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Book Review of Mullahs, Merchants and Militants: The Economic Collapse of the Arab World written by Stephen Glain

Looney, Robert

Mullahs, Merchants and Militants: The Economic Collapse of the Arab World Robert Looney, The Middle East Journal; Winter 2005; 59, 1; Research Library pg. 155
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any oil from Saudi Arabia, the kingdom still will be able to play a dominant role in shaping oil prices and policies given its massive resources. Finally, Yetiv approaches oil policy as a zero-sum rivalry, whereby one side's gains are another's losses. To be sure, this had been the main characteristic of oil markets for several decades, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. However, since the early 1990s producers and consumers have worked together to achieve a common goal stability of global oil markets. The International Energy Forum is a good illustration of these joint efforts.

Despite, or probably because of, these controversial issues Yetiv's work is a good contribution to a growing literature on oil security.

Gawdat Bahgat, Director of Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and author of American Oil Diplomacy in the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea (2003) and The Persian Gulf and Israel (2005).

Mullahs, Merchants and Militants: The Economic Collapse of the Arab World, by Stephen Glain. New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2004. x + 305 pages. Photos. Maps. Chron. to p. 314. Sources to p. 321. Bibl. to 328 Gloss. to p. 331. Acknowledgments to p. 336. Index to p. 350. \$25.95.

Reviewed by Robert Looney

In a fascinating study filled with memorable first hand accounts of individual hopes, despair, and struggles for a better life, Stephen Glain tackles one of the questions most often posed to Middle Eastern experts: "What went wrong — why is the region so stuck behind the times?" The answers he comes up with will surprise many, especially those unfamiliar with the everyday struggles and challenges faced by the region's belea-

guered and declining entrepreneurial class.

In contrast with many contemporary observers, Glain is able to draw on the past to provide added relevance for many of his observations. He is particularly struck by the fact that around the tenth century, the Middle East, together with China, was the most economically advanced region of the world. Yet today, as documented by the authoritative UN Human Development Report, one in five Arabs lives on less than \$2 a day.

Over the past 20 years, growth in income per capita increased at an annual rate of 0.5%, a rate lower than anywhere else in the world except sub-Saharan Africa. Around 12 million people or 15% of the labor force are already unemployed. Based on current trends, the number could rise to 25 million by 2010. Surveys find that, with severely limited prospects, more than half the youth in the region would like to relocate to Europe or America.

A wide range of explanations abound for the economic slowdown in the Middle East — its neo-colonial heritage, structural economic imbalances, the so-called "curse" of natural-resource abundance, deficient political systems, conditions of war and conflict and even culture and religion. While Glain is obviously aware of these theories, he doesn't dwell excessively on them. Instead, he appears to have approached his writing with few pre-conceived ideas concerning the region's demise.

One senses he is an adept interviewer and patient listener — one who easily gains the confidence of normally cautious, guarded businessmen. His skills come together on one level to produce a refreshingly new perspective concerning the day-to-day struggles of entrepreneurs in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, and Egypt. On a higher level, the commonality of experiences allows him to advance several fresh insights as to what needs to be done to reverse the region's decline.

Glain's interviewees provide consistently sad accounts of intelligence, competence, and honest hard work thwarted at every step of the way by useless, arbitrary bureaucratic hindrances, incompetent gov-

ernment officials, and corruption. To cross one hurdle is only to come up against another. While the details vary a bit from country to country, the over-riding theme is one of breakdowns in governance at nearly all levels. With governance in disarray, economic reforms, if present at all, are incapable of directing resources toward productive uses.

While Glain finds a little truth in each of the explanations noted above for the region's demise, he is particularly struck by the fact that even the enlightened leaders in the region have little use for or interest in economics or the economy. Perhaps as a result, most of the Arab world has largely opted out of the global economy. With global competitive checks absent and little in the way of domestic reforms or effective reformers, the region's economic fate was set.

Reaching the end of the book, this reviewer sadly found little basis for optimism. The Bush administration's efforts to mold the Middle East into a centerpiece of democracy will fail, Glain argues, unless it first rehabilitates the Arab world's once mighty middle class — not a small task given the circumstances. Short of that, there is little the United States or its European partners can do to rebuild the region. Yet in looking for possible indigenous-based virtuous circles of reform, growth, and middle class development, one sees the same old gloomy vicious circles of failed governance, economic stagnation, and middle class flight.

Mullahs, Merchants and Militants represents a major contribution to our knowledge of the inner economic workings of the harried Arab business class. It is a serious, objective study that should be on the shelf of anyone concerned with the fate of this vitally important region.

Robert Looney, Professor, Naval
Postgraduate School

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

A War of Words: Language and Conflict in the Middle East, by Yasir Suleiman, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xiii+ 230 pages. Appends. to p. 234. Bibl. to p. 254. Index to p. 270. \$70 cloth; \$27 paper.

Reviewed by Muhammad H. Amara

Political conflicts affect language repertoires, and in some cases language issues become part and parcel of the conflict. Language is not abstracted from reality and people but responds to surrounding changes. The Middle East, with its unique history and politics, offers a fertile background for the study of language and political conflicts.

Yasir Suleiman, in the work under review here, deals with language and political conflicts in the Middle East, shedding light on the subject from various perspectives. The investigation of language and conflict in this book combines social as well as political conflict, although the latter is more dominant in the book. Such a study undoubtedly requires a multi-disciplinary approach. Suleiman leans on various disciplines, and he extensively borrows terms from political studies (e.g., conflict resolution, zero-sum game, confrontation, hegemony). The book focuses on national identity, state building, ethnic marking, map marking, and semiotic representation. This book is the second volume of a three-part study on language and society in the Arab world. The first of these volumes is *The Arabic language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003).

The book comprises six chapters. Chapter 1 opens with some personal examples and concepts and introduces the content of the book. Chapter 2 explains the basic concepts employed in the book. It mainly deals with the interaction of power, conflict, and