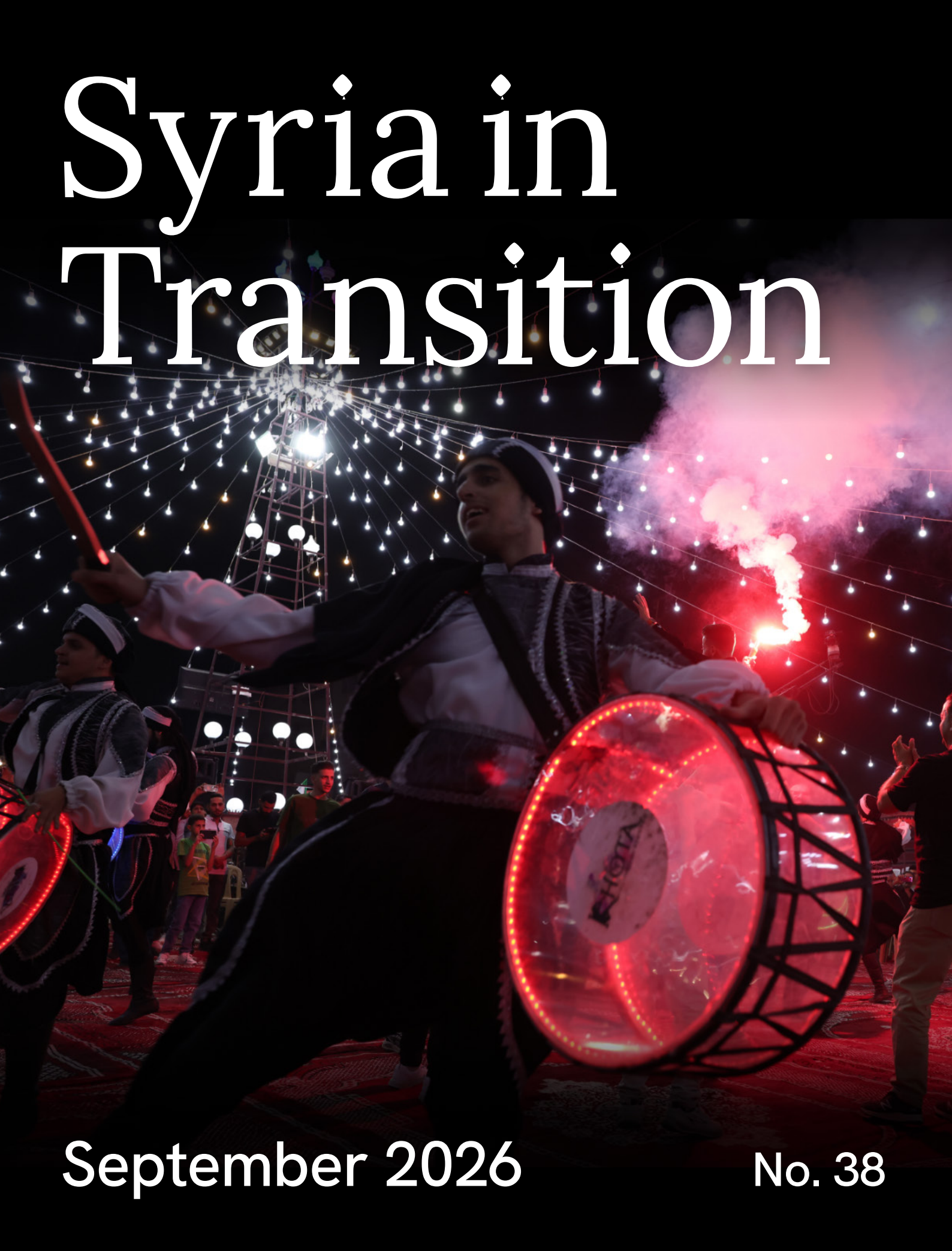


Syria in Transition



September 2026

No. 38



Welcome to the September issue of Syria in Transition, a monthly magazine on Syrian politics and society that cuts through the noise. SiT goes straight to the point and shuns unnecessary verbiage – just as we would prefer as avid readers ourselves.

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SiT thrives on continuous exchange with our readership. We kindly invite you to reach out with criticism, ideas, information, or just to say hello at info@syriaintransition.com

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The old bargain between religion and state lives on

Grand Mufti Hassoun's life sentence has opened the book on religious co-option. Will anyone turn the page?



In sentencing Ahmad Hassoun to life imprisonment, the judges cited his abuse of office for personal enrichment and incitement to violence. But Hassoun was not a black sheep. He was part of a system in which parts of the Sunni religious establishment were entangled with the Assad regime. Most of these networks have since found accommodation with Syria's new rulers.

