

oriented strategy text. Soliman consciously avoids lengthy theoretical discussions; instead, he opts for language that is readable for decision-makers, policy analysts, and academics. This approach, on the one hand, renders his work more directly related to discussions of grand strategy centered on the U.S. than to the literature of classical international relations theory. While this choice by the author increases the book's accessibility, it also limits the analytical framework to a state-centered perspective. On the other,

West Asia is an ambitious and controversial work that aims to reframe the U.S.' perspective on the Middle East and the broader Eurasian geography. The book offers an important contribution to academics, policy-makers, and graduate students interested in grand strategy, U.S. foreign policy, and Eurasian geopolitics. Whether accepted or criticized, Soliman's proposed framework constitutes a noteworthy intervention, as it forces us to rethink the Middle East's place in global politics.

Handbook of Middle East Politics

Edited by Shahram Akbarzadeh

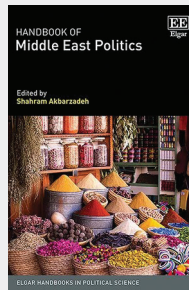
Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023, 416 pages, \$288, ISBN: 9781802205626

Reviewed by Abdullah Özbay, Social Sciences University of Ankara

DOI: 10.25253/99.2026282.BR5

Shahram Akbarzadeh's edited book, *Handbook of Middle East Politics*, sheds light on the Middle East's dynamic social, political, and ideological transformations and provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the global dimensions of regional problems. Akbarzadeh is a research professor of Middle East and Central Asian Politics at Deakin University in Geelong, Australia, and his work particularly revolves around Iranian foreign policy, sectarianism, and Islamism. His book offers readers a rich analysis by bringing together different academic perspectives on various topics, including citizenship, ideologies, political Islam, environmental security, and regional dynamics.

The book's central theme focuses on the social and political structures in the MENA



region. Topics from the historical transformation of citizenship regimes to the evolution of political Islam, from ideological conflicts to environmental security issues, are covered in detail. The concept of citizenship is analyzed in the context of historical social contracts, shedding light on the relationship

between the individual and the state. Periods such as the Islamic social contract, the colonial order, the socialist Arab contract, and the authoritarian stability contract reveal how individual rights and state control mechanisms were shaped.

The book is structured into 23 chapters. These chapters reflect the complexity and multidimensionality of the region's political landscape, offering a thematic and analytical approach rather than a strictly chronological

or geographical one. Such a rich book suggests balancing macro-level structural analysis with case-specific investigations, facilitating theoretical discussions and empirical insights. The political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran exhibits what Chapters 8 and 9 describe as theocratic electoral authoritarianism, combining divine sovereignty with popular sovereignty. The divine institutions (the Ayatollahs and the Council of Guardians) reinforce the authoritarian structure by controlling the democratic process, while elections provide the regime with both domestic and international legitimacy, but can also threaten stability through low turnout or protest votes. On the other hand, the popular movement that began with the death of Mahsa Amini has provided an opportunity to reassess state-society relations and the international context of Iranian politics. Demands for women's rights and cultural opening have created a common ground of resistance, while modern communication tools link local struggles with global solidarity, demonstrating the impact of digital technologies on politics.

The book engages with broader themes of social transformation, political frameworks, and environmental security in the MENA region. For instance, Chapters 2, 7, and 23 discuss the concepts of environmental security and citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa region, as well as social transformation and political frameworks. Environmental security is examined through the impact of natural resource scarcity and environmental degradation on social conflicts, while green transformation initiatives are emphasized as incompatible with social equality. On the other hand, citizenship has evolved through historical social contracts (Islamic, colonial, socialist, and authoritarian) as a framework regulating individual rights and state-individual

relations. The post-Arab Spring protests have created a space for renegotiating social contracts based on environmental activism and citizenship.

Chapters 19 and 20 frame the Palestinian question in the context of international interventions and the Israeli occupation and examine their impact on Palestinian domestic politics. Chapter 19 highlights how the interventions of international actors (particularly the U.S., Iran, Türkiye, and the Gulf states) have affected the political polarization in Palestine and the mobilization capacity of the society. It argues that Palestine has become an object of instrumentalization in the international balance of power and that leaders have become less accountable. Chapter 20 analyzes how the Israeli occupation has limited the functioning of Palestinian politics, and how the Palestinian Authority, established by the Oslo Accords, has moved away from the goal of independence. This chapter also explains how Israeli settlement policies, territorial divisions, and dependence on international aid have fragmented the Palestinian social and political fabric. The divisions between Fatah and Hamas and the confusion of roles between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have undermined national unity. They explain how Palestine's quest for independence has been manipulated in the interests of international and regional powers and how both the Israeli occupation and the international system have thwarted Palestinian aspirations for development and independence.

Political Islam is another important topic that is analyzed in Chapter 3. Over four decades, a wide range of examples, from the Islamic Revolution in Iran to the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) in Türkiye, are analyzed, and the complex relationship between

political Islam and democracy and individual rights is discussed. Ideologies are examined through the conflicts between nationalism, secularism, and fundamentalism, and their impact on regional politics is detailed. These debates contribute significantly to understanding the ideological fault lines in the region. Environmental security and the political economy are other important areas that the book studies. While there are references in many chapters about these topics, Chapters 22 and 23 analyze them in detail. The effects of environmental threats on social justice and state-society relations are analyzed; environmental security is not only an ecological issue but also linked to social transformations. Moreover, the impact of global financial capital on the region is discussed within the framework of imperialism and neo-liberal policies. These analyses show how economic and environmental problems in the MENA region can be seen globally.

The book reserved Chapter 21 for the conflict and peace negotiations in Syria, Chapter 17 for Lebanon's chronic political crises, and Chapter 14 for China's strategic posture in the Gulf. Issues such as the use of international talks in Syria as a tactical tool by the regime and Russia's manipulation of the peace process for its geopolitical interests provide a critical perspective on the concept of conflict resolution in the region. Lebanon is analyzed in the context of sectarian power-sharing, weak state structure, and the regional influence of actors such as Hezbollah. China's economic influence policies in the Gulf countries are one of the noteworthy chapters of the book. China's strategic balance policy in the Gulf over energy security and infrastructure investments reveals China's interest in the region and its pragmatic interests despite its claim of neutrality. In particular, the deepening relations with Saudi Arabia and the

United Arab Emirates demonstrate China's efforts to increase its economic influence in the region. Approaches from history, political science, and sociology add to the methodological richness of the book. For example, Chapter 11, Bourdieu's social theory framework of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is deepened by an interdisciplinary analysis. This reflects the book's effort to provide readers with a broad perspective.

This book, notable for its interdisciplinary approach, provides a comprehensive guide to understanding the complexity of the MENA region. Methodologically, some chapters, particularly those presenting historical events, lack a sufficiently in-depth examination of causal relationships. For instance, the evolution of the concept of citizenship during the Ottoman era or the transformation of political parties in Türkiye could have been analyzed in greater detail, incorporating multiple perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, the evidentiary support for certain arguments could be enhanced by increasing both the variety and depth of sources. In some sections, arguments rely predominantly on a single source, whereas a broader engagement with diverse academic literature would strengthen the analytical rigor.

Furthermore, the scope of certain topics could have been expanded. For example, a more detailed comparative analysis of women's movements across different countries would have enriched the discussion by providing a more nuanced perspective. Regarding academic writing style, while frequent citations contribute to the scholarly credibility of the text, in some instances, they disrupt the narrative flow. A more seamless integration of references into the text, along with a more judicious use of lengthy quotations, could