



A History of the Middle East: 4th edition

Peter Mansfield

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Over the centuries the Middle East has confounded the dreams of conquerors and peacemakers alike. This now-classic book, fully updated to 2009, follows the historic struggles of the region over the last two hundred years, from Napoleon's assault on Egypt, through the slow decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire, to the painful emergence of modern nations, the Palestinian question and Islamic resurgence. For this fourth edition, Economist journalist and Middle East correspondent Nicolas Pelham has written an extensive new chapter examining recent developments throughout the Middle East, including the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the situation in Iran, the continuing Arab-Israeli conflict and relations with the US under President Obama.

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From Reader Review A History of the Middle East: 4th edition for online ebook

Ivan says

(Letto nell'edizione SEI, anno 1993)

Pubblicato dall'autore nel 1991, fu edito in Italia per la prima volta nel 1993. E' quindi naturalmente un testo per certi aspetti più che datato, ma sempre molto interessante. Il pregio maggiore dell'opera, per me, è l'aver focalizzato quasi tutta la sua attenzione sul XIX secolo e soprattutto sul XX secolo, tra l'inizio e la fine del colonialismo, la caduta dell'impero ottomano e il sorgere degli stati "nazionali", fino agli anni Novanta. In tal modo evita di diventare un malloppo corposo e ci presenta un quadro sufficientemente esauriente della moderna geopolitica del Medioriente e dei suoi problemi, connessi in primo luogo alla vicenda Israele-Palestina, non solo, ma anche alla rivoluzione khomeinista, etc. Il libro delinea anche il sorgere lo svilupparsi dell'integralismo islamico e del jihadismo, ma si arresta agli inizi degli anni Novanta con la prima guerra del Golfo.

Kevin says

This is a good introductory history to the Middle East. It's fairly comprehensive except for the final quarter, which seems rushed. To be fair, current events which are tied to events of the past century are still being interpreted and reinterpreted at a fast pace, and so it may be wiser to merely report what's going on rather than attempt in-depth historical analysis. What this book does is start to unravel the excruciatingly complicated relationships between the West and the Middle East and between the many factions inside the Middle East itself. One quickly realizes how shallow is the "sound bite history" we get from the American media and our political pundits. For anyone looking for an informed view of this crucial part of the world, this book is a great place to start.

Justin Tapp says

One critic has suggested the book "be re-named as A Western History of the Middle East" but I would suggest perhaps "A Political History of the Middle East." It is definitely the view from 10,000 feet, focusing mostly on political maneuvering and power struggles. This makes sense given that Mansfield wrote for papers like The Economist and the Financial Times in the mid-20th century; the majority of the book is devoted to the 20th century. Mansfield largely sets aside theology, almost ignoring any role it may play in dividing relations between Iran and the Saudis, for example. Why are Shia largely repressed and marginalized in Saudi Arabia while Sunnis and Kurds face difficulties in Iran? He devotes a few paragraphs on major Shia-Sunni differences, but only after he reaches the end of the 19th century. What are Alawites, Druze, Coptics? What is the interplay of Lebanese Christians alongside Palestinian Arab refugees and Shia militia? This level of detail is not really found. Given his financial journalistic background you would think he would have included more details on demographics, economic growth, and other such aspects of the Middle East but these are also largely left out.

Tamim Ansary's *Destiny Disrupted* is a world history through the eyes of Islam, which is a decent book to

read in contrast to this work, and is much more detailed in terms of religion and culture. Other books that I read prior to this include Albert Hourani's *History of the Arab Peoples*, *The Cambridge History of Turkey* vol. 1 and 2, Paul Johnson's *History of the Jews*, Anderson's *Lawrence in Arabia*, Kissinger's *World Order*, Kinzer's *Reset* (on relations between Turkey, Iran, and the US), and Salim Yuqub's Great Courses lecture series on *The United States and the Middle East from 1914-2001*. Yaroslav Trofimov's *The Siege of Mecca* is also an important work on events in 1979 that have much to do with 2016. All of these provide details that Mansfield book does not, but I find Mansfield largely hits the high points and gives a good overview of life until 1991.

