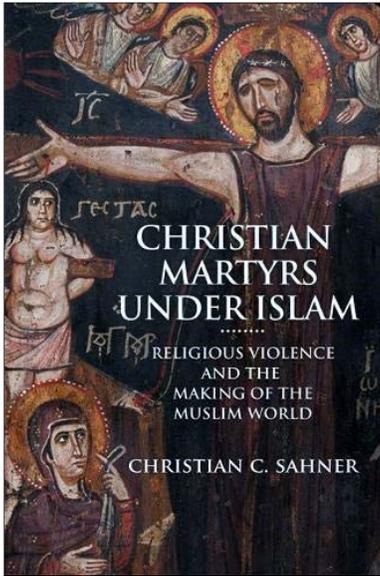


Brief Reviews, Spring 2019



Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World. By Christian C. Sahner. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 360 pp. \$39.95.

Sahner, associate professor of Islamic history at Oxford University, informs the reader that *Christian Martyrs under Islam* “seeks to explain the earliest stages of a long-term process whereby the predominantly majority-Christian Middle East of late antiquity became the predominantly Islamic region of today. In particular, it explores the role of religious violence in the process of de-Christianization.”

The evidence marshaled by Sahner validates his thesis. He focuses on Christian blasphemers and apostates to Christianity between the seventh and ninth centuries. The Umayyad and Abbasid authorities regularly

tortured and executed these individuals in “grisly and ferocious” ways, including crucifixion, amputation, and the preferred method, death by fire.

Sahner also shows that “heavy taxes and harassment” by Muslim authorities caused Christians to “turn to Islam faster than sheep rushing to water,” to quote an eighth century chronicler. Even unrepentant Christian blasphemers among the Martyrs of Cordoba—whose vociferous attacks on Muhammad have caused many academics to dismiss them as rabble-rousers who got what they deserved—vented and revolted against a suffocating system that required them to appease every Islamic sensibility at the expense of their own faith.

The book’s weaknesses are its limited vistas: Sahner has no interest in “writ[ing] a history that connects past and present.” Fair enough, but by not acknowledging the evident continuity between pre-modern and modern persecution, he risks casting persecution in antiquity as anomalous.

For example, he documents Christian and Muslim sources confirming that Christian blasphemers and apostates were regularly burned alive but urges readers to “keep in mind that immolation and cremation were stock motifs in Christian hagiography.” Knowing that Christians are still being burned alive today, not just by Islamic terrorists of the Islamic State, but by other observant Muslims—including Pakistanis who burned a “blaspheming” Christian man and his pregnant wife alive¹—suggests that

¹ *NBC News*, [Nov. 7, 2014](#).

barbaric medieval accounts of immolation were not mere “stock motifs.”

Similarly, Sahner suggests that the Umayyad and Abbasid authorities persecuted and killed Christian blasphemers and apostates because Islam was then a minority religion and could not afford challenges to its legitimacy. But, today, when tiny Christian minorities, often only 1-2 percent of Muslim nations, are still persecuted and killed, it would seem that something more than self-preservation is and was responsible for the violence.

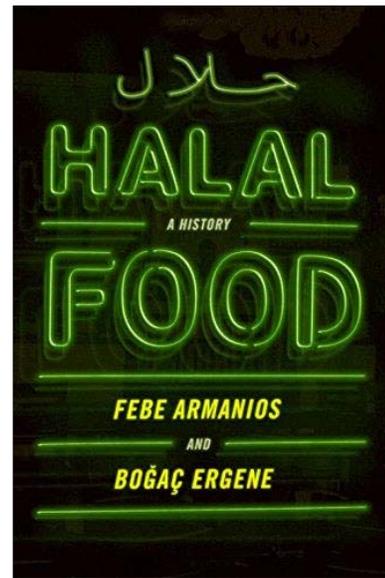
Christian Martyrs under Islam is a welcome book that helps document the role of violence and martyrdom in the creation of the Muslim world. It would have been timelier had it connected some especially glaring dots between past and present.

Raymond Ibrahim
author of [*Sword and Scimitar*](#)

Halal Food: A History. By Febe Armanios and Boğaç Ergene. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 400 pp. \$29.95.

