

# Brief Reviews, Fall 2021

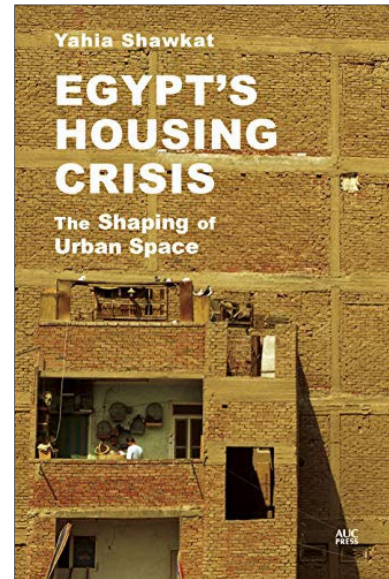
by Daniel Pipes

**Egypt's Housing Crisis: The Shaping of Urban Space.** By Yahia Shawkat. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2020. 312 pp. \$49.95.

One can justly bemoan the cozy, semi-corrupt symbiosis between recent Egyptian governments and well-connected developers building luxury housing, often by clearing out poor people living in what the government considers slums. In *Egypt's Housing Crisis*, Shawkat, an urban and housing researcher, documents the vast sums the government has poured into constructing housing that ordinary Egyptians cannot afford and which the government insists on marketing at prices that do not have sufficient buyers. The result is that, in a country with grossly inadequate housing, the rate of unoccupied housing is among the highest in the world.

Notably, much of Shawkat's volume goes against the tide of leftist critiques of free markets and their calls for greater government intervention and subsidies for "affordable housing." Indeed, the story he tells is of the damage done by governments and the ingenuity of Egyptians working around regulations. He charitably, and possibly accurately, attributes the government's actions not primarily to corruption but to its preoccupation "with modernist, 'scientific,' and *dirigiste* principles" and with "an obsession with top-down, engineered urban development," to quote David Sims' superb foreword.

Shawkat begins in the 1940s, exploring housing policies under different governments



and the remarkable similarities in policies followed by all governments of the last eighty years. That such varied governments as the monarchy, Nasser at his most socialist, Mubarak at his most free market, and the current military-dominated regime had remarkably consistent policies demonstrates the deep roots of this system. The policies have a combination of a powerful ideological justification—modernization—and the self-reinforcing material interest of the regulators and the well-connected.

An important example of the system's dysfunction is the rental market and its changing and complicated government regulations. The lack of a stable and simple regulatory environment has driven landlords and tenants alike to evade the rules in what is politely called an "informal" market. Other examples are the complex and ever-shifting

policies towards land ownership and privatization of state land, which have resulted in title to much of Egypt's land and housing being entirely unclear. Shawkat estimates that "at least 70 percent of families do not have secure tenure." The consequences are periodic, arbitrary actions by the authorities, often followed by protracted court suits that leave title up in the air for years. Further, he reports that "over two-fifths of urban dwellers and almost all rural dwellers liv[e] in homes they have built. ... The obvious point is that self-built [mainly informal] housing is the main and most suitable means."

Surprisingly, Shawkat devotes little attention to the role of the military. The military's insistence that it has to approve almost any transaction involving land—on the theory that control over land is a matter of national security—has been a stifling hand on reform efforts and market forces.

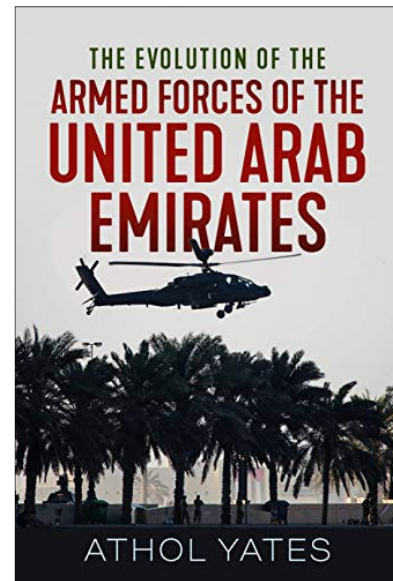
Shawkat endorses a variety of policies to facilitate self-built housing, but the bulk of his recommendations are for changes to government-funded housing, which seem hopelessly optimistic after considering the decades-long history of poor government management. Despite this, the book is an interesting and intriguing read.

