

Dawn Chatty. *Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refuge State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. x + 289 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-087606-7.

Reviewed by Sarah Parkinson

Published on H-Diplo (January, 2019)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

The Syrian emergency is now broadly known as the largest episode of forced migration since World War II. Over 5.5 million Syrian citizens are currently registered as refugees; more than 6.5 million are displaced within Syria.[1] The Syrian government's ongoing efforts to alter property-rights laws and prevent returns may render many Syrians permanently displaced.[2] Sustainable return is still practically unattainable for even more, who fear violence and retribution.[3] Dawn Chatty's new volume *Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refuge State* helpfully reestablishes Syria's pre-2011 ethnic and religious diversity and locates Greater Syria as a nexus of historical forced migration, constructively resisting the post-hoc trend of essentializing the Syrian populace as either "Sunni" or "Shi'a." In this way, Chatty's *Syria* will serve as welcome supplementary reading for those trying to understand the current displacement crisis and its roots in the history of forced migration in the Levant, Anatolia, and the Caucasus.

Based on a set of thirty-one narratives drawn from Chatty's prior oral history work and from ten additional interviews conducted in the post-2011 era, the work pulls from Chatty's considerable oeuvre on the history of migration in the region, particularly her 2010 volume *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle*

East. Following largely the same outlines as *Displacement and Dispossession*, *Syria* provides broad overviews of various forced migrations into Syria. Chatty begins with the Ottoman era and carries her analysis through to more recent urban encounters and, finally, to the contemporary Syrian refugee crisis. Separate chapters illuminate the experiences of Circassians and Chechnyans, Armenians, Kurds, Palestinians, and Iraqis who have all come to call Syria home.

The oral histories help to frame and ground Chatty's narrative of each population, putting a human and multigenerational face on population-level trajectories. In approaching these communities, Chatty focuses on issues of mobility, identity, and belonging throughout the migrant experience. The chapter on the Damascene quarter of Sha'laan is noteworthy for how it grounds broad histories of forced migration in a tangible urban and social context; this is perhaps the book's high point. Throughout the historical chapters, Chatty also contextualizes long-standing Russian interests in the Black Sea region and the Levant. This background will prove useful to those interested in the current conflict and Middle Eastern geopolitics in general.

Despite the book's strong foundation in Ottoman history, *Syria* contains very limited material on the Syrian state itself during the supremely

relevant Ba'athist era (the late 1940s onward). There is little information on the roots of the current conflict and, in particular, the ways that both the Hafiz and the Bashar al-Assad regimes' policies have influenced and been influenced by migrant trajectories. Other than the sections on the revocation of Kurdish citizenship rights and the Qamishli riots, Chatty largely avoids overt discussion of politics; she addresses contemporary modes of belonging, integration, and liminality primarily through the chapter on Sha'laan. More thorough engagement with foundational scholarship, for example, via a dialogue with Anaheed al-Hardan's *Palestinians in Syria: Nakba Memories of Shattered Communities* (2016), Bassam Haddad's *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (2012), and such classic writers as Hanna Batatu would have produced a richer analysis on this front.

Chatty also makes some unexplained decisions regarding the exclusion of various cases and historical moments. For example, she largely avoids the Syrian government's long-term engagement with Palestinian resistance organizations (such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command, Fatah al-Intifada, and Hamas) and only passingly mentions the Syrian regime's multiple sieges of the Palestinian district of Yarmouk (which initially housed more than 110,000 people and has now been all but emptied following battles, shelling, near-starvation conditions, and resultant flight). Chatty says relatively little about the regime's thirty-year occupation of Lebanon, the displacements it fueled, or its role in fostering Syrian labor migration.[4] Likewise, she briefly notes Syria's repeated status as a haven for refugees from Lebanon in a personal vignette but does not address these important, episodic migration flows in a chapter of their own. On this note, Chatty's accounts can feel somewhat selective; given her vast experience in the region, it also represents a regrettable set of missed opportunities.

A glaring inaccuracy in the book is worth noting, because it speaks to the book's broader inattention to detail. Specifically, Chatty devotes several pages to incorrectly recounting an event that occurred at the Danish Research Institute in Damascus on March 17, 2011. Chatty recalls encountering a former student, Chesa Boudin, and quotes Chesa as informing her that "he was accompanying his mother [Professor Bernardine Dohrn] and Professor [Lisa] Wedeen on a speaking tour she was undertaking in Syria sponsored by the US State Department. And he went on to say that Lisa was speaking about civil disobedience" (p. 220). However, neither professor was on a speaking tour and neither was sponsored by the US Department of State (both are critical of the US government). Rather, the event involved a screening of the documentary film *The Weather Underground* (2002) where Wedeen briefly welcomed Dohrn. While Dohrn introduced the film and answered questions, there was no lecture or presentation on civil disobedience; Dohrn and Boudin were in Syria primarily as tourists.[5] Given the sensitivity of this matter, the deployment of these unverified details is questionable. These errors will hopefully be corrected in future editions.

Other small errors throughout compound concern. For example, Chatty misidentifies the date of the Yarmouk siege's start as 2015 (p. 169); the first siege of Yarmouk ran 2013-14 following battles in 2012 that reduced its population to approximately eighteen thousand. There were further battles starting in 2015 that lasted into 2018. [6] Despite a smart discussion of the politics of forced migrant statistics, Chatty only intermittently sources her statistics and does not indicate, for example, whether she bases refugee numbers on the United Nations' official tally of registered Syrian refugees or on larger estimates of total refugee population (studies have demonstrated that over 40 percent of refugees in Lebanon were not officially registered).[7] While the book's histories of migration are important and useful to the nonexpert reader, one would be advised to consult com-

plementary sources for more detailed material and recent Syrian history.

Notes

[1]. “Syria Emergency,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html> (accessed November 23, 2018).

[2]. Sara Kayyali, “Protecting Syrian Property Rights,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 19, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/19/protecting-syrian-property-rights>; and “Syria: Residents Blocked from Returning,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/16/syria-residents-blocked-returning>.

[3]. Jamey Keaten, “UN Official: Syria Has Withdrawn Controversial Property Law,” AP NEWS, October 18, 2018, <https://apnews.com/9f7a29ef5e0c4f78b6d27310e607e0fb>.

[4]. See John T. Chalcraft, *The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[5]. Lisa Wedeen, correspondence with author, November 25, 2018.

[6]. “The Crisis in Yarmouk Camp,” United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), <https://www.unrwa.org/crisis-in-yarmouk> (accessed November 26, 2018); and Harriet Sherwood, “Queue for Food in Syria’s Yarmouk Camp Shows Desperation of Refugees” *The Guardian*, February 26, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/26/queue-food-syria-yarmouk-camp-desperation-refugees>.

[7]. Caroline Abu Sa’Da and Micaela Serafini, “Humanitarian and Medical Challenges of Assisting New Refugees in Lebanon and Iraq,” *Forced Migration Review* 44 (September 2013): 70–73, esp. 72; and Sarah E. Parkinson and Orkideh Behrouzan, “Negotiating Health and Life: Syrian Refugees and the Politics of Access in Lebanon,” *Social Science & Medicine* 146 (December 2015): 324–331, esp. 325.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Sarah Parkinson. Review of Chatty, Dawn. *Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refuge State*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. January, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53041>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.