

## The Middle East: The Best Gateways to Learning and Understanding .... Gary Hoover ... [www.hooversworld.com](http://www.hooversworld.com) April 2009

[Links to purchase the books and other products mentioned in this review are contained below. Your use of these links will support my website and continuing book reviews.]

### Why I love studying the Middle East

No place in the world outside the United States has captured a greater share of American attention since the end of the cold war than the Middle East. At the same time that this makes sense – our dependency on their oil, the birthplace of multiple great religions, and the scene of our most recent military actions – it is also true that this focus has been so lopsided that, perhaps with the exception of China and India, we ignore most of the rest of the world. Most Americans cannot name the leaders of our two biggest trading partners and closest neighbors, Canada and Mexico. Nevertheless, the Middle East is, has been, and will continue to be front page news.

Understanding this part of the world is becoming more important, required not only to read and evaluate the news, but increasingly useful in our daily lives. So if a friend says, “I’m headed to Dubai on business,” the informed citizen can suggest they go see the Jumeirah Mosque or, upon their return, ask them what they thought of their ride across the “creek” on a traditional boat called an abra:



My own interest in the Middle East started early, and I think came from two sources. First, both my parents were Protestant preachers’ kids, so I attended church *every* Sunday the first 18 years of my life – only death would have been an accepted excuse not to go. So every week I was surrounded by pictures of men and women in robes with camels in desert-like settings. All of this was portrayed as very important and usually good. The environment of the Middle East was therefore perhaps more familiar to me, in small city Indiana, than New York or even nearby Chicago.

Second, at the age of eleven, my parents took us three kids on our annual movie trip to a big theater in Indianapolis to see the epic film of the day, and that evening it was *Lawrence of Arabia*. To this day, this is my all-time favorite film; I can close my eyes and visualize many scenes.

The big breakthrough came many years later, though, on my first trip to Spain, when I saw the Alhambra Palace at Granada and became spellbound by the beauty of Islamic architecture and design, especially the stunning precision of the geometric patterns.

The net result for me is that I now have spent time touring and photographing Islamic architecture in four Middle Eastern and North African countries: Morocco, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. I have also traveled to the most populous Islamic nation – Indonesia – which is not in the Middle East,

Malaysia, India, and Turkey. In my efforts to understand the story and its context, I have added perhaps two thousand books on Islamic history and art to my library.

Everywhere I turn I find surprises – the Moroccan link to Israel and the Jews, the religious independence of Oman’s Ibadi Muslims compared to neighboring Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabism, and the root of much Latin American and Spanish architecture in Moorish forms such as the inner courtyard. At first things may seem strange – do you spell Qadaffi Kadaffi or Quadafi or what? But when I was met at the Casablanca airport by two rent-a-car company representatives named Yacoub and Youssef (Jacob and Joseph), I realized how many traditions we shared.

I consider understanding the Middle East a serious pursuit. The following notes are intended to help you build your own library of books about the Middle East, starting with the ones I have found most fundamental. It goes without saying that a huge amount has been written about this part of the world, and the rate of new publications has only accelerated in recent years. It used to be very hard to find books about one of my favorite nations, Morocco, except for travel guides, but now there are even a few widely circulated books on Morocco. And of course there are always plenty of specialist and academic books, not the kinds of books you will normally find in your neighborhood bookstore.

As you would expect in a region of strife and tension, many of the books on the Middle East have a clear point to make, they are really long position papers by the author. These can be very important to read, but they should only be read after you have a firm foundation of broad, unbiased (insofar as possible) knowledge. You ought to know the history and rules of the game before you start cheering for one team or another. And I think you need to draw your own mental picture of the “big picture” before you let someone else interpret it for you. So I will first recommend to you those basic starting books.

I believe that comprehension of any subject – from marketing to the Middle East – usually starts with an understanding of history and geography, of time and place, of when and where. This is especially true of the Middle East, since most of us have a very superficial understanding of the region. When I first visited, I was surprised to find “Arab” countries with Jewish cabinet members, “Islamic” countries that recognized Israel as a nation, huge numbers of Christians, countries where French was the most common European language, and other countries where Arabic was not spoken at all. Nations with little or no oil. Modern countries, backward countries, poor countries, relatively rich countries, and leaders of all types.

