

## Brief Reviews, Fall 2015

**Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe.** By Esra Özyürek. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. 172 pp. \$24.95.

Ethnographer Özyürek, born and raised in Turkey and now living in America, explores Muslim life in Germany. She investigates Muslim immigrants and post-1989 East German converts. Her key thesis is highly controversial: that the search by German and other European-born converts for a purified Islam can best be understood in a climate of increasing xenophobia and hostility to Islam. The reader might ask if that hostility is indeed increasing, and, if in a less heated climate, would there be no search for a “true Islam?”

Religious minorities, Özyürek posits, cannot fully embrace their minority position, nor entirely abandon it, nor cause it to disappear completely. Politicians insist that Muslims can live in Germany as citizens, but their religion or Islamic identity is often not accepted. In turn, they try to respond to this challenge by showing that one can be, for instance, a conservative Muslim and a good German citizen at the same time. Thus, they willingly let their ethnic identities as Arabs, Turks, Bosnians, or Indians slip into the background, says the author. Members of the Muslim Youth of Germany, founded in 1994 by the German convert Muhammad Siddiq Borgfeldt, have been successful “in conflating the categories of German and Muslim, confusing insiders and outsiders.” However, according to Özyürek, they remain perceived by some officials as “internal enemies” who might potentially disrupt the



society, and “they must be kept under constant observation.”

Her field work from 2006 to 2011 included studying lectures and social activities for converts in eight mosques operating mainly in the German language. Additionally, Özyürek conducted interviews with sixty-six converts and fourteen born-Muslims; these form the most vibrant section of her book.

Almost all the converts she met embraced Islam following some intimate contact with individuals born Muslim. But following conversion, many converts distanced themselves from immigrant Muslims and did not always find it easy to identify with those born as Muslims.

Surprisingly, she finds that, for East Germans, becoming Muslim is “a way of escaping their East German identity” (although

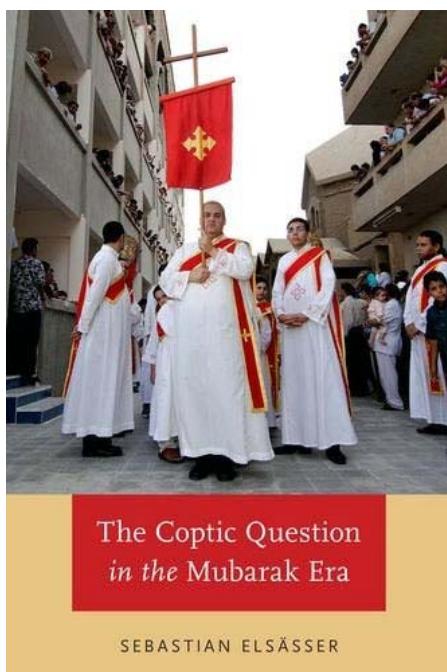
many East Germans still have a proud identity as participants in the overthrow of a totalitarian regime). Born Muslims, on the other hand, promote a more de-culturalized Islam as a way for them to integrate.

In terms of field research, this book is a trail-blazer. Although not free of stereotypes, including those regarding East Germans, it offers quality food for thought on many of the main issues of Muslim integration and non-integration in Germany, and constitutes a solid base to compare results with other parts of Europe.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz  
Middle East Forum

**The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era. By Sebastian Elsässer. Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2014. 319 pp. \$74.**

Elsässer of the Christian-Albrechts-University in Kiel offers a detailed account of the status of Coptic Christians under Husni Mubarak's regime (1981-2011). The author defines the "Coptic question" as a complex of issues ranging from the struggles



of daily life to constitutional questions to the problem of political participation.

The author argues that, in the Mubarak era, human rights and civil society groups saw Coptic concerns within the framework of authoritarianism and human rights violations though the rise of public discussion of these issues marked a breakthrough for Coptic grievances. Unlike in previous discourses on national unity and religious patriotism, the debates on citizenship provided a widely accepted conceptual framework in which different problems such as legal and administrative discrimination or human rights violations against the Copts could properly be addressed. Human rights pertain more broadly to all citizens regardless of religion while this is not necessarily the case when defining "unity and patriotism."

