Owners of the Republic: An Anatomy of Egypt's Military Economy
BY YEZID SAYIGH. Carnegie Middle East Center, 2019, 360 pp.

Sayigh brilliantly dissects the Egyptian military's dominance of Egypt's economy. The tentacular reach of the Ministry of Defense into the economy is almost seven decades old, but its growth accelerated under the 30-year rule of Hosni Mubarak and has increased even more under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who came to power in 2013. The military may control as much as 20 percent of total public spending. At the same time, it is not subject to external audit or parliamentary oversight. It is a rent-making machine, controlling the commercial use of most of Egypt's land. It imports and manufactures drugs and food staples, labeling these commodities as strategic. It has a bevy of private-sector allies. It is exempt from taxes and import duties on most of its activities. And it benefits from the silence of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the United States. All that can check its hold over the economy is its own drag on Egypt's potential growth.

Crony Capitalism in the Middle East: Business and Politics From Liberalization to the Arab Spring

The contributors to this important collection parse the variety of crony-capitalist arrangements in the Middle East. They cover Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, and the Palestinian territories. The book proposes that the structural liberalization programs forced by international financial institutions and private creditors on the autocracies of the region in the 1980s and 1990s produced a grand bargain between political and business elites. Well-connected firms accepted limited market reforms in exchange for special benefits that boosted their profits. The authors contend that today's autocrats have an inveterate suspicion of their own private sectors and fear that greater market reforms would shift power to assertive business elites. This hypothesis seems to fit the observed facts in the region, but there's no evidence that the compromise was an explicit state strategy. Moreover, it is not clear why incumbent autocrats should fear their private sectors given how easily business interests were swept aside in the populist era of the 1950s and 1960s.

City of Black Gold: Oil, Ethnicity, and the Making of Modern Kirkuk

This fine social history of the city of Kirkuk, in northern Iraq, traces a century of political upheaval. Bet-Shlimon was born in the United States but hails from an Assyrian family with roots in Kirkuk. The ancient, polyglot city was transformed in 1927 by the discovery of oil nearby. Kirkuk had long been dominated by its Turkish-speaking Turkmen population, but the oil boom drew in a large population of poor, rural Kurds to work in the oil fields. With them came Iraq's Communist Party, which sought to organize the workers. The Iraq Petroleum Company helped build a middle class in the city but neglected the mostly Kurdish lower class. The 1958 revolution that
toppled the Iraqi monarchy exposed the fault lines created during the oil era. Kurds and Turkmens chose opposite sides in Iraq’s national-level struggles. The rise of Saddam Hussein added the force of Arabization and anti-Kurdish animus to the volatile politics of the city. The book criticizes essentialist explanations of ethnicity, but the massacres that rocked Kirkuk in the late 1950s smack of visceral enmities. In this case, essentialist and contingent explanations can both be true.

_Sunnis and Shi’ia: A Political History_  
BY LAURENCE LOUÈR.  

In this succinct, probing survey of a major divide in the Muslim world, Louèr explores relations between the Shiites and the Sunnis in seven different countries in the Middle East and South Asia. She does not tap new sources or make many new interpretations, but she compellingly mingles analysis of Shiite and Sunni doctrine and an examination of the political dynamics between the sects. Neither camp fully accepts the legitimacy of the other—although coexistence and cooperation have occurred, as in Mughal India. A major watershed was the advent of the Safavid dynasty in Persia in the sixteenth century, which wed Shiism to a geopolitical entity wedged between the Ottoman and Mughal empires. Ever since, the rivalry has become as much geopolitical as doctrinal and is more prone to militant and violent forms of confrontation (as exemplified by the evolution of Yemen’s Houthis, a Zaydi Shiite group).

_Asia and Pacific_  
Andrew J. Nathan

_Democracy in China: The Coming Crisis_  

There is a Chinese saying about the audacity of negotiating with a tiger for its pelt. In this closely argued book, Ci, a Hong Kong-based philosophy professor, embarks on a similar enterprise. He directs what he calls a “prudential” argument at the Chinese Communist Party: it should give up its dictatorship in order to save China from impending chaos. He argues that authoritarian rule no longer suits a Chinese society that is sophisticated, egalitarian, and dissatisfied with mere material comforts. In reaction to the spread of liberal values, the regime is cracking down harder, but this only accelerates the weakening of what Ci calls its “teleological-revolutionary legitimacy.” By his reckoning, even outstanding economic performance can keep the regime in power no more than another ten or 20 years before a major crisis will trigger its collapse. He says the party should get ahead of events by opening Chinese politics up to dissenting views—something liberals in China have hoped for ever since Mao Zedong’s death, only to be disappointed by each new leader. Ci offers shrewd insights into the contradictions in the party’s ideology, the mentality of China’s middle class, and the various ways the party sustains its legitimacy. But his argument...