

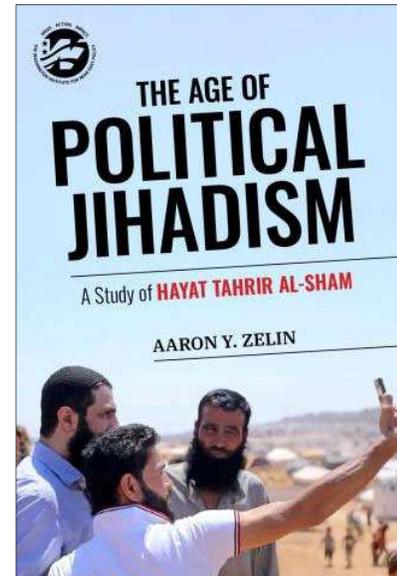
Brief Reviews, Winter 2023

The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. By Aaron Y. Zelin. Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2022. 92 pp. [Free download.](#)

Zelin, a researcher of Sunni jihadist movements, seeks both to outline and to analyze the trajectory of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a jihadist movement founded in Syria in the course of the civil war. HTS today maintains an autonomous area of control in Idlib province in Syria's north-west. It governs through a body known as the Syrian Salvation Government, but HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani is the acknowledged true ruler of this area.

Zelin outlines the trajectory of HTS from a closed, clandestine al-Qaeda franchise called Jabhat al-Nusra, which emerged in 2012, to its current status as a ruling authority (or “inchoate polity” as Zelin calls it). He also asks the question of whether the group's current status as a de-facto ruling power should lead to its delisting from the U.S. terror list. He notes that this is clearly a goal that HTS and its leader Jawlani are seeking, as may be seen from the latter's efforts to present the movement via regional media as a responsible governing authority.

By way of an answer, Zelin examines the evidence, noting HTS's crushing of Huras al-Din in 2020. The latter group had emerged from more purist, doctrinaire cadres of HTS's forerunner, Jabhat al-Nusra. He also looks into the earlier differences between HTS and the Khorasan group, which was part of al-Qaeda and linked to the overall leadership of that network. He concludes that



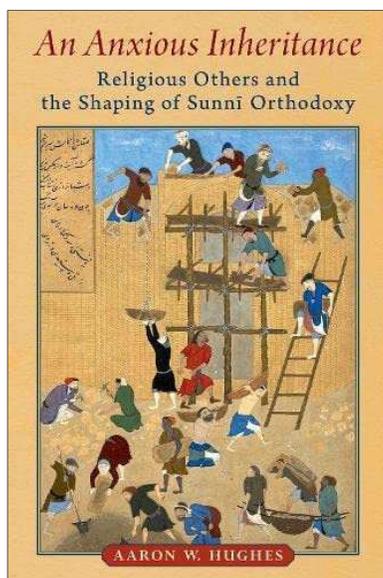
the differences between Nusra and Khorasan were genuine and that HTS should be taken seriously in its claims that it is no longer seeking to initiate international operations but, rather, is focused on Syria.

Interestingly, Zelin notes that HTS in Idlib has come in many ways to resemble a “traditional Arab government” in its repressive nature, but also in its orientation towards power and politics, rather than a purist approach to global jihad. He further observes that Turkey maintains an “unstated alliance” with HTS. This partial transition to governing authority represents, as Zelin correctly points out, a unique direction so far for an Arab Sunni jihadist movement. The author terms the current position of HTS as “political jihadism.” He concludes by recommending that Washington not remove HTS's terror designation yet, but rather work, perhaps through back channels, to present a

list of demands that the group could fulfil in order to move towards delisting.

The Age of Political Jihadism is an important work on a significant subject. HTS and Jawlani are among the less likely survivors of the Syrian war. It is not yet clear if the “political jihadism” of HTS and its exercise of authority will remain an anomaly or prove a harbinger for Arab Sunni jihadist organizations. This reviewer suspects that it may well prove the former. Still, Zelin has succeeded in providing a succinct, well-researched, and readable account of the key aspects of the group’s changing nature, along with a cogent analysis of the significance of its trajectory.

