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Syria: The Barbarian State

Leïla VIGNAL

The Syrian revolution is orphan because the repressive, authoritarian and increasingly ferocious regime of Bashar al-Assad is still in place. According to Ziad Majed, the lack of response from the international community is largely responsible for this state of affairs.

Reviewed : Ziad Majed, *Syrie, la révolution orpheline*, [Syria: the Orphan Revolution] Sindbad/Actes Sud, collection L'Orient des livres, 2014, 171 p., 20 €.

Let us say at the outset that *Syrie, la révolution orpheline* is a highly valuable document, an essential book for anyone who wishes to better understand the Syrian revolution and the country's long descent into hell. Its publication last spring should thus be welcomed in more ways than one.

The book is based on the very accurate and personal knowledge that the author, political scientist Ziad Majed, has amassed at each stage of what has become the contemporary Syrian tragedy. It helps to understand both the origins of the revolution and the Assad regime's repressive response to it, by tracing the revolution's foundations and recent history and by shedding light, in five chapters, on the key elements being played out in Syria today. This short, beautifully written, and clearly constructed book provides readers with information and analyses drawn from primary sources obtained through close relations with key players of Syria's domestic scene.

Indeed, the essay proposed by Majed is the work of a committed intellectual who, ever since the first weeks of the uprising, has maintained permanent contact with Syrian society—the one that rose up and is made up of activists, intellectuals and political opponents, but also of all those ordinary people who have revealed the little-known, and often unknown, face of Syria. For a while, these Syrians generated enthusiasm thanks to their courage and the strength of their claims. Yet their revolution was gradually engulfed, if not in indifference, at least in the silence of the world.

From this perspective, *Syrie, la révolution orpheline* provides an informed, critical and thoughtful reflection on the way such silence has covered, during the many months of this still ongoing conflict, the peaceful uprising of a people in the name of human dignity and the violence

of the repression that followed.¹ It gives voice to those who are now facing two scourges that feed off each other: the raw violence of what remains of the Assad regime, determined to survive at all costs, and the equally destructive violence of the jihadist project.

The Assad Regime and the “Domestication” of Society

Why has the Assad regime—father and son—lasted so long, even though it has undergone major changes since the start of the Syrian uprising, and even though its days are most likely counted? Through what means has this regime, whose levels of police violence are among the highest in the world of tyrannies, been able to perpetuate itself and to benefit year after year from relative impunity on the international stage despite being regularly blacklisted?² The questions Majed seeks to answer help to understand the current Syrian paradox, namely that of a regime that has managed to preserve itself while being engaged in the large-scale and bloody repression of its population for almost four years.

The first set of explanations proposed by Majed can surely be found in what he terms the project of “domestication” of Syrian society initiated by Hafez al-Assad in 1970. This once vibrant society (before the Baathist era inaugurated in 1963)³ was domesticated through the gradual and then brutal muzzling of the different oppositions to the regime—i.e., the organisations on the left, but also the Muslim Brotherhood, whose uprising in the city of Hama was drowned in blood in 1982.⁴ The process of domestication also relied on a mix of “techniques” that pertain to the very substance of an oppressive regime: the personification of power (whereby the president is the source of all things and the origin of all success), the suspension of time (given that the regime is there “for eternity,” as the 2000 father-son succession seemed to confirm), absolute control over social and physical space, confiscation of the public sphere, and monopoly over the narration of reality. Lastly, the institutionalisation of repressive and surveillance instruments instilled among Syrians the feeling of impending danger, generalised distrust, and fear, thereby enforcing obedience.⁵ Together these elements give us a glimpse into the mental and physical reality of the Assad dictatorship, which the sociologist Michel Seurat analysed as the embodiment of a “state of barbarism.”⁶

¹ In early 2016, it is estimated that the number of deaths linked to the conflict is at least 350,000. Half of the population (ten million people) had to flee their homes: Eight million are internally displaced and over four million have found refuge outside the country.

² For the recent (pre-2011) period: US economic sanctions from 2003 onwards, on the one hand, and cooling of relations and suspension of negotiations on an Association Agreement with the EU after the 2005 assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister, which was attributed to Syrian intelligence, on the other hand.

³ See “The Origins of the Syrian Insurrection,” a review of Souhaïl Belhadj’s book, published on 26 January 2015 in *Books and Ideas* (<http://www.booksandideas.net/The-Origins-of-the-Syrian-Insurrection.html>).

