Support the work of the Syrian Studies Association! See page 29 for details on how to join. What is the Syrian Studies Association? How can I contribute to the newsletter? See page 40. Details of the 2011 article/chapter prize competition are on page 51.

Those of us who are madly trying to figure out what path Syria is going to take in the post-Jasmine Revolution era can benefit greatly from the activities and output of two new organizations. The Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies sponsored a one-day conference on political and economic developments during the Bashar al-Assad era in late January, which was hosted by the King Fahd Center for Middle East Studies at the University of

Letter from the President
Arkansas. The program's ten papers offered detailed surveys of internal and external affairs, from a range of different perspectives. The organizers intend to collect the proceedings into an edited volume, which looks to be not only thoroughly up to date but also comprehensive in scope.

At the end of the meeting, the executive director of SCPSS, Radwan Ziadeh, chaired a lively discussion of future initiatives that the organization might pursue. There was unanimous agreement that a second annual conference should be held in early 2012, and that the call for papers for the meeting must be disseminated as widely as possible. Annual conferences will be part of a long-term project to build up a body of scholarship on Syria that is as free as possible from any sort of ideological biases. SCPSS has already started to translate important academic books on Syria into Arabic and arrange for them to be published by reputable presses. As part of SCPSS's effort to encourage cross-language fertilization, the proceedings of the Arkansas workshop are going to come out in both English and Arabic. Further information about SCPSS is available at www.scpss.org.

Attending the conference was the director of the London-based Strategic Research and Communication Centre, Ausama Monajed. The Centre has an ambitious agenda to promote greater understanding of Syria through a combination of rigorous research and media savvy. The organization is preparing a set of policy analyses that can be forwarded to state officials and non-government organizations, and have a direct and concrete impact on public affairs. Although most of the analyses will be prepared by its own staff, proposals and submissions on the pressing problems that confront Syria today are welcomed. The Centre's informative website can be found at www.strescom.org.

Closer to home, SSA welcomes a new webmaster and fresh Newsletter and book review editors, in addition to the incoming secretary-treasurer, Zayde Antrim of Trinity College. Hilary Kalmbach of New College, Oxford, is already hard at work updating the Association's website (including, unfortunately, the somewhat dated photographs of the officers), and would be glad to hear suggestions for how to make its contents as helpful as possible to members and casual readers alike. Andrea Stanton of the University of Denver will be editing the Newsletter, while Beverly Levine of Washington University encourages graduate students who might be willing to review books to get in touch with her. Including a wide variety of voices in the pages of the Newsletter will benefit everyone.

We cannot, of course, find adequate words to thank SSA's founding webmaster, Joshua Landis, for the many years of conscientious and enthusiastic attention he devoted to creating and maintaining the site. Steve Tamari of the University of Southern Illinois, Edwardsville, deserves no less gratitude for bringing such creativity and skill to the Newsletter, making it an accessible outlet for stimulating information and insightful commentary. Geoffrey Schad played a key role in getting SSA on a firm legal and financial footing, and I very much appreciate his comradeship over the past year. Thanks to Geoffrey, the SSA reception at MESA in San Diego featured lots of tasty food and plenty of seating for those of us who had the pleasure of witnessing Peter Sluglett's presentation to Abdel-Karim Rafeq of a festschrift to honor Professor Rafeq's unmatched contributions to Syrian studies.

Fred Lawson, 25 March 2011
News of the Association

Annual Meeting Yields New Board Members and Award Winners

The Syrian Studies Association held its annual meeting on 18 November 2010 in San Diego, CA in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association. President of the Association Fred Lawson presided.

President Lawson welcomed the membership, listed the Association events at MESA, and reported that after much work the Association’s bank accounts were now consolidated. He specifically thanked past Secretary-Treasurers Sherry Vatter and Annie Higgins for having assumed the burden of carrying SSA’s finances in accounts for which they were personally liable. Lawson also announced that after much investigation and correspondence, the Internal Revenue Service had confirmed SSA’s status as a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt entity.

Lawson also announced that the Academic Travel Abroad organization had joined SSA as an institutional member.

Election Results

President Lawson announced that SSA members had elected Zayde Antrim (Trinity College) as SSA Secretary-Treasurer, and Heghnar Watenpaugh (University of California-Davis) as Member at Large of the SSA Board.

Zayde Antrim is Assistant Professor of History and International Studies at Trinity College. She received a BA in History from the University of Virginia in 1995, an MPhil in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from Oxford in 1997, and a PhD in History from Harvard in 2005. Her forthcoming book, Routes and Realms: The Power of Place in the Early Islamic World, focuses on the relationship between geographical texts, political power, and religious belonging among Muslims between the 9th and 11th centuries. Her doctoral dissertation, “Place and Belonging in Medieval Syria, 6th/12th to 8th/14th Centuries,” won the Bruce D. Craig Prize for Mamluk Studies in 2005. She has published articles in the International Journal of Middle East Studies, the Mamluk Studies Review, and al-Masāq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean. Other research and teaching interests include gender and sexuality, cartography, and literature in Middle Eastern history.

Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of California, Davis. She publishes on Islamic urbanism, issues of gender and space, as well as heritage in modern Middle Eastern societies. Her book, The Image of an Ottoman City: Imperial Architecture and Urban Experience in Aleppo in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (2004) received the Spiro Kostof Book Award from the Society of Architectural Historians. She has also received the Best Article Award from the Syrian Studies Association in 2007 for her essay, “Deviant Dervishes,” published in the International Journal of Middle East Studies. She has received fellowships from the J. Paul Getty Trust, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Fulbright-Hays, Social Science Research Council, the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art, and the Office of the President of the University of California. She held the Aga Khan Career Development Professorship at the

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Scholarship on the Kurds in Syria: A History and State of the Art Assessment

Jordi Tejel

Northern Syria with major Kurdish population centers of the northeast corner of the country shaded in. From Jordi Tejel, Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society (Routledge, 2009).

The Syrian Kurds are rarely featured in the media. This is also true of academic research dedicated to Syria. Indeed, the Kurdish factor in Syria has been a marginal issue in classic works about the French Mandate in the Levant (Longrigg 1958; Khoury 1987) and the period of independence (Raymond 1980; Hopwood 1988). Moreover, most works on the Kurdish question focus on the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Iraq and, to a lesser degree, Iran. Therefore, for a long period, the Kurdish features in Syria have remained at the margins of social science. Despite increasing interest in the Kurdish question in Syria since the riots of 2004 in Qamishli, there remains a dearth of anthropological, historical and political perspectives on the subject. Many factors are responsible for these gaps in information.

In the first place, the emerging academic research on Kurds in Syria was directly related to the French Mandate (1920–46) in the Levant. When the French occupied Damascus in 1920, the colonial power established diverse institutions that were more or less linked with the Serai. One of these institutions was the French Institute in Damascus (FID), founded in 1922.1 In its beginnings, the FID resembled the classic Orientalist institutes, considered by the critics as “obsolete.” When Robert Montagne became the director of the

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Studying the Kurds in Syria: Challenges and Opportunities

Robert Lowe

The Kurds in Syria offer a fascinating and fertile area for study. It is well known that these people are less well known. This lack of knowledge and the rich complexity of Kurdish society, politics, identity, culture and history make research in this area especially rewarding. The huge problems and deprivation faced by many Kurds in Syria make it particularly urgent to provide greater exposure and improved understanding of contemporary issues. The significance of the additional trans-state dimension of Kurdishness offers a further dynamic aspect for exploration and also takes the researcher into the broader Kurdish milieu.

This article will explore some of the challenges and opportunities facing research on the Kurds in Syria. The observations apply to contemporary political and social studies and are based on personal experiences during six years of intermittent and modest research on the subject.

The lack of existing research and expertise has been a major difficulty for the newcomer to this field. When I first met Kurds in Syria in 2003 I could find very little useful published material relating to them. Neither Syrian nor Kurdish specialists have ever focussed seriously on the Kurds in Syria. Leading names in both areas would remark on the pressing need to start filling the gap. This has much improved by 2010 with the publication of valuable books by Jordi Tejel and Harriet Montgomery and there is now a much stronger body of scholars conducting research, including also Julie Gauthier, Eva Savelsberg, Seda Altug and others. Despite this there still remains a large lacuna in Kurdish studies in Syria, as Jordi Tejel explains elsewhere in this Newsletter in his thorough examination of the existing scholarship.

Primary data is also problematic. Most contemporary political research on Syria faces great constraints but it is especially difficult to acquire data which specifically concerns the Kurdish population. The Syrian state’s deep sensitivities about internal Kurdish matters mean that it declines to either keep or share statistical information in areas including demography, statelessness, migration, education, employment and access to state services. It is very hard, and indeed dangerous, for Kurdish political parties or human rights, social and cultural movements to produce such data but these groups have greatly increased the volume and availability of their materials on human rights, political and cultural issues, mostly through the internet. There is now a considerable number of Syrian Kurdish-run political and human rights websites which are valuable sources for researchers. Many of these are operated from Europe.

The reliability of sources needs to be treated with caution. The Syrian government is, of course, unreliable, although its information (or more often the lack of it) on domestic

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Ten Years of Bashar al-Asad and
No Compromise with the Kurds
Eva Savelsberg and Siamend Hajo

In July 2000, 34-year-old Bashar al-Asad was sworn in as the new Syrian head of state. His inauguration raised hopes for change in the West and beyond. Admittedly, as the son of the deceased Hafiz al-Asad, he stood for continuity, but at the same time, the young London-educated technocrat was nevertheless considered capable of opening up the country. These hopes remain unfulfilled, for Arab as well as for the Kurdish population of the country.

Since January 2009, there were at least 283 cases in which Kurds were detained for political reasons. The charges and convictions registered since 2009 primarily invoke Article 288 (joining a political or social association of an international character without prior approval), Article 307 (inciting racial and sectarian strife) and Article 336 of the Criminal Code (participation in demonstrations). Sympathizers and members of Syrian-Kurdish parties are frequently charged on the basis of Article 288. These parties are still illegal, although all they demand are reforms within the framework of the existing system. Torture while in custody is routine—since 2009, a total of 49 Kurdish cases have been reported; at least one person

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Government agriculture office smolders in the wake of the Qamishli protests in the Kurdish town of Amude. Similar protests occurred in Afrin and Ras al Ayn.
Sufism among the Kurds in Syria

Paulo Pinto

The Kurdish town of Afrin, located in the Kurd Dagh (Mountain of the Kurds), in the northern Aleppo province. It is the most important Kurdish town in that area and an important center of olive production.

Sufism has a pervasive presence in the religious and cultural life of the Kurds in Syria. The vast majority of them are Sunni Muslims and their Islamic practices and beliefs are marked by a strong influence of Sufism. Many Kurdish Sufi shaykhs and their disciples see Sufism as a Kurdish “school” (madhhab) of Islam, claiming that ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jailani, the founding saint of all Sufi orders, was a Kurd. The Sufi communities in the Kurdish areas of Syria usually use Kurmanci as a liturgical language and incorporate several Kurdish cultural elements, such as songs, music and dances, in the performance of their religious rituals.

Sufi communities are spread throughout the rural areas of the Northern Syria, such as the Kurd Dagh, as well as among the large Kurdish population of Syria’s main urban centers, such as Aleppo. The main Sufi orders among the Kurds are the Qadiriyya and the Naqshbandiyya. Nevertheless, in both the Kurd Dagh and the Kurdish community of Aleppo, the Rifa‘iyya also has a strong presence.

The rural Sufi zawiyas (lodges) usually accompany the migration of their members to Aleppo, creating branches or, simply relocating the whole community there. These zawiyas

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Book Review

A Work of Reference on Syria’s Kurds


Boris James

A sigh of relief. What better way to pay tribute to a new book? At last we have found a work of reference on the Kurds of Syria. Far away from the often too global approaches that abandoned the Syrian space, and far also from the studies that focused exclusively on the humanitarian dimension of the question, the author of this monograph, equipped with a strong theoretical background in anthropology and political science, traces the course of an unknown history. This way he ceases the modality of emergence of the Kurdish nationalist mobilization in Syria. The multiplicity of views and approaches allows the author to present complex and sometimes paradoxical historical moments and evolutions, avoiding any rash judgment or essentialism. Jordi Tejel’s work is born of a manifold acknowledgement.

