Syrian Studies Association Bulletin

The Bulletin is the bi-annual publication of the Syrian Studies Association, an international association created to promote research and scholarly understanding of Syria. Andrea L. Stanton serves as Editor, with Beverly Tsacoyianis as Book Review Editor.

Taxis at Baramkeh Garage in the rain, February 2006. Credit: Andrea L Stanton

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Letter from the President

2012 has been a year full of activity for the Syrian Studies Association.

The SSA has prepared a new constitution for discussion at our board meeting at MESA. We have made some big changes. We felt that the SSA needed to modernize the way it selects officers and carries out elections. To that end, we have democratized our process. From now on, the SSA will ask the membership to nominate and vote on all officers.

Voting has taken place for a new Secretary/Treasurer, Member-at-Large, and Prize Committee Chair, all of which will be announced at MESA.

For the Dissertation Prize, to be announced at MESA, we had a whopping nine entries. Steve Tamari, the head of the Prize Committee writes that the entries cover “a host of issues from WW I to Palestinian refugees, to music, and Sayyida Zaynab. All are written by women, too! We have entries from Ireland, England (3), Sweden, USA (3), and Canada. The fields represented are sociology, political science, music, anthropology, and religious studies.”

Here are the entries:


Fred Lawson and Heghnar Watenpaugh have organized a terrific panel that will follow the SSA business meeting on Saturday, November 17, 2012. Titled “Perspectives on the Syrian Uprisings”, it will include: Rebecca Joubin, Seda Altug, Max Weiss, Keith Watenpaugh, and Ben Smuin.

Andrea Stanton, Bulletin Editor and Beverly Tsacoyianis, Book Review Editor, have put together another excellent issue of the SSA bulletin.

Joshua Landis
November 2012
2. Sunday, 11/18, 4:30pm:

Blurring Nationalism and Religion in the Early 20th-Century Middle East (P2985)  
Anthony Smith has defined nationalism as “a new religion of the people,” with its own prophets, scriptures, holy days, and rituals. Nationalism, rooted in the triumph of secular ideologies of the 19th and early 20th centuries, clearly demonstrated religious qualities. This panel aims to reconsider the nature of the relationship between religion and nationalism in the Middle East following World War I by considering the following questions: How did religion, religious practices and religious classes address nationalist discourse? Did nationalists, as the creators of nationalist rhetoric, did the authors of nationalist rhetoric couch nationalism in religious terms or symbols, and to what extent did they link national struggles or the nation to religion? Were there any attempts to reform, rationalize, modify or nationalize religious ideas, rituals or organizations? How did religious classes and institutions engage nationalist movements and try to shape their respective politics and economies? What did the rise of national consciousness mean to the religious or sectarian minorities? Our first paper will analyze conflicting views of religion held by exiled Kurdish nationalists living in Syria and Lebanon under French mandatory rule. The second paper discusses an activist network in Latin America that linked the Maronite Church to Lebanese emigrant parties and its impact on Lebanese nationalist ideology and the church during the early Mandate period. Our third paper, focusing on investment in Lebanese energy companies, examines the role of the Maronite Church as a material and rhetorical force in the creation of a distinctively national Lebanese economy within the wider French mandate in the inter-war period. The final paper will offer an analysis of al-Azhar’s role, through student and ulema activism, in the Egyptian anti-colonial movement prior to and during the 1919 revolution, and ways in which such activism blurred the lines between secular nationalism and religion.

figure of the (Arab) primordial national conflict with the figure of the newly-invented, internationally-recognized citizen? What role did education play under the mandate in creating civic identity and counter-narratives to colonial citizenship? What were the differences in citizenship rights and duties under the system of mandates administered by France as opposed to Britain? Emigrant and refugee status are key to these discourses.

Equally important is the position of Arab emigrants who had been born Ottoman nationals but left their homelands before or after the imposition of mandates. In various cases, these native Arabs could not return to their homelands to claim citizenship. In cases such as this, the practices of nationality as discussed by the Arabs came into contrast with the colonial imposition of citizenship. Historians have focused heavily on nationalism and the development of national identities in the post-Ottoman world but the study of nationality and its relation to citizenship have yet to be fully explored. This panel will explore just that, as well as begin the process of comparing how Arabs in different mandates internalized citizenship, as well as practiced and rejected components of its civil, political and social rights.

Shira Robinson (George Washington University), Chair

Benjamin Thomas White (University of Birmingham), “Refugees and Nationality in 1920s Syria and Lebanon”


Hilary Falb (University of California, Berkeley), “‘Are They Educating Their Pupils for a World in which They are To Be First or Second?’: Government Schools and Citizenship in the Mandates for Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Palestine

Seda Altug (Boğaziçi University), “Debating Syrianness in French-Syria (1936-1939)”

Will Hanley (Florida State University), Discussant
presenting both local and trans-global perspectives, the papers will make use of archival documents, periodicals, private collections, interviews, and diaries in Arabic, English, French, Kurmaji Kurdish, and Turkish. In their respective historical contexts, the panelists will demonstrate the fluid dynamics that characterized the reciprocal interaction of religious and nationalist discourse as well as the role of the church in bolstering the emergent state, its policies and economics.

Lisa Pollard (UNC Wilmington), Chair
Ahmet Serdar Akturk (University of Arkansas), “Many Faces of Religion: Kurdish Nationalism in French Mandatory Levant”
Matthew Parnell (University of Arkansas), “What is ‘National Unity?’: Religion, Egyptian Nationalism and the 1919 Revolution”
Stacy Diane Fahrenthold (Northeastern University), “Men of the Nation, Men of the Cloth: Lebanese Diasporic Nationalism and the Church, 1919-1932”
Simon Jackson (European University Institute, Florence), “Sacred Infrastructure: the Maronite Church as Institutional Shareholder in Mandate-Era Economic Development”
Joel Gordon (University of Arkansas), Discussant

3. Monday, 11/19, 2:30pm:

Mapping Spaces of Inclusion and Exclusion: Sociability in Ottoman Syria (P3118)
What can we learn about the intersection of everyday social practice and imperial power within the walls of favored Ottoman institutions? How is Ottoman authority sustained and/or contested in public bathhouses, coffeehouses, and imarets? How do these institutions treat social difference in the form of Muslim and non-Muslim, and male and female, and urban and rural identities? Drawing upon interdisciplinary methods and archival research, the panelists will show how many local and global trends converged within the bathhouses, coffeehouses, and imarets situated along caravan routes and major arteries in the empire. The panel begins with an examination of the structure and uses of the coffeehouses in Ottoman Aleppo, with special attention to the Coffeehouse of the Waqf of Iphsir Pasha, Aleppo (1653). The rise of new commodities, sociability, and leisure culture in Aleppo's coffeehouses will be linked to the wider global consumption in coffee as well as to the broader architectural environment of the city. The second paper examines urban bathhouses through the lens of eighteenth century bathhouse regulations that sought to segregate Muslim women from non-Muslim women. The author will examine the juridical basis for barring mixed confessional bathing and place it within the context of Ottoman anxiety over the transgression of non-Muslims in public space. The next paper maps bathhouses in Ottoman Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama using historical and archaeological methods to document commonalities and differences. Drawing upon a database of rural baths in Ottoman Syria, the author will examine the ways urban and rural bathhouses were Ottomanized as well as the ways rural bathhouses adapted to local needs and tastes. Another paper explores imperial soup kitchens (imarets) situated along the main pilgrimage and trade routes in Syria. Using endowment deeds, chronicles and travel accounts, the author examines social inclusion or exclusion within imperial public kitchens and mosques. The panel finishes with a discussion of social gatherings in the private space of the home, including courtyards and gardens in sixteenth century Damascus with special attention to ethnic differences between Ottomans and local Arabs who encountered each other in these gatherings and the power relations brokered through social networking. Through the lens of multiple spaces, the panel examines coffeehouses, bathhouses, imarets, and private homes as loci of global and imperial interests that are sustained and, at other times, contested in popular rural and urban social practice.
Helen Pfeifer (Princeton University), “Meet Me in the Majlis: Sociability and Ethnicity in Sixteenth-Century Damascus”
Heghnar Watenpaugh (University of California, Davis), “The Coffeehouse: Architecture and Sociability in the Ottoman City”
Vivian Elyse Semerdjian (Whitman College), “Nudity and the Dhimmi Woman: Regulating Co-Confessional Bathing in Eighteenth Century Aleppo”
Astrid Meier (University of Halle-Wittenberg), “An Ottomanization of the Countryside? Village Bathhouses in Ottoman Syria (Damascus, Aleppo, Hama)”
Marianne Boqvist (Swedish Research Institute, Istanbul), “Hospitality Unlimited or Confined? Imperial Imarets on Ottoman Syrian Highways”

**Full List of Syria-Related Papers**

**Saturday, 11/17, 5:30pm:**
[P3204-13281] Aleppine Armenians during the Last Decades of the Nineteenth and the First Quarter of the Twentieth Centuries by Serife Eroglu Memis
[P3021-12772] Collective Memory and Nationalist Narrative: On the Possibility of Recounting a "Syrian Experience" of the First World War by James L. Gelvin

**Sunday, 11/18, 8:30am:**
[P3134-13612] The Radicalization and Ruralization of the Ba'ath Party by Bassam Haddad
[P3210-13637] Aspects of Integration and Segregation among the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Communities of 17th-Century Ottoman Aleppo by Charles L. Wilkins

**Sunday, 11/18, 11:00am:**
[P3022-12821] Ideological Mobilization in the Age of the Crusades: The Evidence of the Manuscripts by R. Stephen Humphreys
[P3022-13283] The role of Ibn Sa'd's Tabaqat in Ibn 'Asakir's Tarikh Dimashq by Ahmad Nazir Atassi
[P3022-12858] Leveraging the Sahaba: Discourses of Orthodoxy and Sunni Revival by Nancy Khalek

**Sunday, 11/18, 2:00pm:**
[P3035-12770] Jihad Propaganda in Damascus: Scholars, Rulers, and the Masses by James E. Lindsay
[P3035-12860] The Earliest Documented Arabic Book Collection: The Profile of an Endowed Library in 13th-Century Damascus by Konrad Hirschler

**Sunday, 11/18, 4:30pm:**
[P3175-12818] The Echoes of Fitna: Developing Historiographical Interpretations of the Battle of Siffin by Aaron Hagler

**Monday, 11/19, 8:30am:**

**Monday, 11/19, 2:30pm:**
[P3129-13323] Court Astrologers and Historical Writing in Early Islam by Antoine Borrut
[P3129-13256] Maghazi and Imperial Ideology in Late Antique Syria: Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri as a Case Study by Sean Anthony

[P3129-13478] Was Al-Zuhri an Umayyad Court Historian? by Steven C. Judd

[P3202-13605] Peasants, Pests, and Pine Trees: State Power and Environmental Control in Late Ottoman Syria by Samuel Dolbee


Monday, 11/19, 5:00pm:

[P3147-13655] Demanding Images: Documenting Revolution in Syria by Anne-Marie McManus

[P3137-13326] “Shaykh Salih al-?Ali” between Local Uprising and Nationalist Revolt by Max Weiss

[P3148-13495] From "Let Me finish" to "Eat Shit": How a Lebanese Political Talk Show on the Conflict in Syria Went Sour by Nadine Hamdan

Tuesday, 11/20, 8:30am:


[P3184-13712] Cultivating Land, Negotiating Change: The History of an Ottoman Agricultural School by Elizabeth Williams


Tuesday, 11/20, 11:00am:


[P3000-12752] New Evidence for the Survival of Libertine Rites among Some Nusayri 'Alawis of the Nineteenth Century by Bella Tendler


Tuesday, 11/20, 1:30pm:

[P3049-12885] Confession over Community: Forced Decisions in 1919 Palestine by Andrew Patrick

[P3045-12950] Prelude to an Uprising: Syrian Fictional Television and Socio-Political Critique by Christa Salamandra

Zayde Antrim is Secretary/Treasurer of the Syrian Studies Association and Associate Professor of History and International Studies at Trinity College.

