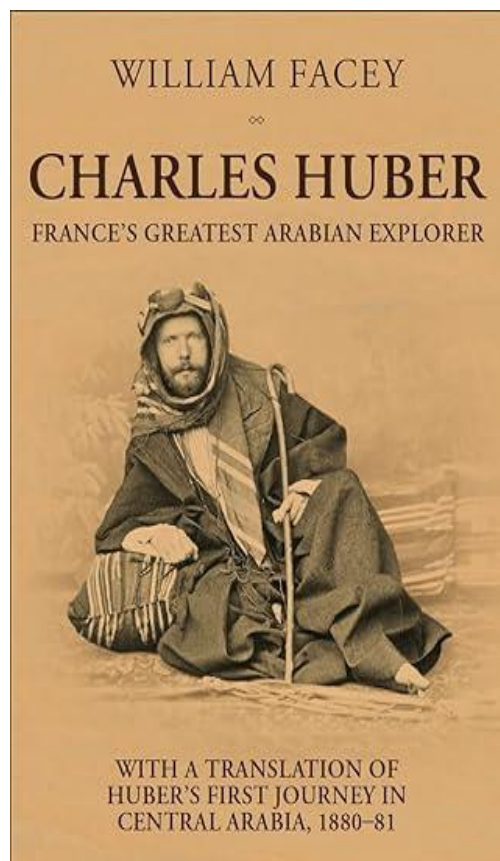


## Brief Reviews, Spring 2024

**Charles Huber: France's Greatest Arabian Explorer.** By William Facey. Arabian Publishing Ltd., 2022. 552 pp. \$36.45.

Huber (1847–84) tends to be overlooked in the pantheon of great European explorers of Arabia. Several reasons help account for this obscurity: he wrote in French, a minor language of this topic; indiscretions in his youth; a lone-wolf character; a limited output due to being murdered at age 36; and because his dry style of cataloging meant, in the words of Christian Julien Robin, that he “sought recognition above all else as a leading geographer and explorer among his fellow-professionals, and had no ambitions for literary success or public admiration.” Nonetheless, as his biographer, the historian Facey shows, Huber deserves to be remembered for the documentary contributions made during his two Arabian journeys between 1880 and 1884.

Huber’s primary interest, Facey explains, lay in “mapping a region of which Europe had almost no geographical conception.” Although he had uneven relations with the French government and fellow explorers, his “explorations and the scientific data he collected were recognized immediately by the French geographical establishment as a major contribution to knowledge.” He managed this despite hostile relations with his main European partner, the German Julius Euting, for Huber “was possessed to an extreme degree by classic ‘explorer’s syndrome’: the ambition of the pioneer in unknown lands to claim ‘firsts’ for himself.”



Facey’s work represents a model of academic thoroughness, with its many footnotes, appendices, and contributions by other scholars. My favorite of his accomplishments must be the turning Huber’s eccentric transcriptions into something recognizable and pronounceable; thus does the otherworldly El-Uscevuasce become the much simpler al-Washwāsh.

Daniel Pipes  
Middle East Forum

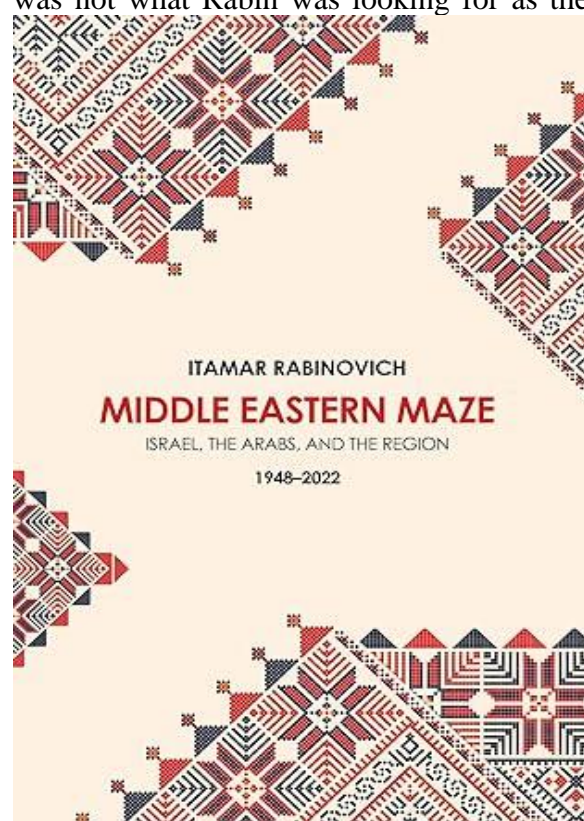
**Middle Eastern Maze: Israel, the Arabs, and the Region 1948-2022.** By Itamar Rabinovich. Brookings Institution Press, 2023. 376 pp. \$90 (\$32, paper).