Patrick Clawson

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**The Evolution of the Armed Forces of the United Arab Emirates. By Athol Yates. Warwick, U.K.: Helion and Co., 2020. 380 pp. \$69.95, paper.**

Yates' timely book recounts the history, challenges, and internal dynamics of building the most competent and modern military in the Arab world. Long dependent on foreigners to underwrite their security, Gulf Arab countries are facing the hard reality that global powers, particularly the United States, are little interested in being security guarantors in a



region where ethno-sectarianism shapes geopolitics. Yates, of Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi, argues that the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) armed forces have set a different course, helping the country steer in a more favorable direction.

The book has three parts: the physical, cultural, and political environment of the UAE military; its defining characteristics; and the evolution of each main force (army, navy, air force). Yates details how the UAE's federation was built on compromise, cunningness, and cooptation, and how this history has shaped the armed forces. The various rulers moved from developing their own armed forces for defending local interests to creating a unified and integrated military for the wider national interest. The second and third sections provide a descriptive and well-researched overview of the forces' core missions and institutional histories. The book concludes with an assessment of the UAE armed forces' effectiveness and discusses the cultural challenges facing Arab militaries.

The book's main strength is that it does not shy away from the region's taboos, such as the history of distrust among the different emirates, challenges to federation, and an

objective assessment of operational successes and failures. Discussing these issues makes the accomplishments of the UAE military more credible and convincing.

What is missing, however, is a more satisfying analysis of the sustainability of the UAE armed forces' progress. What helped the UAE armed forces become what they are today does not guarantee that their success will continue. The author assumes that the UAE military will advance as long as the country's enlightened leadership remains militarily savvy, is willing to spend big, and continues to wield a heavy hand in shaping the military's institutional culture. While the author points out that military culture must be aligned with national culture in order for it to sustain success, he does not assess whether that is likely to happen.

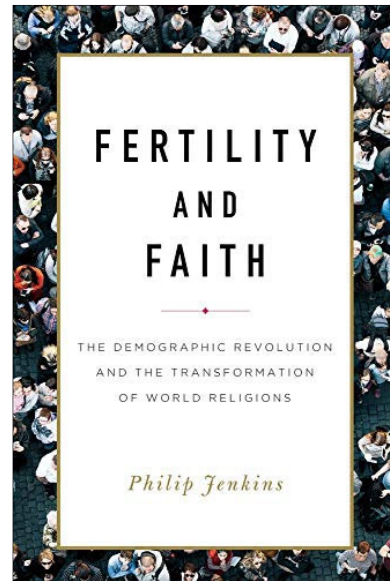
Despite this blind spot, the book is a deeply-researched and courageous attempt to give a transparent assessment and objective history of one of the most consequential and successful modern Arab militaries.

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All views are those of the author

[Fertility and Faith: The Demographic Revolution and the Transformation of World Religions.](#) By Philip Jenkins. Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2020. 270 pp. \$29.99.

Jenkins, distinguished professor of history at Baylor University in both title and in reality, announces at the start an intuitively obvious but powerful generalization:

High-fertility societies ... tend to be fervent, devout, and religiously enthusiastic. Conversely, the lower the fertility rate, and the smaller the family size, the greater the tendency to detach from organized or institutional religion.



Or, more succinctly, “fertility and faith travel together.” The bulk of Jenkins’ study then works out the sometimes counterintuitive implications of this thesis, for example, “What separates the winners and losers in the religious economy is not the soundness of their theology but their fertility rates.” Or this: “religions have to evolve new means of presenting their views” if they wish to survive and succeed. Or “security and stability tend to reduce fertility” (and thereby faith).

Turning to Muslims, Jenkins focuses on what he calls “two-tier Islam,” distinguishing between high-fertility countries like Yemen and Afghanistan, and low-fertility ones like Albania and Iran. The former is characterized by a “package of values” that includes communalism and communitarianism, traditional orientation, less gender equality, more sexual regimentation, more honor orientation, more aggression and instability, and unquestioning commitment to religious values. The latter is more Western in outlook, with high stability and a developed sense of individualism. So much do Iran’s rulers despise this increasingly Western outlook that Mahmoud Ahmedinejad in 2010 described wanting to consume more

rather than having children as “an act of genocide.”

