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Christian C. Sahner, *Among the Ruins: Syria Past and Present*, Oxford University Press, 2014, $27.95 US (hbk), 256 pp., ISBN 9780199396702.

Christian Sahner's *Among the Ruins*: *Syria Past and Present* attempts to fill a dearth in serious literature about Syria. Sahner is a young scholar specializing in Byzantine history. His antique historical interests have taken him to Syria where he lived for some years, studying the archaeology of the place, improving his Arabic, and dabbling in light hearted touristic anthropology. This book combines his specialized knowledge of Syria's ancient past with the more up to date observations he recorded in his purple diary when he lived in Damascus from 2008-2010 and in Beirut from 2011-2013. The result is a book that attempts to explain the contemporary Syrian crisis by recourse to a longue durée mode of historical writing. It is tempting to apply this method to Syria's multi-millennial history, with its promise to reveal the almost inert constants that continue to influence the development of history in this war torn place. Yet, the longue durée is a risky tool if applied haphazardly, for it might lead to analytical errors by neglecting important historical transformations brought about by human agency and people's relationship to a past they call their own. Sahner's main argument is that sectarianism is a trans-epochal political and social framework of relations. As a result of this naturalization of sectarianism, we encounter a Syria that is historically determined to fall into bloodshed because of an engrained sectarianism that he traces back to an ancient time.

Sahner rightly notes that, "[H]istory tends not to repeat itself…rather…modern peoples attempt to ground the innovations of the present in a seemingly familiar but actually unreachable past. It has a powerful legitimizing effect on the present" (36). Thus, Sahner combines this awareness of history as invented tradition with the Annales school mode of writing "deep history" in order to analyze the process by which Syrian society constructs political identities. He contends that his method might explain how historical narratives in general are constructed to serve a clash of interests between two or more groups and the societies they represent. Unfortunately, despite his intentions, he fails to provide an adequate explanation that situates the sectarian historical narratives within the complex unfolding of a catastrophic situation in Syria today.

In this vein, the principal failing is in his claim that the Umayyad period was the watershed moment in Syrian history—especially with respect to sectarianism. Sahner's construction of this point of origin obscures rather than reveals the very problems he set out to explore in the book, namely how religion shapes the political imagination and the people's sense of national belonging. As the book develops, his cyclical approach to Syria's history undermines what could have been an illuminating contribution to Annales school

historiography by augmenting it with anthropological rigor. Despite his poetic erudition on Syria's long history—Sahner's diction is what Barthes would have called the pleasure of the text—the book lacks a self-reflexive rigor in its anthropological observations. Instead, the book conclusively assumes that the organizing principle in Syria's history is the image of the phoenix rising repeatedly from the ashes—with its people fatalistically tied to seasons of historic violence and bloodshed—which allows the author to administer a palliative of eternal hope and a greeting of love to the suffering people (190). The problems with this book are methodological and ethical and they reveal the author's insufficient awareness of the possible outcomes of combining touristic anthropology with Annales school deep history. The anthropological lack of rigor is inexcusable, even if the author names the general reader as his audience. In fact, Sahner skirts serious engagement with a crisis the size of a genocide and with multiple local, regional, and international actors who have high stakes in the ongoing killing.

Sahner's reliance on a deep historical method presupposes a belief in the idea that the past and present share structural pillars that remain almost static throughout history. Accordingly, he argues that sectarianism is such a trans-epochal structure in Syrian society. In true Annales fashion, Sahner relates Syrian sectarianism to the region's geographical peculiarity. As he writes, "perhaps it was inevitable in a place like this—veritable crossroads of Greek, Jewish, Aramaic, Arabic, and Persian civilizations—that no one interpretation of the faith managed to prevail over the others" (50). And so, according to him, since the earliest divisions between the Syrian Christian churches until our present day, the Syrian people have had to continuously come to terms with religious difference translated into demographic realities whenever they have had to decide on a legitimate political ruler.

