

Checkmate: The King's Game in the Middle East

Gennaro Buonocore

Notable Publishing (Nov 10, 2020)

Softcover \$14.95 (118pp)

978-1-73585-350-5

Checkmate is a fascinating text that explains, in detail, the history, culture, and politics of the Middle East.

Gennaro Buonocore's *Checkmate* is a concise and thoughtful primer on the intricacies of Middle Eastern politics.

With chess as its overarching metaphor, the book describes Middle Eastern affairs from the perspective of their major players, asserting that, "when it comes to the Middle East ... there are no available short-cuts." Middle Eastern politics, it claims, require patience, built on the understanding that its nations have long memories, and that its people tend to think in terms of centuries, not months or years.

The book's early chapters address memory, identity, and ISIS; the chapters that follow these are devoted to profiling the countries at play in this international chess game. Here, the pawns are represented by the United Arab Emirates and other Persian Gulf states; the rooks are Egypt and Iran; the bishops are Turkey and Israel; the knights are China and Russia; and the queen is the United States. The details of these assigned roles are documented alongside insights into how the Middle Eastern political chess game is played—and how it should be played.

Buonocore explains that Egypt and Iran are assigned roles as rooks because the economies of both are controlled by the military, and both are unified nation states with ancient histories and identities. Israel, the Western bishop, is called so because of the perception that it was created by Christian Europeans in conjunction with Zionist Jews; it is recorded as a well armed and well supplied wedge, designed to thwart Pan-Arabism. Each chapter includes ample examples and thorough explanations of the internal politics of the nations in question, further solidifying these perceived roles.

As much about identity and the search for meaning as it is an exercise in *realpolitik*, the book addresses problems with centralization, and the limits of civic nationalism, especially in relation to the rise and fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, in an approachable manner. Still, though it invokes the work and ideas of others well, the text is prone to meandering, and its first chapter comes to seem irrelevant to the book's larger discussion. Nevertheless, it is an excellent diagram of the political climate of the Middle East. It concludes by addressing the rising threats that China and Russia pose in the region, as well as the issues with the status quo, which the US is charged with enforcing.

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BENJAMIN WELTON (December 16, 2020)

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