

## A Concise History of the Middle East

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By Arthur Goldschmidt, Jr.

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Reviewed by Anthony Wanis St. John

History is made every moment of every day, as long as it is recorded in some form for later analysis. However, it is the momentous and lofty that capture human attention: events of magnitude that mark transitions and outline discernible patterns in the long web of human existence. In current times as in the past, the events that mark a great deal of our history are conflicts, their immediate outcomes, and their ultimate resolutions. In the Middle East, the site of rich cultural heritages accompanied by much historical conflict, one such transition seems to be taking place: the 50-year stalemate in the Arab-Israeli conflict has come to an end. The Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements,<sup>1</sup> signed in September 1993, marked the end of one era and the commencement of another, in which differences are to be resolved through negotiation rather than in a bitter armed struggle between Israelis and Palestinians.

In *A Concise History of the Middle East*, Arthur Goldschmidt, a professor of Middle Eastern history at Pennsylvania State University, takes the reader on an intellectual journey spanning the rise of the region's civilizations to its division into modern states. Goldschmidt begins where most course texts on "Western civilization" abandon the Middle East, 476 A.D. By this date, "Roman power and culture had already shifted to the eastern Mediterranean" (p. 15). The author spends some time recounting an important element of Middle Eastern antiquity: the state of culture, civilization, and religion on the eve of Islam's birth. The predominant religion was Christianity, and the principal conflicts were among the various Christian sects such as the Arians, Nestorians, and Monophysites, separated by their opposing views on the nature of Christ.

Throughout the book, Goldschmidt links the past to the present and, in particular, to the non-Middle Eastern present. As an example, Goldschmidt traces the eventual predominance of Islam over Christianity to a single event:

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the 451 A.D. meeting of Christian Orthodox bishops at Chalcedon. There, the Monophysite claim of a wholly divine nature of Christ was declared heretic, and Monophysite Christians (today the Syrian Jacobites, the Egyptian Copts, and the Armenians) were consequently persecuted by the Byzantine religious authorities. The author links the present to the past by stating that "this policy turned dissenters against Constantinople and would later lead to the Arab conquests and the subjection of Middle Eastern Christianity to Islam" (p. 19). The Christian doctrinal disputes weakened the Byzantine Empire's political structure and thereby left an opening for Islam in the Middle East and for Protestantism in Europe.

The author cites other examples of ancient precursors to later developments: the Egyptian and Hebrew monotheisms, Egyptian and Mesopotamian hydraulic engineering feats (which have lasted into the modern era), and the Middle Eastern influence on Greek philosophies and Roman law, the bases of later Western law. The advent of an imperial kingship in the Middle East under the Sassanid Persians was perhaps most subtly significant. This rival to the Roman Empire set a precedent for a later Muslim-ruled but multicultural political organization under the Ottoman caliphs. A haven for scholars and students from Europe and Asia, the Sassanid Empire is credited by Goldschmidt for preserving the "humanistic heritage of the whole ancient world" by permitting scholars and others to escape the prejudice, dogma, and political restrictions of the Byzantine Empire (p. 20).

After this inquiry into pre-Islamic civilization, Goldschmidt gives little more than a footnote on Islamic belief and practice. He sets forth core beliefs such as the "Five Pillars of Islam" and basic aspects of Allah, his messengers, and angels. More relevant to the contemporary student, however, is the author's treatment of the principle of  *jihad* . Goldschmidt clarifies the fact that Mohammed's concept of  *jihad*  did not call for conversion or massacre of Christians and Jews. Unfortunately, this is a very preliminary treatment of a subject of great significance, especially in light of the coming Palestinian-Israeli "final status" negotiations. Goldschmidt believes that the historical tolerance of Islam is poorly understood, and that a long view of history does not support the thesis that Arabs and Jews must be eternal enemies.<sup>2</sup>

In chapters addressing the emergence of Israel and the wars that followed, Goldschmidt presents a relatively uncritical view of U.S. policy and particularly Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's post-1967 "shuttle diplomacy."<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, Goldschmidt's account is valuable for its broad portrayal of concurrent events that provide proper analytical context. For example, the political succession struggles taking place in Libya (Colonel Qaddafi's rise to power), Israel (Golda Meir's becoming prime minister), and Iraq (two coups d'etat in 1968 resulting in Ba`th party rule) all influenced the "Rogers Peace Plan" then being promoted by the United States. These events created internal instability in a region already lacking stable interstate relations.