Yet the seminal moment came with the advent of the Umayyad dynasty. For Sahner, the Umayyad conquest and the fall of Byzantine was *the* event that gave Syrian sectarianism its current form, firstly by marking the origins of enduring hostilities between Christians and Muslims, and secondly between the Muslims themselves, who split into Shi'ites and Sunnis following the bloody ascent of Mu'awiya to power in the seventh century. Since then the cycles of bloodshed that volcanically erupt throughout the epochs can all be traced back to this moment of Muslim fissure. For the specialist historian of Islamic civilization, the story is too well known to merit repeating, and indeed, as he repeats it, Sahner contributes nothing to the details. His main claim is that this event can be used to explain why people are killing one another in Syria today. However, without a serious historiography on the changes in the interpretation of this event across time, Sahner's account does not take into consideration how today's narrative took on significant political contours with the triumph of the Iranian revolution.[1]

Instead of nuance, Sahner relates eyewitness observation from his time in Damascus when one day he encountered Iranian pilgrims in key Shi'a shrines in the city. Of importance to those pilgrims is the Umayyad mosque which is said to have displayed the severed head of Hussein, in addition to the shrine of Zeinab, Hussein's sister who was taken captive by the Umayyads and is believed to have been buried there. Sahner notes that the Iranian pilgrims and Shi'ites in general "have no love for these Umayyads" (29). Sahner does not offer any explanation as to why his observation of a few Iranian pilgrims on the site can be generalized to include all Iranians or all Shi'ites. Nor does he mention that the presence of those pilgrims

[1] For a more reflective work on the transformations that beset Iran after the Islamic revolution of 1979, see Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

is a recent phenomenon less than three decades old, but has intensified since the political rise of Iran following the last American invasion of Iraq than it is to the famous Muslim split.[2] More egregious than this generalization is his anachronistic assumptions that what he witnessed summarizes the historical dynamics that exist between the Sunnis and Shiʿites. Here a disclaimer, like many that abound in the book, does not insulate Sahner's methodology from critique. It is insufficient to be sensitive to how "the destructive sectarianism the world has witnessed in Syria recently is something new" if one is willing to continue in the same breath that, "sectarianism…builds on pressures that have existed in Syria for a long time" (110). The hatred that Sahner registered among Iranian pilgrims in Damascus one day is not the result of pressures that have been brewing since Umayyad time. If the author is truly convinced by this, he has not produced evidence to corroborate this thesis.[3]

Have Shiʿites carried such an unchanging grudge towards the Sunnis since the murder of Hussein, son of Ali? Sahner reduces the overlaps in religious ritual and communication between the various groups to a syncretism that harks from an ancient time, when Muslims were Christian. So when the Syrians defy the sectarian label that Sahner wants to paste on them, then they are syncretics, incapable of a reasonable approach to their faith. To him, the Muslim women nibbling on candles in a monastery in a quiet Syrian village are signs of the past resurfacing in the present generation (65).[4] To be precise, the continued meaningfulness of rituals such as *Ashura*, and the forms of *taʿziya* that some Shiʿites participate in reveals how the religious worldview of Shiʿites is organized around this inaugurating historical event, but this observation is a scarce detail that cannot support an overarching interpretation that this event—across time—has been directed towards a sectarian hatred of the Sunnis. Rather at certain junctures Shiʿa-Sunni relations have been in strategic alliance, against more occult types of Shiʿism, and other religious groups, and during those periods, this event took on a variant interpretation than the one current today. The forms of Shiʿism we encounter in Iran, Iraq, and the Levant today are more closely linked to the Safavid competition with the Ottomans than with the Umayyad rupture.[5] Moreover, the rise of the Shiʿites is in itself a phenomenon that developed out of the more recent history of colonialism in the Middle East, which has only token mention in the book. Sahner's neglect of the colonial history is glossed over with a motley selection of anecdotes, none of them about Shiʿites, even if many of them are poetically striking. The anecdotes fill the air with erudition, but in effect, provide

[2] Paulo Pinto has conducted extensive anthropological work in the shrine of Zeinab in Damascus and has dated the phenomenon of Iranian pilgrimage to 1981. See Paulo Pinto, "Pilgrimage, Commodities, and Religious Objectification: The Making of Transnational Shiism between Iran and Syria," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* Vol. 27, No. 1, 2007.

[3] See the author's recollection of his taxi fare as the only comment he offers to the kidnapping of Shiʿite pilgrims on their way to Beirut, which is a key event that marked a transformation in the engagement of Iran in the Syrian crisis (160). For a more well-informed view, see the recent book by Nicholas Hénin, *Jihad Academy: Nos erreur face à l'etat islamique* (Paris: Favard, 2015).

[4] For a varying reading see, for example, Toufoul Abou-Hodeib, "Sanctitiy Across the Border: Pilgrimage Routes and State Control in Mandate Lebanon and Palestine," in *The Routledge Handbook for the History of the Middle East Mandates*, Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan, eds. (London: Routledge, 2015), 384-394. This article shows how the different sects shared saints between them and created fluid forms of worship that have been the historical norm for as long as people could continue to freely move between the newly established state borders. Whereas Abou-Hodeib does not specifically deal with the Shiʿa/Sunni problematic, there is no reason to believe that this particular group behaved otherwise.