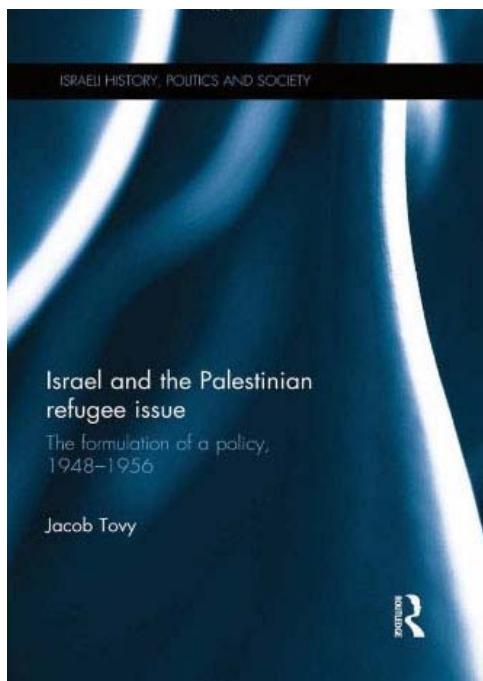
Of course, the regime denied the existence of any discrimination against Copts. But its bad governance, non-transparency of decision-making, widespread human rights violations, administrative inefficiency, arbitrariness, and corruption exacerbated existing tensions.

The author finds that Muslim and Christian religious revivalism appeared simultaneously and share similar ideas and social bases (the educated middle class). He posits that Coptic revivalists have little political ideology, certainly nothing remotely comparable to their Muslim rivals such as the Islamist Sayyid Qutb. Christian revivalism, also, focuses on increased spiritual interest or renewal of the life of the church.

Elsässer sees the current volatile state of Muslim-Christian affairs and rising sectarian tensions as the legacy of the Mubarak era. But the 2014 Egyptian constitution for the first time offers a "democratic system," and article three allows Christians and Jews "their Shari'as" as the main source of civil legislation to "regulate their respective personal status, religious

affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps there are some glimmers of hope.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz



**Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Issue: The Formulation of a Policy, 1948-1956. By Jacob Tovy. London: Routledge, 2014. 306 pp. \$145.**

This thorough and authoritative account assembles the definitive record of Israel's policy toward the Palestinian refugee issue in the early years of the state. Tovy of the Herzl Institute at the University of Haifa examines the origins of Israel's policy toward repatriation, resettlement, compensation, blocked bank accounts, internal refugees, and family reunification, drawing on declassified archives from government meetings, Knesset committees, and files of the prime minister's advisor on Arab affairs.

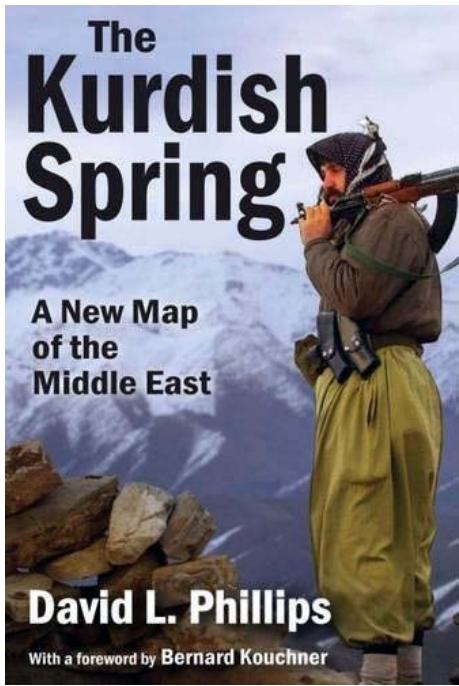
Tovy illustrates how, beginning with Israel's creation in 1949, its first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, came under great pressure to accept the return of large numbers of Arabs displaced during Israel's war of independence. At home, the second largest party in the Knesset, Mapam, a Marxist-Zionist party allied with the Soviet Union, advocated for full repatriation of all Arab refugees. Abroad, the Truman administration initially called upon Israel to accept repatriation of 200,000-250,000 Arab refugees, a number that would have raised the Arab minority in the fledgling state from 13 to 30 percent and created staggering political, economic, and security problems.

