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The Contemporary Middle East in an Age of Upheaval ed. by
James L. Gelvin (review)

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interned there under brutal conditions and compelled to help construct France's long-standing dream of a railroad that connected its colonies in the Mediterranean ports of Algeria to those in West Africa. Miller describes the gruesome scene when the line between Bouarfa and Kénadsa was completed in December 1941. She writes: "A sumptuous banquet was laid out on the sand dunes for the honored guests," who included some of the highest-ranking officials of the colonial and metropolitan governments. These officials had no trouble feasting, despite their knowledge that "ex-soldiers, Spanish republicans, political detainees, and Jews, sentenced to hard labor for practically no pay" had been worked nearly to death to build the railroad they were celebrating (p. 98). Before 1942, Benatar corresponded with prisoners in these camps to help them. She was one of the few people with any power who even knew the camps existed. In the end, Benatar was crucial in the efforts to finally liberate these camps, months after the Allied landing in North Africa.

Historians have only recently started to view North Africa as an integral part of the history of World War II and of the Holocaust, rather than as an afterthought. Miller's work on Benatar adds to a growing corpus, including the new *Wartime North Africa: A Documentary History, 1934–1950*, edited by Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein (also published by Stanford University Press). Miller's book is a thrilling read about a truly remarkable Moroccan woman. It should be on the reading list of anyone interested in modern North African history, Jewish history, or the Second World War. In addition to a gripping tale, Miller has demonstrated the centrality of the war to North African history and the centrality of North Africa to the war. The disciplinary divisions that have separated Europeanists from Maghribists have long been crumbling; Miller's work is another blow to this imaginary barrier and a model of how to write modern Moroccan history as global history.

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MODERN HISTORY AND POLITICS

The Contemporary Middle East in an Age of Upheaval, edited by James L. Gelvin. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021. 368 pages. \$28.

Reviewed by Nicholas J. Lotito

Has the twenty-first century radically transformed the political and social landscape of the Middle East? Following the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Arab uprisings of 2010/11, an unrelenting onslaught of violence has destabilized the region and called into question the continuity of the region's entrenched orders. But amid this upheaval, how much has really changed? Has the Middle East entered uncharted territory or do most of the old rules still apply?

Edited by James Gelvin, *The Contemporary Middle East in an Age of Upheaval* offers some qualified answers to these pressing questions. Writing a history of the present is a tricky business. Fortunately, this effort is shepherded by one of our era's most accomplished historians of the contemporary Middle East. In his introductory chapter, Gelvin successfully lays out a thoughtful meditation on a question — is there a new Middle East or not? — whose ultimate answer will be unknowable for years to come. The book's contributors largely find that despite the radical challenges of the past two decades, the contemporary Middle East is an evolutionary update, not a revolutionary one.

Diverse chapters summarize developments in the regional economy, Islamist politics, and the political futures of several key states. Alongside updates on well-known phenomena like crony capitalism and oil dependence, in the opening chapter Joel Beinin offers insights into newer dynamics such as intraregional foreign direct investment. But overall, consideration of the region's historical political economy and of state-business relations lands a significant blow against the hypothesis of historical rupture. Selections by Peter Mandaville

(Chapter 6) and Nathan J. Brown (Chapter 7) address the crisis within the region's Islamist movements following the temporary high of winning office in Egypt and Tunisia in 2012 and the subsequent reckoning with public opprobrium and state repression. In Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, recent history has posed existential threats to previously stable states. Authoritarian leaders such as Muhammad bin Salman Al Sa'ud (also known as MbS) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seem poised to perpetuate a kind of authoritarian stagnation, despite their claims of reform and progress. Meanwhile, vicious wars in Syria and Iraq have left those societies devastated, with massive population loss and displacement, their prospects hindered by previously unknown levels of sectarianism and social fragmentation.

Standout contributions from Laurie Brand on education and human security, Kevan Harris on the myths of political behavior in Iran, and Aomar Boum on "poets of the revolutions" (i.e., rappers), in North Africa significantly revise our understanding of core social relationships related to education, class status, and youth culture. Brand forcefully argues that systemic failings in public education across the region have diminished human dignity and opportunity, with little prospect for improvement. Harris convincingly argues that identification with Iran's middle class is based mainly on conspicuous consumption and self-image, rather than political consciousness or collective action. Leveraging original, large-scale survey data from the impressive Iran Social Survey,¹ the chapter undermines a widespread faith in the political activism of Iran's rising middle class. Taking a literary approach, Boum mines the catalog of Arabic hip-hop to establish a historical continuity among youth protest movements since the 1990s, belying a common belief that the adoption of internet-based social media renders contemporary activism unique. Together, these contributions provide a power-

ful challenge to the conventional wisdom that the Middle East's large "overeducated and underemployed" youth generation, connected by social media, is the key driver of social and political change in the region.

Should a "new" Middle East emerge, its genesis may not be found within individual states, where fundamental economic, political, and social forces appear largely resistant to rapid change. In Part Four, contributors raise the possibility of a more substantial transformation at the international level, where dynamics like proxy wars and foreign intervention have the potential to reorder regional politics. In superb chapters, Marc Lynch and Aslı Bâli, respectively, interrogate the rise of the proxy war as a dominant mode of security competition and the extreme impact of international law, often overlooked by scholars, on patterns of foreign intervention in the region. Considering the differing conclusions of the domestic- and foreign-focused chapters regarding the potentialities of transformative change, scholars should build on the insights of this volume to consider how change may be coproduced from without and within the states of the Middle East.

With an impressive range and depth of analysis, *The Contemporary Middle East* is a fascinating and highly recommended read. Each chapter offers a compelling narrative of recent events and contemporary dynamics of social, economic, and political life. The volume frames an ambitious central question about the nature and degree of change in the "new" Middle East. This inquiry promises to help scholars and practitioners alike identify whether the lessons and strategies of decades past will remain useful guideposts today and into the future. While it remains too early for a definitive answer, this volume offers a major contribution toward a definition of this era in Middle Eastern history and an illuminating read for scholars and policy practitioners alike.

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1. Kevan Harris and Daniel Tavana, *Voter Behavior and Political Mobilization in Iran: Findings from the Iran Social Survey* (Lund, Sweden: European Middle East Research Group, 2018).