Dear SSA Members

I think this is my penultimate Presidential letter, and it comes to you as a rather late spring is coming intermittently into the Salt Lake Valley. The semester is over and I have only a few more essays and term papers to grade.

The elections for my successor will take place this fall, and I strongly urge you all to vote. I am delighted that Geoffrey Schad is already in place as Secretary to ease the transition and that Beverly Levine is our new student representative. I should like to extend my sincere thanks to Dr Imad Moustapha, the ambassador of Syria to the United States, who not only gave a most interesting talk at our reception at MESA in Washington DC last November, but also graciously invited several of us to his residence for dinner, a most enjoyable and memorable evening.

This year the Association has sponsored three panels for MESA in Boston, which I very much hope you will all attend. I understand that Sadik al-Azm will be in the United States this fall, and I will invite him to give the talk at our reception. I think he already has his US visa, so I anticipate that he will be able to accept our invitation.

Last time I wrote this letter I thought that I perceived something of a thaw in US/Syrian relations. After the US Presidential elections the process seems to have developed further, and while this country is inevitably most concerned with the financial crisis it seems that foreign relations are proceeding in a generally positive direction. There have been informal meetings between American and Syrian officials, a trend that I very much hope continues. I have received several enquiries about language courses in Syria over the past few months, and it is clear that more and more students are interested in going to Syria to study.

As usual I should like to thank Joshua Landis for his work on the website, and Steve Tamari for editing the Newsletter. I am glad that the Association continues to prosper, and I look forward to seeing many of you in Boston in November.

Very best wishes to you all,
Peter Sluglett
News of the Syrian Studies Association

Syrian Ambassador Moustapha Addresses SSA Meeting at MESA: “Syria-USA Relations: a Thaw or a False Start?”

On November 22, 2008 Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. Dr. Imad Moustapha addressed an overflow crowd of Middle East academics attending the annual convention of the Middle East Studies Association in Washington, DC. Ambassador Moustapha’s lecture—sponsored by the Syrian Studies Association—was titled “Syria-USA Relations: a Thaw or a False Start?” In the aftermath of both the election of US President Barak Obama and the US attack on Syrian territory near Abu Kamal on October 26, Ambassador Moustapha focused on the events of the last year of the Bush administration.

Ambassador Moustapha began by describing a series of positive steps taken by the Bush administration officials in the last days of September, just before the US election campaign went into high gear. These steps appeared at the time to be part of an effort to reengage Syria after a period of open hostility toward Damascus that began at the time of the US-led invasion of Iraq in early 2003, but which intensified after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005 when the US withdrew its ambassador to Syria. The US was also vehemently opposed to Syrian-Israeli talks sponsored by Turkey which were not announced publicly until May 2008.

On Sept. 26, 2008 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met briefly with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem on the sidelines of the meetings of the UN General Assembly in New York. On Sept. 29, a round of talks was held between Moallem and the head of the Near East desk at the State Department, David Welch. Ambassador Moustapha attended this meeting and reported that it seemed the US was serious about a re-engagement policy.

But, the promise of these contacts were completely dispelled by a daylight “Rambo style” US
Study of Druze of Southern Syria Wins Dissertation Award

At its annual business meeting on 22 November 2008, the Syrian Studies Association awarded the prize for outstanding doctoral dissertation to Cyril Roussel. Dr. Roussel's thesis, entitled “L'espace communautaire des Druzes du Sud de la Syrie: des strategies de creation d'un territoire a celles de la mobilite”, was presented to the University of Tours in 2007.

On behalf of his colleagues on the awards committee (Geoffrey Schad and Andrea Stanton), Fred Lawson read the following commendation: "Dr. Roussel's comprehensive survey of Syria's Druze community engages a wide range of scholarship in the fields of geography, history and social science. The dissertation illuminates the demographic, economic and social dynamics that characterize the Druze population in Syria, paying special attention to the patterns of mobility that the community exhibits. It offers cogent comparisons between the trends one sees in Syria and those found in Lebanon and Palestine, and it avoids the deterministic assumptions that often creep into studies of geography and society. The dissertation makes a substantial contribution to our general understanding of the complex fabric of contemporary Syria."

Syrian Ambassador
(continued from previous page)

helicopter raid into Syria on October 26th which left nine civilians dead. “Until now,” said Ambassador Moustapha, “no US official has explained the reasoning behind this attack.”

During the second half of the talk, Moustapha speculated on the reasons behind the October attack. He suggested there were two possible scenarios: it was part of an effort by some in the US government to undercut Rice’s rapprochement initiative; or it was based on false intelligence—the successful capture of a prominent al-Qaeda suspect would have bolstered the flagging McCain campaign.

Moustapha acknowledged that the Syrian government had to respond, but did so in a primarily symbolic way by ordering the closures of the American Community School US Cultural Center, both in Damascus.

In a question-and-answer period Moustapha expressed his guarded hope for US-Syrian relations under President Obama. “The best we can expect from President Obama is that he will put US national interests first in conducing US policy in the Middle East.” Asked about Syrian support for Hamas, Moustapha quipped, “We are simply following the Bush Doctrine, supporting the cause of democracy. We are not in the business of deciding Palestinian leadership.” On Lebanon: “Relations are constantly improving. The Lebanese President’s visit was a high point; we’ve signed 16 of 17 bilateral agreements (excluding security) and these agreements were determined more by Lebanese ministerial concerns than by Syrian concerns.
Prof. Geoffrey Schad, Secretary-Treasurer of the Syrian Studies Association

By Fred Lawson

At its November 2008 business meeting, the association installed Geoffrey D. Schad as secretary-treasurer. Dr. Schad is assistant professor of history at Albright College, and is a member of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association. He is a specialist on the economic, social and business history of Syria during the Mandate period, who received his doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania in 2001. His publications include "Colonial Corporatism in the French Mandated States: Labor, Capital, the Mandatory Power, and the 1935 Syrian Law of Associations," Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Mediterranee, no. 105-106 (2005) and "Toward an Analysis of Class Formation in Syria," in N. Meouchy, ed. France, Syrie et Liban 1918-1946 (Damascus: IFEAD, 2002). Dr. Schad has held a number of elected and appointed offices in the SSA. In addition, he serves as list editor for H-Levant.

Fred H. Lawson holds the Frederick A. Rice Chair in the Department of Government at Mills College, Oakland, California, USA. He is also chair of the SSA Prize Committee.

Beverly Levine is New SSA Graduate Student Representative

By Steve Tamari

Beverly Levine joined the Syrian Studies Association board during the business meeting held in conjunction with the annual MESA convention held in November 2008 in Washington, DC. Ms. Levine is a fourth-year PhD student in History at Washington University in St. Louis. She will be conducting research for her dissertation during the 2009-2010 academic year on the social history of medicine during the French Mandate period. Just as this issue of this newsletter went to press, Ms. Levine learned that she had been awarded a Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad in order to pursue her research. In the short time she has been on the board, Ms. Levine has demonstrated remarkable enthusiasm for our association. She contributed an article for this issue on the ways and means of carrying out a pre-dissertation exploratory trip to Syria. She has expressed interest in involving more graduate students in the work of the Association and encourages like-minded young scholars to contact her at balevine@wustl.edu.

Steve Tamari is editor of the Syrian Studies Association Newsletter.
Syrian Studies in Japan

By Toru Miura

Middle East studies in Japan started in late 19th century after the National Government of Japan was founded in 1868. At the time, Japan had a keen interest in revising the unequal treaties in Egypt and Ottoman Turkey, for it was also forced to conclude similarly unequal treaties with European countries and the USA. However, interest in Syria among Japanese scholars was never as strong as that in Egypt. Japanese scholars first became interested in Syria during the the 1920s when reports appeared about the emergence of Arab nationalism; the Syrian revolt against the French Mandate after WWI; and the strengthening of commercial exchanges with Syria as a part of increased trade between Japan and Middle East. According to a 2005 survey of the 672 members of the Japan Association of Middle East Studies, roughly 5% of members of the association consider Syria as their main country of study. Egypt still commands the lion’s share of Japanese scholars’ interest with 20% of the association’s respondents saying it is their main area of interest.

Here I would introduce readers to the main research trends among Japanese scholars of Syria since the early 1980s. Until the 1960s, political and economic issues dominated Japanese scholarship and Arab nationalism, in particular, was the focus of attention in Asia during the Cold War period. The pioneering works were published in 1980s and included Yoshihiro Kimura’s Studies on the Formation of the Countries of the East Arab (in Japanese) in 1987 and Tsugitaka Sato’s The Syrian Coastal Town of Jabala: Its History and Present Situation in 1988. Syrian studies in Japan also benefited from the invitation of Syrian scholars to Japan. Daad al-Hakim, Director of National Archives of Damascus, came here in 1987 to teach younger scholars how to read sharia court records. Abdul-Karim Rafeq, Mahmoud Hareytani, André Raymond
and Muhammad Adnan al-Bakhit were invited to participate in the International Conferences on Urbanism in Islam in 1989 and 1990, and Rafeq brought with him the off-prints and photocopies of his all papers. This large research program devoted to urbanism in Islam (headed by Yuzo Itagaki) inspired many Japanese scholars to turn their attention to Syrian studies in which urban networks are characteristic both in terms of internal and external relations.

Exchange programs between Japan and Syria were accelerated as Keiko Ohta and Hidemitsu Kuroki stayed in Damascus during the late 1980s thanks to a Japanese scholarship/fellowship program. Ohta published her work on early Islamic history in Syria, and Kuroki his on the social history of Aleppo. Toru Miura started his study of Damascus from medieval times into the Ottoman period using sharia court records and focusing on the history of the Salihiiyya quarter. Tomoki Okawara had the unique experience of working on the staff of the National Archives of Damascus through a Japan International Cooperation Agency program. He compiled a database of sharia court records and edited and published a catalogue of these records with Brigitte Marino of IFEAD (now IFPO). This collaboration enhanced relations between IFEAD and Japanese scholars, lead to the appointment of Marino and Stefan Knost as Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Post-doctoral Fellows.

