

## BOOK REVIEW

**A history of the Middle East: from Antiquity to the present day**, by Georges Corm, Reading, Garnet, 2010, 224 pp., ISBN-13: 978-1-85964-220-7

In an earlier issue of *Contemporary Arab Affairs* (2 (2), 2009), I reviewed a book by Georges Corm entitled *L'Europe et le Mythe de l'Occident* in which I suggested that it was indeed unfortunate that the Anglo-Saxon publishing world had apparently *deliberately* ignored a major Arab author whose books have been translated into seventeen languages, *except* English! An initial redress of this shortcoming seems to have been undertaken by Garnet Publishing, an affiliate of Ithaca Press, which has opted to translate and publish one of his latest books.

This is a short book written for those who have little or no knowledge of the Middle East and its long history, and given that the period covered spans from antiquity to the present, there is no way a 224-page book could be considered as a reference to Middle Eastern history. Despite this, the book genuinely constitutes a new way of reading the history of the region. In an earlier work, *Le Proche Orient Eclaté*, first published in the 1980s and now is in its fifth edition, since 1999, and in a new edition by Gallimard, Corm criticized the approach taken by many historians and self-appointed 'specialists' in writing the history of the region. He proposes a multilayered, multidisciplinary approach for the understanding of the tumultuous history that has shaped, and continues to affect, the region and the entire world. His work is an application of the methodology he articulated in his earlier 1000-page book. His 'history' is a profane overview of the Middle East, whereby 'profane' he means 'a perspective that is neither biased nor imprisoned by religion' (p. 12). He adds:

our approach does not consider religion to be the sole marker of historical epochs and of their characteristics, as we believe that there are in fact other, no less significant, factors than the advent of religions; such factors include the geographic contexts, the demographic evolution, the emergence of a vast linguistic and cultural groups resulting from the numerous invasions that befell the Middle East throughout the long course of its history, as well as the economic aspects, the region's abundance in energy resources, and the development of techniques, modes of transport, etc. (p. 12)

His approach is the result of his own experience as a political sociologist and economist with a thorough understanding and assimilation of Western and Arab cultures.

Corm devises an interesting new concept in developing his methodology. It is 'geology of cultures' (p. 13), since his approach lays 'emphasis on the region's main geographical and cultural pillars' (p. 13), which have served as centres for eminent historical empires. I might add to this 'geology of cultures' another concept relating to the historian's undertaking of the task of peeling off the layers of cultures: namely, that of an 'archaeology of cultures'. Corm invites the reader to undertake this voyage from immemorial times to the present day through the prism of cultures that were repeatedly overlaid by peoples of various backgrounds. This is how the reader can

well grasp the differences between the Iranian, the Turkish and the Arab cultures, without forgetting the previous ancient centuries of Pharaonic, Aramean, Phoenician, and Hellenistic and Roman cultural predominance in the Middle East.

The book is divided into ten chapters, a conclusion, and a concise chronology of events, where a selected bibliography for the curious reader completes the work. The chapters are grouped into three broad sections. Part I portrays the evolution of the Middle East from prehistoric times until the beginning of the colonial era. Part II addresses the changes that took place from 19th-century European colonialism to the American invasion and occupation of Iraq (and one may add the destruction of state and society in Iraq). Part III, the final section, investigates the continuous decline of the civilizations of the region, and 'It also examines the validity of conventional wisdom regarding the Middle East' (p. 15). By that Corm means that simplistic rationales

too often abusively employ Islam as the sole identity and historical marker for the Middle Eastern peoples, and try to use this religion as the unique key to understanding the devastating tremors and hostilities that have been tormenting them for the last fifty years. (p. 15)

The author places the conflicts afflicting the region in a much broader context, including the evolution of global geopolitics and the emergence of new political and cultural ways of thinking. More significantly, he takes into consideration the American military and imperial deployment in the Middle East made possible by the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the tragic events of 11 September 2001. Such events have bolstered reductionist theories about 'clashes of civilizations' – pitting the Euro-Atlantic countries that define themselves as Judeo-Christian against the Islamic bloc, or the countries hostile to the Western world (p. 15).

