

# Brief Reviews, Winter 2016



**The Business of Identity: Jews, Muslims, and Economic Life in Medieval Egypt. By Phillip I. Ackerman-Lieberman. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2014. 446 pp. \$65.**

The Cairo Geniza documents have rightfully been seen as the richest source of information about the intellectual, social, and economic history of the Jews in the medieval Islamic world, and indeed, for Islamic socioeconomic history more generally. In this erudite and sophisticated work, Ackerman-Lieberman, who holds degrees in rabbinics, economics, and Near Eastern studies, reexamines the evidence of commercial and legal documents found in this Egyptian trove and revises the conclusions of earlier scholars who pioneered the field of Geniza studies.

The book opens with a summary and critique of the outlook and main themes of S.D. Goitein, the doyen of Geniza studies,

and of several of his protégés, historians of the so-called Princeton School. Ackerman-Lieberman, who also trained at Princeton, notes the humanistic approach of Goitein and others and how many of their assumptions were absorbed to a greater and lesser degree by the subsequent generation of scholars. The author concludes that many of these assumptions and conclusions on the convergence between Muslim and Jewish business practice, as well as social practice, are “tentative at best.”

Next, he analyzes evidence in the sources that was not always used by his predecessors. Examining the institutions of commercial partnership from legal documents rather than business correspondence, Ackerman-Lieberman concludes that the documents “actually reflect the models of commercial cooperation outlined in the Talmud and subsequent Jewish legal materials” and not those of their Muslim neighbors. He then demonstrates that Jewish religious and cultural identity constituted “an important component of economic decision-making.” This finding differs from the Princeton school, which views the Jews of the Geniza world as thoroughly embedded within Islamic society and its commercial legal system.

Ackerman-Lieberman then asks how typical were the merchants and the practices revealed in the Geniza and how representative were they of their co-religionists? Taking a more skeptical approach than his mentors and colleagues, he marshals evidence for “a stratum of Jewish partnership practice” that diverges from the Islamic legal codes cited by A. L. Udovitch

and others, and which calls into question “the assumption of commonality of practice between Jews and Muslims.” The author bolsters his views with a valuable appendix of legal documents that includes many agreements along with an explanatory introduction and annotation.

Ackerman-Lieberman suggests that his findings will herald “a sea change in the study of Geniza documents away from the commonalities ... in favor of complex social forces.” This remains to be seen, but the author has made a serious and scholarly effort to change the focus of the field.

Norman A. Stillman  
University of Oklahoma



**De Haat Mag Niet Overslaan Naar Onze Straten: De Terreur Dreiging Door Islamitische Staat (Hatred Must Not Spill Over into Our Streets: The Terror Threat by Islamic State). By Emerson Vermaat. Soesterberg, Nether.: Uigevererij Aspekt, 2015. 272 pp. €19.95, paper.**

Dutch investigative reporter Vermaat’s new book is meant to warn those

in the West who, while appalled by the barbaric excesses of ISIS and like-minded groups, have yet to take the Islamist threat seriously. In *Hatred Must Not Spill over into Our Streets*, he meticulously details the genesis of ISIS, the psychology of its members, and the sociopolitical impact of their actions worldwide.

Vermaat is not shy about stating the root of the problem as he perceives it. He recounts the history of violence within Islam from the time of Muhammad until today and characterizes its “glorification of death as a religious and Satanic ritual.” The author of several volumes on Nazism and the Holocaust, Vermaat draws parallels between ISIS and the Nazi SS, both of whose members believed that the “enemy was life itself.”

