

Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom

Alan George

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Reviewed by Joshua A. Stacher

Alan George's book *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*, published in May 2003 by Zed Press, comes at a propitious time. With the world's attention focused on Iraq's changed regime and the United States passing the Syrian Accountability Act against Damascus' Baath regime in December 2003, a work detailing president Bashar al-Asad's consolidation of leadership is extremely relevant. George, who is a journalist and a specialist on Syria (having earned a Ph.D. on Syrian politics from the University of Durham), has the tools to provide needed insight into this understudied and misunderstood Arab republic.

The book argues that domestic constraints, namely regime hardliners, and external factors, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the U.S. role in the region, are impeding Bashar al-Asad's reforming agenda and hampering the political system with enduring authoritarianism. This, in turn, leaves Syria mired in a state of economic and political underdevelopment.

George divides his monograph into nine chapters. These include a brief introduction to the country and chapters dealing substantively with modern Syrian politics—including the acclaimed Damascus Spring (May 2000-January 2001), a period of civil society-state negotiation to redefine political space when Bashar came to power, and its termination, which he aptly calls the "Damascus Winter" (January 2001-present). Also, there are chapters that examine major institutions such as the Baath party, the People's Assembly, the legal system, the media, and the education system. The concluding chapter summarizes George's findings and reviews the ongoing struggle between modernizers, headed by president Bashar al-Asad, and conservative hardliners, led by regime stalwarts such as 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam (161-62). The book ends with an overview of the country's economic situation (162-66), external relations with Europe and the United States (166-69), and the regime's prospects for political reform.

George maintains a keen eye for detail and uses language that is easily accessible to a number of audiences, including nonspecialists, human rights activists, journalists, students, or regional specialists. This works in the book's favor. George has a clear style and his prose remains happily free of academic jargon. Particularly worthy of note are chapters two and three, which detail the Damascus Spring and Winter and civil society's role as a force for political change. The author relies on field research and interviews with civil society activists within and outside of Syria, many of whom were directly involved in the Damascus Spring. George has spent considerable time in Syria and this shows through his hands-on approach. The concluding chapter is the book's most analytical, as he details many of the working dynamics of Syria's enduring authoritarianism. The middle chapters also provide an adequate account of the everyday working of authoritarian institutions. Nonetheless, it must be said that readers wishing to obtain a

better understanding of Bashar al-Asad's difficulties in liberalizing Syria's political order will not be satisfied by this book because of its facile analysis.

While George's language is accessible to a wide audience, his analysis is marred by various questionable assumptions regarding political change. For example, throughout most of the book, the author assumes that had Syria's civil society not been reigned in, a democratizing breakthrough would have been likely. Given the extent of academic works that have been devoted to civil society, such a facile view is hardly justifiable. Additionally, there is George's assumption that economic liberalization will contribute to a parallel liberalization of the political order. Yet, as all too many works have shown, this has not been the case in the Middle East, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. George's unsupported assumptions produce a tension throughout the work. Although he argues in the concluding chapter that civil society will not necessarily lead to the establishment of democracy (171) and that the so-called Washington Consensus is erroneous (170), his treatment of these issues is inconsistent in earlier chapters.

In a related vein, the book can be faulted for its ambiguous handling of the regime. This is partly due to Syria's political leadership and its inaccessibility. Throughout the work, George makes comparisons between the society described in George Orwell's 1948 novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—wrecked by “Big Brother” with its outrageous claims and obsessive tactics to force citizen loyalty—and contemporary Syria. While an attractive comparison, this only loosely reflects the political reality of any dictatorial regime. It is, without doubt, too simplistic to be useful as a framework for understanding contemporary Syrian politics. The irony is that George's use of Syria's “Old Guard” allusion resembles Orwell's faceless, nameless “Big Brother.” The reader is never quite sure who the “Old Guard” are, with the exception of Vice-President ‘Abd al-Halim Khaddam, former Parliamentary Speaker ‘Abd al-Qadur al-Qadurra, and Defense Minister Mustapha Tlas. Thus, the “Old Guard” remains a diligent actor working against liberalization. The “Old Guard” becomes a black box that extends and holds influence over Bashar al-Asad's modernizing designs. While one cannot disagree with the notion of the “Old Guard” in principle, it needs to be developed further.

The remaining criticism is that the book is all too often polemical rather than sharpened social science. This is most evident in the limited bibliography and over-reliance on some sources, such as the Human Rights Watch report *Syria Unmasked* (1991). There are times when the author argues emotionally, for example: “Depressing as it may be for lovers of freedom and democracy, it would seem that bread *can* be made without freedom” (171). While it is difficult to oppose ideas such as freedom and democracy, George's approach results in a biased, value-laden study reminiscent of Kanan Makiya's *Republic of Fear* (1989). The language leads to an argument of good versus bad rather than a representation of a more sophisticated political reality. The author's views on the regime are one-sided. As George argues, “Although it [the civil society movement] posed no immediate challenge to the system . . . it reminded Syrians that there are alternatives to brute force and fear as the basis of political life” (28). While the domestic situation is easier to understand when it is presented in a regime versus civil society or authoritarianism versus democracy dynamic, the reality is that Syria's political environment is polarized and fragmented due to decades of social conflict and unabated authoritarianism. This has produced many multilayered and co-dependent political, economic, and social relationships, which cannot be reduced to a duality.

George is pessimistic about Syria's chances of developing a more liberal or inclusive system of governance. President al-Asad has clearly chosen administrative and economic reform without political liberalization during his consolidation period. Despite my criticisms, the book is important because of its analysis of the Damascus Spring, the struggle between the modernizers and the hardliners, and prospects of future development. After Washington's quick victory over Iraq and the moments of irrational exuberance that followed with its warnings to Syria, it is evident that the social science community, human rights activists, and the wider public need to learn more about Syria. But the book better serves as an introduction with a polemic argument. Researchers remain better off referring to the works of Volker Perthes and Raymond Hinnebusch, which provide a more complex representation of Syrian politics, although they are less current. This work deserves to be read, but readers will unfortunately have to wait for a less biased explanation of the Damascus Spring and Bashar al-Asad's ongoing leadership consolidation.

Joshua A. Stacher is a doctoral candidate in the Department of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews (UK).