

# FIRST THINGS

DECEMBER 1999 • Number 98

## The Middle East Without Tears

**BETWEEN MEMORY AND DESIRE: THE MIDDLE EAST IN A TROUBLED AGE.** By R. STEPHEN HUMPHREYS. *University of California Press.* 297 pp. \$29.95.

*Reviewed by Daniel Pipes*

ANY BOOK ON THE Middle East that refers in the title, as does this one, to the region being "in a troubled age" is off to a good start. It means that the author acknowledges that the region with the worst economic performance in recent years, the largest military buildup, the most radical ideologies, and the most wars has major problems. This may not sound like much of a standard, but too many

---

DANIEL PIPES, by training a medieval historian, is director of the Middle East Forum and author of *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (Free Press).

---

scholars either apologize for the Middle East or blame its problems on the outside world.

It is even more encouraging to find this big-picture analysis written not by a Washington analyst or a journalist, with their tendencies toward the superficial, but by a scholar deeply grounded in the past, someone with a wide context and a long perspective. Indeed, some of the most interesting commentaries on current events in the Middle East are written by medievalists on vacation, as it were, from their usual labors: Bernard Lewis is the outstanding figure, but others include Richard Bulliet, Ira M. Lapidus, and Roy Mottahedeh.

R. STEPHEN HUMPHREYS, a historian and specialist on Islamic studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, takes up some of the most difficult and persistent issues of the modern Middle East—the demographic and economic pressures, authoritarianism, pan-Arabism, "crazy states," military dictatorship, the role of Islam in politics—and analyzes them with intelligence and insight. Musing on his three decades plus of studying the Middle East, Humphreys asserts truths that many of his fellow academics neglect, though he does so in the gentlest and most constructive manner. The reader—whether a specialist or the "interested nonspecialist" whom Humphreys targets—comes away from *Between Memory and Desire* not just better informed but also more capable of understanding the choices that Middle Easterners face.

In particular, two themes stand out: the dominant role of military dictatorship and the rising force of Islamism (a.k.a. fundamentalist Islam).

Autocracy, Humphreys establishes, is the region's deepest and perhaps oldest dilemma. For the warlords, for example, who quite rapidly took over from the Prophet Muhammad's successors and dominated the era 850-1250, the "crucial political problem" was legitimacy—"some convincing

reason (beyond brute force) why his subjects should obey him and his rivals should respect his right to exist."

Sound familiar? It should, for the Middle East is today the world's least democratic region and it still grapples with the same demons (who have names like Qadhdhafi, Asad, and Saddam). In Humphreys' words, "most Middle Eastern governments since World War II have been haunted by the specter of illegitimacy, by the fear (usually quite well founded) that in the eyes of their subjects and of neighboring states they have no right to rule." The warlords of the postwar era all followed the same familiar path: "Every military regime seized power on the basis of the same pretext—that is, the corruption and weakness of the old civilian governments—and proclaimed the same program—that is, some form of nationalism, rapid economic development with social justice, and neutrality in the U.S.-Soviet confrontation." While these goals were in themselves credible, they "had a fatal flaw. They legitimized power as such, in the abstract, but they did not say who should wield it." In other words, the soldiers' programs failed to provide them with the justification they so craved, so they were left relying on brute force.

MIDDLE EASTERN POPULATIONS, whether centuries ago or today, respond to this unhappy reality by withdrawing their allegiance from the authorities and turning for solace instead to the realms of religion and family life. This leads to a peculiar but widespread situation in which "Arab societies seem to regard their governments as an alien entity; they endure them, and they wait for them to go away." On one level, this mutual antipathy works: the ruled carve out an autonomous area of life, the officers get to stay (and stay) in power. "Military government may well not be good government, but by the standards of the twentieth-century



Middle East it is—sometimes anyway—stable government.” Trouble is, stability becomes an end itself and has a fearsome price. The preoccupation with staying in power means that other goods—economic development, civil society, cultural florescence—are sacrificed.

Warlordism turns out, for example, to be the single greatest obstacle to economic progress. “Only governments that enjoy the confidence of their citizens,” Humphreys rightly observes, “can really take the steps needed” to enable growth. Not enjoying the benefits of civil society, the rule of law, or many basic freedoms, the Arabic-speaking countries are

falling ever further behind in the brutally efficient global marketplace: “Not one Middle Eastern state (with the partial exception of Turkey and of course Israel) has followed the only economic growth strategy that has worked since World War II—namely, the export-oriented production of high-value-added manufactures.” As a result, and this is a startling fact, “there is not one Middle Eastern manufactured item that can be sold competitively on world markets.”

MORE DEPRESSING YET, the author sees no relief from this predicament anytime soon: as far as the eye can see, “we are left with weak and frustrated governments, uncertain of their place on the world stage and unable to achieve key domestic policy goals. They themselves are under siege by frustrated, angry populations.” The consequences are worrisome: “It is a certain recipe for turmoil, perhaps ultimately a cataclysm.”

Humphreys traces the fall of bygone ideologies, like Pan-Arabism, and shows that the sort of conventional state patriotism found in most of the world has little chance among Arabic-speakers, for most of today’s countries are creations of the colonial era that fail to draw on deep feelings. Given the paucity of rivals, Islamism pretty much has the field to itself, and Humphreys devotes considerable space to understanding what it is and what it implies.

In a useful categorization, he notes that Muslims have historically had three kinds of attitudes toward their religion, one relaxed and two stringent. In the relaxed viewpoint, Islam “is simply what Muslims actually do and believe.” Its adherents hold that the established order is “inherently Islamic,” and regard anything more as superfluous. This status quo way of looking at things holds that “Islam is a body of values, beliefs, and practices that undergirds and legitimizes the way things are.” In this schema, the role of government is merely “to shel-

ter and supervise ordinary religious belief and practice, not to establish the Kingdom of God on earth.” This “go-along, get-along” outlook has been the norm through fourteen centuries of Muslim history.

However, in troubled times such as the present, one of the stringent approaches tends to take over. These are more revolutionary, seeing in Islam not affirmation of the status quo but the means to build “a new society founded on God’s law.” In one variant, it is the rulers (as in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan) who impose a strict Islam on their populaces; in the other, discontented elements (as in Algeria, Egypt, and also Saudi Arabia) use Islam “as a language of reform and protest” to mobilize against the rulers. With slogans such as “Islam is the solution,” these movements raise expectations for a new utopian order. This simple division helps to clarify many of the tensions prevailing among Muslims today.

Humphreys also has important things to say about three prominent but delicate aspects of Islamic politics: *jihād* (conventionally translated as *holy war*), the treatment of women, and the human rights record. Ignoring apologetic blather about *jihād* being a form of moral self-improvement, he concentrates on its martial meaning and finds that it is a “crucial concept” for Muslims when fending off the West or justifying domestic repression. Women face the hard reality that “the Qur’an is irredeemably patriarchal.” Human rights stumble on the fact that in Islamic law, “the claims of the community against its members take priority over those of individuals against the community.”

Humphreys is no historical determinist, and he offers the cautious hope that the Middle East’s many problems are not irremediable. That may be, but most readers will come away from this book persuaded that the region’s “troubled age” will persist well into the future.