

## Brief Reviews, Summer 2020

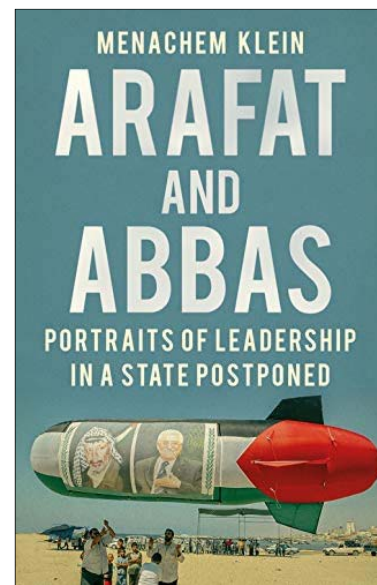
**Arafat and Abbas: Portraits of Leadership in a State Postponed.** By Menachem Klein. N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2019. 225 pp. \$39.95.

Bar-Ilan University professor Klein had a front row seat for the collapse of the Oslo process, having advised the Israeli government when talks with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) imploded in 2000 and taking part in the failed 2003 Geneva initiative.

Accordingly, Klein should have keen insights about Palestinian leaders Yasir Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas. He does acknowledge that Arafat subjected his people to a “dysfunctional, chaotic and informal” style of “one-man rule” that lacked “strategic planning” and ultimately yielded little. Klein writes that under Abbas, “authoritarianism has increased,” noting that the current Palestinian leader “has refused to resign” despite losing public support and “stubbornly refuses to appoint a successor.”

Yet, Klein’s portrayals of the two are strangely forgiving. Arafat was a “humble leader who listened to and took care of his people’s troubles.” Despite clear evidence that Arafat initiated the disastrous second intifada, Klein doubts that he was “the mastermind of evil orchestrating” it.

As for Abbas, Klein declares that he “maintains a sharp distinction between his home and office,” ignoring how grotesquely Abbas’s family has prospered during his years at the top. Klein also asserts that “Abbas cannot be charged with doubletalk”



though he talks peace but bankrolls convicted terrorists. Klein even clears Abbas of anti-Semitism, despite a Ph.D. dissertation charging Jews of collusion with Nazis.

Further, Klein calls the Israeli government an “ethnic regime” and a “colonialist power.” These and other characterizations of Israel are wildly off the mark.

The author redeems himself in the second half of this book, delving more deeply into the expansion of authoritarianism and corruption under Abbas and his obstinate refusal to prepare for his own succession after extending his 4-year term to fifteen years. But other accounts of Abbas’s sins are far more compelling.

Jonathan Schanzer  
Foundation for Defense of Democracies



**Hizbullah: A Mission to Nowhere.**  
**By Hilal Khashan. Lanham, Md.:**  
**Lexington Books, 2019. 186 pp. \$90.**

In *Hizbullah*, Khashan of the American University of Beirut expertly unfolds the political evolution of the group, starting with “its bloody suicide bombings in 1983 of the U.S. and French military headquarters in Beirut, as well as its subsequent kidnappings of American and European nationals in Lebanon.” It is significant that Khashan opens the introduction to the book with this simple fact: It means that Hezbollah existed and carried out these and other attacks even before it formally announced its existence in 1985.

Khashan convincingly argues that Iran’s commitment to export its revolution led to an aggressive Arab policy. Revolutionary Guard commander Ali Shamkhani molded seven Lebanese Shiite groups, all disaffected with Nabih Berri’s Amal Movement, into what became Hezbollah. From the outset, Hezbollah clearly articulated its commitment to the principle of *wilayat al-faqih*, guardianship by jurists, and to Iran’s supreme

leader. But “the strategic objectives of Iran are not necessarily contingent upon the well-being of its Arab Shi’ite clients.”

Khashan maintains that Hezbollah’s claims of victory in its guerilla warfare against Israeli and allied forces in South Lebanon are “a gross overstatement.” Hezbollah declared a “divine victory”—by virtue of not being destroyed—in its 2006 war with Israel. Here, too, Khashan argues that Hezbollah’s original plan for kidnapping Israeli soldiers dragged Lebanon into an unwanted war and an Israeli retaliation that crippled Lebanese infrastructure.