### **Where to start – two core books**

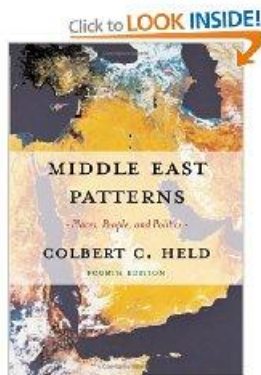
So the two books to start with are a good history and a good geography. There are few geographies but many histories to choose from, here are my two picks:

Any understanding of the Middle East should start with veteran foreign service officer Colbert C. Held’s outstanding *Middle East Patterns*, a geography text now in its fourth edition. I realize you may be saying, “Do you really expect me to read a textbook?” And of course my answer is “yes.” There is no way I could grasp the important things in the world without frequent study of textbooks and reference books. It does not have to be hard or unpleasant – I find it a great joy if done right. (A subject I will be addressing elsewhere on the website.)

Mr. Held's book is now in its fourth edition, published by Westview Press in 2006 – the fifth edition is due out in August, 2009. This 600+ page tome is subtitled "Places, Peoples, and Politics" and lives up to that broad description. With 70 maps drawn for this book, over 100 photos, and plentiful tables of data, this is the "go to" book to get a deeper understanding of any part of the region or aspect of it. It is the best book to understand the incredible variations and nuances of the region, the things that rarely if ever show up on the nightly news. The first third of the book is organized topically, covering every aspect of geography from desert and sea to economics and politics. Then Held spends over 300 pages discussing each nation in the broad band stretching from Egypt to Iran.

If you know your geography, you know that means this book does not cover north Africa west of Egypt – no Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, or Morocco – despite the fact that I just a few paragraphs ago called Morocco part of the Middle East. And therein lies one of the challenges of understanding the region – people do not even define it the same way. This is not the only part of the world this is true of – for example, is Mexico part of North America or Latin America or both? I tend to use the definitions of the prominent geographer Harm De Blij (see my recommendation of his geography text under the heading, "Keep this book handy if you want to understand the world"). Mr. De Blij couples North Africa with the Middle East, primarily based on the North African nations' shared religion (Islam) and ethnic heritage (a large mix of Arabs). The Arabic term for these far western Islamic lands is "Maghreb," which roughly means "where the sun sets."

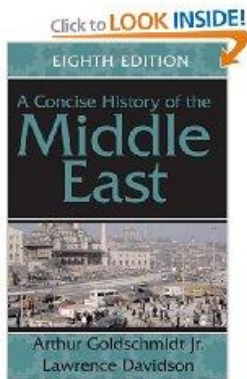
While you will have to look elsewhere to understand the Maghreb, *Middle East Patterns* is the place to start your understanding of the Middle Eastern heartland. Like all good reference/textbooks, the book has a solid glossary, long bibliography, and good index. These are very important if you are starting with little or no knowledge, if you might want to learn more later or go deeper about a particular subject or country, or if you later want to refer back to this book to look something up.



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Probably the best single volume history of the Middle East is *A Concise History of the Middle East*, by Arthur Goldschmidt, Jr., and Lawrence Davidson, now in its eighth edition (Westview Press, 2005). There are a number of books available on the history of the modern middle east, but this one goes all the way back at least until the time of Muhammad (7<sup>th</sup> century) so you get a more comprehensive "back story."

With appendices containing a chronology, glossary, and bibliography, this is an excellent book for reading or reference.

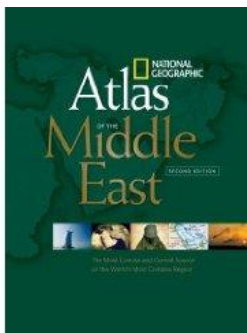


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(In reviewing my big selection of books on the Middle East, I could not help but scan several competing textbooks' articles on the same subjects, to see how closely the stories read. Despite the fact that the facts are the same and all the authors were "unbiased moderates," I still found an array of interpretations of these complex issues. If you like to study things from at least two points of view, as I do, then you might add to your history list *Middle East Past and Present* by Yahya Armajani and Thomas M. Ricks, and for modern history *A History of the Modern Middle East* by William L. Cleveland.)

