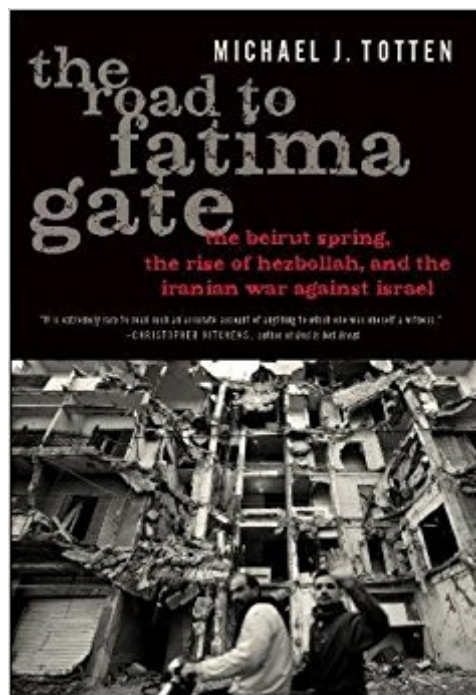




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The Road To Fatima Gate: The Beirut Spring, The Rise Of Hezbollah, And The Iranian War Against Israel



Synopsis

The Road to Fatima Gate is a first-person narrative account of revolution, terrorism, and war during history's violent return to Lebanon after fifteen years of quiet. Michael J. Totten's version of events in one of the most volatile countries in the world's most volatile region is one part war correspondence, one part memoir, and one part road movie. He sets up camp in a tent city built in downtown Beirut by anti-Syrian dissidents, is bullied and menaced by Hezbollah's supposedly friendly "media relations" department, crouches under fire on the Lebanese-Israeli border during the six-week war in 2006, witnesses an Israeli ground invasion from behind a line of Merkava tanks, sneaks into Hezbollah's post-war rubblescape without authorization, and is attacked in Beirut by militiamen who enforce obedience to the "resistance" at the point of a gun. From the "Cedar Revolution" that ousted the occupying Syrian military regime in 2005, to the devastating war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006, and to Hezbollah's slow-motion but violent assault on Lebanon's elected government and capital, Totten's account is both personal and comprehensive. He simplifies the bewildering complexity of the Middle East, has access to major regional players as well as to the man on the street, and personally witnesses most of the events he describes. The Road to Fatima Gate should be indispensable reading for anyone interested in the Middle East, Iran's expansionist foreign policy, the Arab-Israeli conflict, asymmetric warfare, and terrorism in the aftermath of September 11.

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Customer Reviews

Michael J. Totten is an award-winning journalist and prize-winning author whose very first book, The

Road to Fatima Gate, won the Washington Institute Book Prize. He has taken road trips to war zones, sneaked into police states under false pretenses, dodged incoming rocket and mortar fire, stayed in some of the worst hotels ever built anywhere, slipped past the hostile side of a front line, been accused of being a spy, received death threats from terrorists, and been mugged by Egyptian police officers. When he's not doing or writing about these things, he writes novels. His work has appeared in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and The New Republic among numerous other publications, and he's a contributing editor at World Affairs and City Journal. He has reported widely from the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, Latin America, and the Balkans. A former resident of Beirut, he lives in Oregon with his wife and two cats.Â

I picked this book because I served at the US Embassy in Beirut from 1996-97. I retired in 2000 and was out of the loop on what was really happening in Beirut since I no longer had access to the reporting on politics there, that I had when I was still working at the State Department. Totten's book is full of facts and many details that anyone who wants to look closely at Lebanese politics should read. His stories of clashes with Hizbollah, among other terrorist groups operating there, is well worth the time to read. Beirut is a fascinating city, one I wish I could have explored on foot rather than from an armored vehicle in a convoy careening around town. We had to travel to Beirut from Cyprus on US Army operated helicopters, as the airport was considered unsafe during my time in Lebanon. During my time in Beirut the State Dept. considered it the most dangerous assignment in the world. This book should be read by Middle East scholars

It is hard to put down The Road to Fatima Gate. Totten turns arcane subject matter into flowing prose, and lets his subjects speak for themselves. Michael Totten is not an academic, and he's not a political activist. He's a concerned American citizen who happens to be an excellent writer. This makes him a journalist, but that title doesn't fully suite him either, because it often implies reporting on deadline. His interest is not in parachuting into a foreign capital, interviewing the most important political actors and academics, writing about it, and leaving. Totten truly wants to understand the Middle East. As is apparent in The Road to Fatima Gate, Totten arrived in the region for the first time already well versed in the academic and political theories on Lebanon, Israel, and the Middle East at large. However, those works did not describe the place Totten saw. Lebanon and Israel and the people living there were nothing like what he read in books and saw in the news. The first thing he needed to do was to reorient himself. Totten writes that he was apprehensive on arrival in Beirut, but suddenly recognized that the images didn't match the place. A young man in a bar says to him,

