

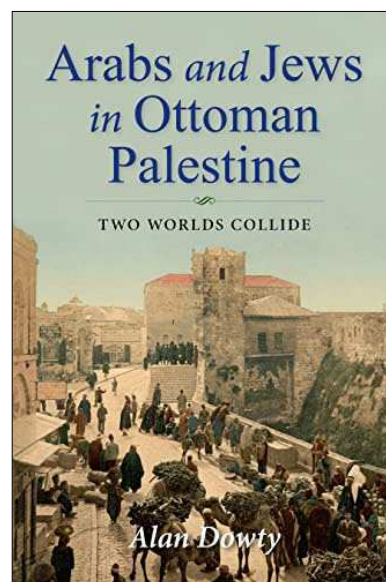
Brief Reviews, Fall 2023

Arabs and Jews in the Ottoman Palestine: Two Worlds Collide. By Alan Dowty. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. 303 pp. \$65 (\$25, paper).

“Could a sharp-eyed observer of mid-nineteenth-century Palestine have detected hints of the future struggle between Jews and Arabs over this land? It seems unlikely. The fact is that none of the observers at the time foresaw the conflict that was yet to come.” Thus does Dowty, professor of international relations and political science emeritus at the University of Notre Dame, open his book and set the scene. Why was the dismal future not visible, what changed over time?

Step by step, through meticulous scholarship and clear prose, Dowty shows how local problems over grazing and water rights expanded into self-aware national confrontations, how “muscle men” avoiding firearms evolved into organized militias. He convincingly concludes that “it is hard to see how the conflict could have evolved much differently” from the way it did, given the Muslim attitude toward these immigrants and the Zionist aspiration to leave the diaspora behind and live as independent actors.

Anyone following the news will be struck by continuities that go back nearly one and a half centuries to the very origins of Zionism. Just as local Muslim farmers then wantonly aggressed on Zionist farmlands, so Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad do now on Israeli ones. Just as Zionists responded then with a mix of punishing violence and hopes that material benefits would soften the hostility, so the government of Israel does now. Likewise, each party relied on a more powerful patron, then the Ottoman Empire and the foreign consuls, now Iran and the United States.

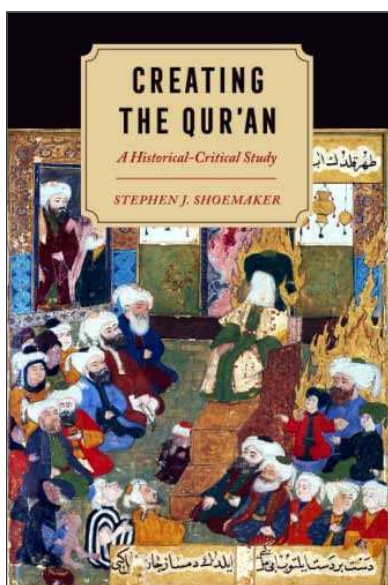


Indeed, Dowty’s account strikingly vindicates the famous insight of American geographer [Wilbur Zelinsky](#):

Whenever an empty territory undergoes settlement, or an earlier population is dislodged by invaders, the specific characteristics of the first group able to effect a viable, self-perpetuating society are of crucial significance for the later social and cultural geography of the area.

Dowty’s excellent study prompts this reader to wonder what it will take to change that later “social and cultural geography”; can Israelis go beyond those now-archaic “specific characteristics” and develop new policies toward the Palestinians?

Daniel Pipes
Middle East Forum



Creating the Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Study. By Stephen J. Shoemaker. Oakland: University of California Press. 2022. 353 pp. \$34.95, paper.

In *Creating the Qur'an*, Shoemaker, professor of religious studies and Christian studies at the University of Oregon, offers a closely argued account of how the Qur'an came into existence. It is a tour de force.

Railing against the “shackling” of many contemporary scholars to the traditional Islamic origin story of the Qur'an and drawing new insights from a wide variety of disciplines, including religious studies, linguistics, and anthropology, Shoemaker concludes that the text of the Qur'an only became fixed during the rule of Abd al-Malik some seventy years after the death of Muhammad. “The Qur'an,” he concludes, “was in many respects non-existent before the end of the seventh century.”

