'The Road to Fatima Gate' review: Michael J. Totten's analysis of Middle East is passionate but partisan
Published: Saturday, June 04, 2011, 11:30 AM

By Special to The Oregonian

THE ROAD TO FATIMA GATE
Michael J. Totten
Encounter Books
$27.95, 338 pages

Divided between Christians and Muslims, saddled with a weak government, devastated by a six-week war in 2006, and dominated by Hezbollah, a militant militia and political party, Lebanon is a powder keg.

Close enough to Israel, Portland writer Michael J. Totten reminds us, for mortars, rockets and even rifles to turn the Jewish state "into a kill zone."

In "The Road to Fatima Gate: The Beirut Spring, the Rise of Hezbollah, and the Iranian War Against Israel," Totten, a foreign correspondent who writes for Commentary, provides a first-person account of Lebanon's turbulent decade -- and its implications for peace in the Middle East.

The "Cedar Revolution" of 2005, he points out, forced Syria to withdraw from Lebanon. Hopes for democracy, however, were quickly dashed. By backing and bankrolling Hezbollah, Iran filled the power vacuum.

Totten makes no pretense to objectivity in "The Road to Fatima Gate." He uses his experiences in Lebanon like a drunk uses a lamppost: for support rather than illumination. When Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Hezbollah, launches into a litany of criticism of Israel, Totten rolls his eyes. Using the terms "fascist" and "psychotic" to describe Hezbollah's leaders, Totten believes they are bent on creating "a bigoted, authoritarian, gender-segregated, micro-managing, bully state."

On the other side of the Fatima Gate, Totten claims, Israel has "tried everything and nothing worked -- not dialogue, not diplomacy, not a peace process, not withdrawal from occupied territory, and not war." Israel should not be blamed for destroying South Lebanon, he adds, because Hezbollah used civilians and residential homes as human shields.

Passionate and partisan, Totten's analysis is incomplete; it does not capture the complex realities of the region. Totten, for example, does not investigate Hezbollah's social development program -- it runs hospitals, news services and schools, and helps build infrastructure -- as a source of its popularity among Lebanese Shites. Apparently, he does not believe that Israel's occupation of territory claimed by the Palestinians is a major obstacle to peace. The use of Israel as a scapegoat by Arab despots and not the occupation, he writes, restrains "development and adaptation to change" in the Middle East.

As Totten completed his book, Hezbollah had the capacity to launch missile attacks against Israeli skyscrapers and nuclear power plants, Iran seemed intent on building nuclear bombs, and Israel was poised to respond -- or preempt -- with a "fury not seen for a generation." Only if Iran overthrew the ayatollahs, and Syrians unseated Bashar al-Assad, Totten suggested, might peace stand a real chance.

In 2011, regime change, even in these benighted nations, no longer seems unthinkable. But for now, we can only speculate about the impact of the "Arab Spring" on the most violent, volatile and vital regions in the world.
Reading: Totten discusses "The Road to Fatima Gate" at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, June 23, at Powell's City of Books, 1005 W. Burnside St.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler

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