

Syria Studies in Scotland and Scandinavia

The Center for Syrian Studies at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland

Raymond Hinnebusch

Syria is a pivotal country that, for perhaps a decade, has balanced uneasily between two contrary impulses: on the one hand, it carries the banner of Arab nationalism against the threats to the Arab world from Israel and the West; hence Syria was the only Arab country to defy the world hegemon and oppose the invasion of Iraq. On the other hand, the heir of a rich mercantile tradition, Syria yearns to rejoin the world economy and was recently on the brink of joining the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. Syria remains poised between these different orientations and just as the “struggle for Syria” of the fifties was, as Patrick Seale showed, pivotal to the course of the whole Middle East so the current struggle for Syria will also be crucial for the future of the region.



From left to right, Professor Hinnebusch, St. Andrews Principal Dr. Brian Lang, Ms. Asfari, chief benefactor Mr. Ayman Asfari, and St. Andrews University Chancellor Sir Menzies Campbell on the occasion of the founding of the Centre for Syrian Studies in 2006.

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-Raymond Hinnebusch

Notwithstanding its importance, Syria is, however, understudied by scholars and lamentably misunderstood in policy circles and in the Western media where the over-amplified voices of special interest pundits are allowed to demonize all who oppose imperial plans for the region. It is against this backdrop that I became convinced that a

research institution that would specialize in the study of Syria would be of great benefit. I have been a student of Syrian affairs for some thirty years: I published my first article on Syria, a study of agrarian reform in four villages, in 1976 after spending a year in the country (1973-74). Since then I have published five books and numerous articles on the country. I began proposing the idea of a Centre for Syrian Studies some years ago, but this idea would have remained a dream except for the intervention of the Syrian ambassador to the UK, Dr. Sami al-Khiyami. Dr. Khiyami had been appointed ambassador to bring fresh views and ideas to representing Syria in London, which remains a pivotal capital as regards the Arab world. Dr. Khiyami made the decisive breakthrough in finding a philanthropist, Mr. Ayman Asfari, who was willing to provide the funding needed to launch the Centre and who has since taken a personal interest in its development. Mr. Asfari is chief executive of the London and Aberdeen-based oil company Petrofac Limited, which has interests in both Scotland and the Middle East.

The Centre for Syrian Studies was officially founded on November 3, 2006 with a ceremony in the newly opened building of the School of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. The Centre, devoted wholly to research on Syria, is the only one of its kind in the world. It sponsors research on contemporary Syria, specifically, on economic and political reform in Syria and on security and foreign policy issues concerning Syria. At the launch of the Centre, Mr. Asfari explained his support for it: Syria was widely misunderstood abroad; within Syria research on the pivotal issues and questions the country was facing was woefully inadequate. The Principle of the University, Dr. Brian Lang, pledged the backing of the University for the new Centre as part of its commitment to Arabic and Middle East Studies. The Chancellor of the University, Sir Menzies Campbell, who attended the launch, had just the previous week told the news media, in his capacity as leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, that if Britain wanted a solution to its involvement in Iraq, "you have to start talking to Syria and Iran." Coincidentally, the previous week St. Andrews had also inaugurated an Institute for Iranian Studies.

The work of the Centre focuses on encouraging scholarship by *Syrians about Syria*, although non-Syrian scholars of Syria have also been involved. The Centre is an integral part of the University of St. Andrews, and located within the Institute of Middle East and Central Asian Studies. As such, it is a strictly non-partisan, scholarly enterprise. It is open to a variety of viewpoints but we depart from the following consensus that is probably shared by most Syrians and friends of Syria, namely a belief in the need for substantial political and economic reform (notably, the transition to a "social market" economy) while defending core values and interests and without jeopardizing stability and security. Syria is undergoing changes for which there is no definitive blueprint on how to proceed and steering such a difficult path is the responsibility of the Syrian government and citizenry. Our centre aims to provide academically sound and politically unbiased knowledge and research that could be useful for Syrians as they chart their course and which would also allow a more balanced view of the country for non-Syrian policymakers and scholars.

