

BOOKS IN BRIEF

Hamrah, Satgin S. Editor. *Contextualizing Sectarianism in the Middle East and South Asia: Identity, Competition and Conflict.*

London: Routledge, 2023.

192 pages. Paperback \$35.96

Much has been written about the contemporary Arab Muslim World for having been plagued by sectarian conflict and violence. Most scholarship thus far has focused on the Sunni–Shia binary, which traces sectarianism to the ancient events that arose after the death of the Prophet Mohammad. *Contextualizing Sectarianism*, ten interdisciplinary and transnational scholarly essays, refocuses the discussion on the complexities of the conflict by foregrounding the political, social, and cultural domains the region has been experiencing in the more recent decades. The compiled scholarly essays challenge the misconceptions about sectarian divisions to reveal the intrastate and interstate factors that play into identity formation, competition, and conflict. According to editor Satgin S. Hamrah, the Middle East and South Asia had experienced a rise in sectarianism since the 1970s and into the 1980s, while she emphasizes the countries’ specificities across geographical spaces, national borders, and ideological beliefs. She rightly notes that it is important to examine the means by which state and non-state politicians manipulate sect-based identity to promote their interests. To do so, the editor explains the theoretical prisms to clarify the definition of the terms. She states: “sect is understood as a socio-religious grouping,” the construction of an exclusionary community that perceives other sects/communities as “other” (1). While the introductory exposé of the theoretical framework of conceptualizing modern sectarianism is enlightening, had the editor added a brief note about the organization of the book, it would have been helpful to readers.

The book comprises ten chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. Given the modern threat of war between state and non-state groups, Chapter 1 unravels the historical context of the seventh-century Muslim world, to reveal the political nature of the Sunni–Shia division at inception. Regarding the more modern conflation of religion and sect, Ayesha Jalal takes India as an example to trace the emergence of sectarianism to the founding of the nation-state in imperial Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. Chapter 2 continues the same line of thought as it explores the exclusion of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Pakistan as a non-Muslim minority. This was the consensus of Muslim scholars from 50 Muslim countries who, in 2009, unanimously defined the “real Muslim” and “orthodoxy,” excluding the Ahmadiyya (22). Hamrah’s Chapter 3 sheds light on the complexity of the Soviet–Afghan War (1970–1988), which she designates as the historical

point of reference for causing the sociopolitical shift in the region. She says that the interventions of the US, Saudi Arabia, and Iran in the Soviet–Afghan War resulted in unpredictable consequences. Although the short-term results were successful in defeating the Soviets, the interventions created long-term conflict and violence within Afghanistan. The Afghani Sunni and Shia had initially united to fight the communist Soviets. However, the US aided the mujahideen to counteract the possibility of establishing a communist satellite state. Saudi Arabia supported the Sunni mujahideen while Iran sustained the Shia, with each being motivated by conflicting goals for regional hegemony. The interventions created tensions and conflicts within, which ultimately evolved into terrorism.

Chapter 4 offers an interesting discussion of columnist visionary advice about the good life to Muslim Egyptians in the era of extremism, and Chapter 5 focuses on the complexity of the sectarian system of government imposed by colonial France on Lebanon. Delving more deeply into sectarianism vis-à-vis identity formation, ethnicity, and nationalism in fragmented societies, Chapter 6 considers the two cases of Lebanon and Iraq in the pre- and post-civil war. We learn about the difficult processes of institution-building, the crafting of constitutions, and the concerns for state security in relation to identity, nation-building, and power dynamics. Dylan Maguire clarifies how a possible balance can be achieved within military institutions and inclusive state interests while simultaneously overriding “national, ethnic, and sectarian groups” (77). Unfortunately, the unstable conditions in both Iraq and Lebanon have not sustained a balance, given the facts on the ground in 2024.