This is a very rich book and well worth reading. It outlines the ups and downs of Israeli diplomacy with its Arab neighbors, with particular emphasis on Israeli-Syrian negotiations (in which the author took part) and on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The book has a number of strengths.

First, unlike other books dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict, it emphasizes the domestic political constraints on Israeli prime ministers, while not hesitating to point out the flaws in their policies. Second, while pointing out the mistakes made by both Syrian and Palestinian leaders (primarily Hafiz Assad and Yasser Arafat) the book also helps the reader to understand the bargaining strategies these leaders used and the constraints, both domestic and international, they were operating under. Third, while it also discusses the role of American administrations in promoting peacemaking efforts in the Middle East, the book very much subordinates that role to the motivations and actions of the Middle Eastern leaders themselves, especially those in Israel, Syria, and the Palestinian movement. A final strength of the book is Chapter Ten, “The Web of Relationships” in which the author presents an encapsulated but very solid view of Israel’s relations with Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the Palestinians, the Israeli Arabs, and Iraq from 1948 to 2022.

As a participant-observer in Israel’s negotiations with Syria when he was Israel’s ambassador to the United States under Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Rabinovich goes into detail on the “hypothetical” agreement

Rabin had suggested to Syrian leader Hafiz Assad. Under this hypothetical, Rabin asked if Israel’s own demands were met—primarily security, but also normalization on the Egyptian model (trade, tourism, and diplomatic relations)—and a five-year period of implementation, would Assad be willing to make peace with Israel if Israel withdrew from the Golan heights (p.35). Assad’s reply was not what Rabin was looking for as the



Syrian leader demanded a six-month implementation period, opposition to the term “normalization” and security for both sides “on an equal footing.” While Rabin’s negotiations with Assad did not meet with success(although, as Rabinovich notes, Assad pocketed Rabin’s “hypothetical” as an Israeli commitment to withdraw from the Golan), subsequent Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Netanyahu, also tried to reach an agreement with Syria, their rationale being that it was easier to make peace with Syria—after all, their disagreement was basically

territorial—than it was with the Palestinians with whom, especially after the outbreak of the Al-Aksa Intifada in 2000, their conflict was existential. Of particular interest in this context is Rabinovich’s discussion of Netanyahu’s use of the Jewish-American cosmetic magnate Ronald Lauder, as his secret emissary to Damascus—a mission, like so many other attempts to reach an agreement with Assad, ended in failure.

As far as the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks were concerned, Rabinovich gives an exhaustive evaluation of the Camp David II talks between Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Bara and argues, citing Henry Kissinger that the reason for the failure of the talks was due to the fact that the goals of the two sides were incompatible because Israel wanted a genuine peace that meant the end of conflict but that Arafat’s bottom line was that he could not accept Israel’s existence. Mahmoud Abbas’s rejection of the very generous peace offer made by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2008, which included an end to the conflict and the Palestinian leader’s refusal to respond to US Secretary of State John Kerry’s peace plan in 2014, would appear to support Kissinger’s theory. Rabinovich also argues that the fact that Hafiz Assad had rebuffed President Bill Clinton’s gambit in March 2000 on a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement, and had done so with impunity, was not lost on Arafat, and emboldened him to do the same thing at Camp David II four months later.

While I agree with the basic theses of the Rabinovich book, there are a few minor problems. First, Tom Donilon did not become President Barack Obama’s national security advisor at the beginning of Obama’s second term in 2013; in fact, he was replaced in that post by Susan Rice in 2013. Second, Rabinovich could have been a bit more

critical of both US and Israeli beliefs that Hafiz and Bashar Assad, in return for the Golan, could be pried away from their alliance with Iran and Hezbollah. This was a long-lasting alliance going back to 1982, and one on which especially Assad depended for security.

