

Brief Reviews

Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East. By David Hirst. New York: Nation Books, 2010. 428 pp. \$29.95 (\$19.99, paper).

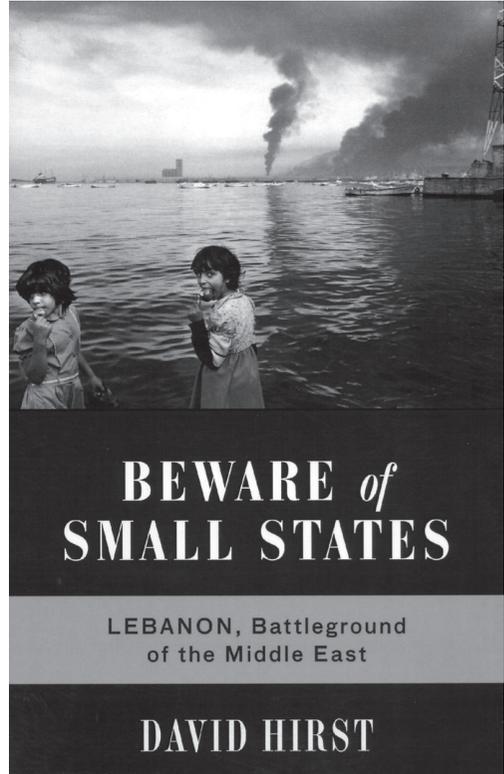
Embracing Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin’s dictum that small states are the victims of greater states, yet a source of danger to them, Hirst, a former Middle Eastern correspondent for the *Guardian*, situates Lebanon in this history at the center of Middle East politics, having undergone successive colonialist, nationalist, and Islamist phases.

Sadly, Hirst’s book reflects the author’s unreserved bias against Israel and what he terms the pro-Zionist, Christian Lebanese. *Beware of Small States* is as much about delegitimizing Israel as it is about delineating the historical course that led to the emergence of Hezbollah as the paradigmatic non-state actor of the Middle East.

Thus, when describing the aftermath of World War I, Hirst writes that “not only was there no Jewish state, there were not even the basic prerequisites of one,” both ignoring historical fact and constructing a lethal fantasy of early Zionists as committed to supplanting the indigenous people and creating an aggressive, expansionist state predisposed to violence.

Similarly, it was “Zionist interventionists” who supported the creation of a Christian Lebanon not so much in the interest of peaceful co-existence with Israel but with the objective of deepening the divisions in the Arab world. Pro-Zionist Christians (in contrast to the Arabist Maronites) support the Jewish state as a means of reinforcing their minority status in the region. The idea of cultural, historical, or political diversity in the Middle East never seems to cross Hirst’s mind, whose condescension towards Maronites who dared to digress from a monolithic, anti-Zionist, Arabic discourse is palpable.

Not once does the author investigate the psychological or sociopolitical conditions of the Lebanese from a Christian perspective. All the



many declarations of throwing the Maronites into the sea, driving them into exile, detaining them at whim, are absent. Simply put, they were Zionist collaborators with Israeli hubris, epitomized by an imperial “war of choice” (the 1982 Israel-Lebanon war). There and then, according to Hirst, Zionism’s inherent violence and aggression were laid bare: the “Sabra and Shatila [massacre] was not an ‘aberration.’ On the contrary, it was a culmination—and a dreadful one—for a state, a society, and the ideology which infused them.”

It is against this background that Hirst traces the creation of Hezbollah as a “Lebanonized,” anti-Israel, jihadist movement. To his credit, Hirst, does not believe that Hezbollah’s “Lebanonization” would transform the Islamist party into a disarmed, conventional one. But what Hirst fails to indicate is that its “Lebanonization” is only a

means to support its jihadist apparatus.

By withstanding Israel's onslaught in the 2006 war, Hezbollah emerges as the de facto caliph of the Arabs and Muslims. Hezbollah and the other non-state actors (Hamas) have arisen where the "official order was most eroded, or most glaringly deficient in its ability to promote and defend the basic interests and expectations of its people." This is Hirst's small state/great agent of change. The narrative concludes with a warning about a new war in which Israeli actions will be offensive and indiscriminately destructive, Hezbollah's merely defensive.

Despite an impressive intimacy with the Middle East, Hirst's narrative is both hackneyed and vindictive, as anyone looking at the unfolding events of the "Arab Spring" can plainly see.