The two essays about Iraq in Chapters 7 and 8 are illuminating. While the former explores the causes of the Iraqi Civil War, the latter investigates the continuing cycle of violence in the post-2003 US invasion and occupation of the country. Frank Sobchak, in Chapter 7, suggests that attributing the cause of the civil war to the 2006 Al-Qaeda attack on the Samarra Shia shrine is too simplistic. His analysis offers a more tenable argument as he considers the Saddam Hussein years during which the Shia had been oppressed and disempowered. He rightly states that the growing sectarian tensions created during the first three years of the US invasion exacerbated the pre-existing sectarian divisions of former years. Furthermore, the re-distribution of political power, the holding of elections, the writing of a new constitution, and the constitutional referendum worsened ethnic relations. Competition among the various sects was exacerbated without providing enough time for negotiations and reconciliation. In rushing to establish democracy, stability, and normalcy, American insistence on holding elections for new Iraqi leaders, the appointment of interim and transitional governments, and the writing of a new constitution did not result in parliamentary democracy for all Iraqis. Not only were the nominees selected by Coalition forces, there were also attacks on leaders, “insurgent threats, Sunni boycotts, and logistical challenges,” a debacle which

resulted in unpredictable consequences (103). The Sunni (20% of the population) boycotted the elections; the results favored the Shia Islamists and Kurdish nationalist parties, with the Sunni winning a minimal number of seats. The end result was the exchange of Sunni-controlled Iraq under Saddam with Shia extremists holding the reins of power for the first time in Iraq's history: "... Iraq progressed from the violent removal of the Sunni-led Ba'ath regime to an approved constitution and an elected Shia government in roughly 30 months" (113).

Chapter 9 is equally enlightening about the intersection of sectarianism and counterterrorism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which have shaped state policy and practice at the international level and into which entered securitization, stability, and "neo-liberalism [and] democracy promotions" (137). The final chapter adds yet another layer to the present sectarian conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, by pointing out the past friendly relationship during the pre-revolutionary Iranian regime. Pouya Alimagham tells of the collaboration between the two conservative monarchies, the Pahlavi monarchy and the al-Saud kingdom, in the 1960s. Not only were they "stalwart allies" of the US during the Cold War, opposing Nasserism, Pan-Arabism, and Arab socialism. They actually had forged a tactical alliance to suppress Oman's Dhofar rebellion, which had been inspired by Marxist ideology. This is evidence that the modern S. Arabia-Iran sectarian conflict is not caused by the seventh-century dispute. Alimagham rightly concludes that the current rivalry came about when the post-Iranian revolutionary leaders switched gears to support both Sunni and Shia Islam across the globe, in the interest of its own hegemony in the Muslim world.

Contextualizing Sectarianism is an excellent source for fleshing out and understanding the diversity and complex phenomenon of sectarianism in the Middle East and South Asia. It would be of value to scholars and students of history, political science, religion, and studies of the Middle East and international security.

Bhungalia, Lisa. *Elastic Empire: Refashioning War through Aid in Palestine*.

Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024.

288 pages. Paperback \$28.00

Elastic Empire offers brilliant scholarship with excellent documentation and analysis about the collaboration between the US and its "special friend," the Zionist settler state of Israel. The study could not have been published at a more auspicious time, as we have been witnessing the Israeli Genocide¹ against Gaza, with the full support for Israel – monetary, military, and diplomatic – of the US and its

Western allies. Though the present war since October 7, 2023, is being conducted with American tanks and aircraft, heavy weapons and bombs, and land invasions and drone strikes, the book narrates the soft, silent power of American aid to the Palestinian Occupied Territories (POT). Lisa Bhungalia argues for the centrality of Palestine to Israel's "geopolitical interests, security prerogatives, and counter-insurgency aims" (4). The book is in five chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. This brief review will summarize the main ideas of Chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 1, titled, "War Through Law," is an eye-opener about how Israel landed in the US lap the case of Hamas as a terrorist organization, before the September 11, 2001, attacks. The decision came about after Israel arrested a Palestinian American citizen in 1993 as he was traveling to Gaza to deliver humanitarian support. Muhammad Salah, Bhungalia tells us, was accused by Israel of being a Hamas leader. Spending five years in Israeli prison, he was tortured, dehumanized, forced into confession, and tried in a military court. On his release, he returned to the US to face a legal ordeal by the American legal system, which was then utilized to establish new counterterrorism laws and other dangerous legal practices. Salah's trial was the longest-running terrorist case in US history, according to the author. He was eventually acquitted in 2007 of all terrorism charges, though indicted on the obstruction of justice. Bhungalia adds that Salah's plight became the "center of an evolving legal-war architecture" with Palestine being at the heart of its development, and the geographic and temporal logics that corroborate it (28). According to his lawyers in the US, Michael J. Deutsch and Erica Thompson, the accusations against Salah were [falsely] invented by Israel for strategic purposes. They contend that

Israel manufactured the military leadership charge against Salah in order to force the U.S. government to outlaw support for Hamas and to stop the flow of funding and assistance from the United States to Palestinians in the occupied territories. Israel's strategy worked.²

With the launching of the "War on Terror" after 2001, the US-Israel partnership, which had its inception in the 1970s, evolved and developed whereby the US adopted Israel's definitions. American and European aid to POT, which is supposed to alleviate Palestinian economic hardships, develop needed infrastructures, and provide public services, among other needs, is imbedded into the global codification of the War on Terror.

