

## REVIEW OF BOOKS

**Sandcastles, The Arabs in Search of the Modern World,**  
Milton Viorst (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, 385 pp).

The reader may share or loathe the opinions expressed by Milton Viorst, but one point seems clear: the author has extensive personal experience in the Middle East. A staff member of the *New Yorker*, Viorst has published numerous articles and eleven books, four of which cover Middle Eastern topics. In his latest book, *Sandcastles*, Viorst takes upon himself the difficult task of examining the complex issues of "nationalism" and "nation building" in the ever changing, erratic, and often incomprehensible (from an American perspective) Arab Middle East.

Viorst seems very comfortable in the Arab world, although he leaves unclear whether he is fluent in the Arabic language or whether he relies on the use of interpreters. His latest book is a unique combination of a detailed travel narrative and a theoretical search for the elusive concept of "the Arab Nation". The laborious search leads Viorst to conclude that, perhaps, he has been searching for a non-existing object. The title of the book, *Sandcastles*, could be an expression of the author's disappointment with the Arab people, who, despite sharing a common language, religion and historical experience, have failed to construct a unifying, national identity. This failure, argues Viorst, has resulted in serious social and political consequences. "The ailment of the Arabs, in an era when nationalism served as a channel to the modern world, was that (Arab) nationalis[t] roots had long since withered... The Arabs had not regained a sense of special identity... The idea of one eternal 'Arab Nation,' had never in fact existed, not even during the centuries of grandeur in the last millennium, when Arabs dominated much of the Mediterranean region" (p. vi). The Arab peoples' failure to adopt Western concepts of nationalism could, in Viorst's view, be attributed to their religion, Islam. "In fact, a strong argument can be made that Islam, the heart of Arab culture, sets the limits of personal and social development in the Arab world. Despotism, the Arabs most pervasive political institution, is surely an offshoot, even though Islam has sometimes been at odds with its despots" (p. 358). Such strong statements are commonplace in the book. While they are often based on personal opinions, Viorst supports them with extensive interviews and personal accounts, though without citations to scholarly sources.

During his many trips to the Middle East, Viorst interviewed almost all the major Arab leaders, including Saddam Hussein of Iraq, whom he revisited after the Gulf war. His first hand accounts of meetings with Arab leaders, peoples, and cultures are fascinating. They take the reader on a unique voyage to the hearts and minds of the inhabitants of the region. Such anecdotes provide an insight into their aspirations, fears, prejudices, hopes, convictions and misperceptions. To the Western reader who often does not distinguish between Sunni and Shiite Moslems, and who is equally unfamiliar with either the Ottoman legacy or the British and French mandates that shaped the modern Middle East, the Viorst book could serve as an intelligent guide.

Indeed the book is constructed as a tour guide, leading the reader from Baghdad, the first city visited, via Turkey, home of the Ottomans, to Egypt, an Arab-African country, then to Syria, land of the great Arab warrior Saladin, and on to civil war-torn Lebanon. Viorst then moves to the unsettled West Bank and Gaza, and to Kuwait and the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan, the last Arab country the author visits.

As part of his chapter on "Jordan," Viorst includes a paragraph entitled: "Meeting the Israelis". In that paragraph, which is three pages long, Viorst never mentions a single Israeli leader by name. Instead, he includes accounts of meetings with King Hussein of Jordan, Kamel Abu Jabber, the Jordanian Foreign Minister, Hanna Nasser, the President of Birzeit University (on the West Bank), and Taher Masri, a Palestinian leader. Why Viorst chose to entitle the paragraph: "Meeting the Israelis" is something of a mystery. Since the book's subject is Arab society, he could have left out any discussion of Israel, which is mentioned only in the political context of the latest peace agreements. Otherwise, Israel is treated, for the most part, as an inconvenience, an annoyance, and a threat to the Arabs.

It is strange to read that Viorst's visit to the Golan Heights "revealed much to me about why the Syrians are terrified of an Israeli army based on the Golan. On the right side of the road was Mount Hermon, site of the ferocious battles in 1967 and 1973" (p. 156). Viorst fails to mention that it was the Syrians who shelled Israeli villages when they controlled the Heights, and it was Syria who so often ferociously attacked Israel, and not vice versa.

His observations about the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, are even more bizarre. "Whatever one's opinion of Saddam," he writes, "one must grant him much of the credit for Iraqi resoluteness. His leadership might not have been inspirational but it was, at the least, intelligent and forceful...he paid attention to the wants of the separate religious and ethnic communities" (p. 42). Surely Viorst heard the claim that Saddam attempted genocide of the Iraqi Kurds by bombing their villages with mustard gas. This behavior hardly qualifies as respect for "separate religious and ethnic communities."

Viorst is convinced that there is "no proof that chemicals had been used on the Kurds...It was only Washington, and particularly Congress-although, conspicuously, not the US embassy in Baghdad-that stuck stubbornly to the original story" (p. 51). Viorst lamented the fact that the story about the use of chemical weapons by Saddam was published right before the second Babylon music festival was opened and "the poison gas story discredited Iraq so badly that hardly anyone showed up and the festival was a total flop" (p. 51). It is, indeed, a strange moral perspective to which Viorst subjects his readers.