The “Kurdish question” in Syria has always been a marginal issue in contemporary studies. Nevertheless it bears a fundamental importance as the events of this last decade have show. The riots of 2004 have been indeed a violent reminder of its importance. As Tejel indicates, they signaled the transition of the long concealed Kurdish movement to visibility. The author tries to understand this transformation from a long term historical perspective, and therefore returns to the period of the French mandate in Syria—a period that was subject of a former book of his (Tejel 2007). This study is not only a study of the Kurds, but also of an ill-known part of Syria’s history, and permits a review of the scientific approaches of the social and political organization of this country.

Although the book has a chronological outline, at every historical step, and especially in the last four chapters, the complex organization of the Kurdish political field in Syria, the transnational dimension of the question, the handling modes of the Syrian State and the foundation of the Baathist system are all scrutinized. It would be an illusion to believe we could summarize a very dense and accurate book. We will only describe what typifies for the subject, the different periods presented by the author.

The mandate period (1923-1946) is characterized by the absence of a united and identifiable Kurdish group, and by a quadrangular political game between the French Mandate authority, the national bloc (the Arab nationalists), the notables of the ethno-religious minorities and the Kurds at the margin. The Kurds who weren’t granted the same status of autonomy as the other Syrian minorities, became involved in two different movements: one a collaboration with the Christians of Djezireh for recognition of the region’s autonomy. The other, more cultural and based in Damascus and Beirut, surrounded the Kurdish movement of Turkey in exile: the Xoybûn. The ambiguous attitude of France, the internal divisions of the Kurdish notables and tribes, and the distrust of the other minorities and the national bloc prevented the implementation of

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Book Review

Syria’s Undocumented Kurds


Ahmet Serdar Akturk

In *Suriye’nin Kimliksizleri Kürtler (Syria’s Undocumented Kurds),* Nevzat Bingöl aims to introduce Turkish readers to the Kurds of Syria. Bingöl is a Kurdish journalist from Turkey’s Kurdish Southeast. His earlier publications deal with the Kurdish question in Turkey and the war in Iraq from a journalist’s point of view. In this book, Bingöl tackles the Kurds of Syria who, he argues, are not well known in Turkey. He first focuses on Syrian Kurdish political parties by examining their ideas, their relations with other states and other Kurdish parties - both in Syria and in neighboring countries -, and their methods of political struggle. Second, he presents the citizenship problems that Syrian Kurds have been facing since the “exceptional” census of 1962. The book is mostly based on the author’s extensive interviews with local people, leading Kurdish politicians in Syria, and reports prepared by organizations such as the Syrian Human Rights Association, the Syrian branch of International Human Rights Watch, and the German Federal Parliament.

The author begins with a discussion of the March 2004 riots and reprisals in Qamishli, which brought the Kurds of Syria to the world’s attention. Proving the saying “soccer is war,” the riots began in the Kurdish city of Qamishli in March 2004 during a match between the city team and an Arab team from the nearby city of Deir ez-Zor, and led to a Kurdish uprising against the Syrian regime. The author was in Qamishli at the time, undertaking a yearlong research trip to write this book. He presents multiple and sometimes conflicting theories to explain what happened in Qamishli in March 2004. Throughout the work, Bingöl places those theories in the context of both Syrian national politics and the larger context of regional politics following the invasion of Iraq by the coalition forces in 2003. He also argues that the incidents united the fragmented Kurdish political parties of Syria that at the time lacked popular support among the Syrian Kurds.

As a Kurdish journalist from Turkey, Nevzat Bingöl also questions the indifference of Kurds in Turkey to the Qamishli riots and the heavy-handed Syrian response, especially those in the adjoining Turkish town of Nusaybin, many of whom have relatives across the border in Qamishli. Throughout the book he emphasizes the significance of Syrian Kurdistan as a center of “Kurdish enlightenment” and a “shelter” for Kurdish intellectuals escaping the persecutions in Turkey following the 1925 Shaykh Said Rebellion, the 1931 Ararat Rebellion, and the 1980 military takeover. Comparing the Kurds of Syria to those of Turkey, Bingöl claims that the level of self-consciousness is higher among Syrian Kurds since there is not a sharp urban-rural division in Syrian Kurdistan.

As Bingöl’s title implies, one of the major goals of the book is to draw attention to the Syrian Kurds’ problem of citizenship status. As a result of an “exceptional” census

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Book Review

Syrian Jewry in Transition, 1840–1880


Ari Ariel

First published in Hebrew in 2003 under the title *Bi-sefinot shel esh la-ma’arav: temurot be-yahadut suryah bi-te’kufat ha-reformot ha-omaniyot, 1840-1880* (By Ships of Fire to the West: Changes in Syrian Jewry during the Period of Ottoman Reforms), Harel’s book is a detailed study of the Jewish communities of Aleppo and Damascus during the Tanzimat era and an attempt to explain how changes during this era eventually affect Syrian Jewish emigration. Though acutely aware of the differences between these two communities (for example, the presence of a relatively large Jewish middle class in Aleppo), Harel lays out a general historical trajectory that is applicable to both: the return of Ottoman sovereignty to Syria after a decade of Egyptian rule, western penetration, economic crisis, and the imposition of reforms that were intended to strengthen Ottoman central authority. Part of these reforms was to be the cancellation of the *dhimmi* status of non-Muslims and the creation of a universal Ottoman subject. As a result, the Tanzimat is often viewed as an emancipatory gesture intended to better the lives of Jews and Christians in the Empire.

The reforms, however, were problematic for non-Muslims. They could not be implemented fully, to some extent due to the resistance of Syrian Muslims, who Harel says were insulted by the idea of equality with Jews and Christians. At times he goes too far, even describing the Muslim public as “fanatically anti-*dhimmi*”. His focus on the religious component of opposition to reform leads him to almost ignore the serious political challenge that the Tanzimat posed to the power of the local elite, which naturally resisted any attempt to re-impose Ottoman authority at its expense. From this perspective, insisting on the inferiority of non-Muslims can be understood as a demand to maintain “traditional” political structures that allowed for a high degree of local self-governance. Harel himself notes that the Jewish religious elite often resisted the very reform measures intended to emancipate their community because these encroached on their traditional autonomy and led to increasing Ottoman interference in Jewish communal matters. Moreover, in addition to equal rights, the reforms would have meant equal obligations to the state. Thus, post Tanzimat, military service should have theoretically been compulsory for all Ottoman subjects, a requirement consistently opposed by Jewish communities throughout the empire. Herein lies the basic contradiction faced by non-Muslims during the reform era: although Jews and Christians obviously favored measures that would give them equal rights to Muslims, they did not want to give up the special privileges allowed to them by the millet system.

As important as changes originating from the Ottoman government were transitions

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Book Review

Postcards from Damascus


Anneka Lenssen

*Souvenir de Damas / Souvenir from Damascus* offers a handy compendium of the images European visitors to the city produced from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. Its authors, Hussein I. El-Mudarris and Olivier Salmon, are scholars based in Aleppo. Over the last three years, they have published a series of books devoted to literary and artistic representations of Syria as well as organized numerous exhibitions of print ephemera (see their website www.aleppoart.com for a collection of images and video, or to order their books). This particular volume pairs good quality reproductions of 200 photographic postcards from El-Mudarris’s personal collection with pieces of historical French and English-language travel writing about Damascus. In other words, it brings together the two types of formalized encounters with the city of Damascus that characterized tourism in the East in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The postcards primarily document sights from the itinerary that any European traveler bent on experiencing the Muslim cities of the East would have undertaken: long-distance views of Damascus from the overland approach, the hammam, the bazaar, the Serail and Parliament building, Damascene house interiors, mosques and churches, gardens, and other such typologies. These are accompanied by texts snipped from the prose of twenty different authors, from Alphonse de Lamartine to Freya Stark. If El-Mudarris and Salmon intend the postcards to serve as colorful symbols of appreciative contact between East and West, and the texts to document the ways in which Damascus has served as a muse for generations of lettered visitors, then the pairing of the two also demonstrates just how powerfully the body of texts we call now Orientalist still work in marking, or producing, the very sites that were naturalized as “sights” in the (subsequent) mass production of postcard souvenirs.

*Souvenir* is aptly named, for its brief prefatory materials key the book to a desire for the experience of authenticity and immediacy that has been lost to the travelers of the twenty-first century. Two prefaces by Mahat Farah El-Khoury (one in French and another in Arabic) emphasize the everlastingness of the city’s charm, and the importance of recuperating it from the collective memory of its beholders. The editors’ own introduction opens with poetic verse about Damascus, written in French. These lines make the white surface of the carte postale into an immanent landscape from which unfolds a “forest of ink” as green as the Ghouta. Indeed, the notion that the postcard may serve to record changes in social structure is almost entirely subsumed to a reverence for the

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Book Review

Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon


Mat Zalk

John Chalcraft’s *The Invisible Cage* portrays the human story behind the vast migration of Syrian workers to and from Lebanon during the past six decades. Rejecting two paradigms through which social scientists have traditionally viewed labor migration—Marxism and traditional labor economics—Chalcraft convincingly argues that a more complex web of hegemonic factors have led Syrians to seek work in Lebanon. Political ties between Lebanon and Syria, mutual economic dependence, and factors of class and societal structure combined to create individual stories that have been overlooked in explaining migration in the past. *The Invisible Cage*, drawing on extensive personal interviews, explores some of these stories, successfully portraying a human aspect and undermining (often) politically motivated immigration statistics that have long been the subject of debate. By shedding light upon the hegemonic controls that led Syrians to work in, and sometimes flee from, Lebanon since the 1950s, Chalcraft explores a largely unexplored history.

The book’s introduction outlines four reasons why the story of Syrian labor migration to Lebanon differs from the usual pattern. First, owing to liberal migration laws between the two countries and a lower cost of living in Syria, a majority of guest workers returned to Syria after completing periods of work in Lebanon. In other words, a revolving door that allowed Syrian laborers easy entry and exit to and from Lebanon made permanent settlement in Lebanon unlikely. Second, Syrian state support of agriculture meant that unpaid female domestic and farm labor created an important incentive for women to remain in Syria and continue to engage in productive work. Third, the Syrian military had a “major and sometimes heavy-handed military presence (during 1976 to 2005)” in Lebanon, even though it was the poorer, labor-sending country. Finally, the Lebanese labor market was relatively free, meaning it relied on personal relationships rather than employment agencies and rigid contracts. In the five chapters that follow, Chalcraft elaborates on these four points, arguing that they collectively formed hegemonic control over Syrian labor migration to Lebanon.

Relying mainly on secondary sources, Chalcraft describes in great detail the historical factors that led to Syrian outmigration until the end of World War II. The Ottoman Land Codes of the mid 19th-century worked toward the prohibition of community ownership of farmland and grazing rights, and required individuals to own precisely delineated properties. This created a land-owning class that made it possible to separate farmers from their means of subsistence, and instituted a dependence on a cash economy that drove Syrians to seek work abroad. Further, the move away from shared community labor

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Book Review

Money and Power in Islamic Syria


Nadia Tahboub

This book is concerned with the most complex and vague period in the history of early Islamic Syria—that is, the late antique-early Islamic transitional period (7th-8th CE), a period that has been understood as representing a fundamental—even a complete—break from the political, socio-economic, and cultural forms of late antiquity. It contains nine mind-stimulating articles that tackle some of the most controversial issues of this period with professional and careful scrutiny of both the archaeological and textual material.

The introduction by John Haldon (pp. 1-20) offers a brief overview with swift and frequent highlights of controversial historical events and debates that refresh the reader’s memory. His introduction also emphasizes the difficulties that researchers into the late antique/early Islamic transitional period face regarding the complex relationship of evidence with its inseparable dimensions: textual, archaeological and numismatic.

In “Coinage and the Economy of Syria-Palestine in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries CE” (pp. 21-44) Alan Walmsley sheds new light on some major changes to the socio-economic conditions of Syria Bilād al-Shām stressing the important usage of evidence totality. Using a cross-disciplinary analytical approach, Walmsley’s conclusions are drawn from comparing and analyzing the numismatic evidence of four sites: the identified mints; coin types and chronology; minting authorities; and coin distribution with other archaeological data.

