Peacekeeping has long garnered interest among political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and policy practitioners. But in recent years, a growing number of historians have joined the fray, reflecting a burgeoning interest in the history of international institutions and their role in everything from decolonization and state formation to global public health and economic development.[1] In this connection, L. Scott Lingamfelter’s *Yanks in Blue Berets* is a welcome contribution to a rapidly growing historical subfield—one that not only exhumes the promise of peacekeeping and critically examines its pitfalls, but also takes seriously the perspectives of the peacekeepers themselves.

There is arguably no better place to explore the promise and pitfalls of peacekeeping than the region in which the United Nations inaugurated it: the Middle East. In late May 1948, less than three years after the San Francisco Conference breathed life into the new United Nations (UN), the Security Council deployed a small contingent of UN security guards to the Eastern Mediterranean to monitor a series of armistice agreements between the nascent state of Israel and Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. These observers constituted the nucleus of what in August 1949 would officially be designated the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO). Over the next thirty years, Israel and neighboring Arab states would engage in four further rounds of fighting: the Suez Crisis of 1956, the Six-Day War of 1967, the Yom Kippur War of 1973, and the first Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1978. In the wake of each successive conflict, the UN created new peacekeeping institutions or adapted existing ones to meet changing realities on the ground. In 1956, for instance, the General Assembly inaugurated the UN Emergency Force (UNEF)—the organization’s first armed peacekeeping operation—to maintain stability along the Egyptian border with Israel. After the 1973 war, the United Nations revamped UNEF (dubbed UNEF II) to monitor the Israeli-Egyptian cease-fire and launched the new UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) to supervise a US-brokered Israeli-Syrian cease-fire in the Golan Heights. And in
1978, peacekeepers poured into Southern Lebanon under the auspices of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). UNTSO deployed its unarmed military observers to support all these operations. As Lingamfelter writes, “UNTSO had become a supplier of military observers to whatever cease-fire arrangement materialized on the heels of the most recent crisis,” becoming “a 9-1-1 emergency call center in the peacekeeping world” (p. 51).

Equal parts history and memoir, Yanks in Blue Berets not only recounts the history of these peacekeeping missions but also offers a firsthand look at what life was like for those peacekeepers charged with carrying them out. Lingamfelter was one of them. In early 1981, the author—then a young captain in the US Army—arrived in the Middle East for a one-year assignment with UNTSO. In the months that followed, he traversed multiple fronts of the Arab-Israeli conflict, traveling from UNTSO headquarters in Jerusalem (chapter 1) to the UNDOF operations center in Damascus (chapters 4-5) to the observation posts dotting UNIFIL-occupied Southern Lebanon (chapters 8-9). Yanks in Blue Berets brings readers along for the journey, interweaving the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the associated UN peace operations with a range of primary sources—Lingamfelter’s personal journal, extensive correspondence with other former peacekeepers, and UN documents—to shed light on the life of an American peacekeeper in the Middle East.

In recounting the history of these UN peace operations, the author provides incisive analysis of what the UN got right and—more often—what it got wrong. Lingamfelter reserves his harshest criticisms for UNIFIL, and understandably so. On paper, UNIFIL was tasked with ensuring the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Southern Lebanon, restoring international peace and security, and helping the Lebanese government to reestablish its authority. But UNIFIL peacekeepers were ill-equipped to meet those tall orders, having neither the arms nor sufficient force levels to deter cease-fire violations or to respond to attacks by the more heavily armed Israeli, Palestinian, and Lebanese combatants. “In failing to plan adequately for a militarily capable force,” Lingamfelter writes, “the UN was unwittingly planning for failure” (p. 117). The even graver error, in the author’s estimation, was the UN Secretariat’s decision to permit the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to retain its position in the territorial pocket around the coastal Lebanese city of Tyre. In turn, Israel demanded that the UN allow its Christian Lebanese allies—the South Lebanon Army, also known as the De Facto Forces (DFF)—to preserve their own enclave in Southern Lebanon. By ceding territory to the very combatants UNIFIL was meant to monitor, the operation was “snake-bitten from its birth” (p. 122). Ultimately, Lingamfelter contends, it was “the UN, not the combatants, who was primarily responsible for undermining UNIFIL’s mandate when the UN Secretariat acquiesced to the PLO’s retention of the Tyre Pocket and the DFF’s occupation of the enclave” (p. 229).