In other critical sections of the work, such as his survey of the current condition of the Palestinian people, Goldschmidt proceeds in a novel way for a writer of history texts. He begins by explaining the Zionist argument that

the plight of the Palestinians is the fault of Arab states that have not absorbed the refugees. He then explains that his own long-held belief that the Palestinians were actually being slowly integrated into both Israel and the Arab states is also incorrect. With refreshing candor, Goldschmidt refutes his own former arguments, as stated in previous editions of this work. He argues now that Israel and the Arab states have not integrated Palestinians at all, but have disenfranchised them further. The outbreak of the 1987 *intifada* (uprising), the continuing Israeli bombardments of Palestinian villages in southern Lebanon, the chaos resulting from the Lebanese civil war, and the post-Gulf War distancing of Arab states from the Palestinian cause all offer evidence of this. In further support of his new contention that the Palestinians have not been integrated, he details the progression of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) declaring itself the government-in-exile of the State of Palestine in 1988, to the Jordanian renunciation of claims to represent the Palestinian cause, to the outright Israeli and U.S. rejection of the PLO, and finally to the Israeli recognition of the PLO in September 1993 and Israeli-PLO cooperation and negotiation toward what will likely be a two-state solution. Goldschmidt's portrayal of these events shows the Palestinians' maintenance of a separate identity and their quest for statehood, disproving the theory that they were being "integrated" into surrounding states.

Goldschmidt attempts to transcend partisanship in his portrayal of both the ancient and modern history of this rich and volatile region, while at the same time addressing the principal acts and grievances that have culminated in the current state of affairs. In his concluding analysis, he provides the beginning student of the Middle East with a summary of the chief causes of regional conflict: 1) an incomplete transition from religious societies and divine law to modern nation-states, 2) the resultant perception of illegitimacy of current governments, 3) "the quest for dignity and freedom by highly articulate people (or nations) who have endured centuries of subjection and are determined never again to lose their independence," 4) "the involvement of outside governments . . . who cannot work with the hopes and fears of the Middle Eastern peoples and . . . play on them to serve their own needs," 5) the growing concentration of arms, 6) the rising need for food, water, and fossil fuels worldwide, and 7) overpopulation in some countries (pp. 371-373). This valuable summary derives from the balanced, clear, and historically rooted perspective that the author provides throughout his work.

In the end, the author encourages the reader to promote a genuine dialogue between Middle Eastern and Western ways of life, and expresses the hope that not only has history *not* ended, but that it will continue to evolve in

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surprising ways. He counters the warning cry of an impending "clash of civilizations" and instead issues a call for "comprehensive conflict transformation from war to dialogue" (p. 373).

Goldschmidt's updated edition is a welcome addition to the plethora of works on the modern Middle East and its immediate historical origins.<sup>4</sup> The principal contribution of the present text is its synthesis of ancient civilization and modern history. Its simple but elegant language is written for newcomers to the field but does not diminish its contribution to historical scholarship. It consistently establishes links between East and West, past and present, and Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Perhaps most uniquely, it connects lasting peace with a genuine understanding of the underlying interests of all those who inherit the vast mantle of Middle Eastern civilization, for whom modern events are truly but a footnote.

### Notes

1. The Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements of September 13, 1993 is reprinted in 32 *International Legal Materials* 1525.
2. This is made clear in the scholarship of Dr. Walid Khalidi, who writes and speaks of the reverence Islam traditionally showed toward Judaism and Christianity until the creation of Israel, and who ties this tolerance to the ultimate resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. See, for example, the introduction to Walid Khalidi, *Before Their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians, 1976-1946* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1991).
3. For excellent critical assessments of Kissinger's diplomatic and conflict management efforts in the Middle East, see Jeffrey Z. Rubin, ed., *Dynamics of Third Party Intervention: Kissinger in the Middle East* (New York: Praeger, 1983).
4. See, for example, Albert Hourani, Philip Khoury, and Mary C. Wilson, eds., *The Modern Middle East* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Don Peretz, *The Middle East Today* (Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press, 1971); David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989); and Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