In “Christian Communities in Early Islamic Syria and Northern Jazira: the Dynamics of Adaptation” (pp. 45-56), Stephen Humphreys examines the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the Christian population, who were the majority in Bilād al-Shām under the Umayyads. Humphreys’ “mixed bag” of evidence (pp. 54) provides researchers with possibilities and threads of evidence on the conditions and events that might have played a major role in determining the slow-waning fate of the social and economic foundations of Christian life in early Islamic Syria.

In “Administering the Early Islamic Empire: Insights from the Papyri” (pp. 57-74) Arietta Papaconstantinou reconsiders the documentary evidence on the administrative policy of the early Islamic Empire, namely the 7th century between the period of the early caliphate and the end of Muʾāwiya’s reign. The well-scrutinized literary evidence on early Islamic

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Book Review

Syria and Iran in the 1980s


Mohammad Ataie

The decade of the 1980s, the formative years of the Iranian-Syrian alliance, was the most crucial and decisive stage of the Damascus-Tehran relationship. Rapid developments in bilateral ties, grave regional developments such as the Iran-Iraq war and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and a fierce political factionalism inside the Islamic Republic which greatly impacted Iranian foreign policy, makes this period stand out in the 30 year-old alliance.

This alliance, and its regional ramifications for Lebanon and Iraq, has been subjected to extensive academic research and journalistic writings. However, an in-depth analysis based on primary sources, which investigates the origins of Syrian-Iranian relations in the formative 1980s, has been absent. Jubin Goodarzi’s Syria and Iran is a response to this void.

The 1980s was not only the period of alliance formation. It also marked the most difficult and complicated stage of the newly created Syrian-Iranian axis. Between 1985 and 1988, major tensions between Damascus and Tehran over the continuation of the Iran-Iraq war, the Islamic Republic’s policy in Lebanon, the Camp Wars, and Amal-Hezbollah rivalries put the alliance to a difficult test. By focusing on a critical stage of Iranian-Syrian relations, Syria and Iran provides the reader with a meticulous chronology and an in-depth analysis of the origin of the two countries’ relations from the 1979 Iranian revolution to end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988.

Goodarzi is trying to shed light on the nature of the contradiction and differences that surfaced between the two regimes, and so he seeks to answer a central question: how the relationship was able to survive all the divergences and conflicts of interest and turned into a lasting alliance that has affected Middle Eastern politics for three decades. To address this, he has used a wide range of Arabic, English, French and Persian newspaper archives to render a detailed story of developments during this period.

Goodarzi distinguishes three phases in the evolution of the alliance between Damascus and Tehran and explains their significance in terms of their effect on bilateral relations and their regional implications. The first phase is the 1979-82 emergence of the alliance; the second phase is 1982-85, a period of achievements in, and limits to, the Syrian-Iranian relationship; and the third phase covers 1985 to the summer of 1988, when the Iraq-Iran war ended. The chapter dealing with this period demonstrates how the partnership between the two countries was able to survive numerous tensions it faced by both the Iran-Iraq War and developments in Lebanon. The author approaches these three stages by emphasizing the inter-connection of regional developments. For example, he relates the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon to the Iranian achievements on the war front against Iraq and explains its significance for the consolidation of the Tehran-Damascus axis.

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Syria and Iran

Hence, he discusses the decisions that were made in 1982 in Damascus, Baghdad, Tel Aviv and Tehran to show how events on the Iran-Iraq war front and the Islamic Republic’s recapturing the invaded territories in the spring of 1982 affected the timing of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (pp. 59-67).

Goodarzi bases his findings on books, official government statements, periodicals and newspapers. Through extensive research and analysis, he tries to put various pieces, accounts, interviews and articles from such sources together “to shed new light on linkages between major events and crucial decisions that were made in Tehran and Damascus” (p.6). However, this has not been an easy job.

Since the relationship between Damascus and Tehran has always been covered in extreme secrecy, most accounts in the newspapers and magazines on bilateral talks are either inaccurate or deal only with the formalities of the bilateral relations. This has complicated Goodarzi’s attempt to provide an accurate picture of the nature of the ties between the Islamic Republic and Ba’thist Syria. Consequently many accounts in the book concerning communications and decisions made between Iranian and Syrian officials are based on speculation.

Interviewing figures who have been part of the formation of the Iranian-Syrian axis could have filled this void; however, Goodarzi describes Syrian and Iranian officials as inaccessible (p.4). This has been despite the fact that several key people who played a significant role in the relationship and many others who have been involved in different stages of relations in Syria, Lebanon and Iran have been approachable for interviews on the subject. Sheikh Sobhi Tofeili, the first secretary general of Hezbollah, Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, the former ambAsador to Damascus, who played a pivotal role in creating the ties between Tehran and Damascus in the 1980s, Mahmoud Hashemi Rafsanjani who was in charge of the Syrian and Lebanese files at the Iranian foreign ministry from 1980 till 2001, Riffat al-Asad, the influential figure in the Ba’ath regime in Syria till 1984 and Abdul Halim Khaddam, the Syrian former vice president who had fled from the country in 2005, are examples among many other figures that could have been approached for such a scholarly work.

Another weakness of the book is that the author’s main emphasis is on “the output and policies that emerged from the black box of Syrian-Iranian decision making” (p. 6) rather than focusing on the influence of domestic politics on foreign policy decision making inside both regimes. As a result, the book’s narrative is mostly limited to the official level of the alliance. This focus on the outputs has downplayed the significance of factionalism inside the Islamic Republic, during different stages of power struggle between 1979-90, on the international role of the revolution and its ramifications for the Islamic Republic’s ties with Syria and its role in Lebanon.

For instance, while discussing “the new Iranian foreign policy and the Syrian response” between 1979-80, (p.p. 20-23) there is no allusion to the first revolutionary effort to post

(Continued on page 16)
Iranian volunteers to Southern Lebanon in early 1980 which was a significant event in the triangular relations of Iran, Syria and Lebanon. Another example is the ties between the Office of Freedom Movements, which was under the auspices of the radical faction inside the Islamic Republic, and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. This issue remained a thorny matter in the bilateral ties till the mid-1980s.

As far as the Syrian politics is concerned, political factionalism and its role in the foreign policy was much less salient under Hafez al-Asad. Goodarzi considers this as a non-issue in his analysis. However, one would still wonder if the book included a research on the internal rivalries and disagreements in Syria under the President Hafez al-Asad, some basic assumptions of the book would change or not. For instance, discussing the religious ties between the ‘Alawi regime and the Shi‘ite clerics in Iran, the books assumes that “the religious element has not been a determining factor and has had little if any salience” (p. xiv) in the relationship. In all, the book’s focus on the formative years of the 1980s makes it a unique work and fundamental to understanding the nature of the relationship of the two regimes. As the author puts forward “if one understand the period between 1979 and 1988 well, one then can more easily comprehend and decipher how the partnership has evolved since then” (p. xii). However, the work needs to be complemented by other research that is based on primary sources and interviews and investigates the Islamic Republic-Ba‘thist Syria alliance through the factionalisms inside the two regimes.

Notes

1. The author has interviewed for this work, the former Iranian president Abolhassan Bani-Sadr and the former US assistant secretary of state in the 1980s, Richard Murphy.

2. Dispatching the volunteers was undertaken by radicals to defy the moderate foreign policy of the Bazargan government. (see: an-Nahar, 1979/12/08& 1979/12/10; Ettela‘at, 1358/09/27- 1979/10/19& 1358/10/03- 1979/12/24).


4. At the time, some top Iranian officials, including the former AmbAsador Mohtashami-pour saw the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 as a direct response to Iranian achievements in the war front against Iraq (author’s interview with Ali Akbar Mohtashami-pour, Tehran, 2010/07/01).

5. Mohammed Nassif, whose sobriquet is Abu Wael, is one of the most prominent ‘Alawi figures in Syria. He has been in charge of the Iranian file as well as the Iraqi and Lebanese files for more than three decades and due to his unique relations with Hafez al-Asad has had much leverage over internal and external matters in Syria.

6. This is based on my interviews with several Iranian officials including Mohammad Irani, Tehran, 2010/01/23 and Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, Tehran, 2010/07/01.

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News


Dissertation and Article Prizes

The Association awarded prizes for the best doctoral dissertation and best article. Peter Sluglett announced that the thesis winner was Benjamin White (pictured above right with Sluglett), Oxford University, currently at the University of Birmingham, for his December 2008 dissertation “The nation-state form and the emergence of ‘minorities’ in French mandate Syria, 1919-1939.”

Andrea Stanton announced that the article prize was shared. The article joint winners were Kevin W. Martin (pictured above), Indiana University, Bloomington for “Presenting the ‘True Face of Syria’ to the World: Urban Disorder and Civilizational Anxieties at the First Damascus International Exposition,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010), 391-411, and Thomas Pierret (pictured above right), Postdoctoral Fellow, Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin, and Kjetil Selvik, Assistant Professor in the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo, for “Limits of ‘Authoritarian Upgrading’ in Syria: Private Welfare, Islamic Charities and the Rise of the Zayd Movement,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009), 595-614.

The prize committee will award a prize for best article or book chapter published in an edited collection in 2011. Articles and chapters published between August 2010 and September 2011 are eligible. Submissions in languages other than English are welcomed; all submissions should be sent electronically. The deadline for submissions is September 1, 2011. Steve Tamari will chair the prize committee; please send submissions to him at: stamari@siue.edu. Winners will be announced at the SSA Annual Meeting in November 2011.

The meeting adjourned so members could attend the reception honoring Dr. Abdul-Karim Rafeq (pictured with Peter Sluglett) and Brill’s recent publication of *Syria and Bilad al-Sham Under Ottoman Rule: Essays in Honor of Abdul-Karim Rafeq*, edited by Peter Sluglett and Stefan Weber. The reception drew a sizeable crowd, who listened intently to Rafeq’s comments on the evolution of Ottoman studies in the past generation and on the numerous arenas for future research.
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FID in 1930, he tried to obtain scientific and financial autonomy for the FID from the mandatory authorities. Moreover, he gave prominence to contemporary dynamics of the Syrian society in order to assure the viability of a modern state (Métral 2004: 217–34). Accordingly, he asked Pierre Rondot and Roger Lescot, two officers but also young scholars, to undertake contemporary studies on Kurds and other Syrian minorities.


In 1936, Lescot started his fieldwork in Northern Syria among Kurdish Yazidis but his thesis was only published in 1975 (Lescot 1975). In the face of an anti-French movement in the Kurd Dagh, Lescot produced a short monograph about the murud movement (Lescot 1940/1988: 101–26), which up today is the only comprehensive study about this social-religious movement. He also worked on the translation of Kurdish stories (Lescot 1940; 1942) and on the elaboration of a Kurdish grammar, which for political reasons related to the World War II and the end of the Mandate was published in 1991.

If their research had a solid basis, Rondot and Lescot were more than solely French orientalists dealing with Kurdish affairs. Today, we know that Rondot and Lescot went beyond the parameters of their scientific mission giving precious assistance to the Kurdish intellectuals, especially Jaladat and Kamuran Badirkhan, who had sought refuge in the Levant after the foundation of the Turkish republic in 1923. At the beginning, the Badirkhan brothers were simply “informers” for Rondot. However, from 1932 onwards, Rondot and Lescot became at once observers of, and participants in, the emerging Kurdish cultural movement in the Kurmanji dialect. Thus, for instance, Pierre Rondot worked, with Montagne’s approval, in collaboration with Jaladat Badirkhan on the correction and supervision of the first Kurdish journal in Syria, Hawar (“The Call,” 1932–43). As for Roger Lescot, he collaborated with Kamuran Badirkhan in the drafting of a Kurdish/French dictionary and participated actively in the Kurdish cultural movement, publishing numerous articles in Hawar and Roja Nû (“The New Day,” 1943–46), translating proverbs, stories, and legends. Thus, relations between French orientalists and Kurdish intellectuals evolved eventually, though not without ambiguity, toward friendship and intellectual complicity. Nevertheless, given that the French Mandate in the Levant was strongly linked to the presence of the French in the region, the post-mandate viability of the academic research on Kurds in the independent Syria was in jeopardy.
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The Years of “Silence”

The departure of French troops from Syria in 1946 opened the way to a period of social, economic, and political upheaval, which would continue unchecked for nearly two decades. The Kurds, like all other segments of Syrian society, actively participated in these social and political changes including the agricultural “miracle” of the Upper Jazira and the expansion of the Syrian Communist Party. In spite of these achievements, the Kurds remained absent from scholarly production.