As Lingamfelter explains in chapters 11 and 12, UNIFIL’s failure to deter another Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the tragedy that befell US Marines stationed in Beirut the following year soured American policymakers on multilateral peacekeeping operations. By the early 1990s, the US government had turned its back on UNTSO, resolving that UN peacekeeping operations were not worth the risk to American lives. Lingamfelter questions the wisdom of “abandoning” peacekeeping in general and UNTSO in particular. To that end, he provides a practical seven-point “framework” for American policymakers to follow in determining whether to commit US forces to future UN peacekeeping operations (pp. 223, 231-233).

Readers can approach Yanks in Blue Berets in two ways, reflecting its hybrid character as both history and memoir. As a work of historical scholarship, the book offers a concise, thoroughly researched, engagingly written account of US participation in, and contributions to, UN peace opera-
tions in the Levant. Occasionally, the narrative is clunky, bogged down by minutiae, military jargon, and a torrent of acronyms. (Helpfully, the author includes a list of abbreviations at the front of the book.) Moreover, the chapters do not proceed in a strictly chronological fashion, at times making it difficult to follow the narrative thread. For instance, in chapter 6, Lingamfelter begins to explain how UNTSO military observers like himself supported their UNIFIL counterparts in Southern Lebanon. But then, in chapter 7, he “turn[s] the clock back” to recount the origins of UNIFIL in greater detail. At other times, the nonchronological narrative results in substantial overlap and repetition across chapters. To name one example, both chapters 9 and 10 cover much of the same ground—namely, the series of Israeli-Palestinian-Lebanese clashes and provocations in 1981 and 1982 that culminated in Israel’s second invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

As far as this reviewer is concerned, *Yanks in Blue Berets* is most interesting for what it reveals as a memoir. Too often, studies of UN peacekeeping focus exclusively on high-level diplomacy and decision-making, marginalizing—or ignoring entirely—the quotidian experiences of peacekeepers in the field. By narrating his firsthand experiences with full candor and in vivid prose, Lingamfelter offers a fascinating window into the motives, thoughts, hopes, and fears of peacekeepers on the ground. Indeed, the most intriguing passages of *Yanks in Blue Berets* are those which convey Lingamfelter’s shifting perceptions of the places and populations he encountered during his year of service with UNTSO. Lingamfelter arrived in the Levant fresh out of academia, having just received a master’s degree in Middle Eastern politics at the University of Virginia (p. 2). But he quickly discovered that “no amount of well-intentioned academia could equal what real life offered, the sights, smells, and sounds of human interactions between Semitic groups whose lives were ordinary yet fractured amid profound conflict” (p. 236). For young American soldiers-turned-peacekeepers, Lingamfelter writes, the Middle East constituted a “learning laboratory”—one in which they not only grew professionally but also learned to question what they took for granted about this region (pp. 223, 240).

Nowhere did the author learn more than in his face-to-face interactions with Israelis and Arabs. Prior to his peacekeeping service, Lingamfelter, like most of his compatriots, came to the Middle East with “a favorable opinion of Israel, in no small part due to a positive view of Israel in American culture and media.” But “once exposed to both sides of the equation, it was not uncommon for US observers to sympathize with the plight of the Arabs” (pp. 47-48). As one of Lingamfelter’s American comrades later recalled, “Israel was always shown as the ‘white knight’ and my time in Southern Lebanon showed me another side. I left with much more empathy for the Palestinians” (p. 244). The change of heart came, in large part, as a result of their brushes with ill-mannered Israeli forces. Historically, distrust of the UN ran high in Israel, and young Israeli soldiers treated the UN peacekeepers in their midst with open contempt. By harassing American military observers and “making a mockery of the UN,” Israelis only alienated otherwise friendly American peacekeepers, Lingamfelter writes (p. 50). “In my mind, Israel was acting more like a ‘spoiled brat’ … while the US was responding like a parent enabling bad behavior” (p. 155). The author had no doubt that the United States “should stand by Israel’s right to exist.” But, as he penned in his journal while on patrol in Southern Lebanon, where Israelis and their DFF allies regularly violated the cease-fire with impunity: “If we support injustice for the sake of friendship, then we set ourselves up for justified ridicule from our enemies and discredit among our friends” (p. 158). On the other hand, Lingamfelter intermingled for the first time with Palestinians, Lebanese, and Syrians, whose hospitality, suffering, and search for dignity led him to reassess—if not always sympathize with—their respective struggles. “I would
have discovered none of this in ivy-covered university halls or the massive corridors of the Pentagon, and I certainly would not have learned about this complex culture in the field training artillery units,” he observes (p. 236). In this regard, *Yanks in Blue Berets* offers a timely reminder that education extends well beyond the classroom.