Inconsistently, while Jenkins notes that “even Saudi Arabia is now below [demographic] replacement,” he also insists that “by no rational standard can Saudi Arabia ... be said to be moving in a secular direction.” In fact, there is massive evidence of such a move. To cite one statistic, a 2012 [WIN/Gallup survey](#) found that “convinced atheists” make up 5 percent of the population in Saudi Arabia while “not religious” persons account for 19 percent.

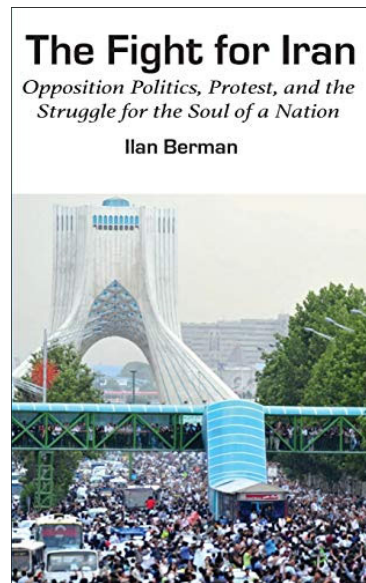
Jenkins throws off many an acute observation. Here are three: Demographics means “Global South Christians are in many ways more akin to their Muslim neighbors than their European coreligionists.” “The ideology of honor [is] a gauge of development rarely appreciated by policy makers.” Iran’s demographic decline “make[s] it less likely that the regime would succumb to any popular turbulence.”

As with other of Jenkins’ writings, this one offers much to chew on and occasionally to disagree with.

[The Fight for Iran: Opposition Politics, Protest, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Nation.](#) By Ilan Berman. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020. 98 pp. \$45 (\$42.50, eBook)

Berman, senior vice president at the American Foreign Policy Council, has usefully and briefly compiled information on leading Iranian opposition groups and the challenges facing them in this collection of previously published essays. His interest derives from the possibility that “these individuals and forces could very well end up inheriting the Iranian nation.”

Berman begins by summing up key characteristics of four external oppositionists. The last shah’s son, Reza Pahlavi, stands out



for his vision “of nonviolent resistance to Iran’s clerical regime.” In contrast, the Mujahideen-e Khalq, the most high profile and controversial of exile groups, “is convinced that the Iranian regime is simply too brutal, too entrenched and too invested in maintaining its hold on power to be removed solely by peaceful means. The alternative could well be armed resistance, and here the MeK holds a distinct advantage.”

Then, there is the Iranian-American activist, Masih Alinejad, who focuses her social media prowess on combating the mandatory women’s head-covering in Iran aiming “to harness this discontent into a broader, crowdsourced anti-regime movement.” Mariam Memarsadeghi and her Tavaana initiative hope

to build capacity within Iranian society through civic education and public dialogue on topics like women’s rights, Islamic reform and democratic values, issues which remain generally taboo within the Islamic Republic.

A survey of opposition within Iran follows. Here, Berman tells about Hamava, or

the Coalition of Committed for a Secular Democratic Iran, within the context of the radicalization that has taken place since 2009:

Back then, there remained some semblance of “loyal opposition” which sought reform of the Islamic Republic rather than its total dismantlement. ... Today, by contrast, Iranians are overwhelmingly united in their desire for a fundamental change in government.

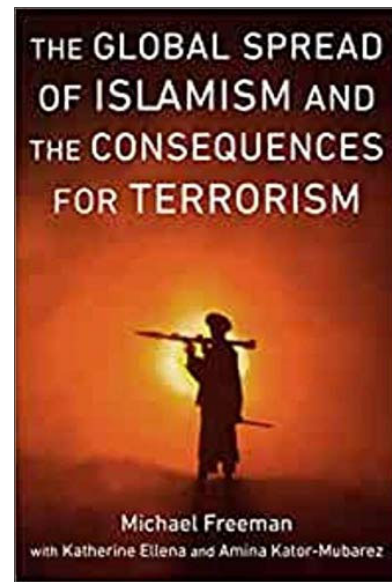
Finally, Berman sketches out some of the challenges facing oppositionists: the regime’s shutting down of the internet, the populations many and deep ethnic divisions, disagreements over what will come after the mullahs, a generational tension, and the power of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Readers cannot get a quicker, better briefing than *The Fight for Iran*.

