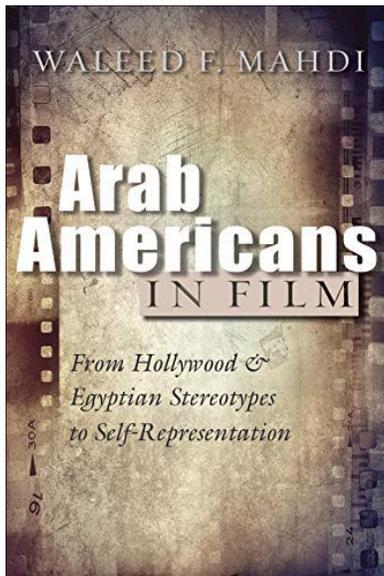


## Brief Reviews, Summer 2021



**Arab Americans in Film: From Hollywood and Egyptian Stereotypes to Self-Representation. By Waleed F. Mahdi. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2020. 328 pp. \$75 (\$29.95, paper).**

*Arab Americans in Film* focuses on the depiction of Arab-Americans in both the American and Arab (mainly, Egyptian) cinematic industries. Mahdi, assistant professor of U.S.-Arab cultural politics at the University of Oklahoma, accuses not only Western cinema producers but also Arabs of “vilifying” the image of Islamists. He uses Edward W. Said’s theory of “Orientalism” as a lens on Muslims in cinema and describes any negative depiction of Islam as colonialist and Western.

Mahdi devotes pages to theorizing how the film industry alienates Arab Americans and shows them as a threat. He complains that Arab Americans are often portrayed as terrorists. But Mahdi conveniently skips over Islamist violence and ignores any storyline or theme in Arab cinema which does not conform to post-colonial theories. He critiques portrayals of Arab Americans in Egyptian cinema as binary: either “dollar worshippers” or selfless, community-oriented Muslims. *Hallo Amerika* is typical of such Egyptian films, which include criticism of radical Islamists. Comedian Adel Imam portrays a hypocritical and deceitful New York Muslim preacher, who condemns the United States as the “greater Devil that every Muslim must fight with all possible weapons,” but also arranges fake marriages for profit. Mahdi omits discussion of these and similar portrayals or focuses on them only to show how racist America rejects Arabs.

Mahdi notes that Egyptian filmmakers often use negative images of Arab Americans to criticize the “imperialist” nature of America. However, in his discussion of films depicting Egyptian emigrants in the United States, he fails to compare these with other representations of Egyptians and Arabs living in Western European countries. For example, in *Hammam im Amsterdam* (1999)—which he does not discuss—the misfortunate protagonist encounters the same difficulties and types of people in the Netherlands that populate the comedies Mahdi critiques about Arabs who move to the United States.

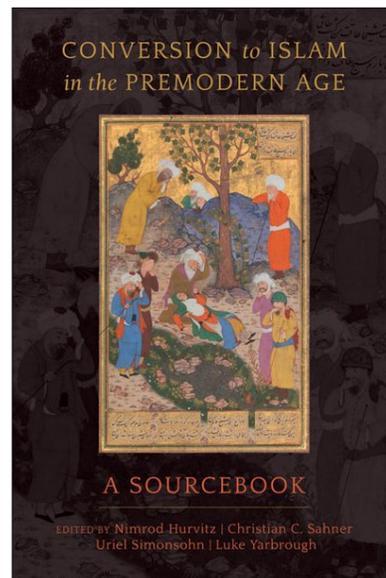
Mahdi includes a lengthy analysis of the Egyptian film *The Baby Doll Night*, which includes many flashbacks to horrific memories in Nazi concentration camps and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Here Mahdi uses the theories of Ella Shohat and others who refer to “Arab Jews,” meaning Jews who lived in Arab countries. This identity exists in American academic theories, but in reality, these populations never called themselves “Arab Jews.” He even characterizes comedian Jerry Seinfeld as an “actor of Arab descent” (since his mother came from the Jewish community of Aleppo).

The book usefully describes the popular, cinematic image of Arab-Americans, but its excessive theorizing unfairly blames imperialism and Zionism for problematic depictions.