Jonathan Spyer
Middle East Forum



An Anxious Inheritance: Religious Others and the Shaping of Sunni Orthodoxy. By Aaron W. Hughes. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. 264 pp. \$99.

Hughes, a professor of religious studies at the University of Rochester, views the genesis of Islam through a religious studies lens. He characterizes Islam’s “quest for

normativity” in its early centuries as an “eminently political and ideological,” psychologically-driven project of late antiquity in which Sunni orthodoxy emerged gradually from fluid beginnings.

Hughes contends that, to articulate the faith of Islam, Muslims reimagined pre-existing religions, driven by an “anxiety” due to similarities between Islam and those other faiths. To alleviate this anxiety, Muslims had to “differentiate the new community from those that came before”: they were “extracting” Sunni orthodoxy “out of a complex set of comparative procedures.”

Thus was early Islam’s take on other faiths a literary creation driven by a need for self-definition: “actual Jews and actual Christians were reduced to safe literary stereotypes, where they could now be marginalized and be both actively and legally resisted.” Early Islam’s portrayal of the life of Muhammad, likewise, was “not a work of history, but one of hagiography.” This also accounts for Sunni orthodoxy’s dismissal of “heretic” Muslims.

Hughes carefully avoids negative judgments of the Sunni orthodoxy he exposes. Three examples:

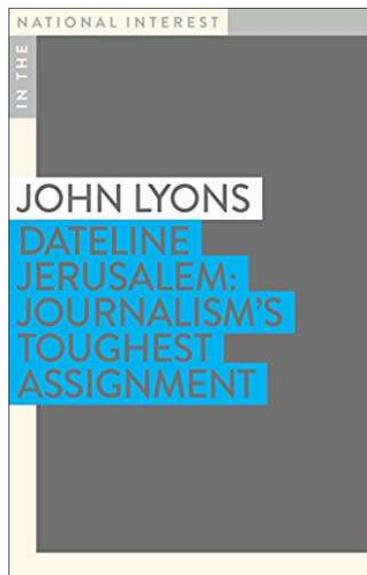
First, he characterizes Muhammad’s claim that Jews exist under God’s wrath and Christians have gone astray as merely “cynical.” His apology for the “intensity” of this characterization is that “the early Muslim community needed to define itself,” and “the only way to do this was to prevent Muslims—and of course non-Muslims—from mistaking the new religion for its predecessors.” In the case of Judaism, this was “not anti-Semitism” but a “natural process” of self-differentiation.

Second, Hughes ascribes Islam’s supersessionism (i.e., its abrogating what it claims to replace) to anxiety. But could not other motivations, for example, the will to dominate, better account for this?

Third, he insists that the Qur'an projects "a doctrinally underdefined Islam" with semantically vague categories. But did not Islamic supersessionism endure for precisely the opposite reason because Qur'anic theology was grounded in clearly defined concepts?

Hughes's thesis that Sunni Islam reduces non-Muslims and "internal others" to literary fictions is compelling and a challenge to Islamic studies' uncritical acceptance of polemical sources, but his psychological explanation is less convincing.

Mark Durie
Melbourne School of Theology



Dateline Jerusalem: Journalism's Toughest Assignment. By John Lyons. Clayton, Aus.: Monash University Publishing, 2021. 91 pp. \$19.95, paper.

Lyons' *Dateline Jerusalem* purports to be an exposé of how Australia's pro-Israel lobby bullies the media into self-censoring its

coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Mercifully slim, *Dateline* will test the patience of anyone expecting extraordinary claims to include proof. Despite six years as Middle East correspondent for *The Australian*, Lyons' observations on Israel and the Jewish world are often shallow, reflexively critical, and conspiratorial.