The interest of Japanese scholars has recently moved in the direction of exploring the pluralism of Syrian society which is composed of people of a wide variety of religious orientation, in addition to Islam. This is shown by the work of Ohta, Kuroki and Masaki Uno. Taeko Nakamura’s interest is in diplomatic relations among Muslim and Crusaders states during the medieval period. Jun’ichi Taniguchi completed his study of medieval Aleppo by focusing on the relations between soldiers, members of the ulama, and urban commoners. Yasuhisa Shimizu edited Ottoman Turkish texts of tax farm registers from the Province of Damascus in the 17th century preserved at the Museum of Arabic Calligraphy in Damascus in conjunction with his study of the tax farm system of the Province. Recently, younger scholars such as Hiroyuki Aoyama and Kota Suechika have conducted socio-political studies of the Syrian Republic.

Today, the Islamic Area Studies Program (subsidized by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Technology) is intensifying international research by inviting scholars of international renown such as Randi Deghuihelim (IREMAM, France) and Muhammad Ghassan Obeyd (Director of the National Archives of Damascus) to Japan. More information about the Program can be found at its website: http://www.islam.waseda.ac.jp/en/).

The study of Syria in Japan has developed dramatically during the last 20 years owing to the collaboration between Japanese and non-Japanese scholars and between research institutes in Japan and abroad. In 2006, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies founded the Japan Center for Middle Eastern Studies in Beirut, which go even further to promoting relations between Syrian studies scholars in the Middle East region and their Japanese counterparts.
Toru Miura is Professor of Islamic History in the Department of Comparative History of the Faculty of Letters and Education at Ochanomizu University in Tokyo. He is co-editor of two books: Slave Elites in the Middle East and Africa: A Comparative Study (London: Kegan Paul International, 2000) with John Edward Philip; and Islamic Urban Studies: Historical Review and Perspectives (London: Kegan Paul International, 1994) with Masashi Haneda. He is the author of numerous articles on a variety of topics including a series on the Salihiyya quarter from its foundation to recent times. Between 2005 and 2006, he was president of the Japan Association of Middle East Studies (http://wwwsoc.nii.ac.jp/james).

Original artwork on the title page of this article by Vladimir Tamari, a Palestinian artist who makes his home in Tokyo

Selected Bibliography

Two on-line databases of Middle East and Islamic Studies in Japan are available and provide access to the publications cited below. The “Bibliography of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies in Japan 1868-1988” can be found at http://www.toyo-bunko.or.jp/ToyoBunko-E/index-e.html and the “Bibliographical Database of Middle East Studies in Japan 1989-2008 (BDMEJ)” is at: http://wwwsoc.nii.ac.jp/james/


The Japan Center for Middle Eastern Studies:
Direct Japan-Middle East Cultural Exchange Takes Place in Beirut

By Steve Tamari

Since its establishment in 2006, the Japan Center for Middle East Studies in Beirut has worked to facilitate cultural and educational exchange between Japan and the Middle East. Toward this end, the center strives to promote joint research projects and international symposia; to coordinate academic exchange programs for researchers and students; and to facilitate the work of Japanese graduate students in the region. The Center is a joint project of the Institute for the Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA) and the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS). Currently the JaCMES is supported by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology of Japan. The director is Prof. Hidemitsu Kuroki of TUFS. The Center is located in downtown Beirut (2nd Floor, Azariyeh Building (Lazarists Center) A2-1; Bashura, Emir Bashir St, Central District, Beirut, Lebanon; Phone/fax +961-1-975851).

I was fortunate to be present at a recent gathering which was an impressive demonstration of the work of the center.

On February 20, 2009, the Japan Center for Middle East Studies (JaCMES) sponsored the fourth in a lecture series in Beirut. The theme of the evening was “Without a Stopover for Transit: Direct Exchange between Arabic and Japanese Literatures” and included lectures by a Japanese scholar of Arabic literature and a Syrian translator and student of Japanese literature and culture. A delightful evening ensured. In contrast to the political and economic barriers that often inhibit our knowledge of one another’s spiritual, historical, and literary inheritance, this encounter demonstrated the potential for a non-stop, visa-free, nothing-to-declare cultural exchange.

Prof. Hidemitsu Kuroki, JaCMES director and a distinguished scholar of Ottoman Aleppo, opened the proceedings with a warm welcome. The first lecture was presented by Prof. Mari Oka, a leading Japanese scholar of modern Arabic literature and a professor at Kyoto University. She is the principal Japanese translator of the works of Ghassan Kanafani. Her lecture was titled “What Can Novels Do? The Significance of Reading Arabic Novels in Japan during Times of Death” and she delivered in a virtually flawless Arabic much to appreciation of those in attendance. Prof. Oka took her audience on an autobiographical search for the meaning of art and literature—especially for translator who is even further removed from the reality he or she studies—in a world of such pain and suffering as that endured by Palestinians. Her answer came in the works of modern Arab novelists, particularly Ghassan Kanafani. She concludes that reading modern Arabic literature and translating it into Japanese has allowed her to approach the lives of others as though they were our own. “Through reading novels, strange lands and unfamiliar people soon become part of our own intimate world. Reading novels changes our relationship with the world, which itself might be a small but significant step towards changing the world itself.”

Prof. Oka’s first person account of the quest for meaning across language and literature dovetailed with a presentation by Syrian poet Dr. Muhammad Oudaimah titled “Introduction to Japanese Faiths through Kojiki”. Dr. Oudaimah is a poet and translator living in Japan. He teaches Arabic and Arabic literature at
several universities including the University of Tokyo. In addition to many volumes of his own poems and anthologies of other modern Arab poets, he has devoted considerable effort to translating Japanese literature and—by extension—Japanese culture into Arabic.


Dr. Oudaimah’s lecture focused on the narrative structure of the Kojiki creation myth and how it compares with the Qur’anic and Biblical creation stories. In a short conversation following the lecture, Dr. Oudaimah expanded on the intersection of Arabic and Japanese literatures and cultures with his own life. When asked how he ended up devoting so much of his life to explaining Japan to Arabic readers, he said that like most of the events in his life—especially his life as poet—it was by accident and that serendipitous effect has been a poet’s windfall. He says that Arab audiences know little if anything about Japan, other than its economic and technological prowess. Furthermore, he considers Japanese cultural as essentially non-Western whereas the overwhelming influence of Greek philosophy on Judeo-Christian-Muslim cultural means that Arab cultural shares much more with its European neighbors than with Japan. Concludes Oudaimah, “Comparing Japan with the West is not simply part of an exercise in cultural transmission, but it is part of my effort to understand myself as an Arab in Japan.”

As so, as the evening began with the journey of a Japanese scholar toward self-discovery in Arabic literature, it closed with a parallel experience for a Syrian Arab poet searching for his own sense of self in Japan. This was non-stop, transit-free cross cultural interaction at its best!

*Steve Tamari is editor of the Newsletter and teaches at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.*
Photo Essay: Arabic vs. English in Politics and Commerce
By Mandy Terc

In March 2008, Damascus hosted the annual Arab League Summit, and the Syrian government undertook a beautification and public relations campaign to herald this historic event. The Airport Road received slick new landscaping, streets were repaved and billboards like the one pictured here appeared all over town. With their Arabesque style, the posters reminded Syrians of the government’s lingering affection for Pan-Arabism and of the role that the Arabic language supposedly plays in connecting them to their Arabic-speaking brethren from Casablanca to Qatar. Efforts were even made to force shop owners to rewrite their English store signs and advertisements in Arabic. But while the language of the daad might promote cultural unity, every Syrian knows it is the language of Shakespeare that sells things.

Consider this window advertisement from December of 2008, just eight months later. It appeared in the windows of the chain of coffee shops In House Coffee, the Syrian-owned answer to Starbucks whose customers can expect free Wi-Fi and trendy, modern decor and to pay approximately $4 US for a latte. Like most Damascus businesses that cater to a younger, affluent clientele steeped in the trends and aesthetics of Europe and North America, In House Coffee rarely uses Arabic in its menus, signage and advertisements. Instead, the chain posts stylized graphics paired with punchy English phrases that depict a hip, urbane lifestyle that resembles Manhattan more than Damascus. It even appears as if one of figures is guzzling a bottle of wine. Although the words “100% Alcohol Free” written on the bottle help the chain avoid any controversy, the disconnect between a typical Syrian lifestyle and In House’s image is striking and so is the absence of any Arabic translation of their English slogans. While their poster does not have the overt political message of the government’s pro-Arabic billboards, the subtext is clear: the use of English bestows prestige on an establishment and its products, rapidly transforming this longtime stronghold of pan-Arabism into a multilingual capital where the market demands English – and gets it.

Mandy Terc is a PhD candidate in linguistic anthropology at University of Michigan. She spent the last year-and-a-half in Damascus, conducting dissertation research on the intersection of Arabic-English mixing and social mobility among young elites in Damascus.
Syria-related Research Notes

Activities of the Netherlands Institute for Academic Studies in Damascus

By Taco van der Zwaag

In 2001, the Netherlands Institute for the Near East (NINO) in Leiden established the Netherlands Institute for Academic Studies in Damascus (NIASD) which aims to enhance the relations between Syria and the Netherlands in the fields of science and education, culture and cooperation. NINO financed and ran the Institute until the end of 2005. Since then, the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has been responsible for the Institute’s financing and Leiden University for its administration.

In March 2008, the NIASD sponsored a workshop on pottery for Syrian students interested in archeology. Photo courtesy of the author.

In terms of science and education, the NIASD encourages and facilitates Dutch research in Syria and Syrian research in the Netherlands; contacts between Syrian and Dutch researchers; student exchanges and study trips to Syria and the Netherlands; and the establishment of cooperation agreements between Syrian and Dutch universities. Other related activities include helping
students who want to do an internship in Syria or the Netherlands; a yearly lecture series in Syria by Dutch researchers; and course delivery. As of 2009, the NIASD will offer two courses: a summer course in Arabic and a summer course on Christian and Islamic Art and Architecture. The Institute is also developing a third summer course on Intercultural Communication. During 2008-2009, the Institute cooperated with the Danish Institute in Damascus on a course on Project Development and Management. In Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, the NIASD promotes the more than 1,300 bachelor and master degree programs in Holland that are taught in English.

