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A Concise History of the Arabs, John McHugo (Review)

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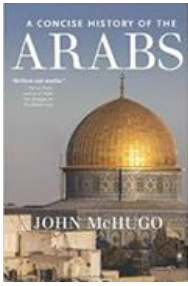
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A Concise History of the Arabs

By: John McHugo

A Concise History of the Arabs. London, UK: Saqi Books, 2014. 352 pp. \$26.95. ISBN: 978-1595589460.

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Review by

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This book is a well-written and useful resource, but it is mistitled. Its fourth through final chapters are concise and clear and explain in detail the geopolitical, economic and cultural developments that led to the development of the autocratic Arab nation-states of the last century, as well as the Arab Spring protests and their aftermath. Especially cogent and worthwhile is McHugo's explanation of the details of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and its roots in decisions made by Europeans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An intelligent layperson who only understood the conflict through the lens of the Western corporate media would be well served by McHugo's work, which provides a nuanced, balanced treatment of the issue. This treatment would go a long way for the hypothetical layperson in understanding why the Arabs are often portrayed as the aggressors in the contemporary conflict; how this is often very misleading; and why the anger on the part of most Arabs has real justification not often fully explicated in the mainstream media.

McHugo's approach to twentieth and early twenty-first century Arab politics sticks closely to the core Middle Eastern states, giving comparatively short shrift to the periphery of the Arab world. Yet, he does an excellent job in explaining the economic and political developments that led to the standard pattern of autocratic presidents-for-life and monarchs that characterize the Arab world of our time. Furthermore, he describes the rise to power and the policies of well-known names such as Nasser, Sadat and Hafez al-Assad in such a manner as to lend real humanity to these names. The author also describes their drawbacks and failures in such a manner as to clarify the influence of Cold War superpower conflicts and Western financial institutions on the policies and aspirations of the Arab leaders. There's little in here that a well-read scholar of disciplines relating to Middle Eastern studies wouldn't already know, but again, for a layperson looking for a concise history of the Arab world — especially its core — in the last century, this is a valuable and worthwhile resource.

Had McHugo stuck to the last century, there would be little here to critique. It is in the initial three chapters, covering the history of the Middle East from pre-Islamic times to the nineteenth century, that issues arise. He presents the standard narrative of the founding of Islam, for example, without so much as mentioning the extent to which textual and critical scholarship of recent decades has problematized this narrative. The subsequent sections, while providing a concise and generally accurate description of the political history of the core Middle East, is, if anything, perhaps too concise. But more importantly, his narrative very rapidly becomes a concise history of the (core) Muslim world. He doesn't address the factors that led to the comparative marginalization of ethnic Arabs during the high Abbasid period; an unwary layperson might not understand that the Abbasid culture was as much, or more Persian than Arab. This same problem applies to his discussion of the medieval period dominated by the Ottomans. The Arabs, as Arabs, aren't as present in the second and third chapters of the book as they could be. Also largely absent from the narrative is Arabic culture. McHugo sticks almost completely to political and economic aspects of Middle Eastern history, which are undeniably important, but to a layperson unfamiliar with the Arab world, an explanation of, for example, family life, gender roles, marriage patterns, the notion of "honor" that so often confuses Westerners, the role of poetry, etc., and the relation of these cultural aspects to orthodox Islam would have been a welcome addition to the text.

Again, insofar as the reader of *A Concise History of the Arabs* is interested in how and why the Arab states came to be dominated by autocracy, or the roots of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, this is a valuable resource. But the background material leading up to McHugo's discussion is limited. This book is of comparatively limited use to scholars, though not at all without merit for the lay reader.