His core claim: while the lobby claims that "Israel's dispute with the Palestinians is complicated ... It's not. It's blindingly simple." In 1967, Israel occupied land set aside by the United Nations for a Palestinian state and refuses to leave it. Lyons ignores anything contradicting this reductionism. He does not mention, for example, the Oslo accords, let alone the century-long Palestinian Arab rejection of Jewish statehood and successive Israeli offers to create a Palestinian state. He also airbrushes the intifada, the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, and Hamas's subsequent takeover.

Lyons insists that "the claim of anti-Semitism is frequently made against critical reporting of Israel," resulting in censorship of news, without citing one bona fide example. He also gets wrong the alleged examples of major news events the Australian media refused to cover.

His spurious claim that pro-Israel lobby groups—smeared by the author as "far right"—pay lip service to the two-state solution while secretly dreaming of a "Greater Israel" is similarly almost evidence-free. Ignoring decades of statements and op-eds to the contrary, he largely relies on a single throw-away line to that effect from a non-Jewish journalist for proof.

Factual errors abound. For instance, Lyons claims that an unnamed "prominent U.S.-based, pro-Israel lobby group" labelled former *New York Times* Middle East correspondent Jodi Rudoren a "Nazi bitch."

Asked to confirm this, Rudoren said she did not remember any such incident.¹ The book's footnotes often contradict its claims, including a canard that Israel used white phosphorous as a "chemical weapon" against Gazans during the 2008-09 war.

Unsurprisingly, the usual anti-Israel suspects showered the book with praise. However, two veteran Australian newspaper editors, Michael Gawenda and Peter Fray, challenged Lyons' portrayal of a supine media subservient to the pro-Israel lobby and chastised his failure to offer basic supporting evidence.

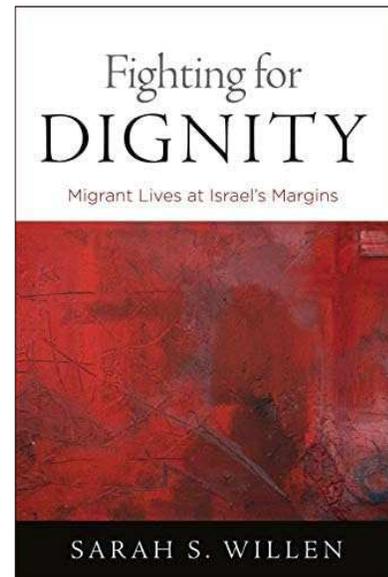
Dateline Jerusalem—poorly-researched, self-absorbed, and factually inaccurate—serves only as a case study in anti-Israel obsession.

Allon Lee
Australia/Israel
and Jewish Affairs Council

Fighting for Dignity: Migrant Lives at Israel's Margins. By Sarah S. Willen. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 302 pp. \$85.95 (\$32.50, paper).

Willen's theme is simple: illegal workers in Tel Aviv are "humans not criminals." An associate professor of anthropology at the University of Connecticut, she became personally involved in the lives of foreign workers who came to Israel on work visas in the late 1990s. Once the visas had expired or legal working positions were no longer available to the workers, their status became illegal and they were subject to deportation.

Willen describes the difficult lives of her



subjects and their plight when the government expelled them. She makes the case for deported workers she knew personally and their constant fear of separation from their families. She memorializes a victim killed during a deportation raid.

Living mostly underground in squalor and fear, ethnic groupings create networks of cooperation and religious fellowship that enable them to live what Willen calls "dignified" and "flourishing" lives. She participated in the life cycle events of the "victims" in their homes and at their churches.

