

## Brief Reviews, Winter 2020



**Iran's Emissaries of Terror: How mullahs' embassies run the network of espionage and murder. By The National Council of Resistance of Iran. Washington, D.C.: National Council of Resistance of Iran, 2019. 208 pp. \$34.95 (\$24.95, paper).**

The National Council of Resistance of Iran-U.S. (NCRI-US) is an outgrowth of the Iranian political group known as the Mujahedeen-e Khalq (MEK) or People's Mujahedeen of Iran. It has a well-deserved reputation for exaggeration and misrepresentation as well as for a cult-like lack of transparency. NCRI-US regularly represents itself as an important factor in the opposition inside Iran, which is simply not the case. It has also been less than transparent about the exorbitant speaker fees it has paid to eminent Americans. Despite presenting itself

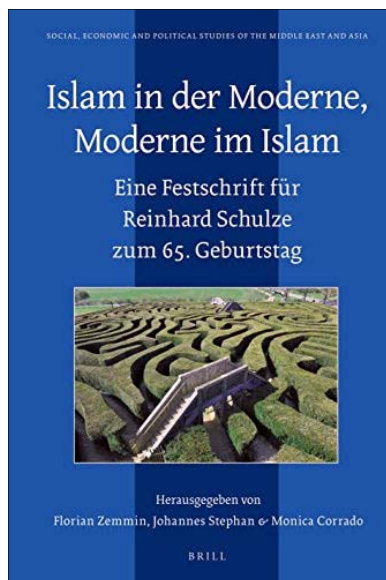
as committed to democracy, internally it is the exact opposite: Dedicated core members—now living in a camp in Albania, after being thrown out of their long-time camp in Iraq—are subject to strict rules set from the top.

That said, NCRI-US sometimes does excellent work. *Iran's Emissaries of Terror* is in fact a very useful account. Much of the volume details recent plots—many, but not all, against the NCRI—in which Iranian diplomats have been directly implicated. The book also recounts the long history of Iranian officials' direct role in terror attacks from the earliest days of the Islamic Republic. The volume includes chapters about Iranian embassies in seven European countries (Albania, Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, and Turkey) and profiles eleven key individuals in the Iranian government's terror apparatus with important information about their backgrounds and careers. In addition, the book explains the role of five key institutions in ordering and executing terrorist attacks. It also reproduces newspaper articles about the Iranian regime's direct role in terrorism in Europe and North America.

But *Iran's Emissaries of Terror* has serious limitations. It is sometimes too quick to accept the Islamic Republic's explanations: for instance, the idea that the Ministry of Intelligence and Security was created in 1984 not only from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' intelligence wing but also from the shah's intelligence agency SAVAK, which continued to function after the revolution. And the main limitation is that *Iran's Emissaries of Terror* is con-

fined to Europe and North America while the principal Iranian embassies that organize terrorism are in the Middle East, notably Iraq and Lebanon. The volume has very little about the many Iranian-sponsored terror attacks against Middle Easterners—mostly Israelis, but also Saudis, Syrian dissidents, and anti-Iranian Iraqis and Lebanese.

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**Islam in der Moderne, Moderne im Islam. Eine Festschrift für Reinhard Schulze zum 65. Geburtstag. Edited by Florian Zemmin, Johannes Stephan, and Monica Corrado. Leiden: Brill, 2018. 603 pp. \$180.**

To honor the eminent historian of Islam Reinhard Schulze's retirement from the Swiss University of Bern, twenty-eight scholars address Islam and modernity, a challenging topic that mirrors Schulze's

works on the history of the Muslim World League, the Islamic Enlightenment, and the Islamic world in the twentieth century.

One of Schulze's key theses is that there were Middle Eastern modernities under Islam before the eighteenth century, commonly known as trends of an-Nahda, which were subdued or deflected by Europe's colonialism. Islamic enlightenments then collided with the Western and Soviet versions. But the previous Islamic ways percolated in residual streams, swayed by forms of Jewish, Western, Eastern, and Christian fundamentalism, modernism, or revolutionism.

