that were borrowed from the experience of the Christian and Jewish dhimmis in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. Kennedy discusses the role of Buddhist monks in negotiating the surrender of many cities in central Asia and the Indus valley (which ironically helped terminate the dominant role of Buddhism in those areas), and of the Copts in Egypt (some of whom helped the Arabs, and some of whom fought alongside Byzantines to defend Egypt for Christendom).

Kennedy explains that the Arabs were fortunate to begin their campaigns precisely when they did and not several decades earlier, when Byzantium and Persia probably could have deflected the caliphal armies. The Arabs seem to have understood at the time that the unity of their various tribes under the caliph’s banners contrasted distinctly with the divisions among their opponents (for example, when they annihilated the multiethnic and multilingual Byzantine force of Heraclius at Yarmuk). The subsequent Arab conquest of the sparsely settled Maghrīb (followed by intense Arab colonization) was greatly facilitated by Heraclius’s withdrawal of his garrisons from Maghrīb to enable him to claim the throne in Constantinople. Kennedy includes interesting sections on the survival of Persian culture under loose Arab rule in northern Iraq, on the conquest of Turkistan, on the significance of the Arab defeat at Tours–Poitiers in France in 732, and on the dearth of information about the Arab defeat of Tang Chinese forces at Talas in 751.

The book includes notes and a good bibliography, a photo section (with some photos taken by the author on his travels), and several useful maps. Students and specialists will find Kennedy’s book to be an important addition to the literature on early Arab expansion.

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Hiltemann, Joost R.
A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja
Publication Date: June 2007

Joost R. Hiltemann is a first-rate scholar and diplomat. He is the deputy program director for the Middle East for the International Crisis Group (ICG). Prior to that he served as the director of the Arms Division of Human Rights Watch, under whose auspices he went to Iraq in 1992 to locate and interview survivors of the Iraqi poison gas attacks on the Kurds in the 1980s. He is also a prolific author of scholarly articles on the region, writing regularly for the Middle East Report, the Journal of Palestine Studies, the International Journal of Middle East Studies, and numerous other journals, newspapers, and magazines. His first book, Behind the Intifada: Labor and Women’s Movements in the Occupied Territories (1991), received little notice outside a narrow circle of specialists. This latest book has brought him much greater recognition, because it deals with one of the most significant violations of human rights and international law since World War I.

On one level, A Poisonous Affair is an extraordinarily dispassionate and scholarly account of the gassing of Halabja, a city in Iraq’s Kurdish region, in March 1988 and the subsequent Iraqi campaign aimed at driving the Kurds out of northern Iraq. It is estimated that some 100,000 Kurdish civilians were killed or driven from their homes by poison gas. Those who did not die in the gassing campaign were rounded up and transported to extermination sites in Iraq’s western desert, murdered in cold blood, and buried in mass graves. On another level, this monograph lays out how those events impacted the entire history of the Middle East from about 1980 to the present.

Gassing an entire city is without precedent in history. It should have brought near-universal condemnation along with a strong international response. At a crucial moment, when the world first began to respond to the nightmarish pictures coming from the killing fields, the Reagan State Department put out a critical piece of disinformation, claiming that the Iranians might have perpetrated the attack—a claim the administration knew to be false. This was but one instance of many in which the United States provided cover for Saddam Hussein. In 1983 and again in 1984, in the midst of the Iran–Iraq war (1981–88), Donald Rumsfeld was dispatched to Iraqi to assure Hussein that the United States was in full support of Iraq in its war against Iran, including the use of mustard and nerve gas. Chemical weapons became a standard part of the Iraqi arsenal. In February 1984, Saddam Hussein, in a chilling speech, felt comfortable enough about his chemical warfare campaign to warn the Iranians that “for every insect there was an insecticide” (39).

Incredibly, Iraq in the 1980s had the support of the United States, the Soviet Union, the European Union, and most of the Arab states. Germany provided most of the equipment and supplies for the production of Iraq’s chemical weapons. The United States provided Iraq with full diplomatic recognition and billions of dollars in trade credits. Even the United Nations provided cover by refusing to take up the issue of weapons violations in the Security Council and dragging its heels as Iran repeatedly called for investigations. As the United States moved closer to Iraq, the Iran-Contra scandal broke, leaving the Iraqis and the rest of the Arab world to wonder at American duplicity.

The lesson for Iran was clear. The world would turn a blind eye to the use of weapons of mass destruction, and the only defense against future attacks would be a nuclear deterrent. Hiltemann describes in detail the catastrophic results of U.S. and Western policy toward Iraq and Iran during these years, Fear of the Iranian revolution and Islamic fundamentalism drove the Arab states and the West to policies that made the world an infinitely more dangerous place. It is impossible to understand our current imbroglio without understanding this profoundly disturbing history.

This book should be widely read by everyone interested in the contemporary history of the United States and Iraq, a broad audience, indeed. Although it is well written, it is too detailed for a general undergraduate course of the modern Middle East. However, it would be very useful in upper-level courses and graduate seminars. It is essential reading for anyone who teaches courses on the modern Middle East.

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Erlích, Haggai
Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia: Islam, Christianity and Politics Entwined
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Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia is Haggai Erlích’s seventh foray into Ethiopian poli
tics and history. In prior volumes, Erlích, professor emeritus of Middle Eastern and African history at Tel Aviv University, focused on relations between Ethiopia and its neighbors to the north, Egypt and Sudan, and the republic’s role in the Mid
dle East politics in general and the Nile basin in particular. The current text shifts the attention to Ethiopian ties with its most powerful neighbor to the east, Saudi Ara
bia, and introduces a novel theme to guide and unify the analysis, that of inter-relig
gious relations as constitutive components of cultural and diplomatic relations.

Given the considerable interest any focused study of religion and Saudi politics might have provoked, the author’s decision to focus this volume’s agenda on the kingdom’s relationship with Ethiopia, of all states, is somewhat puzzling. One might conjure up many an aspect of Saudi politics to which the author could have applied an analysis of religion and politics with greater salience. It is the more surprising, then, and a credit to Erlích, that Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia delivers a rather compelling narrative with nuanced