

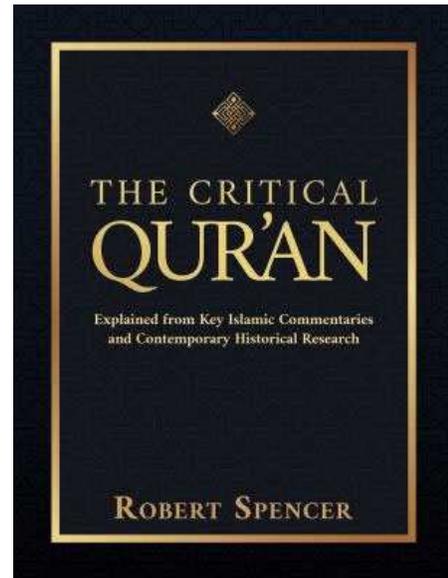
Brief Reviews, Spring 2023

The Critical Qur'an: Explained from Key Islamic Commentaries and Contemporary Historical Research. By Robert Spencer. New York: Bombardier Books, 2021. 548 pp. \$45.

The Qur'an is not an easy read, even in translation: its chapters are out of order, and its contents often obscure; verses do not follow logically one upon another, and some contradict each other. Additionally, while Muhammad's biography provides the context for understanding particular passages, the Qur'an does not provide that information. Many English translations use antiquated King-James-style language, and translators typically translate what commentators think the text means, not what the text actually says.

For English readers, things improved in 2013 with the publication of Arthur J. Droge's *The Qur'an: A New Annotated Translation*.¹ There is also a scholarly 2020 English commentary by Gordon D. Nickel, which uses Droge's text.² To these resources has now been added Spencer's *The Critical Qur'an*, "critical" in the sense that it exposes the reader to the opinions of Muslim commentators, medieval and modern.

Spencer, director of Jihad Watch and a fellow at the David Horowitz Freedom Center, does not spare the reader problematic passages, as his discussion of the wife-beating verse, Sura 4:34, exemplifies. Spencer also draws readers'



attention to internal contradictions in the text and to manuscript variants.

The Critical Qur'an has some limitations. Page headers do not provide sura (verse) numbers. The index is patchy: for example, "idolater" and "associate" are not to be found. A glossary would help. The lack of paragraphs in the Qur'anic text makes it hard to follow. Some scholarship, such as relying on Richard Bell's idiosyncratic work from the 1930s,³ is not up to date.

The extent to which Spencer bases his version on the work of others (something he acknowledges in the introduction) sometimes leads him to present commentary as translation. For example, in Sura 9:29, the Arabic literally says that conquered "people

¹ Sheffield, U.K.: Equinox, 2013.

² *The Quran with Christian Commentary: A Guide to Understanding the Scripture of Islam* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020).

³ *The Qur'an. Translated, with a critical re-arrangement of the Surahs*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1937).

of the book” should pay tribute “out of hand.” This Spencer renders by adopting Yusuf Ali’s “with willing submission.”⁴ Another example is Sura 7:26 where the Arabic says that God gave Adam and Eve “feathers.” Spencer translates this—relying on Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall’s “splendid vesture”—as “beautiful garments.”⁵

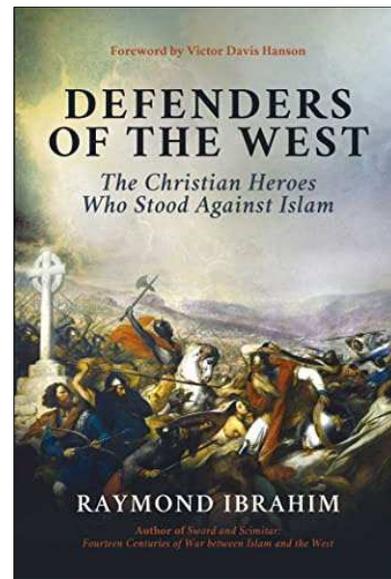
That said, *The Critical Qur’an* is a unique and handy tool to read the Qur’an through the eyes of Muslim commentators, many available online, and supplemented by Droge’s excellent translation.

Mark Durie
Melbourne School of Theology

Defenders of the West: The Christian Heroes Who Stood Against Islam. By Raymond Ibrahim. Nashville, Tenn.: Bombardier Books, 2022. 338 pp. \$30.

