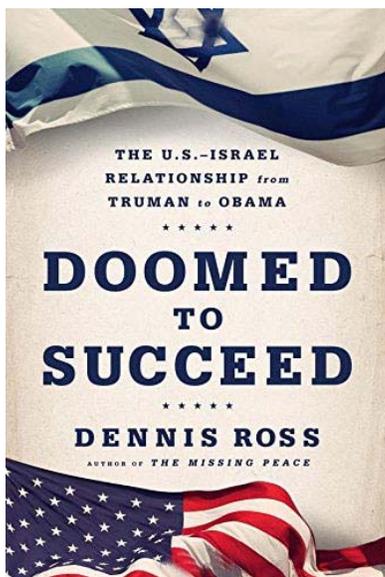


Brief Reviews, Fall 2016



Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama. By Dennis Ross. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016. 512 pp. \$30 (\$17, paper).

In *Doomed to Succeed*, Ross, a diplomat and advisor who served five U.S. presidents, documents the history of the mostly misguided U.S. peace efforts in the Middle East dating back to Franklin Roosevelt. While the early sections are a rehash of well-known facts, the recap is needed to reinforce Ross's thesis that misguided Arabists, who view Israel as a major irritant in relations with the Arab world, have continually and adversely influenced U.S. policy in the region.

Readers familiar with the history of U.S.-Israel relations may want to jump directly to the chapters starting with the

Reagan administration when Ross became personally involved in policy-making. His eyewitness account of decision-making is insightful and reveals the structural, personal, and ideological reasons why the relationship with Israel is close but often turbulent.

Ronald Reagan, for example, despite being revered as one of Israel's best White House friends, could be the most punitive president when Israel angered him. George H.W. Bush's attitudes as vice president foreshadowed his animus toward Israel. Obama was angered by Netanyahu's declaration, prior to his reelection as prime minister, that he would never accept a Palestinian state; Obama considered other comments to be anti-democratic, prompting the president to warn that he would "re-evaluate" policy toward Israel.

Ross was often ostracized or impeded by the Arabists, in part because he did not believe relations with Israel were a zero-sum game in which ties with Arab states would suffer if Washington maintained a close alliance with Israel. Not surprisingly, the Obama State Department withheld the "peace process" portfolio from Ross. But, Obama's early missteps led the administration to bring Ross back to handle Israeli-Palestinian issues.

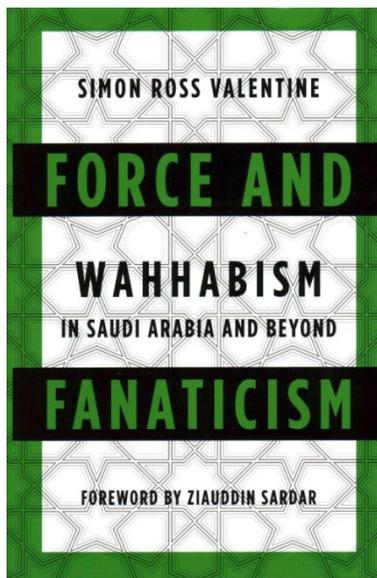
Ross argues that Arab leaders do not particularly care about the Palestinians:

The Palestinian issue has indeed been a centerpiece for Arab leaders, but more to use as leverage against us or against each other.

Ross finds the problem in U.S. Middle East policy boils down to the fact that

too often our policy makers did not understand the fundamental realities in the region ... We not only made basic mistakes, but we repeated these over time. Those past mistakes, and their rationales, continue to echo today.

Mitchell Bard
American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise



Force and Fanaticism: Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and Beyond. By Simon Ross Valentine. London: Hurst, 2015. 256 pp. \$34.95.

Valentine, a British Methodist pastor and teacher who taught in Saudi Arabia, has written a useful book about the desert kingdom. Most interesting is its exploration of how the monarchy is “the single greatest force in spreading Islamic fundamentalism”; it “has spent as much as \$100 billion to

spread Wahhabism in the West,” yet “America and Britain have been, and are continuing to be, implicit supporters of Wahhabism.”

