

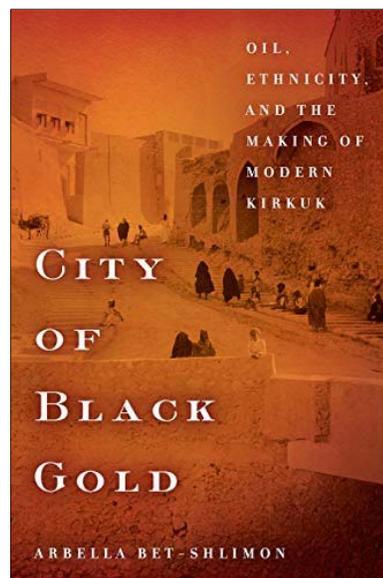
Brief Reviews, Spring 2020

City of Black Gold: Oil, Ethnicity, and the Making of Modern Kirkuk. By Arbella Bet-Shlimon. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. 275 pp. \$85 (\$26, paper).

Bet-Shlimon of the University of Washington delivers a thorough and complete history of modern Kirkuk. This is no mean feat with archives burned, fraudulent documents circulating, and interested parties snatching up the few legitimate records to keep them from political competitors. She covers political history ably and with broader perspective than many writers while identifying patronage and societal networks and tracing how they evolved against the background of Kirkuk's changing sovereignty: Ottoman, British, and ultimately Iraqi.

Many works about Kirkuk are polemical arguments for the city's domination by one ethnic group or another. Few incorporate a wide range of sources or are willing to challenge political myths. Unfortunately, Bet-Shlimon did no research in Kirkuk itself, but her work is, nevertheless, invaluable. She relies instead on archival collections in the United Kingdom, Greece, and United States, as well as memoirs and other Arabic, Turkish, and English sources.

For much of the twentieth century, Kirkuk was arguably the most important city in Iraq after Baghdad. It was the site of Iraq's earliest oil industry and later the frontline of ethnic rivalry between the country's Arab population, restive Kurds, and Turkmen descended from Ottoman elites. The 2003 ouster of Saddam Hussein placed Kirkuk in the crosshairs again, as the autonomous



Kurdistan Regional and Baghdad governments clashed politically—and in 2017 militarily—over control of the city and its lucrative oilfield.

While the Baghdad government and Iraqi Kurdistan squabble over Kirkuk's control, Bet-Shlimon finds that Kirkukis never embraced either nationality. Rather, they developed their own identity against the backdrop of the oil industry even if this identity was never cohesive enough to overcome communal divisions. She wisely calls out those who retroactively extend current ethnic identities back in time, arguing both that identities are fluid and that immigration has changed the character of the city at different times.

Bet-Shlimon's chief weakness is that her study ends before Saddam Hussein's fall. She briefly mentions the Anfal ethnic cleansing campaign, the post-1991 formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government, and the ethnic tensions unleashed after the U.S.-

led invasion in 2003, but there is no comprehensive survey of Kirkuk's role in post-Saddam Iraq. This is unfortunate, but it reflects her insistence on staying true to the historical method rather than to often inaccurate journalism.

City of Black Gold is unapologetically academic, but Bet-Shlimon's writing is accessible to the lay reader. It should be mandatory reading, not only for Iraqi specialists but also for diplomats, journalists, and military officers who seek a crash course in Iraqi complexities and a deeper understanding of an important city that remains a flashpoint.

Michael Rubin

The Greeks and the Making of Modern Egypt. By Alexander Kitroeff. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2019. 256 pp. \$49.95.