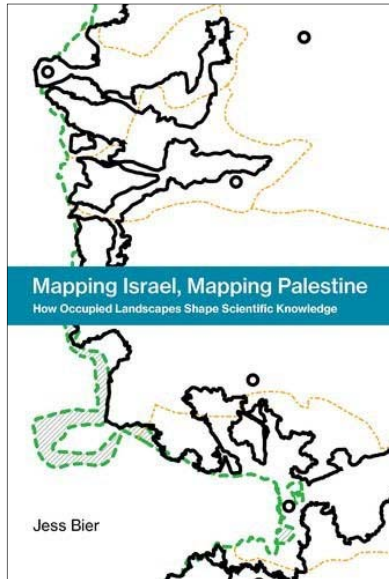
Creating this mosaic requires an interdisciplinary approach. In her contribution, Gudrun Krämer describes the local modernity of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hasan al-Banna while Stephan Guth explores Islamic studies in the eras of neoliberalism, the Islamic State, and, U.S. president Donald Trump. Other essayists offer interesting insights as well: Albrecht Hofheinz on sub-Saharan Africa; Jürgen Paul on Carl Heinrich Becker and semi-feudal relations in the Orient or *iqta* (land grant); Ahmad Dallal on trends in eighteenth-century hadith studies; Armando Salvatore on civility and charisma in the genesis of political modernity within the Islamic world.

Notes by his colleagues on the academic personality of Schulze and his [list of publications](#) make this book a scholarly compendium. Notably, his most recent article of 2017 deals with a new and disputed trend: the establishment of Islamic centers of theological studies at secular universities, for instance, in Germany.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Anmerkungen zur Einrichtung islamischer theologischer Studien an säkularen Universitäten."

This honor study does a double service to Schulze and the academic community and offers nourishing food for thought.

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**Mapping Israel, Mapping Palestine.**  
**By Jess Beir. How Occupied**  
**Landscapes Shape Scientific Know-**  
**ledge. Cambridge: The MIT Press,**  
**2017. 316 pp. \$35.**

While most academic enemies of Israel are Middle East studies specialists, increasingly those in the social sciences and humanities are finding new ways to weaponize their fields against the Jewish state. *Mapping Israel, Mapping Palestine* by Jess Bier, an assistant professor of urban sociology at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, uses the field of geography to

portray Israel's alleged colonization of "Palestine" and isolation of Palestinians in "segregated Bantustans."

Beir combines the now-familiar rhetoric of "anti-colonialism" with the arcana of eth-nographic cartography. The book is suffused with language and terminology that will be unfamiliar to most readers: graduated circles, choropleths, critical triangulation, and so on. Page after page of geographical jargon and lectures on various mapping techniques from the British Mandate to the present aim at showing how Israel unfairly uses its technological superiority to "erase" Palestinian villages, hamlets, and towns, and to force Palestinians to live in remote "Bantustans."

Baffling sentences are found on nearly every page: "Both mobility and fixity can lead to disempowerment, but through a focus on the production of place, stasis provides an additional aspect for the study of knowledge created within political and social movements."

Among the book's shortcomings is its lack of any analysis of Palestinian maps that erase Israel, such as that provided in a short, clear [article](#) by Tsivya Fox titled "Who Took Israel off the Map?" What ethnographic details might lurk beneath the ground in Palestinian tunnels into Israel? How about a cartographic history of the ancient kingdoms of Judea and Samaria? The book's only use lies in illustrating what happens when an academic polemicist takes aim against Israel.

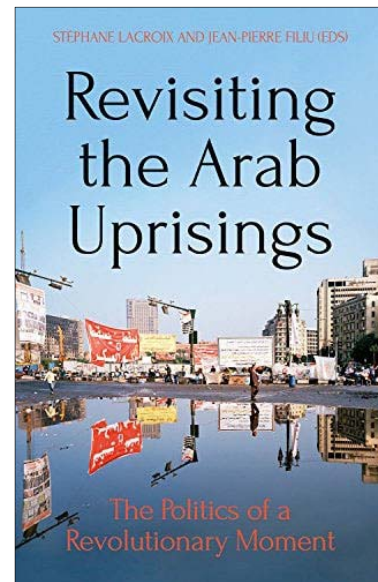
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**Revisiting the Arab Uprisings: The Politics of a Revolutionary Moment.** Edited by Stéphane Lacroix and Jean-Pierre Filiu. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2018. 330 pp. \$34.95, paper.