Feature Articles

Buq'at Dau‘ (Spotlight) Part 9 (2012): Tanfis (Airing), a Democratic Façade, Delayed Retribution, and Artistic Craftiness

Rebecca Joubin

A sleek, chauffer-driven car approaches a tall building. A dignified, love-struck man in a gray suit descends and peers longingly at his office. He opens his office door, and swoons as if to a lover, “Sabah al-Khayr, Sabah al-Ward, Sabah al-Ful, al-Yasmin. Oh, if only you knew how I struggled to reach a time like this when it is just you and me.” As he approaches, the camera shows that he is not talking to a lover, but to his chair, which he caresses and embraces. Breathing heavily, he proclaims, “You’re my love, dearer to me than my children, my mother, my father. You are my life. My God, you’re beautiful. I’m prepared to sell my son, wife, sister, children for you. Allah, what fine leather. I swear nothing in this world will separate me from you. You and no one else.”

As he sits in the chair, a group of men with flowers surround the secretary saying they wish to congratulate the new director. When she approaches him for permission, he orders her to make them stand at a distance, since he is “sensitive.” Additionally, he demands that they place themselves in a straight line so no one can hide himself behind the other. He tells himself, “They need to be aware that I’m firmly established, and that if anyone thinks
about attaining my chair, it will be the last day of his life.”

As the men enter the room, his suspicions heighten, in particular of Ahmad and Bashar. A nightmare that the two men are stealing his chair shakes him in the middle of the night. He quickly calls his secretary and demands that she head to the office with a file of all department heads. The next morning, he transfers Ahmad from Damascus to Qamishli. Still mistrustful, he sits on his chair as his secretary and employee push him through the hallway to sign paperwork. He then desperately searches for a way to get rid of Besher. His solution for Besher’s demise is clear when we see him entering a room full of mourners. Two thugs (shabiha) in black glasses deliver the director’s chair, which he clutches during the funeral. Though he has eliminated his rivals, his doubts do not dwindle. He dines out accompanied by his chair; shops with his wife as thugs transports his chair alongside him; he sleeps handcuffed to his chair. The sketch ends with the insecure director surrounding the chair with piles of large brown sacks. Toting a gun, he hugs and kisses his chair, vowing, “There is no power in the world that can separate us from each other. Remember what I told you thirty years ago, ‘You and no one else.’”

In this short sketch, written by Hazem Suleyman, in Buq’at Dau’ Part 9 (Ramadan 2012), it was not lost on the Syrian viewer that the director was a visual representation of Bashar al-Asad. Discussions of this sketch and others in Buq’at Dau’ this season manifested the split among intellectuals that has become accentuated during the uprising. Some discounted Buq’at Dau’, alleging that those who contributed to this season (as well as others) are muwali (supporters of the regime), an accusation often leveled against drama creators who sharply critique the regime without facing punishment. Others argue that the government is too distracted this season to really pay attention, and that the mu’arid (dissident) writers will pay the price later. Yet, others contend that these kinds of sketches are meant to paint a democratic façade to outside viewers. Previously such a sketch would have been held up as an example of Tanfis (Airing), a theoretical conception propagated by many Syrian intellectuals themselves, and aptly analyzed by Lisa Wedeen in Ambiguities of Domination. Yet, if Tanfis was intended as a means of letting out frustration in order to keep the population from protesting the regime, then surely it loses its meaning in today’s context when the wall of fear has been broken and resistance is a part of daily life in Syria.

The first season of the multi-year television mini-series Buq’at Dau’ Part 1 (Spotlight, 2001), which openly discussed taboo topics such as state corruption, sectarianism, and mukhabarat, was indicative of the hope that intellectuals felt during the first year of Bashar al-Asad’s presidency. Media specialist Marlin Dick documented how Suriya al-Dawliyya (Syria Art Production International), a leading television production company with connections to the state, approached two young, talented comedic actors to create a comic mini-series for the 2001 season. The two actors, Ayman Rida and Basim Yakhur, chose Laith al-Hajjo to direct Buq’at Dau’. This group came up with a sketch-based mini-series engaging in socio-political critique, and welcomed the participation of a multitude of actors and writers. President Bashar al-Asad’s 2000 inaugural address – in which he advocated tolerance of multiple opinions and a campaign against endemic corruption – inspired their courage and audacity to push the boundaries of accepted content. Though Vice President ‘Abd al-Halim Khaddam attempted to stop the show, the president intervened on its behalf. In his detailed analysis of the inauguration of Buq’at Dau’, Marlin Dick contends that this mini-series marked a departure from traditional musalsalat and brought together "revolutionary innovations in comedy form with more daring reformist content." He continues, “Spotlight has fused new approaches to comedy production – cinematic techniques combined with flourishes more in keeping with theater, an emphasis on collective talent over the individual, slapstick interspersed with social realism."
Noted television screenwriter Colette Bahna, argues that after these two key seasons, Buq'at Dau’ lost its exemplary cooperative and democratic spirit, yielding itself to the selfishness of individuals who aspired to dominate others. Additionally, she laments that the stipulations imposed on writers became increasingly harsh. Her sketches would appear in a truncated version once they were finally presented, ultimately leading her to cease affiliation with the show. Actor Jihad Abdo refused roles after season three due to increased arrogance of some its founders who each tried to usurp credit for its success. According to him, once acclaimed director Laith Hajjo exited the sketch comedy it went downhill, since only he was able to protect creative talent and standing up to the production companies to ensure a strong show. Scholars reiterate that due to artistic rivalries and tensions, Buq’at Dau’ eventually lost some of its initial momentum, just like the reform process it was seen as representing.

Similar rivalries that plagued the artistic creators of early the burlesque, politically-oriented Syrian comedies of the 1960s and 1970s afflicted those intellectuals involved in Buq’at Dau’, and this is not without significance. Indeed the direct nature of the government’s relationship to the intellectuals involved in television production exemplifies the capacity of the leaders to distribute privilege to some and not to others. The system’s heavily ingrained divide and conquer policy prompts inequities and ignites animosities, thereby upholding the foundation of the political system. Yet, in my opinion, despite divisions in the intellectual community, Buq’at Dau’ has continued to proffer innovative critique, a continuity of a long, deeply rooted tradition of political satire in Syrian drama.

Consider Season 6’s Al-Jundi al-Majhul (The Unknown Soldier), written by ‘Adnan Zira’i. Here we begin with Abu ‘Izz and his pregnant wife, Um ‘Izz, dancing in their home as a long line of mukhabarat forms outside their home. These mukhabarat believe that there are terrorists in the area and that they need to go up to a particular vantage point provided by this couple’s house to crush them. They barge into the couple’s house, and from the balcony, shoot at the “terrorists,” whom we never really see. Despite the dangers Abu ‘Izz and his wife are proud that their house is being used for nationalist purposes. As the sound of the bullets imbue the air, Um ‘Izz prepares tea and hands the tray to her husband to give the men as they are still shooting. Abu ‘Izz slides the tray of tea to the men, exclaiming, “Who are these terrorists? Why do they want to ruin our country?” The lights go out and their house is on fire as the shooting continues. Um ‘Izz goes into labor and begs her husband to take her to a hospital. He refuses, however, saying that they have a nationalist duty to stay home and help the mukhabarat. As the gunshots pierce the air, we hear the sound of a baby born into the chaos of the night. The next day, cameras arrive at the sights of their destroyed house, praising Um ‘Izz and Abu ‘Izz for standing by the mukhabarat to banish the terrorists. Um ‘Izz, holding her infant, declares in a sad voice that they willingly sacrifice themselves for their country; a now deaf Abu ‘Izz declares: Allah Akbar (God is Great). Here, we have a clear critique of citizens who buy into government propaganda, as well as indictment of the Syrian government that is willing to destroy its own country and citizens while professing to rid itself of the terrorists. It was as if Zira’i were predicting the massive government retaliation of the 2011 uprising against “terrorists,” which is costing the country its history and people. It is noteworthy that while Zira’i had originally gotten away with his sketches, he was arrested and imprisoned during spring 2012 when several of his earlier sketches were now held responsible for inciting the population.

According to Rania Jaban, the supervisor of Buq’at Dau’ Part 9, the increasing leniency of the censorship committee has allowed this season to reach new levels of political critique, though it sought to eliminate all obvious references to terms such as “shabiha.” She argues, however, that Buq’at Dau’ suffered from marketing problems and only aired on only three channels: Al-Manar, Al-Jadid, and Al-Dunya. Despite its audacity in perspective, many argue that this season is no longer marked by the
artistic collaboration that made earlier seasons exemplary, since Hazem Suleyman wrote the majority of the sketches. Critic Amer Sheik contends that the hegemony of one writer created one vision, which could have been summarized in just a couple episodes.\textsuperscript{xi} Ironically, despite the lack of internal democratic spirit among artists contributing to this season, this sketch comedy was one of the few mini-series of the season to make direct reference to the political uprising and society in the midst of war.

In Episode 2, \textit{Tajara al-Qabur} (The Tombstone Business), by Hazem Suleyman, members of the community fall into a mad frenzy about purchasing a gravestone, since so many are dying. Abu Omam, played by slapstick comedian, Ayman Rida, who wears a blue headscarf and talks incoherently, owns a grave business, and is having a hard time keeping up with people’s demands for nice spacious graves in prominent areas of the graveyard. As Abu Omam tries to convince one customer to take a remote grave, they hear explosions overhead. They decide to cut discussions short and write their contract. The sketch cuts to a scene of two men in front of a fruit stand. One man tells his friend about new deals to purchase a gravestone in installments, and his friend tells him that there now even exist graveyard projects in which you can register your name for a large plot where your entire families can be buried. We then cut back to a scene with Abu Omam surrounded by masses of people holding coffins and complaining that their corpses are starting to emit an odor. Just as Abu Omam insists that there is paucity of burial sites, they hear bombing sounds and they all enthusiastically agree to make a mass grave for the dead.

Several sketches deal directly with government manipulation of knowledge. In Episode 2, \textit{Kol Shay Tamam} (Everything is Okay) by Hazem Suleyman, a Syrian news channel announces its \textit{Mojez al-Akhabar} (News Highlight): “People in the world are jealous of our way of living; Syrian citizens want the price of mazotte (cheap diesel) to increase but the government refuses; there has been an increase in salaries and the people tell the government that it is doing far too much for them; one thousand new homes are ready for our youth.” After the news highlights, \textit{Lahza Haqiqiyeh} (A Moment of Truth) described as a show with “credibility and transparency” commences with news broadcaster Widad holding the microphone to a villager, Abu Ahmad. As his face reddens in anger as he complains, a voiceover says, “Our life is boring, since we have no problems. The director of our region calls us every day to see if we are okay. Our governor leaves good-night messages on our cell phone. \textit{Kol Shay Tamam} (Everything is okay). Don’t worry about us.” When the voiceover ends, Abu Ahmad grows more irate, but Widad quickly dashes off. In a factory, when Widad asks Abu Hassan about his life, he talks with passion and throws papers, as a sweet voice over says, “We have more than we need. We want to work more. The director refuses to have a higher salary than us, saying he is sitting and doing nothing. So, yes, \textit{Kol Shay Tamam}.” Widad then sees a woman on the street banging her own head in frustration as the voiceover repeats, “\textit{Kol Shay Tamam}.”