The author examines how Ben-Gurion deflected the pressure with a policy that was adroit rather than confrontational. Adamantly opposed to repatriation internally, Ben-Gurion did not, however, declare absolute opposition to the great powers. Instead, he deflated the issue by saying it should be resolved at a peace conference with Israel's Arab neighbors, at which time an appropriate balance between resettlement, compensation, and repatriation would be negotiated. This put the burden on the United States and Britain to bring the Arabs to the table for a realistic dialogue, something the Arabs would not accept.

In Tovy's opinion, Ben-Gurion's approach worked. In just a few months, U.S. policy shifted from pressure on Israel to accept repatriation, to various proposals for an economic solution, to resettlement through regional cooperation. However, this has left the refugee problem unresolved until today but was probably the most that the government of Israel could have achieved in existing circumstances.

Steven J. Rosen  
MEF Washington Project

<sup>1</sup> [Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt](#), Jan. 18, 2014, art. 3.



**The Kurdish Spring: A New Map of the Middle East.** By David L. Phillips. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2015. 268 pp. \$74.95 (\$24.95, paper).

*The Kurdish Spring* adds to a long list of recent books on the Kurds. This scholarly theme has flourished in the early twenty-first century in sharp contrast with most of the twentieth century when the subject was all but ignored by scholars and politicians alike.

Phillips draws a panoramic picture of the Kurds in all four parts of Greater Kurdistan: parts of southeastern Turkey, northern Syria, northern Iraq, and western Iran. This is the book's strength because it provides a comprehensive picture, but it is also its weakness because the author seems to have bitten off too much resulting in mistakes. To give just two examples, Phillips claims that the British used chemical bombs

against the Kurds in the 1920s whereas according to David McDowall, they used delayed bombs.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Phillips writes that the Society for the Revival of Kurdistan (Komeley Jiyanewey Kurdistan or JK) was established in Iran in 1944 while Abbas Vali states that it was established two years earlier.<sup>3</sup>

The author's main thesis is that since the Kurds play a very important role in the region, the United States should support them. In the case of the Kurds of Iraq, Washington should support their independence because Iraq is no longer a viable state. In the case of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerê Kurdistan or PKK) in Turkey, the U.S. government should remove them from the terrorism list. Washington should also support the Kurds of Syria who are actively fighting the Islamists.

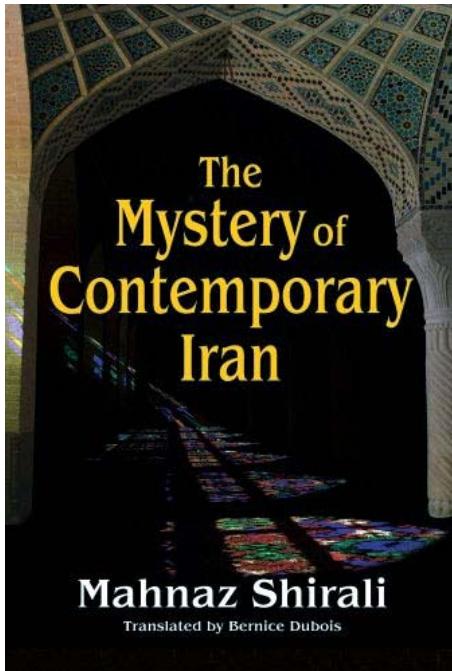
The author analyzes the root causes of the Kurdish problem in the aftermath of World War I and briefly sketches the situation of the Kurds in the four states until the end of the 1990s. He describes the achievements by Kurds in certain parts and examines the collapse of the Iraqi state, which could pave the way to an independent Kurdistan.

The book is written with empathy and understanding toward the Kurds and as such might be an important contribution for lay readers and even to policy makers. However, for a more scholarly and knowledgeable audience, it is too sketchy; it seems to have been written in haste without consulting serious studies on the Kurds.