Corm begins his analysis by indicating the need for integrating geography and demography. The region is in the form of arabesque with its undefined boundaries and its intertwining mountains, deserts and seas (p. 21). Added to that is the mosaic of its demography. Corm acknowledges the difficulty of writing national histories. 'Writing the history of the Middle East in a "national" mode can be particularly tricky due to the lack of such narrative tradition in the region' (p. 169). He notes that as elsewhere, 'the system of the nation-state was a recent artificial graft, totally alien to the local environments where cultural and historical interplay had once been intense, but became lost in the midst of time' (p. 169). What is even worse is that the historical knowledge of the region is weak and fragmentary. A fact that seems to have escaped historians is that

the regional systems of rule have survived with remarkable stability and uniformity through the ages, but their dramatically shifting geographic extensions made it impossible for any empire to effectively dominate the region for more than just a few centuries. Moreover, the Middle East's geographic traits and its demographic fluctuations deriving from the many nomadic migratory waves have persistently undermined the stability of the regional political structures. (p. 169)

And he asks rhetorically, 'which state can claim to be the inheritor of the kingdoms of Nabataea and Palmyra with their strong Arabic tincture?' (p. 171).

The avalanche of events that befell on the region in the last 200 years had their impact in shaping the modern history of the Middle East and the narrative which accompanies it. The author is particularly critical of the use of religion in shaping the historical narrative and calls for the rehabilitation of what he calls 'secular historical criteria'. He clearly asserts that he

chose not to consider Islam as the sole element of identification of the Middle Eastern peoples, the only civilizational marker, or the unique key to fathom the events that have been tearing the region to shreds for the past two centuries. Rather, we chose to concentrate on the geographic, linguistic, and cultural aspects that have characterized the history of the Middle East for over six millennia. (pp. 177–178)

He identifies what he calls ‘four constant pillars in the region’: Anatolia, northern (Babylonian and Chaldean) and southern Mesopotamia, the high Iranian plateaus, and Egypt. These geographic platforms have been the homelands of numerous civilizations that shaped the region and, eventually, the world. Their legacy ‘remains present in our modern societies in the survival of clannish and family-like structures, of Muslim clergies and local brands of Christianity, and of patrimonial states and governors, etc.’ (p. 178). This reviewer would note that what Corm calls ‘local brands of Christianity’ are in fact the oldest Christian Churches and of which ‘Western’ Christianity is simply an offshoot (if not a deviation) of the original Churches.

The contribution of Corm’s *A History of the Middle East* lies in his attempt and success at deconstructing the ‘conventional wisdom’ relating to the causes behind the ‘decadence’ of Middle Eastern civilizations. Corm is quite critical of the ‘enduring intellectual tradition in Europe that blames the decline of the civilizations of the Orient on the “Semitic” character of its population’ or even on Islam (p. 181). Such tradition has its origins in the works of Renan and Gobineau, whereas in modern times historians such as René Grousset suggest that ‘the whole region, since antiquity, was characterized by the struggle between the West, the heir of Hellenic culture, and the Asiatic East’ (p. 181). On the other hand, Marxist analysis has used its theory of Asiatic despotism as an explanation for ancient Middle Eastern empires until the Ottoman Empire. ‘Despotism, religious fanaticism, the “limitations” of the Semitic mind, and the images of predatory Arab Bedouins are all persisting themes, subliminally but more often overtly, in the European perception of societies in the Middle East’ (pp. 181–182). Of course, Corm acknowledges the work of some Orientalists who contradict such themes such as Louis Massignon and Louis Gardet. Some even embraced Islam such as Vincent Monteil or Roger Garaudy. More recently, a generation of Islamologists such as Gilles Kepel, Bruno Etienne, Olivier Carré, François Burgat and Olivier Roy (the latter is a consultant and member of the Council of Foreign Relations in the United States) have considered the political activism of the Islamist movements to be the ‘only possible way for Middle Eastern societies to develop and modernize, especially after what they see as the failure of all the attempted European modernizing experiences, whether secular, democratic, or Marxist’ (p. 182).

In the end, reading Corm’s narrative of the history of the Middle East leaves the reader with many questions, which he raises either directly or implicitly. Future generations of historians of the region as well as commentators are strongly urged not to use simplistic reductionist paradigms in narrating events in the region, if greater understanding of the peoples of the region is at the core of their quest.

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