
Reviewed by Gabriel Larivière

The Syrian branch of the Muslim brotherhood is one of the oldest and most controversial political parties in modern Syria. It’s controversial nature, that is whether it’s a legitimate political party invested in a democratic future for Syria or an Islamist fundamentalist conspiring to impose its own authoritarian rule on the country, came to the fore in the spring of 2011. Regime officials quickly blamed the Brotherhood for the popular protests emerging across the country. At the same time demonstrators held signs and chanted slogans stressing their independence from established political organizations. Behind the scenes laid layers of contested histories. Discourses alluding to the Muslim Brotherhood reflected conflicting memories of “the events” of 1982 in Hama. The Brotherhood represented a violent Islamist group orchestrating a sectarian uprising for some, or the symbol of the Ba’th regime’s brutal oppression for others. Amidst such diverging narratives, it became increasingly difficult to understand the Brotherhood’s trajectory at the height of the Syrian Revolution. Conduit’s book, *The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood*, precisely tackles this challenge. Her work is an ambitious and novel attempt at disentangling the group’s multi-faceted history to better understand its role during the Syrian Revolution.

To do so, the author sets out to uncover the Brotherhood’s history as seen through the eyes of its members. This approach can help better understand how the organization conceived of its past and projected itself in the future at the early days of the Syrian Revolution. Conduit’s account builds on several primary sources, including memoirs and political documents, as well as interviews with members of the Brotherhood (8-11). The central idea of the book is that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood should be seen as a political organization whose trajectory was shaped by the authoritarian context in which it evolved (14-15). The organization was further influenced by three distinct organizational trends that began developing in its founding years: pragmatism, individualism, and ideological flexibility. By focusing on these, Conduit aims to shift broader discussions of Islamist movements away from their ideology, which she maintains “takes a back seat to [their] rational pursuit of survival and relevance” (15).

Conduit makes her case by narrating the development of the Brotherhood’s ideology and, in parallel, the evolution of its political practice. The first chapter lays down the book’s arguments, while chapter two combines sociological and intellectual history to give a broad outline of the organization’s founding ideas. In the tradition of Hanna Batatu’s works, the chapter emphasizes the upper-class nature of the Brotherhood, whose leadership tended to come from merchant, propertied, or professional classes (41-44). This social basis partly explains the organization’s commitment to property rights and economic freedoms. But Conduit is careful not to infer ideology from social class, and she points out the intellectual diversity within the Brotherhood. For example, Conduit argues that this social analysis might describe the Damascene and Aleppine branches of the Brotherhood, it does not apply easily to the Hamawi one, which was historically centered around the personage of shaykh Muhammad al-Hamid. His most well-known student, Sa’id Hawwa, grew up in a notoriously poor family. As Conduit notes, Hawwa’s famous *Jund Allah* (Soldiers of God) series of books, which emphasized the fight against perceived apostasy from Islam and the need to revive the Caliphate, stood in great contrast with the Brotherhood’s traditional calls for parliamentary democracy (54-55). Indeed, Hawwa’s idiosyncratic views did not make their ways into the organization’s official program. Thus, Conduit argues is that despite the diverse ideas espoused by Brotherhood members, the group officially remained committed to its founding ideals of democracy, economic freedom, and pluralism. Even as Hawwa’s popularity as a more radical author was reaching its zenith in the 1970-1980s, he still co-authored the relatively moderate and inclusive Declaration and Program of the Islamic Revolution (55).
Chapter three outlines the Brotherhood’s long history of involvement in Syrian politics. The Brotherhood successfully ran some of its most influential leaders in electoral coalitions, the 1947 League of Ulama and the 1949 Islamic Socialist Font, and even managing to win several seats in the 1961 elections. Muhammad al-Mubarak and Maruf al-Dawalibi, two influential members, furthermore, served as ministers between 1949 and 1951. Indeed, formal politics was a central preoccupation of the organization’s leadership until at least 1963. Conduit then argues that one can better explain the Muslim Brotherhood’s resort to violence once its political history is rightly understood. She holds that the Brotherhood’s violent episodes represent not a core belief of the organization, but “a result of circumstance and tactic … [which] reflected the extreme end of the countrywide popular response to the significant social changes that the Ba’th regime had imposed on Syria” (92).

