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An Exploration of Impact:
Hunger, Cartoons & Philosophy

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Preface

Omar Imady

In the first issue of *Syria Studies* to be published in 2017, we are pleased to share three studies that provide important insights on subjects that have gained significant importance in recent times in so far as how they relate to the Syrian context: siege warfare, political cartoons, and gender politics.

In *Isolating Dissent, Punishing the Masses: Siege Warfare as Counter-Insurgency*, Will Todman analyses the intricate relationship between the nature of the Syrian regime and the military tactics it opted to use to suppress those opposed to it, both during the insurgency phase, and the subsequent civil war. Sieges were effective because they allowed the regime to make optimal use of its military advantage. Once you have a segment of the population in a restricted area, you not only control food and medical supplies, but you can also unleash an indiscriminate bombardment campaign, as the regime indeed did. Todman provides a historic context to the use of these tactics by the Syrian regime (i.e. Hama), and addresses the important question of whether or not siege warfare helped the regime survive.

In *Whose Problem Is It Anyway? The Depiction of Syrian Refugee Influx in Political Cartoons*, Özlem Özdemir and Emrah Özdemir explore the way in which the crisis of Syrian refugees was depicted by cartoons that appeared in Western media. In focusing on twelve randomly selected political cartoons, the authors tell a story of suffering that begins with why the refugee is fleeing and ends with how the refugee is being received by both border countries and beyond. The use of political science and communication theory to analyse these cartoons is not common in the current literature and constitutes an important contribution.

In *Interrogating the Construction of Gendered Identity in the Syrian Nationalist Narrative: Al-Husari, Aflaq and al-Arsuzi*, Rahaf Aldoughli sheds an important light on how early Baathist theoreticians planted the intellectual foundation for the way in which gender roles were to be understood and, subsequently, taught and applied in Baathist Syria. Using extensive quotes from original sources, Aldoughli documents the systematic masculinisation of conceptions of nationhood by Baathist theoreticians. Perhaps most significant was the “normalisation of militarism in the national narrative” which, resulted in perpetuating “a hierarchy that obstructs the elimination of the gender gap in the Syrian constitution and legislation.”

The important common denominator between the above noted studies is ‘impact’; more specifically, the extent to which a specific method or idea achieved its desired impact. Todman explores the impact of siege warfare and concludes that despite the fact that the war economy allowed for besieged populations to receive a level of relief, sieges were overall successful in that they allowed for the regime to make use of its military advantage and survive a dire challenge to its very existence. While Özdemir and Özdemir showed that political cartoons can indeed be used to better understand a specific phenomenon, they equally demonstrated that political cartoons are ultimately expressive of a specific mindset that the majority of a population has at any given moment in time, rather than instruments by which public perceptions can be significantly changed. Indeed, the plight of Syrian refugees was not impacted in any significant way by the cartoons examined here. Finally, Aldoughli explores the impact of Baathist ideology on the way in which gender conceptions and roles were manifested in Baathist Syria. Here, impact is easily discerned. The works of early Baathist theoreticians, systematically and deliberately, became the ideological underpinnings of a society that is dominated by the idea of a militarized nation in which men lead both the state and the family.

Our Authors

Will Todman is an associate fellow in the Middle East program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). His primary research interest is the impact of modern conflict on civilian populations. He holds an MA in Arab Studies from Georgetown University and a BA in Oriental Studies from Oxford University.

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Rahaf Aldoughli is a Ph.D. candidate in politics and a teaching assistant at Lancaster University. Her research interests deal primarily with the masculinisation of Syrian nationalism and the Baath ideology, with a special focus on citizenship rights and early state-formations. Aldoughli is the author of several works on Syria and has widely presented her academic work at international conferences. She is also a member of the Centre for Syrian Studies’ Global Network of Fellows.