In the field of culture, the NIASD encourages contacts and joint art projects between Syrian and Dutch artists and Syrian and Dutch cultural organizations. It also screens Dutch movies and documentaries with Arabic subtitles at the institute.

In the field of cooperation, the Institute facilitates and provides information to Dutch civil servants or consultants involved in international or EU projects in which Syria is a partner.

For all further information regarding the NIASD, please refer to www.niasd.org which contains all our newsletters and annual reports. The NIASD is located in East-Mezzeh at Farabi Street no. 85, basement level.

Taco van der Zwaag is the deputy directory of the Netherlands Institute for Academic Studies in Damascus.

The door to the central room at the Netherlands Institute for Academic Studies in Mezzeh, Damascus. Photo courtesy of the author.
eBay as an Archive: Bidding for Bilad al-Sham Bargains

By Andrea Stanton

Are you in the market for a primary source – something that will add immediacy to your teaching as a piece of historical evidence that your students can see and touch? Or are you shopping for something that you can integrate into your research as material that is physically accessible even outside the archive? This is not the pitch of a huckster trying to sell Maktabat al-Assad – this is a plug for Bilad al-Sham scholars to make more effective use of that rich archival resource known as eBay.

As a scholar, what I like best about eBay is that it allows me to do two things: to purchase historical artifacts useful for my research and teaching, and to do so inexpensively. (In addition to the professional benefits, this makes a virtue of two character flaws: acquisitiveness and cheapness.) While eBay might appear most useful for Americanists, it offers many treasures to Levantine scholars, particularly modernists. In my experience, the twentieth century is the period richest in eBay options, in terms of both selection and pricing. There certainly are objects from earlier eras – mostly manuscript pages or engravings taken from books – but they are fewer, and priced more as art objects. My purchases tend to be in the $5-20 range; my rule-of-thumb limit is $10, but I make exceptions for unusual or particularly useful items.

Shopping eBay’s auctions for research purposes and shopping for teaching are not the same. Finding gems that fit one’s current research depends on serendipity and the willingness to spend time searching the site using different keyword combinations – and to do so on a regular basis. Even then, success may come in unexpected ways. For example, while completing my dissertation on the mandate-era Palestine Broadcasting Station, I searched endlessly for auctions related to keyword combinations like “radio Palestine”, “radio Jerusalem”, “broadcasting Palestine” or—for a comparative perspective—“broadcasting Lebanon”. I found a few items, like a 1930s Philips radio set catalogue printed in Hebrew, but nothing critical to my research (or cheap enough to merit a “maybe I’ll find a use for it” bid).

It was not until the dissertation had been defended, submitted, and set aside in favor of more pressing concerns (like teaching) that I ran across an item of immediate relevance. It was nothing big from a seller’s point of view: an envelope sent by Boutagy & Sons, one of mandate Palestine’s largest radio set sellers, from Israel to Britain in 1949. Yet for me it was an important piece of primary source evidence, corroborating other indications that the firm’s owners had tried to continue operations in Israel after the mandate ended – and it was evidence I found not in an archive but during a casual search for Israeli stamps.
Stamps are an excellent example of the inexpensive Levant-centered primary source material that does abound on eBay – and they can be very useful for courses. I have purchased mandate-era stamps twenty at a time, for as little as $1.50 + shipping. I use them to illustrate lectures, or give them to students and ask them to analyze the iconography in light of the political, social, and economic concerns of the time. Postcards are also plentiful, and can be effective springboards for discussions on tourism and representation, as well as urban studies issues. (You can also use them to anchor exam questions or writing exercises.)

What is difficult to find on eBay is any significant body of government documents. Mandate-era Palestinian ones seem to be most common, sold by assorted Israeli antiquities dealers. But I have almost never seen Ottoman or Syrian government documents, and have only rarely seen Lebanese documents. Those that do appear seem more often to have been ancillary documents: receipts, attestations of good conduct, or other items generated by the government but put in private citizens’ hands - like the rejected visa applications for two Syrian Ottomans trying to emigrate to Brazil in the early 1900s that I found last year. The seller, who spoke no English, seemed delighted to have found a buyer, even for the $2 + postage I paid. I can only imagine what he thought I planned to do with them – and I doubt that “use as a primary source for students in a history course on Lebanese and Syrian migration to North and South America” would have been his first guess. But they are treasures: several pages of application forms and embassy letters that together lent a textural immediacy to the story of early 20th-century Levantine emigration.
The issue of government documents leads to a more scholarly concern: how to cite these items, and what – if any – permissions to seek. While I would have no qualms including photos of the visa applications I mentioned above and citing them merely as “private collection of the author”, since they had been the property of the individual applicants rather than any state archive, reproducing published material that has not timed out of copyright restrictions involves all the standard permission issues. Maps, postcards, photographs, stamps – these to me appear little different than the many wonderful secondary source books available for sale on eBay: ownership of one copy does not imply permission to reproduce in one’s own published work.

Another tricky permissions area emerges from those items whose price is set too high for the eBay’ing academic, but whose historical value (and whose beauty shots on the site) make them difficult to ignore. My understanding is that I cannot in good conscience reproduce the image. However, if I can “grab” the image and save it with an accompanying document that indicates the sale URL, the item description, and whatever contact information is available for the seller, I can refer to it textually as a source. My reasoning here is that a reader tracking the item in question down would have no more trouble than if he/she were tracking down the subject of an interview or an item in a private collection – but other scholars may consider this approach too lax.

Navigating permission, copyright and fair use issues may be somewhat more complicated – because less standardized – for eBay purchases than for materials accessed in a traditional archive. This should not be a deterrent, but merely a reminder of the valuable role that these concerns play in scholarship. eBay has a valuable role to play as well: providing scholars with inexpensive primary source materials to use in teaching and research – materials that add life to a classroom discussion and immediacy to a monograph. There are plenty of Bilad al-Sham bargains to be found – all it takes is a user name (mine is “Mutabbal”), a little time to devote to keyword searches, and the willingness to place a bid.

Andrea L. Stanton is Assistant Director of the New York University Center for Dialogues, where she is a member of the Mediterranean Studies Research Group. She is currently Book Reviews Editor for the Syrian Studies Association newsletter and H-Levant list editor.
Exploratory Archival Research in Syria: Practicalities, Affordability, and Advantages
By Beverly Levine

This report is an evaluation of the use of funds, progress to dissertation, and application for future funding made possible through support from a pre-dissertation grant I received from my home university in the summer of 2008.

I was awarded a Pre-Dissertation Research Grant in the amount of $1,500 from my university’s International and Area Studies Department for the summer of 2008. I combined this award with summer funding from the Graduate School through the History Department to pay for a roundtrip flight to Damascus, traveler’s insurance, room and board in Damascus and Aleppo, and direct research expenses such as book-buying, photocopying, and application for library privileges at the Assad National Library.

The funding helped me live in Syria for a total of six weeks. While in Syria, I managed to conduct research trips and build professional contacts with staff and scholars at a number of research institutions, including the Institut Français du Proche-Orient (IFPO) in Damascus and the IFPO in Aleppo, the Center for Historical Documents (Dar al-Watha’iq al-Tarikhyya, or DWT) and the Asad National Library in Damascus, and a number of churches and hospitals in or near Aleppo and Damascus, including the Avicenne Hospital and the Saydnayya convent.

I believe that this exploratory trip truly advanced my dissertation proposal progress by allowing me to become familiar with the professional and cultural landscape in Damascus and Aleppo. I developed academic relationships with a number of Syrian and European scholars in Syria, and I expect my return to Syria next year to be a smoother transition into the local research climate. My visits to a number of Syrian government ministries, hospitals, libraries, research centers, archives, and universities during the summer trip have given me the confidence to believe that my research timeline for next year, and my topic on health in interwar Syria, is feasible.

It is safest to avoid renting from landlords whose apartments are unregistered with the Syrian government. When a Syrian landlord registers their apartment(s) with the government, they must give a sizable portion
of the rent to the state. If the apartment is unregistered, landlords may keep the rent for themselves. This situation may be economically beneficial to landlords, but the unregistered status of the apartment will present problems for you in any government-requested situation in which you need to provide proof of housing.

Check the SSA website [www.ou.edu/ssa/general_info.htm#Apartments](http://www.ou.edu/ssa/general_info.htm#Apartments) and call or email ahead about staying at the IFPO or the Danish institute ([http://www.damaskus.dk/index.php?id=2](http://www.damaskus.dk/index.php?id=2)) for a week or so, just long enough to check bulletin boards at the research centers for foreign flatmates or home-stay options in Bab Touma. For scholars interested in living in areas less frequented by foreigners, try Mouhajireen or Afif. These two neighborhoods are also closer to IFPO than Bab Touma. See [http://www.ifporient.org/IMG/pdf/Plan-Damas-1.pdf](http://www.ifporient.org/IMG/pdf/Plan-Damas-1.pdf) for a map IFPO provides of Damascus neighborhoods and research centers. A warning to foreign travelers in Syria: do as much research as possible on apartments by speaking to friends in Syria.

I ended up paying a lot by Syrian rent standards (1000 SP a night (22 USD) – which is how much IFPO charges in Damascus and Aleppo) for staying at what turned out to be (unbeknownst to me at the time) an unregistered apartment. The apartment had A/C in the bedroom along with a twin-size bed, a desk, lamp, and chair; a small TV and pirated cable that had BBC Arabic, CNN World, VH1 and a handful of other channels with varying levels of reception quality; a modest closet; a very small bathroom with a Western style toilet and a 3’x3’ shower space using water from a tank above the building rather than plumbing; a very sparse kitchen with a large fridge, sink, and small stove-top burner lit by holding matches to a large gas tank sitting below the table (this was very difficult for me to do without burning myself, as the matches routinely broke, but perhaps you’ll have better luck); and a dial-up modem line in a common area far from the A/C and shared with neighboring unregistered apartments rented to foreigners. I was lucky to live near plenty of internet cafes when I was in Damascus, but Aleppo's internet cafes are fewer and further between, and frequented by Syrian men more than by foreigners of either gender.

