
Reviewed by Mary C. Wilson

The general public and professors who wish to assign a survey of modern Syria will welcome John McHugo’s *Syria a History of the Last Hundred Years*. It is short and organized into chronological chapters, according to standard periodization: ancient civilizations to World War I, the French mandate, independent Syria until 1970, Hafiz al-Asad’s 30-year rule (divided into two chapters), and Bashar al-Asad up to 2013. Since it is a synthesis of English language secondary sources, however, the book adds little to scholarship on Syria.

Every author who aims at a general audience has to choose what to tell and what details to provide as evidence. To his credit McHugo has neither dumbed down his presentation nor overwhelmed it with extraneous details. That said, I think there are points that he has missed. For example in chapter one, which necessarily skims over ten centuries to get to the last one hundred that are the focus of his book, he should have explained the evolution of the cultural geography of Syria in addition to its topography, which he describes well. Readers need to be weaned from the essentialism that so often clouds our view of the Middle East. We always need to be reminded that people move around, learn and forget languages, and change religions. Readers also need to get over an excessively sectarian view of Syrian society; here a few examples of shared holy sites and rituals would have helped. That said, McHugo does a good job of situating today’s Syria in the context of what Arabs called *Bilad al-Sham*.

The first two chapters follow familiar storylines: the decline of the Ottoman Empire, modernization, imperialism and nationalism. Perhaps the more accurate than decline is devolution, which in the Ottoman Empire had the misfortune to coincide with growing European military and economic power. By the mid-nineteenth century a revolution in power and communications allowed the Ottoman Empire to initiate a process of centralization at the same time as it increased European interest and interference in Ottoman affairs, the two pulling in opposite directions. Still, the Ottoman Empire fought on four fronts during the First World War and survived, if not for very long. Modernization theory has been given the bum’s rush by its many critics of the past forty years, but its evil twin modernization lives on. It is far too general a term to carry much meaning beyond its Eurocentrist beginnings. Considering specific components of ‘modernization’ might have helped: for example integration into a global economy and extension of the state into all aspects of life. Lacking culturally neutral criteria for what constitutes modernity, American students will all too readily fall back on an easy dichotomy: we are modern, they are not.

The French mandate and the rising tide of nationalism in response provide the central narrative of Chapter 2, with the Great Syrian Revolt serving as the meat grinder that turned the peoples of Syria into Syrian nationalists. Along with Michael Provence I would argue differently: the Great Syrian Revolt, along with the battle of Maysalun became the foundation tales of Syrian nationalism, but many, especially urban notables and Alawites, did not take part. They wrote themselves into the nationalist narrative later. Far from detesting the French (p. 79), many urban notables spoke French and admired French culture and political organization. Of course, one can both admire France and lead a nationalist party so the more useful line of inquiry concerns the uses of nationalism in building political support and the process of building consciousness and loyalty to a particular state. France worked against this component of state formation by playing on difference to challenge the appeal of either Arab nationalism or Syrian nationalism.
The third chapter takes on the difficult task of making the rapid changes of government between 1946 and 1970 into a coherent narrative. McHugo begins with the creation of new parties based on new ideologies and the men that led them: the Ba’ath Party, the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, the Syrian Communist Party, and the Muslim Brotherhood, followed by the series of coups, the creation of the United Arab Republic and its demise, and the first Ba’ath government. To his credit he follows this story without confusing the reader. Still, a shift of focus from the particular to the general might have made the period more comprehensible. It was not and is not obvious in what ways peoples inside Syrian borders differed from those on the outside or in what ways the inhabitants of Syria themselves could identify as a single political unit. The political elites of post mandate Syria faced the formidable task of making the state more tangible than simply a morass of resentment against the French. How did they do so without easily manipulated differences like language or religion to separate Syrians from Iraqis, Palestinians, Lebanese, or Jordanians? Second, as McHugo explains, a new ruling elite composed of the sons of peasants replaced the old urban notables. I think he could have stressed that although it may have taken twenty-five years, by the time Hafiz al-Asad came to power in 1970 a shift in the social location of power, a revolution, had taken place. Despite the ever changing governments and their inconsistent, unfinished programs, how did this shift take place?

