

BOOK REVIEW

M.E. McMillan, *From the First World War to the Arab Spring: What's Really Going on in the Middle East?*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 279 p.

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The most recent book authored by M. E. McMillan, *From the First World War to the Arab Spring: What's Really Going On in the Middle East?*, endeavours to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Middle East by approaching difficult and controverted chapters in the history of the area, such as the circumstances following the First World War treaties to the conflicts of the Arab Spring.

In the Introduction, *Lost in the Labyrinth: What's Really Going On in the Middle East?*, the author closely scrutinizes the recent course of events in the region, with all its contradictions and inconsistencies, offering a guide into the labyrinth of the post-Arab Spring Middle East.

The escalation of the civil war in Syria is taken as a first example: the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, the involvement of the Kurds into the *vortex of violence*, the drama of the Syrians trying to escape the massacres, the horrors of the refugee camps, all marks of a *seemingly endless war*.

Part I, *The Tangled Web: Why the Great Powers of Europe Became Involved in the Middle East*, surveys in its first chapter, *Sarajevo: Sunday, June 28, 1914*, the problematic circumstances that led to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo and the beginning of the catastrophic conflagration that soon followed. Within weeks five of Europe's great empires were at

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war, the tentacles of violence reaching beyond the European continent to areas as far as the Arab world. The Middle East, under strong influence from France and Britain ever since the nineteenth century would come to be roughly impacted by the brutality of the First World War.

The author dedicates the next chapter, *The British Empire and the Arab World: Ambition, Austerity, and a Class Apart*, to the case of Egypt, a key region to the British Empire and its maritime and colonial kingdom, with a central role in securing the sea power.

The third chapter of the first part, *The French Empire and the Arab World: From the Crusades to the Civilizing Mission*, presents the long presence and entanglement of France in the Arab world. One such example is Algeria where the French involvement culminated with a traumatic war whose implications would prove to be terrible for both countries. Other areas affected by the French domination were Lebanon and Tunisia facing different levels of hostility and interference from the European power. Morocco would soon become a new step on the path France took for dominance in the North- African region. Though under Spanish sphere of influence at the time, Morocco's faith would be settled in 1906 when the dispute between France and Spain would be regulated and the former allowed to take the bulk of Morocco while the latter kept its ports in the north.

The Russian Empire's influence in the Arab World is explored in the fourth chapter, *The Russian Empire and the Arab World: Religion, Royalty, and the New Rome*, emphasizing the religious pillar and the essential role it played in a time when religion and royalty were *inseparable*. In Russia, *the tsar was much more than a defender of the faith, he was almost divine*; ever since 1453 and the fall of Constantinople under the rule of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed, the Russian royalty assumed the mission of becoming *the last line of defense for Orthodox Christianity against the seemingly unstoppable Muslim advance* (p. 41). The author also analyses the impact Russia had on the Arab part of the Ottoman Empire, an influence that was embraced by the Orthodox community: "Russian royalty built churches for the faithful in the birthplace of the faith, Jerusalem. Tsars maintained close links with the famous Orthodox monastery St. Catherine's in the Sinai, said to be built on the very place where Moses received the Ten Commandments. And in Orthodox homes across Syria, the tsar's picture could be seen hanging on the wall alongside religious icons" (p. 43). It is a connection that McMillan emphasizes as being still present while scrutinizing the conflict in Syria and its implications.

One must not overlook that the greatest influence Russia had on the Arab world relates to the large Jewish community of nineteenth-century Russia, facing persecution and consequently fleeing to other regions in what has become known as one of the largest migrations of Jews in history: "Most set sail for a new life in the New World. The more adventurous, the more religious, and the more desperate set sail for the old one. The Jewish Return to Palestine had begun" (p. 44). One specific dimension of the immigration process needs to be explored in this context, that is the burst of nationalism and its consequences for the region.

Chapter five, *The German Empire and the Arab World: Family Feuds and Eastern Ambitions*, analyses the connections of the German Empire to the Arab world, the journey taken by the young German nation, its destiny shaped by Kaiser Wilhelm and the influence of the personal on the political, the economic and military successes in parallel with the steps to be taken in international relations in a struggle to keep up with the great powers Britain, France, and Russia.

The last chapter of the first part, *The Ottoman Empire: How the Arab World Was Won and Lost*, is centered on the old Ottoman power, its struggle and competition with the European powers, on one hand, the German-Ottoman alliance, on the other, the tensioned context prior to the beginning of the First World War.