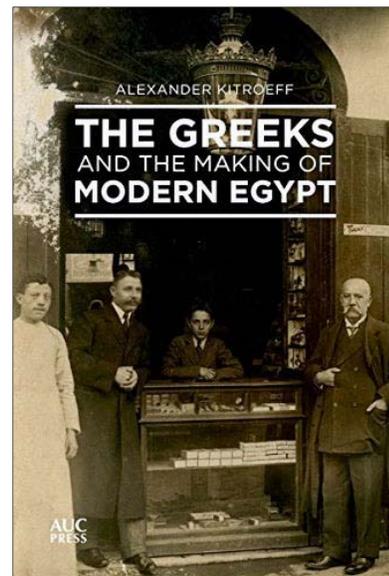
Kitroeff's book focuses on the special relationship of the Greeks of Egypt with that country and its population. His twofold argument is noteworthy: that Greeks have played a particular role in the making of modern Egypt, contributing to its economic life as exceptional merchants, but also in its cultural and social arenas. Moreover, Kitroeff, professor of history at Haverford College, notes that the prominent and fruitful Greek presence in Egypt is the outcome of the Greek diaspora's ability to "adapt to changing circumstances and navigate successfully between their ties to their Greek homeland and the Egyptian home." He details the Greeks' contribution to the modernization of Egypt but avoids romanticism and exaggeration.

The book is organized chronologically into eight chapters from Muhammad Ali,

who invited a group of Greek merchants to cross the Mediterranean and settle in Egypt, to the Nasser era when the Greeks began to lose the privileges that helped them rise to prominence. The book concludes by shedding light on the nostalgia that the Greeks of Egypt feel about their past.

Kitroeff's well-researched and eloquently written book will be of interest to academics in many different disciplines addressing Greece, Egypt, diasporas, colonialism, and more. The book is also accessible to the interested layman. Finally, the timing of Kitroeff's work is auspicious. First, by highlighting the special relationship between Greeks and Egyptians, he usefully emphasizes Egypt's cosmopolitan past. Second, he provides important background to growing networks of cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean between Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt, and increasingly with Israel.

Ilias Kouskouvelis
University of Macedonia

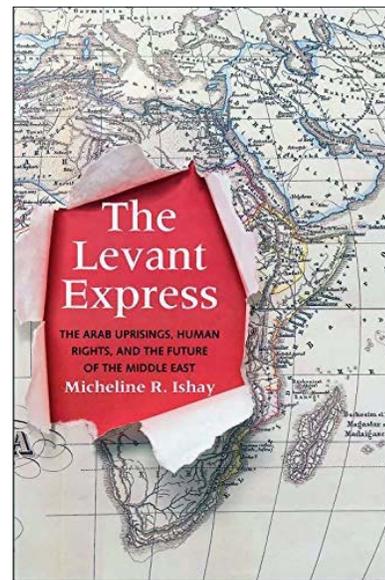


The Levant Express: The Arab Uprisings, Human Rights, and the Future of the Middle East. By Micheline R. Ishay. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. 338 pp. \$30.

Ishay, director of the international human rights program at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver, hopes to relaunch the human rights drive of the stalled Arab uprisings. She grounds her book in President Franklin Roosevelt's 1941 Four Freedoms: freedom of speech and worship, and freedom from want and fear. The author divides the book into three parts: the human rights uprisings, the counter-revolutions, and the four rights in the age of counter-enlightenment.

For Ishay, technological and communications mechanisms are key. The Industrial Revolution inspired the invention of the railroad, which hastened the process of urbanization and facilitated the coming together of disenfranchised people as well as the transmission of revolutionary ideals. Ishay writes of a "revolutionary tradition" beginning with what she terms the "Trans-Europe Express" (1848), which contributed to the revolutions of 1848 on the continent and even to the Arab uprisings in 2011. She posits that the defeat of nineteenth-century revolutions did not doom the political transition of Western and Central Europe toward democracy and economic wellbeing. Nor did the Warsaw Pact crushing the Prague Spring in 1968 stop the 1989 anti-Soviet revolutions in Eastern Europe. Similarly, Ishay argues that defeat of the Arab uprisings should not stop Arabs from trying for reform, and here she introduces Roosevelt's four freedoms as a means of promoting Arab enlightenment.

