

US acceptance of Iraqi refugees has proved equally lax, despite renewed attempts by the Obama administration to live up to responsibilities. One anecdotal exception to this failure is the heart-warming story of a former US soldier who sponsored his Iraqi translator's application to live in America, eventually buying a house for the two families to share—'we owe them a home, because we took theirs away', he explained.

Amos sheds light on the sectarian mindset of the new Iraqi leadership and its inability to create the conditions for refugees to return. The book tells how in 2007 Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki visited Damascus, his home for more than a decade during Saddam's time. During the visit he was overheard describing the exiles as 'cowards' and demanded that Syria arrest a list of 65 dissident Iraqi artists and writers living in Damascus (President Assad refused). Back in Iraq, Amos describes how Maliki has supported 'an ethno-sectarian quota system known as *muhasasa*, which governed job opportunities in every ministry and dictated the number of seats on provincial government councils'.

Whereas the author succeeds in telling the human stories of the Iraq war's fallout, her political hypothesis is far more ambitious. Its cornerstone is the idea that 'the Arab order, Sunni dominance in the region, was under siege' across the Middle East. Yet Syria itself somehow places this theory in doubt—a secular country with a Shi'i Alawite leadership and a majority Sunni population with ties to both Iran and a host of substate Sunni and Shi'i movements that managed to weather the neo-conservative storm. While Amos makes a stab at deciphering the story of the US–Syrian relationship, this light overview feels like one of the book's many sidetracks away from what initially seems a very coherent message.

Indeed, the Middle East does not fit easily into neat political boxes and the author's experience in Lebanon is a testimony to the importance of a more nuanced understanding of its subtleties. Lebanon offers a multitude of interesting parallels to the 'new' Iraq. Nadim Shehadi of Chatham House recently outlined how 'Iraq is sharing the Lebanese model: power-sharing with a local flavour'.

Yet Amos erroneously links recent events in Lebanon directly to Iraq, describing how 'Iraq rules' were operating in Lebanon. Amos travels to Lebanon to witness the growing trend towards radicalism in the country's Palestinian refugee camps, yet this is a product not only of returning fighters from Iraq, but also of Syria's withdrawal from the country; the moribund state of the larger peace process; and internal factionalism within the ranks of Palestinian refugee politics.

Rather than seeing events in the camps in Lebanon as a direct result of the Iraq war, it would have been far more poignant to use their presence as a reminder as to how refugee problems can echo for generations. This funnelling of a wide range of events across the Middle East to fit an ambitious hypothesis is a slight letdown on what is otherwise a sober reminder of the ongoing legacy of the Iraq war.

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**Dubai: the vulnerability of success.** By Christopher M. Davidson. New York: Columbia University Press. 2008. 376pp. Index. £25.00. ISBN 978 1 85065 888 7.

**Dubai: gilded cage.** By Syed Ali. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press. 2010. 228pp. Index. Pb.: £14.99. ISBN 978 0 30015 217 3.

Both of these books deal with a subject of special concern to scholars and researchers working on the Arab states of the Gulf: the hidden costs of Dubai's unique political, economic and social model. They share similar concerns with regard to the human dimension of the events taking place in Dubai and more generally in the Gulf, which both authors analyse

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in a thorough and well-informed manner. They acknowledge that the emirate has had successful outcomes over almost 40 years, but comment how, when the international financial crisis hit the world in 2008, Dubai felt its effects and its vulnerability was exposed internationally. Thus, they explain how Dubai having been the first Gulf state to have diversified its economy has not reduced its dependency on foreign economies and has created a new dependence on an expatriate workforce.

However, each author emphasizes those aspects they consider more relevant, clearly reflected in the books' titles. *Dubai: the vulnerability of success* identifies the key problems the emirate faces, while *Dubai: gilded cage* focuses on the consequences of the system of temporary visas for foreigners (the *kafala* system) in the lives of the emirate's inhabitants. Both books are very well written and easy to read, but Christopher Davidson adopts an academic style, which Syed Ali, following his editor's directions, has tried to avoid. Thus, Ali's book is more accessible to the general public, while Davidson's is directed towards a more scholarly reader.