These minor disagreements aside, I would strongly recommend this book. At a time when there has been a lot of ahistorical nonsense on college campuses since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, this book should serve as a useful source for those who wish to genuinely understand the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict as it has developed since 1948, and I would strongly recommend it for courses on the modern Middle East and on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

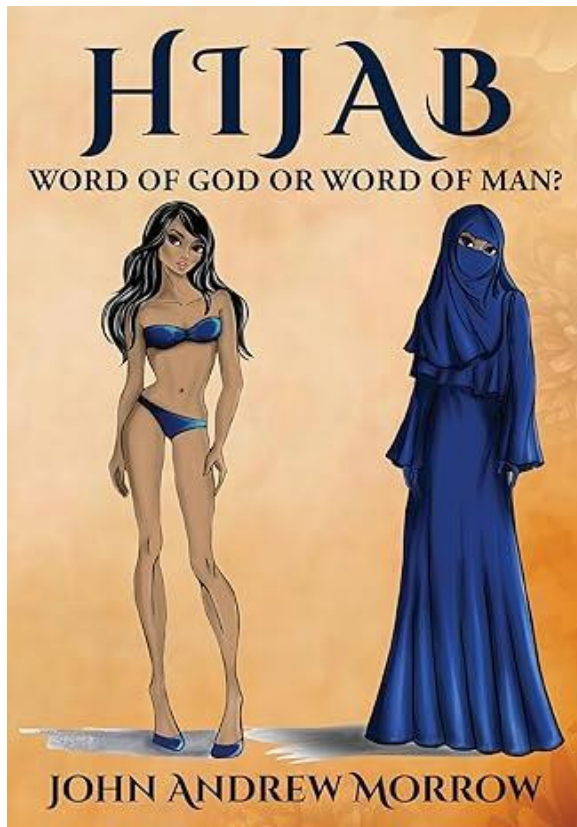
Dr. Robert O. Freedman  
Johns Hopkins University

**Hijab: Word of God or Word of Man? By John Andrew Morrow. Academica Press, 2023. 425 pp. \$99.95.**

“The subject of *sitr* or covering is far more nuanced than we have been led to believe. The spectrum of opinion is far more vast, tolerant, and permissive than most have imagined in their wildest dreams.” With this, Morrow (or Ilyas ‘Abd al-‘Alim Islam), a prolific Canadian convert to Islam, opens the small but also vast topic of Islamic strictures on the need for women to cover up. His definition of *hijab* makes his own view evident: “the religious prison created for women by men inflicted with numerous psychological and theological diseases, including ignorance, arrogance, and polytheism.”

As this impassioned definition suggests, Morrow takes a dim view of much Islamic





practice and, as a modern Westerner himself, seeks “to realign Islam with the Qur’an, since the former has outrun the latter.” Getting female clothing right has a central role in that effort. Toward that end, Morrow marshals evidence to show that accretion over the centuries has turned a simple Qur’anic command to cover the genitals into a major element of the faith. Scripture “tells believing women to protect their vaginas and vulvas. In other words, to remain chaste. It by no means commands women to wear the *hijab*, *burqa*, *chador*, or *niqab*, and to cover themselves from head to toe.” But misogynists, “who fear and hate the power of female sexuality and seek to suppress, subjugate, and control it, the solution is to seclude women, cover them in potato sacks, or bury them.” More specifically, “The spread of the invented neo-*hijab* has gone hand in hand with the spread of radical Islamist ideology.”

Among the most interesting chapters of the book are two that survey the views of twenty-three “qualified and competent” modern Muslim men and twenty-four equivalent modern Muslim women on the topic of hijab.

Morrow does not spare “weak Western nations” from his anger, rightly calling them “too cowardly to defend their secular values and human rights, have empowered and emboldened conservative, retrograde, and radical Islam. ... Terrified of being denounced as ‘Islamophobes,’ they act as the allies of radical Islamists rather than stand on the side of moderate and secular Muslims.” Too true.