Ofra Bengio  
Moshe Dayan Center

<sup>2</sup> David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (I.B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 154-5, 179, 180.

<sup>3</sup> Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran* (I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. 20.



**The Mystery of Contemporary Iran.**  
**By Mahnaz Shirali. Trans. by Bernice**  
**Dubois. Edison: Transaction, 2015.**  
**276 pp. \$47.95.**

A major problem with histories of modern Iran is that most were written in the immediate aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, treating it as the pinnacle of Iranian political evolution rather than an anomaly. Shirali, a professor at the Paris School of Business, does not fall into this trap.

The author provides a narrative, both readable and substantive, tracking the major trends in Iran over the past century, from the constitutional revolution in the first decade of the twentieth century to the rise of Iranian nationalism, the coup against Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq (r. 1951-53), through the fall of the shah and the establishment of the Islamic Revolution. In separate chapters, she explores the major ideological trends that have dominated the Iranian political landscape: communism, “revolutionarism,” and ideological Islam.

Shirali displays an impressive ability to describe the big picture and illustrate salient trends, but her consideration of the clergy makes *The Mystery of Contemporary Iran* path-breaking. Many authors include them among Iran’s engines of change. Shirali argues, however, that both liberalism and political reform frightened the clergy, setting the stage for increasingly reactionary behavior not only in the aftermath of the constitutional revolution but also against the backdrop of Mosaddeq’s agrarian reforms and the shah’s modernization drive of the 1960s and 1970s. One of her most startling contributions is evidence showing how clerical intransigence evolved into support for terrorism decades before Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolution took the world by surprise.

With so much new academic work in Iranian studies blighted by arcane theory, apologetics, and a narrow, irrelevant focus, Shirali’s work is a breath of fresh air, offering a masterful and must-read combination of political and intellectual history.

Michael Rubin

**Shi'i Islam: An Introduction.** By  
**Najam Haider.** West Nyack, N.Y.:  
**Cambridge University Press, 2014.** 244  
**pp. \$27.99, paper.**

Haider’s volume is by no means an introduction to the Shiite tradition in Islam. Rather, it is the author’s analysis of features of Shiism that have drawn his attention, emphasizing details that for a reader little acquainted with the sect will likely be difficult to follow and of little interest.

According to his Columbia University website biography, Haider is an assistant professor of religion at Barnard College, and his courses “bridge the gap between the classical and modern Muslim worlds with a particular emphasis on the impact of colonization on Islamic political and religious discourse.” Haider is, therefore, not only fond of the more obscure aspects of

Shiism but fashionably leftist and occasionally post-modernist in his approach.

Thus, while discussing the transformation over time of the Khoja Shiites and their absorption into Niza‘ri Isma‘ilism, the reader is forced to suffer through rather predictable but, nonetheless, lamentable quotations from leftist sociologist Frantz Fanon and Palestinian apologist Edward Said, culminating in a sharp critique of the movement’s current leader, Aga Khan, IV, for what Haider calls his “modernist” ideas and attachment to capitalism.

For the author, the “collective memory” of Shiites, focused on the legitimacy of Muhammad’s son-in-law Ali as successor to the Muslim prophet, his assassination in 661 C.E., and the subsequent battle of Karbala, in which Ali’s son Hussein was slain, recede into the background. They serve merely as markers to distinguish between the main Shiite traditions: the Twelvers, the Isma‘ilis, and the Zaydis. Comparison of the differences in narratives of Karbala among these groups—which focus on a cosmic significance in the martyrdom of Hussein among the Twelvers

and Isma‘ilis, and a less spiritual protest over the break in Muhammad’s lineage for the Zaydis—provides a simple reference for scholars.

