

Five Keys to the Middle East Issue: A Review of *Middle East Politics and Society*¹

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Abstract: *After World War II, the Middle East, due to its irreplaceable geographic value and oil resources, has been an arena for international politics and a barometer of international relations. Its long and sophisticated history and unique religions, nationalities, sects and tribes also add to its mystery. However, introductory books or articles on the Middle East often turn out to be disappointing in the eyes of the readers. Many experts and scholars then try to sort out the nature of the Middle East issues by highlighting its vital points as Dr. Lian Wang does in his new book Middle East Politics and Society. This article reviews the basic structure and characteristics of the book and strives to interpret the five key concepts of contemporary Middle East studies summarized by the author in the hope of furthering the research in this respect.*

Key Words: *the Middle East; Key Concepts; Muslim and Arab; Conflicts and Revolution; Energy Security*

The Middle East, resting on its long history, is known as one of the birthplaces of world civilizations. Located in where two oceans, three continents and five seas meet, the Middle East boasts rich cultural deposits and most of the world's oil reserves. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the Middle East especially the Gulf area fell into unrest and upheaval. Organizations and parties involved directly or indirectly around the world were totally confused. They had been tired of hearing "the Middle East" during the Iran-Iraq War, yet the crisis in the Gulf region and the Gulf War once again compelled them to hear various reports about "the Middle East". Professor Weilie Zhu of Shanghai International Studies University points out, "In order to apprehend the labyrinthic situation in the Middle East, we must be aware of three keys, i.e., desert culture, Islam and oil resources."³ Such highly pithy summary and statement dispels all the bewilderment of those who are interested in the Middle East and points one direction for Middle East studies. Now scholars and experts often tend to interpret the unrest in the Middle East in a unique way, that is, by using numbers. For instance, Chinese former Ambassador Fuchang

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³ Weilie Zhu, *World Hot Spots: The Middle East* (Hong Kong: Sdxjoint Publishing Company 1993), p.4.

Yang once wrote an article named "The Middle East Issue-1234"⁴ and Dr. Hongxi Yang also summarized the core of the Middle East as well as the Palestine Issue in his article named "123456: the Origin and Evolution of the Middle East Issue"⁵. In 2006 when the Lebanese-Israeli conflict resurged into war and old conflicts clashed into new ones in the Middle East, nobody knew for sure what the situation would become of. At this time, *Times* published an article named "Six Keys Necessary to Peace in the Middle East", namely, participation of the US, peace between Palestine and Israel, security of Israel, stability of Lebanon, talking with Iran and the future of Iraq.⁶ In March 2009, Dr. Lian Wang published his new book *Middle East Politics and Society*⁷ in which he sums up five key concepts of contemporary Middle East studies. This article aims to introduce and analyze these concepts in the hope of furthering the study in this field.

I. An Overview of the Book

Entering the new era of reform and opening up, the national strategic focus of China has changed as domestic and foreign situations experienced radical changes. Middle East studies has grown to be a branch of profound learning in China and there are numerous comprehensive and original books and essays dedicated to the Middle East Issue.⁸ *Middle East Politics and Society*, a book newly published by Peking Publishing House, is both a research monograph and comprehensive textbook which collects plenty of materials: 600,000 words in total, including the prologue written by Professor Weilie Zhu, 30 sections of seven chapters and the postscript of the book; 15 books and 28 articles, in Chinese or English,

⁴ Fuchang Yang, "History and the Present Situation of the Middle East Issue," *Qiushi Journal*, No. 6, 2003; Fuchang Yang, "The Middle East Issue-1234," *People's Digest*, No. 12, 2004.

⁵ Hongxi Yang, "A Review of the Palestine Issue," *International Data Information*, No. 11, 2005; Hongxi Yang, "123456: the Origin and Evolution of the Middle East Issue," <http://blog.ifeng.com/article/1679296.html>, accessed on July 10th, 2009.

