Book Review:

*The Other Side of the Mirror: an American Travels Through Syria.*


Reviewed by Samuel Dolbee

Brooke Allen closes the introductory chapter of her Syrian travel narrative with an explanation of the book’s mission and title, *The Other Side of the Mirror:* “to visit Syria is to confront the unhappy truth...that much of the international news we read or see...serves not as a window looking out at the world but as a mirror: a mirror that reflects our own fears and obsessions and shines them right back at us.” (28) Allen’s work, then, is an effort to move, as the title suggests, beyond American preconceived notions about Syria and Syrians and, instead, see the reality beneath these distortions and stereotypes. Allen, an essayist and critic whose most recent book detailed the irreligious nature of America’s founding fathers, generally succeeds in this task. She is at her best when she debunks these inaccuracies throughout her wanderings, peppering deep contemplation of the past with vivid observations of her surroundings.

The travels that form the body of the book occurred in two installments in 2009: for two weeks with her husband and two teenage daughters in the spring; and again with an old friend in the autumn of that year. The text is arranged in five thematic chapters and does not adhere to a chronological timeline regarding either Syrian history or Allen’s travels.

What above all distinguishes Allen’s work is the aplomb with which she argues against the notion of a Western monopoly on Greco-Roman civilization as a primogenitor and the seamless way she weaves this argument with her travels. Although she had little knowledge of Syria prior to her visit and must rely on French and English to communicate with Syrians, she has clearly done extensive reading, citing poets from Nizar Qabbani to al-Mutannabi and scholars from Amin Maalouf to Lisa Wedeen. This level of erudition – well beyond that of most writers of travel narratives – enables her to bring together ruminations on modern, medieval, and pre-Islamic history to make a convincing case for the utter fallacy of the concept that “Western” civilization was the sole inheritor of Greco-Roman civilization. “In the West, we have been educated to see the mainstream of civilization...as a Western affair,” Allen writes. (57) With the pithiness that characterizes much of her writing, Allen continues, “Here, all this stands revealed as nonsense.” (57) Seeing the remnants of the Greek agora in the courtyard of the Ummayad Mosque or the tradition of the Roman bathhouse in the Syrian hammam, Allen adeptly conveys Syria’s rich historical tapestry. She continues this nuanced estimation of historical content and context with respect to other epochs as well, characterizing, for example, the 1839 Ottoman Gülhane Decree as “revolutionary not only by Ottoman standards but by any standards of that era.” (119)

Allen also vanquishes a number of common misconceptions that have obdurately remained swirling in the American public sphere regarding the nature of contemporary Middle East politics more generally. She reminds readers, among other things, that opposition to Israel is different from anti-Semitism; the Holocaust occurred in Europe, not the Middle East; and those who wonder how Hizbullah can attract such a huge following could start to find an answer by looking at the social services they provide.

In addition to elucidating these important matters, Allen rises above the American-media driven
stereotype of a country filled with violent extremists by detailing numerous interactions with the consumately friendly people of “the most welcoming” country she has ever visited. (1) Encountering none of the “knee-jerk, virulent anti-Americanism that is so common in Western Europe”, Allen instead found Syrians without fail differentiated between her and her country. (8) Indeed, many were eager to engage her with their affinity for various English-language cultural forms. For example, Allen and her travelling companion encountered a lover of English poetry, who delighted in listening to Allen’s companion recite verses from Gray, Donne, and Eliot. Another Syrian acquaintance’s proclivities angled toward an altogether different form of poetry; this young man hoped “to be the Arab Eminem.” (27) Meanwhile, the boy’s mother often invoked Dr. Phil. (27) Moreover, as consumers of American media are surely surprised to learn, Syrians do in fact wear lingerie, which, Allen adds, “is sold quite openly.” (39) All of these points go to show that Syrians are not so different after all.