Valentine discusses the background of how this “unholy alliance” came about. He warns: “If the West simply ignores it, Saudi Arabia’s role in international terrorism seems likely to worsen rather than conveniently disappear.” This is troubling considering that “ISIS is Saudi Arabia’s latest monstrous contribution to world history.”

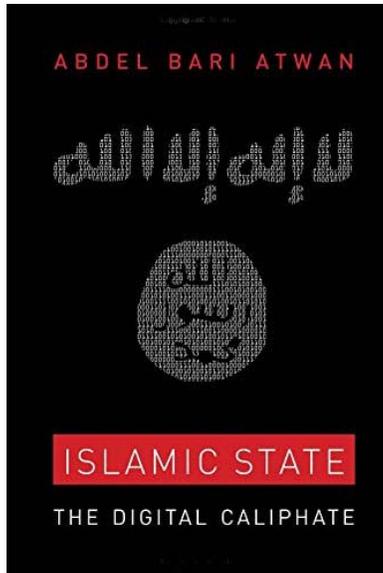
The author explores important topics, including the *mutawwa*, or religious police, and provides useful historical context, discussing the origins of Wahhabism, its alliance with the House of Saud, and the oil discoveries that changed everything.

Unfortunately, a large chunk of the book is devoted to separating Islam from Wahhabism, meaning the author never gets to root matters. Anything positive is attributed to Islam and anything negative—misogyny, draconian punishments, execution of apostates, persecution of non-Muslims—to Wahhabism.

This position stems from the author’s own cultural presuppositions. He “felt confused and puzzled” by Wahhabi intolerance and the “attempt to propagate their beliefs by force.” In all his conversations with “ulema, imams, Mutawa and Saudis generally, there was never a mention of ‘love.’” In fact, Islam’s prophet, Muhammad, followed by countless caliphs, did sanction the use of force; and while Islam attributes ninety-nine characteristics to God, love is not one of them.

Valentine’s readers would benefit much more had he simply laid out his useful information concerning the inner workings of the Saudi regime and its unholy alliance with the West, without trying to tackle the deep question of what Islam really is.

Raymond Ibrahim
Middle East Forum



Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate.
By Abdel Bari Atwan. Berkeley:
University of California Press, 2015.
256 pp. \$24.95.

At best, Atwan's book amounts to a rehash of common facts and knowledge associated with the Islamic State. Worse, it contains a large number of errors, ultimately rendering the account worthless.

For example, the author, former editor-in-chief of the London-based *al-Quds al-Arabi*, claims that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) "has already pledged allegiance to [ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-] Baghdadi." In fact, AQAP remains loyal to al-Qaeda leader Ayman Zawahiri and explicitly rejects ISIS's caliphate claim. Atwan claims that Libya's Ansar ash-Sharia declared allegiance to Baghdadi and announced an Islamic emirate in Derna in October 2014. No: Ansar ash-Sharia remains loyal to al-Qaeda while the group in Derna, which pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, is called the Islamic Shura Youth Council.

The author claims to draw on special contacts and sources that give him unique insights into the Islamic State. But one such

source, allegedly close to the ISIS leadership, having spent time in prison with Baghdadi, speaks of the latter's release in 2006 while prison records document Baghdadi's release in 2004.

