

Will the Middle East implode? By Mohammed Ayoob. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014, pp. 192, ISBN: 978-0-7456-7924-2.

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As the title implies, *Will the Middle East Implode?* is a book written by renowned scholar on the Middle East, Mohammed Ayoob, to answer the question on the future of one of the most volatile regions in the world. The future of the Middle East is more unpredictable now than ever following the Arab Spring which shook the world in 2011. Rather than adding to the growing body of work trying to analyse the Arab Spring in a wider theoretical framework, this book gives an important overview of the current situation that some may overlook and what the author believes to be the eventual outcome.

The author argues that, “given these interconnections and overlaps [among conflicts], there appears to be a serious danger of a chain reaction developing and leading to an implosion, or a number of mini-implosions, that could engulf much of the region” (p. 4). After the euphoria felt by proponents of democracy in 2012, the author is now pessimistic of the prospect of a new order finally replacing the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world. Ayoob based his arguments mostly on his own expertise on the area and on previous literature covering a wide range of topics regarding the political situation in the Middle East.

The book aims to be an easy read for both experts and non-academic readers. It is divided into six chapters, with four of the main chapters being on the key issues that could possibly lead to implosion in the Middle East: the growing strength of political Islam, the persistent issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the role of regional and global powers in the region, and the issue of Iran’s nuclear ambition. This structure allows readers to have a good understanding on each potential source of conflict in the Middle East without being overwhelmed by the wealth of information and intricate issues that seem to pervade the region. Furthermore, the clarity in the author’s style of writing is an invaluable aspect of the book with the absence of political jargon that could divert a reader’s attention from its main goal of bringing attention to the combustible region.

A chapter of the book that is of more relevance today is on “Regional and Global Rivalries”, in which Ayoob covers a number of countries and analyses how conflicts in each are affected by other players that have strategic interests in the region. The author argues that even though the events of the Arab Spring are the result of the internal problems of a country, a chain reaction may come about that potentially transforms the national conflict into a broader regional and global concern. A clear example can be seen in the Syrian civil war, which has led to the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and to the embroilment of faraway nations such as in the recent decapitation of a Japanese hostage by the terrorist organisation. Another significant revelation in this chapter is that the Middle East is stuck in the era of Cold War rivalry, with Russia and the United States being unable to forge a middle path when it comes to finding peace in countries such as Syria and Iran.

The book stresses on the argument, as offered in previous literature, that Islamist movements in the Middle East are susceptible to abort all attempts at democratisation if they feel that there are domestic and international entities that will never allow an Islamist government to rule. Chapter 2, “The Islamist Challenge”, makes the argument that a majority of Islamist movements, as evidenced by those in Jordan, Morocco, and Turkey, are not interested in militancy and are committed to moderation and political participation, yet they are constantly faced by sceptics who doubt the Islamists’ commitment to democracy. Furthermore, the author’s ability to discern the evolution of the Islamist movement, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, helps readers to better understand that structural opportunities afforded to the Islamists are important in steering the direction of an Islamist movement in the future.

Ayoob makes a valuable attempt to prove that the Middle East is on a dangerous path of implosion based on his analysis of events affecting the region in recent years. The book thus invalidates previous optimism felt worldwide following the regime change in Tunisia and Egypt after the conflict-prone region continues to be entangled in civil wars and political instability as it goes into a period that some have called “the Arab Winter”. For the students of Middle Eastern politics, such observations, though interesting, are not ground-breaking as the problems in the region are the culmination of other issues such as foreign occupation, irredentism, identity formulation, economic

stagnation, and political repression, none of which seems to go away anytime soon. For many political scientists, the absence of a thorough analysis of, for example, the increasing support for militant Islamists in Iraq and Syria being the direct result of the overthrow of democratically elected Islamist government in Egypt, leaves the author's assertions of a pessimistic future unconvincing.

The book provides a substantial amount of information and is eager to prove its argument of an unpredictable future in the Middle East. The book's effort to cover as much ground as possible relating to the various conflicts in the region is commendable, but it lacks a clear analysis of the interaction among the forces that have convinced the author of a bleak future facing these countries. The discussion on foreign interference in domestic affairs, for example, may be eye-opening to readers who are not familiar with the different expectations on a country's role in the wider regional community. However, these descriptions are no substitute to a clear argument of the interaction among these various forces that affects the multiple political players involved. Despite these shortcomings, the book is a worthwhile read to general readers and those who are familiar with the region to bring us closer to solving the Middle Eastern puzzle that has been attracting great interest from scholars attempting to separate assumptions about Muslims and Islam.