Syrian Studies Association Bulletin

The Bulletin is the regular publication of the Syrian Studies Association, an international association created to promote research on and scholarly understanding of Syria.

Edith Szanto, Editor

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Letter from the President

Dear Members,

As your newly elected SSA president, I reach out to you all in an era of fear and uncertainty. As an organization dedicated to the promotion of scholarship on Syria, the last decade saw many of our members struggling to conduct their work but also overwrought with emotion as the war and humanitarian crisis festered. Today, war-weary Syrians struggle to survive amid destroyed cities and infrastructure. Basic commodities lay out of reach with inflation and a new series of US sanctions during a pandemic that have made life nearly unbearable. Taking in all that is happening in Syria places COVID-19 in a new perspective. This century’s plague has now upended daily life everywhere making precarious conditions all the more so.

As to our work as academics, the Syrian Studies Association had planned to have a program at this year’s MESA conference. Upon learning that some campuses had already decided to offer online instruction and others have barred faculty from travel, we did not move forward with the booking of the rooms. Instead, we are discussing the possibility of a webinar on the topic of antiquities since two of our current board members—Heghnar Watenpaugh and Stephennie Mulder—are immersed in discussions that bridge academia and activism. Living in rural America, I have personally benefitted from the access to presentations and webinars that were made available to more audiences during the COVID-19 lockdown. We hope that this webinar can bring many more people to our program and showcase the great minds in our organization.

Last fall we elected new SSA board members including Heghnar Watenpaugh as Member-at-Large, our former president Fred Lawson as Treasurer, and me as the incoming President. Andrea Stanton ran for the position of Webmaster and intends to give our website a much-needed facelift. Edith Szanto has been our long-time Newsletter Editor and was able to put the publication together despite the pandemic’s setbacks. She will be consolidating the newsletter into a once a year publication moving forward. We will be moving forward with elections this Fall for an open position as Member-at-Large and The SSA Prize Chair.

This issue of the SSA newsletter includes an article titled “Love in the Time of the Revolution” by Leila Asadi, a research note by Uğur Ümit Üngör, a humorous musing titled “Cutch: A Short Story” by Arsheen Devjee, and a short analysis of Syria’s foreign policy by Zakia Aqra. We also have four books reviews included in this installment of the newsletter.

Paul Cobb, our resolute prize chair, has formed a committee to review submissions for this Fall’s best dissertation prize. In fall 2019, the Syrian Studies Association Book and Article Prizes were awarded at the Middle East Studies Association Conference in New Orleans. The winner of the SSA Book Prize was Stacy D. Fahrenthold for her work Between the Ottomans and the Entente: The First World War in the Syrian and Lebanese Diaspora, 1908-1925 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). The winner of the Article Prize was Reem Bailony for her publication “From Mandate Borders to
the Diaspora: Rashaya’s Transnational Suffering and the Making of Lebanon in 1925, “Arab Studies Journal XXVI:2 (Fall 2018), 44-73. Both scholars have served on the SSA board previously, and I wish to congratulate them for their well-deserved accolades.

The SSA Prize Committee unanimously decided to create a special “honorable mention” category for the artistic Nashid al-Tuyur or Birdsong, published in Beirut in 2019 by the collective of young Syrian and Lebanese scholars, writers, and artists known as Sijil (which includes Khaled Malas, Salim al-Kadi, Alfred Tarazi, Jana Traboulsi, and Aamer Ibraheem).

Lastly, I would like to remind you to renew your membership to the association. We are approaching our thirty-year anniversary as an organization and can only continue our work with your membership.

Elyse Semerdjian
President of the SSA
Note from the Editor

Dear Readers,

It is my pleasure to finally present the 24th volume of the Syrian Studies Association Bulletin. This 24th volume is the 2019/2020 edition. It could not have been completed without Sherwan Hindreen Ali, my former research assistant and a current graduate student at McGill. This volume includes a humorous story about life in Syria. We hope that this will start a trend and that in the future other scholars will be willing to share their memories of Syria.

Edith Szanto
Editor of SSA Bulletin
Syrian Studies Association News

2019 Syrian Studies Association Book & Article Prizes

By Paul Cobb

The Syrian Studies Association awarded its 2019 book and article prizes for the best works in Syrian studies during the annual Middle East Studies Association meeting, held in New Orleans in November. Awarded annually for over fifteen years, the awards recognize scholars whose recent work has made a particularly distinguished contribution to the field of Syrian studies. Recipients receive a financial prize and a mention in the Syrian Studies Association’s biannual Bulletin.


Stacy D. Fahrenthold’s book is an important contribution to Ottoman and Middle Eastern history and global migration studies. The book tells the story of the Syrian and Lebanese diaspora in the United States, Brazil, and Argentina, or the mahjar, in the critical historical period between the Young Turk Revolution and the consolidation of mandatory rule in the Mashriq. This transnational history of migration and migration politics pushes the narrative of World War I in the Middle East into the Americas and, at the same time, challenges traditional territorial conceptions of Syria and Lebanon. By combining trans-Atlantic Arabic newspapers with US and French archival documents, Fahrenthold demonstrates that the mahjar exerted considerable influence on the Mashriq. Both the Ottomans and the French paid careful attention to the political mood and investment capital in the Levantine diaspora. The value of the work is self-evident to historians of the modern Bilad al-Sham; In the 1920s, the mahjar became a salient factor in determining where the new borders would lie and who would be included in the new nations in the Levant. Moreover, in Between the Ottomans and the Entente, historians of the United States will find a fascinating account on the making of early US foreign policy toward the post-Ottoman Arab world and US policies on migration from the Middle East. In an age of mass Syrian refugee migration, Fahrenthold’s beautifully written book enriches our knowledge about the transnational Levantine diaspora.


Reem Bailony’s article presents a transnational history of the Christians displaced by the 1925 Jabal al-Druze revolt that transforms how we understand not only this revolt, but also the formation of nation-states in Syria and Lebanon. Bailony focuses on the activities of displaced residents of the border town of Rashaya, located in the Ottoman vilayet of Syria but just inside the border of Lebanon, including their outreach to Christians living abroad. She reveals that the 1925 revolt not only resulted in cross-sectarian nationalism within Syria, but also increased the urgency
of demands from Christians in the mashriq and mahjar for a Lebanon that was separate from the rest of Syria and extended beyond the borders of Mount Lebanon. The committee was especially impressed by the way in which Bailony used a microhistory of a borderlands community to shed new light on issues of relevance to a range of fields: Syrian and Lebanese history, transnational history, Middle Eastern studies, and mahjar studies. The article as a whole demonstrates the ways in which emigration extended colonial and postcolonial landscapes far beyond the colonized nation, enabling the mahjar and their contacts in the mashriq to have a disproportionate impact on colonial policies.

**Honorable Mention:** The SSA Prize Committee were unanimous in creating a special distinction of “honorable mention” and extending it to the beautiful and moving work *Nashid al-Tuyur or Birdsong*, published in Beirut in 2019 by the collective of young Syrian and Lebanese scholars, writers, and artists known as Sijil, among them Khaled Malas, Salim al-Kadi, Alfred Tarazi, Jana Traboulsi, and Aamer Ibraheem. A slim but powerful volume, the book brings together the artwork, poetry and diverse voices of the Bilad al-Sham, from the Bronze Age to the present, often in stunning juxtaposition. With wry wit, archival soundings, and true soul, Sijil dances from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the countryside to the cities, from the deeply painful to the soaringly joyous. The Committee could not imagine a more creative and humanistic response to our present, contested moment.

Paul Cobb is a social and cultural historian of the pre-modern Islamic world at the University of Pennsylvania. He currently serves as the Chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. He is also the chair of the SSA prize committee.
Treasurer’s Report

By Fred H. Lawson

As of 31 December 2019, the Syrian Studies Association held funds in two separate accounts, a business checking account in Wells Fargo Bank and an online transactions account at paypal.com. The balance of the former stood at $774.56, and the balance of the latter was $5343.07. Those figures reflected outlays that had been taken to cover the meeting-in-conjunction fee charged by MESA for the 2019 annual meeting in New Orleans, as well as for the prize honoraria awarded at that meeting.

During the first six months of 2020, the cost of the 2019 annual meeting reception was paid out of the Wells Fargo checking account, completely emptying the account. Current officers of the Association have no access to the Wells Fargo account, which should now be considered closed. As of 30 June 2020, funds in the transactions account at paypal.com totaled $5509.24. MESA is presently reorganizing its offices and has no mechanism to accept PayPal or credit card payment for the meeting-in-conjunction fee for the 2020 meeting in Washington. If and when such payment becomes possible, $300 is earmarked for that purpose.

As soon as the Association has its status renewed as a non-profit educational organization that is exempt from Federal and State income taxes in the United States, it would do well to set up both a new checking account and a new transactions account at paypal.com. Given the provisions of the Patriot Act of 2001, these actions most probably cannot be carried out using the Association’s Employer Identification (EIN) alone.

Fred H. Lawson is professor emeritus at Mills College, where he taught international relations and Middle East politics from 1985 to 2017. He is currently editor of the Syracuse University Press series Intellectual and Political History of the Modern Middle East. He is also the treasurer of the SSA.
Feature Articles

Love Politics in The Syrian Uprising

By Leila Asadi

Introduction

What is the relationship between love and politics? When and where do they collide or co-exist and what forms and spaces would they create? Focusing on the narratives of two Syrian women who participated in the 2011 Uprising, I attempt to investigate the role of love and politics in order to see how love manifested as multiple emotions in the space of the Uprising. There is no doubt that many scholars and researchers from various disciplines have already studied the 2011 Syrian Uprising, approaching it from various legal, political, social, and cultural perspectives. Here I analyze the spatial effects of Syria’s protests as a ‘collective love for justice and dignity’ in personal and individual love relations between Syrians. I came across this topic in a few formal and informal interviews during which Syrian women shared their vivid memories and narratives of drastic change in their relationships with families and friends during the Uprising. These changes ranged from animosity and resentment to passion and love. In what follows below, I focus on two stories that took place during the first days of the protests to show how romantic, interpersonal love was transformed in the midst of collective love in the chaotic space of the 2011 Uprising in Syria.

