

The Prolonged Suffering of the Syrian People

by Leyla Dakhli

Arrests, torture, massacres: the Assad clan has been tormenting the Syrian people for the past 50 years. This major collective work provides conclusive evidence of the violence to which Europe turns a blind eye.

Reviewed: Catherine Coquio, Joël Hubrecht, Naïla Mansour, Farouk Mardam-Bey (ed.), *Syrie, Le pays brûlé. Le livre noir des Assad (1970-2021)*, Paris, Seuil, 2022, 848 pp., €35.

Syrie, le pays brûlé ("Syria, the Burnt Country") is a difficult book to open. From the outset, we have some idea of what to expect. We may remember the words that give the book its title, the phrase chanted by the Syrian government's militias and spray-painted on the walls: "Assad, or we'll burn the country to the ground". So we know it is not going to be easy to handle, literally: it is also a big book that contains 831 pages of double-column text combining analyses, personal accounts, literary accounts and documents. There are six parts, preceded by a substantial set of introductory texts (perhaps a little too many? First a foreword, then an introduction and a prologue), each introduced by a member of the editorial committee, and each explaining a little more clearly the horrors of the Assad system, from the terror used to hold on to power to the mass concentration camps; from the abduction of corpses to organized rape; from open warfare against civilians to systematic destruction and massacres; from the use of denominational, ethnic and political divisions to the implementation of a policy of large-scale plunder. A comprehensive account of the

Assad dynasty's deeds and misdeeds over more than 50 years was much needed, even if the last 10 years take up the most space.

This gathering of evidence is central to this book's aim, which is to compile a collection of the horrors committed in Syria since the first Assad, Hafez, rose to power, followed by his son Bashar. This compilation is not that of a dry judicial file. It makes room for several registers: analyses by researchers and intellectuals, eyewitness accounts (marked by a different font), literary texts and reproductions of works of art.

In doing so, this project seeks to make sense of hell, to find the barbaric rationality behind the systematic destruction of any hint of protest, any demonstration of freedom, any quest for dignity. Systematism is at its heart. And the authors are equally methodical in deciphering, dissecting and rendering intelligible *what happened*. They begin with the events that unfolded *before our very eyes* over a period of 10 years— what the editorial committee describes in the very first sentence as "the killing of a people and its drive for freedom". Through a meticulous process of collecting, translating, confronting, updating and writing, the authors progressively show us what, in reality, *we had never really seen*. Because we did not notice what was right in front of our eyes. And the uniqueness of the Syrian question, as Yassin al-Haj Saleh calls it, is that it is a paradigm of human destruction, and yet the rest of humanity does not understand it as such. We may remember hearing the cries of Syrians asking why they had been abandoned, and this book invites us to retrace our steps and listen to those cries again, to go and hear them together, to look back not only on the years of revolution, repression and destruction, but also on the repression and destruction that preceded and paved the way for them. In this respect, this is a history book, a history of contemporary Syria seen from the perspective of its martyred people. It is also a black book, a piece of evidence in the case file, laying a foundation stone for future justice.

Understanding Syria under the Assads

Clearly, the foremost originality of this book lies in the decision to consider the reigns of the Assad father and son together. It is justified from the outset by the continuity of their dynasty, and also by the continued pursuit of a policy based on repression and brutal violence against all opposition. The analysis focuses in particular on the massacres in Palmyra in 1980 and Hama in 1982. In Palmyra, hundreds of

prisoners were brutally executed in the space of half an hour on the morning of June 27, in retaliation for an assassination attempt on Hafez el-Assad. Blaming the Islamists, the regime issued a statement a few days later reasserting its determination to eliminate as many enemies of the "revolution" as necessary (reproduced on p. 53). This threat was carried out a few months later in the insurgent city of Hama. Against a backdrop of growing power and popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the ever-increasing repression directed against it (the Palmyra massacre, the purge of administrations, etc.), the city of Hama became the focus of popular protest against the regime, and the Muslim Brotherhood's rear base from which to launch its armed resistance. In February 1982, the city was subjected to a four-week siege, during which bombing and destruction, looting, rape and murder ensued. The death toll was between 15,000 and 40,000. These events were revisited during the 2011 revolution, as "resurgences", as explained by Cécile Boëx in her chapter (p. 61 ff.). The authors also retrace the events by republishing texts from the time, notably the gripping reports by Sorj Chalandon and Jean-Pierre Perrin. The fear and traces of these traumatic incidents are also conveyed through literary writing, in this case the work of Manhal al-Sarraj and the late Khaled Khalifa.