Chapter 2, "Elastic Sovereignty," analyzes the topological web of laws that undergird modern imperial formations and wars in the Global South within the framework of an elastic empire. The discussion attempts to answer a few questions, such as: how does a security state enfold the mechanics of humanitarian aid to people who have been dispossessed, displaced, and occupied? What happens to sovereignty? And how

does the aid system rearrange, constrain, and reconfigure the lives of people receiving aid? (51) To answer these questions, Bhungalia traces the articulation and implementation of the US counterterrorism laws as they play out in Palestine. We find out how after September 11 the American legal processes have instituted laws via executive orders and other legal mechanisms, through jurisdiction and security infrastructure to control aid flows and finances to POT, and around the world. Coordinated with Israel and Western allies, the legal mechanisms police, pacify, conduct surveillance, and authorize preemptive war against terrorism suspects and those who harbor them, whether they are individuals, states, or non-state groups. The US security state, she argues, operates through “elastic materiality” that “stretches, transforms, and mutates the landscape and time of sovereignty” (28).

Moreover, not only has the US played the leading role in establishing the “aid–war dynamic” (5). But it has constructed paradigms to intercept threats before they happen, so they can be captured before they materialize (39). The author discusses the USAID as an example of the operational process. The NGO and all its local aid workers have to undergo “extreme vetting” (55) for the job, which affords them a good salary and freedom of movement. But they have to sign the “paper”: the anti-terrorist certification (ATC), the executive order that went into effect a few weeks after September 11. The paper stipulates that the aid workers and the groups being aided do not support terrorism and organizations that have been designated by the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) as terrorist organizations (49). What is also interesting is that ATC and OFAC utilize modern technologies, databases, and intermediaries that link topological relations between Palestine – among other far-away sites – and the US so that postmodern imperial formations are accomplished. Bhungalia concludes that Palestinians have been turned into objects of empire, and Palestine has emerged as “an archetypal example of the workings of American empire” (24).

Elastic Empire is an original scholarly work that will be of great interest regarding the silent workings of American and Western empire in the twenty-first century. It would be valuable to scholars and students of geography, Middle East Studies, settler colonialism, globalization, and empire studies.

Inbari, Motti, and Kirill Bumin. *Christian Zionism in the Twenty-First Century: American Evangelical Public Opinion on Israel*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024.

240 pages. Hardback \$29.95

It is common knowledge that evangelical and born-again American Christians have supported Israel rather than Palestine in the Israel–Palestine conflict. Motti Inbari and

Kirill Bumin contest this oversimplified notion. Their findings are based on the results of conducting three surveys over five years, in 2018, 2020, and 2021. To “deepen and broaden scholarly understanding” of the evangelicals’ “views on Israel, Jews, Muslims, eschatology, and the Israel–Palestine dispute,” the writers initiated a quantitative study by focusing mostly on the “opinions of ordinary evangelicals,” and also including the pastors’ political positions and religious beliefs (1). The survey questions focus on American evangelicals’ attitudes toward religion and American foreign policy in relation to the conflict. The interviews and conversations with a diverse group – theologians, pastors and ordinary people – demonstrate a less homogenous, more complex picture than commonly believed. We learn about generational differences. The 2021 surveys targeted a group of under 30 (18–29-year-olds), whose attitudes are motivated less by theological beliefs, church attendance, and Bible reading in comparison with their elders. This younger generation is driven by sociopolitical and justice rationales, as well as knowledge and perceptions about the Palestinian condition. This brief review will highlight a few prominent findings of the study.

Yaakov Ariel’s Foreword sheds light on the current changes that took place during the Trump administration (2017–2021), most notably the relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He notes that the designation of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is evidence of the influence of the conservative presidency and policymakers, in addition to far-right American Jews. However, he adds that the pomp and circumstance at the embassy’s opening ceremony is not a sweeping indicator of the evangelical positive support for Israel. Rather, he points out two things: 1) Not all evangelicals subscribe to the Messianic motif in the Jews’ role in the End of Time scenario; 2) Young evangelicals’ faith does not pre-dispose them to sharing their elders’ Messianic hope. The book comprises five chapters, an introduction, a conclusion, and many graphs representing the survey’s specific findings.

