

Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society  
Volume 3, Issue 2, Spring 2011, pp. 96-112

Monika Bolliger

**Writing Syrian History while Propagating Arab  
Nationalism. Textbooks about Modern Arab History  
under Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad**

Bolliger, Monika. "Writing Syrian History while Propagating Arab Nationalism. Textbooks about Modern Arab History under Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad." *Eckert.Jemms* 2011/2.  
<http://edumeres.net/urn/urn:nbn:de:0220-2014-00107>.

*Post peer preview precopy edit*

Final printversion accessible from publisher Berghahn Journals under  
[berghahn.publisher.ingentaconnect.com/content/berghahn/emms](http://berghahn.publisher.ingentaconnect.com/content/berghahn/emms).

**edumeres.net**

## **Writing Syrian History while Propagating Arab Nationalism. Textbooks about Modern Arab History under Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad**

*Monika Bolliger, M.A., Institute for History, University of Zürich, Switzerland*

---

**Abstract** • This article argues that Syrian history textbooks promote the formation of Syrian national identity although their explicit objective is to propagate Arab nationalism. The authors' attempt to construct the history of an imagined Arab nation encompassing the whole of the Arab world in fact tells the story of different nation-states. Syrian students are therefore confronted with rival geographical spheres of national imagination. Changes in the new textbooks under Bashar al-Asad<sup>7</sup> reveal increased Syrian patriotism, a will to comply with globalization, and attempts to maintain Arab nationalism.

**Key words** • Arab nationalism, history textbooks, Middle East, national identity, nationalism, pan-Arabism, Syria

---

Anyone familiar with the *Ba'thist* regime in Syria naturally assumes that the regime propagates secular Arab nationalism (pan-Arabism<sup>2</sup>) via school textbooks, which are edited exclusively by the government. The *Ba'th* party's ideology is based on the idea that all Arabs are part of one nation that needs to be politically united in the future.<sup>3</sup> The regime, whose rulers belong to the *'Alawī* minority, lacks legitimacy in the eyes of the Sunni majority of the country. The Asad rulers have therefore been trying to strengthen a common secular Arab identity among its people by propagating the view that all inhabitants are primarily Arabs rather than Sunnis, Christians or *'Alawīs*. The nation they belong to is the imagined Arab nation, with all Arab countries unified.

But how can history textbooks propagate this ideology of pan-Arabism when writing about modern history and the diverse developments of different nation-states within the Arab world? Within the history textbooks, one can roughly distinguish between three geographical spheres of national imagination for Syrians. The Arab world comprises, ideologically, all nation to which Syrians and Arabs belong. Historically, geographical

Syria (*Bilād al-Shām*) plays an important role as a culturally distinct region that has been divided by colonial powers into the modern states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories. Geographical Syria might therefore provide a second sphere of national imagination. The state of Syria as a third sphere is the existing nation-state Syrians live in and with which, to a certain extent, they identify. Formulations of national identity are located within the tension of these three spheres.

For this discussion, we first need to consider the difference between nationalist *ideology* and the complex factors shaping national *identity*.<sup>4</sup> Apart from ethnic, geographical or cultural criteria, the actual institutions of a nation-state play an important role in shaping national identity. If there are Syrian passports, a Syrian TV channel, Syrian flags and Syrian schools, Syrian citizens will perceive themselves as Syrian, even if there is no Syrian nationalist ideology referring to the contemporary Syrian state within its borders. The institutional elements of the Syrian state evoke something particularly Syrian that all citizens have in common.

Nationalist ideologies usually propagate the view that a certain group of people is a nation due to a natural and eternal bond (such as a common language and history), separating it from other nations. The creation of a state and its institutions have an impact on the identity of its citizens, and can trigger the formulation of a nationalist ideology. But the content of a nationalist ideology is based on claiming the natural unity of a community with an ancient, common past and traditions – which can be invented for such a purpose.<sup>5</sup>

Referring to the constructivist argument by Benedict Anderson and others, I define a nation as a group of people, imagined by its members (and in nationalist ideologies) as related via a common culture or ethnicity, and a territorially defined home. This imagined community – to use Anderson's famous term – either lives in a sovereign nation-state within the boundaries of the referred territory, or claims sovereignty over a certain territory.<sup>6</sup> *Nationalism* is an ideology which legitimizes the claims of a group of people to be a nation, or which propagates a common identity of people living in a state. National identity, on the other hand, is the actual notion of belonging to a nation, resulting from different factors such as a common language, common institutions or a common historical consciousness, possibly propagated via nationalist ideology.