The book's narrative is lucid and engaging but has limitations. A disproportionate number of Ishay's observations come from the United

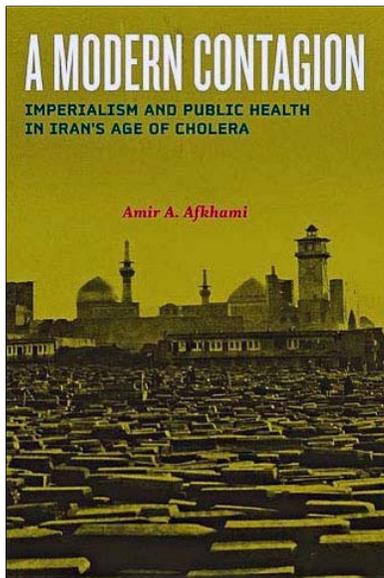


Arab Emirates (UAE) where she lived for three years. The UAE is not a core Arab country, and her interviews with officials in Abu Dhabi, especially regarding secularism and critical thinking, cannot be taken at face value. Louvre Abu Dhabi and Sky News Arabia, among many other ostentatious projects, do not suffice to transform the UAE into an Arab cultural hub.

Ishay also equates Europe of the 1920s with the Arab region during the 1960s and 1970s. As bad as their situation seemed in the 1920s, European societies were already secular while, for the most part, Arabs still lived with the shackles of religion. The Depression and fascism put Europe on the road to World War II, whereas the failures of Arab ruling elites paved the way for the rise of Islamism. The book's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is inconclusive, and the author avoids taking a stand. The chapter on the "female time bomb" is the book's strongest asset, for the heavy involvement of women in the Arab uprisings attests to the gravity of their suffering and treatment as non-entities in male chauvinist societies.

Even though the author takes us on a journey that has no destination, the book is pleasurable to read and is especially suitable for a general readership, human rights courses, and as supplementary reading in comparative politics courses.

Hilal Khashan
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A Modern Contagion: Imperialism and Public Health in Iran's Age of Cholera. By Amir A. Afkhami. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. 296 pp. \$54.95.

The subject could not seem more obscure, but *A Modern Contagion* tells an interesting story about unexpected impacts of modernization.

First, it was peace, prosperity, and trade that brought cholera to Iran. Afkhami explains, “Britain’s growing colonial presence in India and its wide-reaching navy allowed the ancient disease to break out of its endemic home in the southern Ganges Delta region and assume pandemic proportions.”

The results were periodic outbreaks with spectacular loss of life.

Second, despite the image of clerical and other traditional elites being resistant to change, as the scientific facts about cholera became clearer in the late nineteenth century, Iranians accepted revisions to long-standing and cherished customs, such as shipping bodies months after death for burial in the Iraqi holy city of Najaf.

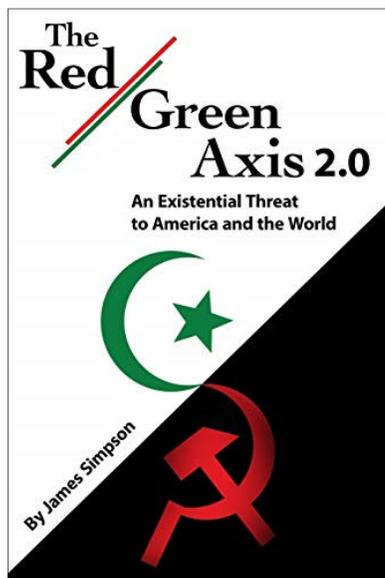
Third, the great powers—Britain and Russia but also the Austro-Hungarian empire—used cholera as an issue to advance their interests while presenting their agendas as neutral public health concerns. The early international conferences pressing the Iranians and Ottomans to agree to outside monitoring and interference were held before scientists understood what caused cholera—the leading theory long having been “bad air.” European demands were at least as much based on imperial interest as on scientific fact.

Lastly, over the nineteenth century, the Iranian public at all levels radically changed its expectations about what were the responsibilities of the government. By the early twentieth century, all saw the government as having an obligation to provide for public wellbeing, including protecting the citizens from pandemics—something no one would have expected from the shah when the Qajars came to power in 1789. Afkhami notes that when the last cholera outbreak hit Iran in the early 1960s, the imperial government’s response was a model of efficiency, with rapid action across a wide range of government agencies containing the disease. So much for the misconception that Mohammed Reza Shah was unconcerned about his subjects.

Afkhami’s epilogue makes a convincing analogy between the Qajar experience with cholera and the Islamic Republic’s raging opiate crisis with the old-fashioned ills of

opium and heroin, rather than the modern synthetic opioids bedeviling America. Afkhami explains how the only effective solution to the opiate crisis—as it was to the cholera problem—would be to tackle the whole range of causes, be it socioeconomic problems or outmoded social attitudes and practices, rather than relying only on draconian penalties.