**The Global Spread of Islamism and the Consequences for Terrorism. By Michael Freeman, with Katherine Ellena and Amina Kator-Mubarez. Lincoln, Neb.: Potomac Books, 2021. 264 pp. \$50.**

Freeman and his coauthors seek to explain why Islamist-based terrorist activity has increased globally since the 1980s. They suggest that traditional explanations typically focused on local factors, such as grievances, and might not account for a uniquely Islamist-inspired terrorism. Instead, the authors propose a “supply-side” explanation, in particular, the supply of the Islamist ideology that underpins it.

The authors point to the momentous events of 1979—the Iranian Revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the seizing of the Great Mosque in Mecca—as a perfect storm in terms of ideological radicalization in the Islamic world and the increase in terrorist



activity during the decades that followed. They trace this increase to the response of Saudi Arabia—newly awash in oil money as a result of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries’ (OPEC) oil-supply cuts—and specifically, its decision to bankroll the construction of mosques, cultural centers, charities, imams, and publishing houses to promote an extreme and “purist” form of Islam, Wahhabism, in countries all over the world: thus, the “supply.”

The study explores how the Saudis and Saudi-backed organizations, including the Muslim World League, World Association of Muslim Youth, al-Haramain Foundation, and the International Islamic Relief Organization, funneled billions into these institutions in Muslim-majority countries (Pakistan, Indonesia) and in Western countries with well-ensconced and growing Muslim minority communities (United Kingdom, United States). Indeed, these four countries constitute the book’s case studies with one chapter devoted to each. Notably, the chapter on the United Kingdom establishes that it has become the global epicenter of Islamist publishing.

In the final chapter, the authors identify a set of methods, such as “arrest,” “expulsion,”

and even “deradicalization programs” to combat what they term the “violent outputs” of Islamist ideology. They offer examples for each from countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, the United Kingdom, and the United States, but they do not link these into a cohesive framework. The authors also state that reining in Islamist ideology really boils down to a “decoupling of the centuries-old alliance between the Saudis and the Wahhabis,” which remains “unlikely.” But the authors hint that the Islamist genie is out of the bottle, and if that is true, then Saudi financing of Islamist ideology, and perhaps the fate of Saudi Arabia, might matter less going forward.

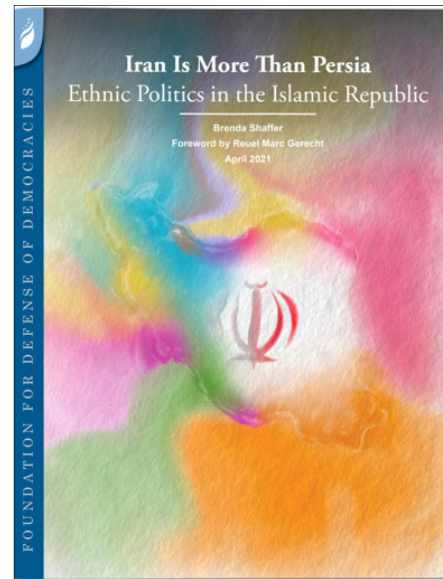
Overall, the authors seek to tackle an important issue, but their book could have benefited from a more systematic analysis of current data regarding trends on the often nebulous link between financing, ideology, and violence.

Susan M. Jellissen  
Belmont University

[Iran Is More than Persia: Ethnic Politics in the Islamic Republic.](#) By Brenda Shaffer. Washington: Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, 2021. 44 pp. Gratis.

The enigmatic title means that Persian-speakers make up slightly less than half of Iran’s population; more bluntly, Iran is not a country but an empire. If the great sea empires (British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish) nearly disappeared sixty years ago, the great land empires (with the exception of the Russian, mostly gone thirty years ago) live on, conveniently hiding under their contiguity: the Chinese, Ethiopian, Burmese, and Persian.