Is Cadbury chocolate or Coca-Cola and Pepsi halal? Armanios and Ergene offer a comprehensive overview of Islamic food laws and their modern-day application. Those laws require, they explain, not just avoiding alcohol and pork but the detection of minute amounts of these forbidden substances in other consumables. “In 2014,” the authors report, Cadbury “came under fire after the Malaysian Health Ministry discovered pork DNA in some of its popular treats.” And, “a 2012 French study confirmed that some Coca-Cola and Pepsi drinks contain 0.001 percent alcohol.”

Armanios of Middlebury College and Ergene of the University of Vermont detail how Cadbury rushed to assure Muslims that



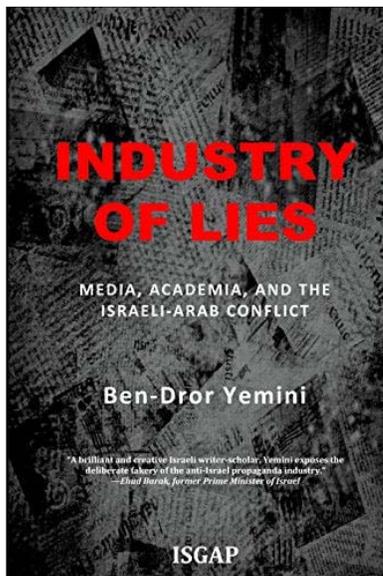
most of its products were definitely halal, and Coca-Cola published a statement noting that “more than 200 countries ... have consistently recognized the drink as a nonalcoholic product. This includes countries where Islam is the major religion.”

Cadbury and Coke are by no means unique: The book is full of accounts of Western businesses hastening to accommodate the Muslim consumer’s demand for halal options. As far as Armanios and Ergene are concerned, this is a wholly positive development. They quote an unnamed Muslim writer that being “halal is not only a religious motive, but it conveys the idea of hygiene, wholesomeness, and being friendly to the society, the environment, and the animals.”

Not everyone, however, shares this sunny view. Armanios and Ergene say that “halal eating is inevitably linked to a religious identity that can carry a stigma, and in countries where scrutiny and suspicion of Muslims is on the rise, discussions of religious dietary preferences sometimes devolve into heated debates about nationalism, acculturation, assimilation, and tolerance.”

They do not, however, delve into those debates at any depth, and that is this book's weakness. Foes of halal are cast solely as bigoted xenophobes. While halal food is noted to be an aspect of "Sharia-compliance," Armanios and Ergene do not consider that some may oppose the increasing prevalence of accommodation to Muslim dietary rules because of other aspects of Shari'a—its approval of warfare against unbelievers, denial of equality of rights for women, etc.—that could be given entrée once halal accommodation is widely accepted.

Robert Spencer
Author of *The History of Jihad*



Industry of Lies: Media, Academia, and the Israeli-Arab Conflict. By Ben-Dror Yemini. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017. 354 pp. \$29.99, paper.

Edward Said called Palestinians "the victims of the victims," and such Holocaust inversion has been baked into the Palestinian

story, turning Jews and Israelis into Nazis. This strategy of feigned victimhood and weakness underlies the success story of the Palestinian narrative.

Yemini, former opinion editor at the Israeli daily *Maariv* and now a columnist for *Yediot Ahronot*, unpacks the relationship between Israel and its global image. The *Industry of Lies* argues that the global Israel-boycott movement has emboldened a growing disconnect between facts and perceptions. Yemini also highlights how academia has become fertile ground for cultivating lies about Israel, stating that "there are many intellectuals who will ... create a new reality, invent facts, publish innumerable tracts containing known lies and speak and quote each other."

Yemini's book is a solid guide to the challenges that Jews face today, both different and disconcertingly similar to those of Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Today the debate is not about race as it was in the 1930s but focuses on Zionism, enabling those who hate Jews to proclaim that they do not hate Jews, just Zionists.

An atmosphere that enables intolerable ideas has become accepted as the norm. This situation needs to be challenged continually, and *Industry of Lies* offers an excellent point of departure.

Asaf Romirowsky
Scholars for Peace in the Middle East

Killing Orders: Talat Pasha's Telegrams and the Armenian Genocide. By Taner Akçam. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 261 pp. \$39.99, paper.