Rejecting the commonly held view that the Qur'an's text was standardized much earlier, by order of Caliph Uthman, Shoemaker concludes, based on Islam's “chaotic tangle of

inconsistent traditions,” that this account is not credible.

Shoemaker reviews the conditions at Mecca and Medina in the early seventh century and posits that these small, out-of-the-way settlements were “simply not capable of producing or even comprehending such a rich and sophisticated collection of late ancient religious traditions.” Furthermore, he draws on findings from literacy and orality studies to conclude that Mecca and Medina did not have the literacy required to fix the Qur'an's text. It is, he argues, a myth that people in pre-literate societies can commit long oral texts to memory without changing them.

Shoemaker's preferred explanation for the origin of the Qur'an is that remembrances of Muhammad's original teachings, first delivered in Mecca and Medina, were passed on orally over more than half a century by his followers. Along the way, they were inevitably altered by normal processes of oral performance and recomposition. It was in regions far from Mecca and Medina that these oral traditions absorbed their many references to late antique religious traditions, before being fixed in written form under Abd al-Malik. (A tantalizing alternative scenario, dismissed by Shoemaker as “too radical,” but entertained by some revisionist scholars, is that the original Qur'anic community was located nowhere near Mecca or Medina.) Shoemaker's firm conclusion is that the Qur'an is “a fundamentally composite and composed text,” a much-altered remnant of Muhammad's original preaching.

Creating the Qur'an is the most comprehensive critical historical account of the Qur'an's origin to date. It is a milestone in a decades-long struggle to bring the Qur'an out from behind the veil of Islamic orthodoxy into the full light of contemporary scholarship.

Mark Durie
Melbourne School of Theology

La dolce conquista. L'Europa si arrende all'Islam [The Sweet Conquest: Europe Surrenders to Islam]. By Giulio Meotti. Siena: Cantagalli, 2023. 456 pp. €22, paper.

Michel Houellebecq's 2015 novel *Submission*¹ contained a genius insight: that the "Islamization" of France would take place not as a hostile takeover but as a piecemeal and voluntary process, one in which the nation slides into becoming an Islamist-led state. Meotti, an Italian journalist, builds on this literary insight, assembling an impressive trove of hard evidence under the memorable title of *The Sweet Conquest*.

Meotti has long reported on Middle Eastern affairs and on the decline of Western liberal culture for the Italian newspaper *Il Foglio*. Here, he brings together statistics, direct observations, and interviews with scholars and opinion makers across a wide political spectrum, ranging from Alexandre del Valle to Michel Onfray. The phenomenon Meotti sketches contains an inherent ambiguity; he argues that a continuum exists from apparently harmless concessions to a profound mutation of European culture.

The book's common thread comes down to an understanding, to quote Meotti's interview with French philosopher Onfray, that "Islam's strength is a consequence of Christianity's weakness." European elites emerge as essentially self-hating, and much of that hatred is directed toward their historic faith. This phenomenon is hardly new. British economist Peter T. Bauer, decades ago, argued that guilt informs the Western approach to its development policies vis-à-vis the so-called Third World; never mind

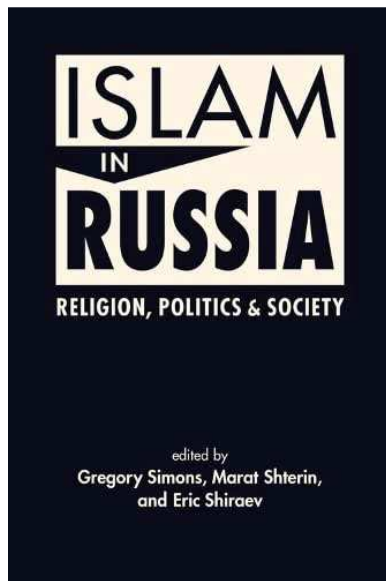


that trade with wealthy Western countries provided "the principal agent of material progress" for poorer ones. Pushed by the likes of Edward Said, Westerners went on to blame their own way of life for nearly all evils on planet Earth.