On the one hand, scholars—and Syrian elites more generally—considered Syrian Kurds as both a group that could be easily assimilated into an Arab majority environment, and as a peripheral population which played only a marginal role in the evolution of contemporary Syria in contrast to other, more “compact minorities” such as the Druze and the Alawites (Hourani 1947). Thus, if some foreign geographers studied the “miracle” of Upper Jazira, the “Kurdish” element of this region was completely neglected (Gibert and Févret 1953: 1–15/83–100). Also, the lack of a strong political movement was considered proof that Kurdish “identity demands” in Syria were only a reflection of desires of the Kurdish elite (notables and landowners) due to their loss of power in the face of the socio-economic transformations of the country.

On the other hand, the focus of historians and political scientists on the authoritative role of the state and the ruling family; Arab nationalism; the position of Syria in an international context marked by the Cold War; and the Arab-Israeli conflict attracted the attention of most researchers. As for Syrian scholars and intellectuals, “identity” issues were seen as problematic. In the context of the rise of Pan-Arabism and the conflict with Israel, they were afraid that the study of the Kurdish identity could bring about “political” endeavours by “domestic” and “foreign” enemies.

One can mention other obstacles to the study of the Kurds in Syria in contemporary Syria. Since the 1963 military coup, Syria has been either a “closed terrain” or under heavy surveillance, offering almost no possibility to the researchers to consult archival material. Finally, independent Syrian scholars like Abdullah Hanna have been more concerned with class and subaltern issues (Hanna 1975/8; 2003; 2007) than with “particularist” concerns.

In the face of these dynamics and material constraints, only dissident researchers in exile wrote about Kurds in Syria. The most important author for a long period has been Ismet Cheriff Vanly, a Syrian Kurd who established himself in Switzerland in 1948. Founder of a number of Kurdish committees in exile and the representative in Europe of Mustafa Barzani, leader of the Kurdish revolt (1961–70) in Northern Iraq, Vanly’s works on Kurds in Syria are clearly biased in favour of the Kurds. Between 1966 and 1968, he published several pamphlets in several languages to “break the silence” around the Kurdish issue in Syria and to specifically denounce: 1) the special census of 1962 which resulted in

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stripping Syrian citizenship from around 120,000 Kurds; and 2) “the Arab belt” (al-Hizam al-Arabi) plan adopted in 1965, which sought to deport the Kurdish peasants living on a strip of land 15 kilometres deep, along the Turkish and Iraqi borders, to the south of the Jazira and replace them with Arab settlers in order to “save Arabism in Jazira” (Vanly 1968; 1968b).

Thanks to his contacts in Syria and Lebanon, Vanly was certainly aware of the state’s policies regarding the Kurds. Nevertheless, his main concerns were political. On the one hand, Vanly contested official propaganda and sought to prove that Kurds were not “foreigners” in the Syrian lands. On the other hand, Vanly advertised Ba’thist human rights violations in Syria (Vanly 1978: 307–19). The picture of Asad’s regime treatment of the Kurds changed, however, in his last published piece on this issue (1992) since both the Syrian government and Vanly maintained good relations with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) at that time. While the author continued to denounce past policies, particularly the special census and the “Arab belt,” Vanly highlighted in his post-script “the new developments in the situation of the Kurds in Syria since May 1990” for the collaboration between Damascus and the PKK strengthened dramatically (Vanly 1992: 168–70). Nevertheless, Vanly neglected the daily life of Syrian Kurds and their strategies of covert resistance.

The “Discovery” of the Kurds in Syria during the 1990s

The historiography of the contemporary period presents a somewhat uneven picture as far as the Kurds are concerned. Fieldwork in Syria became more accessible in the 1990s, giving way to anthropological research about the role and features of Kurdish shaykhs, especially Shaykh Kuftaru and Muhammad Sa’id Ramadan al-Buti, in Syria (Böttcher 1998: 125–40; Christmann 1998: 149–69; Christman 1998b; Christmann 2007: 421–7; Stenberg 1999: 101–16; 2005: 68–91; 2007: 365–77). Those works though very valuable don’t pay attention to the Kurdish issue in Syria but focus on the ways in which Sufi brotherhoods in Syria have responded to the challenges of modernity in general and to relations between Sufis and the Syrian regime more specifically.

More recently, Paulo Pinto has tackled not only the importance of Sufism among the Kurds in Syria, but also has offered a fascinating analysis based on his fieldwork in Aleppo and the Kurd Dagh concerning how the territorial basis of these supra-local religious communities can be re-signified as the political basis for religious versions of Kurdish nationalism (Pinto 2004; 2005: 201–24; 2006: 155–71; 2007; 2007b; 2010). However, it remains extremely difficult to conduct a field study in Syria with Kurdish identity as the core of the research since the regime continues—despite some changes—to view Kurdishness as a sign of fitna, threatening the cohesion of Syrian society more broadly.

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This explains, at least partly, why the study of the period between 1963 and the present has been dominated by the “human rights” literature. Indeed, it is only since the 1990s, as a result of the increasing importance of human rights issues in all countries of the world, that the first complete and detailed studies of the Syrian Kurds have emerged (HRW 1991; HRW 1996; McDowall 1998). These reports offer essential chronological reference points which have been integrated into the majority of later published works. Though valuable, these pieces are less concerned with a deep historical and sociological insight and are more likely to emphasize the Kurds’ status as a “minority” within the Syrian legal framework.

The picture is more nuanced if we consider scholarship on the Mandatory period. The access to the main French archival sources has allowed scholars to elaborate solid accounts of that era. In 1984, Philip S. Khoury wrote an illuminating piece on urban politics in Damascus where Kurdish elites played a significant role (Khoury 1984: 507–40). Christian Velud’s highly original analysis of the colonial policy in Upper Jazira during the 1920s and 1930s (Velud 1987: 161–94; 1991; 1995: 48–69) allowed us to glimpse the daily reality of both urban and rural populations of this “peripheral” Syrian territory where Christians, Arabs and Kurds all lived together, sometimes in conflict and sometimes on good terms. As Velud demonstrates, such conflicts were not always based on ethnicity or religion, but also on territorial and leadership quarrels between “old” – mostly pro-Syrian – and “new” – pro-French – inhabitants of Upper Jazira. Velud’s pieces are thus very useful for tracing the way in which migrants from Turkey integrated into a new political environment. In particular, his depiction of the urbanization of Upper Jazira explains how traditional elites (tribal chiefs, urban notables, religious leaders) reproduced their local power despite dramatic changes (Velud 1986: 85–104; 1991).

Another example of this genre is Nelida Fuccaro’s works. Her deep knowledge of late Ottoman history and access to both French and British archival materials have allowed Fuccaro to provide useful insights into Kurdish communities in modern Syria. In 1997, Fuccaro published a thoughtful article on the Kurdish nationalist movement in Mandatory Syria in which she demonstrated, contrary to the ethnic interpretation of modern Kurdish history (Bedr al-Din 1999; 2003; Seida 2005), that the Kurds under French colonial rule displayed different attitudes towards the new ideas of Kurdish political and cultural self-determination (Fuccaro 1997: 301–26). Fuccaro has developed this argument into two interesting contributions to the reinterpretation of the interwar era, particularly as concerns the question of “identities.” The first (Fuccaro 2003: 206–24), challenges the notion of the quarter as an “ethnic cluster” by examining historical processes of integration of the Kurdish community into the body politic of Damascus. At the same time, she analyzes the emergence of new arenas of public action for the Kurdish community with reference to the emergence of new ideas of class (communism) and community (Syrian and Kurdish nationalism) during the French mandate. In the second piece (Fuccaro 2004: 579–95), through the comparison between the Kurdish mobilizations in Syria and Iraq under colonial rule, she illustrates the complexity of the question of group loyalties. Fuccaro argues that a study of political mobilization during the mandatory

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period is impossible if its interpretation hinges on a binary minority/majority opposition (Kurd/Arab) when each of the two groups constitutes a hybrid socio-political entity to begin with.

My reflection on the Kurdish issue in Syria during the French colonial rule has benefited from the revival of studies of the Mandatory period (Méouchy 2002; Mizrahi 2003; Méouchy and Sluglett 2004; Tatchjian 2004; Provence 2005) and the works cited above. In Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil (2007) I studied how exiled intellectuals from Turkey contributed to the (re)ethnicization of some segments of the Kurdish communities in the Levant, paying special attention to their doctrine and program. I argued that their doctrine was influenced in particular by two sources: Turkish nationalism and French orientalists who worked for the FID (Tejel 2006; 2007: 326–40; 2008: 117–19).

In my recent works on the Mandatory period, I have argued that, parallel to the role of Western intellectuals in the making of the Kurdish movement in Syria, Upper Jazira witnessed the emergence of other types of nationalism, that were more populist, and therefore less civic, and mirrored broader political developments (Gelvin 1998; Watenpaugh 2002: 325–47). Hence, urban actors (Christian and Kurdish alike) in Upper Jazira reproduced much the same “repertoires of action” as in other Syrian cities (Tejel 2009: 151–73; 2009b: 205–22). In this sense, and paradoxically, I highlighted the emergence of the first autonomist demands in the 1930s which led to the “Syrianization” of political life in Upper Jazira. Echoing these developments, Seda Altug has reflected on the importance of the territorial margins, Upper Jazira in this case, in the definition of the nation-state. Accordingly, the delimitation of the Turkish-Syrian border in the 1920s and 1930s played an important role in the Syrian Arab nationalist discourse, since it served to define not only the territory of the state, but also the groups and populations that had to be excluded (Altug and Thomas White 2010: 91–104).

The Qamishli Revolt its Aftermath

The riots of March 2004 in Qamishli and the subsequent massive mobilizations in the predominantly Kurdish towns and quarters of large cities between 2004 and 2005 encouraged the publication of a series of works and articles of uneven quality in response to the sudden “visibility” of the Kurds in Syria. A number of topics are important for understanding the Kurdish issue in Syria today. In the first place, most authors highlight the opportunities offered to the dissident movements, be it “Kurdish” or “Arab,” by the new political environment since the death of Hafiz al-Asad in 2000, the so-called “Damascus Spring.” Despite its short life, the “Damascus Spring” allowed previously marginal Kurdish forces to bring public actions denouncing the injustices to the Kurds to the Syrian capital (Montgomery 2005; Yildiz 2005; Gauthier 2005: 97–114; Gauthier 2006: 217–31).
Other factors have played a dramatic role in the events of 2004–5. Without under-rating the “identity” aspects of the Kurdish mobilizations, socioeconomic factors have been stressed (Tejel 2007b: 269–76). Finally, the influence of the Iraqi experience – the overthrow of the Ba’thist regime in 2003 and the consolidation of Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq – had an influence on Syrian Kurds (Gambill 2004: 1–4; Gauthier 2005: 97–114; Gauthier 2006: 217–31; Lowe 2006: 1–7).

While most of these accounts are prone to conclude that after the riots of Qamishli, separatist feelings were rapidly fuelled among Kurds in Syria, I (2009c) stress a more nuanced picture. For sure, Kurds in Syria have entered into an era of “visibility” (Tejel 2006: 117–33). In the short term, the return to the strategy of “dissimulation,” as defined by James C. Scott (1990), seems to be improbable. However, the pacification of the protests led by the Kurdish parties in 2005 was a prelude to the search for a new equilibrium between the Kurdish movement and the Syrian regime. I suggest that between 2005 and 2009, the Kurds obtained freedom to create space for the open display of Kurdish identity, while the regime confirmed the selective withdrawal of the state from Kurdish affairs. Finally, it is necessary to pay attention to political and social dynamics in Kurdish communities from the time of the construction of contemporary Syria to the present in order to understand the current situation.

Pitfalls and Agendas

Finally, I would like to suggest a number of potentially fruitful avenues for future research. As mentioned above, most works to date on Kurdish issues in Syria has been carried out through the prism of human rights (see recent reports by AI 2005; Danish Refugee Council 2007; Ziadeh 2009; HRW 2009) and there is a dearth of research on history as well as aspects of daily life such as the generational factor, dialect cleavages, modes of consumption, the dynamics of the rural exodus, gender issues, land distribution, mixed marriages; and deeper analyses of intra-Kurdish politics. These areas of research are necessary in order to advance our knowledge of Syria’s Kurds, and eventually to “bridge the gap” between the Kurds and Syrian society at large.