Shaffer provides a much-needed summary of the Persian Empire, laying out how, in all respects but power, Persians are a minority: geography, demographics, linguistics. Because they rule, however, Persian-speakers can discriminate in all the usual ways against the



empire’s minority peoples, including the Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Arabs, Lurs, Gilaks, Mazanis, Turkmans, and Baluch. They deploy negative stereotypes (“portraying Arabs as primitive and extremist and Azerbaijanis as stupid”), engage in environmental degradation, prohibit instruction in local languages, import allied forces from Lebanon and Iraq to quell disturbances, assassinate anti-regime expatriates, and encourage Persian-speakers to move into majority-minority regions. Just as in China, political activity to promote ethnic minority cultural and language rights is condemned as “separatism.” To make matters worse, even the Persian-speaking opposition shares this outlook.

Discontented minorities complicate relations with many of Iran’s neighbors, and especially those in which its minorities also live: Iraq, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Afghanistan. “The regime’s future hold over Iran’s ethnic minorities is far from guaranteed,” Shaffer writes, and, ultimately, the minorities “could pose challenges for the stability of the Islamic Republic.” Indeed, “[i]n an acute regime crisis, the ethnic factor could play a role in toppling the government.”

Shaffer believes the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan “was a watershed moment” for Iran’s largest minority. Which makes one wonder: the Soviet Union split into fifteen countries; when its day of reckoning comes, how many will Iran become?

**Iranian Women and Gender in the Iran-Iraq War. By Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2021. 457 pp. \$90 (\$24.95, paper).**

In 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini led the Islamic Revolution, and opposition to the shah united most of Khomeini’s followers. As he and his clerics consolidated power, resistance among many Iranians grew—especially the more secular and liberal. Khomeini’s strict religious interpretations hit women hard. While some women rallied around Khomeini—most famously Masoumeh Ebtekar, the spokeswoman of the hostage-takers—many others were aghast at forced veiling and efforts to curtail the professions and education available to women. Some believed clerical rule could not last.

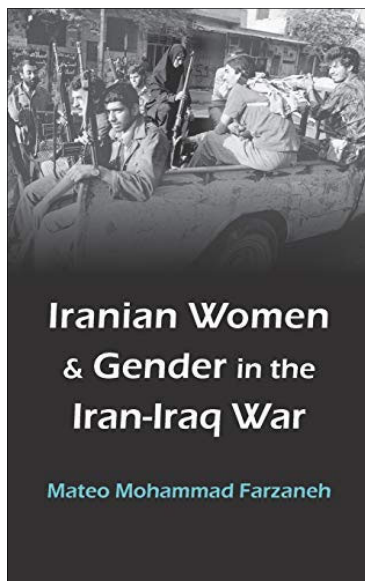
It did. One main reason was the Iran-Iraq

war. The September 1980 invasion by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq created a crisis that rallied Iranians. The military history and political history of the 1980-88 war, and even Iranian art and graphic design of the era, are well studied, but Farzaneh, a history professor at Northeastern Illinois University and a volunteer during the war, contributes a missing piece with an in-depth and well-written study of women.

Farzaneh notes millions of Iranian women participated in the war effort: fighting alongside men, gathering intelligence, working as doctors, truck drivers, journalists, and donating blood. Many also contributed gold and money to fund the war effort. Most served as catalysts for men in their family to volunteer and fight. However, many suffered sexual and physical violence. Farzaneh argues that the significance of women’s contributions was that it allowed them to escape centuries-long “gender roles and sociocultural limitations.”

While Farzaneh focuses on the Iran-Iraq war, he provides ample background both to the diplomacy and politics that preceded Saddam’s invasion, and the situation of women in the decades prior to the Islamic Revolution. He carefully differentiates between groups of women—religious and secular, urban and rural, Persian and ethnic minority. Such nuance and appreciation for Iran’s complexity distinguishes Farzaneh’s historical approach from the theoretical takes fashionable in Middle Eastern and gender studies programs.

Some chapters have a geographical focus, for example, about the women of Khorramshahr and Abadan, two cities that took the brunt of the initial Iraqi invasion and subsequent fighting. Others examine women in the government and those that founded and worked in grassroots organizations. A separate chapter on female prisoners of war based on primary sources expands knowledge of the broader conflict.