The Joy of Love

I am sitting at the table right in front of a window that opens up to a cold, cruel, and snowy day in Michigan. Though feeling warm and staring at my laptop screen, I am listening to what Sara recalls of 2011. “We met each other through online social media in our trusted circle of friends and activists who planned and strategized protests during the Uprising. But we fell in love as the protests continued. We would see each other either in our meetings or in the midst of demonstrations. I was surprised every time that he would find me so easily in the crowd. He would appear in busy streets recognizing me among all the face-covered protesters while smiling and standing right in front of me. I will never forget those days.”

How do we make sense of these yearning looks, shining eyes, and excited, flushed faces of the young Syrian woman and her lover in a crowd prone to rage? It seems that the intensity and “spontaneity” of affection makes lovers pause, give up their control, and indulge in very intimate moments that might be contrasted with the strength of indignation in the crowd. An indignation that gives rise to a rage bringing a strong collective will to the fore to gain autonomy. For this, politics and love have been read and written as separated things, respectively belonging to public and private spaces. Indeed, the intimate and private moments or spaces of longing may function as if they stood in opposition to what the public desires. Furthermore, love itself has been interpreted as a source of oppression for women. For instance, Shulamith Firestone and Carol Smart were the first to critique the common, male-dominated
perceptions of romantic love between men and women as liberating. Soon after them, Carolyn Morell argued that male-female relations constitute power structures in which men dominate and women are oppressed. Feminist scholar Wendy Langford echoes this idea when she states that romantic love is a “process by which restrictions, inequality and dissatisfaction are merely obscured.” Thus, romantic love in some ways creates symmetry and mutuality by which it disempowers women.

Adding to this view from another perspective, Hannah Arendt depoliticizes the notion of romantic love by asserting, “love and politics are antithesis because politics is transient, but love is unworldly.” According to Arendt, love is contrasted with politics, construed as public, materialistic and instrumental. Politics are tools to further one’s interests and to possess worldly or material wealth, whereas love is private, passionate, and unselfish. Rather than focus on romantic love, Arendt introduces ‘love of the world’ as a form of love that is different from other forms of empathy, like charity, forgiveness or care. It requires the acceptance of difference and the welcoming of plurality. The question of whether Arendt’s idea of love can actually be practiced or not, is not my concern here. Two points are significant. First, there are different forms of individual and collective loves that have been and continue to be theorized about by feminists and philosophers. Second, the link between love and politics has recently been highlighted in scholarly debates concerning whether such a link exists to begin with.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that love is political when is it considered a force of social organization. However, the notion of love they address is not a romantic interpersonal or familial feeling. As Michael Hardt states, it is “a force to reimagine and envision new social worlds. It is highly political transgressing the lines of private and public space and in need to be re-known as potential transformative power serving for multitude.” For Hardt, love is a source of becoming different and including the other. Love “stands beyond rationality and calculation of interests for both sides and could be a process or even a field of training for constructing a democratic society.” This concept of love he is elaborating is different from love and friendship as commonly known because “we lose ourselves in love, or in love and we become different.”

My first argument, following some feminists, is that it is important not to conflate the notion of romantic love with keeping women entrapped in the private realm and out of politics. If we agree with the prevalent feminist idea that ‘the personal is the political’, then a clear line can’t be drawn to demarcate the public and private realms. Second, I ask: how can we make sense of the romantic feelings between Sara and her lover in the midst of the Uprising? To answer this question, I will resort to a black feminist’s work on love as a way of “practicing of the self and non-identitarian strategy to structuring political community.” Working on black feminist love-politics, Jennifer C. Nash attempts to move beyond a limiting definition of love, arguing that to love is to transcend the self and produce political communities. In this transient process, bodies are organized around intensities,
longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, and optimism and all these affects produce political movements. Relying on black feminism and affect theory, I argue that love is emancipatory and communal and it leads to a collective transformation. This is the love that created a space of intimacy in the midst of rage and protests for Sara and her partner. It is the affect of political life that brought her joy and also strengthened her identification with the protesters seeking collective love. Thus, the Uprising for her was a mixture of individual and universal love and it situated longing for dignity and political freedom along with temporalities and desires. Here is where politics and selfless love collided and became transformative for Sara and her lover in the midst of chaos. As scholar Sara Ahmed states, “love becomes a way of bonding with others in relation to an ideal, which takes shape as an effect of such bonding. Then [here] love is crucial to how individuals become aligned with collectives through their identification with an idea.” The ideal of dignity and freedom for Syria moves the lovers’ feelings as they unite with the crowd spontaneously.

Unromantic Sorrowful Love

I am sitting in a coffee shop located in a rather affluent area in South Bloomfield, Michigan. It is a cold and quiet Saturday morning, sometime in the fall, and it feels colder and colder as I listen to Mariam, a single mom who is newly arrived in the US. “He disclosed my hiding place to Assad’s men. Therefore, I had to flee to Turkey. You know [the] Syrian Revolution brought to me liberation but [it was] mingled with a taste of betrayal. As if it opened a window to my smelly room letting the fresh air coming in. It was painfully pleasing.” Mariam fought two battles during the Syrian Uprising: one against Bashar al-Assad’s regime and the other against her husband, who was in the pro-regime camp while she joined the people in the streets. For her, the Uprising began at home and later extended to the street and it mixed the sweet taste of liberation with the bitterness of betrayal.

For Mariam, the Uprising was the right time to demand ‘karamah’ (dignity) and to resist oppression in both private and public realms. It opened a space where patriarchal power was crystallized through state power and betrayed marital and familial love. Here, a man’s power worked in tandem with government suppression to subjugate a woman who became rebellious in the house and revolutionary in the public sphere. She transgressed the rules, both in her house and her country. Thus, the messiness and unruliness of the uprising contributed to exacerbating domination and control for Mariam. In this case, love was still political. As Wilkinson states, it “is not just about collective joy, but also love as fear, love as disappointment, love as rage, love as domination.” This painful love also shows the hierarchical relations in the multitude. What is interesting in this story is the role of the dominated subject of love. This subject identifies with the revolutionary collective love through which she emancipates herself from a rigid social hierarchy that ruled her private life by breaking away from her husband’s authority and control via the catalyzer of collective love. Fighting both the oppressive state and her husband through resisting state power and religious male
authority, Mariam overcame fear and oppression. It was as if she had given birth to the courage that then became part of her. She became immunized. Mariam explained: “I overcome fear when I became involved in revolution and when I felt the taste of betrayal.” She refused to remain subject to her personal love and instead sought a collective love in its political manifestation. Mariam’s experiences demonstrate Sara Ahmed’s notion that acting in the name of love can work to enforce a particular ideal. Here a committed housewife and mother worked on others by requiring that they live up to that ideal. She refused “being for the others” while welcoming difference and becoming different from what others, especially the husband, wanted for her.\(^{17}\)

**Conclusion**

In both stories, romantic love became a force for collective action and transformation that crossed borders. Yet, it can also manifest as a desire for sameness and it is this “love of the same” that may introduce hate.\(^{18}\) Also, in the space of the uprising, the love of mass or multitude creates multiplication. Sara’s encounter with her lover in the crowded street constitutes the joy and the affect of this political protest. They joined together and increased their collective potential, their power to affect and be affected.\(^{19}\) In the case of Mariam, the location of the subordinated subject seen in the Uprising creates hate as the affect of patriarchy. Sara Ahmed explains that “the encounters with systemic racism or patriarchy will alter the way in which we are affected”.\(^{20}\) This is what happened to Mariam. For her, patriarchy changed love from a transformational force to a tense connection between the private and the public. In both instances, there is a transformation and a welcoming of difference; in both stories politics and love are conflated with each other and the uprising makes this conflation possible. Therefore, I would argue that a hybrid space was created by the Syrian Uprising in which romantic love became a “political concept” as theorized by Hardt. It was even a tool for collective transformation that brought a politics of intimacy to the fore. Concurrently, romantic love also became a mode of control and domination, and it altered the experience of the Uprising for at least some of the women involved. As Eleanor Wilkinson argues, love is a mix of ambivalence and incoherence that brings joy or violence, domination and desire to distance.\(^{21}\) For Sara, romantic love is ambiguous because it sought to unite in political sameness while also looking for gendered difference; for Mariam, subordinated by interpersonal love and state violence, love became an indestructible desire to learn about the world and the other.

Leila Asadi is a PhD candidate in Justice Studies at Arizona State University. She is interested in feminist critiques of legal systems and justice. Her research focuses on the ethical and material existence of the international regime of refugee protection and she draws on feminist ethics to critique the formal human rights language and its effects on refugee women’s lives.
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Syria’s Foreign Policy in the Regional Penumbra

By Zakia Aqra

Syria’s foreign policy has been in a penumbra caused by regional developments and shifts in the international balance of power, which at times granted Damascus opportunities to promote its interests, while, at other times, deprived it from room for maneuver. Simultaneously, distrust was a constant factor in its foreign policy formation, which derived from the perception of continuous betrayal from Arab allies especially after the 1973 War, which left Syria alone to strive for the return of the Golan Heights. The elements of mistrust along with the volatility of the regional and international system forced Syria to rely on strong allies in order to promote its interests and retain (or improve) its position in the region. In this sense, Damascus’ foreign policy balanced on a tightrope; a paradoxical state in between not capitulating what was vital for its strategic interests and its prestige and bargaining from a relatively weaker position.

Failing to recapture the Golan Heights in the 1973 War, Syria realized that it had to rearrange its alliances. While it never pursued genuine territorial capitulation, Damascus proceeded in seeking Henry Kissinger’s mediation to secure “a satisfactory disengagement agreement in the Golan (May 1974)”. In the eyes of the Syrians, if played correctly, the US would have considered negotiating a deal with Damascus for the Golan Heights, just as it did with Egypt for the Sinai. The first attempt between Syria and the US that entertained the idea of signing a non-belligerency agreement with Israel would not have occurred if Egypt had not finalized the Interim Agreement of 1975. On the one hand, Syria had realized that although a fully comprehensive political settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict based on UN Resolutions 242/1967 and 338/1973 would never be complete without Syria, Hafez al-Assad was losing his clout and had to establish Syria’s relevance in the regional balance of power. On the other hand, Syria would not bargain for what was vital for its strategic interests and its prestige. The paradox between bargaining from a relatively weaker position while insisting on its interests, namely, the Golan Heights, was not as irrational as it might seem. In fact, when the US welcomed Syria’s intervention in the Lebanese civil war in 1976, it was viewed as an acknowledgment of Syria’s significance in the region, especially since Damascus considered Lebanon a natural extension of Syria in the first place, even if it had to concede to limitations such as the so-called red-line agreement—which allowed Syria to send its troops into Lebanon provided they did not deploy south of the Litani River. Yet, despite Syria’s cooperation in Lebanon, the Arab-Israeli peace process was being compartmentalized starting with the separate peace treaty between Israel and Egypt in 1979, which left Syria on the side. Egypt deserted Syria – once again – in a unilateral peace treaty with Israel as opposed to a holistic Arab-Israeli peace process.

