

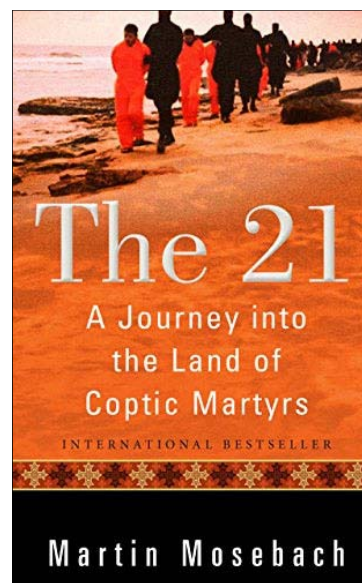
Brief Reviews, Fall 2019

The 21: A Journey into the Land of Coptic Martyrs. By Martin Mosebach. Trans. by Alta Price. Robertsbridge, U.K.: Plough Publishing House, 2019. 272 pp. \$26 (\$18, paper).

German novelist and essayist Mosebach traveled to Egypt to learn about the hitherto anonymous twenty-one Coptic Christians martyred in 2015 at the hands of the Islamic State in Libya. There, he interviewed family members and local clergymen while taking in the culture and atmosphere of Coptic life.

His account alternates between tragedy and triumph, between senseless deaths and staunch perseverance. Because martyrdom is such a common aspect of Coptic experience, neither the Coptic Church (also called the “Church of Martyrs”), nor the relatives of the slain, understood the latter’s martyrdom as something out of the ordinary or in need of elaboration. The martyred seem not to matter as much as individuals but rather as representatives of a collective. All but one of the murdered twenty-one were menial workers who spent most of their lives earning and sending money back home to their families.

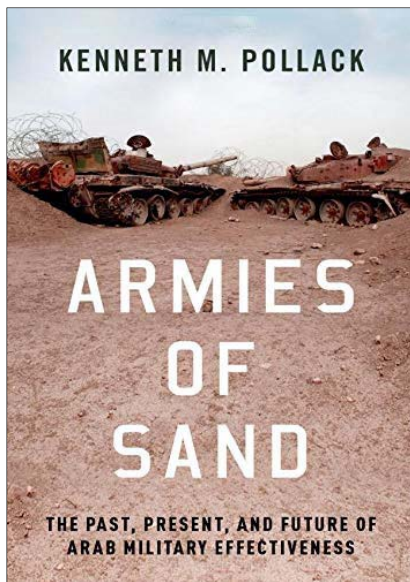
The book deals with topics—Coptic history, language, culture, and liturgy—of interest to Western readers. According to Mosebach, “the Copts have fared badly or very badly ever since the Islamic conquest of the country in the seventh century.” But things changed during the colonial era: “Among the English, we were able to come up for air again,” recalls one Copt interviewed, “but we paid for it later on ... Today, we’re considered a fifth column—subversives in favor of America.”



The book also includes tidbits interesting to the non-expert such as the fact that “the Pharaohs’ language lives on in the Coptic liturgy” and “the Patriarch of Alexandria has held the official title of pope since 249, which is nearly one hundred years longer than the Bishop of Rome [the Roman Catholic Pope].” Even so, unlike mosques, the Coptic Church does not receive Egyptian government funding. Despite its antiquity, no chair of Coptology exists at any publicly-funded Egyptian university.

The 21 contains a number of overly atmospheric descriptions and tedious digressions, but overall, the information about Coptic Christians and their place in Egypt, in the context of their latest martyrs, makes it an interesting read.

Raymond Ibrahim
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MEF Writing Fellow



Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness. By Kenneth M. Pollack. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 696 pp. \$34.95.

Pollack has followed up his seminal study of Arab military, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991*,¹ with an equally impressive, exhaustively researched work, and eminently readable one. The author begins with a review of the 1967 war and segues into a discussion in which he demolishes an oft-advanced academic belief that the ineffectiveness of the Arabs has been due to their slavish adherence to the Soviet way of war. He elaborates on this by examining the operations of three armies that followed Soviet doctrine and achieved success, including the Cubans in Africa.

The remainder of the book covers politicization of Arab military leadership, the

economic underdevelopment of Arab states, and a perceptive cultural explanation for the ineffectiveness of Arab military performance. Pollack deftly compares the politicization of the Egyptian and Iraqi military to that of South Vietnam and Argentina, including the pervasive corruption of the Iraqi and South Vietnamese armies. Contrasting the impact of Arab economic underdevelopment with that of other countries at similar stages of development, such as the Chinese at the time of the Korean War, he finds little correlation between economic underdevelopment and military effectiveness.