Although peace in Syria and a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement may not be around the corner, Khashan argues Hezbollah will be in for a rude awakening when it ultimately comes: “The fragmentation of the social and demographic fabric of Hizbullah is unlikely in the near future, but it is inevitable when peace returns to Syria, and the standoff between the United States and Iran comes to a realistic conclusion.”

Although Hezbollah’s rise to power in Lebanon was backed by Iran, Khashan argues the group’s time is nearly up: “History has a self-correcting mechanism, and its logic informs that the rise of Hizbullah and the consolidation of its powers amount to little more than a transient millennial event.” Only time will tell if Khashan’s prediction of the group’s decline is prescient or naïve. But he speaks truth to power either way when he adds that Hezbollah has proven to be a negative for Lebanon as a country and its sectarian communities, even for the Hezbollah’s core constituent, the Shiite community.

For those interested in where Hezbollah came from and where it may be going, this is a book well worth reading.

Matthew Levitt  
 Washington Institute  
 for Near East Policy

**The Ladies' Secret Society: History of the Courageous Women of Iran.** By Manda Zand Ervin. Nashville: World Encounter Institute/New English Review Press, 2020. 340 pp. \$34.99 (\$22.49, paper).

*The Ladies' Secret Society* provides a rich, comprehensive account of the journey of Iranian women since ancient days, when certain women were revered as divinity, to contemporary times, when the Islamic Republic jails women who remove their hijabs in public.

Ervin, an Iranian-American writer and human rights activist, tells the stories of individual women struggling against repression from the beginning of the Arab conquests through the relative emancipation of the shah's reign, through the loss of most of those gains under the Islamist regime. She paints a striking and seamless picture of Western imperialism's positive impact on women's rights, focusing on the ways females gained societal and political freedoms under the shah's leadership as he embraced Western values including greater equality for women.

The book also tackles the external pressures that can inspire the push for change

from within: in this case, of women against Iran's Islamist leaders. Accounts of experiences of minorities within Iran, including Jewish women, are also fascinating. They struggled under the Islamic Republic's despotism, even as they feared special penalties for being "impure" persons and compelled to dress according to the dictates of another religion.

The graphics, which illustrate the dynamic sociopolitical landscape of women's experiences in Iran, are a highlight, especially as they document changes resulting from European colonialism.

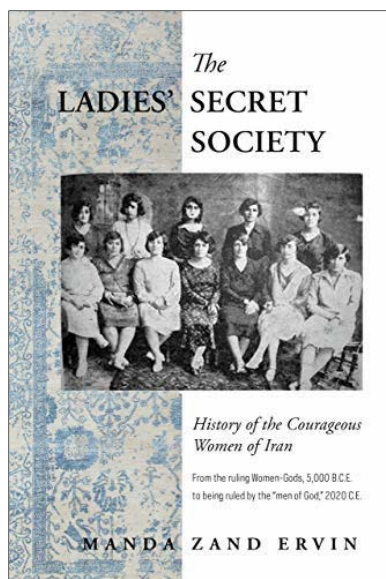
In all, this is a literary gem.

Sarah Katz  
Sunnyvale, Calif.

**Scholarly Personae in the History of Orientalism, 1870-1930.** Edited by Christiaan Engberts and Herman J. Paul. Leiden: Brill, 2019. 196 pp. \$119.

Eight European scholars investigate Oriental studies through the prism of academic personalities. They examine how these ideas were altered in light of new research methods, cross-cultural experiences, and political changes. The book's goal is to clarify the diversity of Orientalists and their many roles as missionaries, scholars, and public intellectuals.