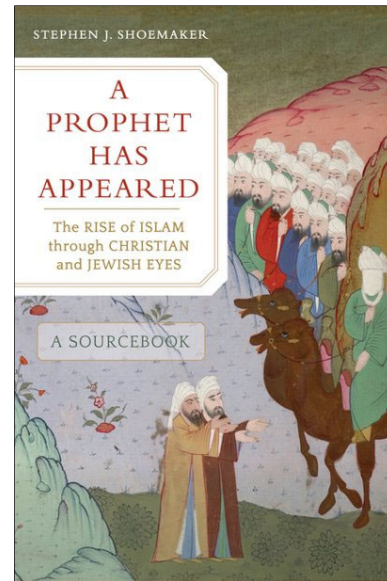
In his final two chapters, Farzaneh considers the continuing impact of the war on women, especially those married or related to those missing or killed, and the role of women in Iranian society today. Many Iranian propagandists laud the Islamic Republic's advancement of women. Farzaneh is no apologist and takes a more honest approach. "There is a long list of unmet expectations by women who participated in the war," he notes. "Women's education and participation in the war have not, however, provided them with a broader say in what is decided on their behalf by the patriarchy."

While Farzaneh undercuts the seriousness of his narrative at times with diversions, these are relatively few and do not detract from the broader contributions of the book.

Michael Rubin

[A Prophet Has Appeared: The Rise of Islam through Christian and Jewish Eyes: A Sourcebook](#). By Stephen J. Shoemaker. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021. 306 pp. \$90 (paper and ebook, \$34.95).

Shoemaker, a professor of religious studies at the University of Oregon, has written several [path-breaking books on early Islam](#); here, he complements them with a sourcebook collecting and translating twenty contemporaneous texts by non-Muslims (all Christians and Jews) about the first century of Islam. These have exceptional importance because the entire Muslim historical tradition relies on accounts from centuries later which are, as Shoemaker puts it, "notoriously unreliable." In contrast, "all the relevant contemporary witnesses to the rise of Muhammad's new religious community" come from non-Muslims. Better yet, they often confirm each other, for example, about the central importance of Jerusalem among Muhammad's followers. The result is a marvel of concision



and originality; best of all, it is readily accessible to the general reader.

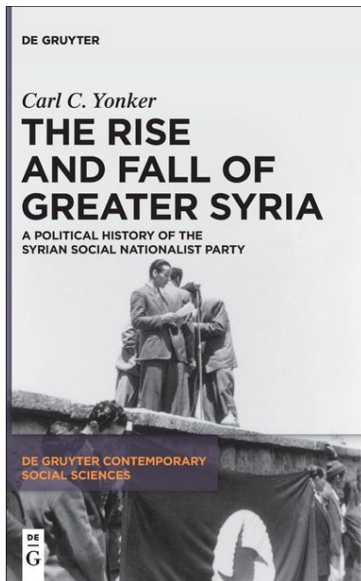
Those twenty excerpts tend to be brief; Shoemaker helpfully introduces each one, provides the passages in translation, and then draws conclusions. But the most eye-popping insights come in the course of his substantial introduction to the volume. Some examples:

- "Muhammad and his followers were determined, it would appear, to liberate the biblical Holy Land of the Abrahamic patrimony from the sinful Romans who were illicitly occupying it."
- "In its early history Muhammad's religious movement was closely linked to Judaism." It was open to Christians as well.
- "The earliest Islamic community appears to have been a loosely organized confederation of Abrahamic monotheists. [Muhammad] served as an arbiter among the members of this inter-confessional community and their spiritual guide, rather than a prophet with a new dispensation."
- "It is not at all clear that the faith and practice of Muhammad and his earliest followers was identical with the



religious faith that would eventually emerge as Islam.”

*A Prophet Has Appeared* is one of the most readable and exciting books in Islamic history.



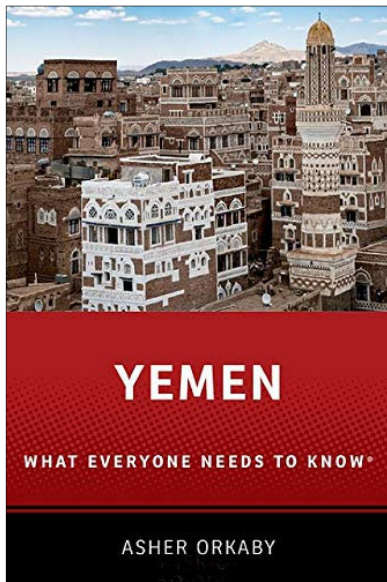
**[The Rise and Fall of Greater Syria: A Political History of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.](#)** By Carl C. Yonker. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021. 291 pp. €77.95, \$89.99.