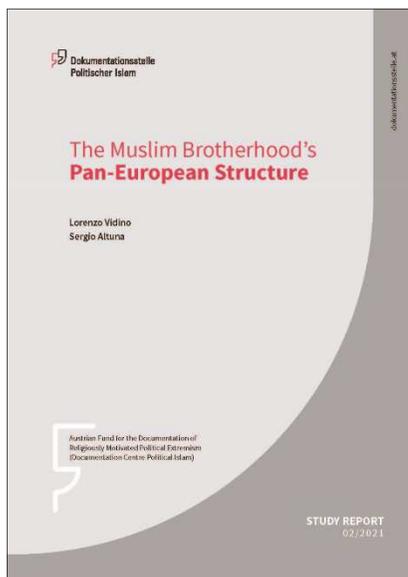
Why, Willen asks, can these Christians and Muslims not apply for Israeli citizenship when Russian immigrants who are not confirmed Jews are allowed to do so? She invokes racial profiling and criticizes the treatment of Israeli Arabs, whom she calls disadvantaged and "systematically discriminated" against. Contrarily, she shows zero compassion for a small country with a limited capacity to absorb large numbers of migrants and their families. Even as one comes to sympathize with their very human

¹ Jodi Rudoren, DM Twitter, Oct. 9, 2021; Allon Lee, "[Media Microscope](#): No Smoke, No Fire," Australia/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council, Melbourne, Oct. 26, 2021.

plight, the question arises, must one condone illegality?

More broadly, this ethnography raises questions along the lines of: How does Israel compare with the very porous borders of the European Union and the United States? What rights has a sovereign government to regulate its migratory policies? What is morality? Unfortunately, the author does not answer them.

Judith Friedman Rosen
CUNY Graduate School



[The Muslim Brotherhood's Pan-European Structure.](#) By Lorenzo Vidino and Sergio Altuna. Austrian Fund for the Documentation of Religiously Motivated Political Extremism, 2021. 279 pp. [Free download.](#)

If the authors' outline of the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe looks like an organizational map of some massive international conglomerate, it is just that. Try to keep these acronyms straight: the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe (FIOE), which

recently became the Council of European Muslims (CEM), is the secretive Brotherhood's public face in Europe. Its multinational subsidiaries include the Federation of European Muslim Youth and Student Organizations (FEMYSO), the European Institute for Human Sciences (IESH), the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), and the Europe Trust. Another possible entry on this list is Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) although it denies having Brotherhood ties.

Furthermore, the FIOE has member organizations in every major European country, from Austria's Liga Kultur Verein to the Deutsche Muslimische Gemeinschaft. These, in turn, have their own subordinate and related entities, some operationally close enough to be labeled "Brotherhood spawns" by the meticulous authors and some sufficiently autonomous to be regarded merely as "organizations influenced by the Brotherhood." France's CEM member, the Union des Organisations Islamiques en France, which in 2017 became *Musulmans de France* (MF), boasts such assets, for example, as Lille's Lycée-Collège Averroès and publishing house Bayane Éditions.

Examining in turn each of the Brotherhood's more significant European units, Vidino, director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University, and Altuna, of Madrid's Elcano Royal Institute, discuss its history, activities, leaders, influence, and funding. Some country-to-country differences are interesting: For linguistic reasons, the Brotherhood never got much of a toehold in the Netherlands but flourishes in the U.K. Although certain governments—notably Germany's—monitor Brotherhood groups closely and suspiciously, others—such as Switzerland's—take a more laissez-faire approach while the multiculturalist Swedes stuff the Islamists' pockets with cash. Indeed, it is remarkable how much European tax money some Brotherhood bodies have

received for insidious but benign-sounding endeavors. And it is unsettling to read how cozy some Brotherhood leaders are with public officials high and low. Absurdly, it is not uncommon for one part of a national government to treat the Brotherhood as a severe security threat even as another part of the same government is funding Brotherhood projects.

Painting a disquieting picture of widespread, official wishy-washiness toward the Brotherhood, the authors quote a 2018 German report that explains succinctly why such a posture is unwise: in the long term, “the threat posed by [Brotherhood-style] legalistic Islamism to the liberal democratic system is greater than that of jihadism.” Perhaps the Brotherhood does not sponsor terrorism, but its activities reinforce Muslim isolation from, and hostility to, mainstream society, thereby setting the stage for a future Europe in which freedom, prosperity, and social harmony are mere memories.