Robert G Rabil
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Contentious Politics in the Middle East: Political Opposition under Authoritarianism. Edited by Holger Albrecht. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010. 252 pp. \$69.95

The timing of the publication of this book, just before the outbreak of the 2011 uprisings throughout the Arab world, could not have been worse. If Albrecht and his authors had only been more prescient, the reader would not be faced with such a counter-factual conclusion as that offered by I. William Zartman: "Apparently everything has changed ... the Arab state is indeed remarkably durable."

The ouster of Tunisia's Ben Ali and Egypt's Mubarak, as well as the likely overthrow of Yemen's Saleh and perhaps Libya's Qaddafi and Syria's Assad, make the book dated even before libraries can begin the acquisition process. Although these uprisings surprised most, they did not occur without provocation. The fact that they have spread as fast and as far as they did suggests that the book's contributors were unaware of the Arab publics' explosive discontents that lay dormant for nearly two generations.

Apart from failing to account for the inception of the uprisings, the book suffers from fatal, methodological errors. The first three chapters present the reader with three different ap-

proaches to the study of contentious politics under authoritarianism but the gratuitous inclusion of a chapter by Peter Sluglett on political opposition in the Islamic tradition is out of place. It does not connect to the theme of political opposition under authoritarianism but is, instead, a historical narrative of religious opposition covering the past fourteen centuries. Thus, Albrecht undercuts the book's value, reducing the effect to that of mere historical narratives with little relevance to theories on contentious political opposition.

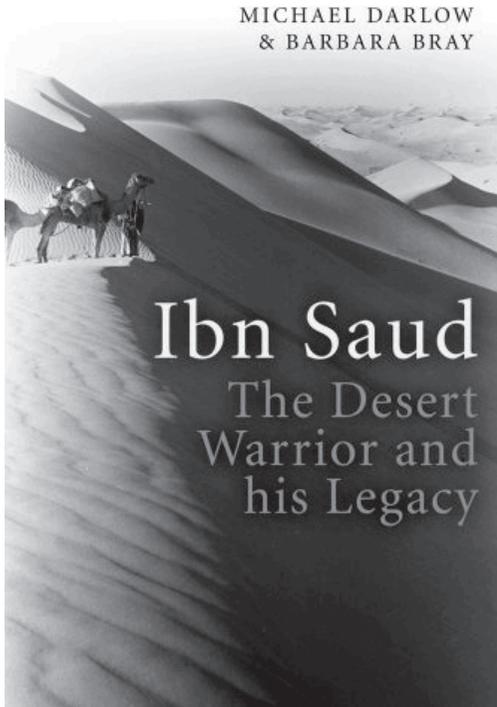
The fundamentals of scientific inquiry presuppose the ability of the researcher not only to identify correctly the existence of a problem but also to assess its magnitude. As if the book's failure to predict the current Arab insurgencies is not enough, the last chapter, Bassel F. Salloukh's "Remaking Lebanon after Syria: The Rise and Fall of Proxy Authoritarianism," delivers the coup de grace: "Syria's exit from Lebanon and the subsequent collapse of its proxy security regime" is prematurely celebrated since Syria's machinations have succeeded in turning the March 14 majority coalition into a parliamentary minority. It is hardly likely that anybody will find this book of utility except perhaps as a warning about the pitfalls of presumptuous scholarship.

Hilal Khashan
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Ibn Saud: The Desert Warrior and his Legacy. By Michael Darlow and Barbara Bray. London: Quartet, 2010. 598 pp. \$30.

Saudi Arabia's founding monarch 'Abd al-'Aziz Ibn Sa'ud (c. 1876-1953) had a remarkable life. Already the subject of a slew of biographies, he is the subject of another study here, the first in over a decade. Though not an academic work, this sympathetic volume by Bray, a lecturer, translator, and broadcaster, and Darlow, a television producer, is aimed at a general readership. Though it draws on an impressive array of sources, its value lies less in its analysis than in its lively narrative. It is an accessible departure point for the interested reader.

Much of this biography centers on Ibn Saud's earlier years rather than on the kingdom that was later to bear his family's name. These were lean



MICHAEL DARLOW
& BARBARA BRAY

Ibn Saud

The Desert Warrior and his Legacy

years indeed for the future monarch, who was forced as a boy to take flight from his family's tribal enemies. The austerity of Ibn Saud's nomadic upbringing makes his life trajectory all the more notable. As poverty and flight gave way to conquest, expansion, and ultimately power, it is hard to envisage how stark a contrast this turn of fortune represented.

Anecdotes add welcome color to this portrayal: Ibn Saud's attempts to bring hundreds of sheep aboard a U.S. battleship so as to entertain his American guests with traditional Arab hospitality on one occasion is complemented by Winston Churchill's puffing cigar smoke in the king's face on another, while insisting that his "religion prescribed as an absolutely sacred rite smoking cigars and drinking alcohol before, after, and if need be during, all meals and intervals between them."

