
Reviewed by James A. Reilly

Faedah Totah’s ethnographic study takes as its subject matter the gentrification of intramuros Damascus in the 20 years before the outbreak of the 2011 uprising and civil war. Gentrification occurred in a context of the Syrian state’s adoption of investor-friendly policies (neoliberalism) beginning in 1992. The most noticeable symptoms of gentrification were the proliferation of restaurants and hotels in “authentic Old City settings,” and the transformation of certain streets (including Qaymariyya and Straight Street) as tourist- and consumer-oriented thoroughfares.

Totah is not interested so much in charting gentrification as in analyzing the discourses to which it gave rise, and the contending social interests at play.

Reading the book as a historian, I was particularly interested in the ways that tropes such as heritage, authenticity and origin (of people, i.e., their *asl*) were deployed in these contestations. Old-time Damascenes (usually Sunnis), whose grandparents may have left the intramuros city for greener pastures and more comfortable homes in the French-designed or built neighborhoods of the new city, claimed cultural capital by means of their assertion of Shami authenticity and deep roots. Sometimes they participated in gentrification, described as a “return.” Often, though, they were skeptical onlookers as people of wealth (investors, *mustathmirin*, typically not of Damascene origin) bought up older properties and turned them into restaurants, hotels, or (sometimes) private single-family homes. These *mustathmirin* claimed that they were preserving or saving the Old City from ruin and degradation, and that therefore they too had claim to the cultural capital heretofore attributed to old-time Damascenes. Both groups (the Shamis and the investors) attributed ruin and decay to the urban poor who had settled in Old City houses in the wake of bourgeois abandonment after 1948. These long-term residents of Damascus (as Totah calls them) represented the actual lived fabric of intramuros Damascus in the years of independent Syria, yet in the discourse of the Shamis and the wannabe-Shami *mustathmarin* the long-term residents were interlopers.

Totah deploys the binary of “civilized-backward” to organize the competing discourses about the Old City: whose Old City is it, to whom does the Old City morally belong, and who are the interlopers. She contextualizes these competing discourses as contests over who could claim to be preserving *turath* or heritage – an argument that in her words represented a kind of “civilizational anxiety” in pre-civil war Syria, a displacement or expression of deep social tensions and divisions. Whoever claimed ownership of an idealized vision of Old Damascus could also claim a kind of societal legitimacy. The argument over the meaning and ownership of *turath* was also one of the few issues of public concern that could be openly discussed in Baathist Syria, meaning that this disputation bore the weight of wider, unspoken and publicly repressed societal tensions. Later in her discussion Totah explicitly brings the Asad regime into the equation, as it too (through multiple, overlapping and rival agencies and departments) asserted the regime’s ownership of Damascus’s *turath* – and therefore of historical and national legitimacy (in terms of the official self-legitimizing discourse).

So the use of history and heritage, and the various partisan ways in which they were deployed, are richly illustrated in Totah’s study. It is also telling (and to this writer’s mind, ironic) how French Mandate-era documentation became a fixed reference for measurements of Shami authenticity, whilst the lived experience of the Ottoman Empire (during whose last 100 years much of the present shape of the residential Old City was put in place) is discursively dismissed as worthless.
or meaningless. In other words, the arguments over *turath* – what it is, and who owns it, and who does not – has opened the way for a reification of Shami authenticity that Totah references under the concept of auto-orientalism.

There is much here for the student of Syria to consider. Other readers will find dimensions in Totah’s book that I have not taken up. As a historian I have not tried to analyze Totah’s work as an ethnographic study. Instead I have chosen to focus on what I (think I) know – namely, deployment of historical claims in present-day political and social struggles, the long shadow of colonialism, and (more ambitiously) the fragility or absence of a societal consensus on the meanings and content of modern Syrian nationhood.

*James A. Reilly is a Professor in the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of Toronto*