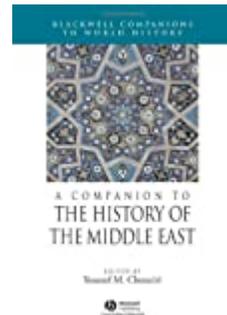


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Youssef M. Choueiri, ed. *A Companion to the History of the Middle East*. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2005. 624 pp. \$124.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4051-0681-8.



Reviewed by James Reilly (Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto)

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This is a “state of the field” collection with essays on various aspects and periods of Middle Eastern history from the emergence of Islam onwards. Written by specialists, the essays are directed at non-specialist audiences within academe as well as at members of the public and (potentially) at policymakers. The distribution of material is weighted toward the modern (two-thirds) versus the medieval/pre-modern (one-third). All of the essays are written in clear and accessible language with good referencing and with valuable bibliographies for further reading. The articles are analytic and rooted in scholarly debates, so readers are not merely handed information on a platter but they also learn where points of contention lie in the scholarly literature. A selection of chapter topics indicates the range of issues covered: Islam and the Caliphate; “classical” Islamic institutions; gunpowder empires; world economy and colonialism; independence and nationalism; urbanism; oil; women; politicized religion; civil society; ethnic minorities; the Middle East state system. The collection gives good coverage to North Africa (pre-modern and modern) and to Turkish and Iranian lands as well as to the Fertile Crescent and Arabian “core” of the region. However, the attention given to Turkish-related issues becomes less evident (though is not entirely absent) in contributions covering the post-Ataturk decades. For readers concerned about

such matters, critical coverage of various nationalisms including Zionism (by different authors in diverse articles) offers “balance” in this collection inasmuch as no one party’s nationalist claims and assertions are taken at face value.

A variegated collection like this offers no single synthesis, and editor Youssef Choueiri wisely does not try to force one to emerge. Rather, the readers are invited to consider the various articles on their own terms and to make the appropriate connections for themselves. An instructor will find this a valuable handbook for learning about essential issues and debates in topics or areas that are outside of his/her own specialization, and about which s/he is expected to lecture. Selected articles also can be valuable as assigned classroom reading, although the hefty size of the hardcover book will make it an impractical student purchase. In an era of instant information accessible at the click of a mouse, there still is a place for a well-produced reference handbook like this one that is solidly researched and vetted. Since the Middle East is unlikely to disappear from students’ interests or the public’s radar anytime soon, this reviewer hopes that *A Companion to the History of the Middle East* will do well enough to justify issuing a revised and updated version a few years hence so that it retains its freshness and utility.

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