

The I.B. Tauris Handbook of Sociology and The Middle East

Edited by Fatma Müge Göçek and Gamze Evcimen

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For many years, the Middle East has been seen in the West as an enigma, a region that is embroiled in political unrest, the oppression of women and Islamic fundamentalism, clouded by Orientalism, propaganda, and stereotypes. *The I.B. Tauris Handbook of Sociology and the Middle East* is a timely and valuable book that attempts to introduce the reader to the complexity of the region, illustrating its rich history, dynamic mix of cultures and religions as well as the conflicts and struggles. It raises controversial questions: What are the boundaries of the Middle East? What defines the region? Would it be Islam, a shared culture or language or simple geography? This book doesn't claim to have the answers but rather presents standpoints that challenge the reader's perceptions and presumptions about the region.

The editors Fatma Müge Göçek and Gamze Evcimen collated writings on the Middle East from leading sociologists in presenting intersectional aspects of politics, religion, conflict, culture, and gender, over time and across spaces.

Acknowledging that creating a handbook for the Middle East is not as straight forward as it may sound, the editors chose perhaps an unorthodox method- focusing on sociologists who have written on the region, in English, and 'privileging' what they considered to be the central lands in the Middle East as well as Islam, namely the Arabian Peninsula, Turkey, Iran and Egypt.

The volume is divided into four parts, each compiled by different contributions (chapters) with interconnected topics and patterns, even if at times, very subtle and often overlap. The four parts are introduced by the editors, who engaged with the chapters and guide the reader through the contributions, aiding a fuller understanding of the arguments and perspectives. Although it is challenging to include all the countries in the Middle East in one volume, it would have been a more complete handbook if they had included chapters Iraq or Saudi Arabia.

In the first part, contributors discuss the societal transformations that occurred as a result of three pivotal conflicts in the region: Israel and Palestine, the Iranian Revolution, and the Arab Upsprings and Egypt. Here the contributors highlighted complexities such as social and gender inequalities, the employment of violence and the influence of international players. Perhaps these insights could have been furthered by including the Iraq-Kuwait invasion and the subsequent Gulf War, which divided the region and resulted in drastic and profoundly significant political, cultural, and social change across the Middle East. What was particularly interesting were the articles that discussed the veiled discrimination that exists in the region against the Palestinians, refugees, women, and the working class, prompting the reader to question the motives for certain policies and projects.

Part II delves into the topic Public Formal Space that was presented by clustering the works into three types of spaces in view of Finance, Islam and Minorities. The strength of this part is its ability to bring the reader closer to the realities and complexities of the influence and the politicalising of Islam, in the Middle East and globally. The chapters by Bamyeh and Kaya are both particularly timely and relevant in understanding the Hijab discourse currently taking place worldwide.

The third part foregrounds everyday practices and offers a nuanced understanding in relation with class status and gender ideals. Whether it is the economics of courtship in Egypt, Islamic dress in Turkey or the 'gay friendliness' Lebanon, the underlying factor is that class status determines what is accessible and acceptable.

Although the justification of including a part on the diaspora (Part IV) from the Middle East in Europe and America could have benefitted from being clearer, its addition does contribute to the overall understanding of the people from the region. The statement that "the Middle East is no longer in the Middle East" (p.457) highlights how the immigrants have taken their cultural and religious beliefs with them as they integrate in society they move to and in which they now live.

Having been guided by the editors with the introductions, there was an expectation that they would end the reading journey with their final thoughts and reflections. Nevertheless, it was refreshing that this book was not restricted to narrowly defining the Middle East politically and through conflicts only but extended to fashion and sexuality. It brought together contributors to offer an exploration of the complexities of the Middle East, presenting perspectives that challenge the understanding of the region. Because of the accessibility of the language, this collection will be valued by sociologists as well as those simply interested in the region.

The volume's main contribution is opening up a vital space for conversations on what constitutes the Middle East and inviting academics and researchers to develop a nuanced understanding of the region.