

Raphael Lefevre, *Ashes of Hama: the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, London: Hurst, 2013.

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Reviewed by Richard Phelps

Beyond the Assad regime's decimation of Muslim Brotherhood, which climaxed in Hama in February 1982, knowledge of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria is generally superficial, even among Middle East specialists. Since then, in studies of Islamism, Syria has typically been overlooked. As observers now contemplate Syrian politics in a post-Assad era, a timely book explores the history and internal dynamics of the Brotherhood's branch in Syria. *Ashes of Hama* is a well-researched work that explores the evolution of the Syrian Brotherhood. It is required reading for those seeking to understand how the country's Islamist past is influencing current politics. The book's major accomplishment is its detailed portrayal of the tendencies, tensions and leading personalities within the movement.

Despite belonging to the global Islamist movement, the Syrian Brotherhood's origins are local and independent. The movement, writes Lefevre, a PhD candidate at Cambridge University, was formed in 1945 by the coalescence of reformist religious organisations that emerged under Ottoman and French mandate rule during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (p.82). Throughout its history, its priorities, agendas and concerns have been shaped by factors and considerations peculiar to Syria.

The author highlights how the Syrian Brotherhood has historically exhibited competing tendencies: at times peaceful and modernist; at other times reactionary, violent, and sectarian. Following Syria's independence in 1946, for example, the Brotherhood embraced parliamentary democracy and participated in elections until the advent of Baathist rule in the early 1960s. On the other hand, during the 1970s, pronouncements by Brotherhood's leaders adopted an increasingly sectarian tone against Syria's minority Alawite community, among whom political power was disproportionately concentrated. Lefevre skilfully shows how these varying tendencies partially reflected the alternating control of the group's Damascene, Aleppan, and Hama leaders: led by Said Hawwa, the Hama leaders' "*particular militancy would play a key role in the violent confrontation*" (p.82) with the regime in the late 1970s; whereas its Damascene leadership had been "*a key driving force behind the organization's acceptance of Syria's nascent parliamentary political system*" in the 1940s and 1950s (p.85).

The Muslim Brotherhood has often reacted to political tides in Syria as much as it has been a driver of them. In the *Zeitgeist* of Arab socialism during the 1950s, for example, its leaders embraced left wing rhetoric: it campaigned for elections under the "Islamic Socialist Front" platform and leaders spoke of "*the socialism of the fast during the month of Ramadan*" (p.33). Under the rule of the Baath party from 1963 onwards, however, government repression prompted it to adopt ever more radical positions. Its leaders' disastrous embrace of violence

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against the regime between 1979 and 1982 came after more radical splinter groups such as the Fighting Vanguard led by Marwan Hadid had launched an armed struggle. Even today, after categorically rejecting the use of violence in 2001 under a “National Honour Charter” (p.174), the Brotherhood waited until March 2012 – a year after the uprising began – before it endorsed the Free Syrian Army’s armed campaign against the Assad regime (p. 193).

Among many analysts, the events leading to the Assad regime’s destruction of Hama in 1982 have assumed an almost folkloric quality. Here, the author provides a clear narrative of how events unfolded and pierces the cloud of mythology through his interviews with members of the Brotherhood and former regime security officials, as well as reviewing the memoirs of the participants. Moreover, the history of the Brotherhood in exile is little known, and the author provides an illuminating reconstruction of the trajectory it has taken during its three decades of obscurity. The Brotherhood also continued to exert influence in Syria. The author explains that the regime “*came to terms with the reality that, whatever the scale of repression, it would never be possible to stifle completely the increasing desire of conservative sections of Syrian society*” (p.154). Therefore it increasingly sought to undermine the Brotherhood through divide-and-rule tactics and exploit more extreme Islamists as a tool of foreign policy.

The Muslim Brotherhood is by no means the only Islamist player in the Syrian political landscape. Not only does the author illustrate how the movement fits into the wider spectrum, but he penetrates the group’s own internal dynamics to depict a movement that is far from homogenous. The “*Brotherhood’s role in the unfolding of the protests was actually marginal*” in 2011 (p.182), he notes. Despite this, the influence of Islamists in post-Assad politics is almost certain to increase, though their exact role remains a contested field. “*We are ready for the post-Assad era*” (p.194) he quotes one Syrian Brother announcing; and *Ashes of Hama* provides an informative and distilled background that will greatly assist readers’ understanding of Syrian politics for years to come.

**About the Reviewer:** Richard Phelps is an Adjunct Fellow of the Quilliam Foundation.