It may sound banal, but it’s important to remind ourselves that Kurds don’t live as an isolated “community” in Syria. They are in constant contact with other groups and have imbibed Arab-Syrian cultural and political references through education, television, music, and, for men, the army. Ethnic awareness is obviously important for Kurds in Syria. But, this is not the case for all Kurds and, more importantly, ethnic awareness doesn’t require that Kurds live entirely apart from the non-Kurdish communities that are part and parcel of their daily lives. They interact with the state – and its different segments – and with other fragments of the Syrian society. The study of these dimensions requires easier access

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to the field and a collective and interdisciplinary effort. Last but not least, these
endeavours would require that, at least in some cases, scholars master both Kurdish and
Arabic in order to access to a wide-range of sources, oral and written.

In sum, Kurdish groups are not only affected by local and national socio-political
transformations but also by both trans-national dynamics, in regard to their “macro-
ethnicity,” and changes on the global stage. The former include tribal, familial, and
religious networks, armed struggles in Turkey and Iraq, and the increasing autonomy of
Iraqi Kurdistan since 1991. The latter involves a structural crisis, namely the “crisis of
difference” in the era of globalization (Balandier 1986: 501). It is necessary that scholars
imbed their work within terms of references common to all Syrians and to global
transformations while simultaneously considering a detailed chronology inscribed in the
Kurds’ own reality.

Notes

1. The first name of the institute was Institut d’art et d’archéologie. See Avez 1993; Trégan 2004:
   235-47.

2. As Pierre Rondot confessed in 1940 in his private journal, “I played their game. I kept their
   secrets, I was their accomplice. Their testimony today is my reward. (Blau 2000: 101).

3. The only non-Kurdish author who tackled this issue was Günter Meyer in his article about
   rural development and migration in the Upper Jazira (1990: 245-78).

4. After the crushing of the Shaykh Said revolt (1925) in Turkey, the Ankara government
   envisaged the deportation of Kurdish tribes toward the west of the country as a means of
   clearing the Eastern provinces of its “more dangerous” elements. This policy also affected some
   Christian populations, especially the remaining Armenian elements, while Kurdish circles in
   Istanbul found themselves forced into exile.

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dans les années 1920 et 1930,” Vingtième siècle, 103: 91–104.


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Studying the Kurds in Syria

Kurdish matters does provide a guide to its position. Kurdish sources are also not reliably balanced and can be slanted by a strong Kurdish, or Kurdish nationalist, view. A glaring example is the uncertainty surrounding the number of Kurds living in Syria. Putting to one side the question of how a ‘Kurd’ is defined, we do not know the size of the Kurdish population. I have been given estimates which vary from 1 million (Syrian officials or Syrian Arab sources) to 4 million (some Kurdish sources). A figure of 1.75 – 2 million seems realistic. The number of Kurds who have recently migrated from the Jazira to the main cities is also unclear. Kurdish sources, and some foreign diplomatic reports, suggest that huge numbers have been forced by poverty to leave the area but it is difficult to assess the accuracy of such claims.

Kurdish sources in Syria can also be problematic because of factionalism and division. The number of Kurdish political parties varies but tends to be higher than 12. The goals, tactics and alliances of these parties can be vague and shifting and often seem to depend upon personalities. More widely, there are varying identity sources for all Kurds in Syria. These are made more complex by the pressure to self-censure or conform in public self-expression in Syria and it is clear that a better understanding of the variety of Kurdish positions within Syria requires a great deal more investigation.

Researchers struggle to gain access in Syria where officials are reluctant or unwilling to discuss the Kurds. It is unrealistic to expect official tolerance of fieldwork exploring Kurdish issues. The mukhabarat take an immediate and intense interest in researchers and the length of time allowed to an individual is variable. Some have managed for periods of months. For others the invitation to leave comes within days. This is particularly so in areas of heavy Kurdish inhabitation such as Qamishli or Hassakeh where foreign visitors are uncommon. Researchers must also consider the risks to people they meet because of the attention this brings. During a visit to Qamishli in June 2009, Kurds with whom I arranged interviews got into trouble. One was prevented from entering my hotel and was interrogated; during dinner with me, another was taken away by the mukhabarat. Others reluctantly would not meet me because of the clear danger this could cause to them and their families. Syrian Arab citizens, such as journalists or human rights activists, who have worked on Kurdish issues, have also received hostile attention from the security services.

Research on the international dimension of the Syrian Kurdish issue has been hampered by a lack of international interest in what has been seen as a minor ethnic group in a country which offers more pressing international concerns relating to Israel, Palestinian groups, Lebanon and Iraq. International awareness of Kurdish issues has been dominated by the more dramatic developments concerning Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, leaving Kurds in Syria (and indeed in Iran) to be of peripheral interest.

There has been much greater international awareness since the troubles in 2004 gave

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exposure to the seriousness of the Kurdish issue in Syria. There has also been sustained international interest in wider Kurdish issues because of the entrenchment of the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq (KRG) and developments in Turkey. This has helped increase the audience and demand for work on Kurds in Syria, from academia, government, human rights and media sources. There are more opportunities for research to be commissioned, presented and published, both from those interested in Syria and those interested in Kurds more widely.

There has been a notable lack of external Kurdish interest in Kurds in Syria. KRG figures make concerned noises in private, but see the Kurdish issue in Syria as less important than their own cause. They are also aware of the relative hopelessness of the situation and of their need not to upset Damascus. The more numerous Kurds in Turkey (with whom most Kurds in Syria share a common language) are also preoccupied with their own struggle and some, notably in the PKK, see Kurds in Syria as merely a useful source of soldiers for their fight.

One external group which does assist research is the Syrian Kurdish diaspora. This has become increasingly organized and active in sharing information and lobbying on behalf of Kurds in Syria. Overseas branches of the political parties, human rights groups and cultural organizations hold meetings, protests and cultural events and, most usefully, have expanded the availability of material through their websites. The quality of this material is improving although it is still subjective. Studying contemporary issues of the Kurds in Syria remains hampered by many difficulties, but the quality and volume of research and material recently produced by foreign academics and analysts and by Kurds in Syria and in the diaspora provides a much firmer base than was previously available. The problems of primary data and access within Syria are likely to remain acute but increased international awareness and interest may help support further studies. The enthusiasm and appreciation of Syrian Kurds for interest shown by foreign researchers is a great reward. The scale of the problems facing Kurds in Syria and the relative infancy of scholarship in this field provides further encouragement.

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Ten years of Bashar

died as a result of torture. Members and sympathizers of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a branch of the PKK, are especially affected. Though the number of people who have been placed under a travel ban for political reasons is unknown, this measure is frequently used to discipline members of the opposition.

Moreover, none of the pressing “Kurdish problems” have been solved under Bashar al-Asad. For example, approximately 300,000 stateless Kurds still live in Syria. Their right to education, a free choice of career, property, and freedom of movement are severely limited. The majority were born in Syria, thus according to the law they are entitled to Syrian citizenship. Instead, new problems have been created. With the passage of Decree 49 in September 2008, the sale of inner-city land in border regions became subject to official approval—a measure which, due to its selective application by the intelligence agencies, has had a harsh impact on al-Hasakah province in particular. By June 2009, inner-city building activity in the city of al-Qamishli, the largest in al-Hasakah province, are said to have declined by approximately two thirds. In a city where the construction industry and the real estate market are two major economic factors, this is an alarming development.

In addition, Decree 49 affected the population of al-Hasakah at a time when the economy was already under severe strain as a result of weather-related agricultural losses. After years of drought, the situation of large portions of the population — already poor compared to the rest of the country — was so precarious that the loss of work and income prompted by Decree 49 seriously threatened not only the existence of many unskilled laborers and craftsmen, but also that of engineers and attorneys. Consequently, it can be assumed that Decree 49 has brought—and still brings—about an increase in internal migration.

The most serious confrontation between Kurds and Syrian security forces to date also took place during Bashar al-Asad’s tenure. In March 2004, sometimes violent mass demonstrations began in al-Qamishli and spread to all of Syria.

The catalyst for the demonstrations was a soccer match between the al-Jihad team from al-Qamishli and al-Futua, the Arab team from Dayr al-Zur on March 12, 2004. The inability of local security forces to separate rival fans in the stadium and the a journalist’s mistaken announcement of the deaths of children in the stadium. The resulting pandemonium caused widespread unrest. An angry crowd consisting not only of Kurds but also of Muslim and Christian Arabs gathered in front of the stadium and provoked the deployment of additional security forces who cracked down on demonstrators killing seven Kurds.

During the mass demonstrations and funeral marches on March 13, the outrage over the

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alleged deaths of the children was transformed into anti-Syrian, Kurdish-national rallies—reflected in pro-Kurdish slogans, the carrying of Kurdish flags, and the violence against symbols of state rule. Tens of thousands of people took part in public protests, and the demonstrations spread from al-Qamishli to other cities in al-Hasakah province, to Afrin (Jabal al-Akrad) and to ‘Ayn al-Arab (Kobani), to Damascus and Aleppo. It took the Syrian security forces more than a week to fully restore order.

Demonstrations of this magnitude had never before occurred in the history of the Syrian Kurds. The sheer number of demonstrators and the fact that the unrest encompassed all of “Syrian Kurdistan” was new. The reaction of the Syrian state was accordingly harsh—the number of those killed or arrested was unparalleled in comparison with earlier events. At least 32 persons were killed by security forces, the number of people arrested was said to be about 2,000.

Hopes were high that after the uprising in al-Qamishli, a new Kurdish movement would develop. These hopes were not fulfilled. However, it seems that the Kurdish political parties—currently 13 for a population of approximately two million—finally understood that they can only work more effectively if they cooperate. In December 2009, after exhaustive discussions, the Kurdish Political Council in Syria, a union of eight Kurdish parties, was founded and subsequently organized coordinated moments of silence and comparable activities.

The Kurdish policy of Bashar al-Asad does not differ significantly from his father’s strategy towards this minority during the 1990s. Those Kurds who openly stress their Kurdish identity are persecuted, while non-political, Arabized Kurds have nothing to fear. It is likely that the Kurdish opposition could be included in the existing system if the Syrian government were to invest in Kurdish regions such as the Jazirah, to naturalize stateless Kurds, and to provide for cultural rights. There is considerable evidence to show that Kurdish parties would be willing to accept such a deal and forgo the fundamental democratization of Syria. So, why is Bashar al-Asad uninterested in appeasing
Ten years of Bashar

significant parts of the opposition? One possible explanation is that in his view, the Arab identity of Syria is the last ideal left to unite the country. Currently, neither pan-Arabism nor socialism plays a significant ideological role. Another possible explanation is that, above all, the security apparatus, not the president, is interested in the ongoing conflict with the Kurdish population. The security service’s right to exist is closely linked to the existence of enemies of the system—external as well as internal. Finally, thousands of Syrian pounds are paid by the relatives of each Kurdish political prisoner to get them out of prisons and detention centers. Arresting and releasing people have become a lucrative business for members of the secret services.

Notes


5. The Qamishli riots were followed by the murder of the Kurdish Shaykh Xeznewi in May 2005. In all probability, this murder can be credited to the Syrian intelligence service. More deaths occurred in connection with various Noruz festivities, most recently in March 2010 in al-Raqqah, when Syrian security forces fired into the crowd. A number of deaths of Kurdish recruits to the Syrian Army remain unexplained thus far. However, due to the lack or reliable data before 2009, it is difficult to say—as some authors do—that we face an increase in arrests and prison sentences for Kurdish political activities since 2004. See for example Rober Lowe, “The serhildan and the Kurdish national story in Syria,” in Robert Lowe & Gareth Stansfield , The Kurdish Political Imperative (London: Chatham House, 2010), 161-179.


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Sufism among the Kurds

serve as cultural references for the new migrants, creating spaces of solidarity and channels for their integration in the urban universe. At the same time, the connection with the rural world is maintained through the continuous allegiance to the shaykhs who lead zawiyas located in their village of origin, or through pilgrimages to the holy sites (tombs of saints or prophets) in the countryside.

The new Sufi communities that developed in the last decade among the Kurdish population of Aleppo tend to be less closely identified with any specific tariqa. These new zawiyas are better defined by the charismatic figure of their shaykh, as it is not uncommon for the shaykh to claim affiliation to two or more tariqas in order to legitimize the particular mystical path embodied in his religious persona.

