

CENTRE FOR WEST ASIAN STUDIES

JAMIA MILLIA ISLAMIA

Al-Nahda

THE WEST ASIAN HERALD

A Dream of Bread: The
Starvation of Gaza's People

The Patriarchal State: Why
Patriarchy and
Authoritarians Make Natural
Allies

DAANES's Democratic Confederatism: A
Review of The Autonomous
Administration of North and East Syria:
Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Flux: Politics of Continuity
and Change in Iranian State
Symbolism

Line Drawn, War Not Won:
Why Halting the Bombing
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The Cave: A Secret Underground
Hospital and One Woman's Story of
Survival in Syria



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Centre for West Asian Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

The Centre for West Asian Studies is proud to present the Al-Nahda Editorial Team a vibrant ensemble of students and faculty united by creativity, passion, and a deep curiosity for the world around them. Guided by the Subject Association, this team transforms Al-Nahda into far more than a newsletter; it is a dynamic stage for fresh perspectives, thoughtful dialogue, and imaginative expression on the diverse issues shaping West Asia and beyond.

Each edition reflects their unwavering commitment to insightful analysis, cultural exploration, and the joy of learning. From in-depth articles and interviews to reflections on art, history, and society, the team brings the region's stories to life with clarity, nuance, and flair. Al-Nahda is not just a publication it is a celebration of ideas, a forum for intellectual engagement, and a space where curiosity meets creativity, inspiring readers to think, question, and explore.

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A Dream of Bread: The Starvation of Gaza's People

By, Sadiya Inam

Centre for West Asian Studies,
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"There is no pain greater than watching your child cry of hunger and having nothing to give." Gazan mother, testimony to Amnesty International.

They wake before dawn, yet there is nothing to look forward to in the hours that follow. The soft cry of a child, the hollow rumble of an empty belly, these have become the sounds of Gaza. Mothers brush dust off cracked concrete, peer into torn sacks, stare at crates of water that never arrive. Bread has become a dream, food a memory. Life trembles under the weight of hunger, and the most ordinary act of survival : eating, has been turned into a privilege denied.

It's been months since Gaza has been under a full blockade so absolute that food, water, medicine, and fuel have been cut off almost entirely, leaving more than two million people trapped in manufactured famine. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the United Nations have all warned that Israel is intentionally obstructing aid, using hunger as a weapon of war. Thousands of children have been diagnosed with acute malnutrition. Many have died not from bombs or bullets, but from the absence of bread, milk, clean water. Agricultural land has been razed, bakeries destroyed, sanitation systems obliterated. Every artery of life is being severed until hunger itself becomes the most efficient weapon. Families are reduced to measuring survival in spoonfuls, rationing a single piece of bread among four children, boiling weeds to quiet rumbling stomachs. Hunger is no longer a by-product of war; it is its chosen method. The desperation has triggered global outrage, with flotillas of activists and aid workers setting sail to break the siege and deliver food by sea: floating symbols of defiance against the slow death imposed on Gaza. Israel has sought to justify the starvation by accusing Hamas of stealing aid, yet no independent investigation has ever proven these claims. Humanitarian organisations on the ground make clear that the real cause of hunger is not diversion but deliberate obstruction: borders sealed, trucks stopped, warehouses emptied by policy. To blame the starving for their own hunger is not only cruel; it is a way to mask the crime itself.

The legal language for this exists. The Geneva Conventions prohibit the deliberate deprivation of objects indispensable to survival. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court lists starvation of civilians as a war crime. International jurists and UN investigators have gone further, finding that the deliberate creation of famine conditions in Gaza aligns with acts of genocide. In short: this is not collateral damage. It is systematic policy, a form of extermination carried out through the slow violence of hunger.

And yet, beyond the law, there are voices: raw, unfiltered, impossible to ignore.

"I'm too exhausted to walk, let alone carry my children..."



if they are going to attack the city, we will just sit here awaiting our death," said a mother in Jabalia. A medical worker described a baby's stomach making noises he "will never forget." These testimonies make clear what reports and resolutions can only hint at: starvation is not an abstraction, it is an assault on flesh and spirit, one meal at a time.