Chapter 1 answers the question as to the reasons behind the evangelicals’ support for Israel; Chapter 2 explores the ideas of American evangelicals regarding the Arab–Israeli dispute. While Chapter 3 analyzes what the authors’ term “Replacement Theology,” focusing on the role of Jews and Israel as far as the end of days is concerned, Chapter 4 discusses the change of the guard vis-à-vis the shift of young evangelicals’ regarding the Israel–Palestine conflict. Of note is the authors’ usage of the word “dispute” rather than conflict. Chapter 5 switches gears to note the views of young evangelists – under 30 – analyzing their open-ended survey responses. Notably, one-third of positive responses toward Israel’s support relate to God’s promise to the Israelites (note the conflation of the Israelites with modern Israelis). Their rationales, 88%, are based on the strands of the Abrahamic covenant that legitimates the Israelis’ entitlement to the land that belongs to God. The secular evangelicals, who did not invoke the Biblical promise (19.8%), base their support for Israel on the political-historical interpretations (152–155), which, I believe, is still driven by the literal promise of the covenant, the secular language

notwithstanding. As the first empirical and statistical study of its kind, the study narrates the motivations of evangelicals behind supporting Israel, which are categorized into seven groups. The authors also note the surveys' descriptive results, and the "operation-ization of variables and statistical analysis," the interpretation of which identifies opportunities for further research (22). The conclusion findings demonstrate three predictors of evangelicals' support for Israel: age, with older Jews being more supportive than younger ones; opinion of Jews as per the Biblical formula of Jews being the chosen people; and socialization with other evangelicals.

Chapter 2 examines the views of evangelicals regarding the Israel–Arab conflict, as well as reported pro-Israeli political action. While a large number expressed a neutral position about the conflict, a significant number have confidence in the Israelis' ability to negotiate with Palestinians; trust that the Israelis will stand by their agreements; support the annexation of the West Bank; and prefer the non-intervention of the international community in resolving the conflict. Most notable are the findings regarding the views and attitudes of the younger population of evangelicals, which are discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. In surveying 700 evangelicals and born-again Christians under 30, the results demonstrate some veering away from religion – that being only 60% invoke the Abrahamic covenant for supporting Israel. Some 48% relate "novel insights," supporting Palestinians due to political and social arguments (20). Inbar and Bumin found out that this latter group express "warmer feelings" toward Palestinians and Muslims more broadly. With revised conceptions about "justice" and "fairness" toward the Israel–Palestine conflict, the younger generation tends to be more critical of Israeli policies (113). Overall, only one-third of the 700 surveyed voiced support for Israel while a quarter expressed support for Palestinians (142).

Christian Zionism in the Twenty-First Century is an eye-opener of the changing views and attitudes of evangelical and born-again American Christians regarding Israel. The claim that Israel has all this group's support is no longer viable. The nuances and multi-layered attitudes of the different sectors of Jewish Americans – the elders, young generation, pastors, and ordinary people – are documented beautifully. The study would appeal to students and scholars of theology, international politics Foreign Affairs officials, Middle East studies, and political activists.

Shlaim, Avi. *Three Worlds: Memoirs of an Arab-Jew*.

London: OneWorld, 2023.

336 pages. Hardback \$19.95

Avi Shlaim's autobiography, *Three Worlds*, is a fascinating memoir of his life in Iraq, Palestine–Israel, and England. The gist of the autobiography is Shlaim's

exploration of identity politics, personally and collectively, from within the wider, complex historical context of the Arab Middle East, since the second half of the twentieth century. The historical time period is summed up in Chapter 1 – from the Nazi propaganda in Iraq to the Nazi genocide of Jews in Europe to the Balfour Declaration of 1917 to the partition of Palestine and the founding of Israel, a history that also includes the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem and the exodus of Jews from Iraq and other Arab countries. Shlaim highlights the Ashkenazi-Sephardic tensions in Israel, which continue to exist in 2024, experienced by the Shlaims, among other Sephardic Jews (17). The biography offers an intimate personal story, to “reanimate a unique Jewish civilization of the Near East” (7). The narrative is also a political argument that critiques Zionism and exposes the fault lines of nationalism and the “Eurocentric state” of Israel (9). For Shlaim, “Nationalism ... lies at the heart of most international conflicts,” for “it stops us thinking” (6). The book comprises 13 episodes with a prologue, maps, a few personal photos, and several documentary photos of important Arab, Jewish, and British leading personnel from the time period. Eight of the 13 episodes focus on life in Iraq where Iraqi Jews lived a life of contentment before they were forced to migrate to Israel between 1950–1951.