Let us end with an examination of an important sketch satirizing the government’s attempt to exploit television drama creators, based on the true story of the 2011 mini-series \textit{Fauq al-Saqf} (Above the Ceiling, originally entitled \textit{Al-Sha’b Yureed – What the People Want}), which was directed by Samer Barqawi and suddenly stopped airing after only fifteen episodes.\textsuperscript{xii} Written by a group of writers who also contribute \textit{Buq’at Dau’}, according to Barqawi, "The work aimed to touch the aspects of the crisis that were not dealt with in television before the crisis. We attempted to probe the new surface of freedom."\textsuperscript{xiii} Commissioned by the Information Minister, the mini-series was overtly political – it demanded freedom and was one of the first productions by the newly established Syrian Radio and TV Production Organization to broadcast on Syrian Arab satellite channel. Phrases and words like \textit{Al-Sha’b Yureed} (The People Want), \textit{Hurriyyeh} (Freedom), and \textit{Selmiyeh} (Peaceful) abounded in the scripts, words that were always on the news during this crisis.\textsuperscript{xiv}
The astounding circumstances of the government commissioning the writing of *Fauq al-Saqf* and the resulting confusion among the screenwriter community was satirized in *Bila Saqf* (Without a Roof), Episode 21, written by Nur Sheeshkely in *Buq’at Dau’* Part 9. This episode starts with screenwriter Hisham telling his wife Maysa that he is not able to concentrate on a new screenplay because of the fighting and instability surrounding him. Hisham immediately receives a phone call saying he is on “the list,” and his wife is immediately scared it is the “list of *Ar* (Shame)” compiled by the government indicating those intellectuals who are against in the regime. He runs out in fear to the meeting to which he is summoned. He sits at a table with a group of writers, anxious to know why they have gathered before him. A comical, preppy looking man comes in, with a loose blue shirt, beach hat, and sunglasses. He introduces them to Nasser, an official in a suit and dark black glasses, who hands a piece of paper to the preppy man to call out some names of the writers. Those who hear their name are ordered to stay. Nasser, speaking in long, run-on sentences, tells them that they are writers and that there are “some problems … actually many problems on the streets” and he wants the writers to write a sarcastic comedy on the upheaval they are now living in. He ensures that they are allowed to speak with complete courage about politics.

The writers ask about censorship, their level of freedom in expression, and Nasser responds that there is absolutely no ceiling. Then he orders them to go home and write. Hisham stays up all night trying to write, but is terrified. His wife says he should go the next day and see what others are writing. But the next day he sees that none of the other writers have an idea. Nasser insists they need to talk about freedom, but Hisham still cannot write and his wife hypothesizes that it is because they have never experienced freedom. At the next meeting, the writers are still confused, but Nasser insists, “The ceiling is gone. Complete freedom, no censorship, what else do you want? Talk… Lift the ceiling.” Hisham says he has idea of story of the son of a leader, but Nasser quickly discounts it. A woman says she has an idea about violence against women, but Nasser questions what women have to do with the current crisis. Another writer says he has a story of a spy. Nasser discounts them all and yells, “How do we benefit? What does it mean? What message? I said lift the ceiling!” The mini-series ends with the writers sweating profusely at the table, Nasser standing over them and ordering them to write their screenplay about *huriya* (freedom) immediately.xv

Syrian drama creators walk a fine line to introduce their subversive ideas. Even though television drama is not directly controlled by the government, as is the film industry, their production is extremely influential over the public and government officials closely monitor the messages that television conveys. The late poet, Mamduh ‘Adwan, a prominent Syrian drama screenwriter, lamented that intellectuals had to play an important balancing act in finding homeostasis between daily security co-opted by the state and engaging in all out creative rebellion. In turn, the best method of survival and articulation of their dissent was to find equilibrium with the bureaucratic contradictions of the ruling regime.xvi Recently it has been argued that while the previous generation was engaged in a constant struggle to widen the boundaries of accepted discourse, this new generation is implicated in "the whisper strategy," encouraging a comfortable dialogue with power as they produce drama.xvii I argue, however, that while there are some artists and intellectuals that the regime manages to “buy,” this kind of vast generalization not only presents Syrian intellectuals as a monolithic group, but also discredits attempts on the part of many drama creators to engage in metaphorical language in order to subvert the contradictions in official doctrine and state rhetoric. Additionally, by focusing merely on reasons the government allows this material to air, we are turning intellectuals and artists into passive participants, rather than savvy and seasoned individuals who navigate the perils to create truly subversive work. We can recall that although the censorship committee prohibited the use of the term *shabiha* in Season 9, murderous *shabiha* can be
seen in the first sketch illustrated above – “You and No one Else,” for example. In my research, I argue that many Syrian cultural producers such as those involved in *Buq’at Dau* have been able to cross over the red lines of prohibited discourse, question the very foundations of regime legitimacy and subvert official discourse, through innuendo, stratagem, and guise, thus underscoring artistic agency.

Rebecca Joubin is Assistant Professor and Chair of Arab Studies at Davidson College since fall 2009. She lived in Damascus from 2002 to 2008, and returned for fieldwork during the summer of 2010 and 2011. She is currently completing a manuscript on gender and politics in contemporary Syrian television drama.

**Modernization, Communal Space and Inter-Confessional Conflicts in Nineteenth-Century Damascus**

**Anais Massot**

In 1860 the Christian quarter of Damascus, called Maḥalla al- Naṣārā was attacked by a large group of people coming from different parts of the city. Many Christians were killed and their houses plundered. This event is part of a series of attacks against Christians in the Ottoman Empire in the mid 19th century. Violent historical events such as riots and events of communal violence are subject to a variety of interpretations. Classic theories about civil violence tend to be underlined by a specific conception of state-society relations based on the European historical experience. When non-European contexts are addressed it is through the prism of ‘ethnic violence’ between primordial groups. Context, structures, inter-personal networks and state policies are often ignored and groups are considered as given entities. This theoretical approach can be observed in the way the attacks on the Christian neighborhood of Damascus in 1860 have been interpreted in the context of the Ottoman reforms. Ottoman reformers and an early scholarship presented inter-confessional violence as setbacks on the way to modernization, outbursts of primordial inter-religious hatred demonstrating the need for further reforms. This modernizing discourse presents violence as an offshoot of traditionalism and associates ‘modernization’ with peaceful societal relations. However by examining inter-group relations in Damascus culminating in the 1860 attacks, it becomes clear that “modernizing” reforms, far from improving societal relations, actually contributed to inter-group conflicts in Damascus. Indeed, the Tanzimat reforms, in addition to other international or local dynamics, undermined the crosscutting urban fabric in which Christians and Jews played a variety of societal roles. In the previous centuries, the overlapping system of craft corporations, neighborhoods and patronage networks created crosscutting markers of identity that were as important as religion in defining one’s place in society. In the 19th century, the reforms, coupled with other dynamics, created a language of rights through which communities defined their identities and loyalties. In this process, religion became the main border on which society was imagined.

The 1860 riots have been explored through a variety of prisms but the communalization of space has not yet been explored. How was ‘communal space’ constructed through the language of the Tanzimat reforms and how did it contribute to inter-confessional conflict? In order to address this question, the changes to the urban fabric introduced by the Tanzimat will be explored. Then I will look at how the reforms enacted a paradoxical language of Christian rights that led to the communalization of space. Finally I will describe how a specific part of Maḥalla al- Naṣārā came be the target of resentments through the interaction of international relations and consular politics.

Ashutosh Varshney, in the context of India, indicates that violence or the lack of it in the context of conflicts can be explained by the strength of inter-ethnic civil engagement. He argues that the possibility of conflict transforming into violence depends on the presence or absence of crosscutting cleavages, blurring the border between binary groups. Such societal links also makes it harder for politicians
to polarize the society on the religious line.\textsuperscript{xxi} While Christians, Jews and Muslims had always been distinct religious groups, in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century their religious identities became the most important determinant of political alliances and relation to the state. Other societal borders such as class, status or guild were becoming less relevant in capturing popular imagination. This process was a consequence of both the undermining of the crosscutting system of urban governance and the politicization of religious identifications.

The \textit{Tanzimat} reforms attempted to undermine the urban fabric and networks of power in place through the creation of an administrative council in charge of tasks which were previously undertaken by various societal actors, such as craft organizations and neighborhood leaders acting as intermediaries.\textsuperscript{xxii} The way conflicts were resolved also changed under the Ottoman reforms. Conflicts were formerly addressed by \textit{shuyūkh} (leaders) of craft organizations, appointed by its members and empowered by the \textit{qādī}.\textsuperscript{xxiii} The guilds often occupied a certain neighborhood and acted as administrative agents to maintain order.\textsuperscript{xxiv} In addition neighborhood \textit{shuyūkh} were also in charge of diffusing and regulating conflicts.\textsuperscript{xxv} Interpersonal issues, which were previously dealt with in the \textit{shari’a} courts were now addressed by the administrative council, which was put in charge of the judiciary. The role of intermediary actors was thereby challenged, and conflicts were now to be addressed centrally. Then, in the \textit{shari’a} court the judgments used to be systematized and individuals from all social groups could bring complaints to the judge. However, under the council, judgments were not systematized and winning a case depended on the political weight of the complainer. This change had the consequence of allowing only groups or influential individuals to bring cases to court. Therefore individuals had incentives to turn interpersonal issues into communal issues to give more weight to their claims.\textsuperscript{xxvi}

Then the reforms instituted a language of rights that contributed to marking the religious border as the main axis on which political loyalties and solidarities were understood. Tariq Jazeel and Catherine Brun, in their work on Sri Lanka, describe a process of “institutionalization of ethnic differences and a new system of political representation” under British rule.\textsuperscript{xxvii} In the Ottoman \textit{Tanzimat} case, differentiation was institutionalized but through the opposite medium: the institutionalization of a paradoxical notion of equality. The \textit{Tanzimat} decrees enacted between 1839 and 1861 abolished the legal distinction which had existed in the Ottoman Empire between Muslims and non-Muslims. This meant that Christians and Jews did not have to pay the poll tax any longer.\textsuperscript{xxviii} At the same time there was an obligatory conscription into the army for all subjects. However, Christians and Jews could pay a lower fee than Muslims to avoid conscriptions.\textsuperscript{xxix} This example exposes the truncated notion of equality embedded in the reforms.

The language of rights that was enacted during the reforms focused on rights to build churches, rights to hold crosses in processions, rights to ring church bells and to participate in the council which was the instrument of the \textit{Tanzimat}.\textsuperscript{xxx} Therefore notions supposed to be universal rights and portrayed as progress were understood as specifically Christian rights.\textsuperscript{xxxi} The \textit{Tanzimat} were thereby seen as devoted to improve the status of Christians. However this was indeed a perception as many Muslims also benefited from the reforms.\textsuperscript{xxxii} Still, opposition and support for the reforms were often framed through this discourse of communal distinction.