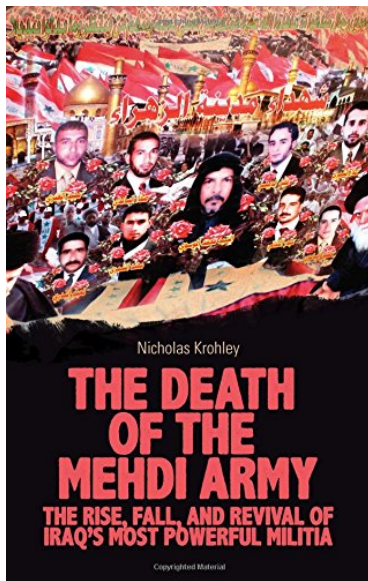
Much of the book is devoted to stories of Western-based Muslims, male and female, who took part in jihad in Syria. Vermaat chronicles their backgrounds, experiences, and in some cases, their legal circumstances upon their return to their Western countries of origin.

Witnessing the massive influx of Middle Eastern refugees to Western shores, Vermaat warns of the dangers of mass immigration from Muslim countries and how this refugee conduit is being exploited by ISIS to bring jihadists into Europe. “ISIS and Hamas are preparing for a new Holocaust,” he warns, citing the self-proclaimed caliph of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who has announced that “the Jews are enemies of Islam ... who must be destroyed.” He also criticizes the European elites’ embrace of Turkey, arguing that it must never become a member of the EU: “Turkey is on the way to becoming a totalitarian state ruled by radical Muslims.”

Vermaat’s book, written before the current Muslim flood into Europe, is an invaluable guide to the dangers posed by

radical Islam in the West and is a wake-up call to the Dutch-speaking public. The problems he highlights describe a reality that threatens the future of Western civilization.

Beila Rabinowitz  
Militant Islam Monitor



**The Death of the Mehdi Army. The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Iraq's Most Powerful Militia. By Nicholas Krohley. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 305 pp. \$40.**

Perhaps the greatest surprise confronting U.S. forces following the 2003 invasion of Iraq was the rise of firebrand Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Prior to the invasion, Sadr was not on the U.S. radar, but in the wake of the operation, he became a military obsession, quickly establishing himself as the chief impediment to the restoration of order in the country, at least from Washington's perspective. While Sadr's Mahdi (or Mehdi) Army (meaning, loosely, the Army of the Messiah) was responsible for thousands of deaths—American as well as Iraqi—relatively little was known about Sadr and his militia beyond

the names of top lieutenants or what could be gleaned from his speeches.

Krohley is a veteran of the “Human Terrain System,” the collection of social scientists embedded within U.S. fighting forces whose job was to illuminate the intricacies of local society to help the top brass's decision-making. He remedies this lack of insight, shedding light on an important piece of recent U.S. history in Iraq.

He asks: Why did the Mahdi Army collapse in 2008? The rapidity of its fall with so little combat suggests other factors at play. In answering the question, the author weaves a masterwork of recent Baghdadi and Iraqi political history, setting his study apart from previous analyses of the surge, which tend to be long on journalism but short on understanding the nuances of Iraqi society.

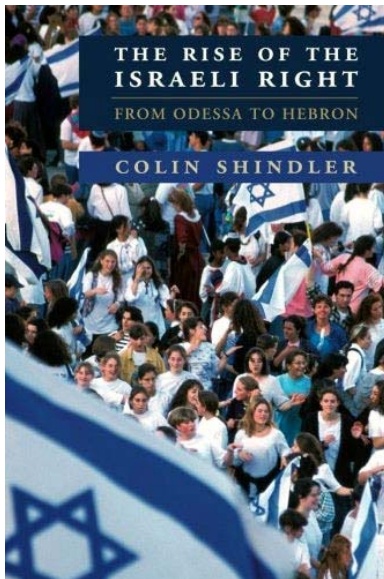
Krohley traces the origins of the Mahdi Army to the growth of the eastern slums of Baghdad and the internal migration of Shiite Iraqis, beginning with the establishment of the republic in 1958. He examines the rise of the movement headed by Muqtada's father, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr in the 1980s and 1990s, set against the backdrop of U.N. sanctions and Saddam Hussein's repressive reign. After the U.S.-led invasion, Muqtada sought to reconstitute his father's movement but lacked the religious credentials or the necessary skills, beyond assembling his infamous and factious band of irregulars.