"You must be crazy to be here." Totten responds, ""You really think so?" I said. I didn't feel crazy to be there. That feeling passed after twenty-four hours" (7). But, of course, how could he know for sure? He didn't do what many journalists would have done: run to the politicians and the political risk consultants and the academics. He talked to the people. He went to their houses, dined with them, and drank tea. It seems his stringers were nice people he met along the way who offered to help him understand this complex place. Totten recognizes that he could not fully understand the biases of his sources, so he talks to as many people as possible. Despite his initial bias against certain factions, like Hezbollah, Totten talks to them. What makes him different than journalists is that he is not looking to portray an overarching concept in a headline and 2,000 words, ie "Hezbollah Attacks Beirut, Settles Scores," "Does the US Need Dialogue with Hezbollah?," "Regional Instability Increases Sectarian Tension in Lebanon." He will describe those same situations and convey his positions on those matters, but only after letting the people speak for themselves. Often times, Totten's sources hang themselves with their words and actions, like when Hezbollah's press relations manager threatens Totten and his photographer, and when Syrian Social Nationalist thugs beat Christopher Hitchens in the middle of a main thoroughfare as Totten tries to rescue him. At other moments, Totten provides a voice to political parties, like the Christian Aounists, little understood in the West (and even within Lebanon). His interviewees appear endearing, and it is left to the reader to recognize their naivete, which Totten often does not need to point out, as he does not selectively quote them and lets them speak for themselves over the course of many pages. In this regard, he is more of an oral historian of the Middle East in the tradition of Studs Terkel than he is a journalist. Totten isn't just telling a story. He is trying to depict lives. An entire chapter is based on a long conversation at a cafe with the previously mentioned Aounists prior to a rally they held alongside Hezbollah to overthrow the government. It is a compelling read, and provides a fair assessment of these Christian men and their motivations for supporting what most Americans believe is a radical Muslim terrorist organization. Like Terkel, Totten has his biases, which are apparent in the text, even if he is sometimes not even aware of them. Like any concerned citizen (and even oral historian) writing about a contemporary issue, Totten makes moral judgements, which will upset people who differ with his opinion. However, Totten reveals his thinking and the process through which he made his opinion. Often, the reader is left in agreement: "The spokesman hung himself with his own words," "That action was unjust," "They seem to be good people, but misguided." My only major qualm with the work is due to something out of Totten's control: that he cannot be in two places at one time. Totten covers the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah from the Israeli side of the border. At that moment, the road

he takes to Fatima Gate is from the south, and he does an excellent job conveying the physical destruction in northern Israeli and giving voice to bombarded Israelis. Not only do those chapters manifest the implications of Lebanon's unstable and violent politics on other countries, but they provide the reader insight into the minds and motivations of Israelis and how much their domestic interests are determined by foreign actors. Totten is so good at conveying the emotions and details of lives that it would have been nice to see effect of that violence on the northern side of the border. Totten makes up for it with what I think is his best chapter - the one that reads like an action novel - on the 2008 Hezbollah invasion of Beirut. Not only will *The Road to Fatima Gate* provide readers with fingerspitzengefühl knowledge of Lebanon, but it will be a fun read, as well.

Drawing together his reporting from the last half-decade in Lebanon and Israel, Totten lets people make their case, or give their opinions, unencumbered. Between hair-raising accounts of visits to dangerous locales, he manages to lead the reader through the ecology of Lebanon -- the people there (Christian, Muslim, Druze) with all their violent factions -- and the players over the horizon (Syria, Iran, Israel, France, the US) who often have agendas at odds with local peace and prosperity. For readers with little or no background in the history of the country (let alone the region), "*The Road to Fatima Gate*" is an excellent introduction. Totten's writing style is vivid, modern, and well-paced. He describes recent events and provides historical background to events and attitudes, as appropriate. Readers will now find newspaper or online accounts of events in Lebanon far more comprehensible. Tales of parties switching sides, thinking short-term, and embracing zero-sum gaming, will trigger more compassion than disdain. It makes for a sober account, all in all. As the author notes in this book, he finally stopped asking people about "their solution," because it's clear that the resolution of conflict in Lebanon is going to be triggered by changes outside the country. The latest turmoil in Syria (occurring too late for inclusion in the book) is one possible source. A Green Revolution in Iran would be another. And the reader is left with the impression that any removal of outside influence will simply kick off another round of domestic "solutions" ... often at the point of a gun. Lee Smith's Strong Horse model is scalable. The reader will come away with an appreciation for the plight of the Lebanese ... and a better understanding of why "getting out" is often the solution of choice for some Lebanese. All the more tragic in light of what the natural resources and beauty of the area might offer in an era of real peace. Lebanon ought to be the place where East meets West with greatest prosperity for both. There's no sign of that coming soon in this book. Reading *The Road to Fatima Gate* is an opportunity to count one's blessings. Buying *The Road to Fatima Gate* is an opportunity to sponsor, and acknowledge, an important new style of

journalism by an excellent, humane writer.

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