
Reviewed by Glenn E. Robinson

Periodically, and through no fault of their own, quite good works of scholarship suffer from impeccably bad timing. Theda Skocpol’s work on social revolutions comes to mind, published the very month that the shah’s regime was overthrown and the Islamic Republic born, even though that social revolution bore no resemblance to the conceptual framework laid out by Skocpol. The edited volume under review – which contains a number of excellent essays – is similarly plagued by bad timing. A collection of essays meant to examine in detail the first decade of rule by Bashar al-Asad in Syria, 2000-2010, the book was in the process of being finalized when the Syrian civil war began in March 2011. As a result, most of the essays contain a few added-on paragraphs that try to relate the topic under examination to the outbreak of civil war.

In some respects, the Syrian civil war has made the volume irrelevant in that the politics of Bashar’s Syria before the war, so richly described in the book, will likely not be replicated when the civil war ends – and assuming there will still be a Syria at the end of this dark tunnel. On the other hand, this volume gives us our richest and most detailed understanding yet of how politics worked in Syria on the eve of civil war, so it is indispensable in understanding how and why the Syrian tragedy came to be.

The book is divided into three sections, in addition to invaluable introductory and concluding chapters (where the editors accomplish the Herculean task of tying the multiple strands of the book into an overarching framework of understanding linked to the outbreak of civil war). In part one of the book, the authors address some of political, economic and ideological challenges that Bashar inherited when he came to power in 2000. Raymond Hinnebusch details how Bashar worked to retire much of the old guard in the Ba’th party and state apparatus and replace them with his own men. But in doing so, and in conjunction with the needs of the expanding neo-liberal reforms being undertaken, Bashar ended up concentrating power even further, and alienating political barons important under his father’s rule. Samer N. Abboud examines the vague term of “social market economy” used by the Bashar regime to describe its political-economy strategy. Abboud shows that in practice the Asad regime accelerated neo-liberal trends that had first begun in the 1980s, and which privileged business elites primarily in Damascus and Aleppo. By contrast, rural communities had state support withdrawn and subsidies lifted, leading to significant rural discontent and rural-to-urban migration. The ‘slum villages’ on the outskirts of urban areas absorbed much of the rural migration, ended up housing nearly a third of Syria’s population, and were centers of anti-regime activity in 2011. Aurora Sottimano examines regime discourses of nationalism and reform in its attempts to bolster its political legitimacy. Sottimano argues that the regime’s dependence on a discourse of Arab nationalism ended up hurting the regime when it reflexively blamed domestic protests on foreign conspiracies.

Part two examines Bashar’s steps to reconstruct the social base of the regime given the neo-liberal political-economy being constructed. The old Ba’thist social base of minorities (especially Alawis), the rural peasantry, and public sector workers that had been the cornerstone of rule under Hafiz al-Asad was already showing cracks even before Bashar came to power. Bashar accelerated those nascent changes. Urban business elites replaced the peasantry as a foundation for the regime, and the public sector diminished in importance (this latter trend is not really examined in the book). Alawis remained in their privileged position, but fewer of them, given the concentration of power in the House of Asad. Bashar deconstructed much of the old social base of power, but the new social base was inadequate to the challenge of preventing civil breakdown.
Part two has six chapters. Najib Ghadbian examines the plight of the opposition under Bashar’s rule, from the Damascus Spring to the Damascus Declaration, and shows the fundamental weakness of the opposition to really open up the political system. As others in the volume show, such political liberalization would not have been consistent with the concentration of power thought necessary by Asad to make economic liberalization work. Tina Zintl asks whether the foreign-educated Syrians brought into the regime structure under Bashar were ‘agents of change’ and concludes that most such Syrians were the sons and daughters of regime loyalists so were not serious reformers. Mandy Terc’s entertaining chapter on the rise of elite volunteerism that coincided with the rise of neo-liberalism shows such volunteer campaigns actually reinforced social stratification instead of diminishing divides. Paulo G. Pinto examines the politics of Islam during the Bashar decade and argues that the regime increased the use of religious symbols and vocabulary as a means to secure greater support from the Sunni religious establishment, with decidedly mixed results. Nicely following on this discussion, Rania Maktabi looks at the controversy surrounding the proposed 2009 Personal Status Law where the draft law was replete with orthodox religious terminology – far more so than the law it was amending from over five decades earlier. Sufficient pressure was brought to bear that the government rejected the new proposed law. Myriam Ababsa examines the drought in northeast Syria from 2007-2010 and argues it was a major cause of rural discontent and migration. As part of its neo-liberal economic turn, the regime dismantled all state farms and returned the land to private hands. The regime also subsidized cotton production, which used an estimated one-third of all water in Syria. Ababsa convincingly shows that the regime’s response to the drought likely caused more political problems than the drought itself.

Part three contains chapters focusing on regional and international factors during the “Bashar decade.” Carsten Wieland examines the relationship between Syria’s domestic and international policies. Ironically, Syria was emerging from its isolation with regard to Europe and the US brought on by the Hariri assassination, the Iraq war, and other factors just when the civil war erupted, the regime responded militarily, and Syria’s relative isolation returned – Iran and Russia notwithstanding. Mohamed Kamel Dorai and Martine Zeuthen look at the plight of Iraqi refugees in Syria, and especially their varied impacts on Damascus. Valentina Napolitano provides a case study on Hamas’ mobilization campaign in Syria’s Palestinian refugee camps, showing how Hamas was gaining power through its resistance motif and provision of social services. Hamas’ break with the regime during the civil war substantially diminished Hamas’ visible presence and activities in the camps.

In the concluding chapter, Hinnebusch and Zintl usefully tie many of the threads together, arguing that Bashar’s version of “authoritarian upgrading” (to quote Steven Heydemann) failed to bridge the growing divide between the needs of neo-liberal economic development and Bashar’s changing (and shrinking) socio-political base of support.

This is an excellent collection of essays about politics in Bashar’s first (and last?) decade in power. The dramatic rupture in Syria’s history that began in 2011 will insure that this volume will reflect a time and a political system that is gone forever.

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