History textbooks play an important role in shaping historical consciousness.<sup>7</sup> In Syria, the government is the sole authority that edits history textbooks, and schools have no choice between different editions. This shows how much importance the Syrian government itself assigns to the textbooks. In this article, I will present the most important results of my analysis of four Syrian textbooks which deal with modern Arab history. These include two textbooks from the 1990s, and their equivalent new books in use at the time of writing (2010).<sup>8</sup> I will draw on three different

periods of modern history that are, in my opinion, the most relevant to nation-building in Syria. The first period is the time of King Faişal and the mandate era, when the process of drawing the borders of the modern Syrian state took place. As we shall see, the conflicts related to this process are still reflected in the formulations of the narratives dealing with this era. The second period discussed here is the post state-building era or post-colonial era. The relevant question for this period is whether or (as expected) not the authors of the textbooks accept the existing nation-states with their borders, and how they insist on the concept of the Arab nation. The third period to be discussed is that of globalization, which is dealt with only in the new textbook for the twelfth grade. I will discuss the meaning of this new and significant chapter and the way in which globalization is interpreted in the chapter. I will also outline some other significant changes made in the new textbooks under the rule of Hafiz' son and successor Bashar al-Asad. Since many contents of the textbooks have not changed in the new editions, I will not only show important changes, but also elements of continuity on the nationalist discourse within the textbooks. First of all, it is necessary to briefly outline the Syrian school system and curriculum as well as my sources in order to provide an overview of their structure and content.

### **The Syrian School System and Curriculum**

In Syria, the first nine years of school have been compulsory since 2002.<sup>9</sup> Literacy rates in Syria are high compared to other Middle Eastern countries; in 2002, *The Economist* stated an 83 percent literacy rate in Syria, whereas in Egypt the rate was estimated to be only 56 percent.<sup>10</sup> In 2004, 96 percent of all children in Syria were registered in primary school (first to sixth grade), but only 54 percent were enrolled in middle school (seventh to ninth grade). Only 34 percent continued on to secondary school.<sup>11</sup> Since private schools must also use the government curriculum, especially in the ninth and twelfth years, textbooks still reach a high number of young Syrians.<sup>12</sup> And, at least at school, there are hardly any alternatives to the viewpoints expressed in the textbooks.

Nonetheless, the effect of these textbooks must be questioned. I have heard many young Syrians complaining about oversized classes, incompetent teachers and boring history lessons. Subjects like history are considered to be particularly tedious because, unlike subjects like mathematics, students must remember every word without thinking on their own. Independent thinking is not required at all. Even though there is no alternative to the historical discourse enforced by the government, students taking part in this discourse make fun of it at the same time. This phenomenon is consistent with the picture drawn by Lisa Wedeen in her

study about the presidential cult in Syria. Wedeen argues that, by ironically taking part in this cult, people both show that they do not really believe in it, but also that the cult is powerful. There is no room for opposition under the totalitarian rule of the *Ba 'th*. Everyone has to play the game, while everyone knows that the information it presents is unreliable.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, even though Syrian students might make fun of what they are obliged to learn by heart, the impact of the narratives appears to be fundamental since they are offered no alternative account of historical events.

