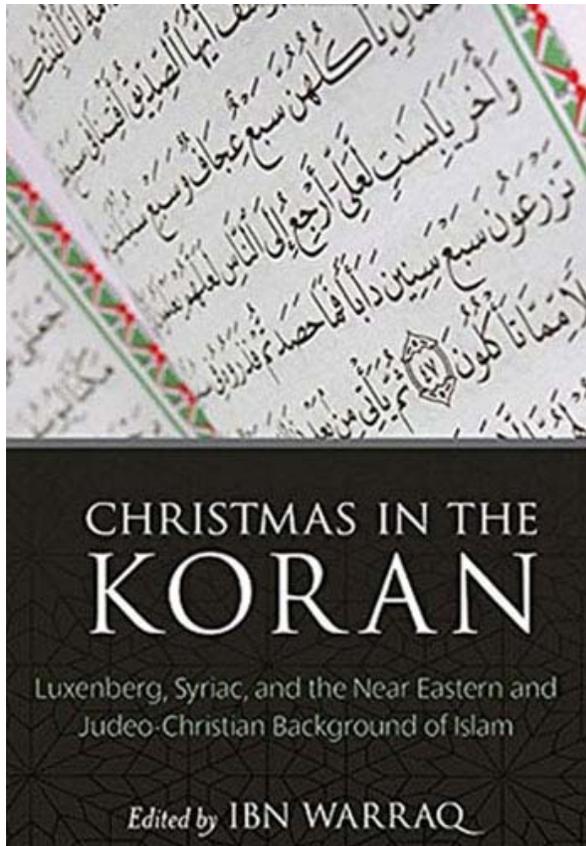


Brief Reviews, Winter 2015



Christmas in the Koran: Luxenberg, Syriac, and the Near Eastern and Judeo-Christian Background of Islam. Edited by Ibn Warraq. New York: Prometheus Books, 2014. 805 pp. \$49.95.

Christmas in the Koran is a valuable compendium of the further research undertaken by Christoph Luxenberg and other scholars on the Syriac substratum underlying the Arabic text of the Qur'an, and how that substratum can illuminate not only obscure passages of the text but the murky origins of Islam itself. This method also sheds new and often surprising light on sections of the Qur'an that appear to be perfectly clear in Arabic. When viewed through the Syriac prism, however, they reveal themselves as having a partially or

completely different meaning from the accepted one.

Most of the collected essays are by contemporary scholars, but some are quite old (albeit hitherto not easy to find), such as Adolf von Harnack's 1909 "Islam." It was wise of the editor, Ibn Warraq, to include this older material as it illuminates the convoluted scholarly antecedents of today's Qur'an revisionists.

Most extraordinary of the many remarkable hypotheses put forward in this collection is the claim that the Qur'an was originally a Christian text, probably a lectionary (a book that lists scriptural readings assigned to be read on a specific day or occasion), in which reference was once made to Christmas, the Eucharist, and other elements of the Christian tradition—references which in the Arabic Qur'an are unclear or overlaid with Islamic interpretations that obliterate their initial Christian character. In one essay, Luxenberg explains that the "mysterious letters" that begin many chapters of the Qur'an and about which Islamic tradition says that "only Allah knows what they mean," are in fact, references to Psalms and other Christian texts for liturgical use. In another essay, Philippe Gignoux locates the origins of the quintessential Islamic credo, the *shahada*, in Nestorian Christianity.

These monographs reinforce the growing case against the text of the Qur'an coming from Muhammad. In this emerging view, the Muslim holy book was compiled from existing, mostly Christian sources, drastically edited, and reinterpreted in order to provide a scripture and a theology for the new religion of Islam. That new religion, it is clear from *Christmas in the Koran*, did not spring forth as the utterances of a seventh-century Arabian prophet but was shaped by

various editors over a period of decades, drawing from earlier, non-Arabic traditions.