There is a single computer (with high-speed internet access) off the kitchen of the IFPO-Aleppo location which is open to researchers staying in one of the five or so rooms at IFPO in Aleppo. The Aleppo IFPO does have a very spacious common kitchen area and a laundry equipped with a washing machine, and is in an old-style Arab house, so there is a beautiful courtyard as well. While staying at IFPO is relatively expensive, affiliating with IFPO is highly encouraged. IFPO has a very good relationship with the Syrian Ministry of Culture, and a letter of affiliation from IFPO will help you easily obtain an extended residency permit at the Ministry of Immigration and Visas two weeks after arriving in the country.

**Note on Visas and Passports**

All travelers to Syria should obtain visas in their home countries prior to travel by contacting the local Syrian embassy. Passport holders showing prior travel to Israel will be denied entry to Syria (and Lebanon.) It is recommended that you contact your respective ministries of travel for information on how to request new passports or second passports so as to avoid this problem.

*Beverly Levine is the Syrian Studies Association Graduate Student Member and a 4th-year PhD student in History at Washington University in St. Louis. Just as this issue of this newsletter went to press, Ms. Levine learned that she had been awarded a Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad for 2009-2010 in Syria.*
US Citizens Studying Arabic in Damascus

A Year in Damascus: The CASA Experience

By Elizabeth Williams

In the summer of 2007, the Center for Arabic Study Abroad (CASA), after 40 years in Cairo, opened a new program in Damascus, Syria. As one of the first-year CASA Damascus fellows, I cannot speak to the exact similarities or differences with the Center’s Cairo program; however, I can attest that the Damascus program is as rigorous as anyone familiar with CASA Cairo’s reputation might expect. The program is a welcome opportunity for advanced Arabic students seeking to study in an immersion setting and is an important addition to the growing number of Arabic language programs offered in Damascus. According to the program’s website, American citizens and permanent residents of the U.S. can apply.

The year I applied, the application process to CASA Cairo and CASA Damascus was the same and applicants could indicate on the application if they wanted to be considered for the CASA Damascus program. The procedure for application is involved and professors should encourage their students to start early. The application form itself is usually due in early January. On a set date in early February, students must take the CASA written exam, which lasts several hours. The year I applied, the exam was followed by an oral phone interview in late February with the results announced in March. This year, however, the oral interviews took place after students were notified of their acceptance.

The CASA program in Damascus has expanded rapidly—in its first year, eight students participated in the program; in its second year the program accepted approximately twice that many. The first-year Damascus fellows were all full-year participants in the CASA program; with the second group, the program began to institute the summer-only option on a limited basis. The program takes a well-rounded approach to teaching the Arabic language, with coursework stressing reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, and includes classes taught in both Modern Standard Arabic and Syrian colloquial. The summer semester in particular stresses intensive classes in Syrian colloquial so that students can begin to use it immediately in their daily interactions outside the classroom. The summer class in Modern Standard Arabic is designed to teach copious amounts of vocabulary accompanied by a significant amount of reading and the weekly writing of a relatively short essay. The intent is to prepare students for the fall semester which focuses on reading and vocabulary, but also continues to build students’ fluency in Syrian colloquial as well as listening and speaking skills. During the first year, texts for the fall semester included novels by Hoda Barakat and Abdul Rahman Munif, a nonfiction book by Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabri, and additional shorter texts in both classical and Modern Standard Arabic.

In the spring semester, students are required to take a writing class that culminates in a lengthy final research paper. The remaining three spring classes are elective and, as the program continues to expand, students’ options for electives will also increase. Thus, students have the ability to decide what skills they want to focus on during this final semester from reading (the year I attended there was a choice between both Modern Standard and classical texts) and listening to grammar and colloquial Arabic. The program’s teachers in Damascus are excellent. From tailoring classes so that they best suited the individual students’ needs and interests to spending hours outside of class working with students individually, their

(continued on page 21)
The National Security Education Program in Syria

By Graham Auman Pitts

In the early 1990s, US Senator David Boren (Democrat of Oklahoma) proposed a huge funding bill that would support the study of ‘critical languages’ and be administered by the Department of Defense. In 2003, the US Congress renovated the program and infused it with millions more dollars. Since then, many of the American students in Syria have lived and studied on the tab of the US Department of Defense. Removing study abroad funding from the control of the US Department of Education was controversial and, in protest, groups such as the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) boycotted the program.

Under the auspices of this bill, the National Security Education Program (NSEP) was created. It came to administer two different grants that send American students to Syria (among other locations): David E. Boren undergraduate scholars and graduate fellows study and research on their own while the NSEP also provides funding to the students of the ‘Flagship’ program. Flagship scholars spend one year in College Park, Maryland studying Arabic in preparation for a year in Damascus. Once in Syria, Flagship students take classes administered by the University of Damascus.

The most cursory of glances at the NSEP website for either program reveals that both Boren recipients and Flagship graduates owe time to the security apparatus of the American state. Both must make a “good faith” effort to gain employment in one of five agencies directly involved in issues of national security. In the recent past, Fulbright scholars, who make no such commitment, have been discouraged from entering Syria, closely monitored when there, and even expelled altogether. Meanwhile, students taking NSEP funds benefit directly from the resources of the University of Damascus. Boren students in Syria are listed on the program’s website. There is no indication that the security services pay any special attention to either Flagship or Boren students. Thus, the welcoming of NSEP students must represent a conscious policy on the part of the Syrian government. Their logic might be something close to the following: if the future shapers of American Near East policy have eaten, lived and studied in Syria, they will be sympathetic to the country, its inhabitants, and the Arab cause generally. The policy demonstrates deserved confidence in Syria’s ability to win over American students with its hospitable people, safe streets and reasonable cost of living.

In the interest of full disclosure, I am a 2008-09 Boren Fellow researching agriculture in Syria and Lebanon. Also, I must confess that over my time in Syria, I did indeed become sympathetic to the country, many of its regime’s policies, and its people. My hope is that the exchange will continue. I am deeply indebted to NSEP for funding my research and to Syria for hosting me. It is exactly by sending future policy makers abroad that the United States can pursue its interests by cultivating public servants who speak Arabic and understand the Middle East. In the end, all sides benefit, as Syria is pursuing a sensible policy of hosting American students to infuse them with a nuanced understanding of its culture, history and politics.

Graham Auman Pitts is a doctoral candidate in History at Georgetown University. The support he received from the NESP contributed to his research on the history of agricultural production and rural migration in Syria and Lebanon in the 20th century.
CASA in Damascus (continued from page 19)

commitment to ensuring the rigor of the curriculum as well as the advancement of student knowledge was unwavering.

Finally, one of the best things about the CASA Damascus experience is the opportunity it affords students to live in Damascus itself. Not only is Damascus a city rich in history and cultural opportunities, but it is an excellent environment for language learning. Most local Damascenes are eager to talk with students and fully expect to be able to do so in Arabic, even if it means being a bit patient. Thus, students should have ample opportunities to practice their Arabic in a “real world” setting. Overall, the CASA Damascus program is a welcome addition to the language-learning opportunities available to students in the region. Students will be rewarded with an intensive immersion experience in a stimulating and rigorous environment. For more information see the CASA website http://www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/casa/.

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Join the Syrian Studies Association!

Annual dues are $25 for professionals and $10 for students, payable by check or Paypal through our website. Membership is free for Syrian nationals residing in Syria. Contact our Secretary-Treasurer Geoffrey D. Schad at gschad@alb.edu

Check out the Syrian Studies Association Website at http://www.ou.edu/ssa/

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The SSA an international association organized to encourage and promote research and scholarly understanding of Syria in all periods and in all academic disciplines. The SSA is a non-profit, non-political association affiliated with MESA (The Middle East Studies Association of North America).

The SSA defines Syria as the area included in historic Bilad al-Sham until 1918 and Syria following that. We invite scholars who study the peoples and territories of what is today Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine before 1918 and those who study Syria after that date to join the SSA.
Book Reviews

Book Review Essay: Syrian Ba’thist Memoirs


Reviewed by Nikolaos van Dam

In my view, Mustafa Talas’ memoirs *Mir’at Hayati* [The Mirror of my Life] are indispensible to anyone wishing to seriously study the history of the Ba’thist era in Syria in detail and in depth. The memoirs provide detailed descriptions of behind-the-scenes situations and of the secretive Ba’th organization and its leading personalities. Mustafa Talas provides essential hitherto unpublished material. Talas was minister of defense for over 30 years (1972-2004) and personally took part in many important developments within the Syrian Armed Forces and the Ba’th Party from its earliest days. Whereas it had previously been taboo to write about sectarianism or the secret intricacies of party history and its intrigues, this has now become possible in Syria. This development was not only due to Talas’ position (although it certainly made it easier), but also because speaking of such issues is no longer considered as sensitive as it once was. Nevertheless, what is now permitted for a select group of Ba’thists in power, remains prohibited to others. Other memoirs (or other kinds of publications or statements) which only hint at sensitive phenomena could land their authors in prison and could be forbidden in Syria.

*Part 1 (1948-1958)* deals with Talas’ youth, his years at the Military Academy, the Ba’thist Qatana revolt (1957), and the unification with Egypt (1958). In addition to his studied analysis, Talas also provides compelling anecdotes, including stories about Hafiz al-Asad who was there at the same time. Al-Asad was both respected and feared. As a disciplinarian he was known to butt *(yantah)* heads with his rivals in such a way as to completely subdue them (I, pp. 307-309). Because of this story the book was reportedly not particularly welcome in Damascus on initial publication, although later on it turned out not to be a problem.

