

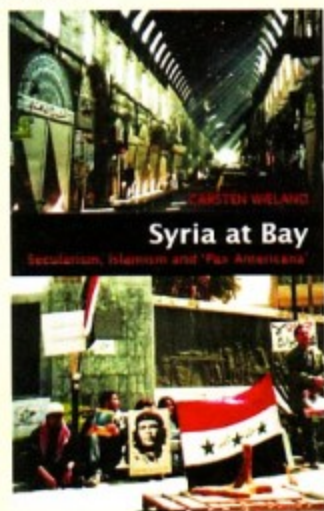
Syria as Peace-broker

Carsten Wieland shows us why Syria is a crucial regional player, says Sophie Bradford

Although in the West, Syria has been kicked around like a Middle Eastern political football of late, the country's foreign policy is seemingly based on carving out a pivotal role as a key regional actor with the potential to tip the balance in favour of stability and security among troubled states. Yet, as a member of America's 'Axis of Evil,' for the past six years Syria has found itself isolated, cornered and 'at bay' in terms of its relations with the West.

In *Syria at Bay*, Carsten Wieland - a research fellow at Georgetown University in Washington DC - describes how the country arrived at this juncture. He chronicles the region's recent history from Syria's perspective since Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000. He explains the complexities surrounding the hand-over from Hafez to Bashar, the problems the new leader faced, and the options open to the new President. Wieland infers that Syria is at a crossroads. The country can find itself further removed from the global centre of power, it can forge alliances in an increasingly polarised world, or it can be welcomed into the diplomatic fold. Indeed there are benefits if Syria chooses to cooperate, not least the reclaiming of the Golan and the signing of an EU trade agreement, currently on ice. Wieland makes a strong case that Syria is in many ways an island in the modern Middle East, not least in terms of its rich patchwork of civil society and minority groups living harmoniously in mutual acceptance. He explains how Syria's

strong, secular state also allows women to enjoy large degrees of equality and opportunity in society and the workplace. There is a satisfactory level of education and "the economic divide is not yet as great as in other countries." He insists that crime is almost non-existent.



Contrasting what Wieland describes as Syria's 'internal stability' with the horrific and barbaric discord that regime change unleashed next door in Iraq, it is clear why there is resistance to foreign interference in Syrian affairs. Damascus' firm anti-war stance, combined with its unwavering support for the Palestinian nationalist cause, has ensured ideological support from its populace. Furthermore, the groundswell of anti-Americanism that took place across the Middle East thanks to America's "morally overloaded egocentrism" and "uncritical stance toward the politics of the Israeli government

and its settlement policy" has only added to a sense of indignation at the idea of a western agenda being forced on Syria. Consequently, there is a strong will for the nation to choose its own course, on its own terms.

In its fight against Islamist terrorism post 9/11, therefore, Washington has lost a "valuable and experienced ally." Wieland blames contradictory policy coming out of the US for causing regional alliances of potentially disruptive elements, which in turn causes further counter-productive political polarisation. He describes the US as having "ruined its moral and political credibility in the Arab-Muslim world after 9/11" and criticises the EU for not speaking out more loudly against the US and Israel "to put an end to violations of international law, from illegal detention and torture methods to collective punishments and pre-emptive attacks."

By interweaving historical context, ideological outlines, personal interviews and anecdotal descriptions of specific developments, Wieland produces a comprehensive account of Syria's contemporary history, which gains in relevance as events continue to unfold. The book is both accessible and informative; Wieland is keen to impart all his knowledge accrued from his days as a Middle Eastern correspondent. His tone is authoritative and friendly, effectively making a daunting subject both approachable and enthralling; this notwithstanding

a certain awkwardness of style presumably attributable to his non-native English-speaking status.

Syria at Bay paints a picture of a country beset and enriched by plurality, contradiction, stagnation and progress. At times, Wieland seems to ask as many questions as he answers in disentangling the various strands of political thought, structure and process that pervade the country. The reader is left with a fascination concerning the path Syria will take and the ways in which it will shape and be shaped by international diplomatic and military developments. However, Wieland's central message is that embracing Syria into the global community cannot but reap rewards, while unreasonably chastising the country would be detrimental to all.

Wieland argues that Syria needs support, encouragement and respect. Put bluntly, the US needs Syria's help, especially in Iraq. As Walid Moallem, Syria's Foreign Minister, said in a recent interview: "No one is thinking about imposing defeat on US forces. On the contrary, we are trying to find an honourable withdrawal for them." Syria had found itself at bay, but there are strong signs that the desperate situation in Iraq will prove to be the factor that brings it back into the fold.

Syria at Bay: Secularism, Islamism, and 'Pax Americana' (Hurst & Co, London, May 2006) by Carsten Wieland