With a sentiment of betrayal, Syria felt that it had to compensate for its lost prestige and opted for a military build-up. The revisionist climate set by the Islamic
Revolution in Iran followed by Tehran’s war with Syria’s ‘arch enemy’ Iraq set the tone for Hafez al-Assad to build up a stronger military profile in order to attain further relevance in the changing environment of the region. Revolutionary Iran offered Assad a potential ally to counter-balance the Israeli-US alliance. Under this prism, the informal cooperation with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war developed into a broad alliance in the 1980s, boosting Syria’s diplomatic and military weight. While this opened a window of opportunity, Israel’s 1982 invasion in Lebanon set off the alarm for Syria to expand its military in an attempt to gain parity with Israel. In fact, Syria’s armed forces were disproportionally large for the country’s size with “5000 tanks, 650 combat aircrafts 102 missiles and over 500,000 combat personal”. With tremendous political and financial support from the Soviet Union at the time, the concept of the military build-up was framed in a ‘doctrine of strategic balance, or military parity with Israel’, as a deterrent to Israel, and a leverage in the negotiations for a political settlement on the Golan Heights. To a certain extent, Damascus’ build-up achieved its goal as it “produced mutual deterrence that relatively stabilized the Syrian-Israeli military confrontation”. Nevertheless, while the regional revisionist ambience benefited Damascus, the changes in the international balance of power gravely limited Syria’s options. In a sense, Damascus’ regional opportunity to move ‘one step forward’ was offset by the gradual retreat of the Soviet Union from the region, which forced Syria to move ‘two steps backward’. Soon Damascus economic limitations were coupled with 1987 Gorbachev’s loss of interest in continuing to sustain the military option in the Arab-Israeli settlement. However, Syria’s conundrum proved temporary, as the dawn of the post-Cold War era offered Syria – at least in the eyes of Assad – a golden opportunity to become relevant again.

Iraq’s invasion in Kuwait in 1990 was a launching pad not only for the US to fill the vacuum of power caused by the Soviet retreat, but also for Syria. As Damascus was unable to sustain its economy and was forced to reduce its military budget, Assad successfully compensated his shedding image by re-approaching the US and joining the anti-Iraq coalition. The symbolic contribution of Syria, which was limited to allocating a small number of troops without engaging in actual combat, came with financial assistance from the Gulf; investments channeled towards the state-run private sector that was crumbling the economy. Syria was opening up to new co-operations in the region; albeit far from forming alliances. In the wake of the Ta’if agreement, Damascus was able to establish a Pax Syriana in Lebanon, and sit on the table of the US-led Middle East peace process, which at the time seemed to have the potential for an overall comprehensive political resolution for the conflict, including the issue of the Golan Heights.

The Madrid peace process in 1991 was set to change the status quo in the Middle East. For Damascus, the time was ripe for Syria to regain the Golan Heights and to reassert its position in the region. For the first time, Israel, under the leadership of Yitzhak Rabin, accepted that the UN Resolution 242 was applicable to the Golan; thus, demonstrating willingness to withdraw from the Golan Heights and to proceed with an Israeli-Syrian peace treaty. This willingness became known as the “deposit” as Rabin “deposited” a long list of
conditions on the Israeli side to the US Secretary of State, Warren Christopher.\(^7\) As the momentum was intensifying, a series of events cut the lifeline of the Syria – Israel peace process, bringing Syrian foreign policy in the penumbra for another time. The ambush of the Israeli – Palestinian deal in 1993 and Israeli – Jordanian peace treaty in 1994 enhanced Assad’s distrust, who already viewed with suspicion the long list of conditions put forward by Rabin. Assad felt once again betrayed by his Arab partners, namely Arafat and King Hussein (reminiscent of Sadat’s separate 1979 peace treaty), inevitably placing Syria in a relatively weaker position to negotiate.

This distrust was further fueled during the negotiations with the subsequent Israeli prime ministers, which extended – naturally – to the US and its credibility as a broker. By the time of the election of Benjamin Netanyahu, the prospects of a positive outcome from the peace process seemed gloomy. Netanyahu retained a hardline rhetoric against a ‘land for peace’ deal with Syria. And although Israel was engaging in secret negotiations with Damascus because, unlike Rabin, Netanyahu preferred a deal with Syria rather than with the Palestinians by principle, Netanyahu was not able to attain the necessary support to go through with it.\(^8\) At the same time, Assad viewed Netanyahu’s willingness as nothing more than a trap. To add to Syria’s insecurity, the Clinton’s administration seemed to have lost its grip over Israel and, by extension, its credibility to broker the peace process. The same logic of mistrust and insecurity applied during the Ehud Barak’s term that followed. It is worth mentioning that Syria’s distrust did not only stem from a self-preservation point of view given its relative weakness, but from a constant and almost consistent abandonment since the 1973 war from its negotiating partners and allies. The distrust overshadowed an almost done deal. Israel agreed to return the Golan Heights with the exception of a 5% that gave access to Lake Tiberius, which was already exploited by Israel and Syria had not been interested in, and a station on Mount Hermon for surveillance purposes. In the end, these rounds of negotiations were halted due to the fact that the new Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, in 2001 switched focus to the Palestinian front as the Second Intifada started, and also because of new, constrained foreign policy of Bashar al-Assad, who needed to first consolidate power domestically as he was new to the Syrian political scene.

In 2003, the American War on Terror automatically placed Syria at the opposing camp, not only because Syria would gain nothing by joining the War, as it did in the 1990s, but also because of the rigid “with us or against us” rhetoric of the Bush administration. With the ‘axis of evil’ discourse in the air, Syria could only rely on its image as the last standing Arab country fighting against US and Israeli policies. With Iran on its side and a renewed friendship with Putin’s Russia, Syria was able to propagate and build an anti-occupation and anti-American rhetoric – since this time the aggressor was not another Arab country but a foreign power – that would boost its image as the protector of the region. At the same time, Damascus’s relevance was demonstrated pompously by assisting Iraqi Baath officials to find haven in Syria. Syria’s foreign policy towards the US was clearly reactionary. However, soon it became clear that Syria was desperate for a way out since its stance proved to be unmaintainable in the long run. This is the
reason why Assad welcomed Nancy Pelosi, the new Speaker of the House of Representatives at the time, in Syria in 2007, who came with the purpose of driving the US foreign policy away from Bush’s rhetoric by bringing a positive message regarding an Israeli-Syrian deal from the newly elected Prime Minister of Israel Ehud Olmert. With the mediation of Turkey, Syria took advantage of the small opening to reattempt negotiations with Israel. Nevertheless, Tel Aviv’s logic had shifted from a simple formula “land for peace” to “a more comprehensive formula that includ[ed] Syria’s relationship with Iran, Hizballah”. This was a concession Assad was not willing to make. First, letting go of Tehran, who seemed to have the most natural and confident relation that Syria ever had with any other regional or international power, would weaken Syria’s position; and second, the history of mistrust cast serious doubts on Israel’s credibility. The strengthened alliance between Syria and Iran and, later, Russia was tested during the Syrian Civil War. Iran, as opposed to its Arab neighbours, demonstrated to be much more reliant in withstanding the challenges that Assad had to face as Syria became a battlefield for regional politics. Amidst a civil war that rendered his regime even weaker in many aspects, Assad was able to bring to the fore and hold its position on its vital interests. From a foreign policy perspective, Assad’s regime is far from re-engaging in a negotiation with Israel regarding the Golan Heights. Now, with Russia covering him, Assad’s foreign policy was able to tiptoe between military confrontation and diplomacy with Israel without escalation, as he was trying to regain his hold on Syrian territory controlled by the opposition, and thus returning to the previous status quo on the border. The pattern that was established in Syria’s foreign policy since the 1973 war, which was to constantly stand or walk on a tightrope has not faded away even with the wounds and damages of as of now near ten-year civil war. Although the region is still far from a status quo and the Assad regime still has many challenges before it consolidates itself within the country again, it still remains to be seen whether the new alliances and regional balance of power may offer a genuine opportunity to establish a new pattern away from the penumbra.

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Remembering Syria

Cutch: A Short Story
By Arsheen Devjee

“So there’s this kid in my class that keeps calling me ‘Cutch’.” Sajid announced when he came home from teaching his morning class at Berlitz one day. Irfaan and I were sitting to eat breakfast in our “penthouse” apartment in the chic neighborhood of Jisr al-Abyad. I call it a “penthouse” only because the apartment was on the top (seventh) floor of an apartment building, with no elevator. We had fallen in love with the oversized balcony overlooking the two jewel-studded mountains of Damascus, Mt. Qasioun and Mt. Arbaeen, and much to the warnings of our newly made real estate broker friend, Tarek, we foolheartedly agreed to the overpriced rent, and paying it three months at a time. We were excited to be in Damascus proper, and made no hesitation heading to the “trendiest” street in the city: Share’ al-Hamra, “The Red Street”. Trendy streets came with high prices, but the balcony in this flat was outstanding. The size of a small bedroom, the open terrace was all we really saw and considered before saying “yes.” We did not seriously consider the compact kitchen, bare furniture and the very limited availability of drinking water before agreeing to rent the apartment. Very soon the water availability became a problem. We had access to drinking water daily until noon, and to a tiny hot water tank on the roof that provided water to the shower, toilet and kitchen. The hot water tank often ran out before the day was done which left us in a very uncomfortable situation until we were graced with more water the next morning. But all of these inconveniences were not reason enough to refuse the chance to have such a striking view in our hands. We were sold the moment we saw it.

“What’s ‘Cutch’”? Irfaan asked casually.

“I was hoping you two might know… This kid’s pretty funny though, she called me ‘Cutch’ like four times this class.” Irfaan and I both shrugged. “How old is she?”

“I don’t know. She’s in the kindergarten class, so five maybe.”

“That’s so cute. Maybe ‘Cutch’ is some weird thing little kids say that doesn’t mean anything, you know? Or maybe she’s trying to say a word in English but doesn’t know how to pronounce it clearly.”