The focus is overwhelmingly on Ibn Sa'ud, the man and his life, rather than wider issues relating to Wahhabism or contemporary Arabian society. Indeed, the latter receive cursory exploration.

While too long to be a genuinely introduc-

tory guide, *Ibn Saud* will encourage students and interested readers to explore Saudi and Middle Eastern history further.

Richard Phelps
Quilliam Foundation, London

The Iran-Iraq War (Twentieth-Century Wars).
By Rob Johnson. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 192 pp. \$88 (\$29, paper).

Perhaps the most vicious war of the late twentieth century, the 1980-88 conflict between Iran and Iraq deserves a fresh appraisal. In *The Iran-Iraq War*, Johnson, a former U.S. army officer, intended to provide a politically neutral analysis of the conflict that would explain how it shaped subsequent events in the Middle East. Such an undertaking is a worthy goal as bias mars many works on the subject: Stephen C. Pelletiere's *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum*¹ astonishingly questions whether Iraq used poison gas against the Kurds at Halabja while Farhang Rajaei's *The Iran-Iraq War: Politics of Aggression*² downplays Khomeini's promotion of revolutionary activity in neighboring countries. Further, since most of the voluminous literature on the Iran-Iraq war was written during or shortly after the conflict, few books explain how the war influenced the region's history.

Unfortunately, Johnson's book leaves largely unfulfilled its promise to explain "how the war shaped the region and set in motion the events that followed." Reminding readers that Saddam Hussein's motivations for invading Kuwait in 1990 included increasing Iraq's oil reserves to pay potentially mutinous returning soldiers and to revive an economy shattered by war does not suffice.

While Johnson avoids repeating as fact the wartime propaganda of either belligerent, he promotes the discredited "October Surprise" conspiracy theory. That story maintains that, to increase Carter's unpopularity and win the 1980 presidential election, Ronald Reagan secretly promised to supply the Iranians with weapons if they would prolong the hostage crisis until after

1 Praeger Publishers, 1992.

2 University Press of Florida, 1993.

the vote. Investigations by *The Village Voice*, *Newsweek*, and *The New Republic*, as well as two congressional inquiries, exposed the allegation as a fraud.³

Although Johnson claims that the time is ripe for a reappraisal of the conflict illuminated by over two decades of hindsight, the book relies too heavily on aging secondary sources and not enough on newly available primary ones. The 2003 invasion of Iraq provided access to much archival material relevant to the Iran-Iraq war, including 2.4 million pages recovered by the Iraq Memory Foundation documenting the Anfal campaign against Kurdish insurgents at the end of the war. Hopefully, authors of future books on the Iran-Iraq war will avail themselves of these resources.

Despite these shortcomings, Johnson does masterfully describe the military operations without getting bogged down in technical information. This book, along with Efraim Karsh's *The Iran-Iraq War*,⁴ is a good primer on the brutal 8-year conflict. For a more technical account, consult Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner's *The Lessons of Modern War, Vol. II: The Iran-Iraq War*.⁵

Micah Levinson
American Foreign Policy Council

The Iraq Effect. The Middle East After the Iraq War. By Frederic Wehrey, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Jessica Watkins, et al. Santa Monica: RAND, 2010. 187 pp. \$40.

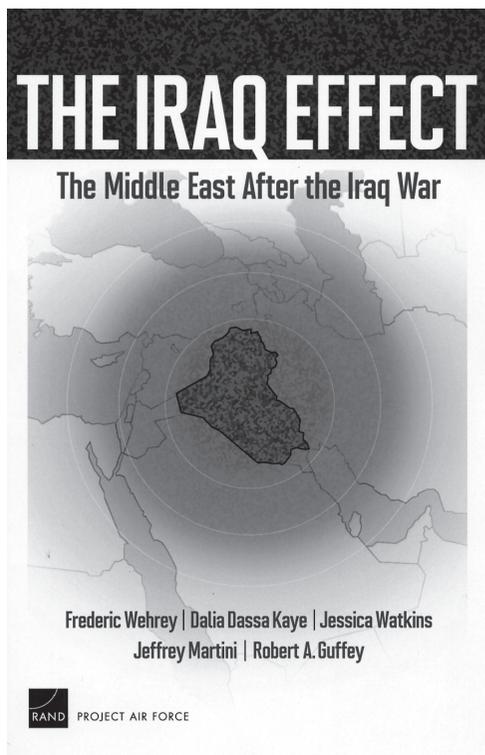
The Iraq Effect is a thought-provoking but flawed study commissioned by the U.S. Air Force on the regional implications of the 2003 Iraq war. Trends discussed may be real, but their presence before Operation Iraqi Freedom suggests that they should not be attributed only to the war.

