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## Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael, *Government and Politics of the Contemporary Middle East: Continuity and Change*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

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**Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael, *Government and Politics of the Contemporary Middle East: Continuity and Change*. New York: Routledge, 2011.**

This book is an introduction to Middle Eastern political history and a fine addition to the growing scholarship in Middle Eastern studies. The complex ethnic, tribal, religious, linguistic, cultural, and historical background of the Middle East poses great challenges for any scholar who attempts to craft a comprehensive book that does justice to its subject. Answers to even basic questions like where the Middle East is or what qualifies as “Middle Eastern” vary from person to person and from continent to continent. Therefore, it is common practice for any book that deals with the region to make some necessary sacrifice to its scope—be it at the historical, political, cultural, or geographical level. This is also the reason why we do not yet (and perhaps cannot) have an authoritative and comprehensive history or political science monograph (or textbook) on the region. This very fact understandably stimulates the appearances of new publications every year.

The Ismaels’ book is another attempt to discuss current issues in the Middle East in a historical context. The book is divided into two main parts. The short first part (at 75 pages) examines two indispensable legacies that have shaped the culture and politics of the Modern Middle East: Islam and colonialism. In this section, the authors briefly cover the long history of the region, starting from 5000 BCE and ending at 9/11 to elucidate basic Islamic themes such as the “Pillars of Islam,” “Islamic jurisprudence,” the “heritage of Islamic political thought,” and “Islamic modernism, revivalism, and fundamentalism.” The main problem in this section is the authors’ heavy reliance on only one or two sources as well as their dismissal of some of controversial issues. For example, on page 45, the authors write that “the relatively physical frailty of women, the social bearing of a woman tended to suffer to a point where infant daughters were buried alive.” Such a statement demands a proper footnote. In fact, their references to only a few academic sources in each chapter is a serious issue throughout the book. Also, in the rest of the book, too much space is dedicated to historical narrative, leaving little space for their analysis of current events.

The longer second part (at about 350 pages) of the book looks into specific Middle Eastern countries, which they categorize as being divided into the northern Belt (including Turkey and Iran); the Fertile Crescent (including Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine); and the area to the West and East of the Red Sea (including Egypt and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council). This part opens up with the case of Turkey. After a brief history of the Saljuks and the Ottoman period and a short introduction to Turkish nationalism, the book investigates the Turkish political system, with a particular focus on the 1999 elections. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the Kurdish insurgency, the Turkish economy, and foreign relations. Although the chapter provides us with a concise history of Turkish political history, it lacks important events such as 2002 elections and the discussions surrounding the changing nature of the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party after 2007. Written with the help of an Iranian journalist and researcher, Ali Rezaei, the chapter on Iran is one of the most lucid, comprehensive, and up-to-date parts of the book along with the chapter on Iraq. Unmistakably reflecting the expertise of the authors in Iraqi studies, the chapter on Iraq is the longest and most detailed section of the work. Unlike the content dedicated to Turkey and Iran, however, the Iraqi historical narrative begins not with the ancient history but with the First World War. Two long sub-sections are dedicated to the “US invasion,” Kurdish nationalism, and their repercussions in

the region. Another sub-section on the Ba'ath party is interestingly missing a basic definition of Ba'athism itself.

The Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon are examined in the same chapter. Syria, being an important political actor in the region, should deserve more than eighteen pages, only one of which is dedicated to Bashar al-Assad. Written with the help of Glenn Perry, an expert on Egypt (begging the question why a more relevant expert was not selected), the next chapter deals with the Israel-Palestine issue, which is one of the region's major sources of instability. The conflict is a long and complicated struggle with key issues of mutual recognition, borders, security, Jerusalem, and human rights. It is the only chapter within which discussions land themselves occasionally on class divisions, interest groups, society, and political parties. Except for one report (Asher Arian, Nir Atman, and Yael Hadar's *The 2006's Israel Democracy Index: Auditing Israeli Democracy: Changes in Israel's Political Party System: Dealignment or Realignment*), the chapter relies almost exclusively on newspaper articles. This chapter should include a more thorough and objective treatment of the main actors. For example, while Israel is shown as a country which "leads the world in inequality," HAMAS is depicted as a mere political party with hardly a military branch. The chapter on Egypt starts with the emergence of modern Egypt and places much focus on Egypt's relation with the US, particularly Egypt's role in the invasion of Iraq. The Gulf Cooperation Council chapter investigates Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates within 44 pages. Keeping the recent devolvement in the region in mind, at least, Saudi Arabia and Qatar should have had a more in-debt analysis.

Should this text be republished, it should incorporate more recent developments like the Arab Spring, Syrian Civil War, and ISIS to its narratives. Additionally, the book's subtitle title reads "Continuity and Change," but this concept is not very well examined within the specific country chapters. A discussion on this subject would certainly enhance the value of the book. Also, reworking some chapters and creating a common structural pattern would be useful too. For example, some chapters have a long section on pre-modern history, while others lack a discussion of the economy, and some do not have demographic information; still others do not have maps. All that said, the book uses clear and comprehensible language and has several valuable pedagogical features like relevant maps and sections on further readings. Therefore, it would be a good resource for students of Middle Eastern Studies.

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