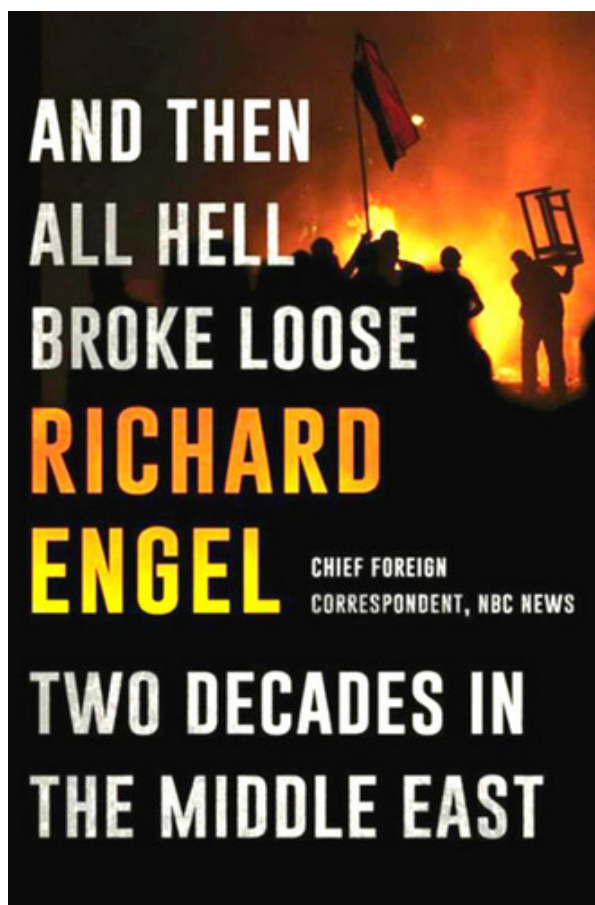


'All Hell Broke Loose' focuses on Middle East turmoil

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"And Then All Hell Broke Loose: Two Decades in the Middle East" by Richard Engel. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016, 256 pages, \$27.00.



"I have watched the Middle East in a momentous transition," Richard Engel explains near the beginning of *"And Then All Hell Broke Loose: Two Decades in the Middle East,"* his chronicle of the never-ending turmoil in one of the most dangerous and strategically important regions of the world. "I saw a historic turning point. For 20 years, I saw the big men (principally Hosni Mubarak, Muammar Gadhafi and Saddam Hussein) at their prime, and chronicled their downfall and the mayhem that followed."

"I suspect a new generation of big men will return," he continues. "No people can tolerate chaos forever. Dictators will offer a way out and many of the exhausted and brutalized people of the Middle East will accept them, and I suspect Washington will as well."

In case you didn't pick up on it immediately, that last line was a well-deserved dig at the United States. American leaders have always had a difficult time deciding what our policies should be in the Middle East and what actions we should take with respect to those policies. But as Engel makes abundantly clear, we share an inordinate portion of

the blame for the turmoil and mayhem we see showcased every evening on our various news channels.

One of the features of Engel's prose I found particularly thought-provoking is the way he interweaves the historical aspects germane to the present imbroglio into his narrative. In order to fully understand the depth of the conflicts playing out on a global stage, it is essential to have an appreciation for the origins of the almost insurmountable religious and geopolitical ideologies embedded in the exceptionally volatile struggles that define this geographic area.

"The Crusades, waged intermittently from 1095 to 1291, but which continued in waves for centuries after that, were military campaigns sanctioned principally by the Roman Catholic Church to reclaim the Holy Land," he writes. "American students barely learn about the Crusades, but they are essential to understanding the wars of the last decade."

The volume is comprised of nine chapters sandwiched between a prologue and epilogue and consists primarily of a personal account of what Engel observed during his tenure in the region. His

first-hand knowledge is then combined with, and considered in light of, the extensive background information and research he has accumulated over the last 20 years. From my vantage point, “And Then All Hell Broke Loose” succeeds on many levels.

Engel is a foreign correspondent for NBC News. The recipient of numerous awards including the Medill Medal for Courage in Journalism, he attended the highly-competitive Riverdale Country School before matriculating to Stanford University, where he completed his B.A. in international relations in 1996. His career has included stints at CNN and ABC. Engel is fluent in Arabic, Italian and Spanish. He is considered somewhat of an expert on the Middle East; his previous books include “War Journal: My Five Years in Iraq,” “A Fist in the Hornet’s Nest: On the Ground in Baghdad Before, During and After the War” and “Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe,” which he co-wrote with Malcolm Nance.

Beyond the overarching ramifications that constitute the bulk of Engel’s thesis, I also learned a great deal about the various sects and factions that make up the Islamic tradition in the Middle East – details that often are not reported in the major news outlets, or only reported in limited scope without the full context needed to accurately interpret their underlying significance. For instance, I’ll bet many readers are unaware of the immense implications associated with Saddam’s overthrow and ultimate execution.

“Shiites commemorate Hussein’s death every year in Karbala, with an elaborate re-enactment and crowds approaching 2 million,” Engel writes in the fifth chapter. “Their sense of grievance is exacerbated by their minority status in the Muslim world, where they represent a majority only in Iran (90 to 95 percent of the population), Iraq (60 to 65 percent), and Bahrain (60 to 70 percent). That Saddam Hussein was a Sunni, a despot from a minority sect who reserved power and patronage for fellow Sunnis and who had slaughtered many thousands of Shiites, explains why the American invasion represented much more than the toppling of a tyrant.

“For the Shiites, it was both a political victory and a moment of religious ecstasy,” he adds. “The Americans, they believed, had helped complete Hussein’s seventh-century mission and would eventually return them to power.”

As is often the case with many of my reviews, I would like to be able to report that Engel is optimistic about what the future holds for the region. And to be honest, I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop as he went into meticulous detail about how bad things are and how utterly hopeless the prospects seem to be for those who call the Middle East their home. But alas, this was not the case. The picture he paints of how the next few decades will probably play out is dismal.

“When the strongmen I suspect are coming try to claw their way to power, they will encounter a generation of young people shaped by this chaos – uneducated, inured to violence by ISIS videos and the atrocities they have seen firsthand, and dehumanized by squalid refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon and from living in train stations and in fields on the long march to Europe,” Engel concludes near the end of the book. “Can kids like these regain their appreciation of human life? They will be in their 20s and 30s when people my age are in their 50s and 60s. They will not be like convicted murderers in the United States, who are released from prison as old men, usually too broken and tired to commit another crime. These young Muslim men will be in the prime of their killing years.”

Yes, given the present trajectory of world events, Engel sees the prognosis for the Middle East as rather grim – at least for the first half of the 21st century. But awareness is usually a necessary prerequisite for improvement and this book provides that in spades. Pick up a copy.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.