Paul surveys these figures in an era when the field was fraught with disagreements over academic reputation, popularizing work, and political engagement. Holger Gzella examines the paradigm of the Prussian professor trying to "fit in" as a scholar. Arie L. Molendijk illuminates the multiple facets of German-born British scholar Friedrich Max Müller. Henning Trüper analyzes German scholar Julius Euting's trip to "Inner Arabia" using notes from that trip. Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn discusses German studies of India considering philology, fieldwork, and indigenous traditions. Timothy H. Barrett explores British diplomat

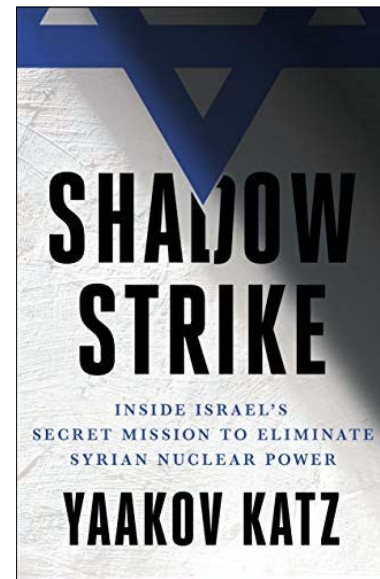
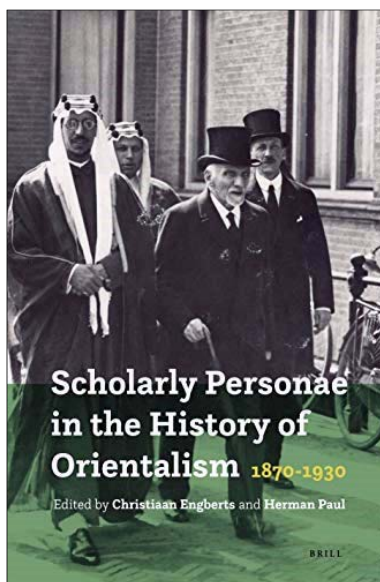


and Chinese linguist Herbert Giles while Hans Martin Krämer investigates Orientalism and the European models of scholarship about Japan.

Perhaps the most instructive essay is Engberts' about Orientalists at the start of World War I. Dutch Arabist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje was revered by his German colleague Carl Heinrich Becker, but their friendship was damaged as the war began, after the Ottoman sultan decreed what Hurgronje denounced as a "Holy War Made in Germany." Hurgronje was against European incitement of jihad while German colleagues supported the kaiser's jihad instigation. This dispute exposed the tension between scholarship and advocacy. Engberts shows how scholars of the time shed their enlightenment values, and instead put knowledge to the use of nationalist and colonial fights, and raised patriotic feelings over impartial cosmopolitanism.

The book's fine and useful essays introduce readers to the deep commonalities between the issues of Orientalist scholarship circa 1900 and today.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz  
Middle East Forum



**Shadow Strike: Inside Israel's Secret Mission to Eliminate Syrian Nuclear Power. By Yaakov Katz. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019. 320 pp. \$28.99.**

*Shadow Strike* recounts Israel's destruction of the Syrian nuclear reactor at al-Kibar in Syria's Deir az-Zur region in September 2007. The book focuses on Israel's discovery of the Syrian program and the air operation that destroyed the reactor. It concludes with a sober assessment of both the operation and subsequent diplomacy.

Katz, editor of the *Jerusalem Post*, is a veteran American-Israeli correspondent of military affairs with a close knowledge of Israel's military and political systems. The book moves easily from the military and espionage elements of the story to depictions of various leaders and political figures in Israel, Syria, and the United States.

The details of the Israeli operation read like a Hollywood script, and Katz's depictions of the operation are colorful and vivid. But he goes beyond the drama by contextualizing, emphasizing the U.S. decision not to punish North Korea for its role in the Syrian nuclear effort. He



accurately describes that involvement as “the greatest known act of state sponsored nuclear proliferation” and speculates that the lack of penalties encouraged other countries to pursue their own proliferation efforts.

The book’s conclusion is positive, noting that the destruction of the Kibar reactor is “a playbook for how one country neutralized an existential threat.” *Shadow Strike* is well-written, engaging, and thoughtful. Among its most interesting elements is the reassessment of the role of Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert. Katz notes Olmert’s mistakes and flaws but points to his willingness to take action where necessary without hesitation. In this regard, the destruction of the Kibar reactor was “most of all ... about decision-making.”