The essays are often quite technical, and some may be inhospitable to the non-specialist. As a whole, however, they are accessible and fascinating. *Christmas in the Koran* represents a significant advance in the study of how Islam came to be and where it originated.

Robert Spencer
Jihad Watch

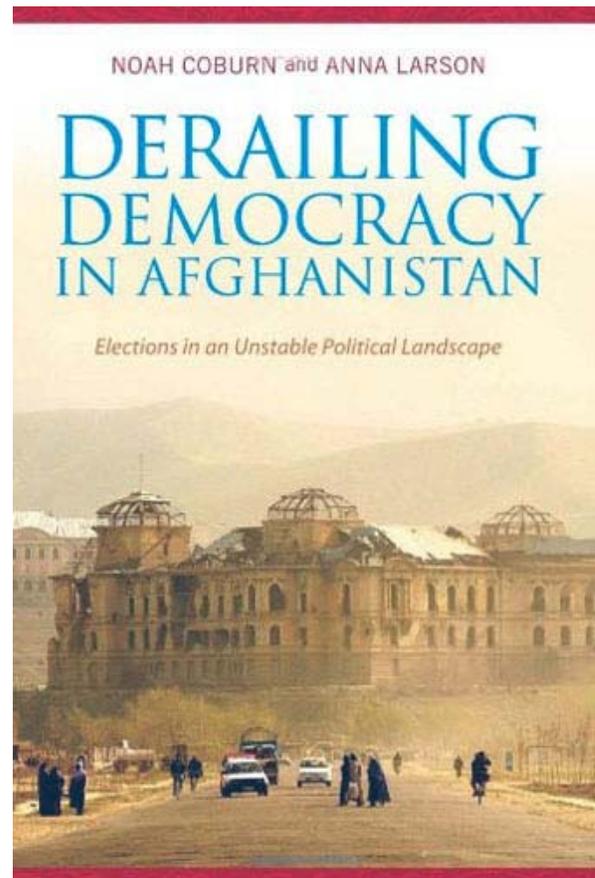
Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape. By Noah Coburn and Anna Larson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. 304 pp. \$50.

The international intervention in Afghanistan that began after the attack on the United States on 9/11 has taken on many forms, some more successful than others. Coburn, a political anthropologist at Bennington College, and Larson of the Kabul-based Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, focus on elections, critiquing that effort not only in its Afghan specifics, but in its larger context, as part of other and similar international interventions.

The authors provide a detailed analysis of what went progressively wrong with the implementation of elections in Afghanistan, which were supported and funded by the international community. Democracy-promoting “workshops,” for example, complete with flip-chart presentations attended by drowsy participants were largely pointless but, nevertheless, were favored by aid agencies because attendance figures produced an easily quantifiable result. Even more troubling is the authors’ description of funding “spikes” for elections shortly before they occurred, which were offset by substantial underfunding be-

tween campaigns of efforts to sustain democratization.

Yet while the authors demonstrate the problems in international efforts to create a viable electoral democracy in Afghanistan, the images that emerge of its successes are at least as compelling. Campaign posters prominently featured both male and female candidates while the sight of former warlords competing for office alongside academics and average citizens presents a dramatic and hopeful contrast to what prevailed under the Taliban. That the wealthy and well-connected tend to win such elections is hardly unique to Afghanistan.



The authors’ thesis that international efforts in Afghanistan and elsewhere should consider local conditions is certainly valid.

They correctly point out that “forms of responsive local governance have deep roots in Afghan culture.” They conclude that by “promoting democracy, human rights, and development all at the same time in an unstable political setting, these combined projects now seem overly ambitious.”

Their analysis would be more compelling had they explained how one or more of these goals could have been deprioritized at the outset. The reality is that the Western democracies who funded these efforts expected all three to progress together, and any approach focused exclusively on one at the expense of the others would seem equally doomed to failure.