Meotti suggests that Islamists benefit from this trend, which has become more exaggerated thanks to the growth of political correctness, extreme environmentalism, feminism, and the woke movement. These intellectual postures not only radically reject traditional institutions and mores but aim to obliterate them. Given that humans hunger for values around which to live their lives, this means that Europeans are effectively canceling the accomplishments of their forerunners and opening the way for Islam.

Alberto Mingardi
IULM University, Milan

¹ New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.



Islam in Russia: Religion, Politics and Society. Edited by Gregory Simons, Marat Shterin, and Eric Shiraev. Boulder: Lynne Reiner, 2023. 205 pp. \$95.

When it comes to Russia, the question of Islam barely registers even though the presence of the Muslim faith is not exactly a secret. The country witnessed an explosion of religiosity in the early 1990s in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Yet, more than three decades on, the role of Islam as a shaping force in contemporary Russian politics is little understood and sparsely studied.

That represents a glaring omission because Muslims make up Russia's fastest growing minority as well as an increasingly powerful political force within the country. They are also in play like never before. Over the past year-and-a-half, the Kremlin has disproportionately singled out minorities (a large percentage of them Muslim) for conscription into its war in Ukraine, making them cannon fodder in what has become a protracted military misadventure—and indicating that it views Russia's Muslims as second-class citizens at best, expendable assets at worst. At the same time, grassroots resistance to renewed Russian imperialism

has led many Chechens to take up arms on the Ukraine side, even as ethnic Chechen forces loyal to the region's strongman, Ramzan Kadyrov, have enlisted in the Kremlin's war of choice against Kyiv.

An introduction to contemporary Islam's place within (and its often-contentious relationship with) the Russian Federation is thus most welcome, and *Islam and Russia* is positioned to serve as such a primer.

Perhaps two chapters are the most relevant contributions for Western policymakers seeking contemporary insights. Nicolas Dryer studies how the faith has influenced the Kremlin's approach to the Middle East against the backdrop of the "Arab Spring" and the Syrian civil war. Hamidreza Azizi of Iran's Shahid Beheshti University reviews how Islam has helped shape Russia's evolving strategic partnership with Tehran. Other chapters deal with issues like the different strains of Islam prevalent in Russia and how Russia's Muslims see the hajj.

The book's larger message is one well worth heeding: that Islam has reemerged as a powerful element of contemporary identity among Russia's Muslims. Increasingly, it is also a feature of Russian society that rubs up uncomfortably against the ultranationalist and neo-imperialist ethos espoused by Vladimir Putin and his circle.

Ilan Berman
American Foreign Policy Council

Natives against Nativism: Antiracism and Indigenous Critique in Post-Colonial France. By Olivia C. Harrison. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023. 263 pp. \$112 (\$28, paper).

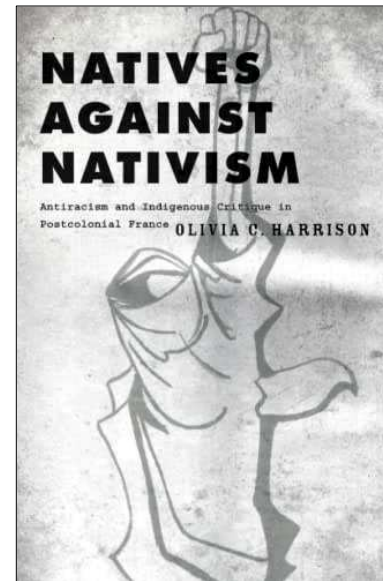
Harrison, associate professor of French and comparative literature at the University of Southern California, traces strands of the history of migrant rights' activists in France from 1970 to the present. These rather thin strands (for which she compensates with

dense prose) represent the thinking and production (writing, film, theater) of authors whose influence has been negligible. The study, composed of five essays held together rather shakily by an introduction and an epilogue, nonetheless, has interest; marginal ideas can sometimes become conventional wisdom.

