

Among the Ruins: Syria Past and Present

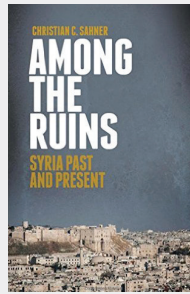
By Christian C. Sahner

London: Hurst & Company, 2014, 240 pages, \$27.95, ISBN: 9780199396702.

Reviewed by Jabir Lund

IT WOULD BE understandable, after four years of devastating civil war, to assume the title of Christian C. Sahner's book, *Among the Ruins* refers solely to the forlorn, rubble-strewn landscapes that are reported daily from Syria's once bustling cities. But, the subtitle, *Syria Past and Present*, makes clear there are another set of ruins to consider. These may not seem as relevant to the current crisis in Syria, but as Sahner eloquently illustrates, the ruins and architectural legacy of past civilizations and cultures represent Syria's deep history, one that undoubtedly impacts the present. It is in visiting these monuments and ruins throughout Syria, accompanied by Sahner's erudite historical narrative and first-hand observations and encounters, that the reader is given an uncommon picture of the formation of modern Syria.

Sahner first arrived in the country in 2008, a student of early Islamic and Byzantine history, driven by the realization that the Arabic language was an essential tool for his academic career. The sites he visited on his time off from study, and which he describes throughout the book's five chapters, are invariably linked to one of the various religious sects of the region; their relevance in terms of the present is to add depth to the debate over 'sectarianism.' This is not a debate Sahner enters lightly. He seems keenly aware of the error in much of the discourse surrounding the concept, stating that his interest in sectarianism's "pre-modern roots



should not be interpreted to mean that religious conflicts (whether between Christians and Muslims, or between Sunnis and Shia) are somehow 'unchanging' or 'primordial.'"

Woven into the history are Sahner's first hand observations and sketches of the real-life Syrians he meets.

Such a perspective is rewarding indeed, both in questioning and shaking many of the narratives supplied to us by sensationalist media reports, and in providing a deeper understanding of the origins of the current conflict.

Chapter one recounts the coming of Islam to the lands of Syria, and their emergence from what had once been the cross-roads of empires to the seat of a dynamic and expansive state itself. For all the talk of the so-called 'Islamic State' representing an anachronistic return to medieval barbarity, the Muslim Umayyid caliphate that conquered and established itself in Damascus in the 7th century does not seem to fit that mold. For example, Sahner recounts how the elite of the new caliphate spent the first decades of their rule performing their prayers inside a wing of the Byzantine basilica that dominated the center of the city, while Christians continued to worship within the same building. It took seventy years until the Caliph personally evicted the last intransigent Christian monk, unceremoniously by the scruff of his (un-severed) neck, and the basilica was transformed into the

Umayyad mosque that stands to this day. In the process of building the mosque, the Umayyads uncovered a relic containing the head of John the Baptist, and created a shrine within the mosque to honor the ancient prophet. While Sahner's historical knowledge is evident, so too is his compassion for the people he meets. He is empathetic, perhaps a product of his own Christian faith, to their religious sentiments and motivations. Where many would become stuck on some of their more radical and intolerant pronouncements, Sahner is willing to investigate the context; his Muslim acquaintances are a far cry from the radicalized stereotype that predominates in the media.

The second chapter deals with the long and rich history of Christianity in Syria and gives us a tour of Bab Touma, Damascus's Christian neighborhood and home to most foreign students in the city, where Sahner also found his accommodation. Alongside a concise overview of the emergence of Christianity in Syria and its many sects, we are given an insight into the prevailing attitude of Syria's Christians. They are proud to be Arab and Syrian, yet are caught between two worlds; on one side their deep connection and sense of belonging to the land, and on the other, their struggle to maintain their place in a predominantly Muslim society where religion and sect have become political rallying points. While the Christian Syrians may have felt ever more uncertain about their identification with the country and state, another minority, the Alawi, from the mountain regions of Latakia in Western Syria, became inextricably linked to it. This was in great part due to the French tactic of minority rule, enforced during the French mandate of Syria in the early 1900s, which promoted loyalty to Paris among a minority elite and privileged the Alawi in the armed forces and in other state institutions.