"Egypt", is one of the best chapters in the book. Viorst's affinity with the Arabs and his personal biases do not interfere with his commentary about Egypt. Viorst is obviously very familiar with Egypt's streets, odors, food and colors, as well as its history, politics and culture. The author takes the reader on an exotic journey through Cairo's narrow streets, dirty alleys, its network of underground passages, and the sidewalk coffee shops. His close friend, the celebrated Egyptian writer and Nobel Laureate, Mahfouz, was probably a significant source of inspiration, resulting in a wonderful lesson not only in Middle East politics, but also in Arab literature and art.

While discussing Egypt, Viorst had to face the Arab world's most serious political problem: Islamic fundamentalism. It actually originated in Egypt, a century ago, with the establishment of the fundamentalist organization known as "The Muslim Brotherhood". It is worth noting that the most recent incarnation of the Brotherhood is Hamas, the notorious extremist group infamous for its violent terrorist acts throughout the Middle East. Viorst tries to trace the historic origin of the movement, as well as its *raison d'être*. The kernel of the movement has been a group of Islamic clerics, called the Ulema. They are not priests since Islam does not have a formal priesthood. However, the Ulema do provide religious and social services.

The Brotherhood's chief goal has been to transform all Arab countries into Koranic societies. The movement has gained strength and is growing, especially among the poor and the underprivileged. Viorst attributes the Brotherhood's appeal to a hatred of Western imperialism on the one hand and the recent advent of socialism in the region (especially in Egypt under President Nasser) on the other hand. The author's discussion is very generalized and lacks the detailed analysis of the book's other topics. Viorst probably found it difficult to penetrate the organization and although he met with two of the organization leaders, the information he received was mainly propagandistic in nature. Viorst comes very close to condoning the Brotherhood's activities, including the death sentence handed down in absentia on the British author Salman Rushdie. The writer (Viorst) does not seem to realize that Islamic fundamentalists are not a group interested in democratic opposition, but rather a single-minded group composed of extremists who rely exclusively on threats and indiscriminate violence.

In examining the Arab concepts of "state," "church" and "nation," Viorst compares Middle

<sup>1</sup> At the time of the writing of his book, Viorst could not foresee that his friend Mahfouz would be targeted by Moslem extremists. In October 1994, Mahfouz was the victim of an attempted assassination. He barely survived the attack, and from the intensive care unit where he was being treated, Mahfouz preached on television against those who would impose a dark, medieval pall on the progressive forces in Egyptian society.

Eastern societies to Western institutions. However, this comparison is not always helpful. Although the same terms may be used they possess different meanings. This problem can lead to mistaken conclusions. Moreover, Viorst's extensive and comprehensive reliance on the personal reflections of the people he interviewed taints his discussion. For instance, he defines the British and French mandates as "a Christian takeover of the Arab world, with some help from the Jews" (p. 132). A reader who is not an authority on the Middle East is bound to be misled by this kind of propaganda and consequently accept such statements as factual.

In his discussion of Syria, Viorst focuses on the individual who has come to be known as the "Sphinx," Syria's president Assad. In Viorst's analysis of Assad (concerning why Assad has succeeded in staying alive and in power where all his predecessors have failed or been assassinated), the author reveals an admirable level of understanding and insight, in regard to both Assad and the Syrian people. Assad is described as a modest man, shunning the idea of a personality cult. Why, then, is Assad's photographic image so widely disseminated? Viorst fails to see the contradiction. His justification for the massacre at Hamma (in 1982) is also misleading. Assad massacred about 25,000 people, mostly women and children, in his war against the Brotherhood. "The massacre had intimidated not only the Brotherhood but the secular resistance as well. Since Hamma, there has not been in Syria even a hint of rebellion" (p. 145). Viorst does not recognize this as state terrorism, pure and simple.

The Syrian Jews are not left out of Viorst's discussion. He visited the Jewish ghetto in Damascus and seems to have found its inhabitants to be free of oppression or harassment. While Viorst was required to get permission from the Syrian police to visit the Synagogue, he had no difficulty receiving it. To the ordinary reader, the Jewish ghetto in Damascus will not appear to be an oppressive environment. Since 1974, "Jews have been legally equal to other Syrians." One exception exists, Viorst notes. The Mukhabarat (the secret police) have the power "to suspend all rights that it deemed threatening to Syria's security" (p. 152). Evidently, due process does not protect any segment of Syrian society, and certainly not the inhabitants of the ghetto.<sup>2</sup>

In his book, Viorst tries not only to examine the past, but also to predict the future. In the case of Israel and Jordan, peace has already been achieved. Syria is still negotiating, trying to get the best possible deal. "Unlike a book," says Viorst in his epilogue, "a society is never finished. It always remains in process" (p. 357). A more fair-minded reportage of the realities of the Middle East would have provided a far more accurate and realistic assessment of the process of change taking place in the region.

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<sup>2</sup> Secret negotiations during the past year have led to the emigration of all Jewish Syrians, so that the number of people still living in the ghetto has been reduced to only those who did not wish to leave. Emigrants were permitted to go to the United States only, not to Israel.