The author analyzes various aspects of culture that reduce Arab military effectiveness such as the predilection to shift blame for failures using secrecy, deception, and exaggeration, or to enhance it by emphasizing the Arab trait of intense loyalty to friends and family, and by extension to fellow soldiers.

Pollack concentrates on performance in conventional wars, regarding the superior performance of Hezbollah and ISIS as counter-cultural phenomena. He reveals a number of reasons for this, but it would have been more instructive to state his inference up front: The same culture that inhibits Arab conventional war effectiveness enhances Arab unconventional war. An expanded analysis of Arab irregular forces would have been particularly useful as it is likely that U.S. forces will continue to face Arabs in irregular warfare in which they have historically performed skillfully.

The author has done a masterful job of pulling together disparate pieces of recent Arab military history with the lessons learned and weaving together a scholarly and well-supported conclusion: The key to the Arab military deficiency in conventional warfare is cultural.

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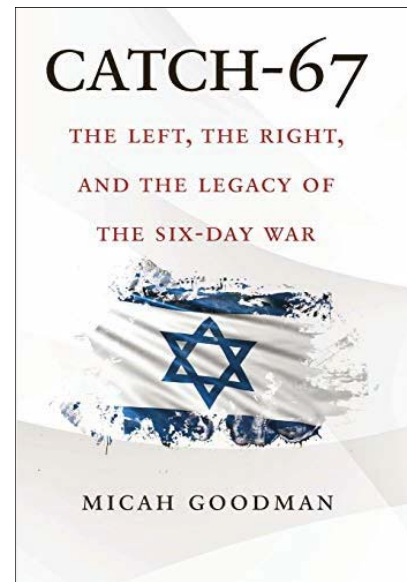
¹ Lincoln, Neb.: Bison Books, 2004.

Catch-67. The Left, the Right, and the Legacy of the Six-Day War. By Micah Goodman. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. 243 pp. \$26 (paper, \$18).

In his best seller, Goodman, a research fellow at Jerusalem's Shalom Hartman Institute, provides a good analysis of the evolution of Israel's extreme Right and Left (adherents to Peace Now and "Greater Israel") regarding the Palestinian issue. He correctly notes that both movements have impossible dreams.

The author claims that the 1967 Six-Day War sparked an ideological debate among those who wanted to annex all parts of the biblical Land of Israel and those who advocated for peace with Israel's neighbors. In his opinion, this debate has created an unbridgeable divide in Israeli politics between Left and Right. The concerns of the Left have shifted from building a socialist society to living in peace with Israel's neighbors and ensuring a democratic Jewish state. In contrast, the Right, which initially placed emphasis on human rights, has moved to adopt the idea of redemption in Greater Israel.

Goodman recommends resisting ideology and adopting pragmatism, but—and this is the main weakness of his book—he ignores that this is what Israel is already doing, with the support of a huge majority of Israelis. Indeed, following the 2000 Palestinian terror campaign, Israelis have no illusions about peace with the Palestinians and are engaged in conflict management to reduce terrorism, prevent a Hamas takeover of the Palestinian Authority, and create more prosperity among Palestinians despite widespread corruption and mismanagement.

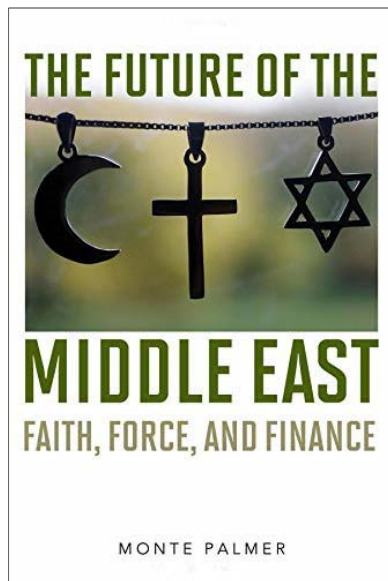


Emphasizing ideologies on the extremes, which have limited impact, ignores the main thrust of Israeli politics, which is pragmatic and always has been: Menachem Begin agreed not to annex the West Bank in 1977 to include Moshe Dayan in his government. At Oslo, Yitzhak Rabin was not swayed by peace visionaries but envisioned security-for-land. Under pressure from the Obama administration in 2009, Benjamin Netanyahu announced support for the two-state solution and in 2013 agreed to discuss John Kerry's peace plan.

Goodman's preoccupation with ideology paints an unrealistic portrait of Israel's society and politics. Actually, there is a continuum in the positions of Israelis on national security. The majority of Israelis are centrists ready for a territorial compromise but resisting risky concessions until the Palestinians show signs of moderation.