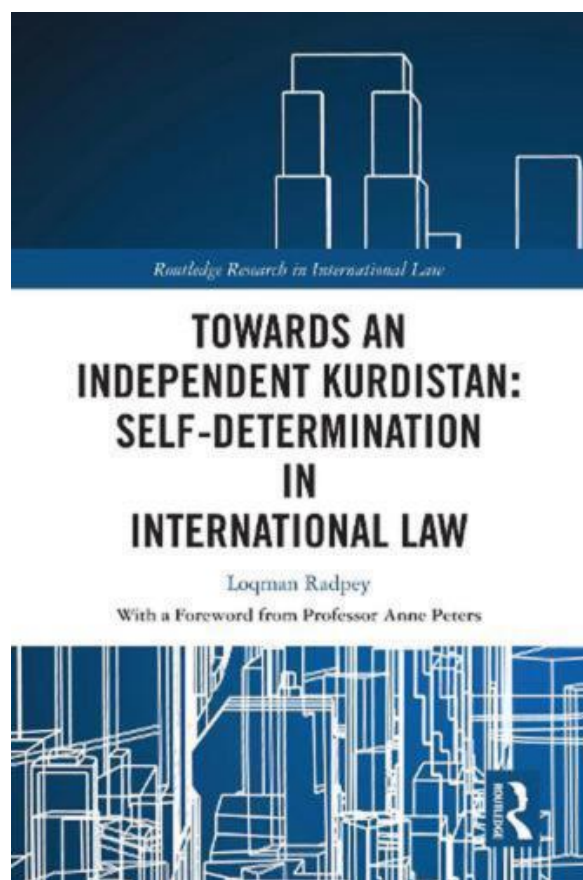
Daniel Pipes  
Middle East Forum

**Towards an Independent Kurdistan: Self-Determination in International Law.** By **Loqman Radpey.** New York: Routledge, 2024. 301 pp. \$170.

The Kurds are the largest ethnic group to lack their own nation-state. Many scholars and diplomats make the moral or historical cases for Kurdish independence. None, however, has taken as deep a dive into what evolving international law with regard to self-determination might mean for Kurds as Loqman Radpey, who recently completed his Ph.D. in international law on the subject at the University of Edinburgh.

Towards an Independent Kurdistan is timely. Whatever the considerations that keep states from embracing the Kurdish nationalist cause, the reality on the ground sets precedents and forces reconsideration. Not only have Iraqi Kurds enjoyed de facto autonomy for more than 30 years, but Syrian Kurds have also run their own de facto statelet for a decade.

Radpey may be sympathetic to Kurdish aspirations, but he does not cheerlead to elide difficult questions. Issues of self-determination are not cut-and-dry. There are precedents set by the dissolution of empires, decolonization, and fracturing of states. Non-state actors often form their own theories of self-determination. Kurds are a particularly complex case due to their division across four states. As Radpey notes, Human Rights Covenants limit themselves to self-determination within a single state, not carving out multiple regions across borders. His treatment of secession, covering legal scholarship, international law, and thresholds that merit secession. He addresses both successful cases (Eritrea, Bangladesh, and Kosovo) and the many failed movements ranging from Biafra to the Basques.



Successive chapters detail different theories

of self-determination, from Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin to President Woodrow Wilson, and from the League of Nations to the United Nations. He details more recent conceptions and categorizations that form a useful primer beyond the Kurdish case. As he richly footnotes resolutions, laws, and articles, his discussion of self-determination could as easily create a framework for discussion of Somaliland, Artsakh, or East Turkestan. His discussion about what categorizes a people is especially illuminating.

Radpey also relates a clear and rich legal history of the Kurds across the past century, surveying maps and relating key treaties, especially in the post-World War I-era. While six decades ago, the late Ambassador Bill Eagleton penned a short book detailing the short-lived Mahabad Republic for a Western audience, Radpey elucidates other unsuccessful efforts for Kurdish self-determination, both under the Iraqi Baath Party and against the backdrop of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

With regard to the present, he details the case from region to region, from Iraqi Kurdistan and discussions of Article 140 of the post-2003 Iraqi Constitution to the issue of remedial separation in Turkey. His discussion of the issue in Iran is likely prescient as Kurdish discord will boil to the surface as succession to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei looms. His discussion of what Kurdish statehood would mean is sound from a legal standpoint but overlooks many practicalities such as dual citizenship and renegotiation of regional treaties to incorporate an independent Kurdish state.

While Routledge unfortunately priced the book for university libraries rather than the general practitioner, *Toward an Independent*

Kurdistan would be a valuable addition to the personal collection of diplomats or journalists working on Kurdish issues. This is due to not only rich and nuanced content, but also an ability to write in plain if not somewhat dry English; unlike many academics, Radpey does not bow before the altar of academe to prioritize theory over reality or to obfuscate rather than elucidate knowledge.