Syrian textbooks have not been extensively analyzed until now. Apart from a few useful articles about Syrian textbooks,<sup>14</sup> there is only one slightly more extensive study by Meyrav Wurmser, which addresses propaganda in Syrian textbooks, but unfortunately in a rather selective way.<sup>15</sup> One reason why Syrian textbooks have not yet been analyzed might be the fact that they are not easily available for research, at least not officially through the Ministry of Education. However, as a foreigner, I did not encounter any difficulties when buying textbooks at the official textbook outlets. My ability to speak Syrian dialect and to say that I was a student of the Arabic language probably made things easier.<sup>16</sup>

I will here give a short overview on the Syrian history textbook curriculum listed in the following table:

#### **Table 1.**

The Syrian history textbook curriculum is structured chronologically, from ancient to modern history, starting in the sixth grade and leading to the ninth grade, which is the last compulsory year. Until then, only Arab history is taught. If pupils continue to secondary school (tenth to twelfth

grade), they choose for their last two years either natural sciences or humanities as a focal point. In natural sciences, they are taught the history of European industrialization, whereas in the humanities section, they study modern European history and more modern Arab history, building on what they have learned about modern Arab history in the ninth grade.

Modern Arab history is therefore taught in the ninth grade to everyone, then later in the twelfth grade in the humanities section only. The ninth and the twelfth grades are both years which precede graduation. Whereas private schools are allowed to use additional materials which go beyond the official curriculum in every other school year, they must exclusively use government textbooks in the years immediately before graduation. Priority is naturally given to modern Arab history within the history curriculum.

### **Textbooks about Modern Arab History**

My study on national identity in Syria was based on the two most relevant history textbooks about modern Arabic history for the ninth and twelfth grades.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, these two books have been reedited since the rule of Bashar al-Asad, while the rest of the history curriculum has remained largely unaltered. Comparison of the textbooks currently in use with editions of the same books from the 1990s under the rule of Hafiz al-Asad was enlightening, especially regarding changes in nationalist vocabulary and the structure of textbooks, as I will show in the following chapters.

#### **Table 2.**

The textbooks about modern Arab history tell a history of the imagined Arab nation which conforms to *Ba'ath* ideology, claiming its oneness and right to sovereignty. We find titles such as “The Ottoman Occupation of the Arab Fatherland,”<sup>18</sup> “The European Invasion of the Arab Fatherland”<sup>19</sup> or “The Arab Fatherland from the First World War until the Present.”<sup>20</sup> But even though the titles suggest a common history for the

so-called Arab fatherland (*al-waṭan al-‘arabī*, sometimes also translated as “the Arab nation”), contents of the different lessons about actual historical events make it nearly impossible to tell a continuous history of the Arab nation. While writing about historical events, the authors are confronted with diverse developments of different regions of the Arab world and today’s reality in different nation-states. Yet a certain continuity with repeated accounts of foreign occupation and resistance in all Arab countries is maintained.

The term “Arab world” needs some clarification at this point. Even though it denotes a category that is not very precise, Syrian textbooks show clearly what is included in the Arab nation. It refers primarily to all members of the Arab League, as well as some smaller parts of neighboring countries with Arabic-speaking inhabitants, who are considered part of the Arab nation, such as the Ahwaz region in Iran or Spanish possessions on the Moroccan coast.<sup>21</sup>

The main periods dealt with in the textbook narratives are the Ottoman rule (often called “occupation”), the growing influence of France and Great Britain, the era of King Faiṣal from 1918 to 1920, the French mandate, the fight for independence, Syria after its independence and developments of the other Arab countries during the colonial and postcolonial eras.

### **Drawing Boundaries. Faiṣal and the Mandate Era**

Historically, “Syria” was not a precise geographical term denoting clear boundaries, but stood for the region of the Levant, also known as *Bilād al-Shām* or Greater Syria. While culturally and geographically a distinct region,<sup>22</sup> *Bilād al-Shām* did not form a political entity until 1918. For a short time only – between 1918 and 1920 – an independent state was proclaimed in this region under King Faiṣal.<sup>23</sup> This era is a very important period in Syrian history for the shaping of national identities. In the short period after the First World War, many Arabs of the Ottoman Empire hoped to embark on a new era of national independence. The Arab nation they had been vaguely promised in 1915 by the British foreign minister Lord McMahon was meant to roughly encompass the region of *Bilād al-Shām*<sup>24</sup> in return for fighting with the British against Ottoman rule. In 1918, troops of the famous Arab Revolt reached Damascus and their leader Faiṣal claimed power. However, the French put a quick end to the young Arab nation-state, dividing it between themselves and Britain into mandate areas.<sup>25</sup> The interval between Ottoman rule and French occupation led to the rise of nationalist popular politics in the Middle East which, in part, continue today.<sup>26</sup> As can be expected, Syrian history textbooks deal with this short period in relatively great length.<sup>27</sup>