One major weakness of this book is that Mansfield dismisses the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood (1960s) and events such as the attack on The Grand Mosque in 1979 by a multiethnic group of Wahabbists as simply dead-enders showing they have nothing large to offer the larger populace and being henceforth rejected and never of any real significance. He writes in the closing chapter that Saddam Hussein proved "Arab nationalism and Islam cannot be mutually exclusive," citing Saddam's ability to muster Arab support for his "jihad" against Iran. His view from 1991 was that oil prices would again rise and the Middle East would again "be important" as its dictators again had oil riches and complaints. As a result, the reader might imagine that the US would end up returning to Iraq to face off against Saddam one day, and that Saudi Arabia and Iran would fight proxy wars someplace like Yemen, but you would not imagine that Saudi-inspired terrorists were already plotting attacks against the US even as this book went to publication or that by 2016 there would be an international war in several countries battling violent Islamists that showed a remarkable ability to recruit internationally by the tens of thousands. (It is similar to the mistake US policymakers and diplomats made in not properly seeing the undercurrents before the Iranian Revolution and being surprised as it unfolded. Even that episode is treated rather politically, Mansfield doesn't bother explaining that Iranians were outraged that the Shah went to America for treatment--an act they saw as an intentional harboring of the puppet.) That is the danger of pulling religion/theology and the underlying values and culture out of a book that aims to be a sweeping history.

The author begins with a rapid run from about 0 BCE to the founding of the Ottoman caliphate. On one hand, it is nice that he does not look at the region in previous times but focuses on the period when the Arabs developed. There is little information available from around the time of Muhammed and rather than speculate, he just speeds forward. On the other hand, many events around the time of Mohammed are important and provide context both to the formation and spread of Islam as well as modern-day struggles (see Tom Holland's *The Shadow of the Sword*). Mansfield then gives a decent overview of Ottoman life and policy, highlighting various aspects of the long decline. In 1497, the Portugese bypass the Cape of Good Hope and the New World takes away the monopoly the Ottomans had on trade and the Western economy. Rather than innovate in the face of competition, the structures of the empire impeded progress and as it declined economically the idea of the Caliphate was revived in order to push its influence over Islam in its territories.

There was an ongoing struggle between the Sultan and Mohammed Ali of Egypt which the British and French were able to exploit, as well as the rise of Mohammed Ali's son, Ibrahim Pasha, who invaded and occupied Syria in 1831. In the midst of this came various Western missionaries who built schools, hospitals, and brought Western ideas (I recommend American missionary Roger Goodell's work on his stay in Beirut during this period) as well as mass-printed books. (It was not until the late 1800s that the Ottomans allowed the Koran to be printed and the printing press was not used widely in the Ottoman Empire.) The 1838 Anglo-Turko treaty and an increasing amount of Russian meddling in the "Holy Land" eventually led to the Crimean War. During this period, young Turks were finally allowed to travel abroad and study in Western schools; they returned with bold ideas for reform and democracy. The Young Turks pushed constitutional reform on Abdul Hamid II in 1876 only to later see counter-reforms and a strengthening of the autocracy two

years later.

According to Mansfield, Armenian revolutionary movements aiming for independence grew during the late 1800s. The slaughter of many in Eastern Anatolia was reciprocated by an Armenian terrorist attack in Istanbul, followed by a further pogrom of Armenians from that city. In Egypt there were likewise nationalist movements aiming at self-determination. There was an open Britain-France-Nationalist-Ottoman struggle for Egypt which eventually led to British occupation because the Suez was too important to fall into enemy hands. Mansfield also mentions the ongoing struggle between Sudan and Egypt, a point of contention between Egypt and Britain.

In the 1890s, the Ottoman Empire could not stand long against the Young Turks in Istanbul or the growing Arab nationalism in its territories. Places like Lebanon, inhabited by both Western Christian missionaries, Druze, and others with more ideas of democratic capitalism, the Sultan's stifling grip on either ideas or commerce began to chafe. Hamid brought Hussein and the Hashemites to Istanbul as part of the court in an effort to keep his friends close but his enemies closer. After he pivoted toward Germany for aid and the construction of railroads, the Young Turks managed to overthrow Abdul Hamid in 1908, only to see the further slaughter of Armenians in a conservative counter-coup. Nonetheless, the Young Turks restored the constitution and its reforms, particularly for women's rights and education.

After Mansfield briefly describes the major differences between Sunni and Shia Islam, he explores the history of the Safavid Dynasty of Persia and the development of unique Persian/Iranian nationalism. One of the founders of the Pan-Islamist movement of the late 1800s was Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani was invited to Iran by Shah Nasser ad-Din where his popular preaching calling for reforms, resistance to Western influence and a return to Islamic principles, caused the Shah to eventually deport him in 1891. As elsewhere across the Middle East there was a growing movement against Western colonialism, and al-Afghani's disciples would eventually oppose British exploitation of Iran's oil resources.

