

Book Review: Among the Ruins: Syria Past and Present by Christian C. Sahner

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2015/01/13/book-review-among-the-ruins-syria-past-and-present-by-christian-c-sahner/

13/01/2015

Among the Ruins blends history, memoir and reportage, drawing on the author's extensive knowledge of Syria in ancient, medieval, and modern times. The author's status as an outsider who deeply immersed himself in Syrian life, culture, and history enables him to write from a non-partial perspective and to share his deep knowledge of Syria with other "outside" readers who seek a deeper understanding beyond news reports of the Syrian "catastrophe", writes Catherine Hezser.

Among the Ruins: Syria Past and Present. Christian C. Sahner. Hurst & Company. 2014.

Find this book: 

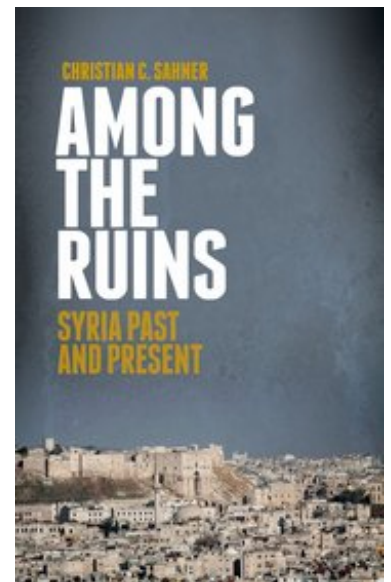
This excellent little book, a mixture of "deep" history and travelogue, is essential reading for anyone who wants to gain a better understanding of the current situation in Syria and the Middle East, beyond newspaper headlines.

The struggle between the Syrian regime and opposition groups, the advent of Islamic State, the crisis of Christians, and discussions about the "unholy" alliance between the US and the Asad regime are making daily newspaper headlines. What the newspapers do not disclose is the long history of sectarianism in Syria which still "exerts a powerful influence on the present" (p.189).

The author, a Ph.D. student in Byzantine Studies, Arabic, and Early Islam at Princeton University, has based his book on the diary entries he made during his stay in Damascus in 2008-10 and in Beirut in 2011-13. The combination of daily life experiences, meetings with Syrians from various religious and political backgrounds, travels to historical places, scholarly acumen, and a deep understanding of and sympathy for the Syrian people make for a fascinating and, despite the sometimes grim outlook, engaging book that provides a deep insight into Syrian history and identity and presents multiple contexts to understand current developments.

In the five chapters of the book Sahner moves from his present-day experiences and encounters with Christians and Muslims of various denominations back into the historical roots of Syrian sectarianism. Tracing the region's history from its Byzantine Christian past and the Islamic conquest of the seventh century to modern sectarian divisions and political allegiances, he is able to present a complex and vivid portrait of a nation threatened to lose its cultural heritage and identity but, hopefully, able to arise out of the ruins "like a phoenix... once the fighting is over" (p.190).

The first chapter focuses on early Islam under the Umayyad dynasty, a time which is often seen as the "golden age" of Islamic state-building. In the seventh century "Syria emerged as the most stable, powerful, and influential of the new Islamic provinces" (p.8) and became the centre of an expanding Islamic world. Yet Syrian society was "divided by linguistic, regional, and sectarian differences" (p.11), with various groups of Christians forming the majority long into the Middle Ages. Muslim attempts to marginalize Christians and to become central themselves are symbolized by the razing of the Byzantine basilica in Damascus's central square and the erection of the Umayyad Mosque in its place. This mosque is like "a palimpsest of Syrian history" (p.20), reflecting a constant re-use and transformation of the past. Early Islamic history also sets the stage for conflicts between Sunni and Shi'a forms of Islam and the development of a Sunni majority. The Umayyad victory over the Shi'a threat in 680 (Karbala) can be seen as a



