



Interview with Nikolaos van Dam

*Author of **Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria** (I.B. Tauris, 2017)*

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Could you talk briefly about yourself? What first spurred your interest in Syria? What are you doing/working on at the moment?

I visited Syria for the first time in 1964 and was impressed by the friendliness and hospitality of its people (see preface to my book). My experiences were so positive, that I frequently returned there almost yearly when having the opportunity. In 1970, I spent most of the year in Syria, (mainly in Aleppo and Damascus) to do research on the Ba'th Party, in particular its history and ideology. The role of sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism became a special theme for my studies as it played such an important role in the struggle for power in Syria. This was not widely recognized at the time, as many academics were more focused on class struggle and the like. The fact that it was a taboo subject whetted my academic appetite even more. In 1974-75, I continued my studies on Syria, being based this time in Lebanon, from where I visited Syria frequently. My studies culminated in a PhD in 1977, which I further developed into a book called *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, which I updated various times. It has had four editions (1979, 1981, 1996 and 2011), every time containing new chapters. The first two editions had the subtitle of *Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics*. The latter two had the subtitle *Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*. Even after almost 40 years it is still being used at various universities all over the world. My predictions turned out to be true, and I can say that I did not write it for nothing. I was asked by my publisher to either prepare a fifth edition or a whole new book on the developments since the start of the Syrian Revolution in 2011. I chose the latter, and the result is *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*, published in 2017 in English and in 2018 in Arabic. It will also be published in other languages like Hungarian and Italian. My earlier book has an Arabic edition and a Turkish one.

In your book, you talk about the war being inevitable after the revolt broke out. It sounds reasonable. What is your view on armed groups within the demonstrators? Robert Fisk, for example, recently opined that they hijacked the revolt very early on. What do you think? Were armed groups important in terms of the denouement of the revolt?

The armed opposition groups were extremely important in terms of the denouement of the Syrian Revolution or revolt. Even though many of the Syrian demonstrators were peaceful at the beginning, I am convinced that already early on arms were being used, basing myself on statements by people whom I trust. The opposition in general wanted to maintain the myth that the demonstrations were peaceful all over Syria, but you need only one single armed man in a crowd to contribute to developments of violence and escalation. The violent suppression by the Syrian regime, of course, strongly contributed to the violent escalation. And one should not forget that various opposition people whose groups had been bloodily suppressed in the past, like for instance in Hama in 1982, had been waiting for many years for the "right moment" to settle accounts with the regime. And the

revolution of 2011 gave the radical Islamist organizations the impression that the time was ripe for it. The opposition groups also counted on foreign support, which turned out to be insufficient, however, for them to succeed. Historians may in due course have to find out the precise course of events, once the dust of the various propaganda battles has settled somewhat.

How do you see Syria's reconstruction playing out in terms of interests, demography and finance?

For a rather long time, foreign countries that have supported the Syrian opposition groups politically, financially and militarily will not be willing to contribute to the reconstruction of the parts of Syria that are under the control of the regime. After all, the regime intends to regain control all over the country with force. Whatever the case, the Syrian people are the victim of all these developments. Many, if not most, Syrians have had to undergo the conflict without the choice to avoid it. The reconstruction of Syria may also imply demographic changes, as part of which those who have opposed the regime may be "punished" by not being allowed to return to their original homes.

Various countries that are socially and economically under pressure from the presence of the millions of Syrian refugees, Lebanon and Jordan in particular, have a great interest in the refugees' return to Syria so they can be relieved of some pressure. The Syrian regime, on the other hand, would not have a clear interest in having Lebanon and Jordan being undermined because of the refugee issue, which may in turn have a negative effect on the situation in Syria.

How would you assess the West's policies vis-à-vis Syria in the 2000-2010 decade? Could things have gone a different way? Were there opportunities squandered?

The European countries wanted to negotiate an Association Agreement with Syria, but the negotiations had so many hurdles that in the end Syria refused it. Western policies were also influenced by the generally pro-Israeli positions. Possibilities of dialogue were not really well developed because of the dictatorship in Damascus.

Do you see Syria's conflict significantly altering the regional balance of power?

It is not so much the conflict in Syria that has changed the regional balance of power, but rather the US-British occupation of Iraq and the toppling of the regime of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein (2003). This resulted in rolling out the red carpet for Iran, which as a result now dominates many parts in the Middle East, including Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The US-British occupation of Iraq achieved exactly the opposite of what it supposedly intended to achieve. The rise of al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State was another result. It was yet another example that foreign military intervention generally leads to disaster. Other examples are Syria, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, not to forget Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. It remains doubtful whether foreign political leaders have learnt their lessons from all these developments.

As a result of the wars in Syria and Iraq, the Kurdish factor has strongly resurfaced. The war in Syria has also led to a sharpening of the Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry and other factors like Turkey wanting to dominate the region more than in the past.

Not many books on Syria's IR seem to have been written (excluding memoirs and sketches). I can pretty much only think of yours, Christopher Phillips' and a couple more. Why is that?

The book of Bente Scheller, *The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game: Foreign Policy of the Assads*, also comes to my mind, although it deals more with the foreign policy of the regime itself. I found Christopher Phillips' book excellent, if not one of the best. I have no clear answer as to why others haven't chosen a similar subject as well. In fact, studies focus more on the opposition than on the regime, whereas having a good understanding of the regime is essential for having a good understanding of the conflict.