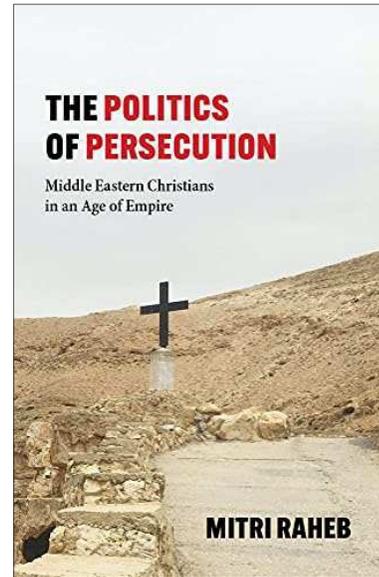
Bruce Bawer

author of *While Europe Slept* and *Surrender*

The Politics of Persecution: Middle Eastern Christians in an Age of Empire. By Mitri Raheb. Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2021. 207 pp. \$24.99.

Raheb, a Palestinian Christian theologian, resists what he considers the West’s simplistic and counterproductive focus on the persecution of Middle Eastern Christians. He seeks to dispel the notion that Middle Eastern Christians are hapless victims of their Muslim neighbors, claiming their real story consists of “resilience more than persecution.”

Politics of Persecution does a decent job of covering large swaths of history and discussing how various Christian denominations and institutions interacted. That said,



Raheb, founder and president of Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture in Bethlehem, argues, in essence, that nearly every bad thing that befell Middle Eastern Christians since 1798 can be blamed on the West, particularly those he deems rightwing Christians or Christian Zionists. The rest is details. This analysis is as simplistic as the one he hopes to refute, just changing the aggressor from Muslims to Westerners.

Consider the Armenian genocide. Forced to concede that Turks perpetrated this massacre, he blames European colonialism and “Arab nationalism” (which he also blames on the West) for the fall of the Ottoman Empire, to which he attributes the genocide. He tepidly criticizes the Turks for the genocide, devoting more attention to the Ottomans’ German ally failing to prevent that genocide than to discussing the atrocity itself.

Raheb’s many slapdash errors make it hard to trust his analysis. He blames “evangelicals” and their “Republican Representatives” for a “narrow focus” on Christian persecution in the late 1990s, and especially, the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998,

ignoring the fact that IRFA passed unanimously in the Senate, met little opposition in the House, and was signed by President Bill Clinton, a Democrat. Another example: Raheb states that Donald Trump's election as president in 2016 "brought the issue of Christian persecution back into focus," ignoring that ISIS' genocide had far more to do with the issue gaining the limelight.

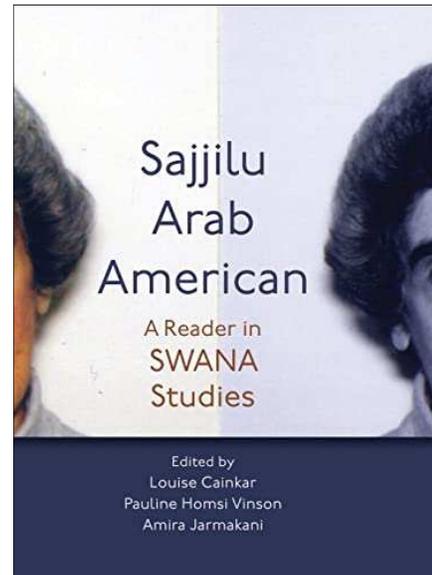
Raheb's language may be academic, but his approach resembles that of an overzealous prosecutor, one lacking the skills to convince a jury. It is almost humorous to witness how, at various times, he portrays Protestant Christian communities in the Middle East as tools of Western imperialism, or useful critics of European actions, or hapless victims "sacrificed on the altar of Western national interests," seemingly depending on which narrative makes the West look bad.

Raheb unintentionally reveals how focusing monomaniacally on the sins of the West, real or imagined, is not only bad history, but also undermines the agency of Middle Eastern Christians whom he purports to champion.