For example, while the authors are certainly correct that the Iranian regime exploited Iraq's postwar leadership vacuum, attributing Iran's "growing aggressiveness" to the war alone ig-

nores more than two decades of Iranian nuclear threats, its support for Hezbollah, or its efforts to undermine stability in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. That Tehran's boldness might be less due to Iraq's fall and more to do with a long history of Western concessions and voided red-lines indicates a skewed and uncritical perspective.

While the authors correctly mark Turkey's rise as an important regional development, their attribution of the Turks' antagonism toward Washington to the Iraq war is less certain. While Ankara certainly had its reasons for opposing Saddam's ouster, the authors fail to ask whether Turkey's Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) encouraged anti-Americanism on ideological grounds which, at their core, had nothing to do with Iraq.

While *The Iraq Effect* does not break new ground, its discussion of al-Qaeda terrorism after Iraq is valuable. The authors note that terrorists have used Iraq as a laboratory to develop new tactics, which they seek to apply in Lebanon, Gaza, and elsewhere. But, at the same time, al-Qaeda



3 Daniel Pipes, "Remember Ronald Reagan's October Surprise? It Never Happened," *History News Network*, Mar. 29, 2004.

4 Osprey Publishing, 2002.

5 Westview Press, 1990.

has struggled to unite nationalist and transnationalist agendas and win sympathy among the broader Muslim publics, attempts which have largely failed.

The book also performs a valuable service by calling attention to the problem of Iraqi refugees and their potential destabilizing impact on neighboring countries. While this challenge may not have earned headlines, it should be of concern to policymakers.

Alas, most policy recommendations are both tired and predictable. If Iran is resurgent, should it follow that Washington ought to strengthen confidence building measures between Iran and its neighbors, rather than build a broader anti-Iran coalition among the Islamic Republic's neighbors? Likewise, just because the Turkish government seeks a new leadership role, why should U.S. policymakers encourage Ankara if its policy choices promote anti-Western sentiments and encourage Hamas and Hezbollah terrorism?

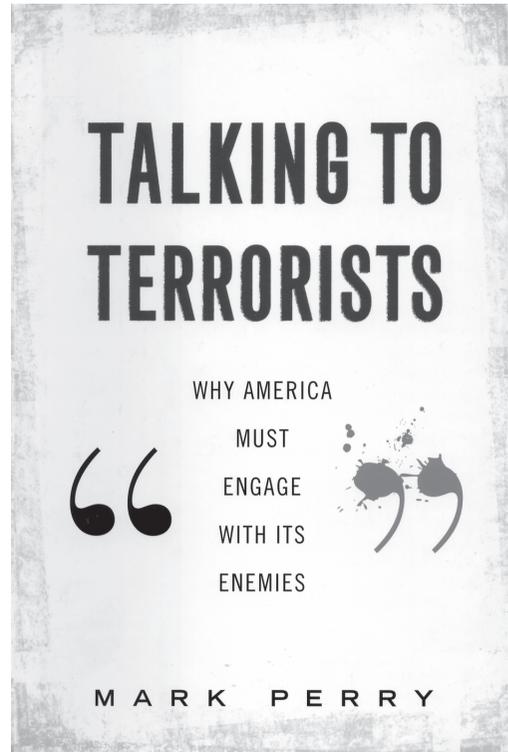
Michael Rubin

Talking to Terrorists. Why America Must Engage with Its Enemies. By Mark Perry. New York: Basic Books, 2010. 253 pp. \$26.95.

Should the U.S. government talk to terrorist groups? Freelance foreign affairs analyst Perry offers a resounding “yes.” His argument, however, is based on a specious reading of recent events in Iraq, which he then extrapolates to other violent players in the Middle East.

Perry contends that it was dialogue rather than the military surge that ultimately ended Iraq’s civil war. “The real gamble in Iraq did not actually take place in Iraq,” Perry argues, it “took place in Amman” where U.S. officials engaged Sunni insurgents. The assumption that these talks occurred in a vacuum is a consistent flaw throughout the book. To argue that military pressure does not affect terrorists’ decision-making is to deny reality.

