

new outlook

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THE ARABS

THE ARABS : A COMPREHENSIVE HISTORY

by PETER MANSFIELD
New York: Crowell
572 pages. \$ 16.95

ARABS TODAY
by JOEL CARMICHAEL
New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday
216 pages. \$ 2.95 (paper)

Reviewed by MARK A. BRUZONSKY

Two new books have appeared claiming to give readers an overall perspective on the Arab world. The first (and by far the best) is English author Peter Mansfield's *The Arabs*. Mansfield is a well-known Arab scholar. The second is *Arabs Today* by Joel Carmichael, editor of the American Zionist monthly "Midstream".

Carmichael's book is largely the product of one man's study and perceptions. It is a macro view of the Arab world — a look at the Arabs as constituting a single Islamic civilization. At times, though, Carmichael does note a significant difference between regional, class and national groups. The title, *Arabs Today*, is somewhat misleading, for Carmichael's historical span is nearly as broad as Mansfield's, though his coverage is much more compressed and at times

rather rambling and oversimplified.

Scholarly and Well-Organized

Mansfield's much more comprehensive and lengthy book is scholarly, well-organized and very well written. The book is neatly divided into three parts. In the first, nearly two-thirds of the book, Mansfield surveys Arab history from pre-Muhammad times through the present. The second part is a detailed country-by-country presentation and the concluding part deals with the large, overall questions facing the Arab world — unity, the "open wound" of Palestine and oil among them.

What is so troubling about Carmichael's book is the way he presents his personal views of Arab history as unchallengeable. Mansfield on the other hand clearly reveals his own biases, especially when it comes to the all-important Arab-Israeli issue which pervades modern Arab history. Just as importantly, the Mansfield book is filled with references to other scholars, many of them Arab — something totally missing from Carmichael's often superficial analysis.

Carmichael's failings put him at a rather serious disadvantage as the two authors continually clash, especially on their interpretations of recent Arab history and the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Indeed, it is an all too familiar confrontation of pro-Arab versus pro-Israeli partisans. But in this particular case many Jewish readers may wish that the pro-Israeli side

were being upheld with more precision and less wishful thinking.

Different Perceptions

An initial example of the differing perceptions comes when Carmichael insists that the antagonism between Arabs and Jews was not foreseeable and resulted simply from Arab territorial greed. "It had been very nearly a cliché before the first World War and even after... (that) there would be no fundamental opposition" to Zionism from the Arabs, Carmichael writes. Mansfield, on the other hand, writes with an ever-present awareness that as early as 1905 an important Arab author noted that the "awakening of the Arab nation and the latent efforts of the Jews to reconstruct... the ancient Kingdom of Israel" were from the very beginning two movements "destined to fight each other continually." Though Carmichael is on safer ground asserting the recent development of a distinct and separate Palestinian Arab national identity, his refusal to seriously discuss the Palestinian problem within today's framework must be considered an inexcusable omission. Carmichael, in fact, seems unable to even refer to the "Palestinians" without quotation marks — his view is all too reminiscent of Golda Meir's now discredited approach.

Possibility of Reconciliation

Mansfield's awareness of the historical clash, nevertheless, does not prevent him from viewing the possibility of reconciliation between Israel and her Arab neighbors within the shifting politics of the Middle East. Indeed, he perceptively notes major changes in Arab attitudes — including Palestinian Arab attitudes — toward the Jewish state. There is a major movement within Arab politics today which is now willing to accept Israel as a reality, a *fait accompli*, Mansfield argues. "This development, which has taken place since the October 1973 War," he asserts in a way prophetic of the Sadat initiative, "is the most significant in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict."

Carmichael falls into a serious ideological trap with his attempts to deny any historical legitimacy to the very idea of a Palestinian people — past or present. He is aware, though that "The shift in focus with the emergence of the new concept of a 'Palestinian people', as distinct from a conglomerate of disparate communities merely located in Palestine, radically altered the balance of forces." "Since the Six-Day War the Israelis have had to wage a struggle against the admission of this concept into discussion," Carmichael continues, "since in its very nature it entails the dissipation of their fundamental claim to the territory they are settled on... For if the concept of a unitary, self-aware, and striving nation of 'Palestinian Arabs', is accepted, there is plainly no place at all for Israel as a state."

Sides with the Right

At a time when President Carter is speaking of the necessity for a "Palestinian homeland" and when the existence of a Palestinian people is more and more widely accepted even within Israel, it is tragic that a noted American Zionist author should be writing that any acknowledgement of the existence of a Palestinian Arab community with national rights negates the entire claim of the Jewish people to a part of the Land of Israel. In doing so, Carmichael not only sides with the right-wing of Israeli politics which is holding out against mounting pressures for a settlement which would make provisions for self-determination for the Palestinians. He further discredits the very notion of a possible compromise, apparently believing that the struggle for Palestine has to be solved with either Jews or Arabs in total control. Carmichael's retort that present-day Jordan is part of Palestine only distorts the predicament actually facing Israel today. With his arguments, Carmichael unconsciously becomes a supporter of the other, uncompromising camp in the Arab world, which Mansfield refers to, which is determined to continue the historical struggle until Israel is either battered or strangled.

All this leads to one final area of serious disagreement between these two authors. Carmichael rather boldly asserts, and the thrust of Mansfield's entire analysis is dissent, that "It is the ominous feeling that time is working *against* them" (emphasis in original) which motivates the current assertiveness of the Arabs in thrusting their oil and financial power to propel an Arab-Israeli settlement based on the 1967 borders and the creation of a Palestinian state.

Both Worth Reading

Consistently, but wrongly in my opinion, Carmichael bases his views on his belief that solutions to the current dependence of the West on Arab oil will come about "in the near future, a span of time perhaps to be reckoned not in decades but in years." The implication of what must politely be referred to as questionable reasoning and wishful guessing is that Israel should hold out for a few more years after which the oil weapon will have disappeared and Arab acceptance of Israel will be fostered by Israeli invincibility.

These are two books worth reading — one for content and insights, the other for its fallacies.