Ibrahim’s work on Christian heroes is as much a redefinition of the concept of heroism as it is a retelling of mostly medieval accounts of Christians resisting Muslim attacks around the Mediterranean basin. To both ends, Ibrahim, a fellow at both the Middle East Forum and David Horowitz Freedom Center, has selected eight historical figures—Godfrey of Bouillon (Crusader Defender of the Holy Sepulcher), El Cid, Richard the Lionhearted, Fernando III of Castile, St. Louis IX of France, John Hunyadi, Skanderbeg of Albania, and Vlad Dracula of Wallachia.

This list is worth considering, as Ibrahim apparently chose his selection carefully: each figure represents a different geographical



area, and the list appears to cover as many present-day European countries as possible (although no figure from present-day Italy is featured). Ibrahim focuses on two basic historical periods: the Crusading/Reconquista period (1097-1270), and the Ottoman conquest of southeastern Europe (1378-1683). North African and Ottoman attacks on Western Europe after the Reconquista are outside his focus.

Ibrahim’s Christian heroes make up a mixed bag. All of the Crusading era figures aggressively pushed back against prior Muslim aggression, reconquering land once controlled by Christians. Of the initial five, only Fernando III’s victory—at Los Navas de Tolosa in 1212, the importance of which Ibrahim rightly emphasizes—had lasting results, right to the present. All of the final three heroes against the Ottomans were tragic figures with Skanderbeg, the Albanian hero, eventually having his people convert to Islam and both Hunyadi and Dracula fighting long-term, losing battles as well.

The title raises the question of what constitutes a Christian hero: Is it someone who is militarily successful or a magnificent

⁴ *The Holy Qur’an: Translation by A. Yusuf Ali* (Lahore, Pak., 1938).

⁵ *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran: An Explanatory Translation* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1930).

failure? How Christian must one be in order to be a defender of the West? The answer is not obvious.

For some of the Crusading figures, such as Godfrey, the Christian aspect of his short rule is prominent. Otherwise, his brother Baldwin I (d. 1118), who succeeded him and was the acknowledged founder of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, would have been the more obvious choice as a hero. Certainly, the Muslims were more in awe of Baldwin. St. Louis IX during his own lifetime was recognized for his Christian faith as well.

The more questionable heroes, El Cid and Richard, were adept military commanders, but neither was really much of a Christian hero. This reviewer is not sure about Ibrahim's pronouncement that Jerusalem would have fallen to the combined armies of the Third Crusade had Barbarossa lived and Philip II not abandoned the Crusade abruptly. Most of Richard's most brilliant military accomplishments happened when he did not have any equals with him in the field. It seems more likely that there would have been irresolvable personality clashes had these three rulers actually joined together as occurred during the Second Crusade, and Richard most likely would have been overshadowed by the more experienced Barbarossa. In any case, the difficulty with conquering Jerusalem during the Third Crusade was not in the actual taking of the city but in the Frankish ability to hold it as their manpower had been destroyed at the Battle of the Horns of Hattin in 1187.

Ibrahim reclaims El Cid from the "naysayers and scoffers," adducing Muslim historians' dislike of him. However, merely because Muslims cursed El Cid does not automatically make him a Christian hero.

The book suffers in that Ibrahim never really tells us what binds all of these figures together other than they were Europeans, fought Muslims at some point in their lives—

although occasionally, at other times, participated in more dubious engagements—and are mostly either vilified or ignored by today's academics. The pervasive influence of those "naysayers and scoffers" makes it extremely important to be careful concerning definitions of heroes and heroism when writing such a book. Are those definitions best served by defending a figure such as El Cid when the more pertinent issue is the defense of European history in the face of present, craven apologetics?

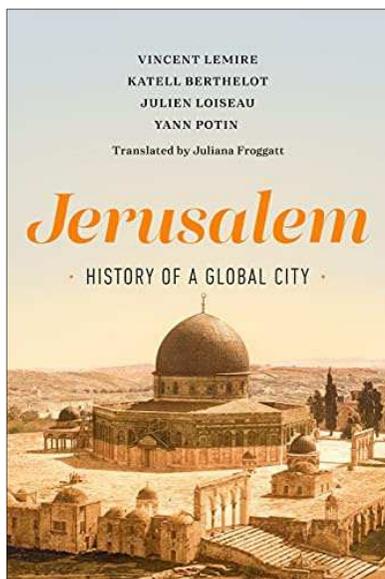
Ibrahim's wish reclaiming Vlad Dracula as a Christian hero defending the West is a lost cause that better suits a private academic discussion than as ammunition against scoffing academics. Perhaps the chapter spent trying to rehabilitate Vlad the Impaler would have been more usefully given over to another defender of Europe.

