

# Understand the Middle East

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The Middle East is in turmoil, caught between peace and conflict like never before. We tell you how and why.

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# The Middle East Today

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Syria and most of Iraq remain at war. The Palestinians and Israelis seem further apart than ever. Egypt and Lebanon appear one step away from crisis. And the stakes keep getting higher in the struggle between secular and extremist world views. Behind this larger picture, however, there are many nuances, not to mention hopeful signs that peace and/or stability can triumph amid all the gloom.

## Best Books

**From the Holy Mountain** (William Dalrymple) Well-told journey through the region's landscape of sacred and profane.

**The Innocents Abroad** (Mark Twain) Still many people's favourite travel book about the region, 140 years later.

**The Thousand and One Nights** Resonates with all the allure and magic of the Middle East.

**Nine Parts of Desire** (Geraldine Brooks) Fascinating look at the lives of Middle Eastern women.

**The Arab Awakening: Islam and the new Middle East** (Tariq Ramadan) A field guide to the hopes and disappointments of the Arab Spring.

## Best on Film

**Lawrence of Arabia** (1962) Evokes the complicated, early-20th-century Middle East.

**Caramel** (2007) Women in war-ravaged Beirut.

**Once Upon a Time in Anatolia** (2011) Acclaimed evocation of the Turkish soul and steppe.

**A Separation** (2011) Oscar-winning Iranian film portraying the angst of modern Iran.

**Omar** (2014) Oscar-nominated film about the fatal entwining of Palestinians and Israelis.

## What Happened to the Arab Spring?

When a young, unemployed man named Mohammed Bouazizi set fire to himself in the central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid in December 2010, few imagined the firestorm of change his desperate suicide would ignite across the region. Within months, the 30-year dictatorship of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak had been overthrown in a popular uprising. Soon, leaders of similarly long standing had been swept from power in Libya and Yemen. Power had, it seemed, been returned to the people, ushering in a brief interlude of hope in a region desperately in need of good news.

But as Iraqis had long ago learned, getting rid of despotic governments was to prove far easier – except in Syria – than building the open, democratic societies which many of those who had demonstrated for freedom craved. With the dictators gone, most countries faced a profound political vacuum. In the heady days that followed the revolution in Egypt, for example, it became clear that those who had led the push for change had neither the unity, experience nor political program needed to build what came next. The well-organised Muslim Brotherhood swept to power, then the army threw the Brotherhood out and seized power for itself. Egyptians still don't have a voice but now have grave uncertainty and disappointment to go with the other struggles of daily life.

## Syria & Iraq

It is difficult to quantify the catastrophe that has befallen Syria. Perhaps the simplest statistic is this: as of the end of 2014, an estimated 200,000 people had died in six years of conflict. The troubles began as a peaceful uprising by those aspiring to a democratic Syria. All that remains of that ideal is a vicious war fought between government forces and a fractured rebel move-