The author's inner anthropologist shines through as he examines the heavily Shiite administrative district known as “New Baghdad” on a sub-district by sub-district level. Indeed, leafing through the nearly 100 pages of notes, scholars may sense the spirit of the late historian Hanna Batatu's classic studies of Iraqi society, albeit with a narrower focus (and without an index—the book's only flaw). Krohley looks at how each neighborhood viewed U.S. forces and interacted with the Sadristes as the 2008

showdown with the Mahdi Army loomed, and what this meant as U.S. soldiers pushed the Mahdi Army out.

Krohley challenges the idealization of the U.S.-led surge “as a triumph of full-spectrum counter-insurgency.” Indeed, he argues convincingly that the demise of the Mahdi Army was self-inflicted—more of a tactical decision by the Mahdi Army itself to fade into the woodwork and perhaps survive to fight another day—rather than the U.S. victory so many hagiographers of Gen. David Petraeus claim. Krohley’s work may be challenged by future writers, but they will need to marshal significant resources to counter his deep and well-researched study.

Michael Rubin



**The Rise of the Israeli Right: From Odessa to Hebron.** By Colin Shindler. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 411 pp. \$94.99 (\$34.99, paper).

For readers looking for an explanation for the “rise of the Israeli Right,” Shindler’s book is a major disappointment: Only the last thirty pages of the work

concern contemporary events, and superficially at that.

Instead, Shindler, emeritus professor at the University of London, devotes most of the book to earlier ideologists, especially Ze’ev Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin, even though recent biographies of these leaders—Shmuel Katz<sup>1</sup> and Hillel Halkin<sup>2</sup> of Jabotinsky and Daniel Gordis<sup>3</sup> of Begin—render Shindler’s rehashing superfluous.

More problematic, Shindler fails to provide an understanding of why the Right has become a dominant political factor. The role of issues and actors that play a part in forming Israeli public opinion, such as “collectivism of the kibbutz,” “Labor’s anti-religious ethos and patronising attitude,” and “Mizrachi voters” are only mentioned in passing. Nowhere does he raise the issue of Palestinian rejectionism, terrorism, and incitement and its effects on Israel’s citizenry. Hamas bombings are noted in passing and Hezbollah not at all.

Instead, the author focuses on the so-called settlements, which for him represent “the emergence of redemptionist Zionism” dominated by messianism. He states that “polls regularly indicate that a majority of Israelis did not ideologically agree with the settlers and wished for a way out of the quagmire.” Why rely on polls and ignore the results of elections, which show strong support for Jewish communities in the West Bank? The disengagement from Gaza and the resultant birth of a missile-firing, tunnel-burrowing Hamas has left most Israelis with

<sup>1</sup> *Lone Wolf: A Biography of Vladimir (Ze’Ev) Jabotinsky*, vol. 1 and 2 (Fort Lee, N.J: Barricade Books, 1996).

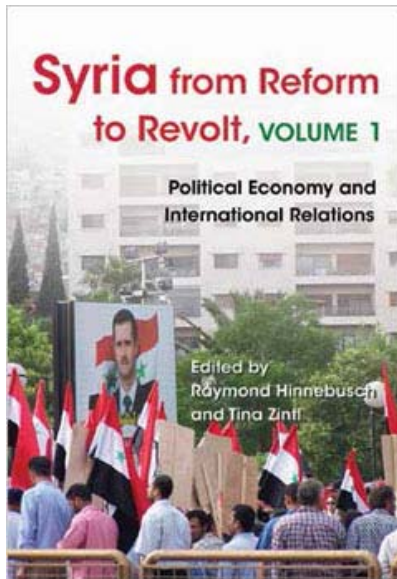
<sup>2</sup> *Jabotinsky: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> *Menachem Begin: The Battle for Israel’s Soul* (New York: Schocken, 2014).

little appetite for further risk-taking with their security.