The world knows this. The International Court of Justice has ordered Israel to prevent famine from setting in. The UN Security Council, with the lone exception of the United States, has declared the famine "man-made." Humanitarian organisations from Oxfam to Amnesty have condemned the deliberate obstruction of aid. Everyone has the evidence. The question is not whether starvation is happening, it is whether the world will admit what it means. Starvation is not an accident in Gaza. It is not a tragic side-effect. It is a weapon, wielded deliberately, with devastating precision. Invoking "never again" carries an obligation to examine how we define and respond to mass human suffering, including hunger. If we decry bombs but excuse the slow killing of blockade, we reveal which deaths we deem acceptable. Gaza is being starved into silence, and silence from the rest of the world is complicity. To dream of bread should never be a crime, but in Gaza it is a death sentence. The denial of food is the denial of life itself, and to watch it unfold is to watch humanity fail. In Gaza today, children fall asleep whispering of bread they may never taste, mothers rock them to silence while their own stomachs twist in pain, and fathers watch helplessly as the act of feeding a family becomes an impossible dream. Starvation has turned the human body into a battlefield, and hunger into the cruelest weapon of all. This is not just the slow death of a people, it is the slow death of our humanity if we continue to look away. To deny food is to deny life itself, and to allow Gaza to starve is to suggest that silence and hunger can erase a nation.

The Patriarchal State: Why Patriarchy and Authoritarians Make Natural Allies

By, Aisha Jabeen

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When democracies slide toward authoritarianism, the first attack is on women's rights. This is not coincidental; women's autonomy, political participation, equal inheritance, and reproductive rights symbolize the state's democratic and secular orientation. So rolling back women's rights becomes a symbolic act of rejecting liberal values and reasserting patriarchal control.

The strategy is clear: strengthen traditional family hierarchies, police women's bodies, and silence feminist voices. This creates a culture of obedience and conformity. And because feminists and civil society activists are usually at the forefront of defending democracy and human rights, crushing them effectively weakens the entire resistance movement and intimidates other groups from speaking up.

Patriarchal control serves another purpose—it ensures that men never feel powerless. Though they may be politically disenfranchised, their dominance within the family restores a sense of authority. This private power compensates for their public powerlessness, allowing authoritarian rule to persist unchallenged.

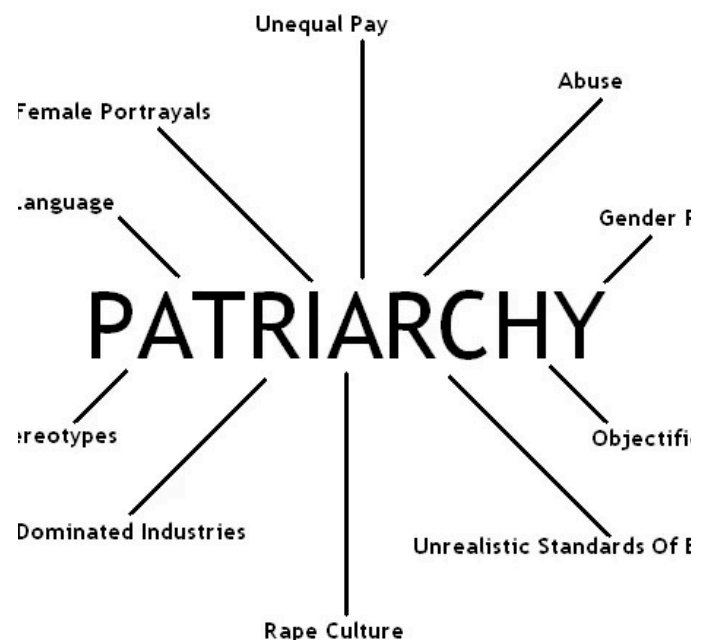
Feminist author Fatima Mernissi captures this brilliantly in her book "Scheherazade Goes West": "All the passionate if not hysterical debates about women's rights that take place in Muslim parliaments from Indonesia to Dakar are in actuality debates about pluralism. These debates relentlessly focus on women. It is no wonder that the first decision of Imam Khomeini who paradoxically declared Iran a republic in 1979 was to ask women to veil. Elections, yes, pluralism, no. He knew that an unveiled woman forces the imam to face the fact that a community of believers, is not homogeneous."