⁴ See Nora Benkorich’s article on the repression of Hama, “Trente ans après, retour sur la tragédie de Hama,” published on 16 February 2012 in *Books and Ideas* (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Trente-ans-apres-retour-sur-la.html>).

⁵ Securing obedience is the most important political issue for dictators, as is recalled by philosopher Slavoj Žižek, quoted by Lisa Wedeen in her book on Syria. In this book, Wedeen specifically analyses the cult of personality of Hafez al-Assad as a disciplinary tool (*Ambiguities of Domination, Politics, Rhetorics and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁶ Michel Seurat, *L’État de barbarie* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1980).

The pages devoted by Majed to this Syria imprisoned from within allow us to grasp the size of the chasm crossed by those who took to the streets in the spring of 2011 against this multifaceted oppression—against this “kingdom of silence.”

Most significantly, the book also shows that the invisibility of domestic Syria is a symmetrical effect of the country’s affirmation as a key player on the diplomatic and strategic stage of the Middle East. It traces how Hafez al-Assad developed Syria’s diplomatic and strategic role in ways that served the project of domestication of society: As Syria became a “regional patron,” an unavoidable interlocutor, its domestic scene was erased and Syrian society was turned into a “black box,” to use the words of the Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh.⁷ This “invisibilisation” of Syrian society⁸ and of Syrian policy’s domestic component is the second set of reasons put forward by Majed to account for the resilience of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in the current crisis. It is Syria’s key regional role which, in his view, explains why it was so difficult for the international community to hear the claims expressed from March 2011 by Syrian society—namely that of “ordinary people.”⁹

From this perspective, it is likely that the importance given to analyses of the Syrian revolution first as a “religious” conflict and then, after the armed struggle broke out, as a “war by proxy” stems in part from this erasure of Syrian society by the regime. Such categories were forged in the light of other conflicts—namely, the Lebanese civil war and the post-2004 conflict in Iraq—and are not adapted to the analysis of the revolution in Syria. Indeed, Syrians did not rise up in 2011 to fight each other on the basis of primordial religious or ethnic affiliations, even though the religious dimension, manipulated by the regime, did play a greater role in subsequent developments of the conflict. Similarly, Syrians did not revolt against the regime of Bashar al-Assad to serve the interests of a particular power, even though Syria’s position as a geopolitical hub on the regional stage did cause the regime’s allies (Russia, Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah) to immediately side with it, while prompting regional and international powers (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United States, France, the UK, and the “Friends of Syria” coalition) to provide (limited) support to some segments of the regime’s opposition.

The “Exception” of the Syrian Revolution

By tracing the chronology of the Syrian uprising, Majed’s book allows us to understand in what sense the latter constitutes an exception in the revolutionary landscape of the “Arab Spring.”

Majed recalls the size of the mobilisation against the regime, the dynamics of its geographic expansion, its peaceful and unitary character, its modes of organisation, and the political sense it simultaneously fostered in multiple centres as well as at the national scale. Yet

⁷ On the issue of invisibility as an element of the Syrian regime’s strategy of power, see also another text by Yassin al-Haj Saleh, “Forty-Four Months and Forty-Four Years, 1-Two Blindfolds,” available on the website L’internationale Online, <http://internationaleonline.tumblr.com/post/102807091601/forty-four-months-and-forty-four-years-1-two>.

⁸ I tried to account for this invisibility in an article published in 2003 in the journal *Esprit*, by choosing the title “Comment peut-on être Syrien?” (How Can One Be Syrian?) (Paris: July 2003).

⁹ For an analysis of pre-2011 Syrian society, see also the book *La Syrie au Présent*, reviewed in *Books and Ideas* (“La Syrie à l’aube du XXI^e siècle,” published on 30 October 2008, <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/La-Syrie-a-l-aube-du-XXIe-siecle.html>), and Caroline Donati’s book *L’exception syrienne* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009).

he also accounts for the actors of the uprising, that is, for the group of formerly voiceless, ordinary people who engaged and thereby emerged on the political scene. Majed devotes long passages to describing the “country within,” which was covered once more with a shroud of invisibility and silence via the ban on foreign media and the deployment of the propaganda machine, as the regime sought to impose a single narrative of what was happening in Syria.

