Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East


Reviewed by Carol J. Riphenburg.

Radwan Ziadeh is a member of the Syrian opposition, director of the Damascus Center for Human Rights in Washington, and a law professor at Georgetown University. While writing before the wave of revolutions that has lately spread across the Middle East, Ziadeh provides an insider’s point of view on Syrian politics during Bashar al-Asad’s first decade of power. He was a member of the reformists who comprised the Damascus spring—a period of intense political and social debate in Syria, which began after the death of President Hafiz al-Asad in June 2000 and continued episodically to the fall of 2001. At that time, the government suppressed most of the activities associated with this brief opportunity for change. What could be more intriguing than for the author to write an epilogue on how this early political awakening in Syria at the beginning of the century may have contributed in some way to the proclivity of Syrian youths to join in the uprisings sweeping the Arab world today.

In its five chapters, Ziadeh’s work mentions Syria’s history after independence in 1946, the country’s domestic politics including Hafez al-Asad’s rise to power, the succession of Bashar al-Asad, the Damascus spring, Syria’s foreign policy, and a final chapter dealing with the nation’s Islamic politics. Ziadeh divides Syria’s history since independence into three republics: creation in 1946, unification with Egypt in 1958, and the revolutionary state dating from the Ba’ath Party coup of 1963 to the present. In 1970, the party’s military wing under Hafez al-Asad effected the last of a series of coups that typify Syria’s post-independence history.

Although Ziadeh states that academic studies of Syria place “too much emphasis on a particular Syrian leader without attempting to study what mechanisms lie beneath it,” his analysis finds some difficulty in penetrating deeper given the opaque, secretive, and autocratic nature of the regime of Hafez al-Asad and his son and heir-successor, Bashar al-Asad.

Ziadeh himself points out the difficulties identifying the devices underlining decision-making in Syria, He mentions that President Hafez al-Asad was “completely and single-handedly the one decision-maker who could set in motion any all-inclusive system at his disposal.” Once Hafez al-Asad acquired some domestic legitimacy through a democratic façade of parliament (People’s Assembly of Syria), a supporting oppositional coalition (National Progressive Front), and a constitution (1973, amending the temporary one of 1969), he proceeded to build a bureaucratic cadre in pyramidal form with the head of state at its apex. The three sides of the pyramid consisted of the government administration, the army and security organs (intelligence), and the party. Seeking greater legitimacy by establishing regional revolutionary credentials, in 1973 Asad went to war with Israel to liberate the Golan Heights, but only succeeded in regaining al-Qunaytirah. Subsequently, with funding from oil-rich Arab countries and Syria’s own oil revenues, he lavishly spent on an extensive security system. Ziadeh estimates that there is one secret police operative for every 257 Syrians.

With the repression of the Damascus spring and his engineered rise to power, Bashar al-Asad should be seen as the inheritor of his father’s regime rather than in any way a reformer, according to Ziadeh. The political system consecrated under Asad the elder is still very operative today. It demonstrates a dictatorial government monopoly over all fields, a bureaucratic environment pervaded by fear, the concentration of political power in the hands of a military elite, the development of a new political elite from rural areas and ensuing changes in the makeup of national politics, and the creation of powerful social, economic, and military networks at the fringes of state institutions, based on patterns of loyalty and personal relationships.
In addition to general information about Syrian politics since 1970, Ziadeh’s work provides a discerning presentation of the intelligence services sustaining the omnipresent Asad presidencies. The National Security Bureau supervises four bodies concerned with security, all four of which are subordinated to the regional leadership of the Ba’th Party. These bodies have branches in all governorates, which have legal immunity and “always went beyond their competence.” The result is an “Orwellian system of surveillance.” In the introduction, the author portrays his own experiences of interrogation by the security forces, leading to his ultimate exit from the country. The massive bureaucracy buttressing the power of the presidency and its security organs is described as an implacable labyrinth with significant influence on legal, economic, and political decisions.

Ziadeh’s comments on the Damascus spring seem haunting today as a similar uprising is taking place, facing all the repressive tools of an overpowering dictatorship. For instance, he states that “Democracy was not the greatest preoccupation among the Syrian elites until the period of the ‘Damascus spring.’” He asks: “How do we read the future of this democratic movement? How much value did the Damascus spring add to the accumulation of a political consciousness in Syria?” At the time the author saw the Damascus spring both as “a mutation in a history of continuous inactivity” and as “a real separation from previous opposition movements in its discourse, slogans, objectives and practice.”

His description of the Syrian regime’s “domination of the vital aspects of society such as parties, trade unions and media—as well as the ban on forming organizations and independent radio or television channels” which makes “the issue of democratic struggle difficult and risky work,” certainly rings true in today’s Middle East. While positing the year 2010 as a “unique state in Syria’s history” with the country “now at a crossroads,” Ziadeh could not have foreseen the dramatic historical events that unfolded across the Arab world in 2011. Still, his portrayal of the work of the muntadāt (salons or forums), the cries for freedom reflected in such documents as the Communiqué of the 99 Intellectuals and the Manifesto of the Thousand, and the organization of new parties and human rights groups during the Damascus spring needs to be reexamined in light of recent events. Ziadeh does see the promise of the Internet as “a great democratic leveler, where different streams and ideologies interact freely.” However, he notes that tens of participants and electronic declarations and critiques are critical but insufficient means of transforming the democratic movement in Syria into an effective force. It takes a spark like the actions of a young man setting himself on fire in Tunisia in January, 2011. And it will not be easy. Ziadeh himself is aware that the build up of democracy in Syrians’ political awareness comes at a high price.

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