Michael Rubin  
Middle East Forum

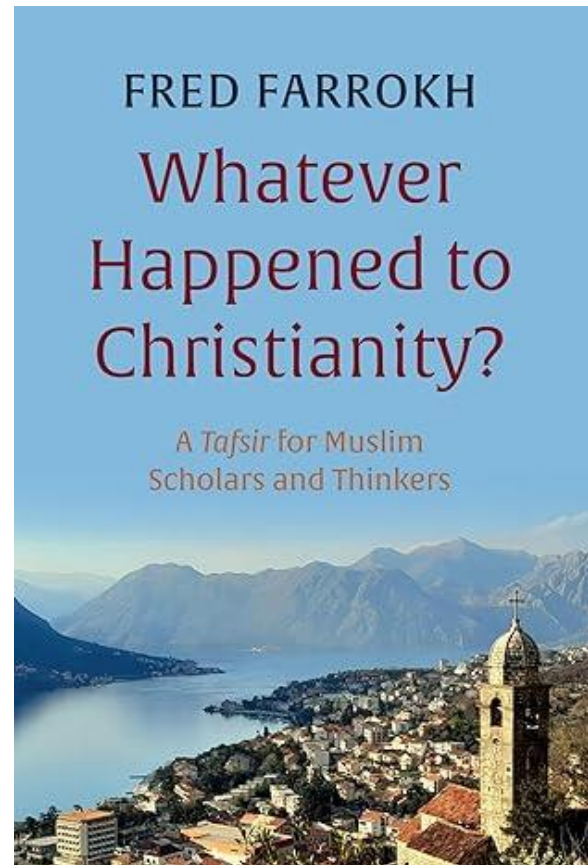
**Whatever happened to Christianity? A Tafsir for Muslim Scholars and Thinkers. By Fred Farrokh. Wipf and Stock, 2023. 136 pp. \$19.92 paper.**

In *Whatever happened to Christianity*, Fred Farrokh, an Iranian-American former Muslim, has reached out to Muslims, inviting them to consider afresh the claims of Christianity.

Daily Muslim rituals of worship include the prayer, *ihdina as-sirat al-mustaqim* (“guide us along the straight path”) so Farrokh introduces his appeal to Muslim readers by asking, how can one find the “straight path”? Open-minded Muslims are invited to inquire whether Jesus was the mortal prophet portrayed in the Qur’an, or “Lord, God and Savior.”

Farrokh reflects on Islam’s teaching that Christians have “gone astray” and invites Muslims to consider, “when, where, and how” this could have happened. He examines Islamic theories that attempt to answer this question and rejects them as implausible. For example, he rejects Muslim arguments that it was Paul who corrupted Christianity. Paul’s message, Farrokh maintains, was in harmony with that of the other seven human authors of the New Testament as well as with the

teachings of early Church leaders. Moreover, Paul had a good relationship with other early Christian leaders, including Peter and Barnabas.



After considering the origins of Christianity, Farrokh examines four Christian doctrines that may be considered “un-Islamic or anti-qur’anic”: 1) belief in a personal, loving God; 2) belief in the deity of Jesus; 3) belief in the Trinity; and 4) belief in salvation by faith in Christ. Farrokh’s conclusion is that “the core teachings of Christian orthodoxy were faithfully transmitted” by Jesus to his disciples, and then to the early church.

Farrokh is aware that Muslims reject the claims of Christianity, yet because they prefer to rely on the teachings of the Qur’an to inform them about Christianity, Muslims often lack basic knowledge about Christianity. Throughout this book Farrokh

carefully fills in gaps for Muslims, using language that can be readily understood.

This book is a notable contribution in a long line of apologetic works produced by Christians and Muslims who have sought to show the superiority of their respective faiths. Although Farrokh is striking at the heart of the Islamic narrative, his tone is gentle, friendly, and respectful. He writes as one inquirer to another.

The turning of many Muslims away from Islam is one of the great stories of shifting religious allegiance in the world today. Many have described the Iranian convert church as the fastest growing Christian community in the world. From the 500 converts to Christianity around the time of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the convert church has expanded to number in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions.

Converts from Islam are now making an important contribution to interfaith dialogue and apologetics and are increasingly seen as thought-leaders helping churches to better understand Islam and Muslims. *Whatever happened to Christianity?* is an outstanding contribution in this genre, which deserves to be read, not only by inquiring Muslims who want to understand Christianity better, but also by Christians and others who want to see how respectful, well-informed apologetics to Muslims can be done.

Mark Durie  
Middle East Forum