Jonathan Spyer  
Middle East Center for  
Reporting and Analysis

**The Truth Is No Defense. By Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff. Nashville and London: New English Review Press, 2019. 350 pp. \$34.99 (\$24.99, paper).**

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR)—whose decisions are binding on all forty-seven member states of the Council of Europe—recently ruled that criticism of the Islamic prophet Muhammad constitutes incitement to hatred and, therefore, is not protected free speech.<sup>1</sup> The unprecedented decision effectively legitimizes an Islamic blasphemy code in Europe in the interests of “preserving religious peace.”

Sabaditsch-Wolff’s legal problems began in November 2009 when she presented a seminar about radical Islam to the Political

Academy of the Freedom Party of Austria, a political institute linked to Austria’s anti-establishment Freedom Party. The left-leaning magazine *News* secretly planted a journalist in the audience to record the lectures, then handed the audio tapes to the Viennese public prosecutor as evidence of hate speech.

In February 2011, an Austrian court convicted Sabaditsch-Wolff of “denigrating religious beliefs of a legally recognized religion.” The offending speech was limited to offhand comments by Sabaditsch-Wolff suggesting that Muhammad was a pedophile since Islamic *hadiths* (collections of Muhammad’s sayings and actions) record that he was at least 50-years old when he married Aisha, then just six or seven, and that he consummated the marriage when she was nine. Sabaditsch-Wolff’s actual words were: “A 56-year-old and a six-year-old? What do we call it, if it is not pedophilia?” and “Mohammed had a thing for little girls.” Muhammad’s alleged actions would be unlawful in Austria today.

The Austrian judge ruled that Muhammad’s sexual contact with nine-year-old Aisha could not be considered pedophilia because the marriage continued until his death when she was 18, and that, therefore, he had no exclusive sexual desire for underage girls. The judge ordered Sabaditsch-Wolff to pay a fine of €480 (\$550, at the time) or spend sixty days in prison. She was also required to pay the trial costs.

After appealing the conviction to the Austrian Supreme Court, she filed a complaint with the ECHR that Austrian courts failed to address her statements and her right to freedom of expression. But the ECHR ruled that states could restrict free speech rights enshrined in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights if

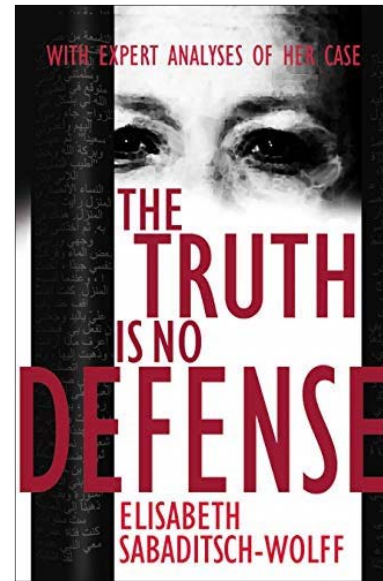
---

<sup>1</sup> [Case of E.S. v. Austria](#), no. 38450/12, final judgment, European Court of Human Rights, Strasbourg, Mar. 18, 2019.

such speech was “likely to incite religious intolerance” and was “likely to disturb the religious peace in their country.”

*Truth Is No Defense* describes her legal odyssey navigating the politically-correct waters of post-modern European jurisprudence. She offers autobiographical insights into her childhood as the daughter of an Austrian diplomat posted in the Middle East; how she became acquainted with Islamic law and practice, and details of her highly politicized court case. Finally, the book includes interpretations by European and American legal experts and scholars of Islam on the meaning and impact of the rulings against her as the ruling establishes a dangerous, new legal precedent.

*Truth Is No Defense* is a highly-readable book geared primarily toward a non-specialist audience. It helps readers to understand how



European leftists suppress free speech when Islam is the topic.

Soeren Kern  
Gatestone Institute  
