

2021

## Escaping the Conflict Trap: Toward Ending Civil Wars in the Middle East

Kurt Buckendorf

Paul Salem

Ross Harrison

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Buckendorf, Kurt; Salem, Paul; and Harrison, Ross (2021) "Escaping the Conflict Trap: Toward Ending Civil Wars in the Middle East," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 74 : No. 4 , Article 15.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol74/iss4/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

stakeholder consideration, delivery of competent government, and meeting of the challenges of the future. There is scant evidence of salaciousness or vivid tale-telling of critical events merely to invoke readers' interest—for instance, there is little coverage of subjects such as Jamal Khashoggi and the Ritz-Carlton affair. Instead, Rundell's effort goes toward providing considerable insight and explanation to help readers understand the “why,” leaving them to draw their own conclusions. In contrast, many of the available books out now use such particular events to draw in readers and keep them interested. Rundell uses history to analyze the decision-making and actions of Saudi rulers, and applies them to current events and personalities as a predictor of what the future may hold.

Like many readers, the reviewer picks up a new book and ruminates on what can be drawn from an initial review of the title, cover, and introduction; I myself do not even begin to read the content until I have considered these for a couple of days. Rundell gives the initial impression that he is looking at Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), his “Vision 2030,” and whether it can bring the kingdom through its current crossroads into the future. What Rundell delivers is an analysis of how the Al Sauds have approached many crossroads in the past, to provide a prediction of how its current leadership will proceed in the future. Readers who study this work and the history of Saudi Arabia will gain insight on what is to come. Regardless of what you think or have heard, MBS is right on track with the history of his predecessors.

JOHN W. STRAIN



*Escaping the Conflict Trap: Toward Ending Civil Wars in the Middle East*, ed. Paul Salem and Ross Harrison. Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2019. 213 pages. \$14.95.

Civil war has been a defining reality of the Middle East for decades. The conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen are just the latest examples of countries squandering their blood and treasure while achieving inconclusive political ends. Even more troubling, civil wars in these countries often lead to a “conflict trap”; war devastates the economic, political, and social fabric of the nation, trapping it in a vicious cycle of unending violence.

In *Escaping the Conflict Trap*, editors Paul Salem and Ross Harrison have brought together academics and practitioners to help shed light on the causes of and challenges posed by civil wars in the Middle East. The volume is written to appeal to a broad audience, including academics, practitioners, and “interested citizens.” The readings offer valuable academic and policy insights on specific civil wars while remaining accessible to the general reader. However, what makes this book truly unusual is that it also includes potential courses of action that might help end a few of the region's civil wars.

*Escaping the Conflict Trap* is structured to address what the editors assert are three “gaps in the existing discourse of civil wars in the Middle East” (p. ix). Salem in chapter 1 and Harrison in chapter 3 assess the historical and geopolitical dynamics, respectively, of civil war in the region. Salem sets the context for the volume by providing a useful synopsis of the “patterns, definitions, and dynamics of civil wars” in

the region during the twentieth century (p. 1). Borrowing from the thoughts of Carl von Clausewitz that civil war too is a continuation of politics by other means, Salem asserts that war termination is fundamentally a political challenge. One could assert that this is especially true given the complicated variety of actors involved in the conflicts in question, ranging from irregular armed groups to regional and great powers. For his part, Harrison examines the economic, social, religious, and political factors that drive civil conflicts within and among nations in the Middle East. These two framing chapters shine a light on similarities and differences among conflicts in the region and the ebb and flow of power and grievances across history. Both chapters also provide a comparative analytical framework for the more detailed historical analyses in the remainder of the book.

The volume also directly addresses the challenges of ending civil wars. Jessica Maves Braithwaite's chapter addresses some causal relationships that may lend themselves to a more protracted conflict, such as the number of warring groups and the existence of "spoilers"—extremist organizations that marginalize moderate elements—that prevent the progress of negotiated settlements in protracted conflict. Of particular note, she argues that biased third-party mediation produces better results than that of neutral parties, which is counter to conventional wisdom. Chester Crocker continues on a similar theme toward the end of the book in his discussion in the chapter titled "Diplomacy of Engagement" about strategies to change a "target's behavior towards more cooperative and constructive policies" (p. 188).