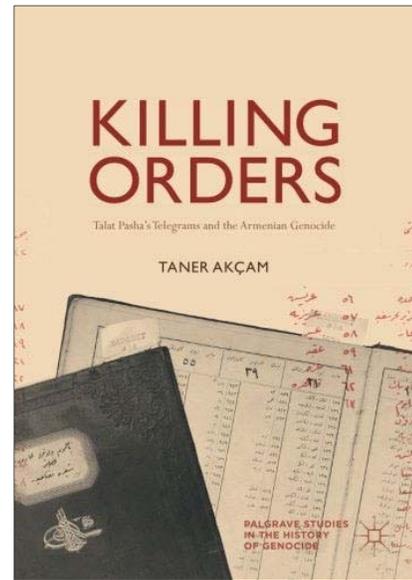
The Armenian genocide is tied to more than one hundred years of denial, and Akçam of the Strassler Family Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies claims denial was planned from the beginning. The Ottomans

fed Armenians with promises of resettlement as victims were deported to the Syrian desert for elimination. The ruling pashas relied on Germany's help and worked together to keep the neutral Americans out of the war. Deception was key to realizing both aims.

Genocide deniers claim that incriminating documents published in the 1920 memoirs of Ottoman bureaucrat Naim Efendi² were fakes. Şinasi Orel's and Süreyya Yuca's 1983 book³ questioned Efendi's very existence and alleged that his papers contained errors (including signatures, ciphers, dates) forged by Armenian journalist Aram Andonian when he edited Naim's memoirs. Thus do Grand Vizier Talat Pasha's killing orders become "falsified cables."

However, Akçam validates Efendi and his memoirs, proving that Talat's killing orders are authentic. Although encryption keys and coded file registries are still closed, he also shows that Orel and Yuca are wrong about encryption methods and practices.

The author includes a number of incriminating communications contained in Interior Ministry telegrams, often to authorities in Aleppo and signed by Talat. On December 5, 1915, one telegram orders: "The Armenians of the Eastern Provinces who come into your hands there are to be eliminated." Then on December 14, another telegram arrives: "The most important persons whose extermination should be attempted are the religious clergy." On



December 24, comes the directive that Armenian reporters are to be "liquidated." And perhaps, more damning, on February 5, 1917, a telegram states that "abandoned or bereft children ... are to be removed by attaching them to the deportation convoys."

Akçam thus refutes a miserable century's worth of disavowals and dishonesty.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz
Middle East Forum

Postrevolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook. By Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kouros Rahimkhani. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2018. 896 pp. \$69.95.

Boroujerdi and Rahimkhani have assembled an extraordinary wealth of information about Iranian politics. The 445-page "Who's Who" is remarkable for its scope, presenting biographical information on over 2,300 people, noting uniquely important information including family ties, pre-revolution imprisonment, and service in the Iran-Iraq war.

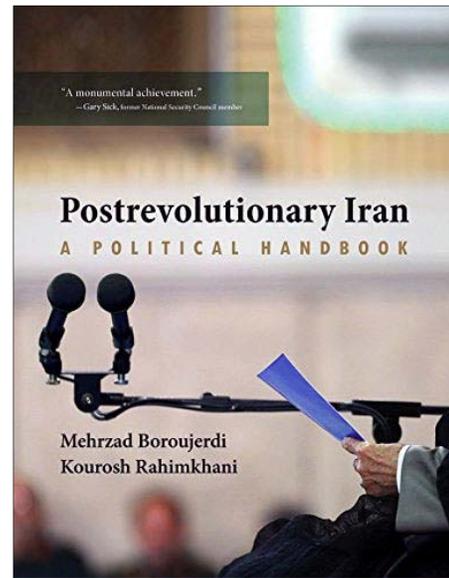
² Naim Bey, *The Memoirs of Naim Bey: Turkish Official Documents Relating to the Deportations and Massacres of Armenians*, compiler, Aram Andonian, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1920).

³ Şinasi Orel and Süreyya Yuca, *Ermenilerce Talât Pasa'ya atfedilen telgrafların gerçek yüzü* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1983).

The other 408 pages are arguably even more useful. A detailed chronology of major Iranian political events is followed by chapters on each major institution, including the Guardian Council, judiciary, presidency, cabinet, Majlis, Assembly of Experts, and municipal councils. Each chapter presents results from every election, lists of office holders (including every member of the Majlis with their years in office), and other facts, such as the breakdown of the cabinet ministers by birthplace, clerical status, and past service in the Revolutionary Guards. The authors also present information not systematically available, for example, data on the profession of deputies' fathers in the first Majlis but not subsequent ones. A reader interested in getting a flavor of Iranian politics could usefully spend hours leafing through these chapters.