Cliff Smith
MEF Washington Project

Sajjilu Arab American: A Reader in SWANA Studies. Edited by Louise Cainkar, Pauline Homsí Vinson, and Amira Jarmakani. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2022. 526 pp. \$125 (\$65, paper).

The preface does not shy from declaring the politics that inspires what follows. The volume fits into something called the Critical Arab American Studies book series that raises and addresses "the politics of producing radical antiracist, anti-imperial, and feminist knowledges about Arab American and SWANA [a new term,



meaning Southwest Asian and North African] communities as well as their connections to other racialized communities in the United States and in the global South more broadly." (News to this reviewer that the United States is in the global South.) The book under review

directly attends to such critical investments in radical and decolonial knowledge production, investments that continue to be articulated and solidified in response to ongoing racial and gendered violence and to evolving imperial agendas and military projects.

Once past this slightly demented theorizing, however, one finds a tedious, if massive, collection of thirty-nine previously published writings covering such haphazard topics as "Grandmothers, Grape Leaves, and Kahlil Gibran," "The Limits of Muslim Cool," and "The Pulse of Queer Live: Arab Bodies in Gay Bars." Oddly, this doorstopper of a book about Arab-Americans somehow manages not once to mention such prominent figures as Paul Anka, Michael

DeBakey, Steve Jobs, George Mitchell, Ralph Nader, Sirhan Sirhan, John Sununu, Danny Thomas, Helen Thomas, or Frank Zappa. Maybe they do not fit into the theme of “evolving imperial agendas and military projects.”

Of course, no academic volume on “decolonial knowledge production” on SWANA studies would be complete without a swipe at this reviewer. Steven Salaita, who proved even too radical by the lax standards of the American university, and who now drives a school bus, declares that my “moral apparatus exemplifies the very worst facets of imperative patriotism.” If any reader can explain what this means, do send a note.

Daniel Pipes

The Shi'i Islamist Regime's Footprints in North America: How Iranian Mullahs and IRGC Expand Their Influence and Networks. By Majid Mohammadi. New York: Majid Mohammadi, 2021. 355 pp. \$119.99, eBook.

Much has been written about the Islamic Republic of Iran's soft war on the United States, including Tehran's use of cyber warfare, disinformation, and political espionage. However, few scholars have explored the Islamist regime's sophisticated network of religious centers, think tanks, academics, and journalists within the United States. Mohammadi, a sociologist and media analyst, presents a one-of-a-kind study of the subversive assets Tehran deploys to influence U.S. policymakers in the absence of a traditional diplomatic mission.

After an opening discussion of Iran's ideological foundations and its expansionist goals, Mohammadi hits his stride by examining the “institutions and forces” at the regime's disposal in North America. Al-Mustafa Seminary, located in Qom, Iran, is “the centerpiece of the Shi'i Islamist

The Shi'i Islamist Regime's Footprints in North America



How Iranian Mullahs & IRGC Expand Their Influence and Networks
Majid Mohammadi

regime's propaganda machine abroad”; foreign students who attend the school are sent on field trips to the battlefields of the Iran-Iraq war for a crash course on jihad.

Shiite schools in the United States send their brightest students to Al-Mustafa, so they can return home and start cultivating the regime's brand of Islamism in their own communities. The Alavi Foundation, which Mohammadi claims “is run entirely by the IRI [Iran], and those who think otherwise live in a parallel universe,” underwrites full-time schools in New York City and Houston.

Mohammadi's analysis drips with such hyperbole, frequently colored by his personal experiences as an Iranian dissident. A seminary student in Qom in 1981, the author experienced first-hand the regime's religious indoctrination. Later, Mohammadi reports, the Voice of America (VOA), a U.S. taxpayer-funded broadcaster, “blacklisted” him for comparing the Iranian regime to ISIS. In return, he helped expose pro-regime elements within the VOA to Congress.