Patrick Clawson
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for Near East Policy



The Red-Green Axis 2.0: An Existential Threat to America and the World. By James Simpson. Washington, D.C.: Center for Security Policy, 2019. 181 pp. \$9, paper.

The alliance between Islamists and elements of the Left is not new. Many writers have documented far-Left politicians in Europe who support Hamas or Tehran. Others have struggled to understand why al-Jazeera broadcasts English-language documentaries praising

support for transgender rights while, in Arabic, it finds it acceptable for men to beat their wives.

Simpson commits to “expose the agenda” of this bewildering collaboration. But he does not in fact write about the Red-Green axis to any significant degree. Instead, his book concerns the role left-leaning organizations have played in subverting U.S. immigration discussions and policies.

The Marxist Red and Islamic Green axis is of particular concern in the United States. During the Trump presidency, many American Islamic organizations close to global Islamist movements have consolidated partnerships with the Left. They jointly organize rallies and marches, file legal challenges to administration policies, run candidates for state and federal offices, and manage sophisticated media campaigns.

Simpson does well on the tactics of the Left and packs an astonishing amount of detail into a concise monograph. He exposes who is manipulating immigration politics and how. But his analysis is weakened by a few too many cherry-picked examples, appeals to the virtues of a “true Christian,” and several unnecessary anecdotes.

Aside from passing references to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and Islamist apologist Linda Sarsour, the author does not discuss the role of Islamic organizations in the first hundred pages at all. He briefly discusses CAIR and the Islamist umbrella organization known as the U.S. Council of Muslim Organizations but mislabels Salafi and obscure Bangladeshi Islamist members as “Muslim Brotherhood fronts.” A multitude of unsourced pronouncements include the conspiratorial claim that the Obama administration’s “Countering Violent Extremism” program was entirely the result of “an influence operation conducted by Muslim Brotherhood and other similarly disposed Islamic supremacists.”

At no point does Simpson examine the most interesting questions about this axis: the motives for theocratic organizations embracing far-left causes; why “Islamophobia” is so central to the Red narrative; or the current heated debate among America’s Islamist movements over the partnership with the Left and resulting intra-Islamic splits.

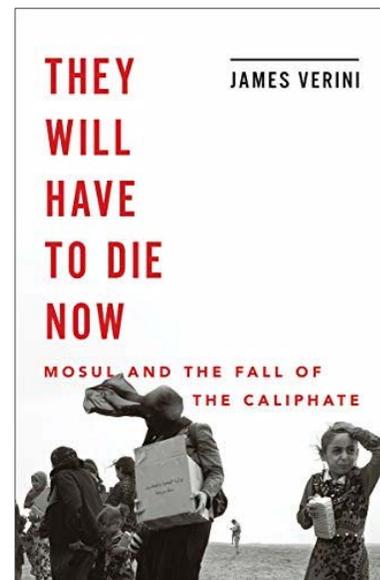
Simpson leaves the reader with a much better understanding of how elements of the Left have successfully contrived to use immigration as a bandwagon for political upheaval. But the reader is left uninformed about the make-up and extent of the Red-Green axis and misled about the few Islamist groups mentioned. Simpson produces a strong conclusion, offering bold ideas to challenge the Left’s immigration dogma. If only they bore some relevance to the book that readers were promised.

Sam Westrop
Islamist Watch

They Will Have to Die Now: Mosul and the Fall of the Caliphate. By James Verini. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2019. 277 pp. \$27.95.

Verini’s book is the product of his reporting in Mosul in 2016-17 when he was embedded with elements of Iraq’s security forces, including the Counter Terror Service, the Iraqi army, and the Kurdish Peshmerga. He also conducted interviews with Mosul’s civilians as Iraqi forces liberated the city.

