

McMeekin, 2011; Clarke, 2012), and it later echoes the hotly debated effort of Timothy Snyder to re-frame the Nazi and Soviet genocides and the Second World War in *Bloodlands* (2010). This new way of narrating the history of the Middle East gives the reader appetite for a more up-to-date version of Hopkirk's 1990 study of *The Great Game*, perhaps with renewed focus devoted to the way in which the struggle between Transeurasian (Russian) and Transatlantic (Anglo-American) powers keep affecting the region.

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Syria from Reform to Revolt Volume 1: Political Economy and International Relations

Edited by Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl
Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. 2015.

Syria from Reform to Revolt Volume 2: Culture, Society, and Religion

Edited by Christa Salamandra and Leif Stenberg
Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. 2015.

The two-part edited collection entitled *Syria from Reform to Revolt* is a crucial read for anyone who wants to understand complex realities and societal, cultural, religious and economic developments and transformations that took place in Syria prior to the 2011 uprisings. It is one of the most comprehensive recent contributions to contemporary Syria scholarship. The volumes focus on the period between 2000 and 2010, signifying the first decade of Syria under the rule of Bashar Al-Assad. The publications are the result of an academic conference entitled *Syria under Bashar al-Assad* which was organized in October 2010, at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES), Lund University, Sweden. The conference was the first international, cross-disciplinary meeting of scholars of contemporary Syria. The two volumes, conceptualized prior to the Syrian uprisings, are based on grounded empirical research in Syria and shed light on some of the seeds of the Syrian revolt. Both, established scholars and

young academics with more recent experience, contributed to the volumes.

The first volume is a rich book with 14 chapters divided over three parts, all providing valuable insights on the changes and transformations in Syrian society during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The three parts are respectively entitled:

1. Reproducing Power and Legitimacy;
2. Reconstructing the regime's social base;
3. Regional and international challenges.

In the introduction, the reader is informed about the developments in Syria when Bashar al-Assad took power. After years of austerity in the 1980s and the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, his second son, the young 34-year old Bashar al-Assad became president. Bashar's presidency was made possible by an immediate change of constitution, which previously stated that a president of Syria should be at least 35-year old. Immediately after his inauguration speech, a new wind was felt in Syria. People started to openly discuss previously forbidden subjects like politics. Where the old discourse of Hafez had been nationalist and anti-Western, the new discourse introduced relative openness through the introduction of government guided economic markets.

The Damascus Spring shook the old guard of the Hafez reign and when the political openness of this first revolt in 2001 became too threatening to the old power structures, Bashar decided to clamp down on this new openness and its main initiators were arrested. Syrian civil society was controlled and co-opted by the introduction of so called GONGOs, government organized non-governmental organizations, headed by the first Lady, Asma al-Assad. Young urban entrepreneurs replaced the members of the old Revolutionary Youth Union. The First Lady, with a background in banking and a British upbringing, served

as a role model for young Syrian women who were highly educated. Despite the promised reforms, Bashar's rule turned out to be a charade of openness where authoritarianism was neo-liberalized and upgraded. The introduction, written by Hinnebusch and Zintl, sets the tone for this volume with its focus on political economy, national reform policies and how Syria transformed from a closed dictatorial regime to an upgraded authoritarian state.

The first part, comprising of three chapters, identifies how power and legitimacy were reproduced under Bashar's rule. Hinnebusch describes how the presidential succession led to an intra-elite power struggle whereby new elites were formed through the economic reforms. The replacement of old guards by modernizers did not go without a major challenge to reform, which reached a watershed during the 10th party congress in 2005 that signified another dissidence towards Assad. Important in this chapter is the analysis of the power struggles between *Assadists* vs. *Khaddamists*, the latter are former supporters of vice-president and longtime friend to the old Hafez. Abdul Halim Khaddam was the second most powerful man in the country and had been one of Hafez's closest allies. The age gap between Khaddamists and Assadists was on average 30 years. Parallel to the internal strife within the Assad circle, the country was lifted into a new kind of national economic openness, also known as the *social market economy*.

The social market economy, Bashar's core concept of his reform project, is central to the chapter written by Samer Abboud. Abboud's chapter gives a thorough overview of what a social market economy in a Ba'athist framework entailed. Aurora Sottimano elaborates on the function of the Syrian social market economy as means of ensuring stability for the regime and maintaining power, whilst implementing politically cautious reform policies. The term became an ambiguous slogan that enabled the regime to micro-manage the envisaged reforms to usher Syria into the new twenty-first century. Reformist and nationalist discourses served as the ideology behind the regime's domestic and foreign policies and provided Bashar al-Assad a narrative to justify why the Arab spring would not affect Syria. As Sottimano rightfully concludes, however, the Syrian uprising transformed Al-Assad into an "emperor without clothes" who continues to cling to an outmoded paradigm of authoritarian power and control.