Efraim Inbar

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The Future of the Middle East: Faith, Force, and Finance. By Monte Palmer. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019. 203 pp. \$34.

In writing about the roles of “faith, force, and finance” in the future of the Middle East, Palmer draws on these variables over the past century. Former director of the Middle East Studies Center at Florida State University, Palmer is primarily concerned about the rapid ascendancy of Islamist movements in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings and the threat these movements pose. The ease with which the Islamic State (ISIS) succeeded in 2014 in seizing large swaths of Syria and Iraq attests to the frailty of the Arab state system and the political vacuum lurking behind the façade of absolute control.

Palmer traces the rise of Islamism over the past century: The secular state emerged following the collapse of the religiously-based Ottoman Empire and Qajar dynasty. But secularism dramatically failed to establish deep roots among profoundly religious populations. A combination of humiliating Arab military defeats, Turkish army seizure of

power, and the Iranian shahs’ extravagance further eroded secularism’s appeal as did excessive coercion and an inability by the ruling oligarchies to provide welfare. The stronger traditions of political mobilization in Iran and Turkey enabled faith-based movements to grab and hold power. In Arabic-speaking countries, the rulers either stifled nascent civil societies or precluded their appearance, leading Islamist movements to clamor for jihad against everybody, including one another.

Palmer predicts a new wave of terror as long as “mass despair and religious extremism continues.” He proposes to stem it by addressing the root causes of jihad and resolving the region’s conflicts by integrating Muslims into the global community. His peace recipe is straightforward, but even he doubts it is doable, given his observation that “the script of the tragedy began with Genesis and the biblical wars that followed.”

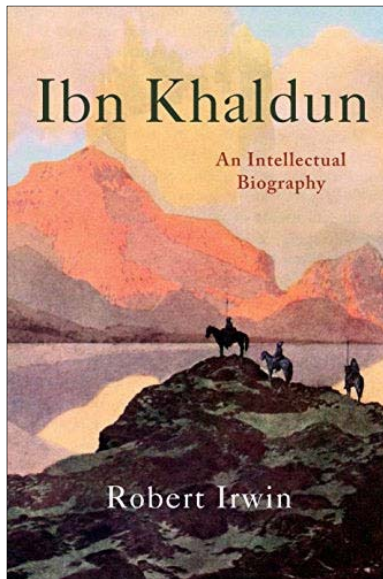
Hilal Khashan

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Ibn Khaldun. An Intellectual Biography. By Robert Irwin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 272 pp. \$18.95, paper.

British medievalist Irwin, a well-known critic of Edward Said, takes us to fourteenth-century North Africa where the Arab thinker Ibn Khaldun wrote his *Kitab al-Ibar (Book of Lessons)*, whose first volume, *al-Muqaddima* stands as a unique example of a universal history. Irwin examines Ibn Khaldun’s life, times, writings, and ideas.

The author describes Ibn Khaldun as guided by events, the Qur’an, Shari’a, and teachers such as al-Abili and al-Mas’udi, “the imam of the historians.” He watched the plague of 1348 take his parents and also recorded the death of his wife and five daughters.



Born in Tunis, Ibn Khaldun survived as a drifter among Arabs and Berbers from Granada to Cairo. He was a politician as well as a teacher and writer, but the book explores the many reverses in his career and his missed chances to win a position where he might sway rulers. Irwin agrees with scholars who have suggested that Ibn Khaldun penned his universal history to explore why he was a political failure. He also believes that Ibn Khaldun was a Muslim jurist and theologian of the strict Maliki school, which may explain his disdain for occultism as it might carry veiled Shiite messages for disruptive politics.

Ibn Khaldun was, in modern terms, a historical sociologist; he used the term *al-asabiyya*, meaning *to be bound by same interest or opinion* over five hundred times in *al-Muqaddima*, evoking the lives of Bedouins, bound by loyalty, bonds of solidarity, and reinforced by religion. His famous cyclical theory of history, based on his reading of early Islamic Arab conquests and Roman and Greek empires, claimed that it took four generations from Genesis until doom. He reasoned that given this brief span, every dynasty might fear an early fall. This

anticipated similar but much later theories by Giambattista Vico and Arnold Toynbee.

Irwin believes that what made Ibn Khaldun unique was his unmatched ability to reason abstractly and to generalize about social and historical phenomena. He appropriately sums up Ibn Khaldun's writing with a saying of the Prophet Muhammad: "Be in this world as if you were a stranger and a passing traveler."