We asked our Arabic tutor later that day what “Cutch” was in Arabic. Mahmood flatly denied “Cutch” was an Arabic word. “We don’t have ‘ch’ sound in Arabic!” he said very loudly. Mahmood was a very passionate man, his tone often resembled shouting, but I knew he would have no intention of that sort, he just “spoke loudly”, especially for our “polite and often timid” Canadian interaction styles.

Mahmood was an Iraqi refugee living in Damascus. He would bring us photocopied University of Damascus Arabic textbooks, and we would learn their content with him in our living room. Mahmood spoke pretty good English, but when he occasionally would get stuck on a word, the volume of his voice, a clear representation of his level of frustration, would reach frightening heights, at least for me. My heart would
thump extra loud when I could not understand what he was saying and had to ask for further explanation, and if he ever got a whiff of my confusion, his voice would grow louder, which only added to my nervousness. He would shout, “Wadeh! Wadeh!” With eyebrows raised and eyes popping out of his face, I would frantically nod just to satisfy him that I understood so we could move on to the next topic. His shouting would directly inhibit my ability to discern what he meant, and my eyes would glaze over from the intensity of his interrogation, leaving my with questions or a half understanding of a text to figure out at a later time in solitude. This method worked for me, as I was studious and had developed quite the knack for figuring out the meanings of words and proper conjugations on my own late in the night. Mahmood would use a very traditional pedagogy filled with dictation, rote memorization and regular tests. Being the keen student I was, Mahmood’s teaching methods fulfilled the intense craving I had for Arabic.

Every morning, as Irfaan and I were eating breakfast, Sajid would come home from teaching his morning children’s classes at Berlitz and indulge us with stories about the cute things his students did that morning, especially the student who would call Sajid “Cutch”, and whose name, in our house, soon became Cutch. “I’m teaching my kids the song ‘head and shoulders’, and Cutch has revolutionized the effort it takes to act the song out” Sajid reported one morning after returning from class.

“What do you mean, ‘revolutionized’?”

“Well, all the kids are so cute going up and down touching their knees and then their toes, you know, ‘knees and toes, knees and toes’. But Cutch didn’t want to go up and down”, Sajid recounted with a huge grin across his face.

“What do you mean Cutch didn’t want to go up and down?”

“Yeah, Cutch stood on one foot, the other raised in the air so she could reach her knees and toes without bending down, and sang the song standing up the whole time, her hands going from knees to toes, knees and toes, knees and toes, all while balancing on one foot. Brilliant! All the kids were in a line going up and down, and Cutch was in the middle, standing the whole time!” Sajid was beaming. He was so proud of his favorite student for coming up with such as ingenious way to perform “Head and Shoulders”.

Comical situations while teaching English occurred regularly in all of our classes. I always thought the whole situation of me teaching English to adults was a farce in itself as most of my students were much older than I was, and addressed me as “Teacher”, or later on at the Arab International University (AIU), “Doctor” with me calling my students by their first names. I was suffering from an acute case of “imposter syndrome”, my age and inexperience foremost in my mind, coupled with my constant doubting that my “native Western accent” alone was a sufficient qualification to teach as was pointed out to us when we were hired at Berlitz. Although all Syrians, my students at Berlitz came from diverse fields: retired army generals, doctors, PhD students, high ranking civil servants, and even retired professors. At AIU I encountered more diversity with students from all over the Arab world. Acting the part of a confident, qualified and
experienced English teacher was often a nerve wracking, theatrical performance to say the least, especially in the face of comical situations.

I was teaching a class of adults at Berlitz and trying to get the students to come up with the word “nervous”. I wasn’t able to bring the correct word out of them and, as per the “Berlitz method”, resorted to giving them the word. As soon as the class heard the word “nervous”, everyone cracked a wide grin and let out a loud moan swearing that it had been on the tip of their tongues this whole time. One student, Radhwan, in the front centre of the class, about my father’s age slowly stood up putting out his hand, our eyes meeting.

The man was short and stout, with silver hair and a silver moustache. He always wore a pressed light blue collared shirt tucked into black slacks with a dark brown belt that artificially separated his torso from his legs. Radhwan was a civil servant who was taking my class as professional development administered by the ministry he worked for. He was a keen student, always asking me for further grammatical explanations, which would often put me in an awkward situation of admitting ignorance and bringing him the answer next class. In Canada, a sign of strength and integrity is when you admit to not knowing something when you really don’t know it; not so in Syria. There, it is better to feign an answer to save face than to admit to ignorance. I did not know that then, and after a couple of times I brought Radhwan a complex grammatical explanation the following class, he began to mistrust me. We both secretly knew that.

Radhwan’s right arm was stretched out in front of him, his palm facing up and his index finger and thumb meeting to form a circle, as if he was holding a morsel of food in his hand to bring up to my mouth to eat. This was the sign for “patience” or “wait” or “slow down” in the Middle East. The signal required eye contact, and one’s hand had to come down gently and pause in mid-air as eye contact is established. It was a handy signal useful in a variety of different settings; if you wanted to cross a busy intersection and tell a car to stop or slow down to allow you to cross, or if you wanted to interrupt someone, cut in front of a line, say please, or sorry, or to say something in class. In front of the class, Radhwan stuck out his hand in the motion of patience holding it in mid-air. “Teechar! I think it is nervooos.”

I smiled and calmly corrected him. “No Radhwan, it’s nervous.” The class had gone quiet, all side conversations paused to watch the unfolding confrontation. Radhwan’s arm went up and down again to reinforce the signal, “Teechar, it’s Nervooos!” I took a deep breath, as my insides laughed at this uncanny situation, trying to simultaneously erase the smile off my face as to appear serious. I wanted to end the conversation and move on to the remainder of the lesson. I had wasted a lot of time trying to get the class to come up with the word nervous and we were behind schedule. “Radhwan, the word is pronounced ‘nerv-us’.”

“Teechar! I know it is nervooos.”

“Maybe in French it is pronounced nervoos, but in English we say ‘nerv-us’.”

“Teechar!”
It took all my strength to end that conversation with Radhwan that evening. We ended up agreeing to disagree on the pronunciation. I was glad to get back to the lesson and finish up the class.

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For the end of term celebration, Sajid’s kindergarten class held a concert. Our fascination with Cutch and her antics led Sajid to invite Irfaan and I to the concert. “Come and see Cutch for yourself.”

“Really? We’ll be allowed?”

“Yes, of course. You are both teachers there. Just come a couple hours early before your afternoon classes, stay for the concert and then we’ll go for lunch before your afternoon classes begin.”

The Berlitz yard was full of parents, all with cameras, pointing and commenting at their very cute kindergarten kids. The class was made of about twelve children in total with Sajid as the teacher. The stage was in the schoolyard. The parents were seated on folding chairs in the yard and teachers and staff standing behind the chairs in the “overflow” space. The children were being led my Sajid onto the stage which was a raised concrete ledge connected to the school. Irfaan and I were standing together behind the chairs, eager to get a glimpse at the infamous Cutch that had captured our hearts over the past couple months.

The students, a good mix of boys and girls, dressed to their finest, the girls wearing colorful, poofy dresses, their hair neatly done up, the boys in dress pants and collared shirts. Where was Cutch? They were all so cute. The music began, and with Sajid’s encouragement, standing in front of the line of students, the children began singing. The lyrics of the “background” song drowned out the children’s voices. Many of the children looked star struck, their eyes glued to what looked like a small sea of parents and teachers cheering the children on, broad smiles with big teeth and eyes popping out of their happy, stretched faces, inadvertently causing temporary amnesia as the song continued, “head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes…” Where was Cutch? Then I saw her, as the children bent down to touch their toes, there was Cutch in the middle of the class in a pink dress with poofy shoulder puffs, her hair done up in a cut little bun, balancing on one leg, her other kicked out to the side, her hand moving from her knees to her toes, a wide grin on her face. “There she is, Irfaan! In the center”, I motioned to him, do you see her? She’s doing ‘knees and toes’ on
one foot, you can see her so well, she’s not bending down to touch her toes like the other kids. Do you see her? Do you see her? Irfaan!”

I turned to look at him. Irfaan was quiet, just staring.

A moment passed. Irfaan staring at Cutch, me staring at Irfaan.

“Cutch is a girl?” He asked slowly as if in shock.

“Of course Cutch is a girl! You thought she was a boy this whole time? I always thought she was a girl!”

“This changes everything. I thought Cutch was a boy.”

“It’s okay, boy or girl, doesn’t matter, look at her, she’s so cute, balancing on one foot…”

The presentation finished to a loud applause and the crown began to disperse, the kids running into their parents’ arms and conversations began filling the air. “I’m going to go talk to her.” I left Irfaan in the crowd and headed to the front to find Sajid. There was a small crowd of parents gathered around him, thanking him for teaching their children. I spotted Cutch and smiled at her. She was shy and hid behind her dad’s leg. After Sajid and Cutch’s dad finished speaking, Sajid crouched down to speak with Cutch. “You always call me ‘cutch’, what does that mean?”

“Cutch” she said with a shy smile.

“Ma ma’ana cutch?” What does Cutch mean? Sajid tried asking again in Arabic with earnest curiosity.

“You” she said with her finger raised pointing at Sajid, and ran off. My eyes met Sajid’s and we burst out laughing. “Now we’ll never know,” I chuckled.

The end of one term meant the beginning of another. New classes, new students whose trust and respect had to be earned. My new evening class was larger than normal, all refugees from Iraq. A local church who was active in helping the refugees navigate life in Damascus had arranged English classes for them. The students were of all different ages, professions, and skill levels. The only thing they had in common was that they were all over eighteen, from Iraq and refugees. There were twenty students, mostly men with a few (three) women. The women were all extraverts, and their proficiency in English became obvious in the first twenty minutes of the class. The students went around the room introducing themselves by stating their names, what they did, and an interesting thing about them. I soon realized a few of the men were ex-soldiers from Saddam Hussein’s recently defeated regime; my heart rate increased every time each of the veterans introduced himself and mentioned his past occupation. Of course, they didn’t mention they were “soldiers” in “Saddam Hussein’s army”, but being Iraqi refugees who used to work in the “army”, what else could they be alluding to? The group was a jolly bunch, laughing a lot.