⁶ Elaine Shannon, "Six Keys to Peace," *Time*, July 23rd, 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1218058-1,00.html>, accessed on July 10th, 2009.

⁷ Lian Wang, *Middle East Politics and Society* (Beijing: Peking Publishing House, 2009).

⁸ Major representative works (order by publishing date): Jing Liu, Ed, *A Handbook of the Middle East* (Yinchun: Ningxia People's Publishing House, 1987); Weilie Zhu, *World Hot Spots: The Middle East* (Hong Kong: Sdxjoint Publishing Company, 1993); Chongjing Yin, Ed, *The Middle East Issue over a Century (1897-1997)* (Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House, 1999); Guozhong Zhao, Ed, *A Concise Encyclopedia of West Asia and North Africa (The Middle East)* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2000); Jianmin Chen, *The Modern Middle East* (Beijing: Peking University Publishing House, 2002); Xian Xiao, Ed, *The Middle East since 1945* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2004). Major representative articles (Order by publishing date): Weihua An, "On the Development Model of the Middle East," *West Asia and Africa*, No. 4, 1999; Jinglie Wang, "Globalization and the International Relations in the Middle East," *Arab World Studies*, No.4, 2002; Shiliang Zhan, "History and the Present Situation of the Middle East Issue," *Foreign Affairs Journal*, No.1, 2003; Weilie Zhu, "Islamic Civilization and the World," *World Economics and Politics*, No.7, 2007; Weilie Zhu, "Understanding and Respect: On Establishing a Chinese Discourse System for Middle East," *Diplomacy of China*, No. 3, 2008.

recommended for the readers, 35 topic questions, 50 charts and 19 pictures/maps.

The book begins with the comprehension of some concepts often used in relevant research. Take the term "the Middle East" for example. It may be understood as a geographic concept (referring to the vast area in the eastern and southern parts of the Mediterranean), a cultural or political concept of Europeans. However, in history it may originate from the description of Persia and its Central Asian territory and the Persian Gulf by the India Office of the UK in the 1850s. When it was first used publicly in 1902 by Alfred Thayer Mahan, an American Navy geostrategist, and later by British archaeologist David George Hogarth, its size had increased (from the Persian Gulf region of the Near East or Balkan to Pakistan today). Then it went "westward" until North Africa on the west bank of the Atlantic Ocean during the Second World War. Disagreements also exist in terms of the connotations of the Middle East. Some say it refers to 17 or 18 countries (mainly located in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf region). Some say it refers to 24 countries (including the six countries in North Africa and Afghanistan). Some say it refers to 32 countries (the above 24 countries plus the five countries in Central Asia, two countries in the Caucasian Area and Pakistan). Although these differences represent different political language situations and political environment, a somewhat vague connotation could apply itself to changing political and cultural environments. Therefore, the author of the book makes it clear that he adopts the concept of "the Middle East" in its broad sense (24 countries).

After clarifying the concept of "the Middle East", the topic of the book, the author proceeds to the analysis of the Orient Issue and the Middle East Issue. Like their historical causes, these issues are even more complicated in modern times. Sometimes it is rather difficult even to tell one from another. Late former Egyptian President Abdel Nasser once said, "American journalists may feel they know enough to write some articles about this area after arriving here two or three days and a book after two months. However, they will realize that they know nothing at all about this area after staying here for half a year."⁹ The author does not take such radical practice as reproducing historical events exactly as they were or simply focusing on hot spot issues of today. Instead, he decides to uncover what lies underneath by studying single events. By combining historical background and contemporary society and environment, he looks into the politics and society of the Middle East from the macro and overall prospective and concludes the five key concepts below should be the major study objects in contemporary Middle East studies. "The five key concepts are Muslim, Arab, conflicts, revolution and oil. It happens that the five keys could be abbreviated as MACRO, which coincides with

⁹ Shiliang Zhan, "History and the Present Situation of the Middle East Issue," *Foreign Affairs Journal*, No.1, 2003, p. 21.

the English word MACRO."¹⁰

II. Muslims and Arab in the Middle East

National, religious and border conflicts are basic reasons for disputes or even war between different groups of people. We've been hearing such terms as fundamentalism, Jihad, terrorism, anti-terrorism and "Clash of Civilizations" all along. No matter what their original meanings or connotations are or whether they are discriminatory or narrow-minded, relevant research must focus on the Middle East and Islam.