The second part of the book addresses the reconstruction of the social base of the Assad regime. This part is the core of the volume with most chapters covering opposition activism, co-optation of foreign-educated Syrians and domestic reforms, volunteerism and education, politics of Islam, female citizenship and agricultural transformation. Najib Ghadbian explains that the 2011 uprising was precluded by a variety of previous opposition movements and dissident activism. Beginning with the Damascus Spring, encouraged by the inaugural speech of Bashar al-Assad in 2000 that raised expectations for genuine reform. The speech encouraged the publication of an open letter that called for the end of martial law, release of political prisoners and reduction

of the influence of security services. Political salons in Damascus were tolerated and well attended. This phase of political opposition lasted less than a year. After the crackdown of this first wave of opposition, the movement rose again between 2003 and 2005, after the issue of the *Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change*. Lastly, between 2008 and 2010 opposition movements took place mostly in form of human rights organizations led by young lawmakers and digital savvy young professionals, which saw another government crackdown on dissident movements focused on breaching the Ba'ath party political monopoly. Ghadbian then links these three phases to the uprisings of 2011 whereby the initial demands of the protesters were not to call for the fall of the regime but rather more reformist and local: to call for the release of child prisoners and end local political corruption. Chants on the streets, however, soon called for the fall of the regime, after the violent crackdown with casualties. Zintl follows up with a chapter on how foreign-educated Syrian technocrats helped create a veneer of reform by the Assad regime. It led to the creation of NGOs, previously banned in Syria, but under the strong control of the regime. The establishment of private banks, prestigious private universities, and English-language media lured highly foreign-educated Syrians back into Syria, which allowed these professionals to exercise some sort of political influence but only within the limits set by the regime. Mandy Terç analyzes volunteer campaigns and social stratification during the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's regime during the transition from a state-run socialist economy to a market-oriented social market economy. It turned young Syrian entrepreneurs from prominent wealthy families into young social engineers, very much compliant with the regime. The *Syria Trust*, the First Lady-led charity organization and largest Government-organized NGO (GONGO), played a strong role in promoting the culture of volunteerism, fund-raising and charity whilst maintaining the strict hierarchies and normative social rules of the Assad regime. The uprisings of 2011 undermined this idea of inclusiveness and showed that those with limited resources (rural non-elites) had been losing out all along and therefore rose up against the regime whilst educated urban elites stood by the regime.

The uprisings put an end to the image of Assad as a reformer and Asma al-Assad as an open-minded care-taker of the poor. Paulo Pinto's chapter on the politics of Islam under Bashar al-Assad indeed concludes that the image of a reformer was quickly crushed during the uprising of 2011, by his determination to hang onto power using all violent means possible. Despite his attempts to co-opt religious Islamic leaders and factions, the regime ultimately lost control over the religious field when Islam became one of the main discourses to mobilize opposition. The chapter by Rania Maktabi touches upon a much understudied and little understood field of study in Syria; female civil rights and citizenship laws. Constraint by a regime loyalty to orthodox clerical power structures, weak reforms took place in this field prior to the uprisings but the outcome of the civil war will have a profound, not necessarily positive,

impact for female citizenship in Syria. Myriam Ababsa's chapter details an important yet often unrecognized dimension in the decade leading to the uprisings of 2011; the impact of droughts and agrarian transformation in North East Syria. Between 2007–2009, Syria endured a long period of consecutive droughts whereby tens of thousands of farmers fled to urban areas in search of a new livelihood. Consequences on agricultural production were considerable and led to a call for aid from UN organizations to care for 300 000 families or so, who were driven out of their homes into camps around the major cities. The chapter gives a well-informed overview of the developments in the Jezira area (north east Syria between the Euphrates and the Tigris) with regard to history of agricultural reform and development policies.