The editors suggest a modest objective: covering “a broad chunk of largely unchartered ground” relevant to the 2011 Arab uprisings, and thus compile eleven lucid, informative chapters, especially those by Alfred Stepan, Omar Ashour, and Filiu.

Stepan addresses the clichéd references to Tunisia’s exceptionalism, brilliantly discussing how years before the December 2010 uprising, its opposition groups reached a compromise formula of “twin tolerations.” According to the working arrangement, Tunisia’s secularists include their religious compatriots in the public space. In turn, the Islamists reciprocate by adhering to the principle of the civil state. Their agreement generated a consensual commitment to a future civic government without having to grapple with the divisive issue of secularism. Stepan’s convincing analysis debunks Western approaches to democratization.

Ashour reviews the Egyptian Revolutionary Command Council’s manipulation of the Muslim Brotherhood after the 1952 coup before Gamal Abdel Nasser turned against them in 1954. Nasser foreshadowed the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces’ approach after the 2011 uprising when it did not obstruct Muhammad Morsi’s election to the presidency. A year later, Morsi’s appointee as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Abdel Fattah Sisi, turned against him in a bloody coup. Ashour insightfully shows how the Egyptian military views itself as superior to the country’s social strata and how it places the Brotherhood at the bottom of society.



Filiu uses the term “modern Mamluks” to refer to politically dominant Arab militaries that have mercilessly aborted the Arab uprisings. But unlike Mamluk slave soldiers, such as sultan Baybars (1223-77), who battled foreign enemies, the only victories that modern Mamluks achieved have been against their own peoples. Filiu notes that former Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba kept the army small and weak to avoid a military coup as in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. Bourguiba aimed to marginalize the army but also instigated the disastrous 1961 Bizerte crisis that inflicted hundreds of Tunisian casualties when he ordered the blockade of the French naval base.

Unfortunately, these excellent chapters lose their impact in an edited book that lacks a theoretical framework. The book’s structure is problematic. First, there are numerous publications on the Arab uprisings, and the claim of “unchartered ground” is simply untrue. Second, the editors plead with readers not to despair about the future because “[t]here are still many reasons to keep faith in the long-term evolution of the region,”

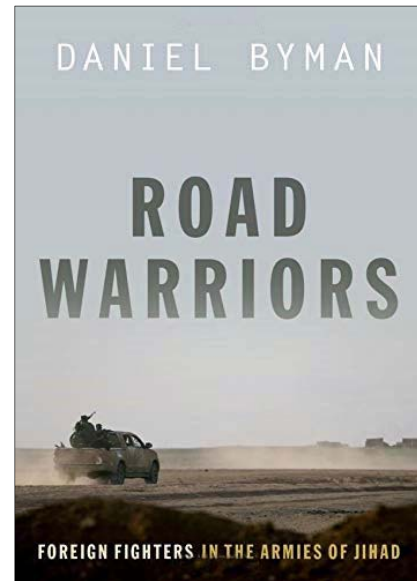
but a chapter moderating the pessimistic view of Arab polities would have been more useful. Third, even though chapters address Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, the book is heavily skewed towards the first two countries. Finally, this narrow coverage is aggravated by neglect of comparative theoretical perspectives.

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**Road Warriors: Foreign Fighters in the Armies of Jihad. By Daniel Byman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 392 pp. \$29.95.**

The phenomenon of foreign fighters serving with (mainly Sunni) jihadist, Islamist militias is well known to researchers. Its most famous manifestations, until the last decade, were the “Afghan Arabs,” citizens of Arab countries—including Osama bin Laden—who took part in the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Interest intensified when large numbers of Islamists from Arab and Western countries joined with the Islamic State (ISIS) after it declared its “caliphate” in June 2014. But much media coverage of ISIS volunteers has been sensational and superficial: Byman provides a comprehensive history of the foreign-fighter issue and grapples with the important question of how Western countries can combat and eliminate it.