While many Kurdish zawiyas in Aleppo are simple urban extensions of rural zawiyas, they must be analyzed within the context of Aleppine Sufism. The limited capacity of the traditional Sufi structures of Aleppo to incorporate the Kurdish migrants, despite the fact that many religiously observant Kurds are attached to Sufi forms of piety, concurred to create a social and religious context favorable to the emergence of new Sufi zawiyas in the Kurdish neighborhoods.

Some of these zawiyas may foster the creation of an “Aleppine” Kurdish Sufism. The performative affirmation of Islamic piety that derives from the affiliation to a Sufi zawiya constitutes a valuable cultural idiom that can be used by the Kurds to negotiate their insertion into the Aleppine society as Muslims, for Islam is an important element in the construction of Aleppo’s urban identity.

On the other hand, many Sufi zawiyas also connect Aleppo with the Kurdish areas of northern Syria, adding a religious dimension to the multiple links that exist between these areas. In rural areas the Sufi shaykhs tend to have their authority fully recognized by the community where they reside, but in the villages and urban centers of the Kurdish-majority areas of Northern Syria there is a plurality of competing shaykhs who try to gather followers across tribal or class divisions.

Some shaykhs manage to become religious leaders in a regional or even transnational scale, as the Naqshbandi shaykh Ahmad Khaznawi of Tall Ma’ruf who had followers throughout the Jazira and the Turkish Kurdistan. His Sufi networks of followers and disciples were inherited by his sons and grandsons, including the late shaykh Muhammad Mash‘uk Khaznawi, who became a symbol of Kurdish resistance to the Ba’thist political order. ²

An important feature of Sufism in the Northern Syria is the cult of saints organized around the tombs of dead shaykhs or prophetic figures that dot the countryside. The cult of saints allows the fusion between religious, cultural and territorial identities. In the areas of high density of Kurdish population, the saints’ tombs give an Islamic identity to the landscape, constructing a “sacred geography” of the territory by connecting Islamic

(Continued from page 7)
autonomy in the Djezireh, prevented the constitution of a unified Kurdish movement as well as the undermining of Kemalism in Turkey, which was the main goal of the Xoybûn.

On the other hand, these two movements might have constituted the basis of a Kurdish consciousness in Syria. Moreover, the French authorities promoted the integration of the Kurdish element within the police and military institutions of the embryonic Syrian State.

This phenomenon stretches from the Syrian independence to the coming to power of the Ba‘ath (1946-1963). However, very soon Syrian police and army were purged of its Kurdish officers. This period is characterized by a rise of the Arab nationalist, great Syrian and communist parties. Syrian politics then moved towards the end of notable politics and the birth of multiple other mobilizations (socialism, trade unionism, etc...). The Kurds, like other minorities, got involved massively in the communist Party. The Syrian State, suspicious of minorities and especially the Kurds remained very weak until 1957, thus permitting the development of a Kurdish cultural movement. Kurdish nationalism still remained nonexistent, however. It materialized in Syria with the creation of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) in 1957. The party was able to bring together Kurdish notables and socialist Kurdish elements, former members of the Syrian Communist Party that was forbidden during the creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) with Egypt. The Kurdish national movement in Syria was born of the beginning of the Kurdish insurrection in Iraq and at the instigation of the KDP of Iraq. Additionally this movement was without the armed struggle (or revendicate independence) that constituted the Barzanist some years later.

From 1957 to 1970, Arab nationalism triumphed, first of all with the establishment of the UAR in 1957, then with the coming to power of the Ba‘ath in 1963. This period witnessed the implementation of openly discriminatory policies against the Kurdish group as a whole (Arabization of the toponymy of the Djezireh, establishment of the arab belt in the Dezireh, the withdrawal of the citizenship from 120,000 Kurds, etc). These policies intended to hold the Kurdish national movement (and the Kurdish notables) in check (p. 59). Here the author suggests that the coercion of the State also contributed to the upsurge of the Kurdish national movement in Syria. What would have happened if these policies, exclusively coercive, had continued and if the Ba‘ath had held the course of ideological purity (socialism and Pan-Arabism) as it did during its first years?

Coming to power in 1970 Hafez al-Asad disengaged with these former policies in handling the “Kurdish issue”. On the one hand Hafez al-Asad’s regime strengthened the symbolical structures of the Ba’athist unanimity, totally excluding the Kurds from the Syrian national imagination (p. 64). On the other hand his regime implemented policies to redistribute resources, co-opt Kurdish individuals and exploit Kurdish military forces (p. 65) in order to widen its political basis, formerly restricted to specific Alawi military circles (p.58, p. 62). In 1976 Hafez al-Asad ended the policies of spoliation against the Kurds in
A Work of Reference

the Djezireh. The regime’s pragmatism also appeared with the exploitation of the problem’s transnational dimension. The alliance with the Kurdish parties of Irak (KDP and PUK) and more specifically with the PKK (p. 82-83), channeled during several years the energy of the Kurds in Syria. This double policy of internal redistribution and external alliance associated with the continued coercion led to a considerable weakening of the Kurdish national movement in Syria. Henceforth, it was characterized with an important fragmentation of the partisan field. Despite this weakness, the author notes that this configuration didn’t prevent the creation of political and social structures in suspense within the Kurdish community in Syria. Jordi Tejel refers to Lisa Wedeen’s work (Wedeen: 1999) to show that these concealed structures formed themselves into the framework of a controlled and codified public expression along with a relatively free private expression as well. In one of the chapters (“The Kurdish response and its margins: ‘dissimulation’ of a hidden conflict” p. 82-108) the author shows how a Kurdish cultural, social and political space developed itself at the margin of the official political system, official Islam and official culture. Paulo Pinto’s argument is discussed in detail (Pinto: 2007). It postulates the joint development of Kurdish nationalism and brotherhoods that led to the upsurge of a religious nationalism of the Kurds(p.95), that is to say Sunni brotherhoods with a nationalist complexion or a Kurdish Sufism (“Sufism is the Kurdish Islam” and “Kurdish Sufism is the real Sufism”) (p.99). However J. Tejel suggests without openly taking a position, that this is due to the play of the social agents, the brotherhood field playing with the nationalism, and the nationalist field playing with the brotherhoods. Contrary to the decisive role that P. Pinto gives to that phenomenon, we understand that the brotherhood circles had only a very limited share in the events of 2004, and that the Kurdish political parties whether they defended a hard line or not remain at the initiative of nationalist action in Syria.

In the last chapter the author tries to understand how the balance that Hafez al-Asad established, broke down in 2004. Why did the “Kurdish issue” reached visibility in Syria? Why also did the agents of the Qamishli uprising resorted to violence? To answer the first question Jordi Tejel explores the political changes resulting from the coming to power of Bashar al-Asad. He examines these the short, but decisive “spring of Damascus”; the rapprochement between several kurdish parties and the Arab opposition; the emergence of new Kurdish parties (Yekiti-kurd, Azadi, PYD) as well as new political practices (public demonstrations, sit-in, declarations, etc.) and the slight withdrawal of the intelligence services in the Djezireh. To explain the explosion of political violence, the author thoroughly uses the scientific approaches of authors such as Hamit Bozarslan, Charles Tilly, Ted Gurr and gathers all the facts and factors likely to have governed the outburst of the riots in 2004. From the situation born of the American intervention in Irak to the dayrî supporters' provocations during the soccer game that witnessed the beginning of the riots, as well as the role of the notables in negotiating with the state and the regime concerning the subjectivity of the rioters (euphoria or despair).
Jordi Tejel concludes with substantial evidence, with a discussion regarding the possible toughening of the Kurdish national movement in Syria, especially among the youngsters (p. 127).

We are dealing here with a book of reference because it synthesizes several former studies, and provides us with totally new information and original approaches. However, by definition, it can not be exhaustive. Some issues raised in this study deserve further exploration. The social and political organization of the Kurds between 1946 and 1968 remains relatively obscure, although it constitutes the moment of gestation and emergence of an organized Kurdish national movement. In fact, Jordi Tejel’s book will hopefully arouse new studies on the period.

The concept of “dissimulation” is used to describe the development of the Kurdish identity far away from the public sphere. The author draws a parallel between the case of the Kurds in Syria and the argument of Lisa Wedeen according to which in Hafez al-Asad’s Syria, any dissident speech (and thus for J. Tejel the Kurdish nationalist speech) was banished to the private sphere. Individuals could only enjoy relative freedom as long as they publicly “acted as if” they subscribed to the rhetoric of the Syrian State. As far as the Kurds are concerned, is this analysis so relevant? Is the division between public and private speech still as obvious as it seemed? For instance the symbolic link established between Palestine and Kurdistan by the State and the Kurdish political agents doesn’t reveal the desire to impose a certain type of public speech, but rather the willingness to assure the Kurds, the State or the rest of the Syrian population of everybody’s loyalty to the Kurdish or the Palestinian cause. The point was not only to invent and codify a public speech, but also and primarily to convince. Lisa Wedeen’s work raises the question of the possible existence of several levels of intimacy and publicity. Isn’t there also a Kurdish public sphere distinct from the Syrian public sphere, as codified by the State and the agents especially during the New Rûz? How do Syrian and Kurdish identities adjust within private and public speeches? These will require long field studies to be answered.

In Jordi Tejel’s book another question remains: What is the Kurdish culture in Syria and how is it used in interaction to define the particular features of a « we-group » and to establish ethnic boundaries with the rest of the society (F. Barth)? According to the author and based on Paulo Pinto’s work the ethnic identity of the Kurds of Damascus is not defined by a common language but by lineages and by joint cultural practices like the New Rûz festival (p.103). This assertion, however, doesn’t seem convincing. My opinion is that the Kurds of this city as much as the Kurds of Aleppo, see in the practice of their language a foundation for their Kurdish identity. If one wants at all cost to make a comparison between the specific relationship the Kurds of these two cities have with their native language, one would have to consider the question according to other factors. The Kurds of Damascus whom mainly come from the Syrian Djezireh, speak the forms of Kurmandji known in this region as xerbi, ashitî, ali and koçerî unlike the Kurds of Aleppo who come
both from the Djezireh and from the region of Afrîn and Kobanê where different forms of Kurmandjî are spoken.

Beyond the question of Arabization—which can be considered generalized within Syria—it would be interesting to see how these linguistic practices and representations shape the Kurdish spaces of identity. And furthermore, how for instance, the xerbî develops into the more commonly spoken Kurmandjî language in Syria. Once again one will not be able to skip sound anthropological and sociological field studies.

Despite a few transliteration errors (Asad becomes As’ad and far’ filastin becomes firh filastin) and the absence of a chronology that could have helped clarify his points, this book reaches its goal brilliantly. It illustrates the emergence and the diffusion within Syria of the idea that a Kurdish national group exists, and the transition to visible collective political action. This book also permits to cease and to accept the paradoxes peculiar to any study on the political and social organization of a State or national movement. Here, the State according to its organic conception of the Arab nation must reject the Kurds, but for diverse reasons integrates and co-opts them. Additionally, political agents in conflict with the State, use negotiation with it in an authoritarian framework. And finally, the simultaneous presence of numerous « infra-national loyalties » among the Kurds and the existence of a strong Kurdish nationalism exemplify these paradoxes.

In effect, Jordi Tejel has laid the foundations of a framework of reference for many studies to come.

Bibliography


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What is the Syrian Studies Association?

The SSA is 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 its area of interest as the lands included in historical Bilad al-Sham until the end of the First World War and Syria after 1919. Professional and amateur scholars in all fields, from art history to anthropology to hydrology, are welcome.

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The Newsletter is always looking for writers of short articles on their research (1,500-3,000 words) and of reviews (1,000-1,500 words) of books, film, recordings and other media related to the scholarly study of Syria and Bilad al-Sham. We especially welcome reviews in English or French of books written in Arabic. Contact Newsletter Editor Andrea Stanton (andrea.l.stanton@gmail.com) or Book Review Editor Beverly Levine (balevine@wustl.edu) for more information.

Sufism among the Kurds

practices and beliefs with natural or social landmarks, as well as integrating into the realm of Islam the remnants of pre-Islamic sacred landscapes. The tombs of saints are located in rural cemeteries, on hilltops, near water springs, or even in pre-Islamic ruins or holy sites.

