

**Middle East Patterns: Places, Peoples,
and Politics, 4th ed.**

Colbert C. Held

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Widely regarded as the most comprehensive, authoritative, and geographical study of the region, *Middle East Patterns: Places, Peoples, and Politics* has evolved dexterously into a fourth edition that embraces such diverse themes as archaeology and military capabilities, ethnolinguistic features and agricultural developments, and future implications for relations both within

and without the region. The additional 221 illustrations – comprising maps exclusively hand-drawn for the publication as well as images contributed by the author and tables that elucidate the text through their scrupulous cogency – jointly advance the author’s objective to enhance the reader’s knowledge of the region through a review of the Middle East’s natural and cultural patterns and their impact upon political and economic developments. Transcending the conflicts that have made the region a permanent fixture of the world’s media, Held presents an enlightening evaluation of the interaction between the region’s people and biophysical phenomena in the context of spatial and historical processes over time.

Introducing the region’s historical and geographical foundations through eight chapters, “Part One: Physical and Cultural Geography” examines the environment, the historico-political evolution of the power cores, and the spatial interaction between the geographical areas and the political events in a region that encompasses “ancient cultures in new states – old wine in new bottles” (p. 219). Located in an area of geographical wonders that range from the planet’s lowest body of water body (1,310 ft. below sea level) to extreme weather conditions that witnessed a locale southwest of the Dead Sea receive its average total annual rainfall in a one-hour downpour during December 2003, the environment has not escaped the consequences of political discord.

Ecoterrorism, also called “ecocide” or “environmental terrorism,” reached its zenith in January 1991, when Iraqi forces executed the largest oil spill in history by dumping millions of barrels of Kuwaiti crude oil into the Gulf’s waters. The sabotage of Kuwait’s oil wells, tank farms, oil-export terminals, pipelines, and refineries, all of which resulted in the direct loss of billions of dollars in resources and facilities as well as the destruction of countless creatures and marine habitats, served as “a global wake-up call to the potential catastrophe posed by current oil technology” (p. 27). The environment was targeted once more by Saddam Hussein’s 1991-92 project to drain the marshes between Nasiriyah and the confluence of the Euphrates with the Tigris at Qurnah to corral the Madan (the Marsh Arabs) and capture Shi’i fugitives taking refuge there. The Madan have nurtured a unique ecological relationship with the marshes for hundreds of years, utilizing the local reeds (*qasab*) to construct reed-mat islands in addition to their council houses (*mudifs*). After their surroundings were devastated, many Madan fled to Iran until the Baath party was overthrown in April 2003. To date, initial steps have already partially restored their ecosystem (p. 382).

Expounding upon oft-overlooked details, a significant strength of *Middle East Patterns* resides in Held's ability to present such issues within the context of a vast study in a subtle manner that does not detract from the greater events. For example, environmental catastrophes blend seamlessly into economic triumphs, and his aptitude for expressing considerable analysis within a comparatively limited space is an added accomplishment. This is particularly evident in "Part Two: Regional Geography," which guides the reader through seventeen countries – Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, Jordan, Israel/Palestine, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, Oman and Yemen, Egypt, Turkey, and Iran. Each chapter consists of specific themes of history, geography, regional patterns, demography, economic features, resources, and relations, and begins with a profile outlining the particulars – official name, population size, and exports/imports – in a comprehensible format. As the primary section is devoted to the human and geographical components, the latter half focuses on the region's political and social aspects.

Of particular note is chapter 12, "Israel, Palestine, and Disputed Territories." Divided into two, *Israel* and *Occupied Territories*, it succeeds in functioning not only as separate entries, but also as a comparative study. Though close in geographical proximity, each could not be more distant in terms of economy and rights. The author subtly refrains from accentuating this disparity, instead relying upon facts and the words of observers, such as Emile A. Nakhleh, who characterised Gaza in 1988 as "overcrowding, poverty, hatred, violence, oppression, poor sanitation, anger, frustration, drugs, and crime" (p. 371). In addition to an overview of Israel's military capabilities and forays, Held delves into a fractured society that retains sub-schisms that exceed nationalistic lines and thus captures the multifaceted society in the précis:

... ethnic: Ashkenazi/Sephardi/Mizrahi/Russian/Ethiopian/Arab; political: left/right/center; religious: ultra-Orthodox/Orthodox/Conservative/Reform/Cabalist/secular; economic: rich/middle class/poor; philosophical: Western/Eastern and modern/traditional; and, cutting across all the above categories, with hawkish/moderate/dovish orientations toward the peace process. (p. 346)

Amidst this kaleidoscope is the Neturei Karta (Guardians of the City), a group of ultra-Orthodox, anti-Zionist Jews who live in the section of Jerusalem known as Mea Shearim and oppose both Zionism and the existence of Israel as a political state. It is regrettable that they were noted so fleetingly. Located in Israel, London, and New York and numbering around 5,000, this

group has drawn criticism from other Orthodox communities for its pro-Arab activities and presents an intriguing perspective that would have benefited from a lengthier discourse.

The contribution of *Middle East Patterns* to the study of the region is debatable, as that which affords it triumph also yields one of its few flaws. As it negotiates the region's expanse on every level, it provides insights from a plethora of angles that are frequently disregarded in favor of more contentious issues and sorely missed. In so doing, however, it confronts the dilemma of space versus content. Held surpasses in circumventing this hindrance, but the publication remains limited if it is to be utilized by readers seeking an exhaustive analysis of a specific subject area. In spite of this minor setback, it remains an indubitably commendable and meticulous evaluation of the Middle East of the past, the present, and the future.

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