Julie Sirrs and Owen L. Sirrs
former analysts,
Defense Intelligence Agency

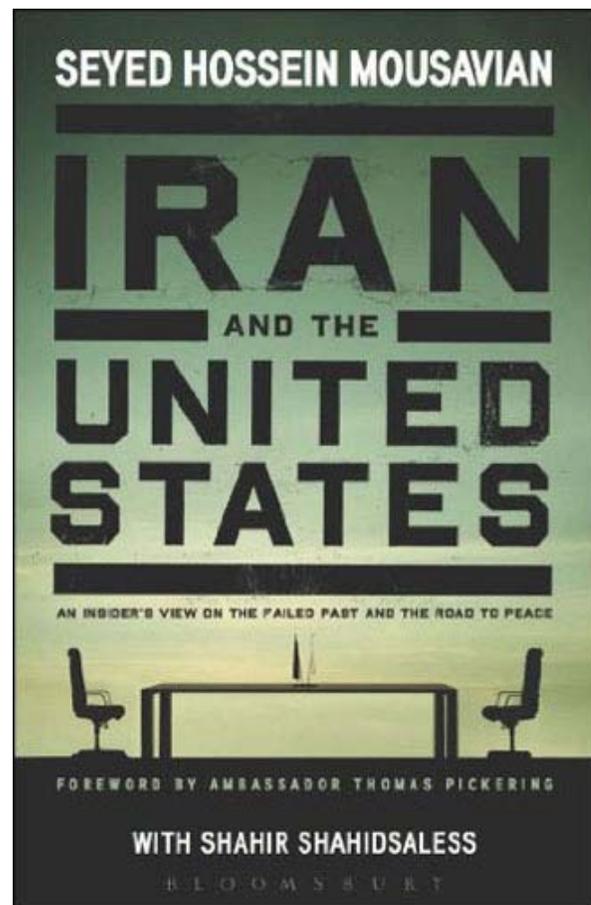
Iran and the United States: An Insider’s View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace. By Seyed Hossein Mousavian with Shahir Shahidsaless. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. 344 pp. \$35.

Just what do Iranian leaders think about the United States and the ongoing disputes over Tehran’s nuclear program and the Middle East peace process? If Mousavian, former spokesman for Iran’s nuclear negotiating team and a polished Iranian diplomat, is to be believed, the Islamic Republic is a pragmatic, rational actor misunderstood by a generation of U.S. policymakers.

Impediments to reconciliation, however, do not lie in misunderstanding. The problem is that Americans know the Islamic Republic all too well. They know of its support for terrorism, the “Death to America” rallies, and the missiles draped with banners promising to wipe Israel off the

face of the earth. Although a succession of former U.S. officials—Obama appointee Vali Nasr, former Carter aide Gary Sick, and career diplomat Thomas Pickering—testify to the book’s importance in elucidating the Iranian perspective, what they and Mousavian actually do is promote a sanitized and perverted narrative of history.

The truth about the 2002 seizure of the *Karine-A*, a ship carrying fifty tons of Iranian weaponry destined for the Palestinian Authority? Simply an Israeli disinformation plot, Mousavian claims. Never mind that the ship had been tracked from the moment of its loading at an Iranian port. The Khobar Towers truck bomb that killed nineteen U.S. servicemen in Saudi Arabia? The real tragedy, it seems, was that the Clinton team



wrongly fingered Iran, which sidetracked real opportunities for diplomacy. Forget the fact that U.S. intelligence conclusively showed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps training the terrorists who carried out the attack.