The rights that were given to Christian and Jews were only superficial as they focused on representations in public. They were rights to display, supposed to show the improved status of Christians rather than actually improving it. This phenomenon might have to do with the fact that those reforms were enacted to please European powers and therefore were reforms of image rather than structure.\textsuperscript{xxxiii} Those rights were based on an understanding of status as visibility. Visibility, however, should not be assumed to reflect a better status in society even if some Christians did improve their status economically and were involved in the administration of the \textit{Tanzimat}. If rather than successful individuals, all the communities are
considered, Christians’ place in society might even have worsened because they were increasingly excluded from the urban fabric and the local networks of power. xxxiv

Religion was politicized through a variety of dynamics, including the use of space. Indeed, through the language of the reforms, space was institutionalized as a tool of group identifications and group narratives. Brun and Jazeel argue that to think about cultural politics we must think spatially, indeed identifications do not happen in a spatial vacuum but differences are rather produced through space. They see space not only as a container of intergroup relations but also as a fabric through which identifications are shaped. xxxv

An example of the interaction of the language of the reforms with spatial dynamics is the right to undertake religious processions. Indeed processions are often a place of contestation, a means to mark communal space. Processions have always been embedded in the urban structure of Ottoman cities. They were social practices weaving the fabric of the city together and delimitating ownership of spaces and the borders of neighborhoods. They were also a medium to show respect to other neighborhoods and leaders thereby reinforcing hierarchies and the overlapping system of power. xxxvi When the legal authorization to carry Christian processions in the city were enacted in the context of the Tanzimat, they were no longer seen as a tool of reinforcement of urban relationships but instead were seen as privileges awarded to Christians. Processions came to be seen, whether this was the intention or not, as political claims. During those processions, displays of political allegiances contributed to the conflation of local Christian communities with foreign powers, thereby creating a binary vision of the world based on religious identifications. An example of such a procession occurred on May 1st 1841, on the occasion of the celebration of the French King. The French consul M. Ratti Menton wearing his best clothes organized a procession inviting all the Catholics from his house to the Catholic Franciscan convent of Terra Santa. xxxvii After celebrating a mass at the convent, Catholics came out firing muskets and chanting ‘Vive le Roi’. xxxviii

The display of European flags also created social tensions: from 1855 onwards, European consulates started to fly their own flags. xxxix The intertwining of foreign policy, political allegiances and intergroup relations is exemplified by the following event: a debate which erupted in 1841 between Greek Catholics and Greek Orthodox over the donning of a certain priestly attire took an international dimension when the English consul sided with the Catholics and the governor Najib Pasha with the Orthodox. The administrative council imposed restrictions on the priestly attire of the Catholics. xl As a response and an act of defiance to this decision the Catholic churches flew the French flags on their rooff. xli In the previous centuries those types of conflicts could have been resolved through the urban ‘ancient regime’ based on interpersonal problem solving and the involvement of intermediaries but in the 19th century, the interaction of international policy and local dynamics created a very sensitive and politicized environment. In this context, local conflicts could take an international scope. In the same period, foreign powers’ intervention on behalf of Maronite and Catholic Christians eventually led to a petition signed by influential Damascenes, both Muslim and Jews, asking the expulsion of Europeans and Uniate Christians from the city. xlii

Then, the status of Christians and the discourse of their rights were also used in inter-personal power struggles between consuls and governors. Complaints to the sultan that the governor was not enforcing Christian rights could make the latter lose his position. For example the British consul complained to the Sultan that Najib Pasha, the wālī of Damascus for the years 1841-1842, was not treating Christians correctly as he was expected to because of the Tanzimat reforms. Najib Pasha almost lost his position because of those accusations. xliii

Then, European consuls started to give protected status to Christian individuals, which meant that they could enjoy the tax breaks accorded to Europeans during the Capitulation treaties from
1838 onwards and that they were to benefit from diplomatic representation as if they were foreign individuals. The local politics of the consuls contributed to a perceived association between local Christians and foreign powers, indeed they would often use their protective power over Christians to interfere into interpersonal issues. They thereby turned personal matters into issues of international relations. This language of minority rights, closely related to power struggles, placed Christian communities in a difficult situation as they became associated with foreign intervention – which in this period was seen as contributing to the disintegration of the Empire. This dynamic is especially true in the case of the Greek Orthodox, who became associated with Russia and the Greek Catholics, who were seen as France’s agents. Their religious identity became the main prism through which their role in Syrian society would be seen.

As a consequence of those dynamics and uses of space, a strong spatial dimension can be read in the accounts of the riots. Indeed, the neighborhood called Maḥalla al-Naṣārā, was the sole target of the 1860 violence. Christians living in other areas were not bothered, even when they lived a few streets away from the targeted neighborhood. It is also interesting that some groups from the Midan, a suburb where Christians also lived, participated in the riots and therefore had to pass in front of Christian houses in their own neighborhood in order to reach the city center but did not harm them. In addition, only the consulates present in the neighborhood were attacked; the ones outside were ignored by the crowd. Maḥalla al-Naṣārā was also increasingly associated with Catholicism and therefore with France. Indeed, many Catholic churches were built or renovated in this area in the beginning of the 19th century. It should be added that those Catholic institutions tended to center on a particular zone of the Christian neighborhood called Bāb Tūmā. This zone, as the surroundings of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, was the least populated by Muslims. The eastern area of the neighborhood, called Bāb Sharqī, was composed of a mixed population and hosted the non-Uniate churches. The Catholic missions and churches and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate were directly attacked during the 1860 riots, while the other churches are described as only affected by the general fire of the neighborhood. The violence therefore did not target the whole Christian community but rather specific groups within it. It is not surprising that this is the case since France had a strong role in the Egyptian occupation, and was seen as causing the trouble in Mount Lebanon to weaken the Ottoman Empire. In the context of the Russo-Ottoman wars and after the Greek Revolution, the Greek Orthodox were also increasingly seen as Russian agents working to weaken the Sultan’s authority. The 1860 destruction of Bāb Tūmā can therefore be considered not as an attack against Christians but rather as strikes towards what those spaces came to represent. Resentments were not directed at displays of a certain religious identity but rather at the claims and political meaning these displays came to embody.

In conclusion, the modernization reforms of the Ottoman Empire enacted a language of rights that affected intergroup relations. The end of the Ottoman Empire saw an urban transformation from a system in which different cleavages were overlapping into one in which a clear majority and minority were delimitated. The distinction between Muslims and Christians’ relation to the state was institutionalized through the language of the reforms, consular politics and international dynamics. While those changes were designed to improve the situation of Christians in society it actually extracted them from the overlapping crosscutting system of local governance. The reforms, with their emphasis on visibility, designated space as a tool of identification claims and conflicts, which contributed to turning Bāb Tūmā into a specific locus of resentment. In this context, the politicization of religious identities by the interplay of international relations, consular politics and other local dynamics, created the possibility of violence.

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To Protest or not to Protest? The Christian Predicament in the Syrian Uprising

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“The demonstrators are nothing but terrorists,” said Archbishop Tabé of the Syrian Catholic Church, scarcely veiling his contempt. “In any political system, there are always 10% who have to be sacrificed.” Although hardcore Christian support is steadily waning, after a year of political crisis, the majority of Christian leadership and laity alike failed to support the Sunni-led democratic movement in any collective, cohesive or concrete way. With the specter of post-Spring Islamist rule looming, Christians in Syria were forced to choose between secular autocracy and sectarian democracy, a decision informed by the perception that the status quo ante under al-Assad, though democratically deficient, put a (temporary) lid on civil hostilities and afforded Christian minorities with extensive secular protections and even prosperity. While Christian acquiescence is driven largely by the perceived alternative of an Saudi-style theocracy, analyzing the polarization at the heart of the pluralistic Syrian society through a binary lens of majority vs. minorities neglects the importance of socio-economic interests—which cut across sectarian boundaries. As the persistent co-optation of religious minorities continues to hinder democratic reforms, and as the position and security of Christians (who constitute two million citizens) grows increasingly precarious as Syria slides into a civil war fragmented along sectarian fault lines, understanding the motivations behind Christian passivity is crucial.

Despite Syria’s history of religious pluralism, Muslims and Christians are socio-economically segmented— with Christian presence in the middle and upper class contributing to Christian passivity. The uprising started in the agrarian city of Dera’a, with the disenfranchised revolutionaries suffering the most from the strains of population explosion that particularly afflicted the rural poor living in government neglected peripheries, the urban poor disillusioned with crony capitalism and legions of unemployed youth. Inclination to protest is influenced more decisively by class background (and proximity to the political, economic and military elite) than religious affiliation, though the two often overlap. For instance, the Sunni Nahhas and Jood families of Latakia, who benefited from regime-espoused “sweet-heart deals,” are among the most ardent regime loyalists— demonstrating that co-optation is contingent on affiliation with the professional classes rather than sect.

Syrian Christians (especially Greek Orthodox, the most populous Christian sect in Syria) have historically been more urbanized than Muslims and do not generally belong to the lower class. Proportionately more Christians receive secondary education, join skilled-labor professions and attend Western-oriented, private and foreign language schools. Under Hafez al-Assad, the Sunni underclass with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood was categorically denied state protections, jobs and opportunities, while anti-Islamist, secular Christians established connections (wasta) with state officials and rose to socio-economic prominence. Yet even the smaller proportion of lower class Christians who suffer from the same protest-inducing factors as their Muslim compatriots—high unemployment, a devastating drought in the East, an inefficient public sector, the effects of international sanctions and the post-uprising collapse of the tourism industry—disassociated socio-economic frustrations from the regime due to the lingering effects of decades of propaganda.

Although they are better integrated with Muslims in big cities, Christians tend to be geographically self-segregated. As class is a function of locality, that districts and villages are so clearly delineated along sectarian lines (such as the Valley of Christians consisting of over 30 predominantly Greek Orthodox villages and the majority Assyrian governate of al-Hasaka, home to the 75% Christian city of Qamishly) indicates
that class is closely associated with confession in Syria, which also explains the potency of sectarianism. Members of the Armenian Orthodox Church—the second largest in Syria—are especially prone to self-imposed isolation, rarely mixing with Muslims (or even other Christians) in less prosperous districts. The affluence of middle to upper class Syrian Christians, relatively unaffected by the same socio-economic grievances afflicting the hordes of protestors, further facilitated Christian reluctance to join the uprising.

The importance of preserving secularism—here defined as state equidistance and radical neutrality vis-à-vis religious identities—was an even more salient source of Christian loyalty to the embattled regime at the outset of demonstrations. Syrian Christians enjoy not only legislative and constitutional freedom of worship, but practical treatment as “full” citizens facilitated by a non-sectarian framework in one of the few remaining Arab countries where, as one bishop puts it, a Christian can “really feel the equal of a Muslim.” Syrian non-sectarianism paradoxically grants elites derived from minority communities a privileged societal position, leading Christians to view the al-Assad regime as a bastion of (a favorably distorted) secularism and, as such, their only chance at maintaining prominence in state and society. Such guarantees pushed Syrian Christian liberals to trust the Baath Party and embrace the so-called Damascus Spring when Bashar succeeded his father in 2000. Although the Syrian state nominally privileges Sunni Islam in some ways (and de facto, the Alawite elite), discrimination is reserved for those only for those who jeopardize regime authority. Most Christians therefore prefer the devil they know, four decades of secular autocracy, to an uncertain and potentially dangerous future under Islamists, who will undoubtedly demand a stake in a post-Assad Syria. In short, Christians are terrified of an “Islamist winter.”

Such fears are not unfounded. At the onset of protests, reports quickly surfaced of demonstrators chanting “Christians to Beirut and Alawites to the coffin,” and in August 2012 alone, anti-regime elements killed six Christians near Homs and 48 in the mainly Christian and Druze Damascus suburb of Jaramana. Armenian Orthodox Christians have picked up arms to defend their neighborhoods in Aleppo against attacks from the Free Syrian Army attacks as well as the regime’s militia. Syrian Christian refugees from the border town of Quaysr fled to Lebanon after rebels equated Christian neutrality with hardcore regime support and drove them out of the country. Such incidents disconcerted minorities and drove them to rally behind the government, even if they had been skeptical of al-Assad before the uprising. The regime fomented Christian anxieties by continually stressing that the greatest fears of the Christian community—Islamists, Shar’ia law and the prospect of burning churches—would be promptly realized if the regime were to fall. State-sponsored propaganda—like Donia TV broadcasts of the funeral processions of Christian soldiers “assassinated by thugs” alongside hysterical relatives—affirms that the regime has invested much of its energies into intertwining the fate of Christians with its own to scare them into submission for the purpose of regime self-preservation, as authoritarian leaders did in Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq.