Harrison argues that Palestinianism as a “rallying cry” in the immigrant-rights movements in France in the 1970s has been overlooked. Certainly, the idea that Palestinians are victims of Zionism, rather than of their own leadership, has gained currency. Indeed, at least some of their offspring have joined cries of support for Palestinian terrorist organizations with vituperation against France.

Harrison’s subjects are the French writer Jean Genet, the Algerian-French novelist Farida Belghoul, and a trove of tracts, newspapers, and archival materials from leftist migrant-rights organizations. Her heroine, the epitome of what Genet et al. were reaching for in earlier decades, is Houria Bouteldja, a French polemicist and writer who came to France as a baby with her parents from Algeria. Her thesis has been consistent: she is a French native, an *indigène*, by virtue not of her upbringing in France and its schools but by a right of return.

Bouteldja argues that in coming to France, she (and every other immigrant from the ex-colonial empire) is almost obligated to transform France from a society organized on the principle of white racial supremacy into one of, to take the name of her party, *indigènes de la République*. It is not entirely clear what this project aims for, other than that whites, at least as a political category, will disappear. Ironically, Bouteldja herself is fair skinned, but no one in France dares to say anything about her skin color.



Maybe this is why Harrison has written on obscure writers rather than explain why immigration is a political issue. It has, to be sure, spurred a debate between fringe political movements and their would-be intellectual spokesmen regarding who has the most right to be called French.

This has been a debate with some impact; after all, the xenophobic National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen made stopping immigration from Africa its central plank for decades, until the renamed National Rally party, led by his daughter Marine, fired him and toned down the phobia against the xeno. Marine now leads a major bloc in the parliament.

The common thread between the authors and their self-elected spokesmen for the victims is their bias against the liberal, bourgeois consensus. They found in Palestinians a cause worthy of their support that is sufficiently anti-Western.

Roger Kaplan
Washington, D.C.

Palestine 1936: The Great Revolt and the Roots of the Middle East Conflict. By Oren Kessler. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023. 317 pp. \$26.95.

Kessler, a think tanker and journalist writing his first book, has taken up a topic that ought to be well studied but, as he notes, is not. His impressive immersion in the sources and his lively writing bring the “Great Arab Revolt” of 1936-39 to life and show its continued significance. It was then, he argues, and not in 1948,

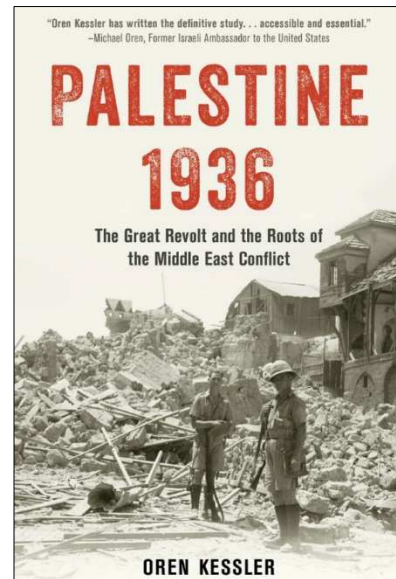
that Palestine’s Jews consolidated the demographic, geographic, and political basis of their state-to-be. And it was then that portentous words like “partition” and “Jewish state” first appeared on the international diplomatic agenda.

His history details growing Palestinian-Zionist disputes, tensions, and violence that build and build until they reach a climax with the London conference of early 1939. At that point, awareness of a looming conflict with Germany forced the pro-Zionist Malcolm MacDonald, British secretary of state for the colonies, effectively to walk back the Balfour Declaration’s promises of a “national home for the Jewish people.” With great fairness, Kessler dismisses as unpersuasive David Ben-Gurion’s claim that, if not for that reversal,

the six million Jews in Europe would not have been exterminated. Most of them would have been alive in Palestine.

But he does endorse Golda Meir’s claim that “hundreds of thousands of Jews—perhaps many more” could have been saved.