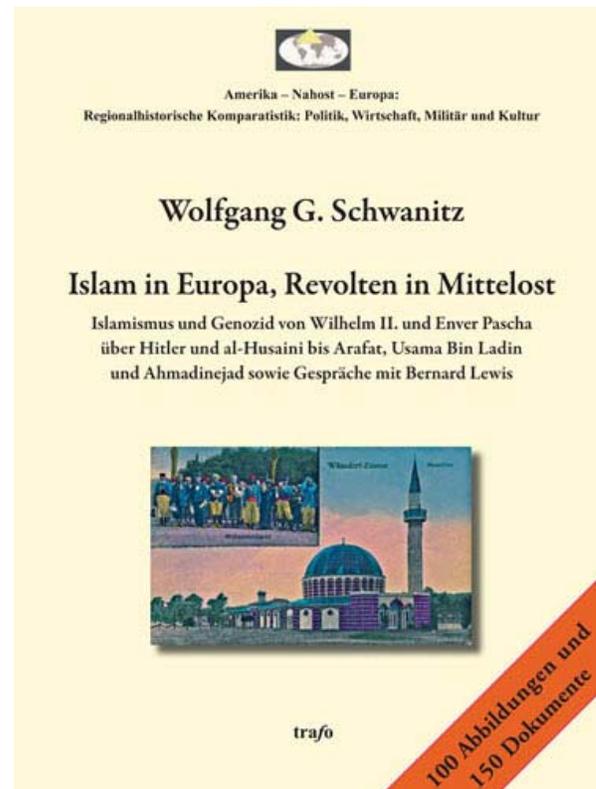
The author likewise whitewashes the so-called Iranian reformists and their actions. Do not expect mention of current President Hassan Rouhani bragging about his success in deceiving the West so as to advance Iran's nuclear program during negotiations. Mousavian may call revelations exposing Iran's covert nuclear program "shocking," but he bypasses any discussion of why Iran kept such facilities secret if its intentions were benign. Instead, he rehashes Tehran's usual talking points about its right to enrich uranium, despite the International Atomic Energy Agency's finding that Iran had violated its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty safeguards agreement, which led to the U.N. Security Council demand for a cessation to Iran's activities.

Those prone toward moral equiv-
alence will find much solace in Mousavian's account, for he suggests (based on discredited assertions by Seymour Hersh) that terrorism is a problem of which the United States is equally guilty. Mousavian dispenses with the problem of Iran's murderous hostility toward Israel's existence and, citing Harvard University Stephen Walt's polemics, suggests that most Americans would understand Iran's position if it were not for the nefarious activity of "the Israel Lobby."

Mousavian holds out hope that Washington and Tehran can reconcile. Indeed, by jettisoning discussion of the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the discrepancy between what Iran's so-called reformers say in English versus what they say in Persian while cherry-picking his way through history, he creates a narrative in which a diplomatic thaw could probably be

accomplished tomorrow. Luckily for the rest of us, there is still reality to keep such impulses in check.

Michael Rubin



Islam in Europa, Revolten in Mittelost: Islamismus und Genozid von Wilhelm II. und Enver Pascha über Hitler und al-Husaini bis Arafat, Usama Bin Ladin und Ahmadinejad sowie Gespräche mit Bernard Lewis. By Wolfgang G. Schwanitz. Berlin: trafo Wissenschaftsverlag, 2013. 799 pp. €96.80.

The title, *Islam in Europe, Revolts in the Middle East: Islamism and Genocide from Wilhelm II and Enver Pasha through Hitler and Hussein to Arafat, Usama bin Laden, and Ahmadinejad, along with Discussions with Bernard Lewis*, indicates the scope of this book: the increasing influence of Islamism in both the Middle