*Part 2 (1958-1968)* describes the secretive life of the “exiled” Syrian Ba’thist officers in Egypt during the Egyptian-Syrian union, and the formation of their secret Ba’thist military committee which eventually took power in Syria. Talas introduces some hitherto unknown Military Committee members. He also covers the separation of Syria from Egypt in 1961, the Free Officers Movement and their abortive coup attempt in Aleppo in 1962; the Ba’thist revolution of 8 March 1963; and the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Hama insurrection in 1964. Talas also attends to internal Ba’thist power struggles, including the expulsion of Military Committee leader and Alawi General Muhammad ‘Umran; the 23 February Movement of 1966; and the abortive coup of 8 September 1966 led by Druze Major Salim Hatum who tried to topple the regime by inviting the party leadership for a banquet *(walimah)* in al-Suwayda’ with the aim of taking them hostage and, possibly, killing them. Talas compares Hatum’s plan with the slaughtering of the Mameluks by Muhammad ‘Ali in 1811. Talas reports that Hatum had tried to set up a similar trap in October 1965, but had failed then as well (II, pp. 612-614). The volume
closes with a critical analysis of relations with the Soviet Union and of the causes and consequences of the June War in 1967.

Part 3 (1968-1978)—by far the longest section of the book at 1,460 pages—deals with the power struggle between Alawi Generals Hafiz al-Asad and Salah Jadid and the suicide of National Security Chief ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jundi (all three co-founders of the Ba’thist Military Committee). It also covers Hafiz al-Asad’s Corrective Movement of 1970; foreign and inter-Arab relations; the October 1973 War; Syrian military intervention in Lebanon; the Israeli invasion in Lebanon in 1978; and Ba’th Party congresses, Camp David, and the Palestinian resistance movement.

The book had to undergo an amusingly minor type of censorship in Part III (p. 1086), where President Hafiz al-Asad is quoted as having asked about an officer of Rif’at al-Asad’s Saraya al-Difa’a (Defence Brigades): “Where is that donkey (himar) from?” With a small piece of paper glued over it, himar has been replaced by “officer (dabit)”...

Part 4 (1978-1988) deals with Syria’s relations with both Iran and Iraq, including Iraqi-Syrian unification efforts; internal Iraqi Ba’th affairs and encounters with then Vice President Saddam Husayn and President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr; the Muslim Brotherhood’s massacre of Alawi recruits at the artillery academy near Aleppo (1979); ”lessons learnt” from the Iraq-Iran war; and the abortive coup of Colonel Rif’at al-Asad against his brother Hafiz al-Asad in 1984.

Most of Talas’s work focuses on developments in which he himself personally participated. These are by far the most valuable parts of his work. The analyses of Talas are generally valuable because they come from an insider.

The memoirs of the former commander of the National Guard and later of the People’s Army, Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali, Hayati wa al-I’dam [My Life and Execution], are equally important and indispensable for those who want to obtain an in-depth understanding of Syrian Ba’thist history and the inner workings of the Ba’th Party. They were privately published in Damascus between 2005 and 2007 (in several editions, available through Maktabat al-Nuri) and make fascinating reading for those who are fond of detail and already have a solid background knowledge of the relevant issues. The three volumes are not always chronologically ordered, nor are they systematically organized. They also contain minor repetitions.

Volume I is almost exclusively devoted to the Arab nationalist Free Officers Movement (Ba’thists, Nasserists and others) and their abortive coup in Aleppo in 1962. It has the character of a very detailed documentary study, which was originally planned as part of a wider Ba’thist history project about the Arab nationalist movement in Syria. Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali was sentenced to death because of his role in this coup. As the date of his execution was scheduled on 9 March 1963, the Ba’thist Military Committee leaders decided to carry out their coup earlier than originally planned, in order to save al-‘Ali from execution (I, p. 157).

Volume II provides fascinating insight into al-‘Ali’s difficult early youth in the countryside surrounding Hama, where his Alawi parents suffered the harsh conditions of poverty under Ottoman rule and as a result of the feudal system which oppressed the peasantry. The book then
proceeds through various stages of al-'Ali's military career and his early risky experiences as member of the Ba'th Party. Of particular interest are his accounts of the bloody Nasserist coup of 18 July 1963; of Colonels Jasim 'Alwan and Muhammad Nabhan (the latter being an ex-Ba'thist Alawi); and of the internal disputes within the Ba'th regime involving President Amin al-Hafiz and Muhammad 'Umran (1963-1966).¹

Al-'Ali’s relationship with the Murshidiyin sect and his crucial role in aborting Rif’at al-Asad’s revolt against his brother President in 1984 (II, pp. 241-274) is especially noteworthy. The Murshidiyin were followers of Salman al-Murshid, a charismatic leader of the people of the Alawi Mountains, who was hanged in 1946 during the era of President Shukri al-Quwwatli. They had been discriminated against ever since. Coincidentally, al-'Ali and Rif’at al-Asad had separately cultivated strong ties with the Murshidiyin. Rif’at relied on members of the Murshidiyin to such an extent that they became the backbone of his Saraya al-Difa’. Rif’at’s revolt in 1984 against President Hafiz al-Asad was made toothless when, at the suggestion of al-'Ali, President al-Asad asked the 3,000 Murshidiyin soldiers to withdraw from Rif’at’s forces. Without these men, Rif’at’s tanks and armored vehicles could not come into action. Al-'Ali’s account of these events is confirmed by Talas (IV, pp. 345-349).

Volume III deals with the coups of February 23rd and September 8th, 1966. The latter coup is described in even more detail than by Talas, as al-'Ali was personally taken hostage by Major Salim Hatum. The abortive revolt in Qatana led by Druze Major Muhsin al-'Aqabani in 1966 (just before the Hatum coup) is mentioned by both al-'Ali and Walid Hamdun (Damascus, 2007, p. 93), but no clear explanation is given as to the background of the al-'Aqabani revolt.² Al-'Ali considers the June 1967 War; Syrian military intervention in Jordan in 1970 on behalf of the Palestinians (an episode which is rarely described by insiders in such detail); the suicide of ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jundi; the removal and imprisonment for life of former Chief-of-Staff General Ahmad al-Suwaydani; important Ba'th Party congresses; and the final supremacy of Hafiz al-Asad beginning in 1970. Al-'Ali portrays Hafiz al-Asad as a strong statesman and principled personality and as one who was prepared to go to any length—short of his own deposition as he demonstrated in 1970—for the sake of loyalty to the party.

Talas and al-'Ali’s accounts of the suicide of al-Jundi differ slightly from one another and from the account of former Deputy Prime Minister and Regional Command Member Muhammad Haydar.³ They all heard the fatal shot themselves, but in the presence of different persons. Taking as a point of departure that all three authors wrote their stories in good faith, it just shows that human memory is not always perfect, however much the authors themselves may be convinced of the authenticity of their respective versions.

This incident is an example of how there can be several different accounts of the same events. Invariably, the author tends to highlight his own position. As a result, it is not always clear what actually happened. One needs to compare multiple sources in order to best approximate the truth. Al-'Ali, for instance, writes himself into a pivotal role during the coup of 23 February 1966, where he gained control over the 70th armored brigade south of Damascus (which provided the military backbone of the regime at the time). However, former Minister and Regional Command Member Marwan Habash (who was, at the time, head of the Ba’th Party
Organizational Bureau) maintains that al-'Ali did not play any role at all. Mustafa Talas (II, p. 680), on the other hand, confirms and, thus, substantiates al-'Ali’s claim.

Both Talas’ and al-‘Ali’s memoirs describe a situation in which Ba'thist military and civilian personnel, especially between 1963 and 1970, lived with deep mistrust of one another. Faced by the real danger of a military coup which could occur at any moment, the threat of murder or imprisonment was always close at hand. Former Ba'th Party comrades and friends turned out, on various occasions, to become the most deadly of enemies. Ba'thist regimes not only severely suppressed their non-Ba’thist opposition but also fellow Ba’thist rivals.

As most of the main Syrian Ba'thist players of the period 1963-1970 have died or are very elderly, this era is also coming to a close as far as the publication of personal memoirs and observations is concerned.

If one has to choose which to read first, the memoirs of Mustafa Talas or those of Muhammad Ibrahim al-‘Ali, I recommend the work of Talas. It is better organized and more analytical. With regards to the three volumes of al-‘Ali’s work, I would give priority to parts two and three. I am not usually eager to read such lengthy books, but for these works I am glad to have made an exception.


1 See also the interviews with Amin al-Hafiz on Al-Jazeera in 2001: Al-Inqilabat fi Suriya kama yarah Amin al-Hafiz [The Coups in Syria as Seen by Amin al-Hafiz] (http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/3E3413BB-03BD-48B7-B9B2-951B0E0C754C.htm). They provide interesting details about the Hama Muslim Brotherhood revolt of 1964; the case of Israeli spy Elie Cohen; and President Nasser’s authorization of the bloody Nasserist coup in Syria in 1963 which appears to have been hopeless from the start.
2 The memoirs of former Deputy Prime Minister and Regional Command Member General Walid Hamdun (1937-2006), Dhikrayat wa-Ara’ [Memoirs and Opinions] (Damascus, 2007), are less detailed and not of the same caliber as those of Talas and al-‘Ali, but they are useful if one wants to have the view of an insider concerning the positions of the author’s party comrades including al-‘Ali and others. According to Talas, Hamdun’s memoirs contain exaggerations and mistakes.
Book Review:
A Memoir- Novel of Tadmur Military Prison


By Shareah Taleghani

In 2001, following the release of several hundred political prisoners, the Syrian government ordered the closure of its most notorious detention center—Tadmur Military Prison. Located in the desert near the ancient site of Palmyra and originally built by the French Mandate authorities, Tadmur has been described as a "kingdom of death and madness" by Syrian poet Faraj Bayraqdar and the "absolute prison" by dissident Yassin al-Haj Salih. The abject conditions of torture, daily degradation, and arbitrary execution which prisoners experienced there were the subject of intense scrutiny by both international and local human rights organizations throughout the 1980s and up until its doors were finally closed almost eight years ago. The site of a massacre of suspected members of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1980, Tadmur, according to a 2001 report by Amnesty International, was and is "synonymous with suffering".