Soon after the uprising was underway, revolutionaries (both Muslim and Christian) identified the importance of secularism to loyalists by emphasizing a minority-friendly civil rights discourse, noting that only a shared democratic future can protect Syrians of all confessions. Aside from brutal fringe elements, activists overwhelmingly promoted the notion of egalitarian pluralism under a civil, secular state, dismissing the regime’s oft-repeated canard that only the al-Assad-headed Ba’ath Party can protect Christians from radical Islamists as a “bogus argument meant to frighten the West and divide Syrians from one another.” The opposition’s commitment to a civil state is reflected in survey results that found that opposition members ranked the French political system highest (5.45/7), with a government styled on the Iranian model receiving the lowest marks (1.26/7), and a majority of respondents affirming the importance of protecting minorities, including Alawites (4.69/7).
The Muslim opposition cites the (admittedly small) presence of Christians in the opposition movement, Syria’s long history of religious cohabitation and the solidarity among the demonstrators to support its claims of secular aspirations. A Friday protest on Easter weekend was dubbed ‘Azimeh Friday (Good Friday) in honor of Christians, protest organizers were quick to silence signs of sectarianism amongst demonstrators, and the Facebook groups “Syrian Revolution 2011” and “We are All Syria,” with over 800,000 members collectively, list a code of ethics against sectarianism. Ali Sadr Al-Din Al-Bayanouni, former General Supervisor of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, announced that the party would adopt civil notions of citizenship if they came to power and avowed the importance of separating the crimes of minority elites from the lay members of these sects. Sheikh al-Zouabi, the leader of the Syrian Salafists, stressed the importance of cooperation between protestors, the need for international intervention to protect Syrians of all faiths and the theological kinship of Muslims and Christians. In the absence of a multi-party system in Syria, the treatment of minorities under Islamist parties remains an open question and claims of good will may mask different realities. Nonetheless, such rhetoric clearly identifies the importance of secular guarantees to pro-regime factions—even if many Christians, like Greek Catholic leader Archbishop Jeanbart, continue to prefer the current situation to a “mere promise.”

Unwavering regime support emanating from Church hierarchies further entrenches Christians. In statement dated December 15, 2011, the three Syrian Patriarchs declared their absolute rejection of foreign intervention or any other threat to Syrian sovereignty. Throughout 2011, the Armenian Orthodox Patriarch instructed churchgoers to obey the government, support the president, and keep a low profile. In September 2011, Lebanese Maronite Patriarch Rai III expressed concern over the future security of religious minorities in Syria and the region, urging the international community not to rush into regime-changing resolutions that could topple al-Assad, a “poor man who cannot work miracles.” This stance led George Sabra, a Christian and the spokesperson of the oppositional Syrian National Council, to attribute the mass absence of Christian protestors to the lack of Church-sponsored mobilization. The Russian Orthodox Church’s open support of the al-Assad regime may also be spurring similar attitudes among their Syrian counterparts. It is difficult, however, to determine to what degree the Church response reflects the attitude of its constituents or creates it.

It is similarly problematic to ascertain whether such institutional displays of support on the part of the Church are voluntary, Christians may well be coerced into obedience, with the Church leadership constrained by the watchful eye of a praetorian government brandishing a carte blanche arrest policy borne of the 1963 emergency law. Stories of attacks on Christian protestors—including the assassination of Father Basilius of Homs and the beating and detention of 20 year-old student activist Hadeel Kouky and actor Jalal al-Tawil—serve as warnings to their community and demonstrate the systematic silencing of dissident Christian voices, however rare they may be. Christians therefore fear not only for their security tomorrow, but also today.

When choosing allegiances, Syrian Christians also consider the experience of ill-fated Iraqi Christians and the ongoing post-revolutionary struggle of Egyptian Copts. Syria neighbors Lebanon and Iraq, which both deteriorated into sectarian conflict in the absence of strong leadership. Much like al-Assad, Saddam Hussein cultivated a close relationship with fellow minority Christian groups, who were perceived as collaborators and consequently targeted when the regime was toppled in 2003. Bloody sectarian attacks then forced the exodus of at least 330,000 Iraqi Christians to Syria, where refugees settled in Christian areas and came with stories of atrocities at the hands of the Muslim majority. The effect of the deeply discouraging Iraq experience is reflected in a December 2011 YouGov-Doha Debates poll, which found that of the 55% of Syrians polled who supported al-Assad, the most common
reason (46%) was “we do not want to see Syria become another Iraq,” rooted in the Christian fear of majority leadership giving free reign to Muslim fundamentalists.

Alternatively, the military and political integration of Christians partly explains the Christian reluctance to join the protests. Christians demonstrated their indispensability to public administration and civic life through the founding of the country’s two most significant post-independence political ideologies and the subsequent parties they spawned. The Syrian National Social Party (SSNP) and the ruling Ba’ath Party both created a secular framework to unite the Sunni majority with minorities under an inclusive banner of nationalist identity. Christians are counted among the late Minister of Defense and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as previous Prime Minister Fares Khoury of Defense and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Christians demonstrated their indispensability to the Alawites’ unofficial incorporation of minorities underpinned by the belief that ‘minorities protect minorities.’ The al-Assad regime has historically portrayed itself as the protector of Syria’s Christians in a politically expedient act of superficial solidarity, with Christians taking comfort in their mutual minority status. The advantage of being ruled by a minority is that the Alawites are engaged in a constant struggle for legitimacy due to their own minority status. The choice is then made simple for Christians: it is better to remain attached to Alawite rulers, however unpalatable they may be, because they will fiercely defend the status of other minorities to prevent hegemonic Sunni rule that could prove unresponsive to minority demands. This strategic alliance stems from the Alawite desire to garner diverse allies to bolster legitimacy and create a pluralistic national identity, the Christian desire to break away from the inferior societal position of minorities, and most importantly, mutual concern of an Islamist takeover. This stance is understandable, though not admirable, as pulling away from the Alawite regime may leave Syrian Christians vulnerable.

As the fragmentation at the core of Syrian society between loyalists and dissidents intensifies, the silent Christian community is caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. As the stakes get higher, so does the eagerness for sectarian revenge—a recipe for a Lebanon-style civil war. By failing to defect in a significant way to an increasingly violent opposition movement, Christians risk irrelevance in a post-Assad context, or worse; being viewed as “cowardly and timid sycophants who were afraid to do the right thing when the opportunity presented itself,” which Sunni compatriots may not easily forget. Betting on the losing horse—al-Assad—will only incite the animosity towards Christians that the community is trying so desperately to avoid, yet siding with the insurgents might incur the wrath of government troops and hasten the advent of a Sunni, sectarian democracy. Whatever trajectory takes shape, the inclusion of religious minorities will undoubtedly mold the social, cultural and political identity of a post-revolutionary Syria in particular, and the Arab world in general.

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“Syria Love”: Watching Syrian Propaganda in Iraq

Edith Szanto
Ramadan 2010 was the last time I visited Syria. I have been aching to go back, but the situation there does not allow it. For the last year, I have been sitting across the street, in a manner of speaking, talking with neighbors, watching the events from a safe distance. The place from where I have been observing Syria is from neighboring Iraq. Iraqi Kurdistan to be exact. From here, I have spoken with Syrians who have left before and during the current crisis. Some of my students are Iraqis who have spent years in Syria. They grew up in Syria and they miss it just as I do. In the beginning, when I first I came to Iraq in the fall of 2011, Syrian friends in Iraq (but not all of my Iraqi students who lived in Syria) univocally supported the uprising. Many have reconsidered their stance. They want neither religious factions to take over, nor do they want civil war. They were optimistic in the beginning. They were certain the regime would fall quickly. Today, they expect Syria to turn into another Iraq, predicting a decade or more of violence. Among the many questions this raises is why the Syrian government has lasted this long (in contrast to the Tunisian and Egyptian governments, which fell relatively quickly). Moreover, what has the Syrian government done (besides employ sheer force) to remain in power? In this article, I examine two Syrian TV channels whereby the Syrian government has been trying to promote itself and gain support.

When I settled into my new apartment in September 2011, I browsed the satellite TV channels in search for news about Syria. I found Syria News and Syria Drama, the usual channels. However, I was surprised to discover channels entitled Syria Education, Syria Medicine, Syria Love, and Syria Balad. Syria Education and Syria Medicine simply repeated Euro-American subtitled documentaries. In contrast, Syria Love and Syria Balad were domestic productions. Syria Love was a nationalist and loyalist music video channel. Syria Balad played Arab classics such as Fairuz and hosted call-in shows while renting out the screen. As callers and the moderator in turn blessed and prayed for all of Syria to remain safe, pictures and messages flashed across the screen mainly congratulating children on their birthdays, displaying pictures of them. By May 2012, Syria Love and Syria Balad disappeared. Now, clips from these channels can only be found online, where they compete with other videos, which range from non-political patriotic songs to anti-government music. What does the death of these channels mean? The violence is still ongoing. Has the government given up on its image? Unfortunately, the task of answering these questions must be left for future research as I lack the necessary access to sources. The questions I focus on here are: What were the main themes that emerge? What do they say about the kind of social imaginaries the Syrian government promotes? And how did these channels compel support?

Syria Love was the shorter-lived of the two channels. I ceased being able to watch it around February or March. Two months later, Syria Balad was also off-air. While on the air, Syria Love played love music. It expressed love for the country and love for Bashar al-Asad. There were different themes: there were military songs, mass marching songs, songs about Syria’s heritage, and strong-men songs. Military songs mainly demonstrated the strength and dedication of the Syrian military forces. Mass marching songs showed viewers supporters of Bashar al-Asad, casting them into the same role of supporters, albeit the masses were actively displaying their loyalty publicly, while television viewers remained passive and private. Mass marching songs aimed to recreate effervescent moments and to compel viewers to identify with the “Millions of Lovers.” Heritage songs took viewers on virtual tours of the country, stopping by Roman ruins, the Umayyad mosque, crusader castles, and the old cities of Aleppo and Damascus. They celebrated a nationalist history, claiming nativist authenticity, and equating it with loyalty to the country. Notably, heritage songs often displayed groups of young people, many of whom play the role of university students, given their dress and their book bags. By having university students celebrate nationalist history, the channel equated university education with stability, regime-loyalty, and authenticity.
The singers included both amateurs and professionals. Military, mass marching, and heritage songs sung by female performers portrayed Syrian women as patriotic and even militant. These songs emphasize a moderate (and non-rebellious) form of religiosity coexisting peacefully and even cooperating with secular and non-Muslim citizens by showing both women with and without scarves, and by excluding munaggibat (or face-veiled women). Children occasionally sang mass marching and heritage songs. Little boys, in particular, sing praises to Bashar al-Asad.