Chapters 4 and 5 cover Hafiz al-Asad’s rise to and exercise of power, four covers foreign policy and five internal affairs. Granted the thirty years of Hafiz al-Asad’s rule is the longest period a single ruler has survived in Syria’s twentieth century history and short chapters give readers much-needed resting places in surveys. Yet by separating the two, McHugo loses how closely the external and the internal are intertwined. For example Asad’s intervention in Lebanon on the side of the Phalanges in 1976 served to coalesce militant Sunni Islamist opposition against him. And a look around the region in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the Iranian revolution took place, Juhyman al-’Utaybah took over the Great mosque in Mecca, and a militant Islamist group assassinated Anwar Sadat would have shown that Islamist opposition hardly needed to be sharpened by presumed sectarian spite. In Syria the Islamist opposition certainly played the sectarian card, but did Asad’s support of Iran in the Iraq-Iran war necessarily inspire Islamist or Arab nationalist opposition back home? The Iranian revolution may have been carried out by “Persians” (p.177) and Shi’a, but to many in the Arab world, irrespective of ethnic or sectarian tags, the success of a largely unarmed people in overthrowing an authoritarian ruler supported by the United States was positively inspiring. Perhaps Asad was shielded from an Iranian-style mass uprising owing to the distance he maintained from the United States, another close connection of the external and the internal. In keeping his distance, Asad stood alone in the Arab world, except for Qaddafi, and thus Iran became and remains a very important regional ally for both father and son.

In McHugo’s telling, Asad’s rise to power appears to be more an outcome of character than the result of political strategy. Asad was a pragmatic, disciplined, cautious, cool-headed workaholic according to this book and everything else I have read, but I would have appreciated examples of his strategies in building and maintaining support. Asad seems very generally to have followed a system of redundancy in the military and the bureaucracy. Every military or police command was balanced by another command, and every command had an accompanying intelligence service. In the bureaucracy, competition for posts and higher salaries created an insidious climate of gossip and tattling; efficiency sacrificed for security. Divide and rule also served Asad well. When he created the Progressive National Front as a Ba’th dominated umbrella for all leftist, nationalist political parties in the country, the parties that shared the political end of the spectrum with the Ba’th split into two broad groups. One part of each such party joined the Front and so maintained formal existence at the cost of actual influence or even credibility; the other part of each party remained outside and was forced to disband or go underground. Similarly after the ‘time of troubles’ that ended with the destruction of central Hama, Asad co-opted some of the Muslim Brotherhood who then made their peace with the regime and even won seats in the Syrian parliament running as independents. The rest disappeared or were disappeared, creating a well of resentment that is feeding the opposition to Bashar al-Asad today.
Chapter 6 covers the years since Hafiz al-Asad’s death. This must have been the most difficult chapter to write owing to the relative lack of secondary sources much less primary ones. McHugo tells us about the hopes Bashar al-Asad raised early on for less state control of economic activity and political expression, but says little about the impact of the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. What happened to all those soldiers and migrant workers whose earnings in Lebanon arguably staved off unrest at home? Are they and their impoverished families feeding the many faces of Syrian opposition today? Also since journalists like to demonstrate the magnitude of Syrian refugees by reference to the displaced persons crisis after World War II, perhaps greater attention should have been accorded Syria’s generous reception of Palestinian, Lebanese and Iraqi refugees since World War II.

In the conclusion McHugo aims, as he says in the title of the chapter, to “draw… the threads together”. Some of his threads do not work for me, or are too simplistic to be meaningful. That the French bombed civilians and the Ba`th does the same does not make them similar. That both the urban notables and the Ba`th tried to limit the political organization and expression of other groups does not make them similar either. Other threads he draws out are more useful, the politicization of religion, for example, and the politics of fear, neither uniquely Syrian.

To sum up, this book makes the last one hundred years of Syrian history accessible to general readers. This necessarily involves choices of what to include and what not. What I most miss from this account is a sense of warm-blooded people living the material realities of their times. By not using primary sources, and there are some in English, or even a very complete list of English language secondary sources (where for example is Malcolm Kerr’s *The Arab Cold War*, Elizabeth Thompson’s *Colonial Citizens*, Keith Watenpaugh’s *Being Modern in the Middle East*, or Lisa Wedeen’s *Ambiguities of Domination*) the sense of lived history is lost. And it is this sense, the sense of real people rather than victims or monsters, which is missing from our understandings of Syria and the Middle East today.

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