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**[Conversion to Islam in the Premodern Age: A Sourcebook.](#) Edited by Nimrod Hurvitz, Christian C. Sahner, Uriel Simonsohn, and Luke Yarbrough. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. 355 pp. \$95 (\$39.95, paper or e-book).**

The editors commissioned and assembled no less than fifty-seven of what they term “some of the most vivid and neglected [primary-]sources” on conversions to Islam during the premodern period, 700-1650 A.D. The geographic coverage extends from West Africa to Indonesia, with an emphasis on the Middle East and especially Syria and Iraq, a reflection of both the Middle East’s centrality in Islam and the sources available. Translations into English are from languages as varied as Armenian and Malay; each is followed by suggestions for further reading.



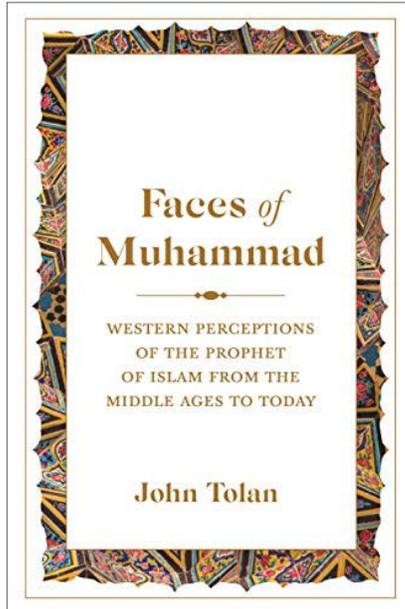
The scholarship is exemplary, providing a sober and literate survey of a key topic of Islamic history. Reading the excerpts one after another, from here and there, relentlessly moving forward in time, provides extensive information on circumstances, motives, legal implications, personal changes, social impact, and more.

But beyond those specifics, the collection leads to an inescapable overall impression of betrayal and oppression: almost always, the convert implicitly realizes that as he joins what the editors candidly call “the hope of joining God’s ‘winning team,’” he leaves his former co-religionists in the lurch. In the Geniza, for example, the convert was usually known as a “criminal” (Heb. *poshe’a*).

Conversely, few conversions occur for positive, affirmative, inspirational reasons. (One exception of note concerns the forty-one monks of Amorium who converted *en masse*.) Thus does the editors’ scholarly framework vanish, pushed aside by the pain that soaks the testimonies and cries that reverberate through the centuries. The agony

for non-believers of Islamic supremacism remains sadly consistent.

Daniel Pipes



**Faces of Muhammad: Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today. By John Tolan. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. 309 pp. \$29.95.**

Asserting that “Muhammad has always been at the center of European discourse on Islam,” Tolan finds that “Muhammad occupies a crucial and ambivalent place in the European imagination ... alternatively provoking fear, loathing, fascination, or admiration.” Indeed, views of him are “anything but monolithic,” ranging from the satanic to the most positive.

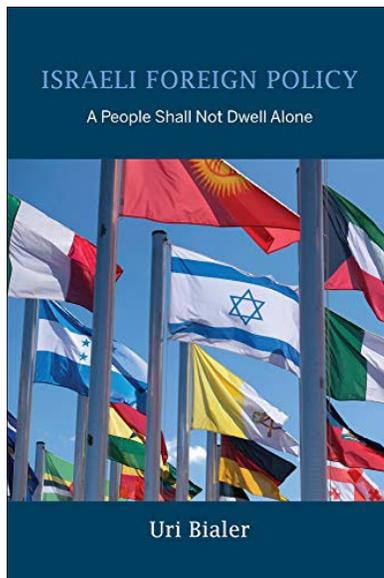
Tolan’s nine chapters look at instances of this phenomenon over eight hundred years,

starting with Crusader stories and ending with such twentieth-century scholars as Louis Massignon and W. Montgomery Watt. Tolan, a professor of history at the University of Nantes in France, makes no attempt to sketch a complete account but offers separate case studies, some thematic (Muhammad as idol or as fraud), others geographical (Spain, England) or varied in outlook (Enlightenment, Judaism).