Indeed, many more obvious candidates come to mind than those the author selected: Charles Martel, Byzantine emperors such as Leo III or Nikephoros Phokas, Robert Guiscard, Alfonso VI of Castile, Don Juan of Austria, Sebastian I of Portugal, or Jan Sobieski of Poland, for example. For a future work, perhaps Ibrahim might also consider the non-military figures who acted in a heroic manner—St. Francis comes to mind—but are largely forgotten today.

The book is an easy read with a great deal of narrative prior and supplemental supplied. Each chapter is named for a given figure in order to tell a larger contextual story connected to that personality's exploits.

Defenders highlights historical figures usually forgotten in today's presentation of European history. Well-documented, it contains copious original sources. The material cited and the author's perspective are both sorely lacking in the present discussions of pre-modern Europe.

David Cook
Rice University



Jerusalem: History of a Global City. By Vincent Lemire, with Katell Berthelot, Julien Loiseau, and Yann Potin. Juliana Froggatt (trans.). Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. 334 pp. \$34.95.

This wonderful book covers the history of Jerusalem from 4000 BCE until today. The authors, all French historians, set themselves a seemingly simple but, in fact, quite complicated goal: to write a history of Jerusalem as objectively as possible without digressions and without being limited by any particular belief, religious or cultural baggage, or political outlook. This is a challenging goal when it comes to a city such as Jerusalem, brimming as it is with old and new beliefs, national and personal hopes and aspirations, as well as political and religious sensitivities.

The authors pass this challenge with flying colors by presenting the history of Jerusalem while utilizing modern research findings and including references to relevant literature. The descriptions are vivid, clear, and easily understood. They make use of manuscripts, archaeological findings, topographical analysis, among other sources.

On issues debated by academics, the authors present the various opinions in a clear, concise manner, so as not to affect the flow and the wider context of each chapter.

The significance of the historical description presented in this book, as well as its religious, spiritual, cultural, and political implications, are presented in a subtle and respectful manner. They are not ignored, but no attempt is made to adopt a particular stance or to justify one side or the other.

The book's only flaw, perhaps, is its hybrid style, which may stand in the way of those who wish to read it without the references and academic controversies, or researchers who may be looking for a purer and more detailed academic presentation.

The authors evince a deep respect for the facts, different academic views, and various beliefs and narratives regarding Jerusalem. This is the book for anyone who loves Jerusalem and has an interest in its history—and does not fear footnotes and references.

Dvir Dimant
Bar Ilan University

The Massacre That Never Was: The Myth of Deir Yassin and the Creation of the Palestinian Refugee Problem. By Eliezer Tauber. New Milford, Conn.: Toby Press, 2021. 322 pp. \$39.95.

On April 9, 1948, two dissident Zionist militias, the Etzel and the Lehi, stormed and captured the Arab village of Deir Yassin, a small settlement on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Rumors began to circulate shortly thereafter claiming a large-scale massacre of some 250 defenseless Arab men, women, and children had occurred there. Tales of horrendous atrocities spread far and wide, not only within the local Arab and Jewish communities but also abroad. Etzel and Lehi, which had

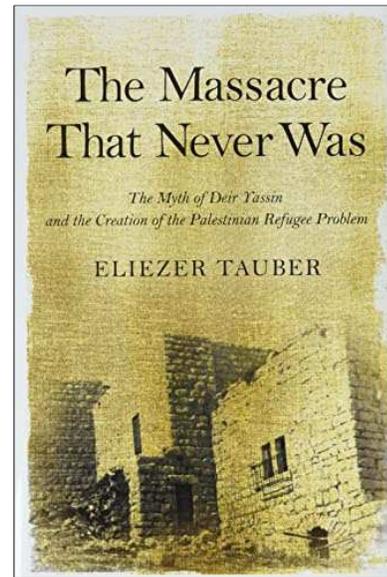
already been branded as terrorist organizations by their British, Jewish, and Arab foes as a result of prior actions, were denounced in the harshest terms around the globe.

What actually happened in Deir Yassin that day, however, bore little resemblance to these stories. Both Jewish and Arab participants in the fighting confirmed that no large-scale massacre occurred in the village and dismissed as wild nonsense most of the tales of horrendous atrocities. Both Jewish and Arab participants later agreed that a battle, not a massacre, had taken place in the village, albeit a battle that resulted in heavy collateral damage among Arab non-combatants.