Denying reality seems to be Perry’s strong suit. When he turns his attention to Hamas and Hezbollah, he describes how, after a series of talks with Western interlocutors, both groups abandoned their maximalist positions. Here, he lacks introspection, never considering the possibility that terrorists lie. Hamas, for example, is said to



have backtracked on its goal to eradicate Israel and agreed to limit its demands to Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem, this despite the fact that Hamas’ unrepudiated charter continues to call for the destruction of the Jewish presence in historic Palestine.

Likewise, he takes a Hezbollah spokesman at his word that the group is just anti-Israel and not anti-Semitic but ignores ample evidence to the contrary. Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah, for example, has quipped, “If they [the Jews] all gather in Israel, it will save us the trouble of going after them worldwide.”⁶

Not only are Perry’s arguments weak but so too is his grasp of facts. He embraces Internet-circulated conspiracy theories about U.S. decision-making, misrepresents officials’ positions, and presents hearsay as dialogue. Officials Perry dislikes—Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Coalition Provisional Authority head Paul Bremer—become cartoon characters.

⁶ *The Daily Star* (Beirut), Oct. 22, 2002.

Tunnel vision also plagues his arguments: He can counsel appeasement to end terror campaigns, but he never considers the impact on those whom terrorists oppose. For example, empowering Sunni rule in Iraq would likely have led to far bloodier backlash among the majority Shiite population. Nor should sacrificing Israel—or any democracy—to autocratic, Islamist terrorists ever be a viable policy option. The question of whether talking to terrorists has a place within U.S. policy options is an important one, but the answer offered here is essentially worthless.

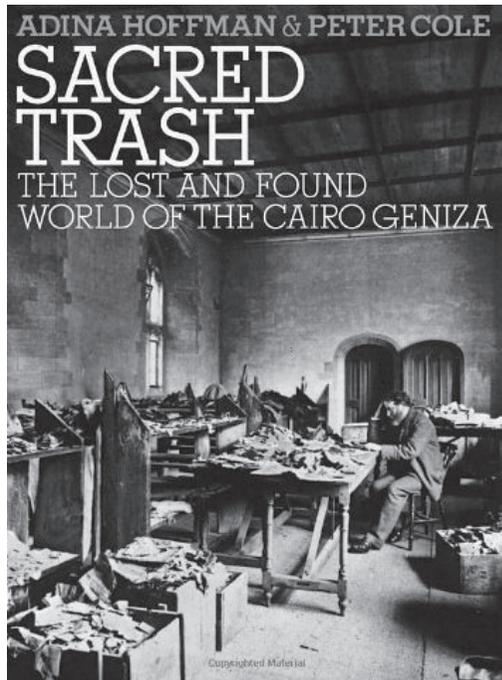
Michael Rubin

Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza. By Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole. New York: Schocken, 2011. 386 pages. \$26.95.

With the skill of historians and the style of novelists, Hoffman and Cole tell the remarkable story of the medieval document trove that came to light in the 1890s and has kept scholars busy for over a century.

A *geniza* is a repository for writings with Hebrew letters on them—sometimes even in other languages—which Jews traditionally preserve because God’s name often appears on them and because of a general reverence towards the Hebrew language. The actual content of the texts could be religious, literary, commercial, legal, or personal. The trove found in the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat near Cairo contains 331,351 of such pieces of writing dating from as early as 870 C.E. and up to a millennium later.

The authors approach their topic by alternating between the stories of the modern scholars who worked with the materials and the *geniza*’s revelations themselves. Solomon Schechter, Jefim Hayyim Schirmann, Ezra Fleischer, and S.D. Goitein unearthed and studied the materials while the “sacred trash” included the first Hebrew versions of the apocryphal book of Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus), works by the schismatic Karaite sect, Andalusian poetry, and letters of the revered medieval sage, Maiminides. Perhaps most importantly, they bring the daily life of the Jewish community of medi-



eval Egypt and other areas of the Levant to life.

Hundreds of specialists, deploying a great array of linguistic and disciplinary skills, now aided by the Friedberg Genizah Project to inventory and digitize the entire collection, have studied this extraordinary collection of materials, chipping away at the immense volume, contributing brick by brick to the building of a unique scholarly edifice. There is probably no other learned pursuit so detailed, unexpected, ironic, singular, and humane as this one. In the words of Fleischer, “The recovery of the Geniza has meant . . . the spectacular completion of a breathtaking landscape, the perfect, harmonious, and inevitable unity of which all of a sudden seems revealed.”

Sacred Trash traces the evolution of focus on the *geniza* from biblical criticism to poetry to history. The book is beautifully written and commended to all who would gain insight into both the painstaking work of dedicated scholars and a world long past.

Daniel Pipes