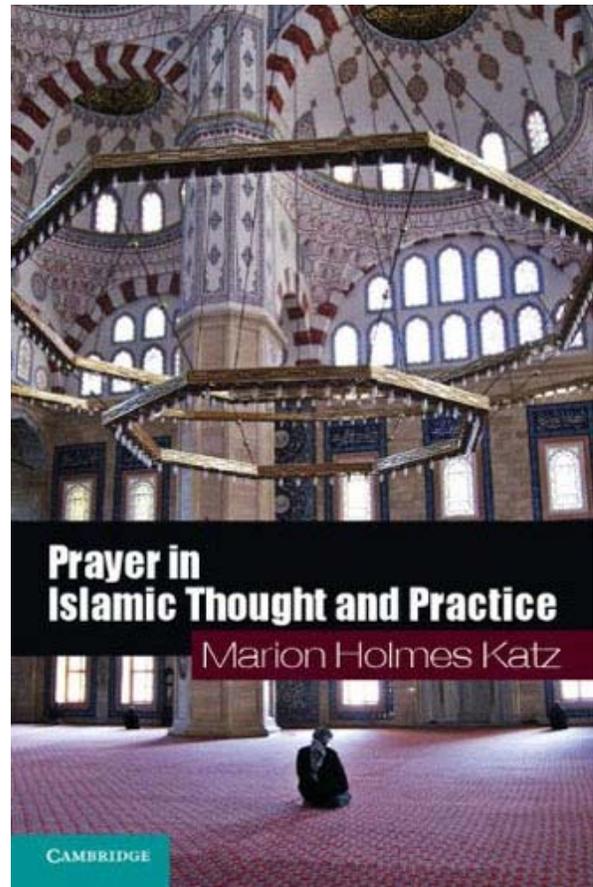
East and Europe since Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany declared himself “protector of Muslims” in 1898 up to the present.

Schwanitz, author of several important works on modern Middle Eastern history, examines in great detail the growth of Islamism, its growing impact on Europe, and anti-Islamist responses. In addition, he explores the connections between Islamism and fascism, as well as other extremist movements during the world wars and the Cold War, and their joint attack on Western liberalism. Schwanitz brings his work up to date with chapters on “the revolt years” of 2011-12, concluding with a chapter of dialogues with Bernard Lewis on the radicalization of Islam.

The author argues that Islam has not only been closely related to seminal events in modern European history but that its more radical elements are now increasingly involved in influencing European affairs. He offers compelling information about recent phenomena in Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands, then discusses immigration and demographic data and the increasing involvement of Muslims in their host-countries’ elections and as parliamentary members. While not ignoring a certain degree of secularization and integration, the author notes an increasing polarization in which Islamists have gained influence in Europe. Schwanitz does not forecast whether the Islamic threat is likely to succeed, but he does take the possibility seriously.

This major study of ideologies, events, and trends is extensively based on interviews as well as on materials in public and private archives and many other sources. It should remain a standard work on the development of radical Islam and its political relations with Europe. An English translation would be most welcome.

Jacob M. Landau
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem



Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice.
By Marion Holmes Katz. New York:
Cambridge University Press, 2013. 244 pp.
\$26.99.

Katz, associate professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at New York University, has written a thoughtful and at times eye-opening examination of the role of prayer in Islamic societies, part of a series produced by the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton titled “Themes in Islamic History.”

Katz’s goal here is to restore “ritual to its proper place in the study of the sharia, and legal analysis in its proper place in the understanding of ritual.” Thus, she surveys the classical schools of Islamic law, explaining their differences on the details of prayer. But while these distinctions are typically minor (dealing mainly with such

matters as the position of the hands or the correct number of prostrations), some have wider implications that resonate today.