There are several reasons for recalling these episodes. Firstly, of course, to show that the violence of the Assad regime is nothing new. Secondly, to understand its main characteristics and systemic workings (the personality of Rifaat al-Assad, Hafez's brother and Bashar's uncle, and his reliance on increasingly important special brigades). Finally, to understand the traumatic memories, the heavy silences ("the enormous mountain of silence, whose shadow hovers everywhere, right down to the family table", as Véronique Nahoum-Grappe writes in her essay on impunity, p. 117-123), that part of the Syrian population endures (Cécile Boëx analyzes these shifts in memory using images that circulated during the 2011 revolution).

Telling the story of Syria under the Assads is no mean feat, given the limited access we have. Consequently, this book's merit also lies in its ability to bring together our knowledge and revive some classic analyses (in particular Michel Seurat's texts on the "state of barbarism", resituated and re-interpreted here in the light of Salwa Ismail's more recent analyses (Part One, Chapter 1).

After a "reminder" of events, we delve into a more detailed analysis of the Assad system, in particular its clannish/denominational aspects and its use of propaganda. Yassin al-Haj Saleh's text (pp. 95-103) focuses on what the *shabiha* (those hateful, obscene militias who occupy the streets, looting and stealing for the regime) are doing

to Syria; not only directly through their actions, but also through what he calls *tashbih*, i.e. behaving like a *shabiha*. *Tashbih* is then a means of disfiguring society, of making it vile, first by debasing its language through the constant use of insults and vulgarity. *Tashbih* is a form of continual escalation, both in language and in actions, creating an economy of plunder and robbery that targets bodies as well as goods, and which is firmly established with the "liberalization" of the country and the appropriation of wealth and lucrative contracts by Bashar's clan. It is clear that this is not simply another instrument of power, but its most faithful and systemic incarnation. The *shabiha* are not, as we sometimes read, uncontrollable elements of the regime, or thugs; they are the regime's very own form of instituted thuggery. Yassin Al-Haj Saleh's analysis is echoed in Nisrine Al-Zahre's analysis of the words and language of power in the pages that follow (pp. 108-116).

Ultimately, the system and its violence are underpinned by impunity, in this case based on the idea, repeated ad nauseam, that the regime is here to stay (*ila al-abad*, a core Assad slogan) and is not accountable. The consequence of impunity is to allow cruelty to flourish, with no reason to hide (Boëx, pp. 124-130).

Since this black book offers a lucid plunge into the politics of evil, its use of history is entirely geared towards understanding the present situation. Here and there, of course, we read of periods in which these mechanisms of horror are "relaxed". The closure of the infamous Tadmor prison was seen as a positive sign, simply before anyone realized the scale of destruction that would be unleashed in the Saydnaya prison.

Techniques used in Syrian concentration camps

A map of detention sites and a text by Catherine Coquio seek to take stock of the situation and make sense of the statistics and figures that have accumulated and continue to pile up, much like the bodies (pp. 145-157). These two documents are supported by Joël Hubrecht's organization chart of the official institutions of repression, found later in the book (pp. 391-393). Catherine Coquio provides an overview of Syrian concentration camps, in particular the fate suffered by children, the use of rape, the widespread disappearances, the use of incarceration to put pressure on families, and various forms of trafficking. She also recounts the appalling link with the Nazi Alois Brunner, who took refuge in Syria in 1954 to become Hafez's

special adviser, and the advice given by other "experts" in state brutality who were brought in from East Germany and the USSR. The analysis of the system and its specific features is always backed up by facts and studies, and by the prison literature that has become one of the strongest forms of Syrian—and, unfortunately, also Arab—literature.

