

Afghanistan. Da una confederazione tribale alle crisi contemporanee is a necessary reading. By addressing the public and stimulating in-depth reflection, it raises awareness of the past events that are reflected in the present. The result is, on the one hand, a historical reconstruction and an acute assessment of the “weight of history” (p. 143), the role of the West and its crisis, and the position of emerging powers. On the other hand, it is the deconstruction of misconceptions, unfortunately widespread and established in public opinion, in favour of a complex and timely reinterpretation of Afghanistan’s history.

Trombetta, L. *Negoiazione e potere in Medio Oriente. Alle radici dei conflitti in Siria e dintorni*. Milano, Mondadori Università (Collana Saggi Oltre), 2022, XLII-374 p., ISBN 978-88-6184-819-1

With two decades of experience in the field, Lorenzo Trombetta has a unique familiarity with both the dimension of everyday life and the grand schemes of international and domestic politics in the Middle East. This proficiency translates into a massive work that is almost reminiscent of Braudel in its sharp focus on the *longue durée* of political processes and the relevance of geographical spaces.

The author leads the reader into a voyage back and forth through three centuries of Syrian history, with a focus on the complex and unstable relations between central governments and peripheries. A prominent feature of the book is the rich pattern of evolving arrangements and the agency of multiple subjects involved in the fight for power. Conflicts are historicized and presented as multi-layered, in a clear departure from the analyses that portray Syrian politics and conflicts in terms of (supposedly) intrinsic ethnic or sectarian traits. A major feature in the volume is the idea that the conflict in Syria cannot, and should not, be read merely as a proxy war nor as a primordial clash among homogeneous communities.

Negoiazione e potere in Medio Oriente is a dense book, and as such it might prove challenging for first-timers in Syrian history and politics. It requires, and deserves, dedication and careful reading. An entire chapter is devoted to the political history of Syria from the late Ottoman period to our days, and yet the author problematizes the concept itself of periodization, especially when it comes to the troubles that have been wreaking havoc on the country since 2011. Any choice of a watershed moment appears as open to discussion and should not dilute the factors of continuity and persistence, as well as the changes that are detectable only on a longer time span.

The author explains the negotiation and the fight for power in contemporary Syria as an architecture with multiple levels, including the international, the regional (Middle Eastern), the national (Syrian), and the micro local dimension. A nuanced and meaningful analysis makes sense only when it looks at the interconnectivity among these levels, and how the actors at each level influence each other.

In fact, this is a book on politics and the political history of Syria as much as a thoughtful and thought-provoking meditation on methodology of research and positionality. The author actually questions his own positioning in relation to the social and political context of contemporary Syria, and how this has an impact on his research and analysis. This self-reflective attitude emerges as a refreshing break from the prevailing trends in the public discourse about the Middle East.³

The book includes an appendix with three interviews. Rather than a fringe section, these interviews reinforce the main argument of the author and appear as an integral part of his discourse. The author steps back and gives voice to three individual stories. Such stories are not selected because they are exemplary in any sense, but because they give a strong sense of the complexity and contradictions of trajectories that can hardly be simplified and flattened through labels and empty signifiers.

These final interviews are arguably the most captivating section of the book, where the author is able to both assume a fair scholarly distance from the topic of his analysis and display a vibrant empathy for these human beings and their lives, deserving praise for the balance he is able to achieve.