For much of the information presented, the source is the “authors’ database.” That is to be expected but is also problematic. Many Iranian political figures have been caught misrepresenting their educational accomplishments and likely other parts of their backgrounds. Boroujerdi and Rahimkhani note that “there was often no way of independently verifying the information individuals provided about themselves.” They would have been well advised to note discrepancies and unverified claims. It is also incumbent on Boroujerdi and Rahimkhani to make their data accessible to those with questions although that presents problems about the confidentiality of sources.

The authors should also have prominently noted the problematic nature of some of their data. What the Islamic Republic claims happened is not necessarily what actually happened. The most obvious example is the 2009 presidential election results, but that is hardly the only one. Boroujerdi and Rahimkhani note, “It has become commonplace for the Ministry of Interior and the Statistical Center of Iran to



offer different statistics on the number of eligible voters in any given election. The researcher has to decide which source to use. In addition, Iranian government agencies often put information about current legislation or election results on official websites for a short period of time and later make it unavailable to the general public.” These are not minor problems.

In short, *Postrevolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook* is a monumental accomplishment, but one wishes the authors had been a bit more meticulous and cautious.

Patrick Clawson
Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Western Imaginings: The Intellectual Contest to Define Wahhabism. By Rohan Davis. New York: American University of Cairo Press, 2018. 232 pp. \$55.

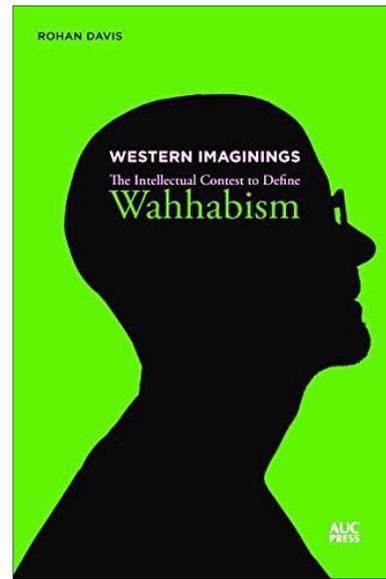
According to Davis, Wahhabism—the puritanical version of Sunni Islam formulated by the eighteenth-century cleric Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab and formally adopted by the Saud family in

1744—is based on “imaginings” by maleficent Westerners. But Wahhabism is not an analytical concept, a propaganda slogan, or a hate term, though apologists may try to present it as such.

Davis’s book supports the writings of Natana Delong-Bas, whom he seeks to whitewash, ignoring that her book—itsself a whitewash of Wahhabism—was assisted directly by Saudi ruling figures.⁴ He evinces no knowledge of Islamic sources aside from secondary texts in English. Instead, he lists “authorities” such as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Noam Chomsky, and other authors useful for padding a bibliography, but not for Islamic, comparative religion, or Middle East studies. Indeed, Davis, who holds a Ph.D. from RMIT University, Melbourne, describes himself as a specialist in “the sociology of intellectuals [sic] tradition” focused on neoconservatism.

Davis’s book exemplifies the institutional corruption, willful dishonesty, and pseudo-intellectual manipulation in Middle East studies. Full disclosure: Much of this book constitutes an attack on this reviewer and his work and is a feverish, Jew-hating pamphlet of a kind that proliferated in Germany and Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century.

The volume is replete with meaningless jargon and invented concepts employed to subvert the truth that Wahhabism is the official form of Islam in Saudi Arabia; that it



motivates terrorism; and that it explains 9/11. Wahhabism is not imaginary and was not invented by any observer. It is a repressive reality faced by a billion-plus Muslims in their daily lives and by non-Muslims as well.

Put simply, this book is a shoddy hit job intended to stir hatred of moderate Muslims, Sufis, Jews, critics of Wahhabism, and others who recognize the danger to the world of Saudi ideology.

Stephen Schwartz
Center for Islamic Pluralism



⁴ See review of Natana J. Delong-Bas’s *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival to Global Jihad*, “Brief Reviews,” *Middle East Quarterly*, [Winter 2005](#).