Syrian activists have been fighting this single narrative by inventing alternative modes of documentation, communication, and information, by launching newspapers and radios, by writing texts, poems, and songs, by developing photography and new media, and by producing often humorous films, short films, and cartoons.¹⁰ Thus Syrians have displayed tremendous creativity to bypass the constraints of confinement and repression, and to overcome the difficulty of producing and diffusing information. A unexpected group emerged in multiple Syrian locations, from Kafr Nabl—a small town famous for the force and humour of the slogans inscribed on its banners—to Saraqib—whose walls were covered with political and poetic graffiti (including photographs), and this in a country where walls had been exclusively reserved for posters glorifying the regime and its leaders. Majed accounts in this way for the commitment to civil action of men and women who have been documenting the victims of repression,¹¹ developing local governance structures (for the most part in areas “liberated” by the armed opposition, such as Aleppo¹²), providing humanitarian aid, building schools and alternative care centres, etc. Yet he also observes that the action of activists has been the main target of repression—in particular the political activism that structured the revolutionary movement of 2011, the latter’s forces having since been decimated by arrests, forced exile, clandestinity, and death.

Majed shows that the gradual turn to armed struggle by part of the opposition from the second half of 2011 was not desired by all, and that it is a direct effect of the violence with which the regime responded to the movement’s political claims. He describes the modalities of this repression aimed at annihilating all opposition, including by dividing Syrians, fragmenting the country with dams, blockades, and sieges,¹³ and engaging in the massive aerial bombardment of “liberated” areas—except for those in the northeast of the country which gradually passed, from 2013 onwards, under the control of the (non-Syrian) jihadists of the Islamic State. He describes how the regime has exacerbated the religious dimension, for instance by sending Alawite militia (who hail from the same religious minority as the Assad regime) to carry out massacres in Sunni villages, by safeguarding the areas under its control, and by exerting a differentiated repression—one less brutal in areas with large minorities, which it could then claim to protect. He also shows how destruction and violence against civilians have been used as a weapon of war, and this especially since late 2012, when the bombardment of “liberated” areas became systematic and massive, accelerating the flight of civilians.

¹⁰ See for instance “The Syrian Revolution in Three Minutes,” an incredibly funny short film produced by activists from the city of Kafr Nabl (<http://syriadirect.org/main/37-videos/804-kafr-nabl-the-syrian-revolution-in-3-minutes>).

¹¹ See for instance the work of the *Violations Documentation Centre in Syria* (www.vdc-sy.info/).

¹² For a review of civil institutions in Aleppo, see Adam Baczko et al., “Vers un nouvel État syrien? Les institutions du gouvernorat d'Alep,” in *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie. Les clés pour comprendre les acteurs et les défis de la crise (2011-2013)*, François Burgat and Bruno Paoli (eds), Paris: La Découverte, 2013.

¹³ For instance the siege of Eastern Ghouta, a neighbourhood in eastern Damascus, the siege of the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp, also in Damascus, and the siege of Homs, which lasted until the spring of 2014.

Lastly, Majed highlights a characteristic that is perhaps unique to the Syrian crisis: the fact that millions of films and photographs have documented, via social networks, this conflict that the regime has been trying to hide. This exceptional documentation constitutes an unprecedented source for future historians. Yet these images also show the worst that a society can produce, namely a violence produced by an even greater violence exerted during forty long years—in short, a barbarism available in a few clicks. Majed also stresses the following disturbing fact: Those millions of images make it possible to identify those who have killed in Syria. Murderers have, in a way, operated “in the open” insofar as their faces have circulated on social networks. One can wonder about the consequences of a conflict in which killers are known for the future reconstruction of Syrian society. One thinks here of the Rwandan genocide which, although less documented image-wise, resembles the Syrian conflict in that abuses were committed by “ordinary murderers” whom everybody knew, and that victims and perpetrators continue to cross paths on a daily basis.

An “Orphan” Revolution: Descent into Hell and International Anomie

In the last section of his book, Majed examines Syria’s role as a regional power. The latter, he argues, explains why the Syrian uprising immediately came up against the support given to Bashar al-Assad’s regime by its regional and international allies. From the very beginning of the uprising, Iran made available its security resources to quell demonstrations and other political actions. With the militarisation of the revolution, the Persian neighbour sent military advisers along with its Al-Quds Brigade of the Revolutionary Guards to supervise the military actions of the regime and of its reserve militias (the “National Defence Forces,” formed mainly by young Alawites), while also providing weapons and considerable financial support (over ten billion dollars). Russia, meanwhile, acted as the defender of Syria on the international stage by vetoing all of the UN Security Council resolutions condemning the regime. It has also provided the bulk of the heavy weaponry that the forces of the Syrian regime vitally needs. Without these contributions, the balance of power would have been very different. As Majed recalls, not only have these two countries backed Damascus because they believe that keeping the regime in place is in their strategic interest, but they also have victory as their goal.