I have categorized strong-men songs, such as those by Ali Deek and Wafiq Habib, separately because they can draw on elements from the other types of nationalist music, but are visually focused on the fact of the performer’s physical strength. These strong-men recordings invoke the ‘abadai or strong-man system, as examined by Michael Gilsenan in Lebanon. Traditionally, strong-men were young men who guaranteed peace in the neighborhood. The ‘abadai system has most recently been idealized in Syrian Ramadan series “Bab al-Hara (the Gate of the Neighborhood)” where ‘abadai are depicted as defenders of local values. They are chosen by the neighborhood (al-hara) and they are from the neighborhood. Ideally, the characteristics of a strong man include youthful bravery, generosity, and general leadership qualities, but not wealth, education, and certainly not old age. The ‘abadai system evokes memories of an undifferentiated coexistence between neighbors, regardless of religion and class. Under the Ottomans (and in “Bab al-Hara”), the ‘abadai system was both organic and well integrated into official imperial politics. It could facilitate rebellions against outsiders, whether rulers or enemies, or it could promote cooperation with external powers. Only few aspects of the ‘abadai system have survived the emergence of the modern nation state in the Levant. The za‘im (who closely cooperates with the strong-men) is now a local clerk and administrator. As in the past, his cooperation with the state and especially the government’s executive branch, the police, lends him not only authority, but power. Yet, as a mediator between the distant state and the local community, he also invokes an image of organic support. As a part of localized structures of power and authority, the ‘abadai system includes Muslims, Christians, and other minorities. The system itself is not religious and hence, can be used to symbolize inter-sectarian coexistence and cooperation. When strong-men sing about their love for Bashar al-Asad and Syria, it links local structures of power, which are tied to the government, to local guarantors of peace, as well as folk heroes. While images of national heritage sites, military training, and mass protests flash by in the background, strong-men performers symbolically tie Syria together institutionally, socially, and religiously. They remind domestic and foreign viewers that the stability of Syrian society is at stake.

Syria Balad was more inter-active than Syria Love. While Syria Love played amateur artists to submit their patriotic performance to be judged and aired. Syria Balad allowed for more direct access. Syrians could call at almost any time in to live shows and they could pay for personal messages to be run on air. The later feature attracted upper-middle and upper-class families who congratulated their own children and the children of other important families for their birthdays. It was both a prestige contest and a way to create and consolidate family connections. The shows had little thematic content. They allowed Syrians to access air-time by calling in and requesting songs for loved ones. The only patriotic content was that at the beginning of each conversation, the hostess (invariably female) and the caller formulaically repeated that “Syria is well” (suriya bi-khayr). Most callers were male, making interaction gendered conversations directed towards a common goal; loving Syria and implicitly, the current regime. The gendered aspect marked these as secular or at least liberal religiously. Callers never requested religious songs. They generally requested classical Arabic music, such as the songs of Abd al-Halim Hafez and Fairuz. This music invokes history, authenticity, and stability, thereby symbolically linking the current government with continuity. By allowing Syrians to post messages and call in, Syria Balad compelled Syrians to participate in
Beyond Syria’s borders, these channels allowed the Syrian state to demonstrate that it could still muster support. Considering the fact that Iraqi and Lebanese Shi’i forces, in particular, have come out in support for the Syrian regime and others in Iraq and Lebanon have added the opposition movement, it makes sense that the Syrian government would try to influence its neighbors through aesthetic and rhetorical means. These channels are part of a larger battle. They partake in the aesthetic, the affective, and the discursive battle for the hearts and minds of Syrians and their neighbors.

According to Walter Benjamin, modern art (or “art in the age of mechanical reproduction”) does not allow viewers to concentrate and truly reflect on the events, emotions, and symbols depicted. Rather, mass produced art (or kitsch), such as pro-government propaganda on television, distracts. It affects viewers viscerally by invoking nostalgia for and pride in Syria’s heritage and linking these to structures of power. It affects viewers by casting them into the role of supporters, who stand (or sit) with the masses marching in support of Bashar. Syria Love and Syria Balad elicit a kind of distracted consent. It is important to see this point because Syria Love and Syria Balad are not unique in this approach. Their tactics echo those of other nationalist and sectarian groups who produce and disseminate propaganda on VCDs, DVDs, and on YouTube today.

“Our Real Educated People:” Neoliberalism and Syria’s New Elites

Mandy Terc

The Damascus branch of Junior Chamber International (JCI), Syria’s largest entrepreneurship organization for young adults, held its 2008 annual dinner in a large ballroom in Damascus Sheraton on a December Sunday evening. Banquet tables to accommodate approximately 200 attendees formed a semi-circle around a wooden dance floor and DJ booth. Four projection screens equipped to play video lined the walls, and professionally-printed programs and annual reports sat at each place setting. Members of JCI and their invited Syrian guests – directors of banks, company owners and representatives of global corporations who financially support JCI’s charitable activities – arrived in large numbers, dropping their European cars with the Sheraton valet. The attire was business formal; men wore crisp suits and patterned ties and women sported cocktail dresses and elaborate hairstyles.

As the guests took their seats, an hour-long program of speeches and award presentations celebrated the organization’s achievements, recognized members for extraordinary efforts and acknowledged the support of Damascus’ businessmen and women. A slick video documentary featured local celebrities like television and radio personalities praising the group for its contributions to the community. In English, a Damascus radio celebrity proclaimed, “it’s not easy what you guys do, not at all.” The outgoing leadership presented formal speeches a year’s worth of activities, and reminded attendees of a sense of group affiliation, proclaiming in English that JCI is “all for one and one for all.” The screens projected snapshots and personal information of members who had won prizes such as “the Dreamer” or “the Entrepreneur.” In between the formal program, the room buzzed with the conversations of members and guests as groups laughed at their tables, individuals circled

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around the room greeting friends and colleagues and small groups chatted in the corners.

During the dinner, an elegant and vivacious JCI member, Lana, seated next to me leaned in to remind me how novel an affair like this was for Syria, stressing that there are very few comparable opportunities for Syrians to gather like this. She told me that a decade prior the very existence of JCI would have been unthinkable, and that the success of the dinner and elaborately displayed local celebrity support for it was just another sign of how much Syria had changed. I replied that I too felt the changes in Syria, as new businesses and activities seemed to appear almost every week. Lana nodded in affirmation. She replied that even Syrians had a hard time keeping abreast of the rapid changes around them. She told me, only half jokingly, that if she stayed home and worked for a month or two, before she went out again, she would have to call around to her friends to ask what had transpired in her absence. And the changes, she insisted, went far beyond superficial developments like new nightclubs and boutiques; it extended to social norms about marriage, children and employment. Almost anything, she believed, was subject to change in this energizing atmosphere.

Similar articulations of a rapidly changing Syria surfaced in many of the interactions I had in Syria in the years leading up to the uprisings. Indeed, in those years it was hard to ignore the flourishing of newness at every level of life in Syria. The consensus seemed to be that change had originated from a series of government-led economic reforms and then spread into an eager population who quickly availed themselves of the new opportunities. Political scientists and economists were quick to note that these changes followed a neoliberal turn (see Abboud 2010a, 2010b, 2009; Hinnebusch 2008, 2005; Selvik 2009; Sottimano 2009). At a societal level, urban economic elites who capitalized on these new openings began to coalesce into a new social group: Syria’s neoliberal elite. The group was composed of individual young Syrians in their 20s and 30s who eagerly adopt the ideological component of neoliberal economic changes. They participated in the new associations, businesses, schools, commercial venues, volunteer campaigns, linguistic resources and social outings enabled by official reform. Numerically, the group did not represent a substantial percentage of society, but the group and its members were visible and influential and thus had an outsized significance, particularly in urban areas. These were the Syrians who embraced the changes and actively positioned themselves to take advantage of them. They developed a feeling of internal cohesion and begin to enjoy external recognition. Significantly, the group was multi-sectarian, incorporating large numbers of Sunnis, Alawites, Christians and other sects.

In addition, they began to adapt a social ideology that paralleled the economic ideology of Syria’s neoliberal turn. Beyond their shared institutional affiliations, prominence and social connections, it was the unwavering belief in the following principles that united them:

1) Advocacy for the retreat of the state from service provision and economic leveling mechanisms.
2) Belief that strengthening the private sector can better society.
3) Focus on individual responsibility to build “skills” and achieve economic success.
4) Teleological approach to social development.
5) Alignment with transnational non-state institutions that promote similar ideals.

They also lived these principles: by flocking to the private sector, by organizing volunteer campaigns to impart “skills” to the less fortunate, by joining entrepreneurship organizations to enhance their own development and by labeling those who did not adopt their ideology as backwards or personally deficient.

In the Syria of the last decade, there was a great deal of movement and adjustment as Syrians from various sectors of society responded to these new circumstances by forming and joining new non-governmental organizations, enrolling in new educational institutions, consuming newly available goods and services, pursuing new private employment and speaking and
learning increasingly valuable foreign languages, particularly English. With the excitement and sparkle of the new, however, came the frustration and alienation of exclusion. As engagement with the norms of an organization like JCI create occasions of social mobility, those same norms also act as social barriers. JCI’s annual dinner, for instance, was perceived as unique and new in the Syrian context because it utilized its newly permitted activities and newly venerated wealth to create a sentiment of prestige and exclusivity. The vast majority of Syrians would have felt neither comfortable nor welcome there. Furthermore, the neoliberal ideology that pervaded such occasions carried an additional moral burden for those who felt unwelcome. Since these elites believed that it was the responsibility of individuals to prepare themselves for the more “developed” private sector, it was an individual’s personal shortcoming if they failed to learn and display the norms and credentials to participate.

The economic changes encompassed by Syria’s proclamation of a new, neoliberal “social market economy” – permitting foreign investment, private banking and finance, reducing import tariffs and allowing private education – reflected a free market/neoliberal orientation that privileged urban cosmopolitanism. Yet the benefits of the new economic order permeated Syrian society in uneven and often alienating ways. As Samer Abboud has noted, the regime also reduced or eliminated its subsidies on key commodities such as food stuffs, heating oil and electricity. In other words, the cessation of economic leveling mechanisms means that the gap between rich and poor expanded, as Syrians not experiencing wage increases in the new private sector faced stagnant salaries and rising prices. The end result was that more Syrians suffered under the new system than profited from it.

While no one dynamic is solely responsible for the year and a half of protests and violence in Syria, certainly this rising socio-economic stratification did contribute to the dissatisfaction of so many Syrians. Given that many Syrians understood the prominence of neoliberal elites – whether in private sector employment, private education or civic organizations – as a direct result of regime policies, neoliberal elites could stand as one symbol of the regime’s unjust and exclusionary preferences. Neoliberal elites themselves, however, have presented varied responses to the conflict in Syria. I should caution here that I, like many of us, often have had difficulty contacting Syrians in Syria and obtaining information. That said, over the course of the conflict I have had email and private Facebook conversations with several members of the neoliberal elite on their feelings about the conflict. Interestingly, even though they took different political stances (some firmly anti-regime, others firmly pro-regime and still others ambivalent), in all their explanations, they all utilized their shared neoliberal ideological framework to articulate their positions.

Comparing exchanges I had with two young professionals, both Sunni and both well-known members of the neoliberal elite, illuminates this. After noticing that they had been unusually vocal and personal in public Facebook posts about their reactions to the uprisings, I reached out to them via private Facebook messages. The first, Jawad, frequently posted pro-regime sentiments that were unique for their personal content and fervor. I asked him to summarize what was happening in Syria, and he invoked the idea of teleological social progression and blamed the uprisings on Syrians who had failed to develop with the society.

believe me I’m with what is the best for my country after all, and

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1 The regime re instituted certain subsidies in early 2011, seemingly in attempt to prevent revolts in Tunisia and Egypt from spreading to Syria.

2 In the early stages of the conflict, most neoliberal elites posted formulaic messages of regime support. After time, the majority stopped posting any messages with explicitly political content, preferring either personal content (baby pictures, birthday announcements) or no content at all.
we all want this, but some areas here are still thinking the old tribe way . . . you actually lived the simplicity and the goodness of our real educated people.

