

MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS



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SYRIA AT RISK? A COUNTRY DIVIDED

BY RANA B. KHOURY

I was simmering with emotion after spending a day amid the rubble of razed houses, wrecked mosques and churches, a shot-out hospital, and with Israeli military outposts in the distance all the while. But my outrage was only partially a result of the scenes of destruction in the city of Quneitra, the former capital of the Golan Heights handed back to Syria after the Israelis razed everything in sight and sent thousands of refugees packing in 1974. Rather, my anger was at the apathy of the Syrians that was to me even more disheartening and unacceptable than I had previously thought. But my grandfather swiftly humbled me. Placing his hand on my shoulder, he explained, “when the body hurts for so long in so many places, eventually one stops saying *ouch*.” His eyes that had seen so much – his country’s liberation from the French, countless coups and political experiments, the occupation of the Golan Heights and Palestine, the inside of a prison cell in which he refused to renounce his leftist politics, and an opening to the West – turned away. His hand remained on my shoulder.

Despite my frustration at the time, I know that Syrians and Arabs are not politically apathetic. That knowledge can come from spending just one hour in the living room of an Arab home. In a kitchen, no dish goes unappreciated by those who know that politics itself has the power to put food on the table. For anyone who may have still thought so, the Arab awakening has dissipated notions of apathy and ambivalence in the Middle East. We should celebrate this new era, and most of all the crumbling of the psychological wall of fear that my generation has exhibited. We should also analyze it and consider the consequences.

The most prominent scholars of Syria are telling us that Syria’s is a complex social fabric. [Bassam Haddad](#) describes the heterogeneity of Syrian society in its religious, ethnic, socio-economic, and ideological groups. [Joshua Landis](#) warns that the Alawite minority, an offshoot of Shi’a Islam which has ruled majority-Sunni Syria for decades, presents a precarious situation that can easily become a violent one. Least is the geographic dissonance. [As’ad AbuKhalil](#), recalls an exchange he had with the late academic Hanna Batatu:

I was once making a presentation about my paper on the Syrian opposition under Hafidh Al-Asad taught by the great, Hanna Batatu. After I finished Batatu looked at me and said, ‘when in the contemporary politics of Syria did Aleppo, Hama, Hums, and Damascus move together?’ I did not have an intelligent answer, I remember.

I would dovetail AbuKhalil’s point with something I do remember. Syrian cities do not move together, nor do they resemble each other. When I lived in Syria after college I visited thirteen of the country’s fourteen provinces. In the eastern city of Deir az-Zor, up the Euphrates River from Iraq, the contrast with the coastal cities was stark. Residents spoke in an accent unfamiliar to me, services were seriously limited, and I struggled to find other women on the streets. The local men drove in this latter point with their quizzical stares; in one instance a group of them were chattering in my direction when one stated, “she’s from Damascus,” and the rest exuded a collective “aah” of understanding.

Yet I did not need to venture across the desert to know of the cleavages. My own story embodies to some extent three significant paradigms in Syrian society - supporters of the status quo, the Islamist center, and the Palestinian

question.

For one, my family is of Christian heritage and generally exemplifies the protected minority that prefers a strong-handed but secular ruler to the frightful alternative of extremist Islam. Most of them are liberal-minded people who understand the flaws of the system and desire more. But after so many years of uncertainty in an unstable region, most of them opt for the devil they know. Yesterday a cousin forwarded me a question on Facebook asking in Arabic if I prefer *aman* or *hurriya*, security or freedom. Syrian minorities, however, are not alone in supporting the regime. As counterrevolutionary demonstrations have exhibited, many middle class Sunnis believe in the current system. This sector is probably economically comfortable, and, more often, supports Bashar al-Assad's shepherding of a pro-Arab and anti-imperialist foreign policy.

Meanwhile, my mother's family is from Hama, a city known for the brutal crackdown it suffered at the hands of the current president's father, Hafez al-Assad, in 1982. Under the pretences of preventing an Islamist uprising, Assad decimated the city. Estimates of the killed hover around twenty thousand. Like all others in the city, my family lived under lockdown for weeks, their houses were looted, they were beaten by government soldiers, and they buried loved ones. And like all their neighbors, they will never forget. Even if they wanted to do so, the bullet holes in old houses and the bombed-out buildings would not let them. The sad irony today is that Hama is as conservative and marginalized as ever.

The atmosphere in Hama is a world away from the bustling alleyways of Old Damascus, the sophisticated air of Aleppo, the laid-back atmosphere of Tartous, and the spiritual ambiance in the towns of Sayd Nayya and Ma'ara, where some inhabitants still speak Aramaic. And all of this is different yet from the Palestinian refugee camp where I taught English to primary students at an UNRWA school (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Near East Refugees). A few weeks ago I was taken back to Husseinieh in [a YouTube video](#) on the [Facebook page of the Syrian Revolution](#). It exposed the decrepit conditions of this neighborhood primarily inhabited by Palestinian refugees.

When I initially began working there, I made the following observations in my personal blog: *The bus I was instructed to take uses an illegal route, adding a guilty sense of complicity to my relative-induced trepidation... I sit in a bus full of men scantily concealing their curiosity at the sight of me... I wonder if they can sense my nerves. Thirty minutes later, we pull into the Husseinieh refugee camp, the entrance of which doubles as the community garbage dump. I absorb the sights as inconspicuously as possible, trying to appear natural as I walk up the unpaved roads towards the school.*

I soon developed a close attachment to my students and the harshness of the poverty surrounding us softened. But I also became acutely aware of the complexity of their relationship to the state they live in – Syria – and the nation they are a part of – Palestine. It is this precariousness of diasporic existence that the regime is utilizing to [blame foreign elements for the unrest](#). This is not new in Syria; the former president led brutal campaigns against Palestinians in Lebanon during that country's civil war. But it is as shameful as ever when Arabs around the region are demanding to be treated with dignity, something the Palestinians have not enjoyed for far too long.

The consequence of this complex social fabric is not apathy but division. It is inspiring to see Syrians rising up against a brutally suppressive security state. But the chance the revolutionaries have of overcoming their divisions and forming a united critical mass remains limited. Bashar al-Assad is poised to retain the minimal threshold of legitimacy that keeps him in power unless he dissipates it with more killings of civilians. And should he manage that, I cannot help but fear the consequences for those who tried to stand up for what is rightfully theirs.

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