If Lingamfelter’s tenure as a peacekeeper compelled him to reexamine one-dimensional views of the Arab-Israeli conflict, *Yanks in Blue Berets* inadvertently reveals that other, equally problematic narratives of the Middle East evaded a similar degree of scrutiny. Here I am referring to religion, which the author frequently invokes to contextualize the events under consideration and to convey his perceptions of the people and places he encountered on assignment with UNTSO. As the book’s epigraph—“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God”—foreshadows, biblical references permeate *Yanks in Blue Berets* (p. vi). Along the drive from Jerusalem to Damascus, for example, the author recounts being mesmerized by the Sea of Galilee, “the site of so much of Jesus’s ministry” (p. 59). “It was here that people experienced extraordinary teachings of Jesus concerning peace and love,” he continues, but “it was [also] a place stained with blood, both ancient and modern” (p. 60). In the old city of Damascus, Lingamfelter and his colleagues “felt as if we were traveling back in time” as they strolled down the “Street Called Straight,” where, according to the New Testament, Saint Paul resided after his encounter with a resurrected Jesus (pp. 76-77). And later, while transiting the Jordan Valley, the author stopped over in Jericho, “aptly described in the Bible as ‘the city of palm trees.’” Picking out oranges, apples, dates, grapefruits, and vegetables at a bustling market, “we imagined how people of biblical times would likewise have found Jericho an inviting and pleasant respite from the unforgiving heat and humidity that blanketed the Jordan Valley” (p. 91).

It may be unsurprising that Lingamfelter—a Christian American encountering the “Holy Land” for the first time—would invoke religion to convey his impressions of the Middle East. After all, religion has long been central to Americans’ imaginaries of, and experiences in, the region, whether they were missionaries in the late nineteenth century, area specialists in the mid-twentieth century, or architects of the global war on terror in the early twenty-first century.[2] A religious framing becomes problematic, however, when one presumes that ostensibly ancient religious animosities are sufficient to explain contemporary Middle Eastern politics. On the very first page, *Yanks in Blue Berets* informs readers that the Levant “was a place where conflict was as ordinary as childbirth. It had been that way for millennia, reaching back to the Judean times of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ...and reaching forward to the emergence of Christianity and Islam” (p. 1). That the Middle East is uniquely prone to conflict, that such conflict is rooted in primordial religious antagonisms, that this had been the natural order of things for thousands of years—these are long-standing tropes in commentary on the region that obscure more than they clarify. Similarly, during his tour of Southern Lebanon, Lingamfelter muses that this region “was not new to war.” Eight hundred years earlier, Saladin had defeated the Crusaders on the banks of the Litani River, marking “the first of many [triump]s that led to an eventual Muslim victory over Christians occupying Beaufort Castle,” a Crusader fortress. “Yet in recent years, the Muslims of the present—lately the PLO—were the ones sheltering deep within Beaufort and enduring a storm of punishing Israeli artillery” (p. 145). Once more, this characterization—that the secular leftist PLO was somehow the progeny of the twelfth-century warrior Saladin—misconstrues the nature of the twentieth-century Palestinian national movement and its conflict with the state of Israel. I dwell on these points not to criticize the author, but rather to tease out how and why the Middle East is viewed—often reflex-
ively—through the prism of religion and ancient history. That history is important, to be sure. But to characterize the Arab-Israeli wars of the mid- and late twentieth century as continuations of ancient strife tempts us to resign ourselves to the intractability of these conflicts, as though they exist outside of history and, therefore, are impervious to political settlement.

In sum, *Yanks in Blue Berets* is an informative, absorbing, and often fascinating read—not only for what it tells us about the history of UN peace operations in the Middle East, but also for what it reveals about the perspectives of American peacekeepers. It is sure to attract interest among policy practitioners, historians of US-Middle Eastern relations, the UN, and peacekeeping, and, perhaps most suitably, future peacekeepers.

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Notes

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