The crucial point is that when democracy recedes, women's bodies become political battlegrounds and this follows no religious lines. It is a pattern across all religions and regions.

Beyond Iran, we saw similar scenarios in Erdogan's Turkey with his "family first" ideology redefining women's role in society around motherhood and domesticity. He urged women to stay at home, and in March 2021, Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention, a landmark European treaty to prevent violence against women.

In Hungary, since Viktor Orbán took office in 2010, he promoted an ultra-conservative nationalist ideology based on Christian family values. The government banned gender studies in universities in 2018 and declared "gender ideology" a threat to the nation.

In Poland, state media portrays feminists as un-Polish, anti-family, and foreign-funded. In 2020, a constitutional tribunal banned nearly all abortions, even in cases of fetal abnormalities.



In our own country, women's bodies remain a political battleground with narratives like "love jihad" and feminists labeled as anti-national. The term "feminist" carries a negative connotation and is often used as an insult.

Even in the United States, supposedly the beacon of liberal democracy, the political campaigns of the current president rest heavily on his strategic use of far-right ideology. He tapped into a masculinist, anti-feminist culture. His crude remarks about women didn't hurt him among his base; rather, they reinforced his "authentic" outsider persona against "woke" liberal norms. He gained support from religious conservatives by opposing reproductive rights and supporting Supreme Court appointments that ultimately overturned Roe v. Wade in 2022.

Tunisia is a heartbreaking example. This was the country that sparked the Arab Spring, a symbol of hope for democracy in the region. But under Kais Saied's authoritarian rule, women have paid a heavy price. In September 2022, he passed Decree Law 55, which completely dismantled the gender parity laws that had been in place. He replaced a system that guaranteed women's representation with one that essentially ignored it. The impact was immediate and devastating: women's representation in parliament crashed from 26% in 2019 to just 11% in 2022.

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Since 2021, at least 34 women have been arrested, investigated, or banned from traveling. Take Abir Moussi, leader of the Free Destourian Party—she was thrown in prison in October 2023 and sentenced to two years, just days after announcing she'd run for president. She would have been the only woman candidate. Or Sonia Dahmani, a lawyer and journalist who's been sentenced multiple times simply for speaking out against the regime and defending African refugees. Activists like Saadia Mosbah and Cherifa Riahi were arrested on bogus money laundering charges after Saied accused NGOs of being destabilizing forces funded by foreigners. Women's organizations that worked on migration, social justice, and violence prevention—like the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women (ATFD) have been shut down. These groups provided lifesaving support to vulnerable women and marginalized communities

Whether we're talking about Islamist regimes, Christian nationalists, or Hindu nationalists—the playbook doesn't change. Patriarchy becomes synonymous with national identity. Feminist activism gets labeled as criminal or illegitimate. Women's freedom is sacrificed for so-called "moral stability." The state builds its authority on controlling gender and sexuality.

Authoritarian leaders survive by tapping into ideas that already exist in conservative societies. There are already men who resent women for "taking their jobs." Autocrats amplify these feelings, feed that male ego, and offer simple solutions. Some men even say they want the Taliban—they fantasize about going back to an imaginary golden age when men had total control over their families. When people think like this, it becomes incredibly easy for extremist groups to gain ground. It's essentially a partnership: men get dominance, and authoritarian governments get legitimacy. It is a symbiotic relationship between conservative groups and authoritarian governments—both sides benefit.

Women's rights get dismissed as Western interference. Feminism is branded as the enemy of tradition and culture. Age-old practices are weaponized to justify keeping women down. By appeasing men and reinforcing their power, authoritarian regimes secure their own position.

