

### Book Review

## Rethinking Middle East Politics

*By Simon Bromley. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994, 203 + viii pp.*

The process by which the modern Middle East has taken its present political shape and continues to develop is the subject of a large and diverse realm of scholarship. Authors have examined this topic from a variety of academic and political points of view, but few have been able to classify the assortment of past works in a coherent way while formulating a valid new approach to this complex area of study. Simon Bromley's most recent book, *Rethinking Middle East Politics*, is an ambitious work that is more successful than most earlier endeavors at meeting this dual challenge.

Borrowing heavily from Marxism, Bromley pieces together a "historical-materialist" approach that, he posits, illuminates the processes of state formation and political development in the Middle East while highlighting both the distinctive aspects of the region's development and its similarities to other nondeveloped areas. The book is not flawless; Bromley makes several claims that may not be as universally accepted as he suggests and supports the modern Middle East case studies with only a limited number of references. Despite these relatively mild shortcomings, *Rethinking Middle East Politics* as a whole provides a compelling and often provocative description of the Janus-faced nature of Middle East state formation and political development.

Bromley begins with an introduction to culturalist and materialist arguments about non-European societies and their development. The reader will be impressed with Bromley's ability to impose a sense of order on the wide-ranging writings of such thinkers as Karl Marx, Bassam Tibbi, Max Weber, and Edward Said and to put together a cogent analysis of the implications of these schools of thought for Middle East devel-

opment studies. His telling critiques of culturalism and materialism lead to an elucidation of a Marxist-informed "historical materialist" framework for examining the modern Middle East and is followed by a brief overview of the region's history up to the decline of the Ottoman empire (pp. 34-45).

According to Bromley's argument, uncovering the pattern of surplus allocation and the social associations directing this process is the *sine qua non* for understanding how the states of the modern Middle East took their present political form. The second chapter lays out the roots of regional state formation from the historical materialist perspective through a detailed examination of the interacting effects of the Ottoman empire's decline (and eventual breakup) and the expanding European colonial empires. Thus, he takes exception to L. Carl Brown's "Middle Eastern Question" view of the area's development, claiming that the latter's ahistoricism and disregard for the influence of western imperialism, ubiquitous even after the First World War, call the theory into question (pp. 61-69, 83-85). The following chapter expands on the author's application of historical materialist point of view, bringing the survey of Middle Eastern a history up to the post-Second World War period by exploring the effects of such factors as oil and the international bipolar structure on the emerging states of the region.

Chapter four concentrates on Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Iran in an attempt to lay the foundations for the next chapter, which presents the similarities and differences in their modern situations. These chapters begin to buckle under the stain of Bromley's challenging project. The cases under examination are left rather underdeveloped and are, unfortunately, supported with only a limited selection of sources. For example, he cites only five scholars in his investigation of the formation of Saudi Arabia (pp. 142-47), slighting the work of many scholars of Saudi state development such as Joseph Kostiner. Inattention to valuable sources ensures that the author misses the subtlety of many arguments about the formation of states in the Middle East. The case studies thus lay a somewhat incomplete foundation for the analysis contained within the fifth chapter.

In addition, Bromley forwards some questionable statements that are declared to be facts. He asserts that in the Saudi state "development was with rather than against Islam" (p. 160), a blanket claim that discounts the Al Saud's difficulties in modernizing the kingdom in the face of fierce opposition from the *ulama*. Likewise, writing that "[perhaps] the peoples of the region would have been better served if the oil had never been discovered" (p. 173) seems to ignore the undeniably harsh conditions of daily life among Gulf littoral peoples before the influx of oil revenues. As a final example, he declares that pan-Arabism is "little more than an ideology of interstate manoeuvre" (p. 177), disregarding too easily the powerful influence that perceptions and ideas, however difficult to put into practice, often have upon politics and the process of development.

Despite these elements of concern, *Rethinking Middle East Politics* is an important piece of scholarship that deserves the attention of students of Middle Eastern politics and development. Bromley's refreshing new look at the area's politics serves as a sobering reminder to reexamine our assumptions about the manner in which the present political landscape has unfolded, especially the widespread belief in a monolithic "Islamic" tradition (pp. 43-44). The problems with chapter four's case studies notwithstanding, the book's theoretical argument is certain to generate a great deal of debate across several academic disciplines. Readers looking for a provocative, if not always wholly convincing, argument should indeed "rethink" Middle East politics—with Bromely's book as a useful starting point.

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## Rethinking Middle East Politics The New Middle Eastern Political Landscape

By David Bromley  
 Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011. Pp. 300.

David Bromley's *Rethinking Middle East Politics: The New Middle Eastern Political Landscape* is a well-written and thought-provoking book that challenges the conventional wisdom about the Middle East. The book is a must-read for anyone interested in the region's politics and development.

Bromley's argument is that the Middle East is not a monolithic entity, but rather a collection of diverse and often conflicting political systems. He argues that the region's politics are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including religion, ethnicity, and geography.

One of the book's strengths is its clear and concise writing style. Bromley's arguments are well-supported by a wealth of evidence, and his analysis is both insightful and accessible. The book is a valuable contribution to the field of Middle Eastern studies.

In conclusion, *Rethinking Middle East Politics* is a well-written and thought-provoking book that challenges the conventional wisdom about the Middle East. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the region's politics and development.