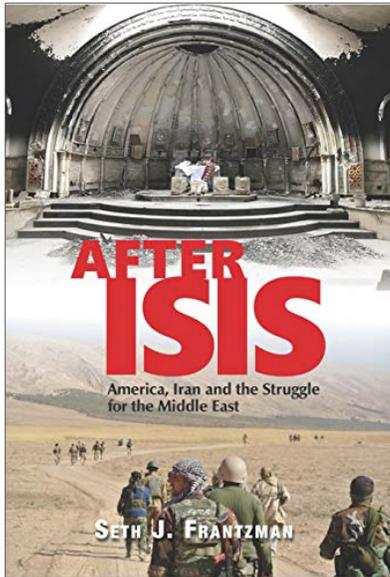


## Brief Reviews, Fall 2020



**After Isis: America, Iran and the Struggle for the Middle East. By Seth J. Frantzman. Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2019. 414 pp. \$16.95.**

Much sadness marks the pages of *After ISIS*, as the author reveals the stories of civilians and soldiers through their own powerful words. Without taking a political position, Frantzman of *The Jerusalem Post* portrays the complex and troublesome partnerships, often deeply rooted in history within Iraq and Syria, between the Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga, which itself included Christians, Sunni Arabs, and Shiites. Frantzman also lays bare the motivations of the many state actors' (Syrian, Iranian, Turkish, Russian, U.S.) as well as those of sub-state actors, including Hezbollah, Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Kurds.

The author sees the Khomeinist regime capitalizing on the conflict with ISIS and highlights how Iran's increased role in Iraq allowed Tehran to form a corridor through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon, connecting several of Iran's proxies throughout the region.

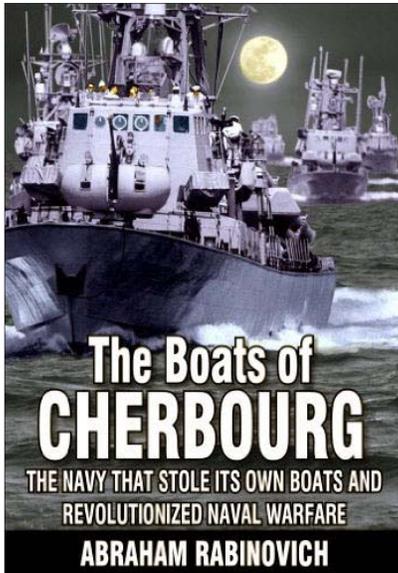
As a fine journalist, Frantzman sews stories together, creating a colorful mosaic of the conflicts from 2014-19. The culmination and intersection of these accounts contribute to a deep understanding: the Turk who saw ISIS as being bad for Muslims; the professor who says the population's frustration leads to support for ISIS; those who protected the Yazidis while losing their own territory; and the Christians who volunteered after losing their homes. Stories from those on the front lines to the civilians who refused to leave, from the refugees to the prisoners, from other journalists to the wives of ISIS fighters all add to the complex picture.

There are so many tales. The testimonies reveal a search for justice and a hope for independence. Short vignettes force the reader to examine the conflict from more than one perspective and through more than one lens, thus Frantzman has truly woven the accounts together into a tapestry that contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Syria's several civil wars. Even readers with no prior knowledge are able to grasp why and how the alliances, betrayals, misunderstandings, and strategies played out as they did but still find themselves disappointed by the not unexpected betrayals by outside powers.

Frantzman outlines the possibilities to come: A non-resolution of conflicts and a possible Iranian expansion into Lebanon and the Arabian Peninsula; a U.S.-Gulf war with

Iran; Turkish dominance in northern Syria; major splits in the Arab League; and even another Middle Eastern “spring.”

Walid Phares  
Fox News



**The Boats of Cherbourg. The Navy that Stole Its Own Boats and Revolutionized Naval Warfare. Revised ed. By Abraham Rabinovich. Primary Publishing, 2019. pp. 354. \$99.95 (\$16.99, paper).**

In a revision of Rabinovich’s 1988 first edition, the author documents the technological innovations led by Israel’s navy to introduce tactical changes that eventually had a strategic impact. The book touches on many of the initial issues, options, and debates the Israeli navy encountered when first created while the most interesting sections focus on the development of an Israeli sea-to-sea missile and its use during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. As in other cases in military history, the author highlights how

political backing was crucial in implementing the necessary changes.