The best example of the Sufi appropriation of pre-Islamic sites is Nabi Huri in the Kurd Dagh, which consists of a lavishly built Roman tomb dating from the second century CE, which has been venerated since the fourteenth century as the burial place one of the prophetic predecessors of Muhammad. The cult of saints anchors Islam into familiar places where one can seek the help and, even, the contact of holy figures that have the power of mediating between local ordinary life and the universal abstract doctrines and practices sanctioned by the Islamic tradition.

Finally, the mawlids (saint feasts) that are celebrated at the tombs of the saints are the (Continued from page 35)

Sufism among the Kurds

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Sufism among the Kurds

occasion for large pilgrimages and tomb-visitations (ziyara), attracting individual devotees or entire Sufi communities from all over northern Syria. These Sufi pilgrimages produce a sacred territory, which is delimited by the various paths that link distant communities to the saint’s tomb. The celebration of collective rituals during the mawlids also creates forms of solidarity and identification that reach beyond the local community, producing a broader framework to Kurdish religious identities.

According to what was presented in this short overview of the role of Sufism among the Kurds in Syria, it is possible to say that Sufi communities and holy places constitute social spaces where discrete articulations between Muslim identities and Kurdish ethnicity emerge. This allows the Kurds to mobilize in each context various forms of affirming cultural distinctiveness and negotiating their insertion in the Syrian society.

Notes

1. The only non-Sunni religious group among the Kurds in Syria is the Yezidi community, which has approximately 15,000 members spread in the Jabal Sinjar, the Kurd Dagh and Aleppo.

2. Shaykh Muhammad had had good relations with the Ba’thist regime. However, after meeting with the leader of the Syrian Muslim Brothers in exile in Europe, he was kidnapped and murdered. His death, in which many saw the dealings of the secret services (mukhabarat), triggered a cycle of revolts and state repression in the Kurdish majority areas of northern Syria. Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics, and Society* (London: Routledge, 2009), 101-102.

3. Many informants told me that Nabi Huri was Uriah from the Old Testament. It is important to note that Uriah was not a prophet in Judaism and, therefore, is not recognized as such by the mainstream Islamic tradition. This example shows the multiple articulations between local religious practices and the Islamic tradition that serve as basis for the cultural and intellectual elaboration of what is defined by many Kurdish shaykhs and disciples as “Kurdish Islam.”

Bibliography


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Syria’s Undocumented Kurds

carried out in 1962 in the province al-Hasaka, around 150,000 Kurdish people lost their citizenship based on the government’s claim that they had come to Syria from Turkey before 1945. In the 1962 census, they were registered as *ajanib* or “foreigners.” The author indicates that some of the Kurdish tribes and families labeled as “foreigners” as a result of this Arabization policy had ironically played a major role in driving the last Ottoman forces out of Syria. To make it worse for the Kurds, some had not even been registered as foreigners and were known as *maktum* or unregistered – meaning that they effectively have no legal existence. Through case studies based on interviews, Bingöl explains the problems faced by “foreign” and “unregistered” Kurds and their families in owning property, working in government positions, studying at government schools and traveling inside or outside Syria.

Syrian Kurdish political parties constitute the second major subject of the book. Bingöl lists the eight major political parties and their factions: the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria, the Kurdish Patriotic Democratic Party of Syria, the Leftist Kurdish Party of Syria, the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party, the Kurdish Popular Union Party, the Kurdish Unity Party, the Syrian Kurdish Party, and the Democratic Union Party. He has interviewed officials from each major party regarding their relations with the Syrian government, with other Syrian Kurdish parties, with the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and with the Turkish government, as well as their views of the United States. The most striking questions concern the interviewed party officials’ views of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), their methods of struggle, what they think about the armed struggle, and why the Syrian Kurds are still deprived of basic rights despite the fact that Syria has been a “center of consciousness” for the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran.

Syria hosted Abdullah Öcalan and his militant armed organization, the PKK, between 1978 and 1998. Bingöl tries to discover what the close relations between the Syrian government and the PKK has meant for the Kurds in Syria. Except for the pro-PKK Democratic Union Party, all other parties are critical of the PKK. The party officials believe that the PKK ignores other Kurdish organizations both inside and outside Turkey and do nothing for the rights of Syrian Kurds based on a deal with the Syrian state. There are important anecdotes about the Syrian government’s attempts to cooperate with Turkey-based Kurdish groups against Turkey since the 1950s and how other organizations, such as Kemal Burkay’s Kurdistan Socialist Party (PSK), rejected this. The Kurdish party officials in Syria interviewed by the author imply that the PKK, on the other hand, allied with the Syrian state in order to have a strong base in Syria at the expense of other Kurdish groups.

Although Syria hosted leading Kurdish intellectuals such as Celadet Ali Bedirkhan, Osman Sebri, Cegerkhwin, and Nureddin Zaza, and became the birth place of Kurdish
(Continued from page 42)

Syria’s Undocumented Kurds

enlightenment in the first half of the 20th century, Kurdish party officials also believe that the current situation for Syrian Kurds is much worse than in neighboring countries, for a number of reasons. First, party officials see the Syrian Baath Party’s stance regarding the political liberties and minorities as an obstacle to the rights of Syrian Kurds. Thus, they cannot be hopeful, despite Bashar Al-Asaad’s statement in 2004 after the Qamishli incidents that “Kurds are one of the basic elements of Syrian Society.” Second, some of the Kurdish interviewees emphasize geographical reasons that weaken the Kurdish national movement in Syria: the scattered nature of Kurdish settlements throughout northern Syria and the absence of the groves and mountains in Syrian Kurdish regions that are vital to the success of the Kurdish struggles in Turkey and Iraq (because they help hide the rebels from the state forces). According to the interviewees, this explains why the armed struggle is not a viable method for the Kurds of Syria.

Despite the repetition of some information throughout the book, Nevzat Bingöl succeeds in his goal of introducing the Kurds of Syria to the Turkish reader who, as the cover of the book shows, used to see Syrian Kurds and their relatives in Turkey twice a year on TV during their reunion for the religious feasts and exchange of gifts over the border. The interviews, as the major source of this book, include very interesting and valuable information for students of the Kurdish national movement in Syria and in Turkey. The album at the end of the book includes photographs of the March 2004 incidents and of leading Kurdish figures in Syria.

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**Syrian Jewry**

within the Jewish communities initiated by increased contact with the West, which eventually led to the formation of a new class of indigenous modernizing Jews. Here Harel makes an important intervention. He convincingly argues that, despite the ubiquitous portrayal of a perpetual conflict between conservative and westernizing segments of the Jewish community, the rabbinic elite did not understand modernization as contrary to traditional Judaism. Only when religious observance began to decline and the authority of the rabbis was challenged did they begin to resist reform. In fact, Syrian rabbis cooperated with the Alliance Israélite Universelle in opening schools for Jewish youth. These are the very schools which are often described as the nucleus of Eastern Jewish modernization and an ideological challenge to rabbinic authority.

Both the Tanzimat and increased European penetration contributed to rising non-Muslim expectations of equal rights and a breakdown of the traditional *dhimma* structure. Syrian Christians, more politically mobilized than Jews, pushed the limits of their new privileges, leading to overt conflict with local Muslims. Syrian Jews proceeded more cautiously, by and large avoiding political engagement and continuing to conduct themselves as *dhimmi*. As a result, they continued to understand their basic relationship to other Syrian communities in terms of difference and separation. In fact, the increasing cultural and political influence of western Jews strengthened the Jewish component of Syrian Jewish identity. Jews, therefore, were not attracted to the regional or secular tendencies of local political movements and the Tanzimat fostered neither Ottoman nor Syrian national identity among the Jewish community.

Over time, the dual process of approaching the West while maintaining separation from other Syrian communities encouraged emigration. Likewise strong economic push factors existed. The opening of the Suez Canal altered trade routes and the bankruptcy of the Ottoman Empire harmed the Syrian banking community. In fact, Christian and Muslim Syrians began to move during the same period. Harel notes that non-Muslims emigrated at a proportionally higher rate and attributes this to religious motives. I would add that Jews and Christians also played a large role in international commerce and, therefore, had both a greater economic incentive for migrating and more contacts abroad.

At times Harel suggests that Jews left Syria in an attempt to free themselves from tradition, though he admits that the migrants established traditional communal frameworks in their new homes. Perhaps then it was economic and societal instability created by economic crisis, along with the cancelation of the *dhimma* and the lack of implementation of the Tanzimat, which were the prime engines of this migration. These criticisms, however, in no way detract from the exceptional value of this work. Harel’s book is extremely well researched and detailed and will be an invaluable resource for those interested in Syrian Jewry, late Ottoman Syria, and Middle Eastern history more generally.

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Postcards

inventiveness of literary language, and the conviction that poetry bestows a timelessness upon Damascus. This in spite of the change in the city that is discernable from the cards, whether thematic (electrical poles installed in city squares) or formal (new points of view, compositions, and print quality). The backs of the cards are not reproduced, nor any other information that might have pointed to the reading or touring practices and publics. Endnotes include only a bibliography of excerpted texts and a list of illustrations. The illustration list is useful insofar as it tabulates each postcard’s printed information – generally a brief caption which names the pictured sight, and the name and/or address of the photography studio or printing house that produced the card – but it does not include data on postmarks or other information that would historicize the images or the experience of their beholders.

In spite of these silences, the book’s material can certainly prove a valuable teaching aid in courses devoted to the modern Middle East. It might best be approached, in fact, as two related trajectories for knowledge production about foreignness (or its obverse, locality), as played out in what would become the Syrian capital. The first is that of the literary production of the Orient in the nineteenth century. For an undergraduate course, the tidbits from Alexander William Kinglake, Gustave Flaubert, and Sir Richard Francis Burton – usefully all arrayed around a single urban setting – would prove a rich case study for thinking through the “Orientalist Structures and Restructures” chapter of Orientalism. One could also assign chapters from British travel writer Colin Thubron’s 1966 book, Mirror to Damascus, a spirited account written from a twilight in British intervention in the Near East. Thubron makes a good comparative because he relegates the eccentric personal behaviors of the preceding period’s Orientalists to arcana yet still follows them in seeking out sights for description – the House of Ananias, the bazaar and its craftsman, the Mosque of the Dervishes and its living practitioners. These are the same sights on display within Souvenir’s postcard categories.

The second trajectory would be more specific to the Mandate administration in Syria and Lebanon and the emergence of the mass tourism industry. Almost all the actual postcards reproduced here seem to date to the 1920s and 1930s. As such, they register a period of transition for the activity of the search for the Other, a refashioning of the Grand Tour to what sociologist Dean MacCannell saw as a universal experience, “the tourist.” That general trajectory, of course, coincided in the region with the French powers’ refashioning of the movement of both people and goods. In the 1920s, the road that was built on the order of the French High Commissioner also allowed entrepreneurs to set up a motorized mail service. The few stamps that are reproduced in Souvenir – those affixed to the front of some of the cards – record the shifting status of the authority to whom consumers rendered pre-payment for postal services: Republique Libanaise, Republique Francaise, Grand Liban.

Additional readings could again turn even single pages in Souvenir into cultural case
Postcards

studies. Kirsten Scheid's 2009 Museum Anthropology article, “Missing Nikê: On Oversights, Doubled Sights, and Universal Art Understood through Lebanon,” for example, could initiate a classroom discussion of the many registers of images associated with the Mandate authority, including postage stamp illustration. On page 103 in Souvenir, an image of a baroque marble fountain inside a mirrored reception hall (no. 158 in a series printed by the Beirut photo studio Photo Bonfils / A. Guiragossian), carries a French postage stamp depicting the Republic as a barefoot peasant-goddess. Scheid's article elucidates how this figure, an 1894 design, refashioned classicized grandeur into a French imperial ideology of cultivation. The stamp was introduced to the Arab regions as the official proof of payment for “French-Levant” postal office services. As a wide-spread element of the region’s visual culture, Scheid argues, it also participated in producing new forms of “local” aesthetic taste and culturedness. When students see the stamp here, literally riding on a postcard picture of Damascene opulence sent by one member of the European elite to another, they can be prompted to consider the interrelationship of representation, circulation, and political power in Mandate-era Syria.