This situation allowed for the meteoric rise of Hafez al-Assad, the current dictator's father and architect of the pervasive and authoritarian Syrian state. Sahner sees the Arab nationalist ideologies, such as the Ba'athism promoted by the regime and its supporters, as a crucial method for legitimizing state authority among disparate communities that had no natural bond to their rulers. Thus a national identity was created, open to Christians and other minorities such as the Alawi, which at the same time championed the anti-Zionist cause that resonated so well in the wider street.

Chapter four investigates the methods and politics of the ruthless state apparatus that Syrians have known for generations, which Sahner was able to infer if not experience first-hand, from his relatively safe vantage point as a foreign student. The state's overbearing strength is paraded through bureaucratic absurdity at every turn, avowed by those who receive its salary and felt by all under the sinister watch of the *mukhabarat* secret service. Images of Hafez, and now Bashar, are ubiquitous throughout Syria and serve political purposes, such as identifying the secular Alawi rulers with Islam, the dominant religion in Syria, or supporting sham election campaigns. Meanwhile the regime managed to portray an image of sophisticated liberalism to the outside world. Sahner notes *Vogue* magazine's gushing 2011 profile on Asma al-Asad, Bashar's wife, published just a month before the revolution erupted against Asad's murderous regime.

In the final chapter the author offers an outline of Syria's microcosm, Lebanon, and its bloody and 'sectarian' civil war, perhaps a useful model to understand the dynamics unfolding within Syria. Nevertheless, the book's value does not lie in empirically based prediction

about the future course of Syria, but rather in its considerate treatment of a topic that has been widely misconstrued elsewhere. Sectarianism may be a clumsy concept, too tightly bound to its modern interpretation as a zero-sum primordial and violent animosity among sects, yet the basic idea that tensions between

communities existed and had to be managed or mismanaged since time immemorial still stands. What Sahner's book helps to illustrate is the variety of ways in which this inevitable issue has been handled throughout history, offering a hope that lessons may still be learned from past traditions of coexistence.

The Human Security Agenda: How Middle Power Leadership Defied U.S. Hegemony

By Ronald M. Behringer

New York: Continuum, 2012, 221 pages, \$100.00, ISBN: 978144113133.

Reviewed by Mustafa Cüneyt Özşahin

THERE IS NO DOUBT that the 1990s were the years when the concept of human security came into popularity not only within scholarly circles but also political ones. Since then, a large body of literature has been accumulated dealing with the topic of human security in terms of its theoretical and practical dimensions. In *The Human Security Agenda*, Ronald M. Behringer aims to contribute to the current literature by interrogating the capacity of middle powers in undertaking a human security agenda under American hegemony. The author successfully illustrates how the U.S. government in some cases engages in activities to prevent middle powers from exercising their human security agenda.

This book falls into eight sections; in the first chapter Behringer introduces the concept of human security, ranging from minimalist to maximalist definitions, by drawing from the relevant literature (pp. 13-16). Surveying the literature related to power hierarchy in world politics, the author similarly elaborates on the



concept of middle powermanship (pp. 16-19). While the second chapter provides an overall theoretical background (pp. 9-28), the last one offers a final assessment related to the human security measures undertaken by middle powers (pp. 163-174). Five diverse cases are used as examples to account for the human security applications throughout the book, some of which were successful, while some were not (pp. 164, 170-172). However, Behringer claims that it is still possible for middle powers to play a leadership role in some issues and to become "securitizing actors" in a political atmosphere shaped by U.S. hegemony (pp. 9, 12). For each case, the author starts with unfolding the unique historical process involved, with a specific reference to the role of middle powers. Following this historical narrative, the author illustrates the reaction of the U.S. as a global hegemon in the face of initiatives taken by middle powers on the international stage.

The cases Behringer puts forward throughout this study can be subsumed under two