Similarly, Mohammadi describes regime proxies in American academia, explaining how the University of Maryland uses unscientific polls supplied by “domestic groups” in Iran. Mohammadi writes,

it is not possible for a foreign institution, especially [one] with Iranian staff, to conduct polls inside the country without cooperating with the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] and security agencies.

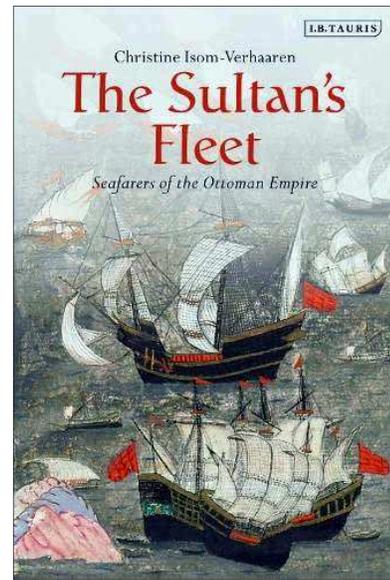
Academia and media provide the intellectual cover that regime lobbyists and influencers need to convince lawmakers to oppose sanctions or support a nuclear Iran. They are helped by “identity politics,” which the author argues “opens rooms for every ideology, including Islamist ones.” Mohammadi comes back to this issue throughout his report, citing leftist ideology to explain why academia is so crowded by anti-Western professors, or how radical Shiite clerics are accepted “as another minority of immigrants, not as a group opposed to the existence of the United States and the West.”

Despite his emotional engagement, Mohammadi reports Iranian bogeymen where they exist. His account is partisan; if one-sided and prone to superlatives, it is also authoritative and truthful.

Benjamin Baird
Islamist Watch

The Sultan’s Fleet: Seafarers of the Ottoman Empire. By Christine Isom-Verhaaren. London: I.B. Tauris, 2022. 280 pp. \$90 (\$31.45, paper).

The early modern Ottoman Empire equaled European powers militarily on land and at sea. Against this background, Isom-Verhaaren, assistant professor of history at Brigham Young University, offers a concise and enjoyable description of the Ottoman navy, describing its major engagements and its institutions while providing biographies of both well-known and unknown naval commanders. The book covers the period from



the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, beginning with Umur of Aydın, admiral of that eponymous principality, and the role of other pre-Ottoman rulers in challenging the Byzantine, Venetian, and Genoese sea powers.

Thereafter, the author discusses the naval history of the Ottoman Empire on the basis of the biographies and operations of prominent admirals, such as naval heroes Hayreddin Barbarossa, Turgud Reis, and Cigalazade, with their diverse social and religious backgrounds. Isom-Verhaaren skillfully combines narrations of the lives and times of her protagonists with an overview of changes in tactics and technologies in early modern Mediterranean naval warfare.

The author’s choice to begin her history of the Ottoman navy in the fourteenth century points to an important issue: Ottoman naval power was not a new creation but rather a continuation of naval capacity accumulated through earlier conflicts between Anatolian principalities and the Latin powers. While depicting the Ottoman navy in all its glory in her portraits of prominent commanders, the author also demonstrates the deficiencies in its organization, which were rooted in the

perennial conflict between experienced admirals and the powerful but militarily ignorant court elite. This tension deprived the Ottomans of decisive victories.

Because the role of the Ottoman Empire as a sea power is an understudied subject, Isom-Verhaaren's work makes an important contribution. She expertly embeds the biographies of grand admirals into the political and military contexts of their times and provides a wide variety of references. Addressing not only scholars in Ottoman studies but also a broader readership, her well-written and clearly structured book

offers a strong and traditional focus on Ottoman mariners making history.

However, to spin an entertaining yarn, she avoids in-depth analysis of details and proper transliteration to the likely chagrin of scholarly readers. In sum, through the colorful life stories of admirals, the book offers a delightful and informative panorama of Ottoman naval history.

Gül Şen
University of Heidelberg

