

THE ARABS: A HISTORY

**Eugene Rogan, Penguin: London, 2009, 2011, ISBN: 978-0-141-02469-1
S. 700. (Illustrations)**

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The Arabs: A History

Oxford University historian Eugene Rogan's *The Arabs: A History* (2009, 2011) is a comprehensive five-hundred-year social and political history of the Arab peoples, covering the period from about 1516 to 2011 CE. His book highlights the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the gradual push by Arab military, political, and religious leaders, intellectuals, and later nationalists, journalists, revolutionaries, feminists, pan-Arabists, and broader society for a greater say in running their socio-political and economic lives. Between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, this culminated in the collective cry by Arab peoples for full independence from external powers (Ottoman, European, and the United States).

This history book examines social and political change and how Arab peoples pursued independence and nation-state building, starting in the late Ottoman period and continuing after the First World War, the Second World War, the Cold War, and up to the present. The Arab peoples have achieved much in the last one hundred years or so, despite internal rivalries, economic development challenges, and powerful external actors interested in seeking to use their resources, wealth, and territory for their own stratagems.

The book contains fourteen chapters arranged chronologically. This guides the reader through events (for instance, the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 and the Iraqi nationwide insurgency of 1920, both targeting the British occupation) and explains the key individuals (for instance, the anti-French occupation resistance fighters: Abd al-Qadir in Algeria, circa 1831-1847 CE, and Abd-el Krim in Morocco, circa 1921-1926). The book's Index (pp. 676-701) is detailed, and the photographs and paintings provide useful images of the places and key Arab peoples mentioned.

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Given the subject and what is available on the market, Rogan's book suits scholars and general readers for several reasons. First, Rogan respects his subject: the Arab peoples, Middle Eastern cultures, and religions. This comes through in the tone of the writing, how he selects examples and quotes to reinforce his argument, and his honesty when analysing European elites' political decisions that did not have the best interests of the Arab peoples at heart (for instance, the secretly discussed carve-up of the Ottoman territories: The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916).

Rogan also highlights the ethnic and geographic pluralism of the Arab peoples. Arabs share a language and many cultural attributes, but from Yemen to Morocco they also show cultural diversity (p. 14). Rogan writes objectively and discusses, in an unbiased and humane manner, the history of the Arab peoples and their aspirations for freedom and equality. This makes the book a refreshing and academically important study, useful for students, journalists and politicians.

Second, the work is well written and structured, with each chapter broken down into relevant sections. Rogan's narrative and descriptive writing, despite the story's complexity with so many different events and characters, is concise, and no one topic or section is given extra words at the expense of another. Like European, Russian, American, African and Asian histories, Arab history is rich in content and diverse (for instance, the non-Arab Berbers in North Africa). This explanation requires a skilled historian and storyteller to engage the reader and invest their time and energy in the study. At nearly 700 pages, the author has produced a resource readers can approach from beginning to end, or access the relevant chapter or section as necessary.

One topic is very thought-provoking: the outcome of European colonial powers lending money, from Istanbul to Morocco, for expensive development projects to late Ottoman-era societies saw the former's greater penetration and intervention regionally (p. 167). Rogan reports that '*reckless government spending*' and the purchase of European technology did not result in greater sovereignty for the Ottoman Empire and North Africa. It resulted in their '*impoverishment and weakening of Middle Eastern governments*' (p. 127).

Third, the author uses primary and secondary source materials that incorporate the '*eyewitness accounts*' of Arab people from different social backgrounds (including some Egyptian pro-independence women, p. 14, 209). This is an important element of the book, and we are not simply reading a Western author or a Western-published non-fiction book retelling a story from a pro-Western perspective. The Arab voices bring the drama and emotion of events to life, along with their reasonable and thoughtful pleas to a sympathetic European audience.

At the same time, the author highlights that before the rise of nationalist sentiments among the Arab peoples during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, many Arab elites and peoples viewed themselves as 'Ottoman subjects' and accepted this identity. Rogan's retelling of Arab history and struggle for dignity and independence is not dry.

Fourth, Rogan is not shy in his criticism of the Western powers and their imperial and colonial meddling in the Middle East over the last 200 years. For example, he says about Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 CE: '*...over the centuries Western leaders have tried to present their invasions of the Arab world as liberations*' (p. 5). In terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the outcome of the First World War for the Arab people – and despite the Hashemite and Saudi Arab elites supporting the British and French militarily –, Rogan says: '*As the Great War came to an end, the Victorious Entente Powers set themselves the daunting task of restoring order – their vision of it, that is – to a world troubled by war*' (p. 193). Likewise, he comments: '*The new age the Arabs faced would in fact be shaped by European imperialism rather than Arab independence. The European powers established their strategic imperatives and resolved all points of disagreement between themselves through the post-war peace process*' (p. 216).

I have few criticisms about his book. Perhaps the author could have made it clearer at times that Ottoman Thrace and Anatolia were culturally diverse and multi-ethnic, with Turks, Caucasians, Kurds, Laz, Arabs, and Muslim converts (for instance, Greeks, Slavs and Europeans), Greeks, Jews, and other ethnic groups coexisting. Also, should we use 'Middle East' when the region from Türkiye's Anatolian region to Palestine (including Israel, Syria, Iraq, Arabia, Jordan, and Yemen) is West Asia? The point I want to note is that whether we are analysing the Ottoman era or the post-First World War period, the term 'Middle East' is not an indigenous construct but a Western/European one. During the Ottoman era, these specific countries did not exist, something Rogan discusses in the book. (People identified with a town or city, region, tribe, or religious community. Today's Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco were all once associated in some way with the Ottoman Empire, and they are now independent North African countries.) Admittedly, my criticisms are minor points when compared with the breadth and depth of Rogan's research book.

The Arabs: A History is recommended for students and readers of Middle East/West Asia social and political history, colonialism and neo-colonialism, Palestine, and nation-state building. The first six chapters relate directly or indirectly to the former Ottoman Empire and, as a result, contemporary Türkiye. Researchers of Ottoman and Turkish history and their longstanding relationship with Arab peoples will find this book helpful, particularly from the perspective of Muslim and Christian Arab and Berber peoples. Lastly, Rogan's book improves our understanding of the past, present, and future. It helps us better understand the historical background of Al Jazeera and BBC news stories, as well as online news sources on YouTube.com.

Source:

Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History*, Penguin: London, 2009, 2011.

Review's word total: 1,211 words.

Sevket Akyildiz wrote this book review without plagiarism. May 2026.

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Ethical Statement: No ethical issues to report.

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Harvard reference style: Sevket Akyildiz. (2026) Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History*, Penguin: London, 2009, 2011 [Preprint]. Available:

