Beirut in the Nixon Administration’s strategies in the Middle East. He has done an admirable job navigating the byzantine structure of U.S. diplomacy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict under the Nixon Administration.

Though the moderate Arab states were not the prime target of Washington’s efforts in the region, Stocker explains that they “played an important role in the development of US diplomatic initiatives toward the Arab-Israeli conflict” (3). Amman and Beirut introduced new complications and challenges to the State Department’s policies that sought to achieve some sort of settlement in the region. American officials were forced to consider the fates of Jordan and Lebanon in the midst of their efforts to deal with Egypt, Syria, Israel, and the rising power of the Palestinians. Not every member of the administration was so eager to balance multiple priorities, however. The author explains that National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger “was clearly less concerned with the fate of Lebanon and Jordan than with Soviet relations with Egypt and Syria” (7). Kissinger was convinced that the Rogers Plan was the wrong strategy for the Middle East. Better, he argued, to stand firm and wait for Egypt and Syria to realize that Israel held all the cards, abandon Moscow’s embrace, and come to Washington as supplicants than to seek some sort of diplomatic settlement. This was what William Quandt has called Kissinger’s “standstill diplomacy.” Moreover, due to Kissinger’s opposition – and his behind-the-scenes conversations with Nixon and Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir to torpedo the proposal –


the Rogers Plan was dead in the water. While many of the headlines focused on Rogers’ diplomacy, in retrospect, Kissinger’s machinations proved to be more decisive. The Rogers Initiative, which helped bring about an end to the Egyptian-Israeli War of Attrition, had the unintended consequence, Stocker explains, of setting off a civil war in Jordan in September 1970. Ironically, the conflict in Jordan had the effect of reminding the Nixon administration just how precarious King Hussein’s position was and bringing Kissinger – and his standstill approach – more deeply into the fold of Washington’s Middle East policy.

As Stocker’s article shows, the outcome of the Cold War in the Middle East circa 1970 was still highly uncertain. The largest states in the Arab world were aligned with Moscow and the handful of the region’s pro-Western regimes was assailed from multiple directions. The Palestinian guerillas were a revolutionary new force in the Middle East that presented an array of problems for U.S. policy. No one at the time could have anticipated how quickly the situation would change with Nasser’s death, the rise of Anwar Sadat, and Cairo’s break with Moscow in the coming years. To many officials in the State Department, Jordan and Lebanon appeared as tenuous footholds for the United States in the Eastern Mediterranean. Stocker is thus correct in reminding scholars of the importance of moderate states in U.S. strategic calculations for the Middle East at the beginning of the 1970s.

In its broadest sense, the article also raises questions about the longer course of U.S. policy toward the Middle East. “The period marked a peak in popular uprisings in the Middle East that has only been rivaled by the current set of revolutions roiling forth across the region,” Stocker writes. (17) Here the author draws our attention toward the larger issue: though many of the most visible episodes in U.S.-Middle East relations have involved Washington’s efforts to combat radicalism both real and imagined – from Mohammed Mossadegh to Saddam Hussein – a parallel stream of support for moderate regimes in states like Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia has also been a cornerstone of Washington’s policies. Ultimately, Stocker’s article encourages us to consider whether or not historians and policymakers have been too quick to focus on these efforts to undermine the ‘radicals’ at the expense of efforts to shore up the ‘moderates.’

Paul Chamberlin is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Kentucky. He received his PhD from The Ohio State University after studying at the American University of Cairo and the University of Damascus. His dissertation won the 2010 Oxford University Press prize for the best dissertation in international history and his first book, The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order, will be published by Oxford University Press in October 2012.
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