During that war, Israel’s military was ill-prepared, but the exception was the Israeli navy. Until 1973, it played a marginal, low-priority role in Israel’s security landscape, strategic outlook, and budgets. Yet, it planned for years for the possibility of war and won every naval battle to worldwide accolades.

Rabinovich recounts how innovative Israeli naval officers developed the concept of the missile boat with approval from the Ministry of Defense (primarily Shimon Peres) and harnessed modest resources to complete the project. Israel’s defense establishment helped the navy procure the necessary equipment from abroad, and finally, smuggled the boats from Cherbourg to Israel despite a French embargo.

In 1960, opposing larger and better equipped navies, including Soviet destroyers and missile boats, Israel’s naval command faced immense challenges. Neither the required missiles nor suitable boats existed in Western arsenals. So the Israelis developed a weapons system indigenously. The German government feared repercussions from Arab governments and refused to build a revised version of the Jaguar fast-attack craft for the Israelis. Instead, Israeli naval engineers modified the German design and moved construction to a French shipyard in Cherbourg. The Gabriel missile was developed for use with these boats.

Rabinovich describes how once the technological challenges were met, Israel’s naval officers developed battle tactics to accommodate the new weapons system and trained for a variety of scenarios. They achieved optimal readiness only a few months before the 1973 war. Syrian and Egyptian boats outnumbered their Israeli counterparts by more than two to one, and their missiles had more than twice the range

of the Gabriel. Nevertheless, the Israeli missile boat flotilla came through the war with no losses while sinking almost every Arab ship it encountered.

The knowledge gained building the Saar class Cherbourg boats was essential for construction of the Haifa shipyards, which later produced larger vessels. Similarly, the flourishing Israeli radar industry benefited from the Saar project.

Despite several sections not relevant to the boat-missile project, this is a fascinating and accessible book most suitable for lay readers and analysts interested in how military innovation occurs, as well as for followers of the doctrinal and technological evolution of the Israel Defense Forces.

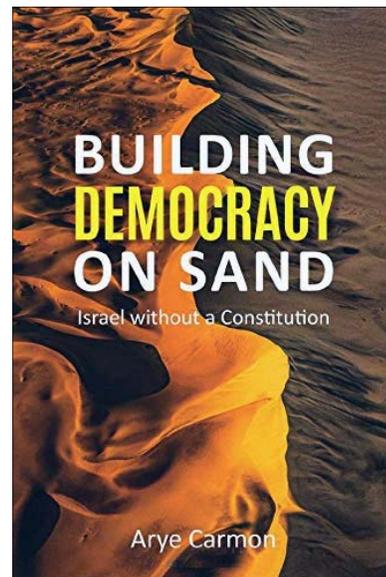
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**Building Democracy on Sand: Israel without a Constitution. By Arye Carmon. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2019. 277 pp. \$21.95.**

Carmon, founder and president of the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), which has called for democratic reforms in Israel since 1991, points out that Israel lacks a constitution delineating the core principles of its government. Instead, it has cobbled together a series of “Basic Laws” that create the legal architecture for governance.

Carmon finds this insufficient, arguing in particular that the Jewish state lacks both a clear vision for the role of religion and a true separation of religion and state. His central argument is that the “orthodox monopoly over the definitions and characteristics of the state’s Jewishness” is unhealthy. This is the ultimate “Zionist deficit.”

Admittedly, over the decades, Israel’s religious right has gained ground, largely



because of its role in helping center-right and center-left coalitions reach a majority of sixty-one Knesset seats. But the tug-of-war between secular and orthodox Jews is far from over.

Also, it is worth recalling that Israel’s government came into being under extreme circumstances and has always operated under duress. Amid this battle for survival, certain key questions have been put aside. Carmon acknowledges this reality but insists that the end result is a “sputtering national effort to build a single, unified people.”

Carmon argues that because the Jewish people for centuries had no experience in self-government, they lack the tools to run a government properly; for him, exile remains “a state of mind” for Jews. He also asserts that popular attitudes toward Arabs show that the “principles of inclusion expressed in Israel’s Declaration of Independence have been eroded in Israel.” The author disregards that the Arab population has long called for ending the country’s Jewish nature. That Israel continues scrupulously to consider their rights is nothing short of remarkable.

*Building Democracy on Sand’s* many

anecdotes of the author's life, which break up his heavy political theory, make the book more readable. But the un-forgiving analysis of the Middle East's only functioning democracy still makes the book's central arguments difficult to accept. Perhaps it is worth remembering that the word "Israel" literally means "wrestles with God."