The Centre began work with a founding workshop in November 2006 attended by a mix of Syrian and non-Syrian scholars. On the Syrian side were Centre fellows, Ibrahim Hamidi, Damascus bureau chief for *al-Hayat*; Sami Moubayed, professor at the Kalamoun University; and Samir al-Taqi, director of the al-Sharq Centre for International Studies in Damascus. Steven Heydeman of Georgetown University and David Walder of the University of Virginia, both of whom have written books on Syria also attended; Mr Asfari and I co-chaired the session which agreed on the outlines of a research project, *Syria in Transition*, and identified the key topics needing research. Since then an advisory board has been composed of prominent UK citizens of Syrian descent, in addition to a former UK ambassador to Syria and renowned writer on Syria, Patrick Seale. Soon afterwards an agreement was reached with Lynne Rienner Publishers, which will publish the books and papers of the centre. A website can be accessed at <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/intrel/syrian/>.

The next project was the “Conference on Economic Transition in Syria” held in St. Andrews, 11-12 April 2008. It explored issues and aspects of the changes that Syria has been undergoing since the nineties. Can these changes be understood within the “transition” paradigm? Do they amount to a beginning of a “post-Ba’thist” Syria? Is there an identifiable “pathway” on which Syria is now set and what is the outcome, in the shorter and longer terms, likely to be? The conference papers looked at the balance of political-economy forces pushing for or obstructing economic reform; regime (and opposition) conceptualizations of “transition;” the role of agents and institutions in it; particular aspects of reform policy (e.g. banking, public sector reform) and the consequences of reform for the economy and for particular sectors (education) and social forces (capitalists, peasants, small merchants), in regard to both absolute welfare and equality in the distribution of wealth and opportunity; and the impact of external factors (such as the EU association agreement and economic relations with other countries) in facilitating or obstructing reform. Papers given included: Samer Abboud, “The Transition Paradigm and the Syrian case;” Aurora Sottimano, “Ideology and Discourse in the Era of Ba’thist Reform;” Soren Schmidt, “Economic Development and Institutions in Syria;” Ferdinand Arslanian, “Growth and Reform Policies in a Transition Economy;” Radwan Ziadah, “The Link between Economic and Political Reform;” Samir Seifan, “The Evolution of Economic Reform in Syria;” Samir Aita, “The Politics of Banking Reform;” Anika Rabo, “Business as Usual? Aleppo Traders since the Year 2000;” Basel Hamwi, “The Experience of the Private Banking Sector;” Ziad Arbackh, “The Syrian Energy Sector;” Tilman Brück, “The Progress of Economic Reform in Syria;” Juergen Amann, “German-Syrian Business Relations and Economic reform;” Bassam Haddad, “Business-state Relations and Networks in Syria;” Anja Zorob, “The Syrian-European Association Agreement;” Michael Dostal, “The Syrian-European Association Agreement;” Salam Said, “Syrian Trade Liberalization in the context of GAFTA.”

The next event of the Centre was the conference, “Syria in a Changing World,” held in Damascus 7-9 November 2008, sponsored jointly with the Orient Centre for International Studies (OCIS), Syria. The papers fall into four categories: I. *The Historical Context* explored the background to the current situation in Syria and included “Syria under the Liberal Regime and the Impact of US policy”, Sami Moubayed (Kalamoun

University), and “Syria under Hafiz al-Asad “, George Jabbur (former advisor of the late president); II. *State And Reform* explored debates over the role of the state in reform and included “Post-populist State,” Samir al-Taqi (Director of OCIS); “A Syrian Model of a Social Market Economy” by Samir Seifan (Director of Arab Development Consultants, Damascus); “Social Consequences of Reform,” a separately solicited paper by Yasin Haj Salah, (*al-Hayat*); “Administrative Reform in Syria,” by Saam Dalleh; III. *Reform in Key Economic Sectors* included papers by Atieh al-Hindi (Ministry of Agriculture), “The Agricultural Sector” and “Syrian Industry” by Fuad Lahham (formerly of the Ministry of Industry); IV. *Syria’s International Relations* examined the external context of reform. Papers included “The Regional Context of Reform” by Marwan Kabalan (Damascus University); “Syria-Lebanon Relations” by Hamidi al-Abdullah; “EU-Syrian Relations” by Maxemiliano Trento; “Syrian-Turkey Relations” by Bulant Aras; “The Syrian-Israeli Peace Negotiations” by Dr Riyad Dawoodi (chief Syrian negotiator with Israel); and “The Syrian-Israeli Peace Process,” by Dr Rizk Elias. This conference was the occasion of vigorous and open debate on Syria’s path. Proceedings can be found on the Centre website.