Once the time line goes to World War I, the British outrage many in the Middle East with the Balfour Declaration and the eventual resettlement of Jews into Palestine under a British Mandate. There is a good explanation of how the mandate worked along with the chronicling of the Arab rejection of various offers for a divided state and the fraught immigration of Jews into an increasingly dangerous Palestine. The rivalry for power and independence in the Levant is well-documented in Anderson's *Lawrence in Arabia* and other works. The Hashemites versus the French, Ibn Saud, and others. Early on in the 1900s there was not a notion of an Arab nation-state or states in the Middle East, but there was clearly a strong pan-Arab, pan-Islamic tide through which various tribal powers appealed to a common base against Western influences.

Ibn Saud forges his still-so-consequential alliance with ibn Al-Wahhab and Reza Shah takes the throne in Iran and both Saudi Arabia and Iran enjoy selling oil to Western markets and rivalry with one another. In Egypt there is the education of Abdul Nasser and an increase in nationalism. Kemal Atatürk remakes Turkey into a secular democracy while the author really misses Reza Shah's envy of the secular aspect of Atatürk's country as he pays a visit (see Kinzer's work for this subject). WWII simply delays the inevitable as eventually Nasser and Sadat succeed in overthrowing their British yoke in 1952. The British and Americans made sure not to allow Iran slip out of their influence by overthrowing Mohammed Mosaddegh in 1953. Iraq's nationalist generals cooperated with Germany to move toward independence, but Allied victory in WWII maintained it in the British camp until a 1958 coup installed a monarch who dissolved the Baghdad Pact. Eventually Egypt tries a pan-Arab union with Syria, but Mansfield writes that the bourgeois opposed Nasser's strong socialism and the alliance collapses into Nasser-Baathist rivalry, a Syrian-Iraqi union at Nasser's expense. Meanwhile, Faizal creates a conservative Islamic front in Saudi Arabia against Nasser. The French and British basically withdraw from the Middle East and Northern Africa.

Eventually, America stops viewing anyone who is not in the pro-America camp as a communist; Kennedy embraces Nasser and Johnson continues the support. The incredible defeat of allied Arab forces against Israel in 1967 have wide repercussions, along with ending Nasser's rule and creating more political squabbling among the Arab states. Anwar Sadat tries to get the US to take Egypt more seriously and starts the Yom Kippur war, leading to greater Israeli insecurity and a more hawkish attitude toward the Arabs, particularly in the form of making ties with US politicians. In the 1960s-1970s, everything seems to center around oil. The Saudis have five-year plans for infrastructure and use oil funds to eventually mount a joint effort to build Dubai. OPEC becomes the household word in the West. Jimmy Carter's foreign policy is humiliated by the overthrow of the Shah, which eventually leads to US engagement in the Iran-Iraq war as the Saudis increasingly have to balance the domestic pressures of a growing Salafist movement opposed to the House of Saud with proxy struggles with Iran. Mansfield essentially dismisses the conservative Islamist seige of Mecca in 1979 as the last gasp of the conservative religious movement on the road to greater secularization.

Mansfield cruises through the 1980s, ultimately building up to the 1991 Gulf War, the results of which were not complete by the time the book was published. Saddam had both gathered Arab sympathies in his war with Iran and tried to boost his credibility as a force to be reckoned with by "retaking" Kuwait, perhaps this is similar in Mansfield's eyes as Sadat's attempt to get Western attention via the Yom Kippur War. He speculates on what would happen if the USSR breaks up-- the Middle East and central Asia would likely grow closer due to its pan-Islamic ties, and Turkey would also be involved due to the pan-Turkic relationship. But Turkey looks to be moving more westward than eastward in 1991.

"The Middle East will not be ignored," concludes the author as he forecasts a return of oil prices closer to pre-1980s levels and a return to power of the monarchs and dictators that rule the region in a great rivalry. In all, I give it 3.5 stars out of 5. There is no ancient history, little treatment of the ethnic histories and religious undertones that clearly mean so much today, no understanding of the demands of jihadi fighters returning from Afghanistan, and no imagination that the pan-Islamism we would see just two decades later was one united in a violent struggle not just among Sunnis and Shias but also between Sunni powers.