What is infuriating—is that the men pushing these policies often don't even follow them in their personal lives. They publicly champion one thing while privately doing the complete opposite. Think about Ali Shamkhani's daughter being photographed in revealing clothing while he advocates for strict hijab laws. Or advisors to Khomeini living completely different lives behind closed doors. They don't necessarily believe the ideology; they just know it sells and they use it to their full benefit.

When democracy dies, women's rights die first, not by accident but by deliberate design. The conclusion is clear, the authoritarian regimes disproportionately affect women.



Flux: Politics of Continuity and Change in Iranian State Symbolism

By, Ali Ahmed

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In the month of October in 2025 in the city of Isfahan in Central Iran a sculpture depicting Rustom riding his steed Rakhsh slaying a Dragon, a mythological event from Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, the foundational epic poem of Persian mythology, was unveiled. As this event escaped headlines in most of the world the gravitas of this event was not lost to the people of Iran: ever since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 the Iranian government composed of Shia clergy have sought to undermine the pre-Islamic heritage of Iran in favour of a narrative that fashions Iran as the vanguard of the Shia ideology, swapping Rakhsh for Zuljanah and Rustom for Imam Hussain, and this event was a departure as big as any. Although on its face it stands in contradiction against much of the ideological and symbolical stream associated with the Islamic Republic and the people running it, it also betrays how the people of Iran think of their country and this understanding remains important to enrich our understanding of Iran beyond clichéd characterisations so widespread in popular media.

Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, a historian of nationalism especially vis-à-vis Iran, writes that "rather than being rooted in the past, memory is a repository of present concerns, hopes and anxieties, which can inform us on the society that has produced it and aims to preserve it", i.e. memory therefore isn't an objective recollection of history but rather a prism through which a society wants to be viewed and views itself. He further writes, "memory can hold social groups such as nations together... a national community cannot sustain its existence without some form of remembering", therefore it holds great utility in fostering a nation and providing for itself a common past. It is expressed through various mediums such as literary and artistic production, speeches by notables, patronising of works of art and architecture and the symbols employed in all these. But symbols aren't just limited to an expression of a country's understanding of its past, they also are an expression of its aspirations, which isn't completely unconnected to the past rather oftentimes a corollary of it.

"Two Centuries of Silence" is one of the most widely-read history in Iran, written by Abdolhossein Zarrinkoob in 1951 this book cements the memory of Iran as an immutable civilization existing amidst repeated invasions by outsiders and each time vanquishing its foe by assimilating it into itself. This rendering of Iran as a continual, unchanged and unaltered civilisation characterised by primarily its language became the dominant view of Iranian history henceforth. During Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's (reigned 1941 - 1979) monarchy this memory of Iran was expressed in the speeches and writings of the monarch but also in the way the monarchy fashioned itself as an inheritor of Iranian kingship in the same vein as the Achaemenids or the Sassanids to which end an elaborate coronation was held in 1967 in which the Shah was crowned Shahanshah, a term harkening back to the title held by ancient Iranian sovereigns,



In 1971 a series of events and spectacles were held to celebrate the foundation of the Achaemenid empire by Cyrus 2500 years ago, this commemoration included military parades and displays of Iranian might, an expression of the monarchy's intent to be the most powerful actor within the region and take the mantle of an imperial power once again. Persepolis, site of the capital of the Achaemenids, was renovated and a new edifice towering over Tehran's skyline, Shahyad Tower, was inaugurated.