Nevertheless, anti-Israel propagandists in the Middle East and around the world have used the myth of the Deir Yassin massacre as a stick with which to beat the Jewish state. Now, Tauber of Bar-Ilan University has ripped the rug from under their feet. In this first-rate forensic examination, he meticulously reconstructs the battle and comments upon its consequences, basing his research and findings on the testimonies of Jewish and Arab participants in the battle as well as on government documents, private papers, and other archival materials. Indeed, the author appears to have perused virtually every primary and secondary source that addresses the events of that day.

Tauber's study conclusively demonstrates that a battle took place in which both Jewish and Arab combatants suffered losses in fierce house-to-house fighting. The total number of Arab dead was about one hundred, including many noncombatants who got caught up in the crossfire. He clearly highlights the circumstances under which most Jewish and Arab casualties took place.

Lest it be thought that Tauber is out to apologize for Israel, he forthrightly acknowledges that Jewish combatants did



commit small-scale atrocities during the fighting, most notably the killing by an enraged militiaman of eleven Arab non-combatants after their surrender, apparently as an act of revenge for the severe injury suffered by one of his comrades. A handful of Arab men may also have been summarily executed after the fighting. These few exceptions aside, however, Etzel and Lehi fighters did not deliberately target Arab non-combatants during or after the battle.

In addition to his inquiry into the battle itself, Tauber also discusses its long-term consequences. He observes the irony that while the battle harmed the Jewish state in terms of public opinion, it hurt the Palestinians even more. Specifically, Tauber shows that propaganda about a large-scale massacre at Deir Yassin caused widespread panic among the general Palestinian population. Purposely inventing and circulating stories of horrendous atrocities gave that population an additional incentive to flee Palestine. Though Palestinian flight commenced well before April 9, it picked up afterwards.

Tauber has written the definitive account of the battle of Deir Yassin.

David Rodman
Israel Affairs



Medina lemekhira (State for Sale). By Matan Peleg. Ashkelon: Sela Meir Publishing, 2022. 256 pp. 39NIS.

Peleg, head of Israel's Im Tirtzu organization, exposes how foreign governments and political parties have employed Israeli non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for their own purposes. He estimates that Germany, the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and others provided them with US\$250 million in the decade 2012-21.

These funds, he shows, thwarted Israel's war on terror, prevented Jewish settlement in Judea and Samaria, impeded the deportation of illegal African migrants, diminished Israeli sovereignty in the Negev and Jerusalem, fomented religious incitement by Christians and Muslims against the Jewish state, and globally spread lies demonizing Israel.

Peleg finds that those foreign entities were often motivated not by moral values, but by economic, political, demographic, and security interests. Most striking was the effort to cancel Jerusalem's agreement with Rwanda to accept Israel's illegal migrants. Lawsuits paid for by foreign entities

convinced Israel's High Court of Justice that the agreement violated the freedoms and human rights of those migrants and that their lives were at risk in Rwanda. The Europeans then negotiated a similar agreement with that same Rwandan government to receive illegal African migrant workers from Libya, thereby avoiding their likely passage on to Europe.

Peleg offers solutions: enact a super-seding clause that curbs the High Court's judicial activism; tax contributions from Israeli NGOs that are funded by foreign governments and political parties; and diminish the NGOs' standing in Israel's courts.

State for Sale has great importance to anyone who values Israeli independence and believes that intra-Israeli disagreements should be resolved without foreign intervention.

Alex Selsky
Middle East Forum

The Olive Branch from Palestine: The Palestinian Declaration of Independence and the Path out of the Current Impasse. By Jerome M. Segal, with foreword by Noam Chomsky. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. 316 pp. \$29.95.

The Olive Branch can best be described as an attempt at political alchemy—an effort to conjure up something from nothing, to create political substance where none exists. The book, replete with unconvincing historical inferences and non sequiturs, is essentially an attempt to resurrect an obscure 35-year-old document and, through torturous arguments and dubious reasoning, artificially to imbue it with vast significance.

