

Syrian Secularism

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Syrian Secularism

Intellectual & Organisational Narratives

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Preface

In this issue of *Syria Studies*, three contributions are included: *Revisiting Ideological Borrowings in Syrian Nationalist Narratives: Sati 'al-Husri, Michel 'Aflaq and Zaki al-Arsuzi* by Rahaf Aldoughli; *More Religious, Yet Still Secular? The Shifting Relationship Between the Secular and the Religious in Syria* by Line Khatib, and *Organisationally Secular: Damascene Islamist Movements and the Syrian Uprising* by Omar Imady.

In *Revisiting Ideological Borrowings*, Aldoughli takes us on an in-depth journey of the intellectual foundations of nationalism in Syria. Her focus is Sati' al-Husri, a secular nationalist thinker whose work formed the basis of several nationalist political movements, including the Baath party. Aldoughli connects al-Husri's thought with two subsequent political activists/thinkers, Michel Aflaq and Zaki al-Arsuzi, highlighting the extent to which they heavily relied on the intellectual contributions of al-Husri. Aldoughli illustrates the internal contradiction within their idea of nationalism, as first articulated by al-Husri, a contradiction which stems from the fact that two different traditions, i.e. the Germanic and the French, were being borrowed from, despite their opposing conceptions of nationalism. As one reads Aldoughli's exploration of the secular legacy of Syria, one wonders whether secularism, irrespective of how broadly understood, will survive in any form in future Syria, or whether this phase was far too elitist and politicised to be capable of resisting the destruction of the last five years.

In *More Religious, Yet Still Secular? The Shifting Relationship Between the Secular and the Religious in Syria*, Line Khatib takes us on a more recent journey than that of Aldoughli's narrative, and explores how secularism was in fact enriched by the very religious discourse assumed to be its antagonist. By focusing on the words and actions of various religious scholars active in recent Syrian history, Khatib documents the inclusiveness, moderation, and indeed 'secularism' of key religious scholars. She leaves us with a question, perhaps too early to be answered, on whether or not this type of religious sensibility is more representative of Syrians than that of the radical forces now fighting on the ground. In the current politicised and highly inflamed context, it is clearly too difficult to determine how deeply rooted this secular approach to Islam is amongst the majority of Muslims in Syria.

In *Organisationally Secular*, Imady introduces a novel method in analysing popular movements, especially those with a religious orientation. Using ideas from organisational typology and organisational communication, Imady identifies what he terms 'organisational secularism', or movements, which are secular in so far as how they are manifested organisationally, yet religious on the level of what they stand for and what they are trying to achieve. His case studies are the *Kaftariyyah* and the *Qubaysiyyat*, two Damascene movements that are disliked by the opposition, and distrusted by loyalist voices. Through their organisational narrative, Imady sheds light on the way in which state and civil society interacted in Syria, especially in the period prior to the Syrian Uprising. Imady documents how the *Kaftariyyah* and the *Qubaysiyyat* evolved, organisationally, over time and identifies the relationship between their organisational features and the type of dynamics they have had to face.