The subsequent chapters extend this idea to the years leading up to the Hama Massacre by building on two insights previously discussed in the literature on the Brotherhood: that Ba’thist economic policies alienated social classes typically drawn to Islamist politics; and that the rise of the Hama branch of the Brotherhood pushed the organization towards violent revolt. Conduit adds that these two dynamics were amplified by the authoritarian context at the time, which excluded moderate voices and reinforced radical forces. After the Aleppo Artillery School massacre and the regime’s subsequent repression, the Brotherhood officially joined the fight against the Ba’th initiated by the Fighting Vanguard (the armed faction for artillery school massacre). For Conduit, the Brotherhood’s rushed and disorganized military performance is further evidence that this episode was the result of a pragmatic decision taken in a challenging authoritarian environment rather than a systematic commitment to armed struggle (115).

Building on this account of the Brotherhood’s history, the second part of the book covers the organization’s trajectory since 2011. It also relies on several interviews the author conducted with members of the Brotherhood. In the next three chapters, Conduit argues that the Brotherhood was at a relatively weak position at the early days of the Syrian Uprising; the group’s exile after 1982 caused a striking imbalance between its lack of connections to local coordination committees and its central role in opposition-led institutions abroad, limiting its organizational strength in Syria itself. We further learn that the organization’s hesitancy to initially embrace the protests stemmed from its political experience, as it was wary of the regime’s potential repression and of how Syrian officials would rely on memories of Hama to discredit the popular uprising (157-159). Conduit continues illustrating the Brotherhood’s pragmatism in her discussion of the organization’s participation in rebel politics after 2011. As was the case historically, the Brotherhood’s members had diverse political views that influenced their preferred visions of what a post-Assad state would look like. Although in general they promised commitment to a “civil modern state,” the Brotherhood’s official communications only offered vague ideas of what they mean by “civil” and “modern.” For the most part, the organization was content to focus on gaining support and making alliances within the diverse revolutionary groups and factions that appeared in Syrian at the start of the uprising. All this was done so as to position itself at the heart of rebel institutions, which was a largely failing endeavor due to the organization’s checkered reputation causing most to distrust it (160-169).

The book ends by looking at how the Brotherhood took part in the militarization of the Syrian Revolution and in the subsequent civil war, which was relatively limited. The lessons learnt from its involvement in armed operations preceding the Hama Massacre made it once again reluctant to support emerging armed opposition groups. Moreover, unlike in the 1980s, the Brotherhood was now removed from training camps and military operations, which made it difficult to directly take part in the armed conflict. Nonetheless, the organization’s great resources and numerous contacts outside Syria made it an important player in financing armed groups such as Liwa al-Tawhid in Aleppo and in funneling humanitarian aid inside the country (205-207).
Conduit’s book is a welcomed contribution to the growing literature on Islam and politics in modern Syria, on par with the prominent works by Khatib, Lefèvre, and Diaz. It invites researchers to seriously consider the political history of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, both as a set of experiences that shaped the organization and as defining feature of it. In addition, the book is important because it illustrates the value of using memoirs and interviews to explore the history of political organization in contexts where authoritarianism makes traditional research method unfeasible. That being said, Conduit’s exploration of the brotherhood would have benefitted from a more sustained engagement with the subjectivities expressed in the memoirs and personal stories she utilized. At points, there seems to be a contradiction between what Conduit herself argues and with what the memoirs and interviews themselves say. A good example of this is found in the case of the aforementioned Sa’id Hawwa, whose deeply personal memoir paints the portrait of a Brotherhood member different in important ways from the picture of the Muslim Brotherhood Conduit paints. Moreover, it’s important to note that Conduit missed an important work that could have enriched her narrative at times and strengthened some of her arguments. Adnan Sa’d al-Din’s five-volume memoirs contain an inexhaustible amount of information and details because of his crucial role as leader of the organization, and the book would have been enriched by its inclusion as a source. Lastly, and as a minor note, while scholars have already noted that the memoirs of Fighting Vanguard Brotherhood members like Ayman al-Shurbaji, Abu Mus’ab al-Suri, and Adnan Uqla are highly valuable primary sources in themselves; lesser known is the fact that they also contain unique information about the Brotherhood’s armed operations in Syria during the 1970s-1980, a topic typically avoided by Brotherhood members themselves. A brief, more detailed degression into this essential area of Brotherhood history would have facilitated the reader’s understanding of the organization, its goals, and history.

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