[5] Wajih Kawtharani, *al-faqih w l-sultan: jadaliyyat l-din w l-siyasa fi iran al-safawiya-qajariyyah w l-dawla l-ʿothmania*. (Beirut: Dar l-Taliʿa, 2001). Also see Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 3-21.

a long list of touristic observations that remain undeveloped. Instead, those anecdotes serve his claim that sectarianism, then as now, has been a major problem for the minorities living under the tyrannical rule of Muslim Sunnis. So rather than deeply analyzing the layers that have stoked the hatred of the Iranian pilgrims he encountered as he loitered in Damascus, Sahner preferred to share other anecdotes of Christian dissatisfaction with Muslims, Druze anger at Christians, and perpetual Sunni sectarianism that was practiced by Umayyads and Ottomans alike, two dynasties that Sahner grossly reduces to their sectarian credentials as the Sunni rulers of Syria. This anachronistic reading of the past through the eyes of the present creates historical tautologies and obscures how the sharp class divisions that structure Syrian society have been made worse with the rise of the Assad family to power in 1970, following an extremely turbulent period in the history of the region, that included but is not limited to the resounding defeat of the Syrian army in the 1967 war with Israel.[6] Nor does Sahner provide even cursory mention of the role played by the French colonization of Syria, the Sykes-Picot agreement that came as a consequence of World War I, or even the most recent invasion of Iraq by the Americans, an event that the political scientist Gilbert Achcar has claimed to have triggered the revolution in Syria and its quick degeneration into violence.[7]

For Sahner, sectarianism is the law that structures all political relations in the country and is responsible for its persistent political crises. Defining sectarianism as "the activation of religious identity as one of the main principles of social and political life" (83), Sahner positions himself in contradistinction to Ussama Makdisi's argument in his book, *The Culture of Sectarianism*.[8] Although he concurs with Makdisi that it is in "the political circumstances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" that we witness the "elevation of religious difference to the most fundamental element of political life" (83), Sahner nevertheless insists that sectarianism is much older than Makdisi allows. "[F]rom the early Islamic period afterward," he writes, "an individual's religious affiliation was the basis of his political affiliation" (84). By taking such concepts as "individual," "affiliation," "religion," and "politics," as metaphysical constants, Sahner displays a worrisome treatment of his historical object that disregards the theoretical problems inherent in treating such constructs as naturalized constants. Shall one recommend a dose of Foucault?

Although Sahner's style maintains a direct prose not bogged down by scholarly conversation, his footnoted reference to Makdisi and his subtle response to his conclusions suggest that he has misidentified the implications of Makdisi's analytical approach to the question of sectarianism as a modern phenomenon, and assumed that Makdisi was making a simple periodization argument (83). Indeed, through his recourse to a metaphysics of epistemic stability, Sahner misses the entire distinction that Makdisi's book constructs. Makdisi's main argument in that book is that the nineteenth century witnessed a transformation from a politics of notables to a politics of sectarianism. Building on Albert Hourani's famous piece, Makdisi demonstrates how sectarianism rearranges the relationship between the masses and the elites from one where the elites share and wrangle for power in the reified airs of courtly salons, to one where the masses claim their own share of political

[6] Hanna Batatu's book remains the go-to source on Syria's modern economic history. See Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). Also see the excellent anthropology by Christa Salamandra, *A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004).

[7] Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

[8] Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History and Violence in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000).

decision making.[9] When Makdisi narrates the story of the peasant turned revolutionary politician Tanyus Shahin, who led the famous revolt of 1858, he clarifies the shifting dialectics of the modern political world and shows how the rise of the power of the masses was harnessed and brought to submission through sectarianism. Whether there existed pre-modern intersections between politics and religion was never his concern in that book. Yet in his later work, *Artillery of Heaven*, he shows the reader just how far back some of these intersections go—to the early modern transformations of the sixteenth century.[10] Whereas Sahner essentializes sectarianism in simplistic fashion, Makdisi's point is more subtle: sectarianism helped to safeguard class divisions and, by extension, propped up the notables while releasing religion from the stronghold of the churches. By contrast, Sahner's point is blunt: then as now, the people of Syria continue to kill in the name of their Gods.