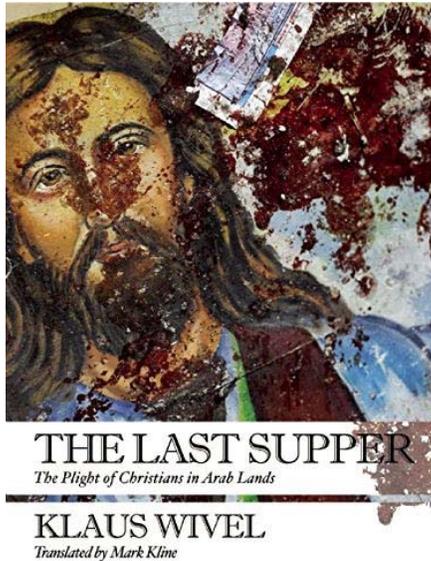
A number of books on the Islamic State, themselves flawed, offer useful information and perspectives. Berger and Stern's *ISIS: The State of Terror*¹ is weak on ISIS's growth on the ground in Syria but has good detail on the exploitation of social media. Such redeeming features cannot be found in *The Digital Caliphate*, a work that is also littered with political prejudices such as the author's speculation, rooted in his anti-Israel sentiments, that the final trigger that galvanized the U.S. decision to invade Iraq was "Saddam's use of oil as a potent political weapon against Israel." Anyone interested in the Islamic State—general reader or specialist—should avoid this book.

Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi
Middle East Forum

The Last Supper: The Plight of Christians in Arab Lands. By Klaus Wivel. Trans. by Mark Kline. New York: New Vessel Press, 2016. 220 pp. \$16.95, paper.

Danish journalist Wivel is to be commended for shedding light on an important but ignored topic, the plight of present-day, Arabic-speaking Christians. His firsthand discussions with an assortment of Christians offer helpful insights. Among these are the cultural differences between Copts, Greek Orthodox Palestinians, and Maronites, who are often conflated as "Mideast Christians." His discussions with an Egyptian teacher and Iraqi politician are especially useful: Public schools in their countries have removed Christianity from history texts so that indigenous Christians are now seen as foreigners.

¹ New York: Ecco, 2015.



Unfortunately, the book fails to deliver. Despite its ambitious subtitle, it confines itself to too small a vista. Of the twenty-two Arab states, the book covers only Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, and the West Bank-Gaza. It does not mention the chronic persecution of Christians in Syria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Sudan, countries where, according to a 2016 study,² Christians fare far worse than the places the author visited. In addition, the work is outdated; originally published in Danish in 2013, the genocide against Christians under ISIS receives no mention.

Finally, Wivel's ubiquitous use of first person makes the book read like a travel memoir. While detailed and dramatic descriptions of atmospheric meetings in restaurants are all well and good in a magazine, they are inappropriate for a book of this nature.

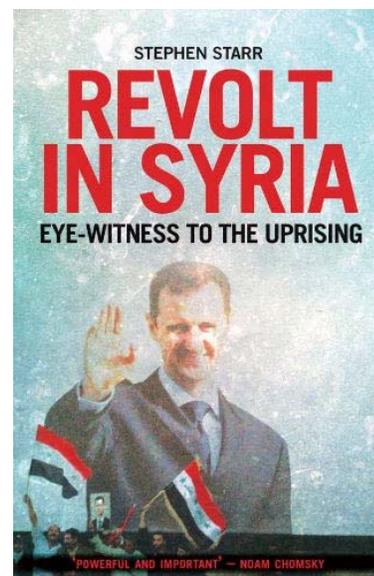
Those seeking useful and current information about Christians in Arab lands need, therefore, look elsewhere.

Raymond Ibrahim

Revolt in Syria: Eyewitness to the Uprising, 2nd ed. By Stephen Starr. London: Hurst, 2015. 256 pp. \$20.

The first year of the Syrian civil war gave rise to a number of books focusing on the uprising against the dictatorship of Bashar Assad, with many predicting the imminent fall of the regime. *Revolt in Syria: Eyewitness to the Uprising* is one such work, written by an Irish journalist who lived in Syria for a number of years before the uprising and who reported on its early stages for major Western newspapers.

Writings on the Syrian uprising covering only its first year have understandably become dated, so *Revolt in Syria* is best read as a period piece. In this way, Starr's contribution benefits from the journalist's several years of experience in Syria and his obvious acquaintance with both the geography of Damascus and the fabric of daily life under the Baathist regime. His account consists largely of a series of conversations with a variety of mostly younger Syrians, including activists in the uprising as well as sympathizers with the regime.



² [“2016 World Watch List.”](#) Open Doors, Santa Ana.