### **An Atlas**

If you are going to understand the world, good maps are critical. I always have a world atlas near at hand. Elsewhere on the website I will review the world atlases that I believe are the best values and best in overall quality. There are also a number of region-specific atlases available, but often they are overpriced and/or do not give more information than what is found in a good world atlas. One exception – a book that is both a bargain and contains extra information – is the *National Geographic Atlas of the Middle East*, now in its second edition (2008). At (last I checked) \$14.93 on amazon, this one is a no-brainer for anyone who really wants to understand this part of the world. The book contains an excellent map of each nation from Egypt and the Sudan east through Pakistan, and goes into more depth on oil, the cities, Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and other key topics.

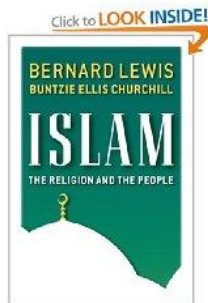


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### Deeper: the next level of understanding

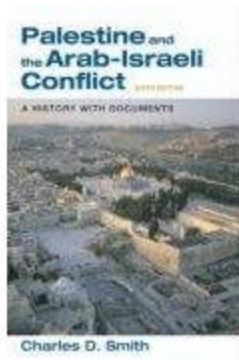
With history and geography out of the way, the next step is to go deeper into selected subjects. There is no shortage of books on the manifold topics relevant to the Middle East, including oil, the Koran, art, architecture, music, and food. Each area of study has its share of fascinating mysteries and subtleties. I suggest you start with two of the most mysterious – to the average American mind: Islam and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

There are perhaps more books on Islam than any other “sub-subject” in this arena. Many are excellent. But you can start at no better place than *Islam the Religion and the People*, by renowned scholar Bernard Lewis and Buntzie Ellis Churchill. This is the shortest book in this review, and it is packed with the tools a westerner needs to understand Islam. Published in late 2008, it is also very fresh. Lewis has written many books on Islam and the Middle East, and I always find him insightful. You really get a good feeling for how the people of Islam think and see the world, even including their wonderful sense of humor.



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Of course the conflict between Israel and Palestine gives rise to and stems from heated beliefs and debates. Many books have been written with clear points of view. But I wanted to understand the facts and the history before I started reading any arguments on either side. I have found the best book for this is *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents* by Charles D. Smith (Sixth edition, 2007). As far as I can tell, this is a straight-up-the-middle history of what went down when in this turbulent clash, even including a brief bit of ancient history. It includes illustrations, a glossary, and a bibliography, as well as all the key documents (such as the famous Balfour declaration) required to understand how we got to where we are today.

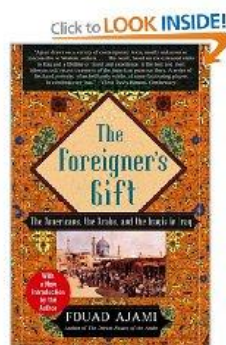


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### Head-turners

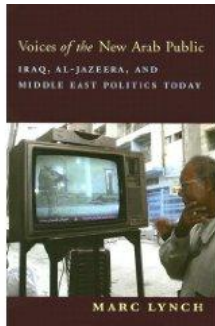
The books I have described above will give you a good, unbiased introduction to the history, geography, and present situation of the Middle East. Once that is in place, it may be time for some “head-turners.” Picture yourself being massaged when suddenly the masseuse jerks your head left, then jerks it right – perhaps further than you thought your head could – or should – go. These next two books are meant to be head-turners, books that may not match what you have heard before, and are likely to provoke whole new ideas in your head. Maybe even cause what psychologists call “cognitive dissonance” – where two opposing ideas have made their way into your head, forcing you to resolve the conflict. Of course there are hundreds of books about the Middle East with a strong point of view, and I am confident hundreds more will be published. But here are two that turned my head.