The reason for the rise of the Right in Israel is simple: Most people do not trust the Left because they find its policies inadequate.

Moshe Dann  
Jerusalem



**Syria from Reform to Revolt: Political Economy and International Relations, Vol. 1. Edited by Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015. 348 pp. \$49.95 (\$34.95, paper).**

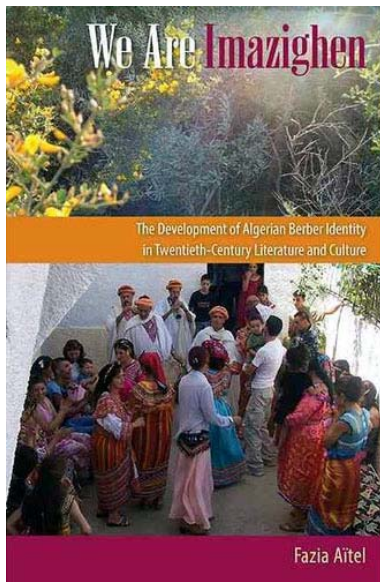
Hinnebusch and Zintl's edited book attempts to explain both the outbreak of the Syrian revolution and the disintegration of the Syrian state. They and their authors focus on the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria, addressing the question of what went wrong following his assumption of power after his father Hafiz's death: Why did the reforms he sought to implement, with the aim of strengthening his regime and adapting it to changes both inside Syria and abroad, lead to precisely the opposite result?

The book's contributors present enlightening and in-depth discussions of various aspects of life in Syria and of the regime's policies from approximately 2000 to 2013. Despite this, the reader is left with a sense of missed opportunity, for the book does not offer any deep insights into the fissures that led to the revolution or the dissolution of the Syrian state and society. Instead, it deals with aspects that have no significance for the violent developments of recent years, such as questions about "volunteer campaigns and social stratification" among school children or Hamas's rhetoric and mobilization practices in Palestinian refugee camps in Syria.

How then to explain the Syrian state's collapse? The essence of the problem was the imposition of a severely flawed system, inherently contrary to human nature. At the heart of the regime stood the tiny Alawite community, a minority group that established its rule over the Sunni Arab majority. The ruling Assad dynasty managed to disguise and obscure this dimension for many years, leading many to claim that the issue was no longer of any significance.

Clearly there is little to expect from Hinnebusch, who was, for the last decades, one of the blind admirers, ready to defend and ignore any negative qualities of Assad's dynasty and Baathist Syria. In the same way, there were many who defended Stalin and the Communist Party in Russia in the 1920s and the 1940s as well as scholars who were surprised to find, in the late 1980s when the Soviet Union collapsed, that ethnic, national, and religious identities did matter.

Eyal Zisser  
Tel Aviv University



**We Are Imazighen: The Development of Algerian Berber Identity in Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture. By Fazia Aïtel. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014. 324 pp. \$74.95.**

Modern ethno-national movements possess a strong cultural component and the Imazighen are no exception as Aïtel, associate professor of French and Francophone studies at Claremont McKenna College, shows in an important contribution. Through her informed and nuanced analyses of cultural production among Algerian Berbers (or *Imazighen* as many modern-day Berbers throughout North Africa and the Berber diaspora call themselves) in literature, song, and poetry, she argues convincingly that the survival and transformation of modern Berber culture owes a great deal to the interaction and dialogue between the Berbers and the outsider, whether French or Arab-Muslim.

