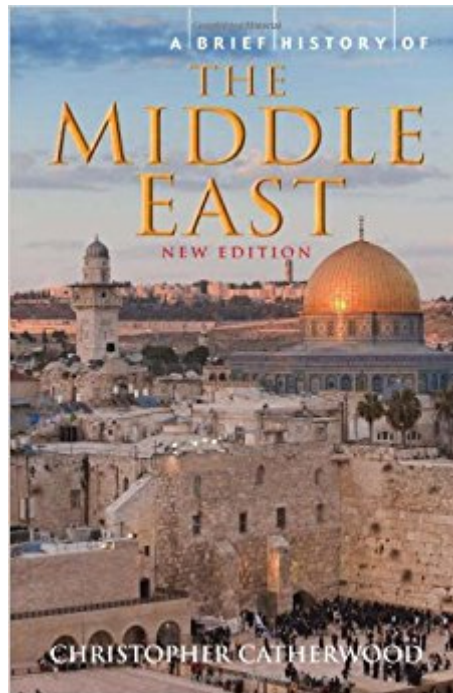




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A Brief History Of The Middle East



Synopsis

For over a millennium, the Islamic empires were ahead of the West in learning, technology, and medicine, and were militarily far more powerful. It took another three hundred years for the West to catch up and overtake the Middle East. In this fully updated and revised edition, historian Christopher Catherwood brings the account up to the present day and places in context the continuing friction between Israel and Palestine, the aftermath of the Iraq conflict, and the rising threat of Iran.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Christopher Catherwood is a historian and terrorism specialist who appears regularly on CNN and the BBC. He is also the author of several books including Churchill's Folly and Merchants of Fear. He lives in Cambridge, England.

I am shocked by the number of positive reviews for this book. I taught this book to high school students for the past two years and have found it to be very problematic. I would NOT recommend this to anyone with an academic interest in the Middle East and I have chosen a different book to teach going forward. Here are some of the problems:

1. There are a number of factual mistakes. From using incorrect names of dynasties to getting dates wrong, the book is littered with errors.
2. Catherwood has no sense of pacing. There are pages devoted to a small battle in World War I (in terms of the overall war) but literally there is one sentence on the Ottoman Tanzimat (60 year reform period).
3. The book has far too much historiography for a smooth read. Students had a lot of trouble following the actual history because Catherwood goes on tangents about other authors' arguments.

While this is fine for a historiographical collegiate work, it doesn't make for a "brief" history of the Middle East nor does it make it easy to read and digest. Now, I will say that Catherwood's treatment of some topics is solid, informative and succinct; but those areas are too few to warrant giving this book any more than a 2 star rating.

If you're looking for a brief one volume overview of the history of the Middle East then this is a good book. Trying to summarize a few thousand years of history into a single volume is no mean feat and I think Catherwood does a good job. I found him to give a fair representation of Christianity and Judaism. I also learned a lot about Islam that I did not previously know. Interestingly he also gives a fairly good critique of Western Secularism. Most history written from a western perspective presupposes a secular worldview. However when it comes to the Middle East the issues are not as much secular as religious ones. On the question of Islam I found him to be fair and in most cases unbiased. This was especially helpful when it came to the question of Israel and Islam. He does a good job of showing how the West is indebted to the Middle East especially in the areas of Maths, Science and Medicine. However I will offer a few critiques. The book is dry and academic at times. The author also bombards you with a lot of names and dates at once. If you are unfamiliar with the Middle East this may further confuse you. I also felt he didn't answer certain questions that were staring me in the face while reading. I gave him the benefit of the doubt and kept reading, but in the end I still had questions. For example, I don't think he gave much credence to the eschatological doctrine of afterlife rewards for martyrs of the Islamic faith. He mentions it in passing in the last chapter and all but ignores it in the chapter on Islamic terrorism. He also didn't give much credence to a religious interpretation of why Arab states refuse to recognise Israel's right to exist. I felt he spent more time discussing it from a secular point of view and downplaying the religious element; something that he later admits is a typical problem for Westerners. Overall I thought the book was worth the effort and gave me a decent framework for understanding the issues in the Middle East.

This was a good book in some specific aspects, such as explaining why terrorists want an Islamic caliphate, thus making perfect sense of why ISIS came into existence. But I would say one has to have some basic knowledge of history in the Middle East already, before reading this book. I can't recommend it to a person who has not a good basic knowledge of key events in the Middle East in the last 3000 years. I am sure it was not intended for beginners either. But I did learn certain differences and subtleties between Shia and Sunni Muslims, among other things.

If you are interested in a detailed introduction of the Middle East that is written by a scholar yet highly readable, well researched with numerous references to conflicting opinions by historians and archeologists, you will find this an excellent book. The span of coverage in just 265 pages, not counting references and index, is quite amazing. Starting from the early Middle East peoples to emergency of Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions to the present day (2006), this book is highly relevant to understanding the Middle East conflicts that stay with us today. The concise coverage of the major religions in the middle east, the various conflicts over time, dynasties (expansion of the Muslim domination into Europe) and central characters is brief but detailed enough to give the reader, particularly those less familiar, an excellent frame work for understanding how the history of the long ago past effects us today. In the modern era, the author's explanation of the decline of the Ottoman Empire and post war colonialism after WWI along (creation of Iraq) with the Balfour Declaration that led to the eventful creation of Israel are shown as the major seeds for the Middle East conflict today. The author, even in this concise history, provides the complete statement released by Osama Bin Laden that explains his view of his conflict with the west, while the author points out that Bin Laden's greater complaints of western exploitation go back to the colonialism after WWI. Also, well described is the difference between the Muslim religion and nationalism, in that Muslims are not so driven by creating nation states as they are in defining their religion and spreading their faith. Also notable is the inner conflicts between the Shia and Sunnis and the emergence of the less tolerant orthodox view that emerged from Saudi Arabia. The book is still current as the author describes the emergence of Hamas in Palestine and the conflicts with the PLO, while also providing a history of both. The author frequently cites influential historians such as Bernard Lewis while including conflicting opinions of others while also referencing their worlds, and occasionally his own. Highly readable and the pages seem to fly by.

It's written from a one-dimensional point of view. I had bought it for a student interested in the middle east, but found the writing too biased.

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