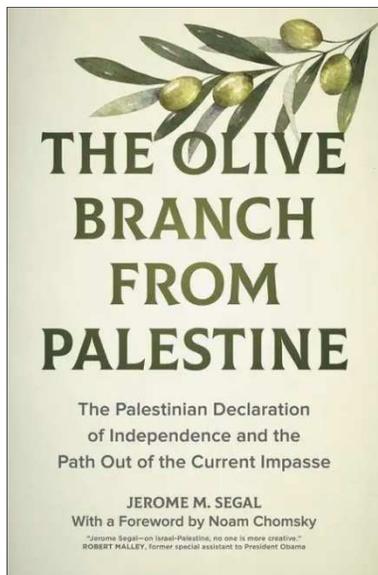
Segal, an American academic philosopher and conflict-resolution practitioner, focuses on a document known as the [Palestinian Declaration of Independence](#), adopted on

November 15, 1988, in Algeria by the Palestinian National Council, the legislative body of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). It purported to proclaim an independent State of Palestine in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip [without having any impact](#) on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict then or at any time since.

The author ignores this reality and attributes two highly significant facets to the declaration. First, he interprets the mere declaration of independence as a real step toward statehood, as opposed to empty rhetoric, unfulfilled over the decades. Second, he considers that declaration a start towards accepting Israel as a Jewish state and, therefore, toward peace, which it self-evidently was not.

Indeed, in a startling passage, Segal concedes that the Palestinian perception of the declaration's significance contradicts his own. Thus, he writes:

Despite the fact that the Declaration acknowledged the international legitimacy of Israel's establishment as a Jewish state,



when faced with demands for recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, Palestinians, rather than pointing out what has been in place since 1988, have responded by firmly rejecting the demand.

The Olive Branch reads like a work born of despair and desperation in a frantic, futile effort to salvage the viability of an irrelevant, defunct document.

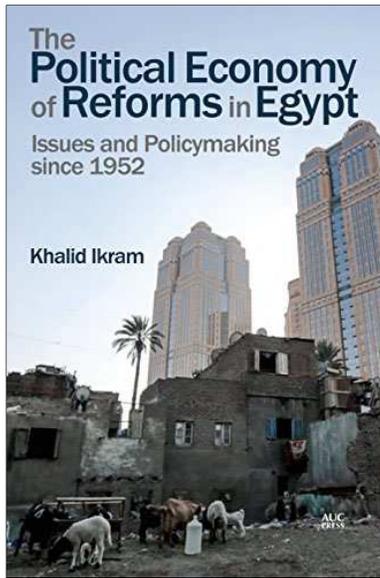
Martin Sherman
Israel Institute for Strategic Studies

The Political Economy of Reforms in Egypt: Issues and Policymaking since 1952. By Khalid Ikram. Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2018. 448 pp. \$49.95 (\$29.95, paper).

Ikram, a former director of the World Bank's Egypt department, has long been an active participant in Egyptian economic policymaking circles. He has written an account of the long view—how Egypt has fared since the overthrow of the monarchy in 1952—while describing the performance and policies of each successive government: Nasser to 1970, Sadat to 1981, Mubarak to 2011, the leaders who followed him to 2016.

His major lesson from this history? How much things have stayed the same. The continuity in economic policies persists despite radical political change. As Ikram writes,

Egyptian regimes since 1952 have maintained an implicit compact with citizens: the regimes would provide a mixture of subsidies and other benefits [garnished with the threat of coercion], the citizens would remain politically dormant.



The government used resources in ways designed to buy social peace, not to encourage the economic growth that would have been most effective at relieving the long-lasting and crushing poverty for its citizens. From 1965 to 2016, despite having a series of governments claiming to be pursuing economic reforms to promote private business, nearly one-third of the labor force was employed at some level of government. Ikram writes that “over the fifty-year period, subsidies accounted for some 12 percent of total expenditures in the budget,” despite periodic programs with the International Monetary Fund that made far-reaching promises to scale back or eliminate subsidies. A key actor in some efforts to curtail those subsidies, Ikram faithfully records their failures.

Another serious Egyptian shortcoming concerns discouraging exports. As Ikram writes,

During the entire period from 1952 to 2016, the coalition of import interests monopolized the ear of the government to the disadvantage of the interest group of exporters ... Import protection

was not confined to tariffs ... An extensive system of non-tariff measures [NTMs] reinforced the structure of direct tariffs. These NTMs were generally cloaked as quality control or health protection measures.

The result of these biases was that from 1952 to 2016, exports of goods and services paid for 73 percent of Egypt’s imports of goods and services—which meant the country staggered from crisis to crisis, generally dependent on substantial foreign aid secured by being politically useful to rich and powerful countries.