In term of nation, there are six large nations each with a population over 10 million and also a country populated mainly by Jews. In respect of religions, the three major monotheisms in the world all originated there, regarding Jerusalem as their Holy City. Border disputes exist between Palestine and Israel, Lebanon and Israel, Iraq and Kuwait, Iraq and Iran as well as Syria and Iran. However, the situation in the Middle East is far more complicated: there are obvious conflicts between different sects of the same religion; the same nation belongs to different countries and each group claims to be independent; internal conflicts within the same nation break out from time to time; local tribal forces and aborigines control the political and social development in many places, etc. To sum up, says the author, in the Middle East, the national issue is entangled in the religious issue so that the politics there becomes religionized and religion politicized while domestic affairs are entangled in international affairs so that national affairs become internationalized and international national problems domesticized and national problems globalized¹¹. In regard of countries, the countries in the Middle East are Islamic countries except Israel and Cyprus. If we have a closer look, we may note that except Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan, the rest 19 countries are all Arab countries. Therefore, in order to understand the Middle East, we must first understand the Muslims, believers of Islam, and the majority of the population there, the Arabs. Otherwise we may find ourselves concentrating on the trifles but neglecting the essentials. In that case, we'll be stuck in the paradox that the more we know about this area the less we understand this area.

Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula and later split into Sunni Islam and Shiah Islam. Today there are 53 Muslim countries in Asia, Africa and Europe and influential Islamic powers are all Middle East countries except Indonesia. Besides, Iran and Iraq, two Shiah dominant countries, are also Middle East countries. Many political elite have been frustrated by the conflicts and tussle between these countries, which are better known as the Middle East Issue. The Palestine Issue, the

¹⁰ Lian Wang, *Middle East Politics and Society*, p. 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-118.

core of the Middle East issues, involves both Palestine and Israel, leading to such focus conflicts as territory, refugees, capital/Holy City and drinking water disputes. As a result, hostility took root between Arab countries/League of Arab States and Israel. Under the influence of the powerful Jewish Lobby, the US adopted the widely criticized double standard policy concerning the Middle East, alienating itself from its traditional European allies. What's more, these problems triggered the Lebanese-Israeli Issue and the Syria-Israel Issue. It's apparent that the Palestine Issue is not only caused by the essential conflict, the territory conflict, but also by the interwoven religious and national conflicts. Speaking of the regional and international hot-spots such as the nuclear issue in Iran, the rebuilding of Iraq and Afghanistan, anti-terrorism in Pakistan and Darfur Issue in Sudan, they all originated in the Middle East. They have been major hot spots in international politics; they remain unsolved all along mainly because of the unique religious and national structure in this area. In addition, there are also other thorny problems concerning certain countries in this area, the Western Sahara Issue in Morocco, the Kurdish Issue in Turkey, the growth of Al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan, the Greek-Cypriot Issue in Cyprus, the Zone of Shiite Crescent, to name a few.

The above appears in Chapter 2 "Nations and States" and Chapter 3 "Religions and Society" of the book. These two chapters, of course, contain much more. No doubt, his long time research at various perspectives has formed his unique understanding and thinking. For instance, he probes into "the Shiah in Iraq", "the minorities in Saudi Arabia", "the deluge in Lebanon", "the non-Shiah in Iran", and so on in the section "Religious minorities", providing the readers with a good perspective from which they can better understand the religions and society of related countries.