Textbook chapters<sup>28</sup> on the Faiṣal era clearly show the difficulties the authors faced in writing national history. While ideologically determined to arrange the events within the framework of an Arab national history, they in fact relate the history of a Greater Syrian state that has been divided into the smaller nation-states we know today. The problem becomes particularly obvious if we look at the terminology used to name the institution of Faiṣal's kingdom, its geographic boundaries and its inhabitants. As outlined above, I consider the main elements of a nation to be a geographically defined home, inhabited by a certain group of people who either aim to be or are part of a modern nation-state.

Faiṣal's kingdom in Greater Syria is delicately called "the first Arab state in Syria"<sup>29</sup> – and not "the first Syrian state." Formulations describing geographic location are similarly cumbersome. The geographic terms *Bilād al-Shām* and *Sūriyya* are both generally synonymously used in the chapters on Faiṣal.<sup>30</sup> When the authors use the term *Sūriyya*, they often clarify that they actually mean Greater Syria by adding "within its natural borders" (*Sūriyya bi-ḥudūdihā al-ṭabi'iyya*) or using similar formulations, such as "natural Syria," "unified Syria," "Syria with its natural borders including Lebanon and Palestine," or "all of Syria." It is historically correct that the region of *Bilād al-Shām* was also called Syria, especially from the nineteenth century onwards, when the term developed a distinct modern connotation in contrast to the traditional term *Bilād al-Shām*.<sup>31</sup> However, authors obviously feel the need to explain themselves, for during the last few decades the term *Sūriyya* (Syria) has developed to increasingly denote the actual Syrian nation-state. *Bilād al-Shām* on the other hand has become a historical term related to the past. In chapters before the Faiṣal era, the narratives mention *Bilād al-Shām* rather than Syria, dealing with events that took place within this region before the drawing of new boundaries by colonial powers. When discussing about the period between 1918 and 1920, the authors consider it important to emphasize the fact that geographical Syria or *Bilād al-Shām* used to encompass the whole Levantine region. The variety of terms used to describe national territory shows the difficulties the authors face here, as they hover between three different geographical spheres: the territory of *Bilād al-Shām*, the Syrian state of today, and the imagined Arab nation.

For the terms used to denote the inhabitants of Faiṣal's kingdom, it is particularly interesting to compare the chapter on Faiṣal in the older and the newer editions for the ninth grade. While the older edition generally mentions "the Arabs," the newer version also includes "the Arab people in Syria," "the people" or even "the Syrian people."<sup>32</sup> Later, in the same book, when discussing resistance against the French mandate, the adjective "Syrian" or "Syrian-Arab" is peculiarly added often, in contrast to the older version. Patriotic "Syrians" rather than "inhabitants of the Arab

fatherland” demonstrate against the French mandate in 1920, and the “Arab army” becomes “the Arab-Syrian army,” and so on.<sup>33</sup>

Similar terms can also be found in the newer version for the twelfth grade, where the Arab character of modern Syrian history is even more pronounced. The state of Faiṣal, for example, is now consistently called an “*Arab*” state, and his “independent state” becomes an “independent *Arab* state” and so on.<sup>34</sup> In general, the authors try to put events in (geographical) Syria within the wider framework of the Arab nationalist cause. The account in the new edition of the ninth-grade book about the lost battle of Maysalūn against the French in 1920, led by the Syrian Yūsuf al-‘Azma, illustrates this notion well:

Yūsuf al-‘Azma and his comrades were fighting with courage and bravery, and they made great sacrifices defending their dear fatherland [*waṭan*] [...]. The battle of Maysalūn is considered to be one of the eternally remembered battles of the history of Syria and the Arab Nation [*al-umma al-‘arabiyya*], and it is a symbol of the fight against the enemies of the fatherland [*waṭan*] and Arabness [*al-‘urūba*].<sup>35</sup>