Kimber Lybbert says

Let me just say that I'm probably the last person in the world qualified to rate this book. It's the first legitimate attempt I've made to learn about the Middle East, so I have no idea if its version of history is skewed one way or another. Mostly I thought it was valuable in that it alerted me to how very little I know about this area of the planet, and made me want to learn more. I can only rate it in those terms--the fact that I wanted to finish reading it, that I did in less than a week, and that I know more now than I did before reading it.

Ahmed says

[illegible]

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David says

Listening to History of the Middle East on 14 CDs during my work commute kept my attention from start to finish. An elementary knowledge of the geography both of the Ancient Near East- such as Mesopotamia and Persia- and the modern Middle East will help the reader or listener keep up with Mansfield who writes at breakneck speed.

The most salient features of the book for me are the details of the modern influence of western power and presence in the Middle East- beginning with the incursions of Napoleon, later followed by Britain, and subsequently dominated by the United States. Contemporary Russian influence in the region can be traced at least to its tendency to meddle in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire- now Turkey- along with its historical friendship with Syria.

It bears noting that the author focuses on the actions and policies of the formal leaders in the Middle East without connecting them to rogue elements such as the 1970s airplane hijackings and the murder of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. Further, the distinction between Arab or pan-Arab nationalism from Islamic nationalism is a useful lens to help understand and interpret modern events in the Middle East.

Razvan Zamfirescu says

Spicuri din recenzia finala care se gaseste pe blogul meu

.....
Marele avantaj al c?r?ii lui Mansfield este tocmai aceast? complexitate ?i extrem de elaborata sintez? a Orientului Mijlociu. Observa?iile economice, sociale ?i culturale transform? aceast? lume aparent ?nsp?imânt?toare datorit? evenimentelor sângeroase din ultimii ani, într-o entitate concret? care poate fi în?eleas? ?i de europeanul de rând. Apari?ia fundamentalismului islamic, evolu?ia ?i impactul asupra lumii arabe este analizat? cu lux de am?nunte, fapt care ajut? foarte mult un cititor ca mine care nu prea are cuno?tin?e despre Orientul Mijlociu ?i care mai degrab? cunoa?te lumea oriental? din ?tirile interna?ionale. Trebuie neap?rat s? v? spun c? drumul c?tre Orientul Mijlociu cel de ast?zi trece prin istoria Imperiului Otoman ?i depinde de influen?a acestuia asupra statelor arabe pe care le cunoa?tem ast?zi, istorie a unui imperiu fabulos care a ajuns bolnavul continentului european atât ajutat de c?tre europeni, cât ?i datorit? incapacit?ii conduc?torilor otomani de a se adapta la nou. Incredibil de fascinant? este incursiunea în m?runtaiele acestui imens imperiu care se lupta s? ?in? în frâu dorin?a na?iunilor de sub el pentru libertate.
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Sajad Afshar says

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Tammam Aloudat says

What a journey this book has been. I have read multiple accounts of the history of Arabs and the Middle East including A History of the Arab Peoples, History of the Arabs, A Concise History of the Arabs, and A Concise History of the Middle East written by a mix of Arab and foreign authors, yet, this account stands out very well for being balanced, extensive, and accurate as far as I know.

First, the form, I am impressed by masterful mix of neutral language and readability that the book manages to put together very well. It is not a biased book although some reviewers noted that it sounds less favourable to the West, but looking at the history of the region not being completely favourable to the West is not a biased position. The book author(s) do not really have favourites in their account of the turbulent history of the region. The sequence is good and has managed to mix what is essentially multiple histories in one narrative that addresses all of them with a reasonable balance. Naturally, the account is not entirely chronological inside every chapter or time period as a completely sequential account would have forced a lot of jumping from one context and storyline to the other. Hence, there is a sustaining of narratives with some zig-zagging in years. This required focus but was rendered easier by the containment of chapters within one period or one context.

Second, transition of authors, while Mansfield has written the entirety of the first part, my understanding is that Nicolas Pelham has continued it in at least the second to this fourth edition updating the timeline into its current end in 2013. To his credit, with some syntactical and form minor differences, I feel that Pelham has kept to the intention and tone of Mansfield in writing his chapters. The book isn't entirely seamless as Pelham is more colourful in his choice of words but the seams are well hidden and cause no disruption in the reading.