However, resentment over the Shah's autocratic rule and heavy handedness of his secret police (SAVAK) gave way to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in which the Shia clergy took over the reigns of power and a dissident exiled cleric Ruhollah Khomeini became the supreme leader. This new clerical class, antagonised by the Shah-era dichotomisation of Iran's civilisation and Islam as an invading faith, sought to create a synthesis between the two. Morteza Motahhari, a key ideologue of the revolution, does this by arguing that Islam as a religion contains no essentialising ethnic element and that it suited Iranian disposition, furthermore, he argues that it was under Iranian stewardship that the Islamic faith reach its apogee. This new order defined itself in opposition to what was seen as American imperialistic intrusion into Iran by way of the Shah. These two factors combined to give way to a program that sought to undermine the pre-Islamic elements of Iranian past and to portray Iran besieged and lonely, surrounded by enemies, struggling for the truth, similar to the situation of Imam Hussain's contingent in the Battle of Karbala. To this end the Shahyad tower was renamed as Azadi Tower and yearly pilgrimages to Cyrus's tomb were banned. The place of these symbols were taken by symbology derived from Shia Islam such as massive, televised, state patronised commemorations of Imam Hussain's martyrdom every Muharram. Motifs in propaganda and artistic output affiliated with the regime routinely recasts Iran under the Supreme Leader as a nation embodying martyrdom, sacrifice and defiance in face of

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adversaries which are more powerful, values epitomised by Imam Hussain.

These two epochs, one of continuity with ancient Iranian past and the other portraying Iran as the Shia vanguard, although superficially contradictory belie a constant which undergirds all hues of ruling ideology in Iran: the desire to be sovereign and reclaim Iran's place as the premier power of the region. As the Islamic republic moves away from the revolution it feels lesser the need to distance itself from the memories of the Shah and a synthesis takes place of symbology wherein the Iranian nationalism articulated in terms of its ancient past is blended with the shia muslim vision of being beleaguered amidst a sea of adversaries. This expresses the ambition of Iran and at once its reality. It is perhaps this idea which finds itself nascently articulated in the unveiling of the statute under the Islamic republic: of a character from an epic written by a shia muslim poet who also articulated the narrative of Iran as an eternal civilisation that subdues its conqueror by assimilating it.



Line Drawn, War Not Won: Why Halting the Bombing Won't Secure Gaza's Justice

By, Shoaib Bhat

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On October 7, 2023, Hamas attacked Israel, killing nearly 1,200 civilians and soldiers and taking hostages, according to Israel. Israel vowed to avenge the attack, rescue the hostages and eliminate Hamas. However, despite the ongoing conflict over the past two years, Israel has not eliminated Hamas, which it considers an existential threat. This war has brought immense suffering to civilians - pain, loss & the destruction of their homeland.

Now, after the US-brokered ceasefire between Gaza and Israel, a fundamental question arises: Will the world deliver justice to Gazans for the suffering they had to bear over these two years - the killing of loved ones, children lost to violence, destruction of homes and displacement? Stopping the bombing is not enough; bringing the perpetrators to justice is what the world owes them.

Failing to hold the architects and those who carried out their mission of this genocide accountable may inspire other authoritarians and power hungry rulers to misuse their political power, leading to further violence, oppression and occupation of vulnerable people vulnerable politically, economically and militarily. Turning a blind eye to such situations can trigger a domino effect worldwide. We see this in Sudan, where a crisis similar to Gaza has unfolded. Had the world stood firmly against any unjust aggression, no one would have dared to cross boundaries and create humanitarian disasters.

Laws were established to maintain social order, ensuring no one's liberty or rights are violated. For those who break them, punishment was created to serve as a deterrent to people with evil intent. But in today's world, laws are little more than ink on paper - lacking real enforcement.

What will be the point of stopping bombings when they have to live their lives under continuous military occupation and face settler colonialism in the West Bank? And in Gaza an open-air prison - they will return to their 'normal' life, which is nothing but dehumanising.

For Palestinians living in Israel, they will have to live under Jewish supremacy, where laws are applied based on ethnicity and racial discrimination. Will stopping the firing of bullets heal the wounds of the refugees who long to return to their homes? The answer is clearly no.

To ensure justice and accountability, the United Nations and other countries should take stronger action to uphold the dignity and legitimate demands of Palestinians, including their right to self-determination, the return of refugees who have been displaced over time and put an end to apartheid, enabling both communities - arabs and jews - to coexist in peace, with equal rights and freedom from racial discrimination, and a sovereign Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders.

Furthermore, they should implement the verdict of the International Court of Justice by arresting political officials convicted of genocide.



