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A Must Read: *Decade of Lost Chances*

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An avalanche of Syria books are on the market, nearly all written in haste, filled with speculation and predictions of dubious value, and highly commercial in nature. They are aimed at attracting readership while the word "Syria" is on everyone's radar.

Publishers are eager to make use of the crisis while it lasts, conscious that interest will soon be replaced by "Syria fatigue," and these very same books will gather dust in warehouses. Of current offerings, very little appears of enduring value.

A refreshing exception is Carsten Wieland's book *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*. It is one of the most serious books on Syria written since the outbreak of the Syrian revolt in March 2011. The book is a good read for students and lay readers as well as a treasure trove of carefully gleaned facts for scholars.

Wieland -- who serves as a German diplomat and speaks fluent Arabic -- has both lived in Syria and interviewed Syrians during every year of Bashar al-Assad's rule. With a superb command of detail, Wieland manages the almost acrobatic feat of telling the Syrian story from multiple perspectives as it progresses through time.

Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances avoids the most obvious flaw of recent books on Syria, nearly all of which cover the subject using simplistic, Orientalist, black and white frames: "people rising against tyranny" or "Sunnis rising against Alawites." In most recent books, the Syrian revolt is treated almost like a John Wayne movie, with "good guys and bad guys" running through the wilderness, shooting at each other. As Wieland demonstrates, it's just not that simple.

The primary virtue of *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances*, however, is perspective and detachment. It's difficult to write about an ongoing event, since any specific fact that is interesting now may become irrelevant in a matter of days. Most books written during World War II, for example, became obsolete the moment the war ended. Tackling history requires perspective and the passage of time. An author must take a long, hard look at what really happened, and why.

Wieland solves this problem by setting the current events of the Syrian revolt within the context of Assad's 12-year rule, and the previous 30 years of his father's governance. His narrative cuts back and forth from the current revolt to precursor events five or 10 years prior, which later defined the uprising's essential conflicts.

I have often seen Carsten Wieland at the traditional Rawda coffeehouse, near parliament in the Syrian capital, drinking strong black tea with celebrated opposition figures like Michel Kilo. Wieland knows that there is more to Syria than "good guys" and "bad guys." He knows that the Syrian revolt really had nothing to do with what happened in the sleepy town of Dara'a, near the border with Jordan, on March 15, 2011. The arrest of schoolchildren, who sprayed anti-regime graffiti on the walls, was only the catalyst -- the spark. With or without Dara'a, Syria would have risen in revolt, some way, somehow, he claims.

The empowerment of Arab youth after the downfall of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes, the uprising against Muammar Gaddafi, and "Forty years of autocracy and corruption at home" all made the Syrian revolt inevitable. Wieland scratches beneath the surface, looking at the "lost chances" in the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's presidency. Wieland acknowledges -- correctly -- that when the revolt began, most Syrians looked up to their president and thought of him as "on their side." Unlike Zein al-Abidin Bin Ali of Tunisia or Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Assad was initially seen as part of the solution in Syria, rather than as the problem itself, as these Arab leaders had been.

During one early anti-regime demonstration in the Harika bazaar of the Damascus old city, Wieland mentions that young men began chanting the president's name -- and doesn't write it off as staged by the Syrian mukhabarat. In the first moments of the revolt, it was only natural for people to reach out to Assad, who they believed, like them, wanted to bring down the regime.

Wieland also understands that sectarianism, now at its peak in Syria, is indeed a novelty. Because it did not exist prior to the revolt, he believes that it is not the root problem. Syrians were never fanatics, he explains, in a chapter titled "Che not Osama," describing how young Syrians pinning photos of Che Guevara, rather than Osama Bin Laden, on their bedroom walls.

The Arab Spring, Wieland explains, gave Syrians a reason to emerge from their "paralysis, dependence, and immaturity." The Dara'a event was a "technical" glitch that brought Syrians onto the streets, originally demonstrating for redress of specific ills: an end to arbitrary arrests, corruption and nepotism; better pay, equal opportunities, and social justice. Day 1 was not about Bashar al-Assad. At the revolt's inception, when things could have taken a reformist rather than a revolutionary path, the people of Dara'a came to security officials to seek the release of their children. They were told to "forget your children" or "make new ones." In these early moments, as Wieland explains, Syrians still projected the evils of the country onto low-ranking officials, especially the police and the mukhabarat. "President Bashar al-Assad was still viewed by ordinary Syrians as a problem solver."

Carsten Wieland traces in detail the evolution of President Assad, recounting how, as a young man on the coast of Latakia in the 1990s, he would laugh at anti-regime jokes with his friends, saying: "More, more! Do you have another one?" Wieland even draws an awkward comparison between Bashar and Rajiv Gandhi. Both men were groomed for anything but a political career. Both men came to power after the accidental death of preferred sons (Basel al-Assad in the Syrian context, and Sanjay Gandhi in the Indian example). Wieland notes, however, that "the footprints which Hafez al-Assad had left behind were a few sizes too big" for the young Assad.

Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances is essential for lay readers as well as scholars who seek to connect the dots of news reports, blog entries and Youtube videos. Celebrated Syria authorities such as Nikolaos van Dam describe the book as "fascinating and highly readable." It will one day be acknowledged as a classic work of scholarship on Syria, alongside Patrick Seale's *Asad: Struggle for the Middle East* and Philip Khoury's *Syria and the French Mandate*.

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