Third, the content. Here I have many praises and a few complaints. To start with the downside, no 500 page book can expect to cover the diverse and long history of the Middle East in any level of depth, however, the account is a little thin in places and the choice of focus is not always clear. For example, Muhammad Ali's reign gets more description and analysis than that of Nasser. I agree that Muhammad Ali's actions have drawn the beginning of the line on which Egypt, and the region indeed, had to walk, but few can argue that

Nasser had a smaller part to play. Similarly, the account of the PLO and Arafat took only a few pages. At a point, it felt that the book started comprehensively and then the author realised they will reach their word count quota soon and started writing more concisely. To compensate, there is a comprehensive and rich list of further reading at the end of the book.

The praises are mainly to the objectivity of the text. As I said, it sounds neutral yet readable and interesting and it states facts (as far as facts can be asserted in the Middle East) and the authors do not hesitate to mention their uncertainty when that is due.

Secondly, while the last part on regime change is short and lacks in details, it is a good preliminary reading on what has happened in the Arab awakening and the revolutions against the autocratic regimes of the region. My hesitance is that it does give the impression that the rebellions are entirely between the dictators and the Islamic inspired movements and spares only a few words for the civil uprising by secular youth in the region except a few words about that in Egypt. For more information about the Arab uprisings, this is not the place, especially that the book ends in 2013 before the Brotherhood president was overthrown in Egypt and the war in Syria took the many turns it did to the worse. The last part is short, feels disrupted, and doesn't give a clear account. I think I would look forward to reading it again in the fifth edition.

There are several options for reading about the history of the Middle East as I mentioned above, Hourani's account is sublime and a must, but Mansfield is more oriented to the modern and recent history of the region and gives a clear and concise idea about what happened in the past few centuries which is essential to understanding what is happening now. Very highly recommended.

Wendy Jackson says

This is probably the most important book I have read this year. My understanding of regional politics - and my appreciation for their complexity - has grown immensely. The news makes so much more sense to me now.

I read an older edition of the book, which I do not think makes a huge difference because the history of the region is so long. However, now I am keen to find a newer edition, in order to get more of Mansfield's accessible and well-written account of the last twenty years of Middle East history.

Nicki says

I found the writing highly accessible, the subject matter dealt with an effortlessly interesting topic and I felt like the first half of the book was fairly straight forward. Once it gets into the modern times, the author decides that every single problem possibly facing the Middle East is either stemming from Israel or the United States, and ignores ongoing human rights issues, wide spread corruption, the desertification of farm lands, lack of job opportunities or crumbling infrastructure.... Time after time, the author dodges difficult "but you can understand both sides of the stories" by comically making one side a complete inhumane demon. Furthermore, the author writes outright fables about the Jewish religion that easily allows him to avoid a complicated, multi-faceted problem. If you are skilled at removing opinion from fact, you may like this book, but I found the inability for the author to write without inserting his opinion in every single issue highly indigestible.

Raluca says

The developed countries in this world are the ones that had the time to develop by themselves, through trial and error, trying out things and establishing what is good for them.

Unfortunately, these developed countries are now spending a lot of time not letting other people develop.

The history of the Middle East, presented in this book with loads of accuracy and objectivity is showing us what happens when for various reasons areas are not allowed to develop by themselves. At first it was the Christianity vs Islam aspect, then there was the Israel aspect, then there was the oil aspect.

For various reasons and for the sake of the interests of countries far away from the Middle East, the Middle East is now the mess that it is. It is a mess of the making of the "Great Powers" (first the British, then the Americans).

Yes, there's nothing that we can do about what's done. But it would be great if we at some point started learning from this. Rather than doing that, we keep on insisting on not letting them be and then we wonder why organizations like ISIS manage to recruit so many people. Well, if someone came and bombed me and sabotaged me at any turn for the sake of interests that are not mine, I may join military resistance myself.

It would be great if some of the leaders of today were aware of that.

Jason Koivu says

Holy crap is the Middle East confusing! I thought I had a good grasp on it. After reading this I realize I most certainly did not.

So, I'm glad I read this well structured history lesson in book form, because it helped straighten out some of the intricate political web that has turned that area of the world into the contentious powder keg it's become. The history of the various religions, governments, sovereign leaders and all their disparate aims are difficult to juggle in one's mind. This book helps.