As she did in her recent book¹, Coquio works with literary texts, revealing their power to bear witness and thus tell the truth. She writes in the words of those who were part of this parallel world, this "factory of disaffiliation", to understand how the prison ultimately became the whole country, to such an extent that, as she writes: "the idea spread that the whole country was a prison, but also, among opponents, that *dignity* was only possible in prison". Many former prisoners today dispute this idea, no longer believing that there is any lesson to be learned or any greatness in undergoing the dehumanization they endured². At this point, we return to their texts (Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Aram Karabet, and the testimonies compiled by Samar Yazbek and Faraj Bayrakdar), and compare them with the testimonies of the "Caesar file" and the exactions of Branch 251 as they appeared in the Koblenz trial (Garance LeCaisne pp. 197-201; Joël Hubrecht, pp. 202-207). In the part dealing with Bashar's prisons, there are numerous testimonies, including those of artists Najah Albukai (pp. 211-222) and Azza Abo Rebieh (pp. 242-243), testimonies of women, and even children's experiences of torture and detention. Needless to say, these unbearable accounts deserve to be read, heard and broadcast.

I will just touch on one of the various manifestations of the concentration camp system, which is discussed in a separate section: enforced disappearance, which, according to Amnesty International, has affected at least 82,000 people since the conflict started in 2011. In Édith Bouvier's text, we read about the painstaking work of Hassan al-Hassan, who scrolls through photos of corpses in a bid to help families recognize their loved ones (p. 286-292). Here too, one testimony follows another, revealing the details of the business of absence and the impossibility of mourning.

¹ *A quoi bon encore le monde ? La Syrie et nous*, Actes Sud – Sindbad, 2022.

² The writings of Alaa Abd el-Fattah, currently imprisoned in Egypt, reflect a completely different way of looking at the prison experience: a visceral rejection of any kind of heroism and a radical critique of the prison system as a whole, whether for prisoners of conscience or ordinary prisoners ("We have not been defeated").

Classifying events since 2011

What war is being waged in Syria? Can we even call it a war? This term has been the subject of much discussion and controversy among specialists in the region, geopoliticians and the media. There is a war going on in Syria, but how do we classify it? Does the war erase the revolution that preceded it? Can this war be described as a civil war?³ Or even an international conflict? The war is one of regime against population, and the book describes its military motivations. It is the continuation of a low-intensity war that has been underway since the Assads came to power. For the most recent period, the authors retrace the evolution of the conflict. Since 2011, the transition from peaceful revolution to war has become a fact. The mechanisms that lead to war are the focus of discussion, clearly outlined by Thomas Pierret (pp. 323-329), who calls for an understanding of the logics of militarization within the regime: this approach concludes both that the use of war is dictated by necessity (and not by choice) and that the strategic rationality of power is deployed on the basis of this necessity (when faced with an uprising that continues to spread and grow in strength, and with the uncertainty of a possible intervention by international forces, as happened in Libya). In other words, the use of violence is not indiscriminate and irrational, even if it was not initially considered to be the only response. Bashar is proceeding cautiously with his military escalation, ensuring that he will not be obstructed and that he has reliable allies with whom to deploy maximum military force against his own population.

The question of war is not only dealt with from afar; it is also reflected in the testimonies of those who have lived through the war, including the voices of survivors of massacres (Houla on May 25-26, 2012, among so many others), and of citizens besieged in Homs, Douma and Yarmouk. These personal accounts tell of the suffering endured and the way daily life is organized in the "liberated" but oppressed areas. The text by Razan Zaitouneh, translated as "Meanwhile, the resistance is being consumed slowly", written shortly before she was kidnapped and almost certainly murdered, aptly describes how the revolution is progressively being undermined (pp. 484-486).

The war question arises on several levels, and not just from the standpoint of the rationality of the regime itself: it also involves strategies of internal division (confessionalism or the "protection of minorities", notably Christian—a policy

³ On this subject, see the discussions prompted by the release of the book *Syrie. Anatomie d'une guerre civile*.

targeting Kurds) and geostrategic alliances. Hosheng Ossi's text takes a welcome look at the Kurdish question in Syria, providing some perspective for understanding the links and tensions between the Kurdish revolution in Rojava and the Syrian revolution (pp. 354-359). A text by lawyer Ibrahim Sidou also reviews the status of the Yazidis in Syria under the Assad regime, while the subsequent text by Estelle Amy de la Bretèque and Farhad Shamo-Roto looks back at their recent persecution under the Daesh caliphate (pp. 675-681; pp. 682-691). The "jihadist trap" is covered in its own section (Section 5), given the urgent need to understand how the country's revolution, regime war and jihadist activities fit together. To counter Assad's propaganda—which quickly branded all revolutionaries (especially Sunnis) as terrorists, and the dominant view in Europe from 2015 onwards of a revolution led mainly by Islamists, all of whom were terrorists to a varying degree—it was vital to re-establish the facts and examine the objective alliances between the regime and the jihadists, against the revolutionaries, be they Sunnis, Christians, Druze, Kurds or others.

