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Book Review

Richards, Alan & John Waterbury. 2008. A Political Economy of the Middle East. 3rd Edition. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. xxi + 474 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8133-4348-8 (pb). Price: £29.99.

by Bjørn Møller (17 April 2008)

This is the third, and thoroughly updated, edition of a standard work on the political economy of the Middle East. The region is broadly defined as comprising the Levant, the Persian Gulf region, and North Africa, including Sudan.

The book covers almost all aspects of the Middle East. Much attention is paid to neo-Malthusian dangers flowing from demographic developments. Whereas most of the region has seen the first stages of a demographic transition to lower fertility levels, the population will continue to grow because of the large cohorts now entering their fertile age, around half of the total population being below twenty. A so-called youth bulge is a reality in several countries. This is regarded by many as significantly increasing the risk of armed conflict, as the bulge likely leaves many youths with grievances over frustrated expectations that can be harnessed to recruit youth into armed groups.

A related phenomenon is water shortage, relative to population growth, which, according to the authors, entails risks of armed conflict between river-sharing states, e.g., by pitting upstream against downstream countries. In this connections the authors might have looked more carefully at the writings of Homer-Dixon, and others, who show that not all combinations of vulnerability and power lead to violent conflict. Comparisons between the Nile and the Euphrates-Tigris basins might have been interesting in this respect: the strongest states in each basin (Turkey and Egypt) are in opposite positions with regard to vulnerability, upstream Turkey being the least, but downstream Egypt the most vulnerable.

A good part of the books is taken up by mainstay economics such as (the lack of) economic growth, economic policies, and structural adjustment programs and to the consequences thereof, e.g., in the form of food insecurity (which the authors, probably correctly, see as a major cause of the nasty conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan). A special chapter is devoted to military factors. Benoit's (still) encountered view of the military as social modernizer and economic propellant is dismissed. According to the authors, "conventional wisdom has long posited that heavy outlays on defense and warfare divert scarce resources away from directly productive investment and human-capital formation. For once, conventional wisdom may be right" (p. 349). Although the authors mention the lack of consistent (positive or negative) correlation between defense outlays and economic performance, the preponderance of the evidence makes it difficult to disagree with this assessment. Military expenditure are generally high in percentage terms— even though, as the authors might have pointed out, still low in absolute terms when compared to the West.

The book is generally well written and structured, updated with lots of useful statistics, and interspersed with numerous boxes containing short case studies. Not only is it a highly recommended "must-read" for anyone conducted research or who is engaged in Middle Eastern

politics, but it is also suitable for teaching purposes, both undergraduate and post-graduate.

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