This description is in line with the traditional idea of Arab nationalism, according to which first the different parts (*ajzā’*) of the nation have to free themselves from foreign occupation, and later unite as one nation. However, it is remarkable that we now explicitly read about “Syrian” heroes and battles in the “history of Syria,” while older textbooks fail to lend much attention to emphasizing the Syrian character of (Arab) national history. The overall impression of the changes in the newer textbooks is that the authors still try to strengthen Arab national identity, while also acknowledging that there is a Syrian identity and reality to consider. For young Syrians in particular, Syrian patriotism might be more attractive, referring to a more tangible reality than the seemingly unattainable idea of an Arab nation.

### **The Post-colonial Era. Approaching the Reality of Contemporary Nation-states?**

Some developments in the new textbooks point to more thorough acknowledgement of the reality of today’s nation-states. The books for the ninth grade in particular show changes in structure which have advanced in this direction. Whereas, in the old edition for the ninth grade, Syria and Lebanon were dealt with together in several chapters over different periods, the new version devotes an extra chapter to “The Development of the State of Lebanon”<sup>36</sup> after three chapters on Syria. The new version is structured in terms of geographic entities, which means that it basi-

cally contains a chapter for each Arab nation-state. The old edition, by contrast, was divided into chapters dealing with shorter periods involving geographic areas stretching beyond national borders, such as “The Arab Fatherland since the Second World War.”<sup>37</sup>

Lebanon has always been regarded as the most closely related neighbor of Syria. In the new chapter about Lebanon, the introduction still states that Lebanon used to be a part of Syria and was cut off from its motherland by colonial powers.<sup>38</sup> However, the new structure of the ninth grade textbook, containing a chapter devoted solely to Lebanon, reveals ambivalent and changing attitudes towards Lebanon. So do changes in wording in the twelfth-grade book, which suddenly mentions Lebanese people instead of only Arabs in general in the time of Faiṣal.<sup>39</sup> At the time the new textbooks were being written (in 2002 and 2003/4), Syrians had still not withdrawn their troops from Lebanon (this happened in 2005) and had not officially acknowledged Lebanon’s sovereignty (which they did in 2008). But whereas Bashar al-Asad increased the presence of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon, he also constantly increased the speed at which military troops were withdrawn before the withdrawal of 2005.<sup>40</sup> Syria needs a Lebanon with all confessions unified in order not to be drawn into a war with Israel, which is why it maintains an ambiguous policy. Historical and psychological factors also explain why it is difficult for Syria to recognize Lebanon as a separate state.<sup>41</sup> One would expect such factors to be reflected in government textbooks. However, such political strategies are not always directly reflected in such narratives.

Structural changes in the new book for the twelfth grade are less remarkable. They do not indicate an approach which is more geared towards states instead of periods of time. However, the 1994 edition for the twelfth grade already contained separate chapters about Lebanon, in contrast to its equivalent for the ninth grade, which had not been revised from 1989 to 2002. But there is one fundamental change in structure in the twelfth-grade book from 2004, which also indicates that the authors of the newer versions tried to leave behind the old-fashioned historiography about the Arab fatherland and to express more contemporary views. In the old edition of 1994, the last chapter was dedicated to the “annexed pieces of the Arab fatherland and their fight for freedom.”<sup>42</sup> These pieces include Turkish Hatay (Alexandretta), the Ahwaz region in Iran (“Arabistan”) and some parts of Ethiopia, Kenya and Spain (Moroccan coast). In the new version, this chapter has been omitted in favor of a whole new chapter of thirty-five pages about globalization, which I shall outline below. This novelty seems to conform to Bashar al-Asad’s new policy, which focuses more on complying with the needs of globalization.<sup>43</sup> The traditional ideological talk about lost territories of the Arab nation appear to be no longer relevant, whereas the challenges of globalization are an obvious reality everyone has to cope with. The only “annexed piece” that