
Reviewed by: Mohammad Magout

As interest in Syria increases with the escalation of violence in the country and the extension of its repercussions regionally and internationally, more and more books are being published about Syria’s recent history. The temptation to quickly satisfy this growing public interest must be balanced with careful, extensive research to tackle the complexity of Syrian society and the ambiguous nature of its internal politics. Carsten Wieland attempts to meet this difficult challenge with his detailed and timely book about Syria: *Syria - A Decade of Lost Chances*. Wieland is a German diplomat, scholar, and analyst who has spent many years serving in various capacities in the Middle East. He lived in Syria for 2 years and visited it regularly over a period of 12 years. This has allowed him to gather plenty of first-hand materials and a sense of how the political mood in Syria has changed throughout these years.

The main focus of the book is not the current Syrian Uprising itself, but rather – as the title suggests – the preceding decade of Bashar al-Assad’s reign over Syria. According to Wieland, Bashar failed to capitalize on the “waves of popularity” he enjoyed during this period and the legitimacy of the Ba’thist state among large sectors of the population to carry out concrete political reforms that may have spared the country its present tragedy. The author examines in detail the behavior of the regime internationally and domestically over this period, focusing on oscillating relations with Western countries and the suppression of the Civil Society Movement which called for political reform after Bashar al-Assad inherited power from his late father Hafiz al-Assad in 2000. One of the central questions that the book attempts to answer is whether there is actually a positive correlation between the external crises of the regime and its suppression of domestic opposition. The writer rightly points out that the regime did not relax its repressive measures against the opposition after its standing had improved regionally and internationally in the year 2008.

Another major question of the book is whether Bashar al-Assad genuinely sought political reform during his first few years in power (but was obstructed by conservative members of his regime) or he was simply a sly pretender exploiting the role of the sincere reformer whose hands are nevertheless tied. In some instances, the author hints at the first characterization of the Syrian president by explaining some seemingly contradicting decisions by the regime, particularly in relation to the domestic opposition, as the outcomes of alleged power struggles between reformers and conservatives. However, in other instances he seems to suggest the second characterization. As with many other questions he poses in his book, Wieland does not seem to settle clearly on one answer over the other. He presents the reader with as much details, testimonies, and theories as possible, but does not make enough effort to synthesize them or construct a coherent argument.

The author states in his foreword that the book is intended as both a journalistic account and an academic analysis of the history of Syria under the presidency of Bashar al-Assad. The book does provide some in-depth analysis of certain aspects of this period of Syrian history. For example, he draws on a number of academic works that analyze the complex relationship between the regime and the new business class, which once upheld the regime but also contributed to the erosion of its support base among the poor and the lower middle class. However, in other areas, such as the political culture of Syria (i.e. how the regime culturally dominated Syria and how the people accepted, interacted with, or resisted this form of domination) his account remains basically journalistic with few footnotes referring the reader, for example, to Lisa Wedeen’s well-known book on this subject (*Ambiguities of Domination*) without drawing anything from its insights. This might be a major problem of the book for an academic reader, given that a large part of it is devoted to Bashar al-Assad’s own character and public image.
The book relies mainly on interviews with members of the Civil Society Movement, particularly Michel Kilo, who is quoted extensively throughout. In addition, a variety of businessmen, parliamentarians, civil society figures, and journalists are quoted in the book, some of whom were at some point close to the circles of power in Syria. The book, however, does not go beyond these elite sectors of Syrian society to investigate the voices of ordinary citizens or more grassroots activists who were present and active in Syria years before the Uprising. For instance, the activities of a group like Majmuʿ at Shabab Darayya (Darayya Youth Group), which organized a number of subversive activities in the Damascus suburb of Darayya around the time of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, are never mentioned in the book.¹ The group activities might have been unheard of outside Darayya itself, but its ex-members (most notably Yahya Sharbaji and Osama Nassar) became the nucleus of the anti-regime demonstrations in the town in the beginning of the Syrian Uprising and iconic figures of the Syrian non-violent opposition. Moreover, even though the book contains an account of the beginning and the evolution of the Syrian Uprising during its first nine months in addition to a description of some of the political coalitions of the Syrian opposition, any narratives or perspectives from activists at the grassroots level about the regime or the traditional opposition itself are virtually absent. This gives the book a slightly elitist bias; and hence it fails to recognize some of the internal dynamics of the Syrian street that helped shape the current situation.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned drawbacks, the book remains highly readable and useful for common and academic readers alike. It might be particularly useful for those who are un- or little informed about Syrian politics, as it contains an extensive and fairly accurate account of Bashar al-Assad’s internal policies and international relations as well as the civil opposition against his regime, which lay the background for Syria’s present dilemma between a brutal, intractable regime and an opposition that is plagued with extremism, factionalism, and political impotence. The book additionally includes 3 short chapters that shed some historical light on social life in Syria and the evolution of al-Ba’thist ideological blend of Arab nationalism and socialism. Nevertheless, even for close followers of Syrian politics, the book can serve as a helpful reference work on Syria’s most recent history and it may well offer some interesting new information. Western policymakers and analysts too are likely to find the book helpful to review and assess Western policies toward Syria before the outbreak of the ongoing uprising, which might explain the West’s present inability to intervene positively in the crisis.

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¹ For a video recording of one of the activities of the group, a silent unlicensed demonstration against the American invasion of Iraq, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sD48yEn5dp4