

Syria in the Abyss

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Since the upsurge of revolutionary opposition to Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship began around March 2011, the world has been riveted by Syria, a country about which most people had previously known little or nothing. Those brave activists animating the nonviolent uprising that lasted for at least a year (and has not ended, according to many), defiantly demanding freedom, justice, and dignity after more than 40 years of single-party rule, were soon relegated to a bit part in a militarized struggle that rapidly escalated from its local and national context into a regional conflict and international proxy war.

At a human level, the past three and a half years have taken the lives of more than 200,000 people, the overwhelming majority civilians. Over nine million have been forced from their homes; about two-thirds of them are internally displaced while the rest are refugees, primarily in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon. As this hellish situation festers and the fighting grinds on, international intervention—by the United States, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait, to name just a few—increases unabated, throwing more fuel on the fire.

Most of the political and journalistic discourse on Syria resorts to breathless punditry without much historical perspective. It is a grim irony that, given the relatively sparse historical scholarship available on modern Syria, bookshelves are now starting to groan under the weight of lurid accounts of atrocities amid what might end up being the most tragic period in Syria's modern history. And this is saying a lot, considering the protracted struggle against French Mandate colonialism (1920–46) and the coup-ridden early postindependence era (1946–70).

Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect
by Reese Erlich.
Prometheus Books, 2014.

In *Inside Syria*, Reese Erlich, an American journalist, offers an account of the Syrian rebellion and subsequent war, and also speculates on prospects for the country and the region. Erlich has extensive experience reporting from the Middle East and North Africa, and his book is conversationally written and informative.

The early chapters provide a capsule history of Syria from the late Ottoman period until the Baath Party coup in 1963 and Hafez al-Assad's consolidation of power in 1970. This narrative is well paced, though it includes superficial descriptions and a few strange detours; all things considered, general readers will find it more useful than specialists.

A FAR CRY

Inside Syria hits its stride when Erlich ably chronicles the initial phases of the uprising in early 2011. He rightly notes that the Baathist regime demonized its own protesting citizens in a way that was incongruous with reality. Even after the uprising became irrevocably militarized, "local people taking up arms in self-defense is a far cry from CIA/Israeli/Saudi-sponsored rebels attacking the Assad government," which is what Syrian state media incessantly reported was happening. The author provides a helpful summary of the various groupings under the umbrella of the Syrian opposition, from secular activists to various shades of Islamist political and military forces, including the Free Syrian Army, Ahrar al-Sham, the Nusra Front, and the Islamic State.

Unlike so much journalism that essentially blames the victims of war for their plight, Erlich uses careful description as a means of understanding Syrian politics and society. He exercises sound judgment on controversial matters—for example, in tracking allegations of chemical weapons use. The author judiciously concludes: "Both sides quite possibly used sarin. Both sides lied and

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manipulated evidence. At a minimum, the Obama administration exaggerated its case to justify a military attack on Syria. At worst, the White House fabricated intelligence. Bottom line: No one has yet presented convincing evidence of who perpetrated the horrific Al Ghouta attack.”

Clearly, Erlich is unafraid to voice opinions, and he never spares the US government and other international actors from judgment. The book offers withering criticism of President Barack Obama’s misguided and even willfully ignorant Syria policy. “Obama had a Syria policy—it just didn’t work,” Erlich writes. “The CIA began working with Syrian exiles very early but was unable to find or create credible, pro-US rebel groups despite strenuous efforts.” He is correct to point out that discussions in the United States about Syria have long been “strangely detached from the reality on the ground,” even as Washington has escalated its indirect involvement in the war.

Inside Syria attempts to take seriously the support still enjoyed by the Assad regime, among Alawites and Christians in particular, which is explained mostly in terms of self-preservation and fear. Erlich also explores the ideological, political, and identity-based interests that underpin the Iran-Syria alliance.

One of the book’s most inventive and effective sections is a history of the Kurds and Kurdish political movements in Syria during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The Syrian regime encouraged the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey, for example, even as it denied citizenship and services to Kurds inside Syria, claiming that they had been born in Turkey or Iraq. After the uprising began, the Assad regime granted citizenship to about 250,000 of the nearly 300,000 Kurds who still had none. Perhaps even more important, Erlich reminds us that Kurds in Syria—unlike separatist movements in Turkey and Iraq—have for the most part called for rights but not independence. In the final analysis, the Kurds are described as “the wildcard in the Syrian uprising,” and they “have no intention of leaving the game.”

DOUBLE STANDARDS

Erlich criticizes the double standards applied to US and Israeli actions in the region, as with repeated Israeli air strikes on Syrian territory since the uprising and civil war began: “Firing missiles at another country constitutes an act of war—unless

you’re Israel or the United States.” He cites a number of Israeli academics and government officials who assert that Israel continues to prefer the “devil they know”—Assad—and thus is perfectly content to watch Syrians continue to suffer. Erlich insinuates that this cynical strategy may also help explain US policy in Syria.

His concluding chapter explores how the United States, Russia, and other foreign actors affect the ongoing crisis. Erlich notes the geopolitical context: “Syria has no strategic minerals and produces relatively little oil. It has no important seaports or military bases. But it has something any real-estate agent would envy: location.”

Having laid out the main historical background and current situation (as of early 2014), Erlich lays his cards on the table. “I oppose all outside interference in Syria, whether from the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or any other country,” he writes. “Both the United States and Russia could play a positive role in reaching a diplomatic solution, possibly through the United Nations.” Erlich also calls for “people-to-people activities” that he says should proceed alongside multilateral political and diplomatic channels.

Some may fault Erlich for such an idealistic appeal. Moreover, the book’s conclusion is abrupt, rushed, and a tad schmaltzy: “The people of Syria—with their tradition of tolerance—will ultimately prevail.” The author occasionally loses his narrative thread. He also tends to rely on a relatively limited body of source materials: In addition to his own reporting, it includes online media sources and a smattering of interviews with Syria analysts.

But *Inside Syria* is intended for a general readership, and those with only passing knowledge of Syria’s history and politics will glean much information in these pages. Scholars of the modern Middle East will find less that is new. Nonetheless, the book will be a useful resource for journalists and general readers interested in disentangling the knotted problems of Syrian history and politics.

Predicting the future in the Middle East is a lucrative but impossible enterprise. However, amid increasing US intervention in Syria and Iraq, it seems safe to say that the sensible recommendations made in *Inside Syria* are both inspiring and unlikely ever to be heeded by those with real power. ■