It appeared they knew each other outside of Berlitz, which brought a light and friendly atmosphere to the class. Or perhaps the students were feeling that sweet nostalgia
of meeting someone from your home country while in a foreign land. The exuberance my students felt filled the classroom air, and I breathed it in with a sense of enjoyment. I began the class by playing some ice breaker games like “Two Truths and a Lie” and “Complete the Sentence”. Despite my reservations and nervousness of some of the students’ backgrounds and my imaginings of their involvement with what I had always perceived as a villainous regime, I was really enjoying my new class. They were talkative, funny and easy to get along with. All of our faces were radiating, the lesson resembling a get together of old friends rather than an English class.

This was a bit of an unusual class in that there were more students than my other classes, which never exceeded more than twelve students and the length of the class was ninety minutes instead of the usual 45, with a ten-minute break after 45 minutes. The class was so much fun, I barely noticed the first half of the class go by.

After the break, my plan was to begin the first lesson. Our lesson was about the family. As the students filed in, I began the Berlitz method of asking questions. I drew a picture of a family tree on the board, put the word “me” in the middle and began to ask for the appropriate words to fill the chart. Hands were flying in the air to help fill the diagram. I was feeling amazing. It is a teacher’s dream to have a fully participating class, and students whose energy lights one another up. This was going to be an awesome two months. The students filled the immediate and extended family tree quickly. I began to “Berlitz” other words from the class, words like “close friend”, “acquaintance”, “colleague” and “classmate.” We were on a roll!

Then it happened. One of the men in the front row began to hesitantly raise his hand. “Yes, Jawad”, I tried to encourage him to speak. Jawad was a quiet student. He wore a reluctant expression as he raised his hand halfway up, then down again, unsure whether to ask. His face, which was before then in a wide grin had become unsure. “Yes Jawad, it’s okay, you can speak. How can I help you?” The nervousness on his face was making my insides squirm. I hope I didn’t say anything wrong. I started to panic a bit, but at the same time tried to sound...
calm and inviting so that he would feel comfortable enough to ask his question. Jawad began to speak ever so slowly, “I’m sorry Teechar, I don’t know what you say.”

“You don’t know what I am saying? What do you mean? Am I speaking too fast?”

Jawad looked at Amir beside him, asking him, through facial expressions, to step in. Amir, being put on the spot was looking left and right, thinking fast on what to say. “I’m sorry Jawad and Amir. I didn’t realize you weren’t understanding me. Am I talking too fast? maybe I am enjoying myself too much with you guys!” The void in my stomach filling with regret that I had gotten so comfortable, I was probably speaking very fast.

“No you’re not too fast”, Amir spoke up. “I think it is your Indian accent I cannot understand.”

POW! Amir’s words knocked me hard in the stomach. My Indian accent?

The class was silent. This was beyond embarrassing; was I really being racially profiled by my ESL class? A moment passed. I felt a deep and familiar feeling of sadness inside of me, something that must have been left over from elementary school teasing. I looked down and made an effort to gather strength and composure, took a deep breath and looked up at the class. Jawad and Amir were also short of words, an embarrassed smile crept up on Jawad’s face. Now I understood why he was hesitating to speak up.

I was winded, unable to say anything. What Indian accent? I’ve never stepped foot in India in my life. In fact, my parents laugh at my English accent when I tried to speak Gujarati or Urdu. What was Jawad talking about? My thoughts were racing a mile a minute, rather, a thousand words per second. What do I say? What do I do? This isn’t like any type of racial profiling I had experienced on the street or in school where I can set the culprit straight, not mincing words or not having to worry about meeting them again. How do I play this off?

“Indian accent?” I said with all my strength. Has any of these people ever even been to India? They seriously come from a world without immigration, I guess there were not many non-Iraqis that immigrated to Iraq and lived there for many generations, or had moved around multiple nations and continents, settling in Iraq?

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“Indian accent!” I repeated with more volume and an ironic expression. “Who has been to India before?” Amir slowly raised his hand, scanning the class left and right to see if anyone was joining him. All eyes were on Amir. “Where did you travel in India?” He rolled off some names of places in India. Bombay and Agra were the only names I recognized. “How is it in India? You must tell us, none of us have been there before, including me.” Amir was shocked. “It is very nice, teechar.”

“I’m sure it is beautiful, and I pray we all get a chance to go visit there one day. I do not have an Indian accent. I was born and grew up in Canada. I have a Canadian accent. This may be the first time you are hearing a Canadian accent.” I spoke calmly and very matter of fact-ly. I was hurt. The pizazz and enthusiasm drained out of me. I began to imitate a British accent, “I am sure you have heard British accents before”, purposely omitting the ‘t’ in “British.” I got some
smiles from the students that gave me encouragement to keep going. I dove right into my imitation of an Indian accent, “Vat are you talking about, vat Indian accent are you chatting about? I speak perfect Angrezi.” Despite how horrible I am at different accents and imitations, my attempt at an Indian accent got the class laughing out loud. I was laughing too, mainly at how horrible I knew I sounded and felt. The bell rang, and class was officially over.

My thoughts of race and identity were constant in Syria. Every time I would meet someone new, I would be hounded with questions of where I was from and what I was doing in Syria. People were curious. But the questions on where I was from would never be easy to give. My knee-jerk reaction is to say Canada. I was born and raised in Canada. However, saying I was from Canada was always met with further interrogation, “Aslik min wayn?” Where are you really from? It’s complicated. My parents and grandparents were born and raised in East Africa. It was my great grandparents that moved to East Africa from India. Although we eat Indian food, speak the language and enjoy Bollywood films (like the rest of the world), there is no other connection to India, not trips “back home” or even family. But my blood is one hundred percent Indian, and it is my blood that everyone was confused about when I called it Canadian. Over time, Sajid and I found that telling people we were from India was a lot more convenient. We would be understood very quickly and not have to go into our complicated history of multigenerational continental migration, and we would be quoted cheaper prices. If we said Bangladesh or Pakistan, the prices would drop another notch lower. We had a lot of fun with this.

Until one day, we were met with a follow up question after revealing we were from India. The man we were conversing with asked “shu al mu’adal litahwil ila lira?” – What the conversion rate to lira? I heard his question and immediately my face became red hot. He wanted to know what the conversion rate was between lira and the Indian… what was the currency used in India? Sajid began to stall out loud, “uh uh, ma fahimt, shu su’alak?” – Sorry, I didn’t understand, what are you asking? We were going to be found out, exposed as “fake” Indians! We had been telling the whole country for more than six months that we were from India, and here we were meeting some random man who had actually been to India, and had enough knowledge and interest beyond Bollywood, to ask us a real question about the place, and we didn’t even know which currency was used in India! I was going over all the possibilities I could think of, dinar, dirham, what else? The man mumbled something that started with an ‘r’. What could it be…? Ruble starts with an ‘r’, but it couldn’t be that. My mind was racing, I should know this. I looked at Sajid, his face was as distressed as my thoughts, I made a facial expression telling him I didn’t know, the man was waiting for our answer. The man’s phone began to ring, saved by the bell! What a sense of relief! But we still had to answer his question. “Ruble?” Sajid spoke lightly.

“No it can’t be, I was thinking the same. Dinar? Dirham? But he said something that started with an ‘r’.” Then it came to me: RUPEE! India’s currency: rupee! “It’s rupee, Sajid!”
“What’s the exchange rate?”

“Wallahi ma ba’rif!” – by God I don’t know, I uttered the common expression to claim complete ignorance, waving my hand to dismiss myself from the issue, leaving Sajid on his own to answer the question. The man hung up his phone and looked at Sajid. “Ohh, uhh, al-rupee fi hind, nafs al mu’adal li lira, nafs ashee” – The Indian rupee and the lira is the same value. It is the same.

“Aywaa, tamam”- yes, okay, he replied. The man was clearly distracted and whatever news he learnt from the phone call caused him to excuse himself promptly. Our cover as “Indians” was saved, but I did spend some time at the internet café researching a little more about India, just in case I was ever questioned again.

Back in Berlitz, I met with Sajid and Irfaan to take the bus home together. As we were heading down the front steps of Berlitz, a young man comes running up to Sajid. “Cutch!” he calls him. “Nice to meet you cutch!” The young man shakes Sajid’s hand quickly and runs off. The three of us stopped in silence. “Did he just call you cutch”? I asked in an ironic voice, smiling so hard it turned to laughter. What was going on? Why did Sajid’s students’ think his name was “cutch”?

After we got home that night, I stayed awake to get some Arabic homework done before my class with Mahmood the following day. I had to read a story and figure out the meaning, spelling and ı’rab (grammatical structure) of all the words and sentences for a dictation test the next day. I was reading slowly, “tashrab at-taairatu al maa-an waadihan”- the bird is drinking the water waadihan. What’s waadihan? I pull out my dictionary and began to look up the very familiar word, repeating it as I flipped through the pages and scanned the different entries, “waadihan, waadihan”. I am not sure whether my eyes fell on the definition first or if my repetitions changed into Mahmood’s shouting voice of “Waadeh! Waadeh!” that the meaning came to me. “Waadeh: clear, lucid, plain, obvious, distinct.”

Waadeh indeed! The bird is drinking clear water, and Mahmood has been asking us if his explanations were clear all this time! I chuckled to myself over how cliché not understanding what waadeh was and I ran to find Sajid and Irfaan to explain to them my discovery.

My next class with the Iraqi refugees was the following day. I spent more time than usual preparing for the class, making sure I would not feel rushed in any way so as not to affect the speed at which I spoke. I was nervous going into class, praying the “Indian accent” thing would not come up again. Although being a lot more reserved than I was in the first class, I made sure to greet the students with smiles and a lot of positive energy. I was trying to not wallow in what happened last class. The first lesson moved fast. The students were a bright group. I was consciously speaking slower and paying more attention to Jawad and Amir to make sure they understood. They both definitely noticed my extra attention on them, and they were grateful for that. After the break, a couple of the students began talking about their life in Damascus and how the laws towards refugees prohibited them from holding most jobs. An outspoken
student, Ali, was complaining of getting cheated at his construction job where he was being paid a third of what other Syrian workers were being paid. Hearing these stories made my stomach curdle. Driven out of their home country, these men and women were navigating life in a country already overburdened with its own financial and security hardships, trying to find a place of their own.

After the break we started on another lesson, sports. I began “Berlitzing” by acting out different sports moves, pitching a ball, shooting a basketball, shooting a soccer ball, hitting a racket, and having the students yell out the sport I was acting out. This activity went quickly and left me scrambling to write down the names of the sports on the white board as they were being shouted out. Next came positions. I showed them a picture of a soccer team on the field. “What are these players called?” pointing to the defense. “They try to get the ball away from the net.” Students shouted out the answers as I wrote them on the board. “What about the player inside the net? What’s another name for this net?”

