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Book Review: Inspirational Reading

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Inspirational Reading: Understanding the Arab World

Jabbar Al-Obaidi

Dwight F. Reynolds, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

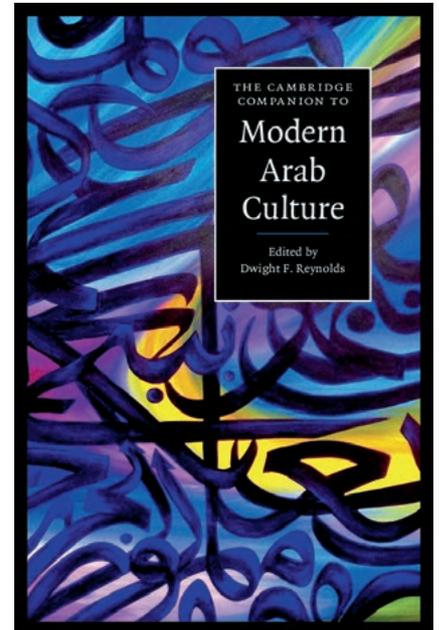
The *Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture* is an easy read for both the general public and specialists, providing insights about the diverse array of people, cultures, and nations that comprise the Arab Middle East. A quick glance at the maps of the Ottoman Empire in 1800, the European-controlled territories in the 20th-century Middle East, and Northern Africa and the Middle East today provides readers a powerful visual contrast and a sense of how much this region has changed in the past two centuries (14–16). These profound changes deserve deep analysis and, indeed, the Arab people, their society, cultures, religions, history, literature, art, music, language, and lifestyle have been discussed by dozens of books over the last 10 years. What distinguishes this volume from other publications is its comprehensiveness, cohesiveness, and analytical depth. In addition to the editor of this book, 15 scholars with various interests and backgrounds contributed to this book.

Dwight E. Reynolds begins the book by offering three general historical measures that, in his opinion, allow readers to delve into the current state of the countries of the Arab World. The three measures are: 1) the spread of the Arabic language, the culture associated with the language, and the Arabization of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA); 2) the influence of European colonization and the movements of liberation and independence that shaped the Arab World that we know today;

and 3) the emergence of the concept of Arab Nationalism and Pan-Arabism, as well as conservative Islamist movements over the last century and a half.

In his introductory piece, Reynolds alerts readers to the boundaries of linguistic terminologies that characterized the Arab people and their countries. It is rather remarkable that 20 Arab countries are labeled by historians, geographers, and politicians alike as the “Arab World.” These states are connected

by history, geography, and language. Reynolds writes: “no other cluster of modern nation states is so commonly referred to as a ‘world’ in English political parlance” (1). The Arab World label clears up the cloud and confusion that usually surrounds the well-known and often-used label the “Middle East and North Africa” (MENA). While a general western audience, for example,



tends to include Afghanistan and Pakistan in the mix of Arab and non-Arab countries that comprise MENA, along with the states of Iran, Israel, and Turkey, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture* defines the term “Arab World” as countries where Arabic is the official written and communication medium and which share other cultural components and history. Indeed, the Arabic language is the primary identifier of Arabs and their countries.

The Arabic language has sustained its written and spoken form since the 18th century; however, the spoken dialects of Arabic are quite diverse. Do accents in and pronunciations of spoken Arabic vary? The answer to this critical question is yes. However, accents

and pronunciations do not abstract or change the full delivery and understanding of meanings, or the quality of communication. While accents and pronunciations change, written words remain the same. And, it should be noted that the eloquent classic Arabic is the language of the Quran.

While the Arabic language and culture have endured over time, it is important to acknowledge that the impact of European colonization and occupation on the Middle East and the Arab World was deep and significant. The book recognizes that a number of states in the Arab World have

the First World War. Subsequently, a sense of Arab nationalism emerged and voices for independence and political unification captured the public mind. The book successfully draws attention to popular terms among historians such as the *Nahda*, which in English translates as “getting up, rising” or, more formally, “*Renaissance, Revival*, or the most recent use for the term *Awakening*” (15). After the *Nahda* took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the cultural contributions of the Arab Middle East increased, especially in the areas of translations, literature, poetry, sciences, and religious studies.

in the Middle East, including those in Syria and Iraq. For example, millions of Iraqis and Syrians have fled their homes recently to Jordan, Turkey, and European countries. A few have reached the United States. It is worth noting that intellectuals and writers later created societies and clubs to sustain their writing and contribute to the intellectual and cultural circles of the countries in which they settled. For instance, the *mahjar*, or émigré, writers, developed their own literary styles that are being recognized in the United States and South America, especially Brazil and Argentina. The multicultural makeup of the Arab *mahjar* writers is reflected in their writing and is connected with the rich traditions of the literature in their homelands.

In conclusion, the best description for this edition is that it is many books in one. Any reader who wishes to gain an in-depth understanding and appreciation of law, art, the Arabic narrative, poetry, music, theater, film and television, humor, and food and cuisine in the Arab World will find *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture* a good resource.

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“a cultural tilt toward the language and culture of the country that colonized them” (11). For instance, French is the second language of elites and educated people in Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia, while English is the second language for Iraqis, Egyptians, the people of the Arab Gulf States, and the Sudanese. This kind of tilting toward the culture of colonization gave birth to the term “Arab Middle East” during and after

Importantly, this book also draws readers’ attention to the issue of mosaic identities in the Middle East and the recent development of migration and diaspora. The Arab diaspora includes different forms of migration: internally displaced refugees, stateless refugees, exiles, and intra- and extra-regional immigrants. Interestingly, the discussion of this vital topic is connected by colonial history to European countries such as France and Italy, and to the recent wars and conflicts



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