More generally, the problem was, as Ikram summarizes, “What Egypt has not done was to undertake structural reforms that would reduce the cost of doing business.” He gives detailed accounts of promised reforms and, then, how little happened. As he puts it,

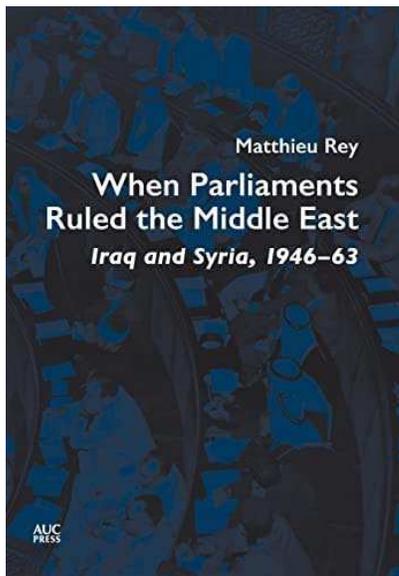
There was a wide gap between the articulation of the problem and implementation of the solution.

The focus in *The Political Economy of Reforms in Egypt* is very much on what Egyptians were doing. Ikram provides limited information about the flood of foreign aid that inundated Egypt. He simply does not touch on the vast resources spent on a military machine that accomplished little—and which remained an impressive drain even after peace with Israel in 1979.

Promoting Egyptian economic growth, no matter the policy, would not be easy. Ikram is quite clear at describing the challenges faced by Egyptian policymakers. The dependence on the Nile is a tight limit; the cultivated area in 2016 was only 15 percent more than in 1947. Population growth has long been high; the 2020 population is about ten times higher than 1900, and population is on track to rise by

another one-third (i.e., 30 million people) by 2050. Feeding all those people with such limited farmland is no small problem, not to speak of creating jobs for the millions joining the labor force annually. But Ikram is also honest: faced with these problems, Egyptian policymakers did a terrible job.

Patrick Clawson
Washington Institute
for Near East Policy



When Parliaments Ruled the Middle East: Iraq and Syria, 1946-63. By Matthieu Rey. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2022. 344 pp. \$79.95.

The collapse of the pseudo-constitutional regimes left by Britain and France in three important Arab states, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, was a major development in post-World War II Arab history. (Lebanon was an exception: its much maligned confessional parliamentary democracy survived into the 1970s.) However much has been written about these countries, Rey of the Collège de France illuminates their history from a novel angle:

the efforts to maintain a constitutional monarchy in Iraq and a parliamentary republic in Syria.

He describes how these efforts have failed but identifies positive aspects in the two countries' political history as well as in the quest to build modern political systems based on representation, the rule of law, and the give and take between different social and ethnic groups.

He begins with the attempts by Ottoman reformers to introduce elements of constitutional and representative government, proceeds with the record of the British and French mandates, and concludes with the failure of this parliamentary experiment.

Syria gained independence from French control at the end of World War II, but it took just four years for three consecutive coups d'état to be staged in Damascus in 1949. Iraq had enjoyed limited independence from the early 1930s, but military intervention in its politics began in the middle of that decade. By 1958, both Syria and Iraq were ruled by revolutionary military regimes. Later, Syria was integrated into the United Arab Republic for three and a half years and has been ruled by versions of the Baath Party since 1963.

What the book lacks is an analysis of the inherent weakness of the parliamentary effort, which doomed it to failure. That analysis would begin with British and French cynicism. Denied direct control of their new possessions by Woodrow Wilson, the two powers devised the mandatory system, which deposited these territories in their hands supposedly to prepare them for independence and enlightened self-rule. Their original sin was drawing boundaries that were hardly viable. Iraq contained three distinct units: Shiite Arab, Sunni Arab, and Kurdish and was handed over to a Sunni Hashemite prince who, with the help of his entourage, tried to impose a pan-Arab ideology and

authoritarian government on a reluctant majority. In Syria, the French saw Sunni Arab nationalism as a hostile force, which they tried to neutralize by fostering ethnic and sectarian divisions. And when parliaments were elected and stood up to the French, the latter just suspended them.

Despite the apparently long history of parliamentary institutions during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, the culture of representation and parliamentary rule was too frail to contend with the might of primordial loyalties such as tribalism and regionalism. Rey correctly points to how the

1948-49 war with Israel delegitimized the anciens régimes of Iraq and Syria and impacted regional and international rivalries.

Then, in the mid-1950s, the rise of messianic Nasserism offered a different, initially sweeping model. And as the sad experience of the recent “Arab Spring” shows, the quest for a genuine, liberal, constitutional governance in the core area of the Arab world still faces huge obstacles.

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