We had covered all of the positions when Amir raised his hand. My stomach tensed a bit as I saw his hand in the air, “Yes Amir?”

“Who is that?” he asked, pointing to the out edge of the soccer field picture. I looked at the class and asked my favorite question to ask as a teacher, “Can anyone tell me who this is at the side of the field? It looks like he is yelling out to the players.”

“Cutch!” Ali shouted out from the back. “That is the cutch!”

“The what?” I inquired with astonishment. Did I just hear “cutch”? “Could you repeat that Ali. Who is that person on the field?”

“The Cutch. That is the cutch, teechar.”

I buried my head in my hands, the biggest smile overtaking my face, bending down, overwhelmed. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, of course “cutch” is coach! That makes so much sense! I moaned slightly at how obvious the answer was! My students were stunned, all of them looking at me as if I had gone crazy, trying to ascertain whether I was okay or not. I looked at them through the spaces in between my fingers of my hands on my face. A moment of silence passed. I took down my hands, and thanked Ali for his answer. My face muscles were starting to ache I was smiling so hard. Finally, I wrote the word “coach” on the board.

“Coach. It is pronounced coach.”

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Research Notes

The Syrian Oral History Project: A Plan for Documentation and Research

By Üğur Ümit Üngör

How do people experience mass violence? The Syrian civil war is an epic, bitter reminder of the profound relevance of this question. An unknown number of Syrians in Europe and beyond have experiences with and memories of very serious violence – as victims, bystanders, and perpetrators. This research project proposes to document and research Syrians’ experiences of mass violence and the dynamic of the violent conflict in Syria. It aims to interview as many people as possible in a strategic, scholarly and purposeful manner. At the same time, it should be realistic in creating expectations, and ethically responsible in identifying and approaching interviewees and storing sensitive data. Documentation and research is useful for academic output in key research areas such as trajectories and political economies of violence, the ebb and flow of refugees, and the roles of economic inequality, poverty, climate change, identity, and religion in violent conflict. In fact, due to restrictions, prohibitions, and lack of access, never before has it been possible to study Syrian history in such a comprehensive manner. Beyond academia, this project would also be relevant in educating the broader public about these topics, and even for assisting investigations and prosecutions of crimes against humanity.

Threefold relevance

A research project into the experiences of Syrians would pursue three major objectives: academic, social, and legal.

First of all, documentation of and research on mass violence is invaluable to scholarly research. Mass violence is not only a thing of the past but one of the most pressing global problems of our time, and therefore deserves lasting academic attention. Much like the eyewitness accounts of the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, interviews would promote a rich source base for academics to use for the sake of their research (see below for research questions). Syrian collective memory cannot be narrowly conceived as only Middle Eastern history but can help clarify a range of issues in violence research, from perpetration to victimization, polarization and reconciliation, religiosity and secularism, mobilization and demobilization, organized crime and human trafficking, and social research more broadly. Indeed, the Syrian civil war is global history and concerns the whole world.

Second, there is a strong societal interest. As this destructive conflict drags on, a mass return to Syria is unlikely and therefore the million+ and counting Syrians in Europe should be seen as future Europeans, including victims and survivors of some of the most infamous moments and spaces of mass violence. Due to their exposure to very serious violence, it is not only vital for Syrians to be treated psychologically, but also to be heard societally as a group that is severely affected by those experiences. Participating in, say, Dutch society, including learning the language, finding a
job, enrolling in education, and having faith in democracy and the rule of law are all processes that are affected by their wartime experiences. Therefore, international and Syrian NGOs have been advocating to reduce the distance between Syrians and European states.

Finally, there is an unmistakable legal interest. Syrian oral history is a body of knowledge that courts can tap into for prosecutions, for many hundreds of Syrian war criminals live in Europe and the already widespread impunity is an affront against the (international) rule of law and a potential security risk. With the help of Syrian refugees, war criminals in Sweden and Germany have already been prosecuted for crimes committed in Syria. Both the international crimes sections of national police corpses and public prosecutors have a strong interest in detecting and prosecuting international crimes. A responsible interview project would cooperate with them and offer a body of knowledge that can support or contrast existing initiatives for databases of war crimes committed in Syria – an explicit objective of both the EU and separate European Foreign Ministries.

Research questions

A range of relevant research questions guides this project. These questions are being developed systematically and organized logically to fit existing research desiderata, gleaned from intersections between the specific historiography on Syria and broader discussions on mass violence. This structured, diverse, and broad set of questions includes but is not limited to four major chronological foci:

1. Life under Assad Sr., 1970-2000
   - How did Syrians experience social, economic, and political life under the rule of Hafez al-Assad? What were Syrians’ everyday encounters with his rule?
   - How did Syrians experience (religious) sectarianism and (ethnic) nationalism? Which forms of political participation could Syrians afford? How and why did people become active in politics?
   - How did Syrians experience the conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s?

2. Life under Assad Jr., 2000-2010
   - Which political, economic, and social changes did Syrians experience during the transition to Bashar al-Assad’s presidency? What were Syrians’ everyday encounters with the regime?
   - How did Syrians experience (religious) sectarianism and (ethnic) nationalism? Which forms of political participation could Syrians afford? How did they get active in politics?
   - How did economic liberalization affect Syrians? How was corruption experienced by the public?

3. The Uprising, 2011-
   - How did Syrians experience the broader Arab Spring from 2010-2011? Why and how did Syrians organize and become involved in mass demonstrations?
   - How and why did Syrians fight? With whom, and why with those groups? Why did they not fight? How and why were norms of pacifism developed and maintained?
   - How did Syrians experience the changes in everyday life as the war
escalated? Which significant regional differences can we observe in war experiences? How important are factors of class, tribal, and religious identities in the conflict?

- How did the civil war restructure Syrian society in terms of political identities?

4. Flight, Asylum, and Life Abroad

- How do Syrians understand, interpret, frame, and explain the ongoing near ten years of conflict? What are Syrians’ ideas about the post-conflict period, including transitional justice?
- How do Syrians perceive European states’ policies towards Syria? How do Syrians integrate into the Netherlands, what are the obstacles they face?
- How do Syrian children experience the conflict, and their parents’ engagement with it? What do their parents tell them about the conflict, and what kind of responses to they develop toward it?

Approach

This research project will be carried out over a period of at least five years, with a team of interviewers and data experts. The project is based at the NIOD Institute in Amsterdam (www.niod.nl), whose broad experience in war documentation date from World War II; it cooperates with Syrian NGOs and groups who have worked on documenting the course of the conflict through interviews. A brainstorm workshop on 29 March 2018 was held in Amsterdam to garner input and feedback on the designs of research and documentation. Towards the end of the project, a conference will present some of the main deliverables, including an online collection of testimonies.

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Reviewed by Elyse Semerdjian

An illuminated Armenian manuscript containing the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John rests in an archive in Yerevan, Armenia, while its missing eight pages of canon tables—concordance lists of passages that connect related episodes within the gospels—are housed at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The dismembered Zeytun Gospels is the topic of *The Missing Pages*, Heghnar Watenpaugh’s biography of a manuscript and the history of the people to whom it belongs. The story begins with the manuscript’s creation by master painter Toros Roslin in 1256 in Zeytun, a pristine rural enclave in Cilicia prior to the campaign to exterminate Ottoman Armenians that would eventually send the manuscript into exile. The Zeytun Gospels offers us an important lesson to consider the fate of stolen antiquities in Syria, including the future legal battles over provenance and custodianship. The Armenian manuscript drew attention in 2010 during a lawsuit initiated by the Armenian Western Prelacy against the Getty Museum in Los Angeles over provenance and ownership of stolen Armenian heritage. Watenpaugh unfurls the mystery of how the manuscript was cleaved in two and how its legacy spread across seven countries concluding with a lawsuit that left eight missing pages in Los Angeles.

Watenpaugh’s study will be appreciated by audiences hungry for excellent story telling. The chapters skillfully unravel the mystery of the *Missing Pages* as it travels from the Hromkla fortress where they were composed to Zeytun where the gospels were held in an iron box within the Church of the Holy Mother of God and later moved to Marash by Dr. Artin Der Ghazarian before it was cleaved into two. Who stole the missing pages will not be spoiled in this review, but the reveal is sure to surprise readers. While the mother manuscript made its way to the Matenadaran Repository of Manuscripts in Yerevan, the eight missing pages of canon tables were held for seventy years by the Atamian family and eventually sold to the Getty in 1994.

The Zeytun Gospels are a potent metaphor for the pillaged and dispersed Armenian Community of the Ottoman Empire that fell victim to genocide in 1915. Watenpaugh effectively ties the fate of what she calls the “survivor object,” to the fate of the Armenian community exiled from their ancestral homelands in Anatolia (40). Torn and disappeared from their original context, both the community and its sacred text lay dismantled in diaspora. These interactions are brought into relief within a brief epilogue where the author places herself in the narrative among Armenian pilgrims visiting the Getty Center in Los Angeles who interact with their sacred object within the church-like museum, a “gleaming white citadel of art” that mirrors in awe-inspiring wonder the “God-protected castle” of Hromkla where Toros Roslin originally ornamented the pages in luxurious jeweled colors and gold leaf, the finest materials available to him in the thirteenth century.
Noteworthy is how Watenpaugh’s talents as a scholar of material culture allows her to skillfully read the material traces of exile on the manuscript’s surface. A vivid description of the large crease in the looted pages prompts her “to imagine how, at some point, unknown hands removed the Canon Tables from the mother manuscript, how they folded it, perhaps tucked it in a pocket or in the folds of a fabric belt like the ones men worse in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire” (22). With such engaging analysis and rich prose, Watenpaugh prompts the reader to imagine just how the Canon Tables were snatched from their original locale and buried in the smuggler’s clothing. Furthermore, the author’s personal relationship to the Getty controversy prompts her to embrace both a role as a public intellectual and a more personal narrative style in this work—a refreshing break from the conventions of history writing that is sure to invite a broader audience to the conversation.

