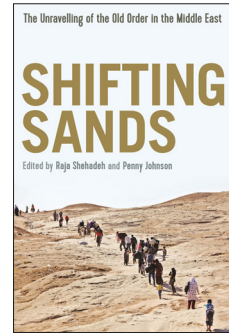


Book Reviews

Shifting Sands: The Unravelling of the Old Order



By Raja Shehadeh and Penny Johnson

Publisher: Profile Books Ltd (ISBN: 978-1781255223) 208 pages

Reviewed by Captain John Hart

Biography: Captain John Hart is a full-time reservist in the Royal Engineers based at Leuchars Station. He retired as an RAF Intelligence Officer with 18 years' service in 2013 and previously studied Middle Eastern and Central Asian politics as a CAS' Fellow at the University of St Andrews.

Introduction

Untold riches were anticipated behind the sealed door, but it was only to be opened on the death of Abu Jafaar al-Mansur, the eighth century Abbasid caliph and founder of Baghdad. Mahdi, his son and heir, had expected wealth but eventually found a room of corpses: men, women and children; in each individual's ear was a leather tag with their name and ancestry. All were Alids, today's Shia.

Justin Maronzzi's macabre tale provides a singularly penetrating insight that gives a new dimension to events in modern Iraq and Syria. It is one of many historical anecdotes that illuminate Raja Shehadeh and Penny Johnson's edited volume, *Shifting Sands: The Unravelling of the Old Order in the Middle East*. The book originated from a series of panels held at the 2014 Edinburgh International Book Festival, when the headlines were dominated by conflict in Gaza and Islamic State's swift drive into Iraq. Historical debate on the creation of the Middle East was also re-energised, when Islamic State ploughed through a sand berm, symbolising destruction both of the current Syria-Iraq border, and the 1916 Anglo-French Sykes-Picot Agreement. Shehadeh and Johnson, both human rights activists, are primarily associated with Palestinian issues but their work covers most major countries, although Israel is surprisingly absent.

The book, consisting of 14 authors, is difficult to categorise, covering a broad range of political, historical and social topics. It is divided into 4 thematic sections centring on historic origins, contemporary political events, the Syrian crisis and the role of fiction and imagination. The remit of the book is both ambitious and, necessarily, selective. The Editors unapologetically eschew dispassionate analysis in favour of insight and personal experience due to the “urgency of understanding” (p.3) the region requires.

The opening chapter by Avi Shlaim presents a conventional charge sheet on the Anglo-French imposition of a Westphalian state system in the Middle East. The imperial powers partitioned the hitherto undivided Arab lands and, in doing so, institutionalised weak states inherently lacking in national legitimacy. The post-war settlement is not distant history but, he contends, at the heart of current conflicts and the root cause of the region's turmoil and instability. A more nuanced view is presented by James Barr (author of the recent history of the region, *A Line in the Sand*). The Sykes-Picot Agreement was less a conspiracy to divide and conquer the Middle East than a product of long-standing Anglo-French rivalry. Ultimately, despite declarations of good intent on managing their new mandates, great power politics prevailed in the region. Yet although the region's Westphalian state system is under sustained attack, its borders remain resilient. The direction of political evolution remains uncertain and prospects of inter-communal reconciliation appear distant. Tamim al-Barghouti's call for Arab nations to unite in a renewed anti-Israeli consensus is disheartening. The need for a Palestinian settlement remains urgent, but Israel may represent less a cause of instability, than a symptom of it.

The book is enhanced by the inclusion of personal narratives chronicling the wave of unrest sweeping the region. Khaled Fahmy provides a lucid and honest analysis of the Arab Spring in Egypt and he perceptively identifies emerging trends in popular protest. One significant feature is that although the ability to communicate via the web and social media has proliferated, centralised leadership and direction is largely absent. Despite Egypt's recent retreat from its experiment in democracy, Fahmy retains hope. The 'lid is off the box' and politics is now everywhere and in every conversation: Egypt's political evolution has not finished. Turkey and Iran are discussed with Ramita Navai articulating her grievance against the now counter-revolutionary Iranian state fearful of reform, the so-called “domestic leviathan” (p.80).

The section on Middle Eastern literature presents a thoughtful range of ideas and exposes the reader to a subject little known in the West. The writers are reflective of linkages between past and present societies, not least the insight into innovative feminist ideas found in early twentieth century Arab literature; issues concerning the role and status of women in contemporary society is touched upon by several writers. Looking through an old yearbook, Mai al-Nakib reminisces about 1960s Kuwait and discovers its hidden, cosmopolitan past. He muses over an old university photo, noting the fashionable Sixties hairstyles sported by all the female students. In stark contrast to al-Nakib's current students, none were wearing a hijab.

There are many engaging accounts from the frontline in Syria. Of particular interest was Malu Halasa's chapter detailing creative forms of street protest, including messaging the anti-Assad narrative through Japanese-style manga cartoons. An early, non-violent victory against Assad was achieved by breaking the psychological barrier of fear surrounding the regime; it was targeted by that most subversive weapon of the masses: humour. The technological medium of reporting has also evolved and I was surprised to discover that Syria recently hosted its own 'Mobile Phone Films Festival': the citizen journalist is now taking centre stage.

If there was an aspect that required more exploration, it would have been for the Editors to have given greater critical analysis to the narrative of grievance and historical inevitability linking contemporary problems to the creation of Middle Eastern states. That the original Imperial powers and subsequent Western policy has had an, at times, detrimental effect on the region is uncontested. Recent criticism by Sara Pursely, however, charges that to absolve local actors and states of all responsibility is to deny their agency in their own affairs. The irony is that most of the book's contributors clearly see local agency within their own countries, but find a balance of culpability originating both from within and without. One writer states his belief that good governance in the region is an oxymoron. Yet, as the book articulates, good governance is desperately needed, not least to facilitate the long overdue renegotiation on the relationship between state, civil society, religion and the individual.

The book is written for a wide audience and I firmly recommend it for the broad view it takes. It has an accessible style of writing and each chapter offers new and, at times, challenging insights. The book's strength is to expose the reader to an expansive range of history, politics, reportage and social commentary that, taken as a whole, provides a more fleshed out narrative than provided by mere media headlines. The book reveals both the continuities and contradictions of the Middle East as well as offering historical anecdotes that provoke fresh thought on contemporary challenges. Most importantly, it demonstrates that, despite many difficulties, people in the region retain hope and are able to imagine a better future.

This article has been republished online with Open Access.

Ministry of Defence © Crown Copyright 2023. The full printed text of this article is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information or otherwise reserved rights, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. For all other imagery and graphics in this article, or for any other enquires regarding this publication, please contact: Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Cormorant Building (Room 119), Shrivenham, Swindon, Wiltshire SN6 8LA.

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
**Centre for Air and
Space Power Studies**

OGL