While addressing the situation in Gaza, not every foreign policy should be pragmatic, some must be driven by moral principles, prioritizing humanity over national interests. History will judge the actions of the international community, no matter how small. Taking bold steps to ensure accountability may prevent another happening like Gaza's.

What we sow today, future generations will reap the consequences. It is up to the people and their representatives to shape the future they dream of.

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BOOK REVIEW

DAANES's Democratic Confederalism: A Review of The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

By Thomas Schmidinger, Transnational Press London, 2020, 217 pp., 9.99 €, (paperback), Print-ISBN-13: 978-1-912997-51-0

Reviewer- Moin Aftab

**Centre for West Asian Studies,
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The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria: Between A Rock and A Hard Place represents an essential and timely scholarly contribution towards understanding the evolution, aspirations, and challenges of the Kurdish-led autonomous region in northern Syria, widely known as Rojava. The edited volume collects interdisciplinary perspectives that vividly bring to life the historical legacies, political structures, military struggles, and social experiments occurring in an exceptionally complex wartime context.

Schmidinger's introduction situates the Kurdish autonomy within Syria's broader state repression under decades of Ba'athist rule, "The emergence of Kurdish-dominated autonomy in northern Syria, initially referred to as Rojava (Western Kurdistan), culminated longstanding political struggles by Kurdish parties and civil society movements for political freedoms and autonomy in Syria. This struggle had been directed against an extremely authoritarian regime controlled by the Arab-nationalist Ba'ath Party since the 1960s" (Schmidinger, Introduction, p. 14). Importantly, the book highlights the population's ethnic and religious diversity, as northeastern Syria includes "Arabs, Aramaic-speaking Christians (Assyrians, Arameans, Syriac), Circassians, Chechens, and Dom" alongside Kurds, explaining the Administration's inclusive rather than ethnonationalist basis (p. 16).

A foundational pillar throughout is the concept of democratic confederalism introduced by Abdullah Öcalan, which "conceptualizes liberation as mostly within the categories of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism. It shifts the focus from the non-existence of Kurdistan as a nation state towards the role of bottom-up politics as a counter-hegemonic sphere built through women's autonomy, radical self-governance, as well as the reinvention of nationhood beyond ethnic dogmatism" (Bur, p. 95). This political philosophy rejects ethnic nationalism and the nation-state model in favor of a pluralistic and decentralized self-administration: "Democratic confederalism presents the option of a democratic nation as the fundamental tool to resolve the ethnic, religious, urban, local, regional and national problems caused by modernity's nation-state" (p. 96).

The volume reveals how gender emancipation is integral, with women playing key roles in governance and the military, notably the Women's Defense Units (YPJ).

"The intrinsic connection of Öcalan's ideology and feminist women's liberation also alienate women who wished to avoid ideological indoctrination from participation in communes and women's institutions" (p. 108),

yet "the public presence of YPJ-armed women also transforms perceptions of the traditional role of Syrian Kurdish women" (p. 107), marking a radical social shift in a deeply patriarchal context.

The military narrative provides a dramatic account of the Administration's rise from local Kurdish defense councils to a key force in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), instrumental in the defeat of ISIS. The celebrated "Battle of Kobanê in winter 2014/15... gained considerable international attention and prestige" (van Wilgenburg, p. 134). Nonetheless, the Administration's survival remains precarious, caught between threats from the Syrian regime and Turkey's repeated invasions, described as "a deliberate attempt to destroy the self-autonomous administration project in the Kurdish region" (Schieder, Foreword, p. 5). The Turkish invasion of Afrin (2018) and northeast Syria (2019), involving allied jihadist militias, led to mass displacement and accusations of ethnic cleansing, severely destabilizing the region.

The book captures how minority communities such as Christians, Yazidis, and the remnants of the Jewish population have sought refuge within the Administration's inclusive framework. Schmidinger writes, "The Autonomous Administration uses Aramaic and Turkish in addition to Kurdish and Arabic to clearly make an inclusive and non-nationalistic administration" (p. 25). Minority groups have "earned trust, admiration, and respect from local and international actors" and strive to build autonomous identities within the broader political project (Maisel, p. 73).