It’s important to emphasize that The Missing Pages is really a work that only an historian like Watenpaugh, whose work straddles Syrian Studies, Ottoman Studies, and Armenian Studies, can undertake. The multicultural, polyglot world within which the text emerged is unearthed through a masterful reading of Arabic, Turkish, and especially Western Armenian texts. UNESCO has listed Western Armenian, the dialect spoken by the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire, as an endangered language slated for extinction—the Armenian Genocide’s final victim. Pre-genocide Zeytun and Marash are brought to life through Watenpaugh’s close reading of Armenian histories accessible only because of the prolific writing culture Armenians brought with them from Ottoman lands to their new homes in diaspora. From these sources, she captures a moving image of Aleppine historian and Armenian Archbishop Ardashit Surmeian “choking” when he observed a vender in Erzurum wrapping olives in a page of Armenian manuscript containing medieval yergatakir script (181). Armenian books, like the Armenian people, were subjected to both ritualized and casual violence as they were stabbed, defaced, and circulated clandestinely throughout the region during the Genocide. She estimates that these un-inventoried and missing Armenian manuscripts could number as high as 30,000, affirming once again why the survival of the Zeytun Gospels is so meaningful to the Armenian community.

Watenpaugh’s narrative is also enhanced by the vivid ethnographic writing documenting her experience as an Armenian inside post-genocide Turkey. In those moments, she interacts with current residents of Zeytun—the descendants of those who perpetrated the killings and deportations that left the region without a single Armenian. As an Armenian visitor, she describes both the warm and awkward exchanges she experiences with those living among Armenian ruins they don’t recognize due to a state policy that largely expunged public memory of the Armenians who once lived there a century ago. She offers a description of how the now-flooded plain that surrounds the citadel where the manuscript was created continues the process of erasure that began in 1915. The author analyzes defaced inscriptions on barely accessible architectural ruins helping the reader grasp how the Gospels is but one example among thousands of disappeared, erased Armenian heritage. The destruction of heritage as an act of genocide was a
project genocide scholar Raphael Lemkin started but did not include in his final draft of the UN Convention for the Prevention of Genocide (1948). Watenpaugh effectively resuscitates his project making the case for heritage as a human right and the destruction of art as an act of cultural genocide.

The Taliban’s destruction of the Bamyan Buddha statues, ISIS’s destruction of Palmyra, Syria coupled with the gruesome execution of Syrian archaeologist Khaled al-Asaad, and recent threats by the US president, Donald Trump, to target Iranian heritage with military strike (though he later promised to “be very gentle with Iranian cultural institutions”) are all examples of how heritage is targeted by political extremism and war. The questions raised by the destruction of the Zaytun Gospels are ones that will continue to haunt the Middle East well into the future as war threatens to erase the heritage that importantly once supported the public memory and unified communities. Watenpaugh’s ethnographic sections demonstrates just how fragile public memory is and how it can be lost when monuments are obliterated, heritage looted, and people erased. *The Missing Pages* is a biography of a manuscript which is, by extension, the history of a people cut down by violence and scattered across the earth like the pages of a looted sacred text. Watenpaugh’s approach to looted Armenian heritage is certain to attract the attention of scholars outside her field promising to usher forth a conversation about the relationship between cultural heritage and human rights.

Elyse Semerdjian is a professor of Islamic World/Middle Eastern History at Whitman College. She teaches a broad range of courses on the subject of gender, sexuality, social history, culture, and politics of the Middle East. A specialist in the history of the Ottoman Empire and Syria, she authored “Off the Straight Path”: Illicit Sex, Law, and Community in Ottoman Aleppo (2008) as well as several articles on gender, non-Muslims, and law in the Ottoman Empire. She received her MA in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor and her PhD in History from Georgetown University. Her dissertation earned both distinction from Georgetown University and the Syrian Studies Association Best Dissertation Prize in 2003. She currently serves as the President of the Syrian Studies Association.

Reviewed by Sherwan Hindreen Ali

James Grehan’s thought-provoking new book *Twilight of the Saints* is a fascinating account of popular religion in the late-era Ottoman provinces of Syria and Palestine. By painting a colorful mural of a world that no longer exists, depicting widespread syncretic religious practices, rituals, and ceremonies in villages and towns outside the urban strongholds of official and literate religion, Grehan adds much to our knowledge of life in pre-20th century Greater Syria. Drawing upon a diverse pool of sources, including memoirs of native belletrists, accounts of missionaries and travellers, official governmental and ecclesiastical registries, and scholarly works from various periods, *Twilight of The Saints* is a valuable addition to the fields of religious and Middle Eastern studies.

Grehan begins with an account of mid 18th century Damascus. After a particularly harrowing swarm of locusts invaded the town and its environs, local communities, through various rituals and ceremonies, appealed to a legendary bird to save Damascus from the swarm. This magical bird, named *samarmar*, can only be lured to Damascus if a group of Sufis were to travel to Persia, draw water from an enchanted spring there and, while never facing backward or letting the cargo stay under a roof or touch the ground, return to Damascus (1). This odd process and fantastic bird have no connection to Islam, Christianity, or any known religion in the Middle East according to Grehan. It reflects an older understanding that predates organized and universalizing religions that have gone extinct today. This tale sets the tone for the rest of the book, as it explores the diverse religious landscapes of Ottoman Syria and Palestine.

Then, Grehan also offers a brief, but valuable, description of historical developments and problems that accompany the study of religion. Eschewing traditional academic theories that reduce and constrain religious expressions to binaries like “popular” versus “elite”, or “rural” versus “urban”, Grehan offers an innovative framework for better understanding pre-modern religion, which he calls “agrarian religion” (14). Agrarian religion was the “religious mainstream” which was “as much urban as it was rural [...] it was the expression of an entire social and economic order whose rhythms were tied to the slow turning of the seasons, finely tuned to the vagaries of earth, sky and environment” (16). In other words, agrarian religion is the primordial form of human religion, a remarkably durable collection of practices with the primary aim of appeasing spirits, saints, and nature so as to protect people from a vast and unpredictable world full of incomprehensible dangers. Furthermore, agrarian religion is distinct although entwined with state-sponsored, imperial religions like Islam and Christianity, since it adopted their veneer to survive across the centuries. As to his sources, Grehan utilizes an impressive variety of works to support his analysis. He cites descriptions and narratives from Western anthropologists, missionaries, and pre-colonial Western counselors’ discourses, while also drawing upon writings by Muslims and Christians native to the region. For instance, the travelogues of ‘Abd al-Ghani al-Nablusi, a 17th century Damascene Sunni scholar and Sufi, which detail the religious landscapes of various areas in the Levant, are referred to frequently throughout the book. The writings of Mikha’il Mishaqa, a diplomat and historian who lived in 19th century Syria and Lebanon and wrote extensively about the major political and social upheavals of that period, are also often quoted and referenced.

The first chapter describes how the configuration of religion institutions and their weaknesses outside urban centers helped maintain agrarian religion. The second and third
chapters explain the ubiquitousness of holy men and saintly shrines and their centrality to the agrarian religious worldview. Some of these shrines were local and known only to the inhabitants of a village or two, while others attracted pilgrims from distant lands, such as the shrine of the renowned female Sufi Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya outside of Jerusalem and the shrine of John the Baptist in the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus. The same applied to saints and miracle workers; some were wandering mendicants found in small towns, villages, and cities, while others were so highly regarded that Muslims and Christians competed for their blessings, like the Maronite nun Hindiyya (62). Chapters four and five detail various cults of nature, often operating with a light Islamic or Christian veneer, and the pervasive world of spirits and magic that encompassed life during that period. Ancient trees, fantastically-shaped rock formations, and majestic waterfalls were often revered by locals and constituted sites of refuge, votive offerings, and blood sacrifices for people from all religions. Likewise, ancient ruins and thick forests were either seen as locations blessed by holy saints and prophets, or haunted landscapes filled with Jinn and demons that were to be avoided at all costs. Finally, chapter six examines various intra-sectarian prayers, blood offerings, and other rituals invoked to appease and protect from harms, both real and imaginary, that were commonplace in pre-modern life. When available rudimentary forms of medical help failed, as they often did, believers would turn to shrines, Sufis, and monks for help. In one account, a Muslim pilgrim to a local shrine in Rashaya, Lebanon vowed to St. Elias that she would baptize her sick son in a local church if the saint would heal him, and she held true to her promise after the child recuperated (178). The devout would walk on foot for miles and offer expensive sacrifices to elicit help from dead saints and prophets. The more famous and potent the saints or shrines, the more expensive were the costs of supplications and the more complex the rituals necessary to ensure that a saint would hear requests. Sectarian affiliations mattered little as Muslim men sought guidance from esteemed rabbis and Christian towns prepared feasts in celebration for the sojourn of famous Sufis. Records of Christians and Muslims celebrating the Jewish Passover, Christians fasting on Ramadan, and Muslims making pilgrimage to sites of Marian apparitions further prove the syncretic resiliency of agrarian religion.

How and when did this millennia-old religious worldview cease to exist? Grehan makes a convincing case that what heralded “modern” religion’s conquest and the final end of agrarian religion was a tripartite movement of mass literacy, scriptural ascendency, and the “sharpening of sectarian consciousness” (196). This change in religion was a slow process. By the beginning of the 20th century, agrarian religion still dominated the countryside where most of the population lived (202). It wasn’t until the post-World War II era, in which rapid urbanization and advancements in medicine and agriculture greatly reduced the need for saints and shrines, that “modern” religion truly takes over (205). Modernity has no place or need for miracle-workers, spirits, or magic, and it reduces popular religion to superstitions beneath the modern, rational man.

One weakness in the book is that it tends to make absolute claims and thus somewhat overstate the matter. While it is true that modernity marginalized popular religious practices like shrine visitation and talisman usage, it hasn’t erased them, even today. Relatedly, while religious reforms in 20th century Middle East condemned what was once seen as scripturally-backed forms or acts of religious devotions like blood sacrifice and praying for saintly intercession, they still have their believers, with the latter being especially popular among Sufis and Shi’is in the Middle East and beyond. Another example of this tendency to overstate would be Grehan’s statement that religious conversions were purely social phenomena with little to no
impact on the individual’s personal convictions (194-95). This contradicts with some the statements cited in the book. For example, the aforementioned Mikha’il Mishaqa is quoted in the book saying he converted to Protestantism from his native Melkite Catholic church after he came to believe that the former is more faithful to Christian scripture (199).

In conclusion, *Twilight of The Saints* is a must-read for anyone interested in historical changes in religiosity in the Middle East. University students and scholars will find this book, with its detailed charts of religious infrastructure and the demographic distribution of religious communities, a goldmine of information, complete with primary and secondary sources about Ottoman Syria and Palestine. Similarly, non-academics will find it accessible, informative, and entertaining to read. Grehan’s writing is direct and unembellished, but also scholarly and impressive. His avoidance of unnecessary academic jargon, erudite usage of primary sources, and entertaining narratives of life in Ottoman Syria and Palestine is a delightfully balanced and enjoyable read.