Jawad frames the uprisings as a conflict between those who want Syria to develop and those who maintain an outdated (“tribal”) worldview. Those who oppose the status quo are dismissed as backwards and uneducated, rather than marginalized or disenfranchised. In contrast, Haneen cast the protesters as part of Syria’s development and future. It was the protesters, she believed, who would bring Syria into its next phase of development. She wrote me: “In fact I was about to immigrate . . . because I lost faith in my country’s youth and future, but after March 15th I decided to stay, this country deserves to fight for.”

While Jawad and Haneen’s opposing viewpoints caution against any generalizations about elites in Syria, the prominence of the neoliberal elite and the social stratification they represent highlight the importance of incorporating socio-economic factors into any analysis of the strife destroying Syria right now. Economic injustice was a central tool of the regime’s punishing policies and the resentment again it. Socio-economic stratification both overlaps with and diverges from other divisive fault lines in Syria, including sectarianism. As the Arab Spring began in early 2011, observers of Egypt wondered if it were “a revolt against neoliberalism” (Arnbust 2011). The answer to that question, of course, will not be a simple yes or no, but we need to take its premise seriously in Syria as well.

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Field Notes

The Remnants of the Assad Regime

Radwan Ziadeh

Three of the five border crossings located on the northern border between Syria and Turkey have fallen under the control of the Free Syrian Army. These are the Bab al-Hawa, Bab al-Salamah, and Jarablous border crossings, respectively. The fall of these portals illustrates the inability of the Assad regime to control its borders and shows the ever-growing threat that the FSA poses to the regime. As a result of these seizures, the opposition is capable of resupplying with relative ease via direct supply lines passing from Turkey through the rebel-controlled border posts to the liberated areas and front lines without the threat of direct contact with regime forces.

I personally had the opportunity to cross the Turkish-Syrian border as I headed to the city of Azaz via the rebel-held Bab al-Salamah border.
crossing. Al-Salamah was originally liberated by the North Storm Brigade, one of a number of rebel groups formed directly prior to the battle of Aleppo.

Signs of the conflict in Azaz are ubiquitous. Either at the city entrance or through its public buildings, it's clear that Azaz was heavily bombarded by the Assad regime. Even private and public hospitals were targeted for allegedly helping to rescue and relieve the injured. Homes of the civilians received the worst of the shelling. It is now clear that artillery strikes on the city were part of a systematic campaign to collectively punish Azaz's population for tolerating the presence of the Free Syrian Army.

However, rather than undercutting the base of support for the FSA, the army's indiscriminate shelling actually galvanized support for the rebels. Many citizens of Azaz were inspired to join local militias in order to defend their city and exact revenge for crimes perpetrated against innocents. Case in point: around 121 individuals were killed in the city of Azaz during the clashes leading up to its liberation—only 12 of were actually professional soldiers from the Free Syrian Army.

The main challenge today is that Syria is stuck in the middle of a pre-transitional period. Huge swaths of Syria are liberated while the regime still controls other areas, such as the capital, Damascus. As a result, the Syrian opposition's main challenge is to manage liberated areas while working toward freeing the rest of the country. Such a process is extremely difficult because complete liberation would require a large amount of administrative, military, and political effort and organization, as well as administrative bodies to manage the transitional period following liberation, a role that would normally be played by the remnants of a central government.

However, the state has collapsed completely in the northern areas. Whether in the suburbs of Aleppo, Idlib, and Deir Elzzour, or even in the city of Aleppo itself, the Syrian army doesn't even consider attempting to retake FSA-held territory because it completely lacks the human and military resources to do so. Instead, the Assad regime targets captured areas with air strikes, leaving hundreds of civilians injured or dead daily. Constant aerial bombardment is the main impediment to the complete liberation of Syria. A no-fly zone is needed to protect populaces and civilian infrastructure from complete destruction.

It is the responsibility of the international community to help and protect the Syrian people in their fight to liberate Syria as well as to assist in the management of the transition process, either through imposing a no-fly zone or by providing technical and financial assistance to the civil society organizations that are currently administrating the liberated areas of Free Syria.

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Reviews

Review of Kürt Tarihi (Kurdish History) magazine’s first issue (June-July 2012)

Ahmet Akturk

Turkey is a good place to observe how true is the proverb “Happy is the country which has no history.” Many individuals and groups do not agree with the official government account of—or silence on—the country’s troubled past as presented in Turkish school textbooks. Thus, the official history, originally designed to provide a common base of identity and national unity, has often lead to disagreements. From time to time, even the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s speeches in his ruling party’s weekly meetings appear to turn into history lessons. Quoting documents from Turkish state archives or old newspaper headlines, Erdoğan criticizes
unpopular policies of the Republican People’s Party of the 1930s and 1940s. National newspapers frequently include articles by historians who challenge the official narratives of the country’s past. People stay up at night to watch TV programs that deal with the hot topics hard to find addressed in their government-approved textbooks. The publication of numerous books on history and the proliferation of popular history magazines are other indicators of the public obsession with history and their efforts to find out “the truth” about the past. The first history magazine on the Kurds published in Turkish, Kürt Tarihi (Kurdish History) has developed in such a context.

Kürt Tarihi is a bimonthly magazine that first appeared in June-July 2012. It is a full-color 10”X12” magazine published on quality glossy paper with many illustrations. The magazine is available across Turkey through bookstores and newspaper distributors. National and international subscriptions to the magazine are also available. A testament perhaps to its popularity, the first issue of the magazine sold out in only a few weeks. Mesut Yeşen, a professor of sociology at Istanbul Şehir University, is the editor-in-chief of the magazine. Yeşen is an internationally renowned scholar with numerous publications on the Kurds in Turkey and, especially, on the official Turkish view of Kurds and the Kurdish Question. In addition to students of the Kurdish studies field like myself, the editorial board of the magazine includes well-known academicians such as Hamit Bozarslan, Martin van Bruinessen, Janet Klein, Hakan Özoğlu, Abbas Vali, and Nicole Watts as well as independent scholars such as Rohat Alakom, Mehmet Bayrak, İsmail Beşiği, Ahmet Kardam, Naci Kutlay and Müfit Yüksel. The editor-in-chief summarizes the magazine’s goal as increasing “knowledge on the history of the Kurds and Kurdistan in Turkish” and sharing it with the public. He also adds that while the magazine does intend to carry out this goal, it will keep “a distance from academic elitism and [Kurdish] nationalist pride.” In other words, the magazine wants to make the latest academic scholarship on the Kurds non-partisan, comprehensible to non-academic audiences, and easily accessible.

Though the language of the magazine's publication is Turkish, it accepts articles in English on Kurdish history that, if approved, will be published in Turkish.

The first issue of Kürt Tarihi (June-July 2012) is a promising start and full of rich content. After the editorial introduction, there is a “these two months in history” section that explains important recent events in Kurdish history emphasizing the two months of the published issue. This is followed by a news section informing readers of recent activities relevant to students and scholars of Kurdish history and culture all over the world. The magazine also has an interview section introducing a scholar and his or her works dealing with Kurdish history. Finally, in the book review section a new book on Kurdish history or culture is introduced to the readers. This first issue includes eight articles that vary in length from two to eight pages. The articles are very informative, well-researched, footnoted, and highly readable, accompanied by images and historical documents. The articles cover a variety of topics, including culture (as with the article on the development of Newroz as a Kurdish holiday); political history (exemplified in the studies of Mullah Mustafa Barzani in CIA documents, and the Shamsadinov Kurds’ relations with the Russian Empire); language (including a piece on the development of Kurmanji Kurdish language in Syria under the French Mandate and in Soviet Armenia); literature (with a focus on a Kurdish poet’s view of Sultan Abdulhamid II, and the first anthology of Kurdish poetry); press (such as the study of Kurdish periodicals in the late Ottoman period) and photography (with an analysis of Ottoman postcards portraying Kurdish and Qizilbash figures).

Kürt Tarihi as a popular history magazine will fill an important gap in Turkey. It will not only make new studies on Kurdish history available to Turkish-language readers but also help academic scholars and independent researchers share their work with a wider audience. Overall, the magazine is a timely and welcome project in Turkey that will expand public interest in historical events on which it has been hard to
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Alexa Firat

Reading *A Woman in the Crossfire* in the Fall of 2012 was not easy; the pain and suffering, both personal and collective, recorded by Samar Yazbek during the first one hundred days of Syria’s uprising against the regime continues unabated, and shamelessly without any effective international effort to relieve the suffering of civilians coming under fire from their government and the hardships of refugees who live in make-shift camps on neighboring borders. It is now 19 months later and lethal attacks are no longer one-sided affairs committed against unarmed demonstrators. Instead, they have escalated into a militarized conflict in which killing and brutality is perpetrated on both sides, snuffing out the original voices of opposition to the authoritarian regime and its legacy of repression against acts of dissent.

Samar Yazbek was born into a respected Alawite family in Jableh, Syria in 1970, meaning that she has lived her whole life as a subject of the Asad regime (*le père* mounted his “corrective movement” that same year). Rafik Schami wonders in the foreword, “Where did this extraordinary woman find the courage to abandon all the securities of a well-to-do Alawite family and to declare her solidarity with Syria’s oppressed?” This text is doubly an effusive and thoughtful response to this question that also manages to document the versatility of Syria’s social and political movements during their initial development. As the title suggests, the narratives are both personal (*A Woman in the Crossfire*) and collective (*Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*). The text documents Yazbek’s journey underground, her personal anguish as her family and many friends turn their back on her for standing with the opposition (and *ipso facto* becoming a traitor to her community). Unable to participate publicly (she is repeatedly harassed, arrested, and tortured by security officers) she struggles with finding the most effective way of participating from within. She is also a mother, terrified by the thought of the harm that is threatened upon her teenage daughter by both security officers and “ordinary citizens.” What kind of role can a silenced public intellectual – a journalist, writer, and former TV personality – play, as the brutality of the regime reveals itself to be more and more unimaginably vicious with each unfolding day?

Yazbek’s experiences during these first months of public outpourings are enough to constitute a memoir. She is a deft writer who takes the reader into her interior hell. What is happening to her and to Syria is almost killing her: she can’t sleep without taking the anti-anxiety sedative Xanax; she witnesses the savagery of the prison system first-hand after she is brought in front of senior security officers who demand she go on television to denounce the demonstrators as armed gangs and salafis. She refuses. They walk her among prison cells to witness the consequences of demonstrating, of raising one’s voice against the regime, to witness the remnants of clobbered bodies before they possibly disappear forever. She looks into the eyes of a dead man for the first time in her life. She will see these eyes again. Death invades her thoughts. Every demonstrator is marked for death, but they continue to go out into the streets in Damascus, Dar’a, Douma, Baniyas, Jisr al-Shughur, Latakia, al-Baida, Rastan, Hama, Homs, Bab ‘Amr and in many more towns and villages where ordinary people, young and old, men and women, fight against their fears to demand an end to the seeming inevitability that has determined their lives.

Yazbek finds inspiration in these extra-ordinary people, and purpose as a public intellectual, by documenting their experiences. She writes that she will “approach these stories like an
investigator,” and they become her passion and anchor. Interspersed between her private anguish and torture, she records the testimonies of activists, witnesses, journalists, and survivors from all parts of the country. Between cigarettes and tears, she listens, and later after more cigarettes and tears she transcribes these eyewitness accounts as an act of struggle against the regime and as an act of rebuttal to their distorted renderings of events. As these accounts unfold, Yazbek begins to realize another consequence of the work: her attempt to understand the revolution. How did it begin? Who are these people that defy every shred of logic that should keep them indoors? How can she render this chaotic and incomprehensible rupture legible? Durable?