Part II, *Too Many Straight Lines on the Map: Where, When, and Why It Started to Go Wrong*, structured in five chapters, focuses its attention on the seminal contexts in the history of the twentieth century that shaped the future of the Middle East and consequently the relations of the Western World with this region.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement signed in 1916 is such a context, agreement which became "the blueprint for the postwar Middle East, and it is their names that have become synonymous with Western imperialism in the Arab world" (p. 73). McMillan reminds the readers that nearly a century after this moment, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, referred to it by urging his followers to overturn "the borders implemented by the Sykes-Picot [Agreement]" and bring back "the Islamic state, the state that does not recognize artificial boundaries and does not believe in any nationality other than Islam" (p. 73).

The consequences of the Sykes-Picot Agreement echoed a few years later in the Treaty of Sèvres, the process France and Britain secured their objectives in the region, the 'new reality' instituted, the challenge of nation-states in the region, are explored in great detail by the author. There are questions left unanswered lingering from those contexts and challenges still to be faced; a *poisoned legacy*: "If, nowadays, there is a barrier of mistrust between East and West, much of it goes back to what went on during this period" (p. 103). McMillan makes the case that all these were *avoidable*: "The Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire had very strong regional and tribal identities. In the long run, those regional and tribal loyalties would have provided a better basis for the boundaries of the new nation-states of the Middle East than the imperial ambitions of London or Paris. And it would have been a better idea to leave it to the citizens of these new states to work out what role religion should have in the public space for themselves rather than create countries with sectarianism at their core" (p. 104).

Part III, *All or Nothing: Why All Roads Lead to Jerusalem*, comprising three chapters, introduces the reader to one conflict that stands out for its longevity and no less for its controversial nature: the war between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The seminal role of Jerusalem, the interactions between Jews and Christians, the influence of emperor Constantine on the future of Christianity, the Council of Nicaea, important episodes related to the Crusades and the Inquisition, the relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims, the Dreyfus condemnation, the Balfour Declaration, Hitler's ascension, the horrors of Shoah, the Jewish community in Palestine, creation of the State of Israel, and the turmoil years that followed, are all examined and analyzed by the author.

The four chapters of part IV, *Kings, Colonels, and Coups: Why There Is a Democratic Deficit in the Arab World*, gravitate around a central question: why "all the Arab states in the postcolonial Middle East, with the exception of Lebanon, had one thing in common" - *they did not become democratic*? The reader is presented a synthesized historical panorama with emphasis on the politics of power, the cult of personality, the fight for independence. It surveys the area, underlining the common points as well as differences and particularities, from Egypt to Irak, Lybia, Marocco and Tunisia, or Syria and the exception to the military-monarchy monopoly of power represented by Lebanon. McMillan also evidentiates how "the military states took a different

route to legitimize their authority. Where the monarchies emphasized tradition and religion, the military republics emphasized revolution and the nation" (p. 163).

Part V, *The Sacred Versus the Secular: Who Speaks for Islam?*, comprising four chapters, begins with a presentation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the great influence exerted by the Wahhabi teachings. Extremist terrorist groups such as al-Qaida and ISIS are the most recent and radical examples of such an influence.

The exception represented by Iran which in 1979 took a different path than the rest of the Arab world, where power was split between the military and the monarchies, by becoming an Islamic Republic, is yet another context approached by the author.

McMillan gives large spaces to the transformations taking place with the beginning of the third millennium, to the new wave of power taking place with in the Arab world, whose first main characteristic was the transformation of presidency, and *presidents began acting like kings*. The pioneer was Syria with the actions of President al-Asad who made sure that his son, Bashar, succeeded him: "Syria, once one of the most radical states in the Middle East, had become a *jamlaka*. Not a republic (*jumhuriyya*) or a kingdom (*mamlaka*), a whole new word had to be invented to describe a republic that acted like royalty and a president who ruled like a king. In this new system, the people were—yet again—shut out of power and the gap between the ruler and the ruled remained as wide as ever" (p. 186).

To explain the phenomenon McMillan introduces the argument elaborated by Harvard Professor Roger Owen in his work *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, that of the "demonstration effect": "Because Arab heads of state meet on such a regular basis at summit conferences of organizations like the League of Arab States (and, to a lesser extent, the Gulf Cooperation Council) and issue joint communiqués stating a common position on many issues, a certain "clubbiness" has developed amongst them, regardless of whether their countries are conservative kingdoms or a military republics" (p. 188).

The Epilogue, *Untangling the Web: What Now?*, concludes on the settlement that followed the First World War and the causes leading to the conflicts associated with the Arab Spring.

The instability in the region remains one of the major problems of our world today and raises further questions and concerns.