On the positive side, *Rise and Fall* meticulously traces the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), one of the Middle East’s most interesting organizations, through the decades, and especially the years 1932-59, documenting its twists and turns as it sought either to overthrow the existing order in Lebanon and Syria or retreated back to a more cautious stance. Yonker, a lecturer in the

Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Tel Aviv University, is true to Israel’s Germanic scholarly tradition.

On the negative side, Yonker’s disappointing study follows those twists and turns without seeing their larger significance for the two countries most involved or the surrounding region. His book reads like a cross between a medieval chronicle and an overly-long graduate student paper. Lists of facts, members, and other pedestrian data will leave most readers wondering why they should care about the SSNP. A typical sentence informs us that SSNP candidates for the Lebanese parliamentary elections in 1953 “were selected at a joint meeting of the Higher Council and Council of Deputies presided over by ‘Abd al-Masih and included Adib Qadurra (Beirut—fourth district), Asad al-Ashqar (Metn), ‘Abdallah Sa’adeh (Koura), Ali Halawa (Tyre), and Nadhmi Azkul (Bekaa el-Gharbi).” So engrossed is Yonker in these minutiae, he devotes only a few paragraphs to the larger topic of the SSNP’s lasting impact on Levantine politics.

Other problems include a misleading title; it should be something like “The Rise and Fall of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party,” for the SSNP’s early history, and not the larger topic of Greater Syria, is Yonker’s near-exclusive focus; King Abdullah I of Jordan and Hafiz Assad of Syria, the two other main protagonists of Greater Syria, receive only cursory mentions. Oddly, Yonker never introduces or explains Antun Sa’adeh, the SSNP’s founder and the dominant character of his study. Eccentrically, he denies that the SSNP’s ideology and aims in its heyday were not, as near-universally accepted, fascist, without offering an alternative explanation. Finally, the book contains too many Arabic mistakes (*um, nahna*) and other minor errors.



[Yemen: What Everyone Needs to Know.](#)  
By Asher Orkaby. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 214 pp, \$74, \$18.95 (paper).

The author, a young scholar at Princeton University, disdains non-specialists on Yemen (“most Westerners,” he notes, “can scarcely find [it] on a map”), and he rejects nearly everything that we think we know about the current situation (i.e., who is making war on whom, the nature of the Houthi movement). Orkaby is also fiercely protective of Yemenis, to the point of apologetics:

Rather than be defined by violence and fighting, tribal life is a rich cultural experience. Communal dances, poetry recitations, religious education, and the elaborate celebrations of life milestones and holidays are important parts of idyllic tribal life and manifestations of Yemen’s rich cultural and social history.

Idyllic?

Fortunately, Orkaby himself provides the evidence to refute such silliness. For example, he writes,

As late as 2010, the Yemeni government continued to perpetuate the false generalization that their country has no ethnic groups and is entirely homogenous, when in fact Yemen has longstanding and institutionalized racism based on loose historical backgrounds and skin color.

Despite these drawbacks, *Yemen* has much to teach the non-specialist. How many readers know about the Salafi school in Dammaj, the Hashid and Bakil tribal confederations, the vital function of flash floods in Yemeni agriculture, the key role of Stafford Bettesworth Haines, the Famous Forty, the *akhdam* slave class, or the coffee beverage called *qishr*? This reader learned that the Hadramawt region has just 1.2 million inhabitants, but its diaspora is ten times larger (making it a Middle Eastern version of Ireland) and was surprised to realize the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen’s declaration of independence on October 30, 1918, made it the first modern Arab state to proclaim itself sovereign.

Turning to the current civil war and the desperate humanitarian situation accompanying it, Orkaby proves a reliable guide to its complexities, pointing out important but little-known facts, such as the country’s dependence on imports for 90 percent of its wheat and 100 percent of its rice.

As befits a book of this description, it has no overarching thesis but contains a compendium of useful information, using OUP’s “what everyone needs to know” model of short questions and long answers. While some questions are a bit obvious (“Is there a

social hierarchy in Yemeni society?”) and the information somewhat random, reading through the volume leaves the reader with a sense of Yemen’s history and culture, one of the world’s more insulated and interesting.