The third part of this volume deals with the international political environment and regional challenges. Carsten Wieland describes the regime's policy paradox of domestic oppression and international openness. Not long before the uprising in 2011, the regime sought to connect to the global international community through initiatives in foreign policy and attempts to move out of isolation. Cautious but strategic engagement with Western government and politicians took place and Wieland gives a thorough overview of the various phases in Bashar al-Assad's rule and the characteristics of Syria's main foreign relationships. Kamel Dorai and Martine Zeuthen's chapter on the impact of Iraqi migration to Syria based on fieldwork between 2006 and 2009 is interesting in the light of the Syrian refugee crisis. The chapter concludes that Iraqi refugees felt trapped after 2011, between accelerating violence in both host society and country of origin. Valentina Napolitano concludes the third part with a chapter on Hamas' rhetoric in Palestinian Refugee camps in Syria. She concludes that the Syrian uprising undermined and destroyed the partnership between the Syrian regime and Hamas, when its leaders left Syria out of protest and settled in Gaza, Egypt and Qatar.

The final chapter by Hinnebusch and Zintl reflects on the Syrian uprising and the many developments during Bashar al-Assad's first decade in power. It casts light on the seeds of the uprising in 2011 and concludes that the reforms that were set in motion created a veneer of openness and modernity which was in fact a kind of authoritarian upgrading that quickly turned into authoritarian persistence reflected in the violent crackdown of the Syrian uprising since 2011.

The second volume focuses on transformations and changes in the role of culture, society and religion during the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's rule. Introduced by Christa Salamandra and Leif Stenberg, this volume presents a wealth of scholarship with work by seasoned scholars with decades of experience and young scholars with field experience that took place just prior to the uprisings. The writers indicate that Syria was rarely a chosen destination for researchers due to restrictions on access and the many logistical challenges to conduct fieldwork there. Much in line with the first volume, the second volume demonstrates how the regime's rhetoric of reform led many

to believe that a gradual dismantling of dictatorship was approaching and that working through institutions would render the regime responsive to real change. The volume addresses the paradoxes of hope, anticipation and eventual betrayal and grievances that were present in life in Syria prior to 2011. Exploring the space between regime support and public support, the chapters illustrate the diversity of positions of the social actors in sectors such as the arts, religion, culture and media where the paradoxes can be found. Central to understanding these transformations is what Stenberg and Salamandra call *limited autonomy*, accepted agency under the control of Bashar al-Assad reformist policies. Under this limited autonomy, hopes for greater freedoms were kept alive but when these hopes were dashed, the disappointment led to impatience and frustration, which ultimately fueled an uprising and public contestation.

In the first chapter, Max Weiss studies criticism in contemporary Syrian fiction and shows that in 2010 the content of the Syrian novels represents a transformation indicating gradual liberalization of politics. Whilst the security police, or *mukhabarat*, still terrified the daily lives of Syrians, in the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's rule, the fictionalized characters of these *shabihha* created a partial dissent towards these daily sources of fear in Syrian society. The psychological *wall of fear*, so obviously present in Syrian society where one out of four Syrians was assumed to be full or partial government informers to check upon their fellow citizens, plays a central role in the analysis in this volume. Whilst most political conversations prior to 2011 would take place at locations not overheard by the *mukhabarat*, in private kitchens, cars or gardens, the novels provided a cultural non-physical space to debate politics relatively free and without repercussions.

Salamandra observes similar transformations in the Syrian TV drama industry, where creators during the first decade of Bashar's presidency pushed the boundaries of censorship through dark comedy and social realism. She observes that many professionals in this industry had their hopes set high on the young president and believed that reforms were gradual but eminent. Syrian soap series, or *musalsalat*, have put Syria on the map of the Arab World as the center of Arab nationalism and resistance based on socialist ideals. Syrian drama distinguished themselves from the studio-based Egyptian drama with regard to on location filming, giving the shows a more realistic feel to it. The legacy of social realism and satire filtered through in the early peaceful protests against the regime, and Salamandra concludes that Syrian television drama exemplified the critical reflection by young protesters in the Syrian revolt. Donatella Della Ratta continues the writing on Syrian TV fiction, as she identifies *the whisper strategy* that guides the communication between drama directors, producers, crew, and representatives of the Assad regime and indeed the president himself and pushes for a reformist agenda. TV drama is seen as a strategic sector for conveying messages to domestic audiences and marketing and projecting a new Syrian to the outside world. The next chapter describes developments in the performing

arts. Shayna Silverstein discusses the cultural politics of Syrian folk dance during the period of social market reform. Highlighting the importance of *dabke*, Silverstein demonstrates that the *dabke* became a unifier in the Syrian revolution when protesters danced the *dabke* in public squares as a show of defiance and resistance against state domination.