*The Foreigner's Gift: The Americans, the Arabs, and the Iraqis in Iraq*, by Fouad Ajami (Free Press, 2006). This prize-winning author tells a full story of Iraq and the history of the Sunnis and Shias. Be prepared to be surprised, and to develop a whole new appreciation for Iraq, what it represents, and where it may go in the future.



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*Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today*, by Marc Lynch (Columbia University Press, 2006). This book was the best one I could find that really explains what the Al-Jazeera television network is all about, and put it into the context of the average person on the streets of the Arab world (the Arab “public”). The way in which the arrival of independent broadcast news sources has turned the world on its head, from CNN’s role in the fall of the Iron Curtain to the more recent impact of the Arab news channels, points up the power of innovative, entrepreneurial thinking to improve people’s lives. (For more on Al-Jazeera, watch the documentary DVD *Control Room* described later in this essay.)



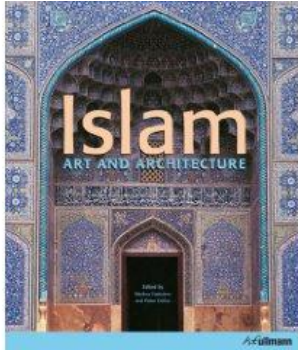
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#### **Further sources for those who want to know more**

Since I have crowed about how much I love Islamic architecture, I would be remiss to save all my recommendations for future reviews. If you want to get one book on Islamic architecture, start with the huge (over 600 pages) and beautifully illustrated *Islam: Art and Architecture*, edited by Markus Hattstein and Peter Delius (Konemann, 2004). Anytime you see a book published by one of the two big German art book publishers, Konemann or Taschen, you are likely looking at a beautifully produced book which delivers excellent value, and this one is no exception. The challenge with both publishers’ books is that they can go in and out of print, in paper and hardcover. They are also often found on the bargain book tables or at outlets like Half Price Books, so you may find the paperback online for \$50 and the hardback at your local store for \$30.

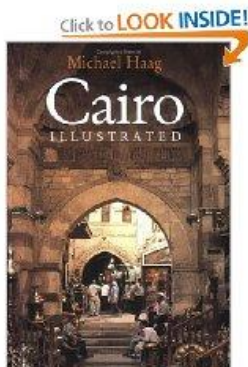
As to this particular book, suffice it to say it is visually the most comprehensive book I own (out of hundreds) about Islamic Art and Architecture, at any price. If you want to deeply and academically understand the art and architecture, there are other books you might turn to first, but none will give you a better sense of the sheer beauty of the Islamic artistic accomplishment.





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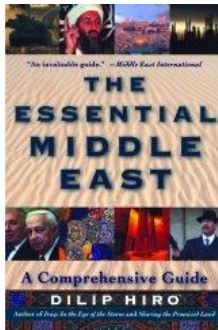
If you want to be seduced into all this on a smaller scale, a full-color paperback of under 100 pages, *Cairo Illustrated* by Michael Haag (American University in Cairo Press, 2006) will do the trick. This is one of my favorite books about one of my favorite cities. Much of what is published about Cairo focuses on the nearby Pyramids, and this book gives them a few pages, but unlike other books this one takes you where the real, living history is: in old Islamic Cairo. I once spent two days drifting through this stunning maze; my own photos do not tell the story as well and as concisely as those in this book. If you are interested in learning more about or travelling to Cairo, seek out other books and guides by the excellent American University in Cairo Press ([www.aucpress.com](http://www.aucpress.com)).



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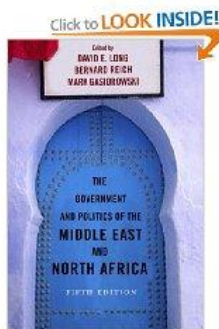
A compact alphabetical “encyclopedia” of the Middle East is *The Essential Middle East: a Comprehensive Guide*, by Dilip Hiro (Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2003). This affordable paperback contains over 600 pages of entries, everyone from Osama Bin Laden to Saddam Hussein and every event, place, or group you might want to know more about.





