

Book Review

An Introduction to Middle East Politics

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MacQueen, Benjamin. 2018. *An Introduction to Middle East Politics*. 2nd ed. London: SAGE Publishing, 392 pp.

Since the end of the Cold War, the Middle East has attracted the interest of a large number of politicians and scholars. This fact can be explained, among other things, due to the internal and external conflicts that have affected the region over the past few years. Among them, the territorial disputes between Palestinians and Israelis – which last for more than seven decades, still without a foreseen end – and the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, which started in 2011. In addition, there is the influence that external forces had in the political and economic formation of the countries that make up the Middle East, from the post-colonial period to the present day.

These elements, combined, make the study of the region increasingly relevant to the field of International Relations, especially after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, in the USA. The event started a new era in international politics, with direct impacts on the Middle East. This can be seen, for example, in the Iraq War in 2003. The consequences of the conflict, together with the events of the so-called Arab Spring, in 2011, led to the Syrian Civil War, contributing to the emergence of the Islamic State in 2014, which destabilized several countries in the region.

However, despite the relevance of all these events, there is little articulation between the disciplines of Political Science and Middle Eastern Studies. As Fawcett (2016: 2) points out, there are still few attempts to integrate the objects of study from the two fields of knowledge. According to the author, although there are some notable studies in the areas of Comparative Politics and International Relations, more efforts are still needed in order to overcome the ‘imaginary fracture line’ that separates the two disciplines (Fawcett 2016: 2).

In that sense, MacQueen’s book *An Introduction to Middle East Politics* can be considered an important effort. The work, initially published in 2013 and expanded in 2018, aims

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to be a new model of textbooks about the Middle East. To accomplish this, the author uses an approach focused on issues such as democratization, political change, human rights and political economy. The second edition maintains almost the same structure as the first, changing only the order and the title of some chapters. Besides, it contains an additional chapter on the Syrian Civil War and its consequent refugee crisis. The phenomenon was still in its early stages, when the first edition was released, changing significantly in later years. The objectives of both editions, however, are the same – and somewhat modest: ‘to reframe discussions, debates and themes in a way that make it more suitable and adaptable to a changed region in a changed world’ (MacQueen 2018: 10).

One way to achieve these goals is to emphasize the importance of countries like Iraq and Egypt, as well as Yemen, Sudan and the North African states. The author does not enter into the debate about the geographical extent covered by the term ‘Middle East.’ However, based on the case studies mentioned throughout the book, it is possible to infer that the term is used to designate countries located in North Africa, the Levant, the Gulf, and the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, the work is divided into eleven chapters, which can be categorized into three main themes: historical legacies (chapters 1 to 4); economy and security (chapters 5 to 7); and authoritarianism and democratization (chapters 8 to 11).

The first four chapters (1 to 4) discuss how important events in international history influenced the political and economic formation of the modern Middle East. Therefore, it is highlighted the impacts of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, of the two great World Wars, of colonialism and of the Cold War in the definition of borders and in the creation of the Middle Eastern states. In this way, great emphasis is given to how European colonialism marked the regional political scenario and the formation of local ethnic and religious identities, especially in Algeria and Tunisia. This was a determining factor for some of the main conflicts in the Middle East and for the emergence of pan-Arab and Islamist movements, which characterized the international insertion of the region during the Cold War and in the years that followed.

Chapter 5 continues the discussions on colonialism by addressing the origins of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its peace attempts. It is emphasized the influence of the different Palestinian and Israeli narratives and how they hinder the achievement of solutions to the conflict. Chapters 6 and 7, in turn, focus more on topics related to economy and security, such as oil, territorial disputes, nuclear proliferation, and terrorism. It is pointed out, for example, the Gulf countries’ dependence on oil revenues and how much it affects the distribution of wealth in the region. In addition, it is mentioned how non-state actors, like Al-Qaeda, have created new challenges to international security.

Chapters 8 and 9 address the issue of authoritarianism in the Middle East in the light of the events of the so-called Arab Spring. In this way, it seeks to understand the characteristics of the different autocratic regimes in the region and the difficulties of carrying out a democratization process. To achieve this, MacQueen conducts case studies of several countries; among which, Syria and Egypt. In this respect, the author challenges the logic of the Middle East’s exceptionality and uses an argument similar to that of Halliday (2009: 13), that the region differs little, in political terms, from other places in the world.

Chapter 10 discusses the role of the USA in the Middle East and how the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have been unable to make effective democratic transitions. Finally, chapter 11 sets out the central dynamics of the Syrian Civil War and the humanitarian costs of the conflict, considering the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis in neighbouring countries.

An Introduction to Middle East Politics does not explicitly apply the theoretical concepts and precepts of International Relations to Middle East issues. However, it systematizes several issues that are addressed by the discipline and that can be observed and studied in the Middle Eastern context. In this sense, the book is quite different from the works of Halliday (2009) and Fawcett (2016). In both, the authors seek to understand the history and the main political characteristics of the Middle East in order to analyse the region in the light of theories such as Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, and Marxism. This is done both through case studies and through the discussion of concepts arising from these paradigms, such as the notion of balance of power and international cooperation.

Another book that follows this path is *International Society and the Middle East: English School Theory at the Regional Level*, edited by Ana Gonzalez-Pelaez and Barry Buzan (2009). In it, the authors demonstrate how the English School theory can be used to explain the political history of the Middle East, contributing to the dialogue between Political Science and Middle East Studies. Thus, although MacQueen's (2018) book addresses the main issues of international politics in the region, it does not offer much to the attempts to bridge the gap pointed out by Fawcett (2016: 2). Its importance, however, consists in MacQueen's goal of reframing the Middle Eastern themes usually studied by political scientists, which has the potential of making easier the integration between the two mentioned disciplines.

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