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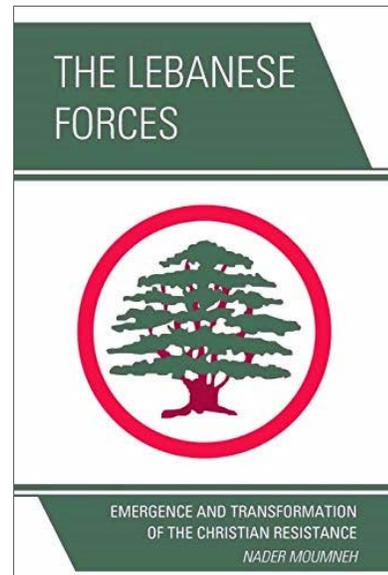
**The Lebanese Forces: Emergence and Transformation of the Christian Resistance. By Nader Moumneh. Lanham, Md.: Hamilton Books, 2019. 577 pp. \$149 (\$60, paper).**

Lebanon came under attack from many subversive ideologies in the 1970s: Arabism, Baathism, Palestinianism, and Islamism. They threatened the country's unique nature and even its political existence. The Lebanese Forces (LF) arose in response, serving as a Christian resistance movement.

Moumneh's lengthy, historical narrative—rigorously factual and objective—chronicles their story. The author, born in Lebanon and now a Canadian policy analyst, interviewed pivotal Lebanese players in the drama and referenced Lebanese and international documents.

The outbreak of warfare in 1975 by armed Palestinian organizations challenged and subverted the Lebanese state. Syria's military foray in 1976 then morphed into a full-scale foreign occupation and police state, soon joined by Iran's Hezbollah proxy.

Facing the liquidation of Lebanon's identity and survival, the Lebanese Forces evolved from "a coordinated body of militias to a surrogate government from 1976 to 1990, to a political organization from 1991 to 1993, and finally a banned political movement from 1994 up till 2005."



Despite calls on Syria to cease meddling and for Hezbollah to disarm, U.N. resolutions, the Taif accord, U.S. and French policies, Arab League demands, anti-Syrian protests, and Maronite patriarchate statements had little effect. Moumneh also shows the barren efforts of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, set up to convict the assassins of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, threatened and scorned by Assad and Hezbollah.

Samir Geagea, the book's central figure, seized command of the LF in the 1980s. Like others, he could not reverse Lebanon's collapse and surrender. Prime Minister Michel Aoun's "war of liberation" in 1990 against Syrian forces offered some hope when it mobilized widespread popular enthusiasm, only to culminate in Damascus smashing Lebanon's army and the Christian community. In 2005, great expectations re-surfaced with the one-million-plus street rally in Beirut that launched the Cedars Revolution, but its impact fizzled out and disappeared.

To his credit, the author does not obscure the errors of the Christian resistance: The LF and army failed to merge; the Kataeb political party proved intolerant of rivals; and

the idea of Lebanese federalism never became credible. Yet Moumneh still hopes that the day will come when Lebanon will be a modern, secular, and democratic country. His book offers a source for reflection on that hope.

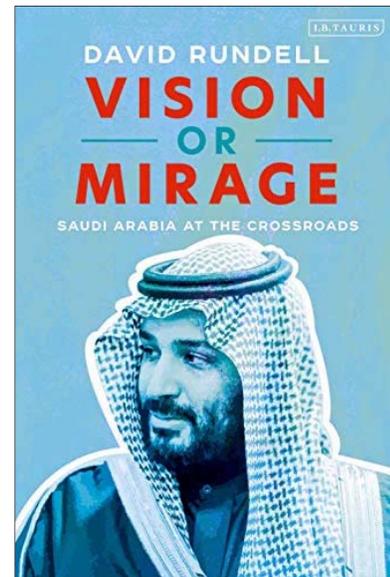
Mordechai Nisan  
author of *Politics and War in Lebanon*

**Vision or Mirage: Saudi Arabia at the Crossroads. By David Rundell. Bloomsbury: I.B. Tauris, 2020. 389 pp. \$27.**

Rundell, a U.S. diplomat who served for fifteen years in Saudi Arabia, describes the disruptive economic and social reforms orchestrated in Saudi Arabia by Vision 2030 and asks whether the plan will prove successful.