The volume then turns to another sector in Syrian society, that of religion. Laura Ruiz de Elvira describes the role of Christian charities during the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's presidency. In this chapter, the study of charities provides an insight into transformations in society as well providing a method to explore the impact of the transition to a social market economic model. The chapter is empirically rich, based on in-depth ethnographic fieldwork with Christian charities in Aleppo and Damascus. Ruiz de Elvira concludes that Christian charities enjoyed privileges under Assad's rule as well as a tolerance from the regime of the tight relationships Syrian Christians tend to have with foreign organizations. The chapter that follows, by Andreas Bandak, analyzes the performance by Syrian Christians on the national stage, exemplified by an analysis of the annual Christmas concert in the national opera house in Damascus, that took place on 17 December, 2009. He extends his study with an analysis of the performances by the choir of Juwat al-Farah founded by the Greek Catholic priest Abouna Elia Zahlawi. The choir's main role was to promote a message of nationalist unity and peace in Syria, epitomized by the Christmas concert. Bandak extends his observation to another staged performance where the choir takes part in the annual *Fakhr Baladi* campaign for national pride, led by the Syrian First Lady Asma'a al-Assad. Bandak concludes that the classic analysis of support to the regime as public dissimulation and living "as if" the public revered al-Assad, as first observed by Lisa Wedeen, cannot be generalized to understand the ordinary lives in Syria before the 2011 uprising. The expressions by Christians during the annual Christmas concert and *Fakhr Baladi* are not merely staged performances but many Syrian Christians, and indeed other minorities, genuinely felt part of the nation and Bandak observed that many Christian Syrians feared a situation where the Assad regime would no longer be able to protect them.

The last two chapters of this volume focus on the Syrian *ulama* (religious scholars), economic liberalization and the transformation of Muslim organizations during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Thomas Pierret studies the economic situation of the *ulama* and their reliance on resources from the private sector. Heavy reliance on the private sector caused some clergymen to take sides with the merchant communities in Aleppo and Damascus, who favored stability and thus remained loyal to the Assad regime. The merchant communities did not want to jeopardize their business. Other religious scholars supported anti-regime protesters from the beginning of the revolt in 2011 and did not rely that much on the economic elites. Stenberg focuses on the transformation of the Shaykh Ahmed Kuftaro Foundation, one of the largest religious organizations in Syria that is linked to a branch of Sufism

of the *Naqshbandiyya* order. The chapter focuses on the religious leader Saleh Kuftaro who succeeded his father Ahmed Kuftaro in leading the organization. In 2009, Saleh Kuftaro was arrested, after the minister of religious affairs and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor issued a decree to curtail the agency of Sunni religious organizations in Syria. The decree diminished the support for the regime among many Muslim religious individuals.

These two volumes are must-reads for anyone who wants to be thoroughly informed about the seeds to the Syrian revolt in 2011 and learn about Syrian society, culture and politics during the first decade of the twenty-first century in detail. Empirically, however, both the volumes suffer from a general problem that can be found in most Syria scholarship prior to 2011 that still resonates in the current scholarship; the heavy focus and emphasis on Damascus and studies at national level. The majority of contemporary Syria scholarship has been based on fieldwork in and around Damascus and urban areas, with the exception of occasional studies carried out in Aleppo and with Bedouins in the countryside. The only chapter in these two volumes, which breaks away from the traditional focus on Damascus and urban areas, is Ababsa's work on droughts and agrarian transformation in north-eastern Syria.

Despite the focus on Damascus, the two volumes provide a good reference for policy makers and professionals engaged in discussion and debates on what should be done for peacebuilding and reconciliation in post-war Syria. The volumes successfully illustrate what is meant by the often-mentioned social market economy and the wall of fear, ever so present in daily life in Syria during this decade. It demonstrates how the reformist policies, rhetoric and narratives gave Syrians hope and how these hopes were crushed during the uprising. As the chapters in each of the volumes were initially written for a conference that took place in 2010, the volumes do not discuss extensively how Syrian civil society and culture were sustained and transformed after the uprising. For example, in the liberated opposition areas in the north and northwest of Syria, a new wave of cultural expression, grass-root civil society and governance emerged in Syria, leading to a dismantlement of the mythical wall of fear under the Assad regime. Open political debates and public meetings were suddenly possible in those areas where the regime had lost control and the extremists militias and ISIS fighters had not taken control.

Syria will never be the same again after years of war, mass killings and violence, and large scale displacement, and it is very unlikely Syria will continue to exist as a nation within the 2011 borders. New forms of local governance and authoritarianism have since emerged. However, these two books provide a good historical reference of what was in Syria and what might be done once the fighting and killing has stopped and those who can return home.

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