Aïtel's initial chapters are devoted to the colonial context and "the ghostlike" and "unacknowledged" Berber presence in Algerian literature among the first generation of Berber Francophone writers. She pays special attention to the works of various Kabyle literary luminaries and includes an illuminating chapter

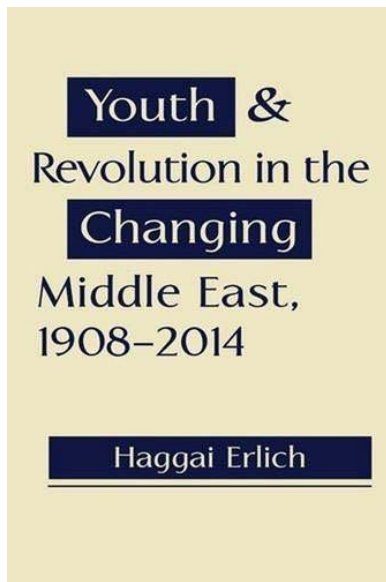
about the recently deceased Assia Djébar, perhaps the best known of all Algerian writers, tracing the evolution and hesitant emergence of Djébar's own Berber identity and her profound ambivalence toward it.

Nearly five years since the start of the Arab upheavals, it is now clear that the notion of secular, Arab nationalism did not provide a sufficient basis for state consolidation within the borders that emerged from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Older, more durable forms of collective identity—religious, ethnic, tribal, and geographic—have taken on new forms and importance, not only in the Levant and Mesopotamia, but also in the Maghreb, whose indigenous inhabitants, the Berbers, numbering twenty million, are increasingly relevant to the political and cultural cross-currents of the region.

Berber identity was generally subsumed during the last eighty years by nationalist movements and post-colonial, state-building projects that prioritized the Arabization of public life in the fashioning of modern national identities. However, even as the Berber language steadily receded in usage and Berber communities became increasingly integrated into wider frameworks, Aïtel demonstrates that Berber culture and identity could not be easily jettisoned. Over the last thirty-five years, the "Berber question" has burst onto the political stage, and in recent years, Imazighen identity has achieved an important measure of official recognition in Morocco, some degree of recognition in Algeria, and has surfaced in surprising and important ways in Libya and Mali.

Anyone who seeks to understand the history and culture of modern Algeria, and North Africa more generally, will find Aïtel's fine study of much value.

Bruce Maddy-Weitzman  
Tel Aviv University



**Youth and Revolution in the Changing Middle East, 1908-2014. By Haggai Erlich. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2015. pp. 339. \$69.95.**

Erlich, professor emeritus at Tel Aviv University, looks at the evolution of Middle East educational systems over a century's time, from their traditional beginnings to their modern forms. His book assesses the impact on society and political development of the introduction of universal education and its institutionalization—especially at the university level.

Military reformers such as Egypt's Muhammad Ali, the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II, and Iran's Fath Ali Shah introduced Western secular education to the region in the first half of the nineteenth century, followed by Christian missionaries in the second half. Only with the rise of secular nationalism in the first decade of the twentieth century, however, did education become universal.

Muslim reformers in the Middle East, whether monarchical, military, or Islamist, generally have excluded the college-educated from the political process. This in turn led university youth to mobilize extra-legally. The long-term failure of both political and economic development has frustrated the youth, eventually unleashing the Arab upheavals of 2011. The young people, many college-educated, who led those uprisings mostly failed to reach their goals due to an inability to institutionalize. In this context, the Islamic State's victories produce a siren song that many young, college-educated Middle Easterners find hard to resist.

Erlich concludes his book on a positive note despite the sad state of affairs that plague most Middle Eastern societies, especially since the beginning of the Arab uprisings. He argues, rather passionately, that the future belongs to the region's educated youth even though he concedes that the outcomes of its current upheavals "are yet to be told."

However, the unevenness of youth activism in the countries discussed by Erlich hampers his ability to write a compelling conclusion. Student activism in Iran and Turkey started much earlier than in Arabic-speaking countries and can be traced back to 1890 in Iran and soon after in Turkey. In contrast, Arab youth activism did not seriously arise until after the 1967 Six-Day War.

Nonetheless, this well-researched book has great value, contributing to our knowledge on key topics.

Hilal Khashan  
American University of Beirut