As the author of many other books on the subject of European responses to Islam (indeed, he calls this study “the fruit of a career”), Tolan ably and elegantly steers the reader from one insightful example to another to build a convincing case for the “anything but monolithic” views of Muhammad. One favorite example: the extraordinary 1856 passage written by Heinrich Graetz in his 11-volume *History of the Jews*: If Muhammad was “not a loyal son of Judaism ... he appreciated its highest aims, and was induced by it to give to the world a new faith, known as Islam, founded on a lofty basis. This religion has exercised a wonderful influence on Jewish history and on the evolution of Judaism.”

That said, there is something unsatisfying about examples not tethered together into a cohesive account. How are we to be sure that Tolan’s exemplars are representative or significant? For example, while Massignon and Watt definitely epitomize the school of Christian scholarship of those who “tried to reconcile their Christian faith with the recognition of the positive, spiritual nature of Muhammad’s mission,” how do they compare in importance to those Christian scholars who rejected such a reconciliation? What is the relationship between the schools, and which had more importance? Why discuss only the one and not the other?

Daniel Pipes



**Israeli Foreign Policy: A People Shall Not Dwell Alone. By Uri Bialer. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. 356 pp. \$95 (\$48.99, paper).**

Bialer, an expert on Israel's foreign policy, particularly its first decades, offers an account of Israel's foreign affairs in terms of the state's political, economic, and social life.

He starts by reviewing diplomacy in the pre-state era and during the 1948 Independence War, when diplomacy was critical to facilitate immigration—the *raison d'être* of the Jewish state. The Zionist movement understood this and developed sophisticated diplomatic skills. This formative period emphasized ingenuity and audacity, and according to Bialer, a “great deal of tactical pragmatism” accompanied by a determination not to give in to international pressures on important issues: Jerusalem, refugees, and borders.

On energy, Bialer relates the successful attempts to get around a market dominated by Arab oil producers, with Iran eventually becoming the Jewish state's main supplier. He,

however, fails to mention that an Iranian guarantee to substitute for the loss of the Sinai oilfields was key to signing the 1975 Sinai Disengagement Agreement, which eventually led to the 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. Israel's oil relations during the 1980s with Mexico are also not mentioned, despite the fact that these preoccupied Israel's decision-makers at the time.

In other chapters, Bialer examines Israel's efforts to bring Jews to Israel from Eastern Europe while delicately maneuvering vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. He writes that Jerusalem also understood that the United Nations was a “problem and even a potential threat” as it took no action to implement its own partition plan but adopted positions reversing Israel's battlefield successes, contributing to the entrenchment of Israeli *Realpolitik*. He also explores in great detail Israel's tactical maneuvering in defying U.S. preferences on the nuclear issue.

Bialer's discussion of peace with Egypt is particularly instructive as he deftly describes the Egyptian state-imposed barriers to normalization with the Jewish state; despite a four-decades-old peace treaty and significant strategic ties, Cairo remains unwilling to allow people-to-people interactions with Israel.

Israel's exit from isolation cannot be explained as simply a function of a start-up nation with knowledge valuable to other countries. Bialer ignores other systemic factors: a unipolar system where Israel allies with the hegemonic power; the changes in the international energy market negatively affecting the power of the Arab bloc; and the rise of revolutionary Islamist Iran.

Bialer lacks a clear cut-off date for his account and more recent years are sketchy. For example, he focuses on the Oslo process, which collapsed in 2000, but disregards the 1991 Madrid Conference, which brought many Arab countries to the negotiating table with Israel.

Despite this, *Israeli Foreign Policy* provides a wealth of information and sophisticated analysis by an author with masterful command of the literature. It is highly recommended for anyone interested in how Israel has met tremendous international challenges.

Efraim Inbar

Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security



**Politiek Van Het Gezond Verstand (The Politics of Common Sense). By Thierry Baudet. Oegstgeest, NL: Amsterdam Books, 2020. 365 pp. €24.95.**

Baudet, founder and leader of The Forum for Democracy (FvD), has written a heartfelt paean to Western civilization and democracy and provides a well-thought-out agenda to preserve both. “The Politics of Common Sense” is in turn a political manifesto and a poetic exploration of art, culture, and traditions that are the foundations of Europe’s Judeo-Christian heritage.

The book is divided into four parts focusing on the think tank, politics, culture, and a collection of vignettes. All the material was published before in various newspapers and magazines and includes a prize-winning essay written at age sixteen entitled “My World in 2040.”