In the recent proliferation of contemporary Syrian prison literature, most narrative accounts of prisoners' experiences of surviving the conditions of Tadmur have been circulated in the form of testimonials and memoirs. Aside from a website dedicated to testimonies of former Tadmur prisoners, Muhammad Salim Hammad's prison memoir *Tadmur: Shahid wa-Mashhud* [Witness and Witnessed] recounts in linear and chronological fashion his experience of detention and torture at the prison as a suspected member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Faraj Bayraqdar's own poetic prison memoir *Khiyanat al-Lugha wa al-Samt* [The Betrayals of Language and Silence] (2005) dedicates an entire chapter to what he calls "Tadmuriat"—brief, disjointed fragments of descriptions of terrifying events and moments he witnessed while detained at the infamous prison—moments that appear to escape the possibility of representation because they are "beyond surrealism".

Mustafa Khalifa's recently published work *al-Qawqa'a* [The Shell] (2008) is one of the first novels dedicated to the story of a detainee's imprisonment in Tadmur. Detained himself from 1982 to 1994, the author presents the story of a seemingly apolitical protagonist who returns to his homeland after studying film in Paris and is arbitrarily detained. Musa is arrested upon arriving at the airport, brutally tortured at an interrogation center of the military security service, mistakenly placed with detainees who are members of or suspected members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and then sent to the "desert prison". He will not learn what precise crime he had
been accused of until close to the time of his release. Like many prisoners, Musa discovers and masters the skill of oral composition and memorization. He has no paper and no pen. But throughout his detention, in his mind, he composes his diaries, memorizes them word by word and sentence by sentence, and retains each entry in his memory until he is eventually able to record them on paper after his release. Except for the very beginning, the novel is composed of these dated entries—some just a day or two apart and some separated by several months. Each entry contains parenthetical observations—editorial comments or additions that the narrator makes to his own memorized composition, seemingly at a later point in time.

Musa is never sentenced by a court, and he is never placed on trial, but he will spend twelve years in the desert prison. He is however, sentenced to silence by his fellow detainees, when he is overheard telling his torturers that first, he is a Christian and then declaring himself an atheist and therefore in no way affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Ostracized completely by the rest of the inmates in his mahja’ (dormitory or communal cell), he describes himself as withdrawing into his shell. The subtitle of the novel is "diary of a secret observer" (yawmiyat mutalassis). Musa is constantly "peering" or "creeping out of" his shell; he listens attentively, meticulously observes, and diligently records all of the horrors he witnesses in the prison. From the beginning of his enforced sojourn in detention, his life is threatened not only by the brutality of daily forms of torture and degradation, but by the Islamist extremists in his cell who believe that he should be executed as an unbeliever. Rescued and then protected by the moderate pacifist Shaykh Darwish and a physician who treated the wounds afflicted by his torture, Dr. Zahi, he nonetheless remains isolated for ten years. No one will speak to him because he is impure—this silencing imposed not just by his jailors but by his fellow inmates mimics the muting of thousands of political prisoners who passed through Tadmur and other sites in Syria's infamous carceral archipelago who have never been able to tell their stories.

Nonetheless, Musa speaks through his diary, and in doing so, he introduces his reader to a gruesome lexicon of torture and detention. He tells of the "reception" the prisoners receive upon their arrival to the prison: each is forced to drink the putrid filthy water from a sewage drain. Those who resist are beaten to death. Those who drink are treated to more torture or "hospitality" as the guards call it. Day after day, the torture continues. Daily activities can bring arbitrary death. He describes the "breather" or break where prisoners are routinely whipped, lashed, and beaten. He recounts how prisoners were not allowed to raise their eyes towards their jailors. He recollects the warden coming into the cell and randomly executing fourteen of his cellmates because of a threat he received in the outside world. He witnesses the weekly execution and trials of inmates in the courtyard through a tiny hole he discovers in the wall of his communal cell. He also methodically describes daily aspects of prison life—surviving the baths, illicit prayers, the confining, airless dimensions of the mahja’, the brutal shaving of prisoners heads and faces, the secret forms of communication between prison cells, the innovative modes
prisoners use to treat the sick and wounded when deprived of medical care, and the myriad forms of resistance that detainees develop despite the ever looming threat of death.

Musa will remain in complete isolation from his cellmates for ten years. After nearly a decade, he is once again confronted by an extremist calling for Musa’s trial, judgment, and execution by the other prisoners; finally, he breaks his silence and vocally confronts his would-be executioner. From that moment, he becomes intimate friends with Nasim—an inmate who was detained as a hostage due to his brother's affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood. Like others, Nasim will eventually suffer a breakdown; his dissent into madness occurs when three brothers are executed after their father was promised that the youngest would be spared. Abruptly, in twelfth year of detention, Musa is transferred from the prison back to the military interrogation center. He learns that his influential uncle has been attempting to obtain his release. But before he is actually freed, he will be interrogated in three different branches of the security services because he refuses to confess to belonging to any political organization, to write a thank you letter to the Syrian president for his release, or to renounce involvement in politics.

After his release, Musa returns to his family home that he inherited from his father and lives with his niece and her family. Despite family pressure to marry and to work, he does neither. He isolates himself from the world around him. Eventually, he learns that Nasim as well as others he was imprisoned with have been released. Nasim, however, has never recovered from his breakdown, and takes his own life in front of Musa after a brief reunion of former cellmates. At the end of the novel, there is no sense of celebratory liberation for Musa. Instead, noting that he has never truly been released from prison, he describes himself as having lost the ability to communicate, as perceiving an insurmountable abyss between himself and all others, and as carrying a grave within himself. Rather than creep out of his "shell" to watch and record what is happening around him, he remarks: "I do not want to look outside. I close its holes in order to turn my gaze entirely to the inside, to me, to myself".

Narrated in stark, simple language, the basic plot of The Shell, along with the framing device of a prison journal, will be familiar to readers of prison literature. Khalifa's direct, documentary style lacks elements of formal experimentation seen in other recent works of Syrian prison literature such as the fragmented, stream of consciousness narration in Hasiba 'Abdalrahman's prison novel Al-Sharmaqa [The Cocoon] (1999) or Malik Daghastani's Duwar al-Hurriya [The Vertigo of Freedom] (2002). However, the absence of experiment with form in the text does not detract from impact of the narrative on the reader. The history of Tadmur Military Prison, the stories of the human lives detained and lost inside its walls, are still in the process of being written, and Mustafa Khalifa's The Shell marks a significant contribution to the beginning of that process.

Shareah Taleghani is a PhD candidate in modern Arabic literature in the Dept. of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at New York University. She is completing her dissertation on the relationships between contemporary Syrian and Arabic prison literature, human rights discourse, and literary experimentalism.
Book Review:  
Nationalist Strains in the Work of a Seasoned Social Historian

Reviewed by James A. Reilly

Abdul-Karim Rafeq needs no introduction to Syrianists and to historians of Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. This collection of three articles is a reiteration and summary of major themes in Rafeq’s mature work. Their intellectual significance is that they operate within an updated Syrian Arab nationalist paradigm to reinterpret elements of Ottoman and early Mandate era history in Syria.

From his early career, Rafeq focused on eras and aspects of Syria’s Ottoman history that earlier generations of nationalist historians had patronizingly dismissed as emblematic of stagnation, backwardness and tradition (tradition in the “bad” sense of historical immobility). In 1966 Rafeq’s first book, on the rise of the ‘Azms in the eighteenth century, explored the dynamics of regional politics and (controvertially) the emergence of a kind of Syrian political identity in the century before the era of modernizing reform in the Ottoman Empire. In the 1970s and 80s, Rafeq was prominent as a pioneer in the use of *shari’a* court registers for studying Syria’s Ottoman-era social history. In this capacity he assisted and encouraged international scholars and helped to raise the profile of Syrian Studies.

The book under review builds on these interests. The first article or chapter focuses on Syrian Arab consciousness during the pre-Tanzimat Ottoman centuries. The next chapter discusses agrarian relations in the Syrian countryside during the Ottoman period. The final chapter analyzes the leadership and outlook of the northern Syrian guerrilla movements against encroaching French colonial rule in the period 1919–1921. The chapters feature sparing references to other authors’ publications, but the first two include extended quotations from relevant literary and archival primary sources. The third chapter includes references to memoirs and to French archival sources.

*Mahattat fi Tarikh Bilad al-Sham* engages wider controversies implicitly but not explicitly. These controversies revolve around questions of collective consciousness and identity. Against a viewpoint that national identities are modern “inventions,” outcomes associated with modern state formation and with the dissemination of print culture, Rafeq maintains that Syrian Arab identity had already developed form, meaning and expression prior to the Ottoman Tanzimat. To build this argument he explores the writings of prominent Syrian (or Shami) ‘ulama’. Far from being “stagnant” (as claimed in the older nationalist stereotypes of the Ottoman era), Syrian Arab intellectual life in the early Ottoman centuries was critical, dynamic, and engaged. Rafeq identifies proto-nationalist themes in their work, including a strong sense of ethnic and linguistic consciousness and of moral/doctrinal superiority (in *shar‘i* terms) expressed against Ottomans (the Arwam, or people of Rum). Furthermore, Shami ‘ulama’ demonstrated a commitment to
justice expressed by noblesse oblige and local loyalties, sentiments that led urban ‘ulama’ to support Syrian peasants against their predominantly Rumi oppressors.

A “national” theme is detectable in the second chapter on agrarian relations, although here the connivance of Arab or Arabized Syrian-Ottoman elites (like the ‘Azms) in the privatization of waqf properties mutes any implicit nationalist dimension of the narrative. However, the article traces a distinct assertion of Syrian localism in the form of the growing prominence of the Shafi‘i legal school in adjudication of waqf property transactions against the official Ottoman Hanafi madhhab. The latter part of the chapter emphasizes attempts by Europeans and consular protégés to acquire land in Syria in the 19th century. Stressing this issue (rather than, say, the emergence of urban-notable latifundists) may serve to raise readers’ sensitivity to or anxiety about the integrity of the national patrimony.