This is a journalistic account of warfare, replete with literary flourishes as Verini is a skilled prose stylist. The book includes a tour through the history of Mosul from the Assyrians to the present. Beginning with an outline of the author’s reasons for covering the Mosul battle, it takes the reader through the months of urban combat before the final



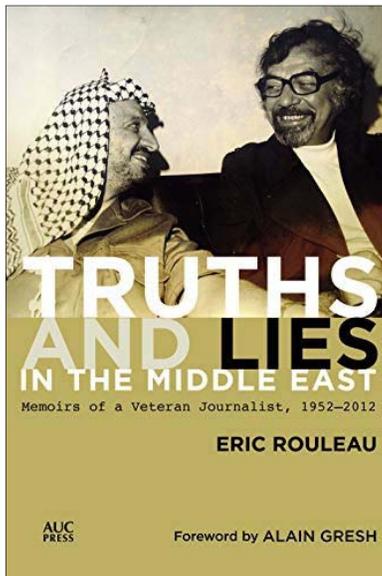
eclipse of the jihadists in late 2017.

The book is also an example of a particular school of American post-Vietnam war reporting. It includes various stock elements: musings about the banality of the experience—“War consists largely of waiting for war”—its absurd and surreal elements, and so on. It is, however, less successful as a serious piece of writing about Iraq, the Middle East, or the business of soldiering.

This is reflected in some basic errors. For example, Verini writes that the “dense white bread that Iraqis eat” is called *khubz*, but this is simply the Arabic word for bread. He informs the reader that the battle for Mosul would be the “climax” of the war with the Islamic State (ISIS), but it was not. Months of fighting remained until the self-proclaimed ISIS caliphate was destroyed. He states that the Iranians have a unit called the “Republican Guard,” that tank commanders are called “pilots,” that the defenders of Masada committed suicide by flinging themselves from a cliff, and perhaps most strangely, that “modern day Zionists” are “indistinguishable” from ISIS in their “grievance” and “wailing over lost empire.” This, unfortunately, is only a sample.

Verini is a talented writer, and parts of his narrative contain genuine insight and vivid depiction. His lack of a deep grasp of the subject matter, however, is a serious flaw.

Jonathan Spyer
Middle East Center
for Reporting and Analysis



Truths and Lies in the Middle East: Memoirs of a Veteran Journalist, 1952–2012. By Eric Rouleau. New York: American University of Cairo Press, 2019. 326 pp. \$34.95.

Rouleau’s memoir offers a glimpse of the Middle East during a period of rising Arab nationalism, British and French withdrawals, coups, and the emergence of Islamist terrorism. Having experienced, sometimes first hand, events of historical significance, he offers a number of interesting anecdotes.

An Egyptian-born Jew, Rouleau was a Middle East correspondent for *Le Monde* from 1955 until 1985 when he joined the

diplomatic corps of France, his adopted country. His access to figures including Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser and Yasser Arafat provided him with many scoops.

But more than anything, Rouleau here showcases his own far-left views and anti-Western biases. Journalists should report the “who, what, where, when and why,” but Rouleau makes clear he saw his role as an advocate. This might explain why anti-American leaders were so willing to grant him audiences. As Rouleau explains, Nasser granted him a career-launching interview because “in political spheres, I was considered to be ‘progressive’ and someone likely to be impressed by some of the achievements of Nasser’s regime.”

Rouleau freely admits his “relative sympathies for Nasser’s regime” and his “defense” of the Republic of Yemen in 1962. He acknowledges that he was “obviously in favor” of the Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba and had contempt for the shah of Iran. However, most glaring is his animus toward Israel and the very idea of Jewish self-determination. Indeed, his first chapter on Israel and Zionism begins by absurdly comparing the Jewish state to Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism. Elsewhere, he accuses Israel of “cashing in” on Holocaust reparations. Later, he observes that Israeli officials thought him prejudiced. Small wonder.

Rouleau whitewashes the discrimination and violence routinely inflicted upon Middle Eastern minorities, including Jews, in the years prior to Israel’s creation. He obfuscates on the decision by many Arab leaders, including in Egypt, to accommodate Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s.

A lack of self-awareness permeates Rouleau’s book, and his penchant for historical revisionism diminishes its worth. Not once does Rouleau acknowledge that his worldview may have colored his reporting.

Readers looking for the truth about the Middle East would be well advised to look elsewhere.

Sean Durns
CAMERA