III. Conflicts, Revolution and the Greater Middle East

Discrepancies and disputes have brought untold conflicts. "Although the joy of the short-lived peace is still in the air, new war and conflicts have come into being. It almost becomes a haunting nightmare of the people and countries in the Middle East." ¹²What the Middle East presents to the world seems to be nothing but war-related reports and cruel scenes. Above all, with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of the new colonial system after World War I, modern countries appeared at wartime in the Middle East. However, they all wore a stigma of colonialism, that is, benefit split as well as divide and rule. Later during World War II, the US and USSR gradually drove the former colonial Europeans out of the Middle East. During the Cold War, "Their participation in the politics of the Middle East was rather deep and influential, far beyond that of the former colonial

¹² Ibid., p. 342.

rulers." Besieged by the interest disputes between powerful countries and the intricate and complicated internal conflicts, the Middle East went through eight wars¹³ between different countries, several wars within Arab countries and other small-scale wars against Israel after World War II.

A nation or people with long history and splendid traditions never shows disregard to the corruption and decay from within or invasion and containment from outside, let alone when they are challenged by multiple tasks. Therefore, reform has been to some extent a common state in the Middle East. The bourgeois-democratic Turkish Revolution in 1923 led by Mustafa Kemal marked the beginning of a new development mode in the Middle East, that is, striving for a prosperous and strong country through secularization. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran led by Khomeini inaugurated the success of Islamic revivalism. These two revolutions changed the development process of the Middle East and even international relations significantly. Whenever the world history is mentioned we have to relate to both events and their influence. And, withal, there were even more revolutions and changes to happen in this area. The 23rd July Revolution in 1952 led by Nasser changed Egypt from a feudal monarchy to a Republic. In 1959 Habib Bourguiba won the first presidential election in Tunis. During the 1958-1969 period, revolutions happened in Iraq, North Yemen and Libya(led by "Free Officers Movement") and republics were established. It's known recent ones happened in two countries under foreign occupation, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Although the US has won some sort of victory militarily in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, it also brought the possibility of new and untold conflicts and dispute to this area, forcing the region to transform politically and socially as a whole. In particular, the US launched its "Greater Middle East Initiative" in 2004, proposing to promote western democracy in the whole Middle East area, including 22 Arab/Islamic countries, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, through all-round political, economic, diplomatic and cultural reforms. Although this initiative has been generally criticized and lack of support from the current Obama administration, it, as a matter of fact, has aggravated the divisions of development modes among Arab countries, imposing an impact on the long-term development of related countries. Detailed analysis can be found in Chapter 4 "Government and Politics" and Chapter 5 "War and Peace" of Wang's book.

IV. Interrelation between the Middle East and Oil

The land in the Middle East is mainly highland, plains occupying a rather small part of the land and great desert region occupying almost the entire Arabian

¹³ These wars mainly refer to the four Middle East Wars between 1948 and 1973, the Iran-Iraq War(1980-1988), the Gulf War(1990-1991), the Afghanistan War(2001) and the Iraq War(2003).

Peninsula. Under such topographic and environmental situations, the economies of the countries in the Middle East run with their own characteristics but "are mainly determined by two factors, crude oil price and regional conflicts."¹⁴ During the world economic crisis triggered by the Arab Oil Embargos in 1973 and 1979, the people on the street also realized that daily life is in close ties with the Middle East. After the Iraq War (2003), the US did not find any proof for the two reasons according to which the US started the war. Again the war proved the saying that "oil is 10% about economy and 90% politics." As Alan Greenspan, Former U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman, said, "I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil."¹⁵ Therefore, the final key to understand the Middle East is nothing but oil.

As of January 2009 proved oil reserves in the Middle East were 102,191,438,400 tons and estimated natural gas reserves 73,387.838 billion cubic meters, 55.60% and 41.44% of the total world reserves respectively.¹⁶ The relation of the world and the Middle East, said a geopolitician, can be summed up as, "although the Middle East has been an important area over the past century, it has been its oil resources that the world really cares."¹⁷ These resources are mainly found in the Gulf area of West Asia. Oil was discovered in Iran of today in 1901. Then the Anglo-Persian Oil Company was founded in 1908. When oil was discovered in the Gulf area in the 1930s, the Mobil Oil Company obtained the concession from Saudi Arabia to search for oil in 1933 and the company began to explore for oil on a large scale. Since oil was found in Abu Dhabi and Dubai in 1958, the United Arab Emirates and other countries also started massive scale exploration for oil and oil exports. From then on, the countries in the Middle East have been making enormous fortunes out of oil, turning a deserted land into a flourishing green oasis¹⁸.