He argues that Saudi Arabia is a very different place than when King Salman ascended the throne in 2015. The kingdom has changed rapidly, marking the end of an order that had governed since 1950. Some called it the Saudi Spring, others, the fourth Saudi state, or “Salman Arabia.” The king understood that structural economic problems and administrative inefficiencies meant Saudi Arabia was falling behind, and he saw talented young Saudis moving to Dubai, New York, and London. Salman has sought to provide a smooth transition to the next generation, reduce the scope of the welfare state, and make society more tolerant. The king was looking for ideas, and his younger son Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) had them.

Rundell believes that Vision 2030 faces several challenges, including those posed by MbS himself. Changing the rules of succession bruised many royal egos through the anti-corruption campaign and the detention of senior members of the royal family. Shifting



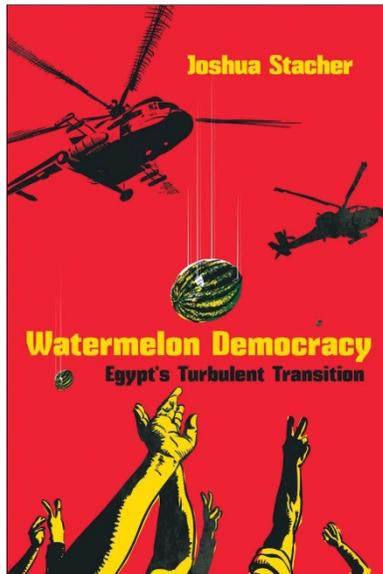
relations with the United States is another major issue: Prior to 9/11, the interests of the two countries were largely aligned, especially during the Cold War. The 9/11 attacks, the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and Egypt’s upheavals have resulted in less cooperation between the two governments, even as Saudi Arabia’s greatest adversary, the Islamic Republic of Iran, has grown more threatening.

Rundell misses the mark on several issues. He fails to understand that this is a top-down revolution initiated by Salman and executed by MbS and worries that the changes are coming too fast. But in MbS’s words, which he quotes: “Time is our enemy. We can no longer wait to reform our country.” The prince believes the changes are not coming too quickly because they should have been done years ago. Rundell also does not make clear that Vision 2030 is a stepping stone towards greater modernity and development, rather than democracy, or that the country’s development is already lagging behind its Arab Gulf neighbors.

Despite these omissions, *Vision or Mirage* is an important book, which reveals Rundell’s deep knowledge of Saudi Arabia. The historical background of the book is

extremely informative and will benefit scholars.

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**Watermelon Democracy: Egypt's Turbulent Transition. By Joshua Stacher. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2020. 288 pp. \$75 (\$29.95, paper).**

Stacher clearly articulates the leftist narrative about the Egyptian “Arab Spring”: The people’s revolution was suppressed by the military autocracy, mostly working in cahoots with the Muslim Brotherhood. This is, of course, a complete fantasy.

His title is the cleverest part of the book. The reference is to the common Egyptian joke about the gamble of buying a watermelon: “The skin of every melon at the fruit stand shines a deep, rich green, tantalizing you with the promise of a sweet, juicy treat inside. ... Sometimes the watermelon lies.”

Stacher focuses on the turbulent 2011 overthrow of long-time president Hosni Mubarak and the eventual consolidation of power by the present dictator Abdel Fattah el-Sisi after the 2013 military coup. For Stacher, the intervening Muslim Brotherhood rule is an inconvenient minor episode. However, the Brotherhood’s role should be a focus: The group stole power when the rest of the opposition was disorganized and then tried to implement an agenda that was massively rejected by the Egyptian people. Stacher shoves the Brotherhood into the shadows so he can concentrate on his heroes—the populist revolution overthrowing Mubarak—and his villains—the military—which took power when it became apparent that the Brotherhood could not run Egypt.

Stacher is no friend of the Brotherhood and portrays it as an ally of the military. But he dismisses the possibility that ordinary Egyptians rejected the Brotherhood’s plodding and repressive rule and that the secular opposition was too disorganized and naive about how the disciplined Brotherhood could push them aside. Instead of analysis, there is an apologia for the secular opposition. Stacher also presents the military as the embodiment of evil with the Brotherhood an understandably flawed actor.

One point that Stacher gets correct is that the Sisi government is an autocracy completely hostile to democracy. The years following Mubarak’s overthrow have been a bitter disappointment for the Muslim Brotherhood, secular democrats, and leftist partisans like Stacher. What *Watermelon Democracy* does capture well is the Left’s ability to give priority to ideological predilections over facts.

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