The geopolitical analyses also shed new light on Russia's presence in Syria, particularly in view of what has been happening in Ukraine since 2022, with what Cécile Vaissié describes as the "hybrid war" waged by the Wagner Group even before the "official" Russian intervention (pp. 373-382).

A black book, for future and ongoing justice

It is impossible to convey the breadth and depth of this book. And that is only to be expected from a black book, which takes a detailed dive into the realities it describes. This is particularly crucial in a context marked by shifting truths (as can be seen in the closing texts, "erasures, falsifications, negations"). The very gesture of recording and depositing reflects a desire to go against all the revisionism that has punctuated debates on the situation in Syria since 2011. The book not only seeks to confront the regime and its "version of events", but also to challenge a number of commentators who have, at various times, refused to acknowledge what was unfolding before our very eyes.

The editors of this book are well aware of this situation. As Syrian researchers, activists and supporters of the Syrian people's cause, they had to fight tirelessly to make room for these truths, and to counter the rhetoric of those who have found good

reason to defend the regime as a bulwark against the jihadists, a source of protection for Christians, a guarantor of stability in the region, and so on.

This book is a space in which people can speak out, tell their stories and bear witness. It is a response to the regime's policy of oblivion and disappearance. As the pages go by, we understand that everything is being done in Syria to ensure that nothing else will surface in the near future. Just as the dead have been made to vanish and their bodies not returned, just as graves and tributes have been refused (Kaddour, "Assadism", pp. 293-296), and just as people have been stripped of their rights and possessions because they have left the country to reconstruct and rebuild "a healthier and more harmonious society", as Bashar calls it, so we can very quickly come to normalize the Syrian regime. In Denmark, there is already talk of sending Syrians back home now that the war has ended. Apart from the fact that fighting is still going on in some regions, to suggest this is to deny the force of extermination at work, the stranglehold of the Assad clan and its allies—particularly the Russians—over the whole of society and the economy. The war has resulted in a vast system of demographic cleansing, organized looting and the destruction of the social system. What point is there in returning, when all Syrian refugees have not only suffered exile, but also lost everything that tied them to their country: a home, a land, a family? Back home, the victors divide up the country's wealth, or what is left of it, and play Monopoly, as Christophe Boltanski recounts (pp. 756-761).

The book concludes with a stark and, naturally, gloomy assessment. Of course, there is no cause for celebration. Syria has been burned and utterly ravaged. However, the testimonies gathered here give us a glimpse of hope and solidarity, as the fight for justice continues, and some of those responsible have already been tried in court. These records and archives also tell of the extraordinary resistance of those who found the strength to help and care for others under the bombs (p. 535 et seq.), to stay alive despite being subjected to siege, hunger and cold; of those who maintained ties, wrote and documented, shared material, recounted even the most unbearable experiences, made films, drew pictures, and put this story into narrative, verse and song.

This is a difficult book to read. And it is also hard to write about, because it is so important to do it justice and not overlook anything. But that is impossible. And as we read through it, we become aware of the scale of what has happened in Syria, what has played out and is still playing out. I am not sure whether this war is "our Spanish civil war", in the words of Ambassador Duclos, quoted twice in the introduction and

conclusion, but it is certainly "our war", and it concerns and engages us as human beings, but also as Europeans.

The magnificent work of translating and presenting the texts that make up this book is proof of this. Although we encounter different types of writing here, we can still hear a shared tone and voice. The book brings together Syrian voices, now mostly refugees in Europe, who have become part of our intellectual and political space, speaking out against the barbarity on our doorstep. It gathers testimonies of sufferings that we have welcomed, but often refused to see. It is not clear that we are any more willing to listen and, above all, to understand than we have been over the past decade. But at least we have the opportunity to be informed.

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