

***Inside the Middle East: Making Sense of the Most Dangerous and Complicated Region on Earth.* Melamed, Avi. New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016.**

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The Middle East is a region of geopolitical intricacies which has perplexed western foreign policy makers for decades. In his book, *Inside the Middle East: Making Sense of the Most Dangerous and Complicated Region on Earth*, Avi Melamed — an Israeli intelligence analyst — attempts to draw the patterns of disorder in the region. The publication is an endeavour to present effective models, not only for engagement with the region and understanding of its puzzling issues but as a path forward from the present functional disorder. This book is a fascinating account of the present occurrences in the region on a cause-effect model along with a rare insight into an effective resolution of the long vexed issues.

Melamed takes account of all the major power players in the Middle Eastern region. He explains the developments such as the Arab Spring, the downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Sunni-Shia acrimony, the crux of the war in Syria and the brewing nuclear arms race. He also provides rare insight into normative patterns of Arab society and its leaders, which are a key to their objectives and aspirations. Simultaneously, he also appraises the terrorists and provides recommendations on how they can be foiled and overpowered. His methodology is based on four major pillars: assimilating simple effective tools for analytical purpose, breaking dependence on the Western-mediators, cultivating a culture of critical thinking in the Middle East and developing a new discourse.

“The Middle East is like a global weather system ...events and developments in one place impact other areas. Its turbulent nature is restrained by a complicated sense of checks and balances (p.273).” According to the author, the key to understanding how to engage with such a complex setting is the ability to “zoom in” and “zoom out” (p.272) and be

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able to interpret and assess things holistically at both micro and macro level, simultaneously. In essence, to understand the region, it is important to examine existing tensions, not only alongside each other, but as interconnected challenges as well.

Another interesting aspect is Melamed's views on the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On a topic, where the discussion is too polarised, the author provides a notably objective and rational synopsis of the conflict. He also outlines a way forward that reflects respect to the rightful objections on each side. Moreover, the author debunks the usual conceptions and assumptions behind the Boycott Divestiture and Sanctions (BDS) Movement. He states that such attitudes are driven by a fanatical mindset "in which romantic idealism in the form of missions to protect animals, save the environment, help the underprivileged and volunteer for organisations engaged in humanitarian assistance make an important personal statement and provide a mission that offers self-fulfillment (p.244)."

He goes on to challenge the present narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the following words, "counter to the narrative that became common in Western circles that argued that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shapes the Middle East, the reality is the other way around. The Middle East reality shapes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (p.268)." In the concluding chapter, Melamed proposes a list of new approaches and necessary overtures that though have not been tested still provide the reader with a fresh perspective on how a peaceful solution should to be pursued.

Even though, at present, the Middle East may seem in a state of bedlam and disarray, Melamed believes that the region does not have to continue its current trajectory. A hopeful future is still possible but only if that future is "examined from a cold and sober view that is painfully real and has no illusions (p.275)." To the effect, he presents a way forward in his final chapter, where he provides a set of tools for understanding one of the most misinterpreted regions on earth. The unvarying ideas of the past century have to be discarded and concrete, realistic and holistic methodologies grounded on a strict adherence to reality and critical thinking need to be employed.

All the 12 chapters provide a unique compass to traverse the incredibly complex labyrinth of the Middle East. It is an untold story of the struggles

that will shape the region and the world, for decades to come. The key idea is that the problems of the Arab world are caused by the Arabs themselves. These are ingrained in the “deeply-rooted belief” in conspiracy embedded in Arab thinking that Arabs “are victims of things like imperialism, colonialism and racism (p.2).” In the first chapter, he also talks about the shortfall of the constitutions in the Arab world, which he states “are at best plastering a challenging, fragile reality (p.6).”

So far, the Arab leaders have failed to provide anything of substance to their people beyond lip service. Thus, it is imperative to understand the dynamics of the region and figure out sustainable solutions. With the revival of US-Russia rivalry, the increasing tensions regarding the Israeli settlements and the Islamic State at the edge of demise, this book is timely and an essential read to make sense of the current seemingly black hole of troubles plaguing the Middle East. A must read for policy makers, academic and students alike. Melmand summarizes it best when he says, “it’s impossible to have a crystal ball but it’s possible to make educated analyses and predictions of what’s to come (p.195).”