



IN THE
LIMELIGHT

BOOK OF THE MONTH

Shifting Sands: The Unravelling of the Old Order in the Middle East

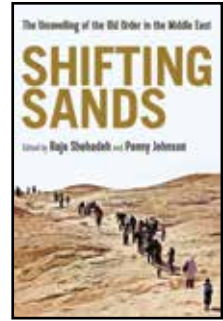
Edited by Raja Shehadeh and Penny Johnson
Profile Books, 2015, 248 Pages, \$18.00
Reviewed by Ahmad Muna, The Educational Bookshop, Jerusalem

Shifting Sands, The Unravelling of the Old Order in the Middle East saw the light at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. It brings together fifteen different writers who tackle various aspects of the Middle East: history, culture, politics, social life, the lost homeland, and a hopeful future.

Starting at different points in history, *Shifting Sands* offers the reader an overview of how the events that took place over a hundred years ago are still very much relevant to the current crisis in the Middle East.

James Barr takes us back to the outbreak of the First World War and highlights some of the details of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which eventually divided the Middle East between the two superpowers. He argues that not only has the agreement certainly helped in creating the conflict between Palestine and Israel, but it also continues to influence the geo-politics of the region.

The second of the four chapters in this book discusses recent history with various essays that cover Iran, Egypt, Turkey, and Iraq. Khaled Fahmy starts his essay on the day he went to Tahrir Square in 2011 to join what he had thought was just another normal demonstration doomed to be crushed. But soon after and within the next few days, he knew that Mubarak's demise was only a matter of time. In his *exposé*, however, he wonders why the hope for freedom and democracy that Egyptians once had enjoyed four years ago no longer exists in the presence of a dictatorship. He presents five reasons why the recent uprising in Egypt and the Arab world may have failed. Yet he



remains confident that the future is hopeful.

Alev Scott takes us beyond the borders of the Arab nations. She illustrates three scenarios of the peaceful protests in Turkey, where there is a standoff between people and the state. Uneasy moments, but definitely happy and hopeful, she argues that while the future of Turkey may be unstable and hard to predict in the next fifteen years, the "Gezi Spirit" remains the hope the Turkish people hold for whatever the government chooses to throw at them.

The essays of this book go beyond politics and history to include writing and living in the Middle East. The three contributing novelists outline not only the critical issues they face when writing about the Middle East, but also how fiction can represent but also misrepresent in the Middle East. Mai Al Nakib's essay illustrates a social change of life in Kuwait that she witnessed and lived through; she emphasizes that fiction is a force that should not be underestimated.

On Syria, the contributors offer a range of different analyses and arguments on the current crisis that bring the reader to better understand the ongoing tragedy that forced half of the country's population to become refugees. Robin Yassin-Kassab visited Syria in 2011 and 2012. He says "neither visit took me to a country or a people recognisable from the Western media." Dawn Chatty argues that the geographical borders drawn by Sykes-Picot may no longer hold, but the long-standing cultural and social groups and communities in the Levant will stay.

The editor, Raja Shehadeh, concludes that a fair and just solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict based on equality is not just a key to bringing down a hundred-year-old injected "deadly fuse," but it will also convey positive change to a troubled region.