Despite some skepticism toward the regime, however, the author is not immune to illusions about Syria that were peddled before the country came apart at the seams. Some passages read like they were produced by the pre-2011 Ministry of Tourism, perhaps a reflection of Starr's work for *The Syria Times*, a government-owned English language publication. Thus, he notes in one passage that "Syria's Christians ... find far more in common with their Sunni and Shia countrymen than with the Christians of elsewhere around the world ... There is much to tie Syrians together."

Revolt in Syria displays some insights and knowledge regarding the daily workings of pre-civil war Syrian society. But these observations are all too often accompanied by statements reflecting a conventional wisdom on Syria and the Middle East which now seems restricted and dated. Calling the targeting of regime soldiers and policemen by rebels, for example, "acts of terrorism, however desperate, not acts of war" sounds in 2016 like regime propaganda. However, Starr is not an unequivocal Assad supporter. At the time he wrote these words, they would have sounded bland and within the conventional consensus that afforded the regime an untroubled essential legitimacy. The book is a message from a Middle East past, which, only five years gone, is already remote.

Jonathan Spyer
Rubin Center for Research in
International Affairs

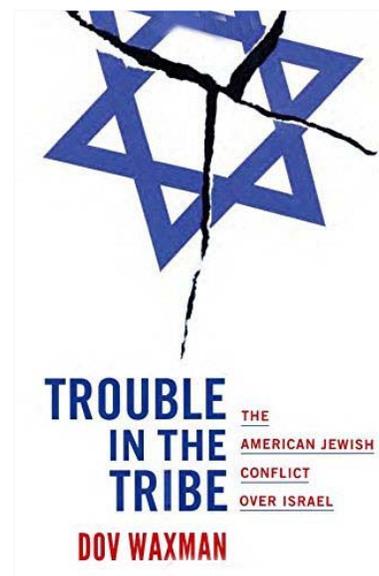
Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict over Israel. By Dov Waxman. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016. 288 pp. \$29.95.

Recent debate among American Jews over Israel and its policies has attracted increasing attention. Waxman, a professor of political science at Northeastern University, traces the development of this debate over

decades and illustrates how it has become so passionate and divisive.

Using a number of polls, Waxman ably demonstrates that American Jews are much like Israeli Jews, whom he describes as "hawkish doves," no longer believing a negotiated solution with the Palestinian Authority is possible though most would favor one if it were. When he attempts a breakdown of American Jewish political divisions, however, he is less successful. Waxman correctly declares that the so-called "right-wing camp" believes that Palestinian statehood will not bring peace since Palestinian Arabs seek to destroy Israel, not to live in peace alongside it. But if this is just a "right-wing" view, how should one explain what he himself points out on the basis of surveys, that three-quarters of American Jews also believe that Palestinian Arabs seek Israel's destruction, not statehood.

Waxman's explanation for the increasing distancing of young American Jews from Israel is also open to serious doubt. He believes that they are increasingly knowledgeable about Israel and estranged by what he ominously calls "the Occupation." A far more likely possibility is that the younger generation of American Jews, increasingly



assimilated, marinated in the politically liberal views of the media and their teachers, and less traditionally Jewish, simply knows less about, and subsequently, feels less for Israel. The experience in campus affairs of the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), which this author heads, shows that once Jewish students learn the facts about the Arab and Islamic war against Israel, they become pro-Israel. ZOA professionals on campuses throughout the country have reported that many students who were previously ignorant or hostile to Israel joined ZOA campus efforts and organizations after attending pro-Israel events and advocacy sessions.

While Waxman speaks hopefully of today's American dissenters as being a

potentially benign source of pressure on the Israel government to work for the speedy creation of a Palestinian state, the opposite is more likely the case. It is far more probable that an American Jewry that drifts further from its pro-Israel moorings and the realities of Israel's situation is likely to have decreasing influence on the views of Israelis and their government.

Ultimately, the book's systematic flaw of conflating left-wing, anti-Israel activism with liberal Jewish idealism muddies rather than clarifies an important subject.

Morton Klein
Zionist Organization of America

