



Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies

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## Interview with Dawn Chatty

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*Author of Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refuge State (Hurst Publishers, 2017)*

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**Ms Chatty thank you both for writing a wonderful book and for taking the time to respond. Please talk a bit about yourself. What is your academic background and what first sparked your interest in Syria?**

I am a social anthropologist. I took my BA from UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles), then my MA at the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague; and then I returned to Los Angeles to take my PhD in Social Anthropology. My PhD dissertation examined the modern economy of Bedouin society in Syria and Lebanon. I wanted to 'disprove the contemporary positioning of much development work that pastoralists, as nomads, were backward and resistant to change. The title of my dissertation and later my first book was *From Camel to Truck*. That title was self-explanatory and clearly showed that the Bedouin economy was dynamic and opportunistic, changing when it saw that its own interests would be served.

My first interest in Syria was developed during my childhood there. I lived in Damascus from the age of about 6 months to 9 years of age and during that time became aware of the Bedouin who used to come to the Ghouta of Damascus in the springtime.

**In your book, you portray Syria as a hospitable, open, multi-cultural land. This seems to have been the rule for some time throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. Yet most of the region's cosmopolitan lands are today lost. Independent of the Syrian war's outcome, would you say there is a trend towards less accommodation? If yes, what is this due to?**

Independent of Syria's war, I would not say that there is a trend towards less accommodation throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. There have certainly been movements which have tried to undermine the secular, cosmopolitan, and multi-cultural cosmopolitanism of the Levant. These are - for me - clearly the religious conservatism that has emerged from post 1970's Iran with Khomeini's efforts to create an expanding arc of Shiite following in the region. His early fatwa in 1979 or 1980 declaring that the Alawite were members of Shiite Islam was the first step in that direction. A knee jerk response from Saudi Arabia resulted in a heightened campaign to spread Wahhabi Islam in the region and also globally. Both these movements undermined the secular open-minded and locally convivial societies of the Eastern Mediterranean and in that way there may have been some who say that these trends undermined or challenged the local accommodation to different peoples and different faiths.

**The European response to the Syrian crisis has been underwhelming, in terms both of politics and refugees. What did Europe mostly do wrong vis-à-vis an admittedly complex conflict?**

The European response to the Syrian crisis has been shameful! It has been hijacked by populist politicians who have lost sight of what should have been basic humanity. The decision by European politicians to blur the differentiation between people fleeing for their lives in regions of persecution and armed conflict (forced migrants or refugees by formal definition) and those seeking to better their lives in regions of oppression and structural poverty (economic migrants) resulted in a generic category of 'migrant' being attached to anyone trying to reach Europe to find safety for themselves and their families whatever the cause of their flight.

There was never a European crisis, per se. There was a grave situation in 2015 when close to 1 million - many of them Syrians - were fleeing both ISIS and Russian and Syrian government air bombardment of their towns, and neighbourhoods. European countries influenced mainly by populist and xenophobic politicians closed the door to them, despite having signed the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (especially article 13 guaranteeing the right to seek asylum in another country from persecution) and the 1951 Convention granting 'non-refoulement' [prohibiting forced return to a country of persecution] and asylum to those fleeing persecution. Syrians fleeing overland came to be regarded almost as 'vermin' in the hysterical frenzy of much of the conservative media coverage of Europe.

Had the European states followed their own internal EU agreements regarding mass influx and dispersed the hundreds of thousands of Syrians arriving on their doorstep throughout the members states of the EU it would have represented less than 1% of the total population of Europe (1 million out of a total population of Europe of 500 Million). There would have been no 'crises'. But expecting the front line states like Greece or Italy to bear the entire burden of giving asylum was unrealistic and to be honest, unworkable.

**There has been a notion that Syrian migrants, if unable to return, could be better integrated in places like Lebanon or Jordan than in Europe. In your book, you mention how for most of their history, these lands have not only been hospitable but also happy to accommodate/host migrants. Could we thus conciliate the above two premises to conclude that the refugee crisis would be better solved within a regional context?**

The refugee crisis would have been better resolved if Europe had been more willing to admit more Syrians especially the educated, middle classes who had skills to offer under terms of 'temporary protection'. These Syrians - at the most 1 million or so - were not looking for resettlement, but instead were seeking to gain permission to enter Europe and work to support their families until they were ready to return to Syria. The less educated and poorer 3-4 million Syrians - by and large - were not moving far from the borders of their country as they wanted to return as soon as conditions permitted. They did not have funds to be smuggled into Euro and furthermore, often had family remaining in Syria who they needed to keep tabs on and help keep safe.

**How do you see Syria's reconstruction playing out? Are there any hopeful signs for the country's future? Are there factors militating against mass returns, such as demographic calculations?**

The future looks quite bleak. There will be a return to a kind of status quo, but there will be no real peace or security for a long time to come. Though the Syrian government may try to raise funds international to rebuild the country, I doubt that there will be significant investment as the opposition to the Asad government is going to be widely dispersed and 'invisible', but I am sure for the near future, it will make itself known by attacks on the government and government facilities for some time. This will mean that Syria will take a long time to be reconstructed.

Furthermore though there have been no government sponsored massacres of minority groups - especially Christian and heterodox religious communities, the majority Sunni

Muslim communities of the country have taken terribly hits. How much reconciliation and forgiveness can take place without concerted efforts both from within the country and from abroad is anyone's guess. But I am a firm believer in the inherent goodness of people and though individuals cannot forget the things that have happened to their families, I do think they can reconcile themselves to returning and trying to rebuild a country that they have loved.