The regional-specific chapters are written by practitioners with direct and indirect experience in specific countries; they cover the civil wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. The chapter on Yemen by Gerald Feierstein is a particularly welcome inclusion in this type of study because it contextualizes current complex challenges within a broader historical and cultural narrative. The chapter also raises the question of how power is transferred within societies in which the stakes are extremely high and within which the settlement of the last conflict can resonate and continue to undercut the current political status quo. This is a good reminder of Clausewitz's words that "results of war are seldom final," shifting the discussion back to how the conflict-termination process shapes the long-term acceptability of the new status quo.

Moreover, as foreign-policy attention shifts to the presence of NATO and American troops in Afghanistan and Syria, the remaining chapters in this edited volume—on Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya—will become rereads for policy makers and their staffs. In particular, these chapters provide the opportunity to revisit the roles of history, culture, sectarianism, and the bitter aftertaste of previous conflict-resolution experiences and consider how they will help to shape expectations and map out current challenges. All four of these chapters also consider the powerful role of external actors in amplifying grievances and accelerating the breakdown in existing political settlements.

In 2021, as the spotlight returns to all the states examined in this volume, the book is a sobering reminder that very little success in transitioning to a stable,

new political outcome will be found in a stand-alone approach that emphasizes military solutions to end conflict. Moreover, it is perhaps discomfoting to read that the political-settlement process in states that experience civil wars does not lend itself to an easily replicated road map. Rather, this book provides nuanced and thoughtful analytical windows into the similarities and differences among these civil wars and some blunt assessments from experts concerning the limitations and possibilities of war-termination processes.

KURT BUCKENDORF



*The Kaiser's U-boat Assault on America: Germany's Great War Gamble in the First World War*, by Hans Joachim Koerver. Philadelphia: Pen and Sword, 2020. 360 pages. \$34.95.

George M. Cohan's 1917 patriotic anthem "Over There" was written to encourage young American men to enlist in the military and fight with determination in Europe, such that "we won't come back till it's over, over there." What most Americans did not expect was that German forces, specifically those of the Kriegsmarine, might seek to fight in American waters—"over here." Military historian Hans Joachim Koerver's engaging history of that effort affords readers a detailed study of an oft-overlooked aspect of the First World War. The devastating effects of German U-boat technology and warfare in the Second World War had their genesis in the experience of and lessons derived from undersea operations of the First World War. Providing a study of diplomatic and economic aspects of the U-boat

operations against the United States as well as the tactical and strategic use of the U-boats, Koerver provides a volume that is extensively researched in primary and secondary sources, yet very readable. Numerous charts, graphs, and photographs enhance the volume. Additionally, four appendices, including one providing copies of pertinent documents, supply resources for those wishing to do further study.

Of particular note to those with an interest in the U.S. Navy in Newport, Rhode Island, and the Naval War College is Koerver's presentation of the *U-53* incident of 7 October 1916. The day after *U-53* left Newport, it boarded one U.S. merchant vessel, reviewed the cargo list, and let the ship pass; however, it then sank five non-U.S. ships in the vicinity of the U.S. lightship *Nantucket* (LV 112)—two of them in the presence of seventeen neutral U.S. destroyers from Newport.

In a volume containing much information and many details, readers will appreciate the presentation of the material in fifty-eight short chapters grouped into five sections, one for the prewar setting and one for each year of the war, excluding 1918. The author addresses many aspects of the U-boat assault and views the ethical and legal dimensions of Germany's unrestricted warfare in 1917, as well as a host of other matters, such as U-boat construction, manning, armament, tactics and operations, strategic significance, and propaganda. Yet the work is balanced and affords readers—whether they begin with little knowledge of U-boat operations or greater knowledge and interest—a very useful volume. Ships receiving individual chapters pertaining to their destruction are RMS *Lusitania* (7 May 1915), SS *Arabic* (19 August 1915), and SS *Sussex* (24 March