The nationalist theme is brought to its conclusion in the third chapter. In his discussion of the rural guerrilla resistance in northern Syria against French forces and French rule, Rafeq emphasizes and concludes the following: 1) the rural resistance was led by recognized notables; 2) the leadership was mindful of noblesse oblige including their responsibilities to the poor, to the downtrodden, and to potentially vulnerable religious communities, especially Christians; 3) the rebels’ alliance with Mustafa Kemal (till 1921) and their use of religious (Islamic) slogans was tactical and utilitarian; whilst 4) the rebel leaderships’ commitment to the Syrian homeland and to their Arab identity trumped other potential loyalties, as evidenced by the leaderships’ choices at various key moments.

So, in these chapters, Rafeq offers an interpretation of major issues in Ottoman-Syrian history, including the formation and expression of national consciousness, the nature of local identities and loyalties, and the character of armed rural anti-colonial movements. Given his command of the material, Rafeq’s theses must and will be taken seriously. Yet this book, while a worthy summation of Rafeq’s mature thought, misses an opportunity to engage more explicitly with these broader questions. Direct acknowledgement of competing paradigms could have offered Rafeq’s Arabophone readers a window into the environment in which he, an internationally engaged scholar, works.

On the other hand (the reviewer’s inner voice retorts), authors are entitled to their own agendas. The book’s introduction (by Balamand history department chair Mahmoud Haddad) suggests that Arab historians should learn from Rafeq’s commitment to social history and from his use of Ottoman-era archival materials. The book’s photographic reproduction of some shari‘a court documents reinforces this point. So if Mahattat fi Tarikh Bilad al-Sham can encourage new generations of Arabophone historians to study the Ottoman centuries with a sense of seriousness, engagement and openness to new interpretations, Abdul-Karim Rafeq’s legacy is secure.

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Book Review:

Regime Acrobatics


Reviewed by Joseph Yackley

Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria is a welcome study of the Asad regime, past and present. By drawing from primary as well as secondary sources, the two papers contained in the slim volume provide readers a valuable framework for assessing the prospects and limitations of Syria’s current reform agenda.

As Syria pursues rapprochement with the West, a return of the Golan Heights and sweeping economic reforms, the regime headed by Bashar al-Asad has gained renewed attention from analysts, policymakers and academics. The quality of the analysis, however, often suffers from the regime’s opacity. It is difficult to know just who is making decisions, let alone how or why.

Two essays recently published by the University of St. Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies under the title Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria underscore why it can be so difficult to assess the regime from the outside. By drawing from the theoretical literature on power and discourse, particularly the work of Michel Foucault, Aurora Sottimano of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and Kjetil Selvik of the University of Oslo show how the Asad dynasty has projected a public persona often at odds with reality. The result is a portrait of a regime that has been far more nimble and sophisticated than is often assumed. For nearly 40 years, Hafez al-Asad along with his son and successor, Bashar al-Asad, have been confronted by a range of internal and external challenges, which they have met by shifting alliances, gradually liberalizing the national economy, and all along exploiting the power of public discourse.

In an article entitled, “Ideology and Discourse in the Era of Ba’thist Reforms” Sottimano seeks to “investigate the role of economic discourse in the maintenance and transformation of power relations in Syria.” She concludes that Ba’thist ideology has been a pliable and autonomous tool in the hands of Syria’s leaders. Often bent, but never broken, this ideology has legitimized a range of policies that, despite betraying Ba’thist orthodoxy, have helped consolidate the regime.

Sottimano illustrates this by tracing Syrian economic discourse from the Ba’th Revolution of 1963 to the death of Hafiz al-Assad in 2000. Through an informative review of various stages in the economic reform process, she shows how “discursive strategies of Ba’thism possessed enough solidity and flexibility as to continue to limit the room for maneuver of Syrian policymakers whilst offering them valuable tools with which to manage economic and political processes.” (p. 14)

Sottimano underscores the currency of economic reform in Ba’thist discourse by citing instances in which the Asad regime pursued economic reforms in order to remedy what were in fact political problems. Over time, this distortion of economic reform has led to a perverse reality in
which “the Syrian citizen is openly asked to work, sacrifice, struggle, and even die in the present, for the sake of an ideal which is always in the future.” (p. 23)

The analysis is informative, yet while it is instructive to see Foucault’s theories about power and discourse applied to a specific setting, it leads Sottimano to give the regime too much credit. Hafiz al-Asad emerges from her study as a clairvoyant authoritarian, aware of where society stood, where it should go, and how to move it there. For instance, she reads the successive economic openings (infitah-s) as “an incremental demobilization strategy” in which Asad replaced class divisions with “cohesion and solidarity” as workers abandoned their private concerns for the goals of the nation. In fact, on numerous occasions the Asad regime has been caught off-guard, overwhelmed by the moment and scrambling to survive. The 1982 uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama -- suppressed through savage bombing of the city that left tens of thousands dead -- is just one instance of how the regime has been undermined by social divisions within Syria. Economic policy under Hafiz al-Asad was less an incremental strategy, than a collection of responses to recessions, the collapse of oil prices in the 1980s, and the disintegration of Syria’s Soviet sponsors.

Selvik’s article “It’s the Mentality Stupid: Syria’s Turn to the Private Sector” picks up where Sottimano’s leaves off, focusing on the reforms under Bashar al-Asad. Selvik presents “a fieldwork-based assessment of the reform process [in order to] identify leading themes in the Syrian discourse on reform.” After a brief and familiar overview of the ongoing shift toward a more market-oriented economy, Selvik provides a series of excerpts from interviews with industrialists and parliamentarians (often one and the same) conducted largely in March and June of 2007.

Selvik’s method has promise. As he states in his introduction, the discourse of entrepreneurs can “shed light on dominant ways of thinking and ideological trends.” (p. 42) Unfortunately, Selvik provides too little information about his interviewees for readers to assess the breadth of these trends. He withholds their names and only seldom lists the sectors in which the industrialists are active or the constituencies the parliamentarians represent. As a result, it is unclear how many people Selvik interviewed and what emerges is a surprisingly monolithic set of opinions about the regime and its reforms. While some, perhaps even most, interviewees may have requested anonymity, it is unlikely that all did. Even the name of “a leading businessman who regularly states his opinion in the press” is withheld. Selvik may have offered anonymity in order to secure the interviews or he may simply have exercised discretion. Knowing which is the case would help readers better assess the content and value of the interviews. Selvik also draws questionable conclusions from those interviews. As an example of how much “Syria has changed”, he cites an entrepreneur who benefited from competition controls while building his business empire, but now calls for them to be dismantled. A more plausible explanation would be that the entrepreneur, now well established, sees those controls (in the form of higher taxes, import duties and restrictions on the movement of capital) as detrimental to his business interests.

Later Selvik argues that the fruits of the Asad dynasty’s efforts to accommodate the private sector, beginning in the early 1970s, are only now starting to bear fruit. (p. 65) He fails to explain why the regime would pursue a slow, but unmistakable policy of economic liberalization over nearly forty years if it only recently began bearing fruit. Volker Perthes, writing 15 years ago, noted how the regime under Asad père survived by relying on a shifting constellation of
constituencies over time. This has allowed the regime to survive despite its failure to regain the Golan Heights, sustain economic development or expand political freedoms. Selvik is aware of Perthes’ writing and his point. On page 42, Selvik describes a long-running movement away from the austere socialist creed of unmitigated Ba’thism as “a survival strategy for the Asad regime since the early 1970s.” He may have defined “bearing fruit” in a different way, but one should not overlook the value of regime survival.

Selvik’s best insights come toward the end of his essay, where a number of issues that warrant further study are raised. Like Sottimano, Selvik highlights the regime’s desire to avoid class conflict, but goes a bit further by identifying the opportunity it provides Bashar al-Asad to act as “mediator between proponents and opponents of capitalism.” (p. 66) Selvik also touches on the plight of Syria’s working class. Quoting the Syrian economist Samir Seifan, he points out that workers have largely been abandoned by the regime without gaining any of the political liberties that would allow them to air their grievances publicly. One wonders if this process of alienation could widen support for Islamist groups opposed to the avowedly secular, and increasingly elitist, regime. Finally, Selvik describes as “lopsided liberalization” a strategy in which the regime moves toward more market-oriented economy, while retaining the clientelist networks needed to secure its position as the “guarantor of relative privilege.” This observation has some potential for subsequent inquiry. What, precisely, are those networks and how are they maintained? What are their prospects as liberalization moves forward?

Both papers suffer from careless typos that even a cursory copy edit should catch. In addition to errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation, the texts suffer from an inconsistent style, in the body as well as the citations. Sottimano translates ‘corrective’ in three different ways: correctly as tashih on p. 13; and incorrectly on p. 26 (once as tashis and twice as tahsis). She also misspells Weltanschauung twice (pp. 12 and 23) and leaves one to wonder why Muntalaqat is capitalized and italicized, while rakba is not, and inftah alternates between the two. Selvik’s errors are fewer and less conspicuous, but problems with spelling and grammar crop up on more than half the pages.

Notwithstanding the afore-mentioned shortcomings, the two essays are welcome contributions to the study of how discourse has influenced and been shaped by the reform agenda in Syria over the past forty years. When read in tandem, the complementary essays provide a comprehensive account of the evolution and interplay of regime discourse and reform in Ba’thist Syria.

Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria is the fourth in a series of publications entitled “St. Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria.” Under the supervision of Raymond Hinnebusch, the user-friendly series is a welcome contribution to the expanding public debate about Syria and its evolving domestic policies and regional role. Those of us interested in contemporary Syria and analysis about where it is headed look forward to the next installment.