The only reason *A History of the Middle East* doesn't get a full 5 stars is that it is a little textbooky at times and the material got a bit laborious now and then, so my overall enjoyment didn't last from beginning to end, but that's mostly a personal issue. I'm not hugely into politics like I once was, so the subject is hard-pressed to keep my attention.

Trevor says

It is hard to recommend this book as a good introduction to this topic, as my knowledge of the history of the Middle East is so limited that really, as long as he mentioned Iraq, Persia, Egypt and some stuff about Islam he could have probably told me anything and I'd have been none the wiser. As it was I started off a little concerned when he talked about how great Christianity is and then went on to talk of the myth of Herod

killing all the boy children as if it was literally true. I very nearly stopped reading altogether, but through gritted teeth...

Oh, not reading, I listened to this as an audio book and that made it much harder than it needed to be. I'm not sure I would recommend this as an audio book unless you have a better picture of the Middle East than I do. The problem is not just that I'm completely unfamiliar with the material, so one character more or less merged into the next, but also this is the sort of book that I would have needed to read with a good map in front of me. Actually, a good series of maps and maybe even a 'family tree' of all the characters.

I think I would have liked to have come away from this with a better understanding of the differences between the Turks, Persians, Kurds and Arabs. To be honest, this isn't really covered as well as I would have liked or expected. Also, the difference between the Sunni and the Shiites is hardly explained at all. The key ideas in this book seem to be skipped over. This might be because, as he says of the differences in Islam, there basically is no difference except historical and political. This is nothing like the differences between Catholics and Protestants, but more like those between Anglicans and Wesleyans.

The good bits of this book were very good, but I felt there was too much detail that I didn't think mattered and not enough to give the sort of helicopter view I was hoping for of either Islam or the Middle East.

This history ends at about the place where most of us more or less know how the story works out – that is, just before the start of the first Gulf War. The Soviet Union is still a going proposition (although only just) and Desert Storm is yet to rage.

His treatment of the background to this war is concise and interesting. He also has many interesting things to say about the Iran / Iraq war and the complications that Israel has added to the region. There is lots of information about Turkey and the Ottoman Empire, the First and Second World Wars and their consequences for the Middle East, but I still did not feel that I came away from this book really knowing nearly enough about any of these things. And like I said, I didn't feel the Kurds rated nearly enough of a mention. I'm very curious about the differences between the Arabs and the Kurds and the Turks and just why they all hate each other quite so intensely, and yet all pray to the one God. I know religion is hardly the great unifier of people – but I would have thought that if everyone had what is almost exactly the same religion that it might have done something to unify these peoples. This is not evident from their history, nor is the reasons why this might not be the case explained in a way I would have liked.

You do come away from this book with a feeling for how the Arabs must feel. They did much to kick start the Renaissance in the West and the idea that we picked up the ball and ran with it must be a bit annoying. The standard line with all of this stuff is that Islam is much to blame. Well, yeah, as any religion is for sustaining ignorance, but there are clearly other issues involved here. It is generally felt in the Middle East that all that is required for Arabs to take their proper place at the pinnacle of world civilisations (as they have been for most of the history of civilisation) is for them to dedicate themselves more fully to their adherence to Islam. I was left with the impression that this view is so deeply held in the Middle East that for it to be forsaken would be akin to abandoning what it means to be an Arab. It also seems clear that Mansfield believes Islam is utterly core to what it means to be an Arab and that therefore these views are unlikely to change any time soon.

My favourite quote about the Middle East is from Chomsky who is often asked to come up with a title for his lectures many years in advance and when this is the case he says he invariably calls them, "The current crisis in the Middle East". Savage, sad, but unfortunately also true – the problems in the Middle East do seem both eternal and beyond solution – and this book gives some of the background as to why this is the case. All the

same, I think this history could have done with a better story teller.

I would have liked to have come away from this book with more answers, but perhaps that is the wrong way to look at it. Perhaps the mark of a good introductory history to somewhere as complex as the Middle East is the number of questions one is left with. If that is the case, this is a particularly fine introduction.

Kate says

I'll admit, it got a little dry at times, and I felt like maybe I was being forced to read it for a class, but I wasn't. After you get past the first few chapters, where it blows through like 1500 years of history (and then this Sultan, and then this Sultan, and then yet another Sultan...), it gets more interesting. It gets especially interesting when you start connecting the dots and seeing how 20th century events led to what is going on now in the Middle East. I read it because I didn't really feel very well-informed about the middle east, and I'm glad I did. Now time to read something a little fluffier.