The next event was the Ankara Workshop of 17-19 June 2009 at Middle East Technical University on Syria-Turkey Relations. This was funded by a British Academy Capacity Sharing Partnership Grant. In 1997 Turkey and Syria were on the brink of war and Turkey was aligned with Syria’s main enemy, Israel; today, Syrian-Turkish relations are amicable, to the point that Turkey has undertaken to mediate in the Syrian-Israeli conflict. What explains this remarkable turnabout and what are its implications for the international politics of the Middle East? This puzzle provides fertile ground for testing rival IR theories. More importantly, it has been a central factor in countering the destabilization of the region under the Bush administration. The project brings together Syrian scholars with Turkish scholars who are researching Turkish-Syrian relations. At the workshop to launch the study, papers were given by Raymond Hinnebusch on “Approaches to the Study of Turkey-Syrian relations”; by A. Kibaroglu on water relations; by Berna Suer on Syrian-Turkish conflict resolution; by Ozden Zeynep Oktav on “The Limits of Change in Syria-Turkey relations;” by Ozgur Ozdamar on “The Kurds and Syria-Turkey Relations” and by Ozlem Tur on “Syrian-Turkish Economic relations” Also participating were Meliha Altunisik, Ahmad Han, and Mustafa Aydin.

A Damascus June 2010 workshop is planned on the topic, *Syria and its Neighbours*. It will continue the Syria-Turkey project but papers will also be given on Syria’s relations with Iran, the Arab Mashreq and Egypt, the Arab Gulf states, and the great powers.

Meanwhile, the Centre has been publishing the *St. Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria* jointly with Lynne Rienner Press. The series purpose is to publish cutting edge contemporary research and analysis on modern Syria, with the focus on the economic “transition” (reform) and on Syria’s current security problems. However, papers on other topics will also be published and we are especially interested in sectoral or micro-studies of the impact of the current changes. Six issues have appeared: Aurora Sottimano and Selvik Kjetil, *Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria* (reviewed in the Spring 2009 issue of the *SSA Newsletter*); Samer Abboud and Ferdinand Arslanian, *Syria and*

the Transition Paradigm; Jörg Michael Dostal and Anja Zorob, *Syria and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership*; Raymond Hinnebusch and Soren Schmidt, *The State and The Political Economy of Reform in Syria*; Samer Abboud and Salem Said, *Syrian Foreign Trade and Economic Reform*; Raymond Hinnebusch, Marwan Kabalan, Bassma Kodamani and David Lesch, *Syrian Foreign Policy and the United States: from Bush to Obama*. Scheduled for 2010 are: Samir Seifan, *Syrian on the Road to Reform and Agricultural Policy and Rural Development in Syria* by Raymond Hinnebusch, Attieh El-Hindi, Munther Khadam and Myriam Ababsa.

The centre is keen to cooperate with the Syrian Studies Association. We welcome papers from members for publication in the St. Andrews Papers which is able to publish work of considerably greater length than that acceptable for journals, yet of lesser length than that normal for books (an issue runs about 25,000 words but can stretch to 28,000); this could also make it ideal for collections of papers presented in SSA conference panels. We are open to any suggestions for collaboration from members of the SSA.

Raymond Hinnebusch is Director of the Centre for Syrian Studies and author of many books on contemporary Syria including those mentioned above and including The Iraq War: Causes and Consequences (2006), co-edited with Rick Fawn; The International Politics of the Middle East (2003); The Foreign Policies of Middle Eastern States (2002), co-edited with Anoushiravan Ehteshami; and Syria: Revolution from Above (2002).