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Book Review: Syria and Saudi Arabia


Reviewed by LeRoy T. Long

Many journalists, analysts, and officials alike are still amazed, nearly a half-century on, that Syria has succeeded in building and maintaining for itself a meaningful role – even a leadership role – in the Middle East in spite of being shunned by so many and possessed of a foreign policy which seldom relies on more than intransigence and bellicosity. How, they ask, has Syria held on to Lebanon, to the Kingdom’s coffers, and to Iran’s peculiar brand of camaraderie for so many years? Sonoko Sunayama argues in her recent book *Syria and Saudi Arabia: Collaboration and Conflicts in the Oil Era* that the answer – at least in the case of the Syrian-Saudi relationship - has to do with that nebulosity of the social sciences: identity. She takes her reader through a periodized history of these two states’ torrid relationship with one another from 1948-1990, dividing the work into chapters more or less according whether it was Syria or Saudi Arabia “on top” at any given moment. Ultimately, she concludes:

Damascus’ need for close ties with Riyadh and vice versa increased *because of* – rather than *in spite of* – their differences. This curious phenomenon was explained in part by the existence of ‘shared’ or ‘transnational’ identities between the two countries – namely Arabism, Islam and the unique entwinement between the two, contingent to which were certain common norms (p. 215).

Sunayama says that her study aims in part “to contribute to a wider debate of whether identities play a role in alliance-making” (p. 217). That debate, she continues, should also be situated within an even wider one concerning whether or not *ideas* must play a substantive role in foreign policy analysis. Too often, she contends, other academics have focused on how Arab states engage in “hostility over the monopoly of Arab nationalist or Islamic languages,” rather than asking how shared or transnational identities “can at times lead to cooperation – in however reluctant a form” (p. 218).

To that end, she sets about explaining how Syrian authorities succeeded in mobilizing the symbols of Arab nationalism – largely by challenging the far more wealthy and powerful Saudi Arabia’s own Arab and Islamic credentials – in order to allow Syria to assume for itself a larger role in inter-Arab affairs. Of course, such attacks bred resentment amongst the Saudi leadership, but Sunayama argues, it was in fact their joint claim to these contested ideologies that enabled them to work with one another even in periods of severe diplomatic and military disaffection. This, she insists, can be seen in their shared history.

By way of introduction, Chapter 1 takes the reader from the evacuation of French troops from Syria in April 1946 (two years after independence) to the signing of the Camp David Accords in September 1978. The leadership vacuum formed by Egypt’s expulsion from the Arab League at the Baghdad Summit just one month later, she argues, left Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq vying for the reigns of Arab leadership. This provoked a complicated game of *realpolitik* only superficially veiled in the trappings of Arab nationalism or joint Islamic action.
Over the next hundred pages, Sunayama discusses in detail how regional events like the Iranian Revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, civil war in Lebanon, the Syrian-Jordanian border crisis in 1980, the Syrian-Israeli missile crisis of 1981, Fez I and Fez II, the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982, the “Tanker War” in the Gulf, and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait necessitated the cyclical forging and dissolution of one Syrian-Saudi alliance after another.

Relying primarily on newspaper clippings, more or less canonical histories of Syria and Saudi Arabia like Patrick Seale’s *The Struggle for Syria*, and a handful of anonymous personal interviews, Sunayama traces a pattern over these years which consists largely of Syria “deliberately jeopardizing Arab consensus” (p. 137), followed by Saudi Arabia vainly trying to woo back its sometimes-ally “through downright appeasement,” and more often than not with undisclosed fistfuls of cash (p. 146). She also evaluates claims that personal relationships, like the supposedly close friendship between Syrian Rif’at al-Assad and Saudi Prince Abdullah, drove politics to any real extent (p. 169). She points out that major players in the game like Hafez al-Assad, Yasser ‘Arafat, Saddam Hussein, and Mu’ammer Gaddafi, all of whom were in power for at least twenty-five years, interacted sometimes in very personal ways on account of their relatively lengthy and involved histories with one another. Occasionally, she concludes, these personal relationships played a role in the successful convention of a summit or other acts of collaboration.

Sunayama’s most compelling argument, however, has to do with what she calls “the beginning of the end of ‘The Saudi Era.’” This, too, she frames in terms of an identity debate. Saudi Arabia was riding high on its laurels in October 1982 after its comprehensive Middle East peace plan received unanimous endorsement at the Fez II summit, an achievement which seemingly attested to the country’s long-awaited emergence as a real regional power. Syria, however, quickly turned the tables on its erstwhile partner by undermining prospects for Arab consensus on major regional issues like the Reagan Plan and the 17 May Israeli-Lebanese Accords, both of which Syria effectively torpedoed within the year. In the name of Arabism, Syria proceeded to veto any Saudi initiative that might be construed as backed by either the U.S. or Israel. Saudi Arabia, according to Sunayama, eventually became so obsessed with getting Syria’s “Arab” endorsement that it was willing to pay for it with hundreds of millions of Saudi petro-dollars.

Finally, it is a minor complaint regarding these cash flows but, for all that Sunayama’s argument hinges on Saudi Arabia cutting Syria a regular check for millions – sometimes billions – of dollars, the author pays scant attention to keeping the reader informed of what these sums really mean in comparative perspective. Her decision not to put dollar amounts in real terms – or for that matter, even to keep sums of money in a common currency – calls for some uncomfortable mental math on occasion as, for example, the reader has to gauge the relative import of a LS 600,000 in bribes in 1950 (p. 25) next to US $50 million of currency reserves in 1986 (p. 192).

In short, however, the book is a must read in the classroom and for anyone interested in understanding the contemporary logic of Syria’s obdurate perseverance and Saudi Arabia’s sometimes-naïve pragmatism, not just in their own relations, but in regional and international affairs more broadly.

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Book Review: Oppositional Arts in 1990s Syria

By Michael Page

Miriam cooke’s *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official*, sketches an intimate portrait of the Syrian artistic milieu and the works it produced in the mid-1990s twilight years of Hafiz al-Asad’s rule. Meeting with Syrian writers, sculptors, playwrights, and film directors, cooke analyzes their work through her concept of *commissioned criticism*, which she defines as “a state-sponsored practice that performs official accountability for the rosy rhetoric of slogans while attempting to convert real dissident practice into state ideology” (73). Through this framework, cooke not only underlines the precarious balance between collusion with the state and the very real penalties for transgressing its constantly shifting red lines (which every Syrian artist must navigate), but also the more general calculus of artistic compromise under authoritarian rule.

Cooke spent from autumn 1995 to spring 1996 in Syria, interviewing and getting to know a number of Syrian artists in a variety of fields. Through these interviews and meetings, cooke combines a detailed literary analysis of their works with a personal narrative of her interactions with these artists. These narrative interruptions are sometimes interesting, as they often highlight the level of distrust and fear present in Syrian society. In several instances, even intellectuals and artists are suspicious of her motives in studying the Syrian artistic scene, while concurrently bemoaning the fact that “our [Syrian] literature is not known abroad” (57). However, in other sections, the dialogue seems superfluous to the literature she is addressing, and adds less value for the reader.

*Dissident Syria* is organized thematically into eight sections. Chapter one is an analysis and critique of the Syrian government’s use of slogans as a mechanism for suppressing dissent. Cooke draws heavily from Vaclav Havel’s writing on life in Eastern Bloc Czechoslovakia to explain the Asad cult, interspersed with Syrian intellectuals’ reactions to this repressive atmosphere. In Chapters Two and Three, Syrian women writers are discussed, with a heavy focus on the author’s personal interactions with writers such as Houda Naamani and Colette al-Khoury. Chapter Four explains the concept of “commissioned criticism”, comparing it with Lisa Wedeen’s idea of “licensed criticism”, from her excellent work *Ambiguities of Domination*:

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Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria. Cooke applies this concept in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven, which investigate Syrian theater, filmmaking, and the genre of “prison literature”. Chapter Eight concludes with a mostly personal account of her final days in Damascus. In terms of the book’s structure, cooke does not introduce the concept of “commissioned criticism” until nearly halfway into the book, and it would be helpful to know why she does not use it as a framework for approaching Syrian women writer’s works.

When reading theories on how authoritarian regimes manage dissent such as cooke’s “commissioned criticism”, it is striking how authoritarian states such as Syria that appear incompetent and lacking in multiple arenas can be simultaneously ingenious and creative in manipulating, and indeed reenlisting, dissidence to serve their own ends. Cooke cites the Syrian National Film Organization (NFO) as a particularly salient example, in which dissidents produce critical films that are funded by the NFO, screened abroad, and awarded prizes at international festivals – strengthening the image of Syria as a country that respects free speech – while banning these same prize-winning films at home, or severely limiting their release.

Additionally, cooke suggests that this forced collusion with the state sews distrust between the masses and Syria’s intellectual and artistic elite - especially ‘Alawite artists. Cooke poignantly cites the example of the great Syrian playwright Sa’adallah Wannus who, dying of cancer, relied on government medical care while working on his final plays, and therefore “risked the charge that he was in [the Syrian government’s] pay and that his criticism had been licensed, that he had become a muharrij, or court jester” (98). However, it seems the Syrian public saw him as anything but, since cooke, referring to Wannus’ funeral, also asks: “Would seventy thousand people have attended the funeral of a court jester” (99)?

Dissident Syria makes numerous comparisons between Syria under Hafiz al-Asad’s rule with the U.S. under the Bush administration. Commenting on the role of outsiders in assisting dissidents in other countries, cooke writes, “The attention of outsiders can break the closed circuit between the actor and the one acted upon, between an authoritarian regime and its people, whether in 1990s Syria or in the twenty-first-century United States” (165). As worthy as the Bush administration may be for an expansive range of criticisms, it was not Syria under Hafiz al-Asad’s rule, which included the death of 10,000 to 20,000 citizens alone in destruction of the Syrian city of Hama in 1982. These comparisons detract from an otherwise worthwhile book – as do a few minor editing errors. (For example, cooke writes that Lebanese writer Samir Kassir was assassinated in June 2004, instead of June 2005.) Overall, miriam cooke’s Dissident Syria is a useful examination of Syrian artists’ struggle to produce critical works while on the one hand evading reenlistment by the Syrian regime to bolster its legitimacy, and on the other, avoiding the fate of many Syrian artists and dissidents: prison, or worse.

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