Economically, the volume outlines a war economy complicated by international sanctions and hyperinflation: "Syrian Kurdistan exports meat or sheep and cattle across the border to Iraqi Kurdistan. Cereals and vegetables from the Cizîrê now can be sold again to Damascus, Aleppo, and other Syrian cities. However, international economic sanctions also affect the population in north-eastern Syria" (Bur, p. 110). The 2019 Caesar Act and subsequent economic turmoil have amplified hardship, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. Geopolitically, the Administration exists "between a rock and a hard place," balancing relations with hostile neighbors, including Turkey, the Syrian regime, and major international players such as the US and Russia. The editor notes the role of European diplomacy: "The EU is now, more than ever, called upon to act as a pragmatic mediator" (Schieder, Foreword, p. 7). Despite being a linchpin in the regional fight against ISIS, the Kurdish militias confront marginalization and distrust from some allies.

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Importantly, the book's analysis gains urgency considering the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. This dismantled over fifty years of family dictatorship, creating new political vacuums. The fall of Assad has fundamentally altered the political landscape, creating new power vacuums and uncertainties. The Autonomous Administration now faces the evolving challenge of navigating a post-Assad Syria. Amid this fluidity, the Administration must negotiate autonomy in a fragmented Syria increasingly contested by rival armed groups and foreign interests.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Cave: A Secret Underground Hospital and One Woman's Story of Survival in Syria

By Amani Ballour and Rania Abouzeid, *National Geographic*, 2024, 256 pp., 14.34 \$, (hardcover), ISBN: 9781426222740

Reviewer- MD ARIF

**Centre for West Asian Studies,
Jamia Millia Islamia**

“The Cave” is a memoir by Syrian pediatrician Amani Ballour, coauthored with journalist Rania Abouzeid, that illustrates the human toll of the Syrian civil war and the associated gendered challenges. Ballour's book is both a memoir and an important historical document. It tells the story of her life, from growing up in a conservative rural Syrian family to becoming the director of an underground hospital in Eastern Ghouta, under constant bombardment. This book is divided into five parts, tracing Ballour's growth, medical training, her experiences during the war inside the hospital nicknamed “The Cave”, and her eventual exile. The first part of the book portrays her childhood as one constrained by patriarchal norms. “My father didn't understand why I wanted to be a pediatrician” (p. 12), laying the foundation for her later defiance of the traditional gender roles in a patriarchal society. Even her appointment as the director of the hospital was met with objection, showcasing the deep-rooted misogyny even during the time of war.

Ballour's description of life inside the besieged hospital depicts the extreme conditions faced during war, including overcrowding, a lack of supplies, and the chaos of triaging a flood of wounded civilians.

In the book, she also gives her account of the harrowing aftermath of 2013 sarin gas attack, “I looked at the square... it was full of people, some were suffocating... and others were deathly still” (p. 3).

The memoir enlivens not just the heartbreak but also the hope entwined in her medical mission, as the staff and the patients alike struggled for survival under siege. The central themes of this book include Ballour's personal struggle for authority in a patriarchal society, highlighting systematic gender and societal issues. “Many times, I thought, if only I was in charge, I'd do things differently” (p.26). Her experience demonstrates the agency of women in wartime. This memoir also engages with other themes like resilience and solidarity amidst the unimaginable hardships of the war. “Many came up to me and said, ‘Just tell me what to do to help’” (p.67). This book contextualizes the siege that led to a catastrophic loss of human life and the destruction of infrastructure, while also situating Ballour's experiences within the broader humanitarian catastrophe of the Syrian civil war. This book balances emotional testimonies with politics and serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggles faced in conflict zones.

The Cave by Amani Ballour is an important book that mixes personal bravery with thorough reporting. It shows the unseen front lines of the Syrian civil war and gives us a unique perspective into the lives of medical personnel who put their lives on the line to save others. This makes the book essential for readers interested in the Middle East, humanitarian medicine, gender and conflict, and human rights.

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