If one has been following the events unfold since March 15, 2011, one may recall the shock upon hearing the news of the massive siege on Dar’a and later Bab ‘Amr and Homs. We watched shaky You Tube images of demonstrations, of tanks rolling through streets, of bodies laying on curbs and brave citizens carrying them home. We heard reports of injured demonstrators being arrested in hospitals, of soldiers defecting, and more and more atrocities. Yazbek corroborates all of this and intensifies our perspective with her first-hand accounts of the non-sectarian and peaceful intentions of those first few months. Through Yazbek we hear from a journalist who broke the Dar’a siege; a woman who watched her husband and child murdered by security forces in Hama 1982 and who, along with most Hamawis, faces the regime in 2011 steadfastly; an Alawi in Jableh at the time of the massacre; a defecting lieutenant; stories from Latakia and more. Time and again, people testify how the regime’s shabbiha and security forces would wreak havoc in their attempt to demonstrate sectarian, i.e. Sunni extremist, motivations. Only the opposite would prove to be true according to the stories Yazbek recorded. Furthermore, she reiterates how the regime was using Alawites as “human shields,” exploiting communal loyalty to shore up support.

One of the more prominent criticisms directed at the opposition is their lack of unity, that what happens in Dayr al-Zur is not connected to what happens in Damascus, and so forth. Yazbek establishes that the development of the coordinating committees located throughout Syria emerged slowly (sometimes too slowly for her) and even (I use the word hesitantly) organically, i.e. out of local needs. According to Yazbek, a group of activists met before March 15 and staged demonstrations in solidarity with Tunisians and Egyptians in their revolutions. They were swiftly repressed. The organizers decided to move their meetings into the mosques, not on religious grounds, but rather to remove themselves from the sight-line of security forces who were deployed everywhere throughout Damascus. This is how “the zone of protest started to grow.” “On 15 March we were blown away by how many people came out to demonstrate, which meant there was no need to mobilize and rally them. The people were ready.” The mobilizations grew into “coordination committees” by early May, each receiving a task according to various issues: politics, media, organization, medicine. Each Friday was given a rallying name, and each Friday people demonstrated anew.

No matter what, we knew that the mobilization came first on the popular level and attempts were made to pull the mobilization forward for the benefit of all sides. After much debate we concluded that pulling the mobilization in any one direction signaled the victory of the regime and the end of the popular mobilization, a distortion of it. We entered into discussions with them. The young men were open-minded and understanding, regardless of whether they were nationalists or Islamists or leftists. The beautiful thing was that everyone realized that the mobilization had a democratic platform, not just in Syria but across the entire Arab world. (200)

Sadly, Yazbek is forced out of Syria. She leaves for the safety of her daughter and commits herself to writing this text. She knows that Syria and Syrians are at the point of no return; neither the regime nor the people can go back to
anything resembling pre-March 15. “There is no dialogue with a traitor who kills his own people.” From the vantage point of Fall 2012 we know that it is only armed fighters who are part of the dialogue now. Yazbek has endured unquantifiable suffering, yet still manages to distill a narrative that maps countless small acts of kindness amidst an enormous web of cruelty. As thousands die (34,000 as of this writing) and buildings crumble, A Woman in the Crossfire is a text that stands against the erasure of these experiences, of their burial alongside corpses, or of their re-editions by the next regime. No matter who or what is to come next in Syria, this text inscribes the many voices and shapes of rage that finally and peacefully erupted.

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Karam Dana

Negotiating Influence: The Economy, Security Apparatus, and the Asad Regime

As waves of Arab revolts continue to sweep the Arab Middle East, different political formulations of power have appeared. While the collective Arab societies’ quest for change has met some measurable outcomes in various countries in the Arab world, the case of Syria remains a cliffhanger. The conflict between the loyalists of the regime and the opposition continues, but most notably, the cliffhanger is due to the uniquely sophisticated political and economic legacy of state-business partnerships between the state and select business elite. Drawing on first hand accounts, and using all types of data a social scientist could possibly utilize, Bassam Haddad’s Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience provides an unparalleled insight into the politics, economy, and nature of state-business relationships in Syria since the 1970s and paints a picture of the Syrian regime as one concerned primarily with its own survival.

Haddad provides indispensable and in-depth critical insight to explain the relationship between the regime and some of the business elite of Syria. The process, as Haddad suggests, began in the 1960s but became a standardized dialectic relationship in the 1970s, lasting until 2005, and explains state intervention in the economy, prolonged economic stagnation, and the erratic Syrian economy of many years. In reaction to a severe foreign exchange crisis in 1986, the state’s “top leadership internalized the need for reform.” (4) Haddad provides an elaborate historical and socio-political context centered around the legacy of mistrust between the state and the business elite. He asks whether the security apparatus of the regime occupied the center stage of the relationship from the viewpoint of the regime. Elites in business networks found their agency limited to a context of mistrust and narrowly defined interests. (105)

Haddad’s research focus on business networks allows for a stronger theoretical understanding of the Syrian economy since the 1970s, and provides clear methodological grounding to the complex puzzle of state-business relations. In this case, looking at the networks themselves rather than limiting the study to a Marxian class-based analysis of society yields more comprehensive explanations of certain socio-political and economic phenomena. While Marxian analyses can be helpful in understanding the context of state-business relations, Haddad's exploration of business networks goes beyond such approaches to effectively present a more plausible explanation of the inner workings of politics in Syrian society.

While taking into account the political legacy of the Ba’athists in Syria, Haddad argues that informal relationships between the state and business moguls were established in a way that would disallow the entire business sector from joining. The reason, Haddad argues, has to do with Hafez al-Asad’s and Salah Jadid’s understanding of the potential costs associated
with allowing a prosperous business elite to exist; they could have jeopardized the authority of the Syrian regime, as they did in 1961.

Five years after the death of Hafez al-Asad and the subsequent “inheritance” of the presidency by his son, Bashar, the policy of state-centered economic policy began to shift and a new mixed economy developed. Under this new approach to dealing with the economy, the state continues to play a role, but market forces would play a more significant role in the economy than in the past. Thus, the year 2005 marks the beginning of a new economic policy approach and changing relationships between business elites and the state. Haddad questions, however, if changes to economic policy were earnest efforts to reform, or yet another episode in the state's strategy to strengthen its security apparatus. This question remains unanswered, and we await research that can address this issue, perhaps in Haddad's second edition.

The book provides a detailed explanation of a complex socio-economic picture where the state engages in relationships with a select business elite, in networks where social status, class, and communal identity all play a role. On an organizational note, the book is a bit hard to follow, in large part due to the number of issues tackled. Helpfully, Haddad does clearly outline his arguments and explanation of causal mechanisms early on in the book, which aids readers in their efforts to understand the various relationships and complicated concepts the author so skillfully presents.

Haddad's Business Networks in Syria is a must read for scholars of political economy and state-business relations. Those interested in Middle East society and politics will find his study to be a great contribution to understanding practices of some authoritarian regimes in the region. He provides insight into how a regime’s repressive internal measure operates where the security apparatus occupies center stage in state-society relations. Business networks of Syria have led to devastating economic results, especially since relations were based on mistrust. Syria’s move into a new economic position after 2005, coupled with the revolt against the regime since early 2011, leaves the status of Syria’s society, economy, and state unknown. One hopes for a state whose security apparatus does not occupy its mission, but rather a state with better informed economic and social policy that can address the concerns of most of its citizens.

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iHazem Suleyman, Episode 3, Anti wa la Ahad (You and No one Else), Buq ‘at Dau’ 9 (Spotlight Part 9), directed by Amr Fahd and produced by Syrian Art
iiInterview with television editor Eyad Shehab Ahmad, September 11, 2012.
viInterview with screenwriter Colette Bahna, October 10, 2012.
viInterview with actor Jihad Abdo, October 14, 2012.
ixSee: Milh wa Sukkar (Salt and Sugar), written by Nihad Qalai and directed by Khaldun al-Maleh, 1973; Dai’a Tishrin (The Tishrin Village), written Muhamad al-Maghout and produced by Usra Tishrin Masrahiya, 1974; For examples of tensions between artists of the time see: Rafiq Sibayi, Thaman al-Hubb: Min al-Sira al-Dhatiya (Damascus, Syria: Mu’assasah al-Wahda al-Tiba’a wa al-Nashr, 1998), 155-175.
ixiInterview with television editor Eyad Shehab Ahmad, September 11, 2012.
“Fauq al-Saqf (Over the Roof), directed by Samer Barqawi and produced by Syrian Arab Television, Damascus, Syria, 2011; Interview with Colette Bahna, October 10, 2011.


Nur Sheeshkely, Buq'at Daw' 9 (Spotlight 9), Episode 21, Bila Saqf.


Donatella Della Ratta, “Dramas of the Authoritarian State,” February 2012, Middle East Research and Information Project, p. 1, retrieved in: http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/dramas-authoritarian-state?ip_login_no_cache=... At an opposition event in Qatar after the 2011 uprising, Syrian novelist Zakaria Tamer exposed Durayd Lahham’s record from the 1970s recounting how he put together a march of artists to Hafiz al-Durayd Lahham’s record from the 1970s recounting how he put together a march of artists to Hafiz al-


Ibid, 131.

Ibid, 136-137.


Masters, Christians and Jews, 138. Moshe Ma’oz, Ottoman Reform, 2.

Linda Schatkowski Schilcher, Families in Politics: Damascene Factions and Estates of the 18th and 19th Centuries (Berlin: Institut für Arabische und Islamische Studien, Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1985) 71; Commins, 10.

Makdisi, 10, 19-20.


Brun and Jazeel, 1-24.

Raymond, 304.


Paton, 37.

Ma’oz, Ottoman Reform, 227.


Ibid, 131.

Ibid, 140.

Ibid, 117.


See for example such interventions by the French consul in A.E. CPC/ Turquie, Damas, vol. 1, 2, Ratti Menton-Francois Guizot, January 6th 1841.


Ibid, 85, 89.


Interview, Hind Kabawat, Foreign Affairs Director for the Syrian Public Relations Association and a Senior Research Associate in Public Diplomacy at the Conflict Resolution Program of Syria at George Mason University, April 10, 2012.


William Dalrymple, “Ignore the hype: Syria shouldn’t be demonized,” The Spectator, October 27, 2007.


Interview, Syrian-Armenian from Aleppo, April 10, 2012.

Dalrymple, “Syria shouldn’t be demonized,” The Spectator.


Nicholas Blanford, “Q&A with a Syrian Jihadist: Minorities have nothing to fear in post-Assad Syria,” Christian Science Monitor; September 29, 2011.

“We Are All Syria” Facebook page, modified March 2012, https://www.facebook.com/We.Are.All.Syria


Sheikh Al-Baynouni, former Secretary-General of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Brookings Institute Lecture, September 19, 2011, Doha, Qatar.


Interview, a Syrian-Armenian from Aleppo.


الكنيسة السورية أخرجت مشاركة المسيحين في الثورة (“Al keneesa al-soreyya okherat musharakat al meseheyen fel thawra”), Al-Arabiya, February 3, 2012, http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/03/192394.html


Interview, Hind Kabawat.


Sheperd, “Assad is not our friend,” Syrian Christians for Democracy.


“Assad is not our friend,” Dr. Elian Sheperd’s Blog.


One of the songs which was played often in the fall was “Hamak Allah ya Asad” by Asala Nasri (accessed October 17, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=058eGyHgQaA). Notably, Asala Nasri has since allied herself with the opposition. Narmeen Ibrahim (accessed October 17, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6qTjV8b3v4&feature=related)

and Manal Mousa are other female singers who sing in support of Bashar al-Assad (accessed October 17, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCpnBvUUj6c

Cf. “Malayan mithatf binhabbak.”