Davidson, fellow of the Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at Durham University and author of several works on the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has produced the first academic book specifically on Dubai, which is already becoming essential reading for anyone interested in the history, economy or socio-politics of this emirate. Davidson uses a large number of sources including India Office documents, press articles and information extracted from personal interviews, and refers to all relevant publications on the Gulf, the UAE and Dubai. The first chapters present a historical overview of pre-oil Dubai; tell the story of the establishment of the UAE; and interestingly explore the role played by nationalism and British containment strategies. The book continues to explain regional economic development throughout the twentieth century, stressing how Dubai became such an attractive business environment; how immigration began before oil was discovered; and how the need to diversify emerged. The author then discusses the durability of the authoritarian political system, highlighting the legitimacy provided by the 'ruling bargain' formula, which in Dubai stems not only from the oil rent but also from the diversification of new forms of rentier activity. In one of the most interesting chapters of the book (chapter six), Davidson accounts for the problems emerging from the Dubai model: the diversification pathologies; the expansion of the expatriate population; the identity crisis of the indigenous population; and the restricted development of civil society and the media. Published just before the international financial crisis emerged, Davidson predicted the possible burst of the 'Dubai bubble' (p. 189). Very interestingly too, chapter seven analyses the case of Dubai within the context of the federation of the UAE and, finally, in the last chapter he puts forward the threats this emirate faces regarding external and internal security issues, such as international terrorism or human trafficking. What seems to be missing, however, is a concluding chapter which returns to the proposed hypotheses of the introduction.

Syed Ali, sociologist and assistant lecturer at Long Island University, explains how he was initially supposed to conduct research on the second-generation expatriates and how, after spending some time in Dubai and having been deported after the authorities considered he was going too far in his investigations, he decided to change direction and dedicate his work to the living conditions of the inhabitants of Dubai. The book provides an interesting approach to the emirate's daily life, which is very useful, both for scholars working on the topic and for anyone with an intention to travel to the region. Based on the ethnographic method, the sources used include personal interviews, academic literature, articles from the press and internet blogs. The first chapters explain the factors that account

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for the rise of Dubai as a 'global brand'. Ali then discusses how this situation has affected the living and working conditions of expatriates and nationals, and finally demonstrates how they all have ended up living in different kinds of 'gilded cages' (p. 109). The main value of the book lies in the real cases it presents, as they provide an accurate picture of the emirate's society. However, the conclusion that 'the *kafala* system colours everything in Dubai' (p. 189) is to my mind somewhat overstated, since many other factors, as explained by Davidson, have played a fundamental role in the shaping of the emirate.

Overall, what lends these books special interest is that both are brave works that tackle sensitive issues usually avoided in studies of the region and that they provide detailed information on the design of the structure of Dubai society. Thus, they fill a gap in the existing literature on the UAE, which generally does not go into such deep analysis of the problems being faced by this emirate.

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## **Sub-Saharan Africa**

**A history of modern Africa: 1800 to the present.** By **Richard Reid**. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. 2009. 386pp. Pb.: £19.99. ISBN 978 1 40513 265 7.

A perennial problem for those interested in Africa is a lack of historical knowledge. The general tendency for observers, commentators, journalists and policy-makers to focus on current events is, in the case of Africa, compounded by the accumulated body of writing on the continent that exhibits immense ignorance of its past. Admittedly, the difficulty is great in that the study of Africa's history in the West is relatively recent and its historiography has largely had to make do without written sources, which habitually form the core of the historian's research. Furthermore, much of the continent's history is to be found in the accounts given by outsiders, ranging from Arab explorers or merchants to colonial administrators, missionaries and anthropologists. In the absence of writing (except in Ethiopia and some Arabic-speaking areas), Africans before the advent of colonial rule were in no position to record their own history. And the long oral history tradition found across the continent offers the type of information that professional historians find difficult to use.

This state of affairs has had several consequences. One is that what is written about Africa is often derived from an extrapolation of the western experience. Therefore, it often lacks plausibility and is not infrequently shallow. Another is that Africa, the continent without its own written history, is seen from the perspective of its encounter with the outside world, of which it has often been the 'victim', rather than from the standpoint of its own internal dynamics. Africa thus becomes enshrined in the 'uniqueness' of its suffering. Yet another is the fact that historians rarely encompass Africa in their comparative work. The history of the continent is seen to have been significantly different from that of the rest of the world, reinforcing thereby the image of Africa as a timeless land that has only been stirred into movement by the outside world. Finally, the present condition of the continent, unremittingly bleak as it is, colours the perception of its history, which is often narrowly devoted to identifying the factors that have made for the current crisis.

In short, then, writing a history of modern Africa is no simple task. And because most students of the continent are area specialists, few venture to present an overall historical panorama of what are now 53 independent countries. But Richard Reid has successfully risen to the challenge in this new history of modern Africa, which includes the northern

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