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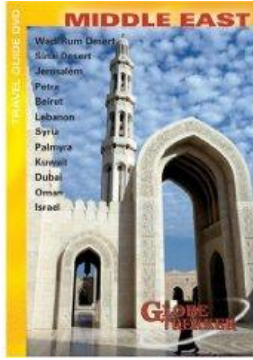
If your interest runs to recent and current politics and political leaders, a great book that goes through the region nation-by-nation – and includes the Maghreb through Morocco – is *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, written by individual experts and edited by David E. Long, Bernard Reich, and Mark Gasiorowski (Fifth Edition, Westview Press, 2007).



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## DVDs

If you have a video bent, like I do, start with the wonderful two-DVD set *Middle East*, from the Globe Trekker Television series. I have always found this series fun, informative, and provocative. The young American and other backpacker-style hosts may not stay at the same hotels I would stay at, but they get with the people of the land and really experience the place. The cinematography is often stunning. And they cover places not shown in other travel video series like the great Rick Steves' travelogues for PBS. This two-disc set includes Jerusalem and Israel, Petra in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates including Dubai, and my favorite, Oman. It is the only video I have ever seen that captures the stunning Sultan Qaboos Mosque near the Omani capital of Muscat.



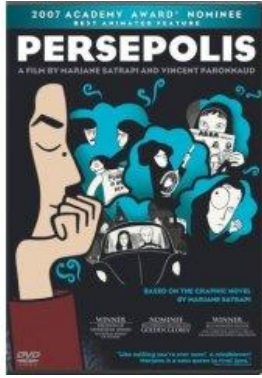
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Even if you don't read Marc Lynch's great book about Al-Jazeera, its competitors, and its impact on society, watch the wonderful award-winning 2004 documentary *Control Room*. It may really turn your head, without having a heavy-handed ideology to portray. Brought to us by innovative film company Magnolia Pictures, this one even got two thumbs up from Ebert and Roeper.



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Another favorite of mine is *Persepolis* (2007). If I tell you about this one, you are going to think you won't like it – it's an animation about the life story of an Iranian woman. But it is not for kids, and it is beautifully done. Trust me, this is no bore. Over 17,000 viewers at the Internet Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)) rated it 8 out of 10, a very high score for such an unusual picture. (Heck, *Lawrence of Arabia* only gets 8.5!)

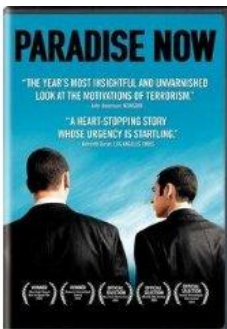


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(Persepolis is the only DVD reviewed here that is also available in Blu-Ray, for only three bucks more!)

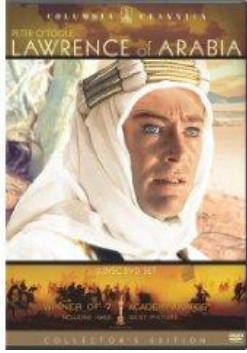
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Why would anyone want to be a suicide bomber? Find out in *Paradise Now* (2005), another excellent award-winning (and very exciting) film full of surprising twists.



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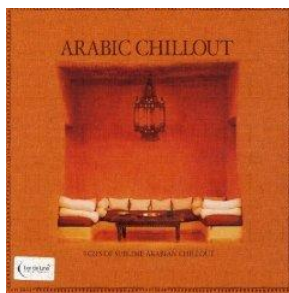
Of course, if you haven't seen *Lawrence of Arabia*, you must see it! I and lots of other movie lovers await its release on Blu-Ray – that will have a huge effect – but if you can't wait, here is the best edition on DVD, maybe the best \$16 you will ever spend:



<http://rcm.amazon.com/e/cm?t=wwwwhooverswor-20&o=1&p=8&l=as1&asins=B0016K40KY&md=10FE9736YVPPT7A0FBG2&fc1=000000&IS2=1&lt1=blank&m=amazon&lc1=0000FF&bc1=000000&bg1=FFFFFF&f=ifr>

## Music

I won't begin to explore the depths of Middle Eastern music – or food – here. But this one might be a nice album (actually three discs for a bargain price) to let play in the background while you read the books listed above. It is one of my favorites: you will often find me cruising through the Texas Hill Country to these mellow beats. If you like chillout music, such as the Buddha Bar collections, you will likely love this one.



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