Irwin's book is an exciting exploration of Ibn Khaldun's writings. Elegantly told, it offers new insights on his ideas about "man, the being who has the ability to think and reflect."

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz
Middle East Forum

Inside the Arab State. By Mehran Kamrava. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 283 pp. \$29.95.

Kamrava of Georgetown University-Qatar focuses on state-society relations in select Arab countries and primarily examines their institutional makeup and their instruments of coercion.

He suggests that Arab monarchies, unlike republican regimes, have succeeded in eluding the turmoil of the 2011 uprisings mainly because of their greater state capacity, largely due to their substantial hydrocarbon resources. Kamrava finds that Arab regime dominance of the public sphere emerged in the early 1950s and that Arab republican rulers chose to rely on unmitigated coercion and repression to retain power rather than open their political systems and unleash growth-driven economic models.

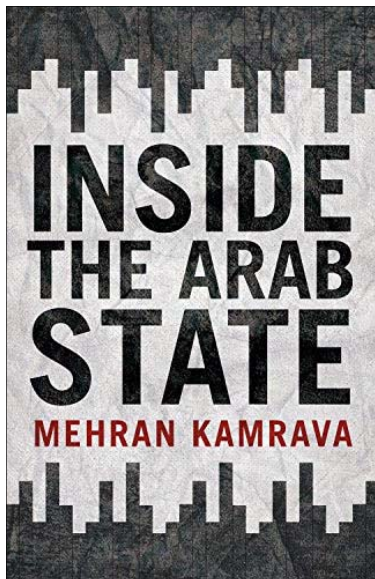
Arab leaders missed the unique opportunity of the 2011 uprisings to create new institutional structures that would have given them a new lease on power. Kamrava cites the example of Syria's president Bashar al-Assad's mishandling of the opening phase of the uprising. He expands on the notion of

Tunisian exceptionalism by highlighting the capacity of the country's political parties for coalition formation as well as the Ennahda party's confidence-building measures and receptiveness to new ideas.

In Egypt, he credits strong social homogeneity and the continuing functioning of state institutions for that country's avoidance of civil war. This argument might be partially correct, but the Egyptian military's excessive coercion and extra-judicial killings also terrorized civil society into submission. Algeria's politics have baffled analysts and scholars ever since its independence in 1962, and Kamrava is no exception. He praises the state's vitality in defusing the 2011 protests but also applauds President Abdelaziz Bouteflika for undermining "possibilities for the emergence of a social movement." Kamrava did not predict the 2019 uprising that coerced Bouteflika to quit, but despite the president's resignation, the deep state in Algeria remains firmly in place.

Inside the Arab State is a top pick for understanding the Arab state and politics.

Hilal Khashan



Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic. By Amin Saikal. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 344 pp. \$29.95.

The fortieth anniversary of the Islamic Revolution prompted a deluge of books about Iran and its regime. Sadly, *Iran Rising* is far from the most valuable.

Saikal, a professor at the Australian National University, argues that the Islamic Republic has weathered four decades in power because it has deftly "oscillated between its religious legitimacy and pragmatic policies." This is undoubtedly correct but hardly groundbreaking. Iran-watchers know well that Iran's regime—to paraphrase Henry Kissinger—sometimes acts like a "country" and sometimes like a "cause."

Iran Rising mostly recounts modern Iranian history and is strongest discussing the factors that contributed to popular disaffection with the Pahlavi monarchy. Saikal's treatment of the priorities and ideology that shaped Khomeini's "theo-political order" likewise has much to commend it.

But *Iran Rising* is weakest regarding contemporary topics. Saikal's depiction of Iranian politics overplays the efforts of some, including Iran's "reformist" president Hassan Rouhani, to alter the clerical status quo, while ignoring or downplaying the excesses, radicalism, and repression of life under the ayatollahs.

Problematic, too, is Saikal's treatment of the 2015 nuclear deal. The author describes the Trump administration's decision to abrogate the agreement as ill-advised, unnecessary, and provocative—without exploring (much less evaluating) the fundamental flaws in the deal that even its supporters have acknowledged. The book also does not offer a serious discussion of how Iran's leadership—emboldened by the

2015 nuclear deal—has embarked upon a regional agenda that today threatens the United States and its regional allies.

Neither does he address the simmering counterrevolution against clerical rule taking place on the Iranian “street.” After four decades in power, the Islamic Republic faces great challenges from a population increasingly disaffected by its economic mismanagement and foreign adventurism.

As such, *Iran Rising* offers little by way of new ideas about how, exactly, the United States and its international partners ought to deal with the contemporary challenge posed by the Islamic Republic.

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