An acerbic wit pervades Allen’s musings. Lady Hester Stanhope, a two-centuries previous English traveler to Syria, is “one of the preeminent lunatics of the nineteenth century.” (81) The Wahhabi leaders of Saudi Arabia are “Bedouin rubes with oil money and a smattering of first-generation sophistication.” (170) Upon finding a clean bathroom at Masyaf, Allen adds, “with toilet paper, mirabile dictu.” (176) Misspelled advertisements and menus (in English) are “excellent signage.” (130) Nor does America evade Allen’s critical eye. At times this self-reflection prompts a reluctance to judge: after all, “a country that has given the world Las Vegas, Graceland, and Trump Tower has no room to scoff at other nations’ lapses in taste.” (170) But Allen’s disdain for Elvis-inspired kitsch notwithstanding, unvarnished aesthetic assessments of places on her itinerary may leave some readers all shook up. Palmyra is a “hick town”; (93) Lattakia is “nasty.” (107) With respect to the latter observation, she returns to the words of her favorite English eccentric, who happened to share Allen’s sentiment on Lattakia; since Stanhope’s time, Allen adds, Lattakia has “certainly not improved.” (107)

Indeed, for Allen and her longue durée perspective, Syria is a place of “essential continuity” as “the same trends and themes and cultural traits would crop up again and again, in different guises, throughout the centuries.” (24) Tracing these continuities can be interesting but other times it is problematic. Regarding Hafiz al-Asad’s effort “to establish a dynasty,” Allen reasons, “This seems an outrage on our side of the mirror, but it is in the natural order of things in Syria, where one dynasty has followed another for millennia.” (246) Although Allen is obviously trying to respond to readers who might self-righteously fulminate against such nepotism, her presentation of Syria as a land ruled by a succession of Oriental despots contradicts her broader goal of moving past stereotypes. Even ignoring the question of what “Syria” means over the course of millennia, the generalization is inaccurate. A glance at Syria’s post-Ottoman ferment – to say nothing of ongoing protests throughout Syria today – reveals broad mobilizations of groups under various political banners making diverse claims about the nature of Syrian politics.

Allen’s deconstruction of prejudice most notably fails, however, in her treatment of the Shi’a. As she recounts her trip to the Sayyida Zaynab Mosque south of Damascus, she comments, “Here, at long last, I found the kind of extreme religious enthusiasm that Westerners associate with the Muslim world.” (171) While the subsequent discussion of Shi’ism involves grasping for comparisons legible to American readers – likening Shi’ism, for example, to “charismatic evangelical Christianity” – the portrait nevertheless remains deeply monolithic and uncharacteristically shallow: her image of Shi’a stems from her observation of them at pilgrimage sites, a discussion with an archaeologist acquaintance of hers, and a joke made by her driver about Shi’i proclivity for unthinking pilgrimage. (172) Speaking with a Shi’i pilgrim, apparently, did not make it onto Allen’s agenda. But as she segues to speaking about the medieval religious order-cum-hit squad of the Assassins, she introduces them as “extremist…even among the already extreme Shi’a.” (174) Allen backpedals from this statement to an extent, noting that today’s Isma’ils – unlike their forbears among the Assassins – are “respectable citizens.” (176) But the generalizations about pious Shi’i pilgrims remain untouched. For a book that aims to dismantle
stereotypes this type of language is especially puzzling.

Indeed, the presentation of the Shi’a as *those* Muslims points to the limitations of this particular attempt to move past the mirror. Going beyond simply interacting with the consumers of English-language popular culture might be too much to ask of a non-Arabic speaker conducting a month-long sojourn in Syria. But this oversight nevertheless leaves the “us vs. them” dichotomy reconfigured rather than rectified. More remains beyond the mirror, as it were. Ultimately, however, disappointment at this shortcoming stems from the high standard of self-reflection and acute observation that Allen establishes in this lively, readable, and thoughtful work that will be enjoyable both for those with no knowledge of Syria and veteran specialists alike.

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