crucial moment of tragedy in Shi'i consciousness. Modern-day Shi'i pilgrimage to the Umayyad Mosque, on the other hand, reflects the close relationship between the Baath regime and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The 2000-year history of Christianity in Syria, exemplified by fifteen churches from different Christian denominations in the Bar Touma neighbourhood of Damascus, is the subject of the second chapter. Struggles between the mainstream "orthodox" church in Constantinople brought adherents of various Christian sects to Syria in the long struggle between orthodoxy and heresy. The arrival of Islam had calmed Christian infighting and promoted intermarriage. At the same time, "a dynamic convert culture" developed, "in which Muslims and Christians kept a foot in both worlds" (p.58). Among the positive aspects of Baathist rule was the support of religious minorities. While cooperation and socializing between Muslims and Christians were still evident in 2008, Muslims tended to suspect Christians of lax "un-Syrian" lifestyles. Sahner suspects that such sentiments reflect "resentment toward the minority as the achiever, as the outlier of dubious foreign loyalties, as the dissenter who rejected the culture of the mainstream" (p.72).

The Baathists' support of Christianity was based on their own sectarian roots. Deriving from the 'Alawi minority of the mountain village of Qardaha and representing a particular form of Shi'ism, the Asad family was able to rise to power at the time of Arab nationalism in the aftermath of French mandate rule. Promoting pan-Arabism, an Arab identity based on a shared language and culture, was meant to counter religious and political sectarianism. The "otherwise avowedly secular worldview" (p.103) of the Baathists arose the suspicion of the Sunni majority and could not disguise the fact that a small 'Alawi ruling clique, supported by the Twelver Shi'a in Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, claimed authority over a largely Sunni population which suffered badly from its policies. The Baath state developed a Soviet-style bureaucracy with internal security services monitoring the public, creating suspicion and distrust among the populace. This "decay of civil society" and "form of dictatorship" constitute "a form of intellectual and spiritual incarceration" (p.122). As a consequence, various more or less fundamentalist Islamic groups rose up in opposition to the Asad regime, especially its alleged openness to western influence.

In this conflict Israel serves as a boogeyman to distract people's attention away from the violence of the Asad regime to the Palestinian cause. Sahner believes that some foreign diplomats' hopes that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict could be solved through "the Syria track" is misplaced: "As these police states tortured, taxed, and terrified their own people, they claimed to champion the rights of oppressed Palestinians", which is all "a matter of shrewd politics" (p.130) and "rhetorical charade" (p.132).

Particularly interesting is the author's assessment of many Syrian Muslims' double standards concerning the West. On the one hand, the greatest fear of observant Sunnis seems to be "America's cultural hegemony in the region", "the overturning of traditional Muslim societies and their replacement with cultures of libertine commercialism" (p.140). At the same time, the West elicits some fascination. As for the 9/11 attackers, "their hatred of the West was born of a deep, almost prurient fascination with it" (p.143); a seeming contradiction which Sahner also encountered among some of his Syrian interlocutors. Islamic terror can then be understood as "a crime of passion gone awry, of dislocation between traditional Islamic values and the liberal zeitgeist of a globalized age" (ibid.). Anti-Western outbursts may also serve to let off steam, "energy, creativity, and talent that went untapped in a system that imprisoned its citizens" (p.144).

The author hopes that the historical tradition of co-existence (*'aysh mushtarak*) between people of different religious backgrounds will eventually come to the fore again and prevail over sectarian violence. His status as an outsider who deeply immersed himself in Syrian life, culture, and history enables Sahner to write from a non-partial perspective and to share his deep knowledge of Syria with other "outside" readers who seek a deeper understanding beyond news reports of the Syrian "catastrophe".

Catherine Hezser is Professor of Jewish Studies in the Department of the Study of Religions at SOAS. She received her Ph.D. from JTSA, New York and a Dr. theol. from the University of Heidelberg. [Read more reviews by Catherine.](#)

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books