Baudet recounts the rapid transformation of his think tank into a political party, briefly one of the biggest in Holland. He outlines the “Three Big Projects” that must be addressed to prevail over Islamism and for Holland to remain a sovereign state rather than a satellite of the European Union: ending unfettered immigration, resisting European unification, and rejecting oppressive and destructive climate change regulations. His solution is for Holland to withdraw from the EU, ending its obligations to take in refugees, and refusing to be forced to adopt costly and useless efforts to combat claims of climate change.

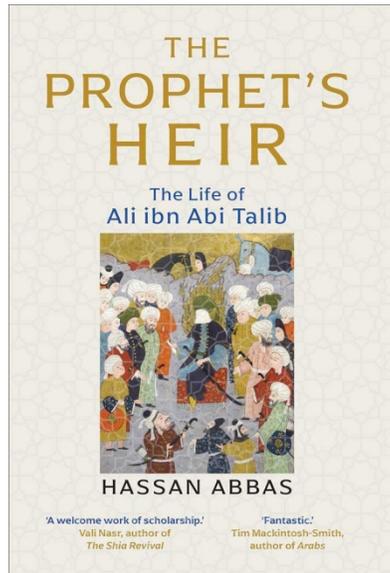
The Dutch media that demonizes Baudet as a “rightwing populist” has for the most part ignored this book. It did, however, have a field day when the FvD was rocked by an anti-Semitic and anti-gay scandal set off by internal communications from the youth wing of the party. Baudet subsequently resigned as head of the party, only to be reinstated.

Even more disconcerting was a picture that surfaced with Baudet holding up a copy of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. The explanation offered was that he was advocating for the sale of the book, which is banned in Holland. The photo, however, is more than “bad optics,” and Baudet’s own book must be seen in the light of these occurrences.

Taken on its own, it is eminently readable and entertaining, part ideology, part philosophical musings, part a celebration of Western culture. But the recent revelations leading to the party’s implosion cannot be

ignored and provide both a perspective and a caution.

Beila Rabinowitz  
Militant Islam Monitor



**The Prophet's Heir: The Life of Ali ibn Abi Talib. By Hassan Abbas. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021. 239 pp. \$30.**

This reader admits to certain expectations on opening a book published by Yale University Press and written by a Distinguished Professor of International Relations at the [Near East South Asia Strategic Studies Center](#) of the National Defense University. The center, it bears noting, is a U.S. Department of Defense unit “focused on enhancing security cooperation” between Americans and regional “foreign and defense policy professionals, diplomats, academics, and civil society leaders.”

Those expectations primarily concern scholarly objectivity; one does not expect to find

a devout Shiite Muslim tract. That, however, defines *The Prophet's Heir*, an apologia for the key figure of Shiism, one of the most important personages of Islamic history, and the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, Islam's prophet.

Consider how Abbas describes his subject in his introduction (available gratis [here](#)): the Distinguished Professor of International Relations whose salary is paid by the U.S. taxpayer informs us on page one about Ali's “matchless valour as well as spirituality.” He describes Islam as beginning “when the archangel Gabriel graced the city of Makkah [Mecca] with a divine message for someone very special. ... God's last prophet on earth.” Page two goes on to explain that the divine message to Muhammad was “a continuation of what had already been revealed, but that had been forgotten or modified”—this being precisely Islam's standard, superior, and disdainful view of Judaism and Christianity. Page four calls Ali “an avid advocate for justice ... a brave warrior.”

The apologetics also go far beyond Ali. Page nine announces that Muslims “excelled in areas ranging from arts and sciences to statecraft and empire-building across the continents during the last fourteen centuries.” The next 190 pages continue in a similar *da'wa* (missionary) spirit, not bothering even to disguise the hagiography as biography but overtly treating pious history as factual history. That a reverent Shiite Muslim should want to write such a paean to his religious paragon is natural enough. But that the U.S. government funds and Yale University disseminates such Sunday-school materials surprises and dismays this reader.

*The Prophet's Heir* should alarm those concerned about the separation of church and state, those worried about government waste, and those fearful of lawful Islamist encroachments on the public square.

Daniel Pipes