Souvenir does include one section that makes a dramatic departure from the typical nineteenth-century itinerary. That is “Le temps des combats,” a fifteen page run of postcards documenting the military occupation of Damascus including multiple views of the devastation wrought by French air raids in 1925-1926. Here the selection of texts from journalist Pierre La Maziere (1925), Roland Dorgeles (1928), two letters from Freya Stark (1928), and a 1926 report from Joseph Kessel provide compelling and absolutely contemporary detail on the Arab Revolt. La Maziere attests, for example, to the multi-ethnic character of the French forces, describing a new kind of military man every hundred meters: a sentinel, a French infantryman, an Algerian soldier, a Moroccan spahi, a Senegalese, and a Syrian policeman. Each of these is said to be calling out “Who goes there?,” crossing bayonets in a single apparatus of repressive force.

The point is that Souvenir provides what it promises. It is a collection of items that index a distant place and time. Each of its elements, of course, also participates in asserting that distance. Its potential as a resource for historians and students will likely be realized in the ongoing investigation of that simultaneity, the structures that establish the relationship of present to past.

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linked labor and wage in a way that had not regularly existed before. Notable community members became lords over peasant sharecroppers, and commoditization of labor in the region was born. In addition, as parcels of land were divided with subsequent generations, according to inheritance laws, plots often became too small to support whole families, and individuals were pushed out to find wage labor in the growing cash economy.

Migration then began in earnest, and various forces interacted to maintain a system whereby attachment to a cash economy increased and workers “voluntarily” sold their labor to employers. Perhaps counter intuitively, it was not the landless and most impoverished who left their homes in search of work, but rather those desperately seeking to avoid the slide into landlessness. Desperation forced individuals to work for exploitative wages in the form both of in-kind payments from community or family members, and eventually cash.

Chapter two attempts to dispel the simple supply and demand rationale for labor movement, focusing instead on the many factors that led Syrians to work in Lebanon. In the 1960s and 1970s it was not simply that wages were much higher for Syrians working in Lebanon—they were—but that wage labor existed at all. In Syria labor was still greatly tied to the non-cash economy of family farms, even though families often could not produce enough to cover their needs and thus needed cash to purchase clothes, stoves and other essential items from the market. To afford these purchases, a (most often) male family member went abroad to work and remitted money to his family in Syria. Networks of transportation and employment meant workers could easily make the short trip to and from Lebanon, and finding work was easy. With a few exceptions, the border between the two neighboring countries allowed Syrian workers unencumbered movement and Lebanese employers cheap labor. It was this mutually beneficial situation that allowed Syrians to go mostly unnoticed. “Like sugar in tea” (89) Chalcraft says, they dissolved temporarily in society, working mostly conflict-free in construction, food preparation, and other menial tasks. Numbers of Syrian workers in Lebanon increased steadily from the 1940s.

Lebanon’s civil war, which lasted from 1975 to 1990, made life more difficult for Syrian workers, who faced sectarian violence at the hands of Lebanese militias and a general stigma in Lebanese society. Many left. Still, some stayed, though Israel’s 1982 invasion and emboldened Christian militias created an even more difficult situation. Familial responsibilities, financial opportunities, and job stability in Lebanon were some of the factors that kept Syrians in a violent Lebanon. Indeed, many employers still favored Syrians during this period because of their strong work ethic and low employment costs. Further, a continued strong economy, the need for war-related reconstruction, and waves of Lebanese emigration continued to draw Syrians to the country despite the formidable risks. Chalcraft’s stories of bombs dropping, children screaming, and months of (Continued on page 48)
unemployment during the worst of the fighting depict the humanity behind the faceless laborers that, in many ways, kept Lebanon operating during the chaos. The author hits home in Chapter 3, with vivid stories that bring to life the choices made by Syrians faced with opposition to their presence and threats to life and family. One interviewee says, “When Israel came in 1982... there were bombs falling. My baby... would get afraid and cry... from the light and noise of the bombs. So I sent the family and the kids back to Syria... My son, Michael, if he saw tanks on television, even if [what he was seeing] were kids toys, he would scream and cry” (128). Syrians faced these situations daily in their tireless search for paid work.

The 1990s saw increased Syrian control in Lebanese politics via the “Pax Syriana”, as well as a return of many Syrian workers to Lebanon. The dire economic situation in Syria and social pressures of acquisition caused this return. It should be noted that statistics on Syrian immigrants are contested, often unreliable, and may have been politically motivated depending on the source. As political winds blew back and forth, the number of Syrian workers in Lebanon was a constant point of contention. Those who supported the influx of cheap labor tended to understate numbers, while those against did the opposite. Nonetheless, it is clear that many Syrians returned to work in Lebanon. Their return highlights the extent and strength of the hegemonic forces at work. Despite hostility from the Lebanese, and a lack of basic social or employment protection, Syrians again found jobs in menial service industries. Some found work in more skilled positions, but their low cost of labor was always their main advantage in finding work; they undercut even Palestinian labor by a significant margin.

This undercutting by Syrian labor eventually led to “Instability and Exile,” as Chalcraft named his final chapter. Because of the low wages they received, Syrians were generally unable to accumulate wealth. The cost of living in Lebanon often consumed a large portion of their earnings, and what was left may have been spent in emergency medical situations or on survival during periods of unemployment. Still, Syrians came, a decision made as a “complex warp and weft of necessity, social obligation, family values, and an individual work ethic...” (153).

It was Syrian labor, however, that formed the backbone of the movement in the early 2000s for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Attacks on Syrians and Syrian supporters began again, and Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri’s assassination in 2005, widely believed to be the work of the Syrian government, caused attacks against Syrians to become even more commonplace. Troops withdrew in April 2005, to the benefit of the Syrian workers, who felt tensions ease. Nonetheless, these workers still felt trapped between two worlds, unable to assimilate fully in either Syria or Lebanon. After years of living and working in Lebanon, most of Chalcraft’s interviewees felt that it was where they belonged, though not necessarily where they felt happiest or necessarily at home.

(Continued on page 49)
Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon

This final point underscores the life of the labor migrant, trapped by choices made out of necessary allegiance to social and economic pressures.

Chalcraft’s research covers uncharted territory of a sensitive subject in a profound way. Nonetheless, a more substantial and even slightly more technical analysis would hammer home Chalcraft’s rejection of the application of traditional economic interpretations of the labor market to this subject. In the introduction, for example, Chalcraft writes, “The notion of labor power as a commodity contracted out by a bearer is an artifact of the economic imagination and contractarian theory guiding practice” (13). The traditional model indeed simplifies the complex factors affecting migration decisions by excluding not-easily quantifiable decisions, and Chalcraft does a thorough job explaining these factors. But the reader is still left with the feeling that the cost of labor is undoubtedly the most important element in the decision to both supply and demand labor. “Syrians found work because they were cheaper and more manipulatable than their Lebanese counterparts” (83) writes Chalcraft. In the end, the story is about salary, and to what length Syrians have been willing to go to make a living in world controlled by employers. The other hegemonic factors, while important, are secondary in the grand scheme of migration labor.

Chalcraft himself admits that he “tended to sacrifice the representativeness of the sample in favor of the depth and quality of the qualitative material” (14). His in-depth interviews paint a compelling story of the daily trials and tribulations of Syrian employees in Lebanon, including the 100-hour work week, unjustified and uncompensated terminations, and general abuse. From home to work and back, most Syrians had little time for much else, living with many other laborers in shared spaces and keeping their heads down in someone else’s society. These portraits of the lives of Syrian workers in Lebanon are made possible only by Chalcraft’s devotion to the personal story of each interview subject.

*The Invisible Cage* is a multifaceted story that weaves history, politics, economy, and personal narratives into a compelling account of hegemony and dominance over Syrian migrant laborers. A book review cannot do justice to the many nuanced ideas covered in the 232 pages. Nonetheless, this compelling account skillfully combines the history and politics of labor migration in historic Bilad al-Sham with an insightful ethnography of those Syrians who struggled for a better life during the past six decades.

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Money and Power

taxation allows a new understanding of the method by which the empire was administered. The analysis stresses an innovative dialectical and dynamic process that characterized the early Islamic administrative system at such an early stage, rather than mere adaptation within themes of continuity as has been understood.

Clive Foss’ “Mu‘āwiya’s State” (pp. 75-96) is a key contribution that will fundamentally change our understanding of the governance of the early Islamic state. The article argues against the general view within the discipline that Mu‘āwiya’s regime was relatively primitive, ruling through a loose tribal confederation. Foss examines Mu‘āwiya’s rule (658-680 CE) over three regions: Syria, Egypt and the eastern provinces (Iraq and Iran). He depends on both the textual evidence that is the narrative sources, papyri and numismatics to highlight the evidence on a complex government and an organized state that existed as early as the time of this caliph.

In “First Century Islamic Currency: Mastering the Message from the Money” (pp. 97-123) Gene W. Heck digs into the evolution and development of early Islamic currency, and its role in the dynamic economic growth of the early Islamic Empire. He employs evidence from medieval Muslim chronicles, supported by the residual mining evidence and coins, to track early Islamic currency development. He establishes that highly developed understanding of monetary policies application “today deemed modern” (p 119) by the first Muslim caliphs was behind the evolution of such a huge commercial empire. This effort will certainly open new doors of research into this complex issue.

In “‘Abd al-Malik’s Monetary Reform in Copper and the Failure of Centralization” (pp. 125-146) Lutz Ilisch discusses the copper coinage fulūs of Abd el-Malik’s monetary reforms as bearing ideological significance as part of a larger process that was intended to create a unified monetary system. By examining the numismatic evidence on the reform copper fulūs from different regions within the early Islamic Empire, Ilisch argues that reform copper coinage as part of a caliphate-wide monetary unity succeeded for a few years but was difficult to maintain later especially in the self-governed provinces.

In “Early Islamic Urbanism and Building Activity in Jerusalem and at Hammath Gader” (pp. 145-163) Jodi Magness reconsiders the chronology of the two sites: the Umayyad structures excavated after 1967 at the southern end of al-Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem, and Hammat Gader. She presents evidence on intensive usage and occupational continuity of the two sites during the Abbasid period that debunks the general belief of a dramatic decline that affected Palestine after the fall of the Umayyads.

In “Late Antique Legacies and Muslim Economic Expansion” (pp. 165-179) Jairus Banaji mainly depends on textual material to argue for the evolution of the first two centuries of Islamic economic growth and the contribution of late antique economic legacies in such an evolution.

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In “Syrian Elites from Byzantium to Islam: Survival or Extinction?” (pp. 181-200) Hugh Kennedy examines the question of continuity and change between the social political and social élites in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Syria. Combining both textual and archaeological evidence Kennedy concludes that whereas the old Hellenized ruling class of pre-Islamic Syria disappeared, the descendents of the Arab tribes the Ghassānids became the real élite of Syria after the Islamic conquest.

This book brings new insights into the history of early Islamic Syria through the ever-increasing archaeological and textual evidence on the complexity of this transformational process. The contributors provide explanatory footnotes, and excellent bibliographies at the end of their articles. The collection addresses specialists and provides graduate students with new themes for research.

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SSA PRIZE FOR BEST WRITING ON SYRIA
CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

In order to promote and highlight excellence in research on Bilad al-Sham, the Syrian Studies Association awards annual prizes for the best writing on Syria.

In 2011, the SSA seeks submissions for best article or book chapter published in an edited collection. Articles published between August 2010 and Sept. 2011 and chapters in edited collections published in 2010 and 2011 are eligible.

Submissions in languages other than English are welcomed; all submissions should be sent electronically.

The deadline for submissions is Sept. 1, 2011. All submissions should be sent to Steve Tamari, Chair of the Prize Committee at stamari@siue.edu. Winners will be announced at the SSA annual meeting in November 2011. Inquiries can be directed to Steve.
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Semester students have the opportunity to take one of two program tracks. Track 1 includes MSA (8 hours/week), Levantine dialect (6 hours/week) and two elective courses taught in English (each 3 hours/week). Track 2 focuses entirely on language immersion with core intensive Arabic language classes and electives offered strictly in Arabic: MSA (8 hours/week), Levantine dialect (6 hours/week), and two Arabic electives taught in Arabic (each 3 hours/week).

For program details, course syllabi and faculty CVs, visit www.cetacademicprograms.com and view what students are saying about CET programs on our blog: http://cetacademicprograms.wordpress.com. Note that the summer 2011 application deadline is March 1, and space will be limited.