Like that of the coal resources in the 17th century, the interrelated system of demand and supply also took root in the oil economy.¹⁹ With the increase of demand for oil across the world, the oil on the market also brought many unavoidable problems, for the oil business is more than a business. The oil business cannot run merely according to the law of demand and supply because the value of oil is beyond economics. As a political commodity, the oil business is not only subject to the economic law of demand and supply but also national

¹⁴ Lian Wang, *Middle East Politics and Society*, p. 422.

¹⁵ "Alan Greenspan Claims Iraq War Was Really for Oil," http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2007-09/17/content_6737591.htm.

¹⁶ Calculated according to relative statistics, "2008 World Oil-proved Reserves and Oil Wells," *International Petroleum Economics*, No. 1, 2009, pp. 59-60; "2007 and 2008 World Natural Gas Reserves," *International Petroleum Economics*, No.6, 2009, pp. 67-68.

¹⁷ Philippe Sebillé-Lopez, *Geopolitics of Oil*, Trans, Geping Pan (Beijing: Social Sciences Academics Press, 2008), p. 294.

¹⁸ Jisong Wu, *80 Countries in the World: The Sustainable Development of West Asia and South Asia* (Beijing: China Development Press, 2007), p. 296.

¹⁹ Paul. Roberts, *The End of Oil*, Trans, Wenzhong Wu (Beijing: China Citic Press, 2005), p.18.

strategies and schedules of countries of the world. Without a guarantee of enough oil supply at home, a country is bound to seek oil supply from the Middle East. In other words, the security of a country is linked to its ability of sustaining foreign oil and oil thus becomes the absolute core of geopolitics. Western countries, Japan and other countries will, by all means, strengthen or fight for their control of oil producers in the Middle East. Therefore, oil is not only in close ties with diplomacy but also unavoidably war. The Muslims in the Middle East and especially the Gulf region thank God for blessing them with the black gold in the desert. However, they have been suffering from the pain that the oil wars brought to them. Fortunately, the author places "oil" in Chapter 6 "Economy and Development" so that the problem can be seen from a broader perspective. In addition, the tone of the author is neither too pessimistic.

V. Conclusion

Although the last chapter of the book is Chapter 7 "China and the Middle East," the author does not simply quote some generalized government policies. After clarifying the relation between China and the Middle East with pretty concise words, he points out the efforts China has made in terms of the Middle East Issue, a hot-spot international issue, and, for the first time, reviews the Islamic factor in mutual relations. Finally, he discusses in detail the bilateral economic and trade cooperations as well as the current situation between the Middle East and Xinjiang of China. This is of great practical value against the background that the core interests of China are being undermined and the world is stuck in an international financial crisis. At this moment of radical transition of the international system such rational thinking stands out in the study of the relation between China and the Middle East.

China advocates building harmonious and fair international relations. Chinese President Hu Jintao calls for "promoting the Middle East peace process and building a harmonious world". To learn about and study the Middle East is a significant way of helping to achieve our diplomatic goals and "making China more influential in politics, more competitive in economy, more cordial in image and more charismatic in safeguarding justice."²⁰ Of course, it would be captious to require the author to elaborate on each aspect of the Middle East Issue in an extensive and systematic way in just one book or each part of the book good enough to be classic. However, the five key concepts put forward in this book are, no doubt, five keys to acquainting the Middle East, a place with old and mysterious history but suffers from disputes and conflicts today.

²⁰ Hu Jintao's speech on the 11th meeting for Chinese diplomats, *People's Daily*, July 21, 2009.