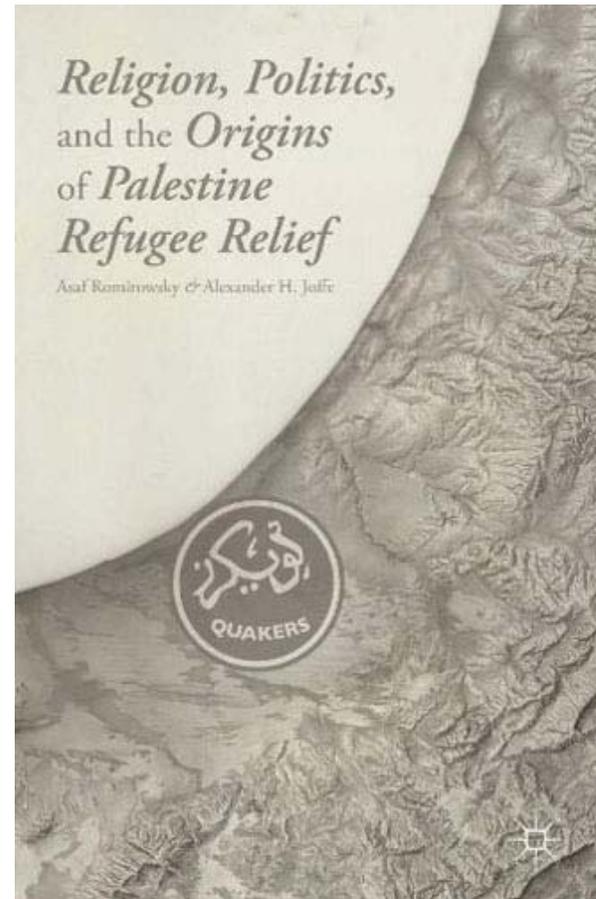
The author notes, for example, that Abu Hanifa, the eighth-century founder of what became the numerically dominant Sunni legal school, argued that prayer—as well as translation and recitation of the Qur’an—in languages other than Arabic, while undesirable, was permissible for a Muslim from a non-Arabic-speaking culture. This position, not shared by other schools, provides greater accessibility to engagement with the faith on the part of Muslim converts. Katz adds that while “almost all Muslims have historically prayed in Arabic,” the debate over language “addresses the significant investment in learning required for proficient prayer.” With this, she provides a historically-based challenge to the widely accepted fundamentalist argument that Arabic must be the exclusive language of prayer and study.

Katz’s book contains many surprises. She notes that requirements for the frequency of prayer have varied significantly in different Muslim communities, even among the “non-urban populations within the Islamic heartland,” such as the Bedouins. Through the centuries, prayer was often neglected by Muslims who were prevented from engaging in it by work requirements or other limitations on personal time. The most hardline Sunni legal school, the Hanbalis, did not prohibit women from leading mixed-gender congregations in special Ramadan prayers. A leading figure in the fourteenth-century Zahiri school of literalist legal interpretation also argued the legitimacy of women leading mixed-gender prayer.

The lines defining what is permitted in Islamic prayer have hardened over the centuries. Katz’s indispensable study shows that the basis for triumphalist attitudes is on

shaky ground and that the issues raised are by no means fully settled.

Stephen Schwartz
Center for Islamic Pluralism



Religion, Politics, and the Origins of Palestine Refugee Relief. By Asaf Romirowsky and Alexander H. Joffe. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 254 pp. \$100.

Romirowsky and Joffe trace the involvement of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)—a Quaker organization founded long before 1948 to assist civilians caught up in the maelstrom of war—in its pivotal role as relief provider to Arab refugees in Gaza under the auspices of the

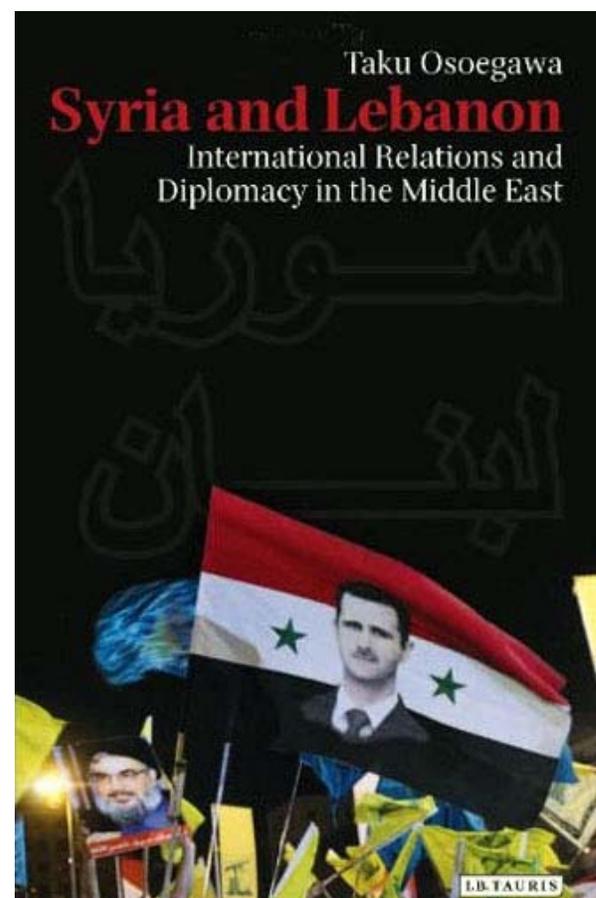
United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees (UNRPR). Painstakingly combing through personal memoirs, cables, and diplomatic communiqués, the authors construct a rich history of the immediate post-1948 period. The AFSC was determined that its relief mission be short-lived to thwart any “moral degeneration” that might occur from a continuing refugee status. Its preferred solution was “repatriation” (return to homes in the territory that became Israel) but quickly changed to resettlement in adjacent Arab states, such as Jordan, Egypt, and Syria, as a more judicious option. This approach was also seriously considered by the U.S. government—then and now the principal source of monetary aid to the refugee operation—along with a program of political and economic development in the Middle East directly connected to larger Cold War policies.