The “Friends of Syria” coalition, which was formed to support the Syrian revolution, did not benefit from a similar dynamic. Indeed, it consists mainly of a support group reflecting diverse and sometimes conflicting interests (some seek to counter the Iranian influence, others aim to control the revolution, and others yet do not really have any choice), and its ultimate goal was never clearly stated. As a result, while this coalition did take some initiatives, the support it gave to the revolution was never really effective. Majed reviews in great detail the positions held by the different players involved, whether those of the regime’s backers or those of opposition supporters.

According to Majed, the imbalance of forces in Syria partly explains the situation that has developed on the ground over the last four years: on the one hand, a dying regime supported at arm’s length by allies determined to have victory, and, on the other hand, a divided opposition that can hardly rely on a coalition of friends with plural and uncertain goals. The eventual lack of reaction to the use of chemical weapons by the regime on August 23, 2013—which had nevertheless constituted a “red line” for Americans—marked the complete anomie of the international community. It also signalled that there would be no US military involvement. The

agreement brokered by Moscow on the dismantling of Syria's chemical arsenal indicated that only the use of unconventional weapons against the population was, in the end, prohibited.

Majed ends his book with a lengthy exploration of why the international community has failed to react strongly in the face of the Syrian drama: this descent into hell wherein the worst possible scenarios seem to have unfolded one after the other, with the takeover of much of northeast Syria by the jihadist group Islamic State being the latest of these. On the one hand, he provides a refined analysis of the inner workings of modern forms of propaganda being deployed by authoritarian regimes to blur the categories of our contemporary societies. On the other hand, he maps the different ideological and political positions that have justified direct or indirect support for the Assad regime's actions since the start of the Syrian uprising.

The first of these positions is that of "neutrality," which largely repeats the propaganda of the regime and relies on several arguments. The first argument stresses the fear experienced by minorities presumably threatened by the Sunni Muslim masses. Yet the Assad regime has never protected minorities; moreover, not only have these not been targeted by revolutionaries, but some of their members participated in the 2011 uprising. The second argument claims that with the militarisation of the movement, Syrians lost the moral right that they had earned by rising up peacefully. The third argument equates the regime's opponents to a horde of Islamists. The fourth argument blames Syrians for the destructive spiral into which their country has fallen, on the grounds that they should have known that the regime would respond with extreme and total violence. The last argument raises the spectre of a divided opposition and of scenes of chaos such as those found in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya—a type of analysis which, by focusing on these no doubt tragic situations, prevents us from recognising that the main purveyor of chaos and destruction in Syria is, in the last instance, Bashar al-Assad and his regime.

The second type of position is that held by a portion of the left and of its intellectuals to justify their support for the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Majed is especially interested in this section of the political spectrum. One would expect it to express particular solidarity with a popular movement of emancipation which claims rights and values that are, after all, truly universal. Yet it is clear that many supporters of Bashar al-Assad's regime are among those who claim an affiliation with the anti-imperialist left. In the Arab world, this support is built around conspiracy theories—according to which Syria is subjected to imperialist designs (the myth of the American Great Satan and its cronies)—and around the defence of a "secular" regime whose fall would inexorably lead to the establishment of Islamist barbarism. Majed explains these positions by referring to the history of the Arab left, whose communist component was always closer to Soviet communism than to a democratic political culture based on the defence of rights and freedoms. In Western democracies, a portion of the left has been as quick as its Arab counterpart to proclaim its anti-imperialist credentials and to denounce the conspiracy against the Assad regime, which, according to a similar myth, is the defender of secularism and the Palestinian cause. To this are sometimes added the voices of self-proclaimed "experts" who use conspiracy theories for the purpose of media self-promotion, playing on the fascination exerted by giving the impression of understanding the real stakes in a necessarily hidden and manipulated geopolitical game. The theme of a "complex" Syria leads, *in fine*, to covering both the voices of Syrians and the claims of their revolution.

In short, Majed's beautiful text provides us with a most detailed understanding of the Syrian revolution—far from the illusions of voyeurism often generated by violence, far from fears which are quick to resurface whenever the other is presented as radically “Other,” and close, very close to the aspirations and actors of the Syrian revolution, to its humanity and its universality.

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