Avi, his family, and the larger Jewish community in Iraq defined themselves as Arab Jews. They spoke Arabic and enjoyed a sense of belonging as a respected minority, among other minorities within Iraq’s multi-ethnic society. They enjoyed Arab cultural heritage with Muslims, Christians, and others, sharing Arab customs, lifestyle, cuisine, and music, which blended Jewish and Arabic features. Iraq for them was the “beloved homeland” (8–9). We learn about the Shlaims’ good social position and their prosperity in Baghdad and the Jewish community’s contributions to the Iraqi economy and culture. Although the less prosperous Iraqis were jealous of well-off Jews, overall all the various sects, including the Jews, lived in peaceful coexistence. Unlike Jews in Europe whose history was a litany of tragic suffering, Jewish history in the Near East enjoyed pluralism, “cosmopolitanism and coexistence,” which could be a model for the future in the midst of the troubled Middle East in the twenty-first century (18).

Shlaim tells how things changed as far as Arab Jews are concerned after 1948 when Palestinians were expelled from their homeland and Israel was established. There was a violent backlash against Jews in Baghdad, which was exacerbated by the secret activities of the Zionist underground terrorist actions against Iraqi Jews. Some of the violence turned to brutal slaughter and bodily mutilations, arousing fear in the Jewish community. To pressure Jews to migrate to Israel, Shlaim discovers and documents that Mossad had planned a scheme of terrorizing Iraqi Jews, with the help of Jewish Iraqi collaborators. There is also a mention of similar actions in Egypt by the Israeli military intelligence to blemish Gamal Abdul

Nasser's revolutionary regime (150). Of Israel's role in inflicting terror on Arab Jews, Shlaim writes that "... it is one of the most shocking examples of 'Cruel Zionism' that I have encountered in my fifty years of scholarly meandering around the highways and byways of the Arab-Israeli conflict" (151).

Avi's life and those of his family were shattered after they were uprooted from Iraq and displaced in Israel. Jews from the Arab world, he relates, felt alienated and discriminated against vis-à-vis Ashkenazi Jews, for being "backward" and "inferior 'human material'" (14). Zionism, as his mother emphasizes, was an "Ashkenazi thing" (9). He says that the violent uprooting of wealthy Jews, such as his family, left "emotional and psychological scars," for not only did they suffer the destruction of their lifestyle, they were also impoverished, living an undignified life, with no sense of belonging to the Zionist state. We learn about the rise of Zionism as a nationalist ideology, the Nazi genocide, and the dehumanization of Palestinians and Arab Jews at the hands of the Ashkenazi Zionists, who entertained "racist attitudes toward the Arabs, the Palestinian citizens of Israel and the Jews of the Arab world" (173). Interestingly, although Shlaim's IDF training in a non-combatant capacity afforded him a sense of belonging to the state, which aided him in overcoming his former sense of inferiority, he nonetheless describes his awakening after the 1967 war. He declares that after the war, Israel "became a colonial power, oppressing the Palestinians in the occupied territories," with the IDF becoming "a brutal police force of a brutal colonial power" (294).

Three Worlds by Avi Shlaim is a fascinating narrative that combines the personal and the collective history of the Arab Jews, the Palestinians, and the Zionist settler colony, which continues to wreak havoc on the region. Written in a clear, lucid style suitable for the general reader, I recommend its inclusion in the history curriculum for high school and undergraduate students. The book would be of interest to students and scholars of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Middle East studies and the general public.

Notes

1. Genocide is "a crime committed with the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, in whole or in part," in "The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948)," <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Genocide%20Convention-FactSheet-ENG.pdf>
2. Micael E. Deutsch and Erica Thompson, "Secrets and Lies: The Persecution of Muhammad Salah" (Part I), *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 37(4) (Summer 2008), 38–58, here 40.