*Road Warriors* provides a concise and ordered survey of the foreign fighter phenomenon, noting that Sunni Islamism was not the first or only political movement to use foreign volunteer combatants. Byman surveys the Afghan experience and notes the crucial role of Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian pioneer of Salafi jihadist military activity, in laying the ideational and organizational foundations for what eventually became al-



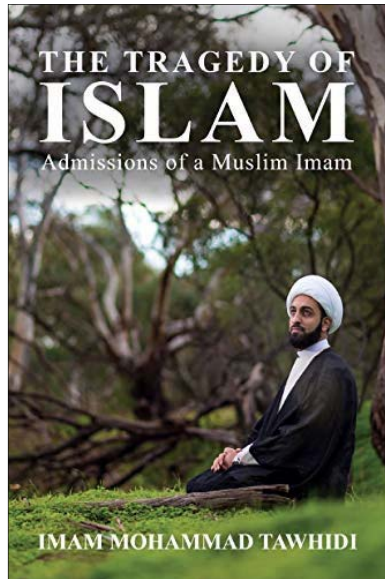
Qaeda. The author looks also at the foreign fighters’ role in the Chechen war, in Africa, and in the context of the Sunni insurgency against the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq. The book then turns to the recent Syrian and Iraqi experiences.

Byman’s research is most valuable as the first attempt by a serious researcher to deal in detail with the particular appeal of ISIS for foreign jihadists. As he notes, more foreign fighters travelled to Syria and Iraq than to all previous jihads combined—about 40,000 fighters. Byman discusses the role of social media and notes that while ISIS has now declined, the movement has “nurtured the flame of jihad around the world.” Other movements will seek to “harvest what Islamic State planted.” He concludes by offering tentative advice for Western policymakers, concluding that as the rise in the appeal of jihad was not predicted, it is also impossible to trace a timeline for its eclipse and decline.

*Road Warriors* is a comprehensive, readable, and informative addition to the literature. Hopefully, it will lead to further focus by researchers on the lessons to be

learned from the astonishing, rapid success (and equally rapid eclipse) of the Islamic State.

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**The Tragedy of Islam: Admissions of a Muslim Imam. By Imam Mohammad Tawhidi. Adelaide, Aus.: Reason Book International, 2018. 329 pp. \$27.99.**

Tawhidi's aim "is to educate and raise awareness about what is taught within the Islamic seminaries in the Middle East." His own story is so important to his project that he devotes the first eighty-two pages establishing his Islamic bona fides as "an Australian Muslim scholar, publicly ordained Islamic authority, thinker, educator, speaker, and one of the leading voices in the global movement of Islamic reform." Doing so permits him to present ideas that would

likely be dismissed as "Islamophobic" coming from a non-Muslim.

His adventure begins in Australia where religious idealism inspired him to travel to Iran and study at al-Mahdi School in Qom. There he "was completely radicalized, and willing to kill anyone who spoke a single word against Ali Khamenei." In addition, he explains,

We all loved Hizbullah, and were prepared to join them at all costs. We detested the USA and cursed it daily along with Israel and the UK.

But he also witnessed hypocrisy and cruelty, leading to skepticism and disillusionment. Relocating to Iraq in 2013, he lived through the rise of ISIS, which, in 2015, captured his uncle, a colonel in the Iraqi army, and burned him alive. Thus began Tawhidi's "deradicalization." He returned to Australia and dedicated his life to Islamic reform. The remainder of the book is "a gradual and intellectual exposé of the difficulties of Islamic thought." His ideas are not entirely original, but coming from a credentialed Shiite imam, are bound to be considered revolutionary.

Tawhidi's thesis is that true Islam ends at the death of Muhammad; all the hadiths are fraudulent, and all the caliphs illegitimate, beginning with Abu Bakr, who "used his caliphate to hijack Islam and introduce his own religious system."

On Israel, Tawhidi is equally iconoclastic, illustrating Islam's "distortion of historical Jewish claims to Jerusalem" and arguing for the need to "admit that our terrorist caliphs were the ones who invaded Palestine and built mosques above sacred Jewish sites."

"The only way forward," he urges, "is to turn around and condemn the violence and terrorism that was committed in our name by

the Islamic caliphs.” The book closes with a promise of more to come: “I shall now move on to ... writing a detailed manifesto of how future Muslim generations can save themselves and the rest of humanity.” This is a tall order, and much needed.

A.J. Caschetta

