



## Holy Lands: Reviving Pluralism in the Middle East

By Nicolas Pelham

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Reviewed by Mahmoud Muna, *The Educational Bookshop - Jerusalem*

How did we get here? The Middle East of today is a place of no tolerance or harmony but a region full of sectarianism and racism. *Holy Lands: Reviving Pluralism in the Middle East*, an extensive work laid out in six political and historical essays by Nicolas Pelham, *The Economist's* Middle East correspondent, is an attempt to understand how a congenial culture nose-dived into the misery of today.

The book presents fresh writings that alternate between exemplary journalism and extensively researched historical accounts. Honest and accurate, Pelham goes beyond the overused tune of “experts view” or “deep studies” that tries to “analyse” the current situation in the Middle East, outside the lens of Eurocentrism. As recently as less than a hundred years ago, the Middle East

was notably more tolerant and diverse than Western Europe.

In the first chapter, the author argues that the end of the Ottoman Empire marked the end of “milletocracy,” a governing system by which religious leaders, “millets,” managed people but shared the control over land with other “millets” within the empire. Later on, the invention and subsequent establishment of the nation-state fostered the idea of Holy Lands over Holy People, and promoted military service as the ultimate manifestation of loyalty. Since then, “defence of the land took precedence over universal values.”

In the second part, Pelham looks at the situation in Israel/Palestine with the eye of a true optimist. Although he admits that Israel is “part of the club of sectarian Middle East states,” he also highlights the work of Rabbis for Human Rights and organizations such as Zochrot as a sign of hope across the divide. He later expresses his surprise at how international mediators have “shunned” religious leaders and looked to secular actors to negotiate terms at “contested holy sites.”

Pelham does an excellent job in investigating, both historically and ideologically, the root of ISIS and the several armed Islamic groups that are in operation now. While many of us will agree on the similarity of their doctrine, it is well worth studying their unique beliefs and strategies to better understand them. In a subsequent chapter, Pelham clearly explains the differences within the Sunni sect as well as within the Shiite, in Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain.

This is a Middle East book par excellence; historical events and political manoeuvres are nicely netted and connected, from Iran to Egypt, Afghanistan and Armenia to Oman, Turkey to Yemen. Hope is a recurring theme throughout the book, and the closing chapter in particular is promising. Pelham emphasizes the need for change from within, a review of how religious diversity is perhaps the key to stability, revival, and inclusiveness. He argues, “If milletticide is the product of carving the region into sectarian states, milletocracy is its antidote,” the mechanism through which holy communities can once again replace holy lands.