But the idea of refugee resettlement in Arab states soon fizzled out. As the authors illustrate, both field personnel and those at the policy-making level within AFSC understood that the refugees were being used as pawns by the Arab governments in their propaganda war against Israel. Once UNRPR’s mandate expired in 1950, the United Nations established the U.N. Relief and Work’s Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) as its replacement, and from then on, the fix was in. For reasons ranging from bureaucratic inertia to self-interest, but most importantly Arab governments’ clear desire to maintain the refugee problem, UNRWA has, for the last sixty-five years, provided “relief” to a population that has increased nearly ten-fold and whose questionable refugee status is handed down to each successive generation as their prized—and lucrative—legacy.

As the authors note, a continuing and permanent refugee status became a necessary condition for the fostering of a “Palestinian” identity. Rather than use its influence among the Arab states to implement a resettlement

program, which would have ultimately been to the refugees’ advantage, the U.S. government pandered to a set of ideas that would prove inimical to long-term regional stability as well as to Israel’s security. This ill-conceived approach continues to this day, sustaining the most powerful weapon in the Arab arsenal against the legitimacy of the Jewish state.

Susan M. Jellissen
Belmont University, Nashville



Syria and Lebanon: International Relations and Diplomacy in the Middle East. By Taku Osoegawa. London: I. B. Tauris, 2013. 246 pp. \$90.

Trying to understand and explain the ins-and-outs of the Lebanon-Syria relationship is a difficult and often

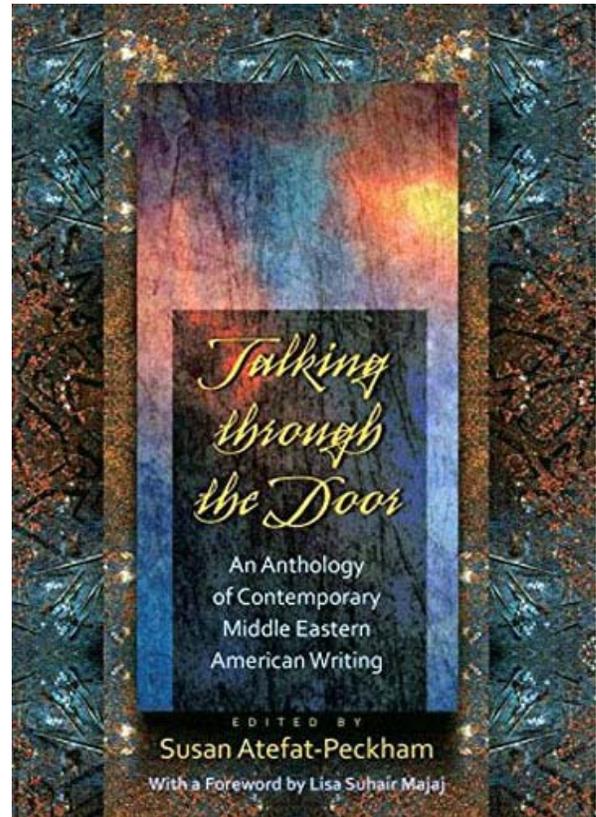
bewildering task. This new attempt by Osoegawa of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies provides useful information to students interested in case studies applicable to general courses on international relations. It is not recommended for those seeking answers about the dynamics of Lebanese political subservience to Syria.

