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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