

MENA through the Lens of Political Economy

A Review of: “A Critical Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa” edited by Joel Beinin, Bassam Haddad, Sherene Seikaly¹

Bálint Fetter², Szabolcs Pásztor³

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Both of these regions are rich in mineral resources, and in political, economic tensions. The below reviewed book presents the distinct dimensions of development, policymaking and priorities of the two regions in detail.

The book includes eleven interesting and accurate essays about the critical political economic effects of the Middle East and North Africa. This is the first writing to deal with this topic comprehensively. The works of many erudite professors and researchers were edited by Joel Beinin (Donald J. McLachlan Professor of History and professor of Middle East history, Emeritus, at Stanford University), Bassam Haddad (director of the Middle East and Islamic Studies Program and an associate professor at the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University) and Sherene Seikaly (associate professor of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara). Among the two major parts, the first one (Categories of analysis) contains chapters 1-4., the second (Country/Regional studies) chapters 5-11.

The first chapter (*Landed Property, Capital Accumulation, and Polymorphous Capitalism:*

Egypt and the Levant) is written by Kristen Alff (assistant professor of history and international studies at North Carolina State University). First of all, this section gives us a historical overview about the economic development of Egypt and the Levant. Capitalism (and of course: capital) in the mentioned regions make up an important part of the chapter too. Finally, the dark side of capitalism is presented, through the abstraction of labour power, which makes the representatives of the working class rather „thing-like” creatures than humans.

In the second chapter (*State, market and class*) Max Ajl (post-doctoral researcher at Wageningen University), Bassam Haddad and Zeinab Abul-Magd (professor of Middle Eastern history at Oberlin College) are presenting us the way from colonial capitalism to independence in the case of Egypt, Syria, Tunisia. It also details the effects-reduced export revenues and remittance income of the oil bust (1986) on the economic development of the Arab states.

In chapter three (*Ten propositions on oil*) Timothy Mitchell (Ransford Professor of Middle

¹ Joel Beinin, Bassam Haddad, Sherene Seikaly (eds) *A Critical Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2020. ISBN: 9781503614475

² Postgraduate student at the University of Public Service (Budapest, Hungary); fetterbali999@gmail.com.

³ Associate professor at the University of Public Service (Budapest, Hungary); ORCID: 0000-0001-8606-8142; pasztor.szabolcs@uni-nke.hu.



Eastern Studies at Columbia University) presents how easily oil can lead to war in the Middle East, which has the world's largest reserves of hydrocarbons. As we can see, the area is highly energy determined. This fact gives great importance and a key role to oil. Mitchell deals with this topic through ten descriptive statements.

In the upcoming, fourth chapter (*Regional militaries and the global military-industrial complex*) by associate director of the Institute for Middle East Studies at George Washington University Shana Marshall, we can observe how strong military establishment impacted the whole political/economic progress in the Middle East and in North Africa. The organization of modern regional militaries, their motivation and privileges as well as the regional weapon development are the key concepts to understand why this region is so extremely delicate and divided.

The fifth chapter (*Rethinking class and state in the Gulf Cooperation Council*) by Adam Hanieh- reader in development studies at SOAS, University of London, deals with the nature of the capitalist class and with the labour and citizenship in the Gulf. The Gulf Cooperation Council organizes several states in the Middle East, for example Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. The Council and its member states are building a specific area in the Middle East politically and economically too. The labour forces here are mostly migrants, without any basic human rights. The gloomy sides of capitalism are also presented here.

Aaron G. Jakes (assistant professor of history at the New School) and Ahmad Shokr (assistant professor of history at Swarthmore) note chapter six, with the title *Capitalism in Egypt, not Egyptian Capitalism*. The writers present the revisited colonial capitalism, national development and neoliberalism in Egypt, through the reinterpretation of capitalist and economic history of the state across the past two centuries.

Chapter seven (*State, Oil, and War in the formation of Iraq*) by Nida Alahmad, lecturer at the University of Edinburgh's Politics and International Relations department, presents how deep the mentioned three factors are forming the political discourse in Iraq. Although the 2003 war had a bad affect on the state arrangement and infrastructure networks, oil means a copious source for development programmes (and perhaps causes other regional and international conflicts).

Chapter eight, *Colonial capitalism and imperial myth in French North Africa* (constructed by Muriam Haleh Davis, assistant professor of history at the University of California, Santa Cruz) seeks the answer a fundamental question in this topic: was the capitalist greed and interest a basic factor/reason in the process of decolonisation? The chapter tries to present the diverse socioeconomic development of the states in North Africa, which was strongly predestined by the French domination in the years of colonisation.

Lebanon beyond exceptionalism is the title of the ninth chapter, which was written by a visiting associate professor of human rights at Bard College namely Ziad M. Abu-Rish. We can ascertain that the political economic development of Lebanon was way different than any of

the other states in the Middle East. This process is presented through different terms of Lebanese history. Many of the actual political and business leaders of Lebanon are former militia leaders. This fact has a major effect on nowadays tactical decision-making, too.

Chapter 10 (*The US-Israeli Alliance*) by Joel Benin shows us those unavoidable factors, which make the covenant of the two states tight. For example, the Democratic Party has many Jewish supporters, who have considerable political power. The chapter gives an overview about the beginning of this relationship, furthermore about the politic, economic interests of both sides. Antiterrorism, security and defence policy priorities are also explained.

Samia Al-Botmeh, assistant professor of economics at Birzeit University notes the eleventh and final chapter: *Repercussions of colonialism in the occupied Palestinian territories*. The political economy of the Palestinian areas is presented, which was obviously formed by a major factor, Israeli colonialism. In the end, we can assess that the lifeway of the Palestinian economy was „held hostage“ to the interests and will of colonialism.

This book must be on the shelves of university libraries and on the desks of researchers as it approaches the complex issues of the MENA region from a special point of view, from the angle of political economy. A number of events have taken place in this region since the turn of the new millennium and this piece offers a detailed view on understanding the fundamental changes and challenges. Anyone who reads this book will have a better understanding of MENA.