At the same time, Kessler sympathizes with MacDonald’s quandary. The United Kingdom could not afford the general enmity of Arabs and Muslims that Jewish



immigration to Palestine would have occasioned:

If Britain lost and Hitler won, there would be no National Home. The Jews would be killed or expelled from Palestine, just as they had been 2,000 years earlier.

It is hard to argue with this analysis.

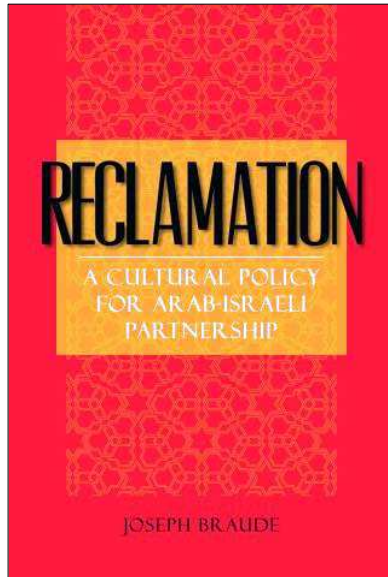
Returning to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Kessler convincingly shows that the 1936-39 revolt strengthened the Zionists and weakened the Palestinians, to the point that the latter

had effectively already lost the war [of 1948-49], and with it most of the country, a decade in advance.

Kessler has mastered the facts of 1936-39, but his survey of later years gets some things wrong, for example, overlooking the Palestinians’ sack of Musa Alami’s [Arab Development Society](#) and credulously repeating the calumny that Zionists “deliberately executed ... significant numbers of noncombatants, including women and

children,” at [Deir Yassin](#). Such errors aside, it is a great book.

Daniel Pipes
Middle East Forum



Reclamation: A Cultural Policy for Arab-Israeli Partnership. By Joseph Braude. Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2019. 162 pp. [Free download](#).

Braude, founder and head of the Center for Peace Communications, an organization focused on improving Arab-Israeli relations, has written an important and highly original book. He recalls the positive history of this fraught relationship, applauds the Moroccan exception, surveys current possibilities, concludes that “a critical mass in favor of reclamation has emerged” whose noise “can be heard from Morocco’s Atlantic shores to the Strait of Hormuz,” and offers a comprehensive set of policy recommendations.

Three words in the title and subtitle deserve notice. “Reclamation” refers to Braude’s slightly nostalgic recollection of good Arab-Israeli relations a century ago. He offers an

impressive array of pro-Zionist Egyptian and Iraqi voices; for example, the Egyptian scholar Ahmad Zaki held that the “victory of Zionism is also the victory of my ideal.” This view is nostalgic because it was always minoritarian. To make it majoritarian requires a “revolution” more than a reclamation.

“Cultural” also bears attention. Braude sensibly argues for the centrality of civil society, even in autocracies, pointing to the unacceptable divide between the good relations governments have with Israel and their denigration of the country domestically:

for the regional approach to deliver the genuine peace it intended, Arab populations would need to join their governments in building a relationship with Israel and its people.

For example,

an Arab-Israeli water desalination project does not influence public attitudes as long as news media ignore it and preachers persuade their flocks that “Zionists” are poisoning the drinking water.

In grander terms:

the singular focus on attaining a handful of new treaties risked obscuring the opportunity to forge countless bonds with Arab peoples.

To remedy this problem, he points to schools, religious leadership, and media as the key for changing attitudes.

“Arab” here means non-Palestinian. Contrasting the two populations, Braude correctly finds that “approaches that apply to one do not necessarily apply to the other,” and so neither includes Palestinians in his survey nor offers recommendations applying to them.

The book concludes with a useful list of steps that Israelis and Americans can take to encourage favorable Arab state relations with Israel, such as: “Establish a monitoring and accountability unit,” and, “Boost access to foreign outlets.” Although he directs such advice to both Israelis and Americans, the former naturally should take charge, given its centrality to Israel’s foreign relations.

Daniel Pipes
Middle East Forum