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Reviewed by James A. Reilly

This handsomely produced book from historian and dean Toru Miura (Ochanomizu University, Japan) uses a model of urban social networks to explore Mamluk and Ottoman Damascus, focusing on the suburb of Salihiyya. The social networks model is derived from Ira Lapidus, who argued that intertwined, often informal social networks of military, religious and economic actors characterized Syrian cities in the Mamluk era. Lapidus's intervention was part of a discussion about what constituted an Islamic City in the medieval Middle East. The Islamic City debate oscillated between reification (based on an idealist rendition of “Islamic urbanism” that drew on Orientalist epistemology) and grass-roots social history. In the latter approach, as Lapidus argued, historical actors came from various social strata and were preoccupied with this-worldly struggles for power, resources and influence independent of any notion of an abstracted Islam.

Miura’s take on the social networks model as a tool for understanding historical Damascus is revealed in the book’s title. Covering a span of 800 years, he argues that social networks were a foundation of Syrian urbanism, and they were dynamic: the character and composition of the networks changed over the centuries with the passage of time, characterized by changing rulers (Mamluks to Ottomans) and consecutive eras (culminating in the Ottoman Tanzimat). Considerations of prestige, property and power lay behind the actions of individuals and groups who feature in Miura’s presentation.

The book’s focus is the Damascene suburb of Salihiyya. It was founded in the early 13th century by Muslims who were fleeing the Crusaders in Palestine. They established it in the foothills of Mount Qasiyun, already known as a place of local pilgrimage, that overlooked the city. Over time Salihiyya became home to an array of Muslim religious institutions — mosques and madrasas — that added to its pious reputation. The abundance of mosques and madrasas, and the existence of waqfs needed to support them, generated documents and records that allow Miura to offer a detailed description of the quarter in the Mamluk period. In the early Ottoman period there is a gap in the Salihiyya-centric documentation, so the book’s detailed exposition of the quarter, its buildings and its networks resumes with the 18th-century era of a’yan and the subsequent Ottoman Tanzimat. Complementing the fine-grained Salihiyya documentation, Miura’s discussion of the late Mamluk to early Ottoman periods focuses on wider trends in Damascus as a whole, allowing readers to suppose that variations of these general trends were also playing out in that neighborhood. Although Salihiyya was separated from the built-up contiguous areas of central Damascus, it and its gardens were close enough to be a part of the larger urban area in medieval and early modern times.

Miura relies on waqf documents for details of Salihiyya in the Mamluk period, and on Sharia court records for the Ottoman period, so his account is colored by these sources and their preoccupations. They create inescapable biases for historians who by definition seek to anchor their studies in empirical evidence. In the earlier Mamluk period, Salihiyya appears to be mainly defined by mosques and madrasas, so the ‘ulama play a disproportionate role in discussions of the quarter’s people. For the subsequent Ottoman period, Miura’s discussion often detours into the multitudinous pathways of sijill-ology, asking what exactly the sharia court records mean, how we should read them and understand their terminology, etc. Sijill-ology is an occupational hazard (or a rewarding adventure) common to all who work with Sharia court records, but the book’s forays into these
byways might cause the reader to lose the thread of the argument regarding the historical dynamism of Salihiyya’s social networks.

On the other hand, the author’s deep dive into his sources — a project that took many years and demanded exacting attention to detail — allows parts of the book to be almost a reference manual for historical Salihiyya, its institutions and prominent personalities. Miura’s account brings Salihiyya into the wider conversation about Ottoman-Arab urbanism. It reinforces an insight that (to my knowledge) was first articulated by the late historian Antoine Abdel Nour, namely that analyses of Ottoman-Syrian cities must include both their built up central districts as well as the green belts and adjoining secondary settlements ("villages") that display urban characteristics of their own (mosques, madrasas, hammams and so forth). Salihiyya, northwest of Damascus and its erstwhile countryside suburb Ghouta, is a premier example of this phenomenon.

Syria scholars owe thanks to Toru Miura for making historical Salihiyya accessible to us in such rich detail. His publisher, Brill, has lavishly illustrated it with maps, diagrams and illustrations including the author’s own color photos of notable places.

Professor James A. Reilly is a professor of Middle East history at the University of Toronto. He received his MA from the American University of Beirut in 1981 and his PhD from Georgetown University in 1987. He has taught modern Middle East history at the University of Toronto since 1987. He has lived and conducted research in Lebanon and Syria and has written numerous monograms and articles over the years.

Reviewed by Matt Buehler

The beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011 brought the small, secretive religious minority that rules the country, the Alawites (sometimes spelled ‘Alawis) into the global limelight. In his timely, well-written book, *Cycle of Fear: Syria’s Alawites in War and Peace,* Leon T. Goldsmith surveys the origins and evolution of this powerful sect that has dominated Syrian politics since the 1960s. His book provides an excellent overview of Syria’s political landscape while simultaneously furnishing a much-needed political history of the Alawites, as both an ethno-political group and a religious community. Goldsmith’s book argues that the Alawites have, historically speaking, held a position of sectarian insecurity that vacillates from absolute disenfranchisement to full integration within Syrian society. Indeed, he writes that the Alawites enjoy “long periods” of “relative security and interaction with wider society,” which “always give way to renewed conflict and persecution” (13). Thus, even though only some Alawites benefit directly from the Assad regime’s rule, and in fact many of them suffer materially as much as non-Alawite citizens, they continue to support Syria’s regime to mitigate the security dilemma they face vis-à-vis non-Alawite sects, most notably the Sunni majority. By security dilemma, Goldsmith borrows a concept from research on international conflict and its processes, which hypothesizes that different groups can never fully and credibly commit to not exploiting and oppressing each other, especially when the central state is weak and does not possess a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence.

The book is divided into five empirical chapters. Although authored by a political scientist, *Cycle of Fear* is refreshingly interdisciplinary. In chapters 1 and 2, Goldsmith surveys the historical, theological, and sociological origins and characteristics of the Alawites. He begins by discussing their origins as an urban movement based in Iraq, which fled to the mountainous area of northwestern Syria (outside Latakia) in search of refuge. A small Shia sect, often confused with the Ismailis (35), the Alawites developed theological beliefs and religious practices often deemed heretical by Sunni imams, which included permitting Alawites to consume alcohol, as well as avoid praying in mosques or wear the headscarf (hijab). They also developed a belief in metempsychosis—a type of reincarnation—and a tradition of secrecy to conceal their religion from non-Alawites (8). The Crusaders, who arrived in the Alawites’ region in 1098, provided a “cocoon” for them to consolidate their communities, grow their population, and practice their religion, since the two groups rarely fought (24). After the Crusaders’ withdrawal, and the reassertion of Sunni Arab (and later Ottoman) control over Syria, the Alawites again faced discrimination and repression. The 1305 fatwa of the Sunni imam Ahmed ibn Taymiyya justified these policies, which designated Alawites enemies of Islam and “more heretical than the Jews and Christians” (35). Because of intense sectarian insecurity during this period, as Goldsmith notes, the Alawites remained mountain tribes and eschewed migrating to urban areas—even nearby Latakia—until the 1940s (37, 61).

Chapter 3 explains how developments in the colonial and post-colonial periods reoriented politics favorably for the Alawites, culminating with Hafiz al-Assad’s ascension to power in 1970. During the French mandate, the Alawites received their own autonomous state, featuring a consociational elected council in which they held a wide majority (10 Alawites; 3 Sunnis; 3 Christians; 1 Ismaili) (61). Some Alawite elites opposed uniting the Alawite State with broader Syria, fearing—as Goldsmith writes, “insecurity about recommitting Alawites to a state dominated by their historic antagonists, Sunni Muslims” (65). Following Syria’s independence,
Alawite elites became involved in secular Arab nationalist parties (especially the Ba’th Party) and the military. Whereas the latter became the “only real path to stable income for the economically disadvantaged Alawites”, the former opened opportunities for political leadership for the Alawites (68, 70). Hafiz al-Assad and other Alawite elites were attracted to Ba’athism’s secular, pan-Arabist, and socialist ideology. However even as Hafiz al-Assad’s rule consolidated, Goldsmith shows how the Alawites continued to face sectarian insecurity. Numerous highly sectarian conflicts—including violent protests against the Syrian constitution’s proposed secularization (88), the Muslim Brotherhood’s rebellion (93-107), and the Lebanese civil war (93)—reminded Alawites that, even though one of their kinsmen was the ruler, Sunni Syrians saw his regime as “antithetical to Muslim causes” and with “suspect religious loyalties” (92).

The book’s remaining chapters and conclusion analyze the Alawites during the contemporary periods of revolution and civil war. After Bashar al-Assad’s ascension to power in 2000, the regime intensified its sectarianization. Already over 90 percent of military generals were Alawite, for example, in the year he became president (131). The intelligence services soon also became mostly Alawite (140). Despite the regime’s increasing sectarianization, Goldsmith argues that these developments did not benefit the Alawites broadly, but rather only specific Alawite families closest to the Assads. Indeed, as Goldsmith notes, “the size of the privileged Alawite elites shrank as Bashar al-Assad withdrew into greater reliance on his trusted inner core of family and close friends” (159). In fact, most Alawites—like other Syrians—suffered economically in the late 2000s, as the 2011 Arab uprisings approached. In particular, Syria’s drought of 2006-9 hurt Alawite small farmers and tobacco producers in the sect’s homeland around Latakia (165). Thus, when the uprisings began, Goldsmith suggests it was unclear if ordinary Alawites would continue to support Syria’s regime or turn against it (2-6).

Yet, ultimately, Goldsmith concludes that ordinary Alawites’ continuing sectarian insecurity—fear of instability and violence in a post-revolutionary Syria—motivated them to “continue to cling to the regime of Bashar al-As[s]ad” (201). The Alawites’ loyalty further solidified as their situation became more precarious, as the Syrian regime descended into full-blown civil war and faced increasing conflict with Islamist extremists.

Drawing on considerable overseas research in Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey, original interviews with Alawite religious and political leaders, and extensive Arabic sources, Cycle of Fear makes an important contribution to the scholarly literature on sectarian politics in the Middle East and North Africa.

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