The book's format suggests it was adapted from a doctoral dissertation that was insufficiently revised for more generalized audiences. Its structure is somewhat mechanical and comes with too many subtitles and redundant summaries. Most importantly, the book does not provide enough background information about Lebanon.

The contours of Lebanese politics and the country's interactions with the outside world date back to its independence in 1943. By focusing on Lebanese-Syrian relations from 1970 on, the author glosses over other important factors in the development of that relationship. Viewing Syrian influence on Lebanon in isolation from the changing patterns of foreign influence that went hand-in-hand with the creation of an independent Lebanon does a great disservice to anyone trying to understand the topic.

Despite this, the book is rich in factual information, illuminating not only the formation of expedient alliances with Syria by Lebanese politicians from different persuasions but also the ease in which they come to infelicitous endings. However, there is little analysis until the work's conclusion when the author explains the nuances of the sectarian divisions in Lebanon and how these shape perceptions towards Syria.

Hilal Khashan
American University of Beirut



Talking through the Door: An Anthology of Contemporary Middle Eastern American Writing Edited by Susan Atefat-Peckham. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014. 272 pp. \$26.45.

Talking through the Door is an anthology of prose and verse, fiction and non-fiction, by seventeen authors whose families came from Iran and other Middle Eastern lands (but not Israel). When the volume's editor Atefat-Peckham died in 2003, the project languished for a decade until Lisa Suhair Majaj took up the task and completed it, including new material written in the ensuing years.

In the best parts of the book, readers will find fictional vignettes of American immigrant life rendered into art. These works range from delightful yet forgettable to tedious and sophomoric. The many scenes depicting people gathered around tables of food and talking about the "Old Country"

give rise to the notion that there is nothing particularly Middle Eastern about most of the narratives here, other than the names of people, places, and things. Substitute any other ethnic names for the Mahmouds, Sittis, and Yousefs and a different diet for the bulghur, kibbeh, and lamb at those tables, and the stories could be those of any ethnic group that immigrated to America in the late nineteenth or twentieth centuries, struggling to succeed through a combination of assimilation and reverence for the old ways.

If the book were only that, there would be little objectionable about it. But there are also non-fictional entries that dictate the tone of the entire volume and strike a decidedly sour note. Atefat-Peckham's 2003 introduction provides a study in special pleading, depicting Western literature from Dante to the Romantics as an unbroken chain of animosity for all things Arabic and Islamic and asserting that those "racist" sentiments were greatly amplified with the birth of the United States and evident in its canonical authors: Twain, Melville, Wharton, Hemingway, even Benjamin Franklin. Mid-volume are two 1996 essays by Joe Kadi, their centrality suggesting a theory of Middle Eastern

American writing around which the other pieces orbit. Kadi's rhetorical tantrums focusing on "cultural Appropriation ... an imperialist attitude in which privileged people want to own segments of other people's cultures" positively reek of Edward Said's attacks on "Orientalists." But Kadi's bête noire is "white people"—the term appearing forty-two times in fewer than thirteen pages: "White people haven't analyzed a monster related to racism, that is, classism and the global capitalist system." It is an act of "cultural genocide" when white people express an interest in Arab culture if they "haven't done the work necessary to become allies of people of color ... don't engage in acts of solidarity around specific issues such as Native self-determination or Palestinian liberation ... don't read books by radical authors of color."

It is unfortunate for the other writers represented in this volume that their works are sullied by the childish attempts at political discourse framing them.

A.J. Caschetta
Rochester Institute of Technology