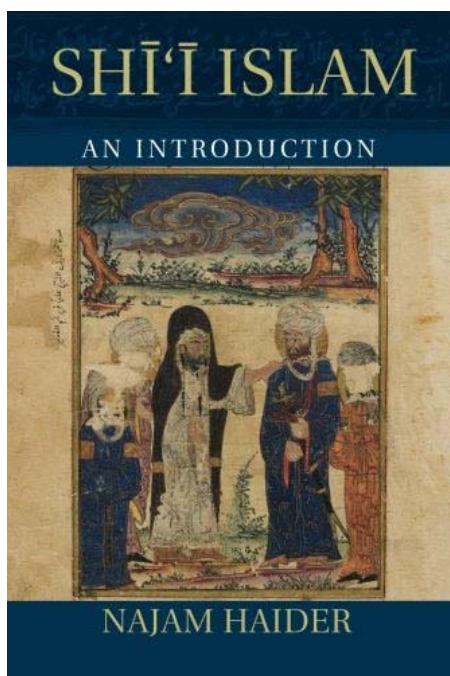
For those who have some acquaintance with Shiism, this volume may prove a useful handbook in sorting out differences within the sect. For most newcomers to the subject, it will likely prove confusing and a waste of time.

Stephen Schwartz  
Center for Islamic Pluralism

**Students and Resistance in Palestine. Books, Guns, and Politics. By Ido Zelkovitz. New York: Routledge, 2015. 213 pp. \$145.**

The 2015 victory of Hamas over Fatah in student government elections at Ramallah’s Birzeit University is just the most recent reminder that higher education in Palestinian life is fundamentally a political arena. Zelkovitz, a research fellow at the Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies at the University of Haifa, documents just how important student politics have long been in both Palestinian higher education and Palestinian nationalism.

From the creation of the Palestinian Student Association at the University of Cairo in 1944 to that of the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS) in 1959, student organizations have been at the forefront of political activism and have provided cadres of leadership to various Palestinian factions. As successive waves of political fervor washed over Arab society, student politics followed suit: revolutionary leftism, pan-Arabism, and Islamism have been prominent themes. Zelkovitz details how Palestinian students, particularly those living far from the Middle East, tended to be more radical and routinely pushed against compromises that could bring peace. GUPS, for example, not only reached out to leftists in Europe throughout the 1960s



but provided support to Palestinian terrorists there and in the Middle East.

Zelkovitz provides a wealth of detail regarding student movements, their constant in-fighting, and the ways they were both vied over and, in turn, influenced by political movements. Universities were not only an arena for activism against Israel but also a place for each faction to demonstrate its ability to lead Palestinians.

Universities have also been vital for nationalizing Palestinian society, especially after 1967, when the first such institutions were established in the West Bank and Gaza. According to Zelkovitz, inept Israeli efforts to control them, their staff, and curricula, backfired badly. This helped bolster various nationalist visions on campus, first Fatah's and then Hamas's.

Zelkovitz notes that Palestinian student radicalism now propels North American universities too: Uncompromising opposition to Israel, the baseline of Arab and Muslim student politics, has also become the touchstone there for leftist university politics.

Alex Joffe  
Middle East Forum

**Track-Two Diplomacy: Toward an Israeli-Palestinian Solution, 1978-2014.**  
**By Yair Hirschfeld.** Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 472 pp. \$44.95, paper.

Hirschfeld tells the fascinating story of how, together with a handful of colleagues, he served from 1978 through 2014 as a private "foreign ministry" for Yossi Beilin and Shimon Peres both before, during, and after they served as Israeli deputy foreign minister and foreign minister, respectively. During that time, Hirschfeld assisted them in track-two diplomacy and exploring new ideas and models of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian dispute through informal discussions with Palestinians and

others. (This reviewer was asked to join the small Israeli team that met in Oslo with the Palestine Liberation Organization to help negotiate the Oslo agreement.)

Hirschfeld has been committed to track-two diplomacy, mostly related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for more than thirty-five years, concurrently wearing several hats in the process: academic, think tank, and political.

In addition to the Oslo talks, Hirschfeld tells about his other track-two diplomacy discussions, including a 1979-88 attempt with Jordan and the 1994-95 Beilin-Abu Mazen understanding.

Because history books are normally written by track-one players, this book provides a unique inside view of the intensive and continuous track-two activity that is hidden from the public eye. It offers a wealth of information that has not yet been covered by any other publication on the Middle East peace process.

Joel Singer, former legal advisor to the Israeli Foreign Ministry