In driving this point home, Sahner neglects how the events we witness in Syria, then as now, are not external to human agency. Indeed the violence in Syria cannot be reduced to sectarian divisions, even though the persistence of modern forms of sectarianism is evidently present in the conflict. In telling the deep history of sectarianism in Syria, Sahner's cyclical mode glosses over how the colonial moment fostered sectarianism. In his discussion of French colonial rule, Sahner narrates a tale of sects that vie for a share in Syria's future. So whereas the anticolonial leaders remain nameless, Sahner informs us that the Druze were against the French, the Sunnis were satisfied with them, and the Alawis stood to benefit the most from their presence. The casting of historical agents as groups of sects and tribes supports the assumption that politics in Syria is inherently sectarian, instead of subjecting this very assumption to historical analysis. This treatment of colonialism disengages the active French investment in fostering sectarianism in Syria. Likewise, Western intervention in the region is treated as a minor event, of minimal consequence to a tale of perpetual sectarianism. For Sahner, Western intervention attempted, but failed, to introduce the noble ideals of the Western Enlightenment. Such civilizing values seem to have been perverted when they trickled down to the Sunni rulers in Istanbul in the nineteenth century. So he argues, the Ottomans/Sunnis were so blinded by their sectarianism that they managed to misunderstand the secularizing humanism of Europe and thereby failed to break the cycle of sectarian violence in the Levant. Once the Ottomans learned about equality from the Europeans, they started the series of reforms called the Tanzimat, which promoted "equality among Muslims and non-Muslims, an equality that only deepened thanks to the expanding European influence inside the Ottoman lands" (91). Despite European benevolence, the Ottomans remained misguided about the precepts of the Enlightenment. For the Ottoman rulers, Enlightenment notions of universalism were remarkably narrow: "to be a good Ottoman was to be a good Muslim, and what is more, a good Sunni Muslim of the state sponsored Hanafi *madhhab*, or school of law. It was universal only in the sense that this identity coincided with that of the empire's ruling elites" (93). Like the Sunni Umayyads before them, the Ottomans discriminated against the minorities that endured life under the dead inertia of their corruption.[11]

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[9] Albert Hourani, "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables," in *The Modern Middle East*, Albert Hourani, Philip Khoury, and Mary Wilson, eds. (Berkley: University of California Press, 1993), 83-109.

[10] Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

[11] For a different view, see the well-researched history of colonial rule in Syria by Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). Also useful is Keith Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism and Colonialism and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Another problem in the book is Sahner's representations of ordinary Syrians. They are specters with no idiosyncrasies, no distinct personalities; they are reduced to static types playing only supporting roles in the author's deep historical narrative. When they appear, they do so only to enliven a tedious turn into a blind narrative alley—they are always spokespersons of sectarianism. Even when he acknowledges their resistance to his narrative of perpetual sectarianism, it is presented as a result of a rare case of secular paranoia. In one of the most revealing encounters in the book, and the only anecdote that attempts to include a secular Syrian voice, the author is confronted by a Sunni Syrian woman who could no longer tolerate being asked to consider the problem of Syrian sectarianism. Sahner, along with a couple of colleagues, had invited twenty Syrians to a conference in the US to discuss the question of Syria. He writes,

> At the beginning of the conference, the participants were invited to help draw up an agenda for the coming days. The usual litany of concerns came up: chemical weapons, foreign intervention, the treatment of refugees, etc. After nearly twenty minutes, no one had broached one of the most important yet highly disputed aspects of the conflict, namely sectarianism, which was then on the media's radar throughout the United States and Europe. (95)

What is remarkable here is the callous dismissal of chemical weapons, foreign intervention, and the fate of refugees into a litany by comparison to Sahner's own agenda of priorities that places sectarianism at the top—or (historical) root—of the problems for which Syrians being gassed to death must find solutions. The Syrian activist responds, and she is angry. She dismisses the idea that sectarianism is at the root of the problem in Syria. Sahner interprets her outburst as "a deeper fear: that by treating sectarianism as a politically and strategically salient dimension of the conflict, we would somehow give credence to it, legitimize it, and normalize it through discussion" (96). But is this really what the Syrian woman feared? Could it perhaps be that the woman was frustrated that her pedantic American host was asking her people to distance themselves from a massacre that took place in the seventh century, when all she was thinking about was how to put an end to the barrel bombs and other weapons of mass destruction that Bashar Al-Assad rains on the people? This frustration does not mean that Syrians are afraid to acknowledge the sectarianism that is fragmenting their society, but it does mean that the historian is being asked to shed his preconceived ideas by gazing unwaveringly into the horror of the massacre instead of pontificating solutions to a problem he read about in some books with only his tourism to reinforce his arcane expertise.

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