The trial and conviction of Ahmad Hassoun, the former Grand Mufti, are the biggest steps yet taken towards reckoning with the role parts of Syria's Sunni religious establishment played under Assad. After the Muslim Brotherhood's insurgency in the 1980s the regime cultivated a tightly sanctioned field of 'official Islam', using selected religious actors to reach constituencies it could repress but never fully penetrate through its Baathist language. On 24 August the Fourth Criminal Court in Damascus sentenced Hassoun to life imprisonment on charges of abusing his office and inciting violence. Detailed records of the evidence presented and the defence's case have not been made public; but one of the gravest allegations against

Hassoun appears not to have been addressed at all: Amnesty International had previously reported that he participated in Sednaya's bureaucracy of murder by approving death sentences. In a statement to the fact-checking platform Verify-Sy in June, the Justice Ministry denied the veracity of claims by activists that formal investigations had uncovered this to be true. Big question marks therefore remain, feeding concerns that a broader examination of the Mufti's office and religious brokerage is not on the judiciary's and government's agenda.

"The most painful paradox is the disparity in treatment," a Syrian academic and former representative of an armed Islamist group told *Syria in Transition*. "Hassoun

is sentenced to life imprisonment and has his assets confiscated, while hundreds of those who signed the same statements, delivered the same sermons, blessed the ‘reconciliation’ deals that emptied cities and bore false witness against their own people continue to speak from the same pulpits.”

Converting religious influence to money and power

According to insiders, established systems of co-option and authoritarian bargaining, in which religious influence can be converted into money and other forms of power, continue. One major gateway is religious endowments such as properties and revenues, administrative positions and appointments, as well as restoration and reconstruction contracts. In a country where roughly half of all mosques have been destroyed, there are many opportunities for enrichment. A second, similarly opaque gateway is charitable and relief work through sheikhs who exercise control over budgets, recruitment and access to foreign donors. A third is religious education, ranging from local institutes to study missions and foreign accreditation. The fourth, and particularly sensitive, is mediation: sheikhs acting as intermediaries in local conflicts, property disputes and other settlements, directly leveraging their connections to the security apparatus.

The continuity of this authoritarian bargain is particularly hard to track because today’s religious landscape is more dispersed and, to a much greater extent, funded from abroad, than the comparatively centralised and hierarchical model established by Hassoun’s predecessor, Ahmad Kuftaro. The UAE, for example, has entered the religious sphere through cooperation with the new Grand Mufti, Usama al-Rifai, under the banner of “moderate fatwas” and by funding the restoration of the Umayyad Mosque and historic religious schools. In a highly unusual first, Syria’s Minister of Religious Endowments, Mohammad Abu al-Khair Shukri (whose sermons a young Ahmad al-Sharaa attended), visited the UAE and was received by its president. Turkish networks and Syrian diaspora communities in Europe and the United States play significant roles as well.

Symbolic purge

Administrative removals have so far affected only a limited number of individuals, among them Mahmoud Akkam, the former mufti of Aleppo, and Abdullah Mohammad Adib Hassoun, the former Grand Mufti’s brother. The boards of trustees and directors of the Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro Complex were also revised, while members of the Farfour family were removed from the Al-Fath Islamic Com-

plex. Yet the vast majority of sheikhs from the old religious apparatus continue their activities, and some, such as Sheikh Naim Araksousi and Abdul Fattah al-Bizim, have moved into influential positions within the institutions of the new state.

“We are seeing a symbolic purge that targets a few scapegoats,” a well-placed source within the religious establishment told *Syria in Transition*. “It has little to do with justice and will produce an even deeper sense of impunity than before.”

Public discussions and media coverage have so far focused on some of the deals the government made with members of the business elite who prospered under the Assads – and who were often themselves interwoven with the religious establishment. This is not only because business is a less sensitive subject than religion, but also because deals with sheikhs concern a very different kind of capital from the financial and material wealth of businessmen. Money always plays a role, but a sheikh’s capital is fundamentally symbolic: his pulpit, his circle of students, his charitable associations and his public standing. Settlements involving this kind of capital leave few paper trails. Loyalty in return for impunity can be explicit, through sermons about stability or fatwas on obedience to the ruler, but it can also take the form of silence about misconduct by the authorities.

◆
“We are seeing a symbolic purge that targets a few scapegoats.”

Divisions in the religious establishment

“After Assad fled, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was more concerned with reaching accommodations with religious authorities that had opposed Assad than with addressing those associated with his regime, as it sought to consolidate its own authority over the religious sphere,” an interlocutor from Sunni clerical circles told *Syria in Transition*. Notably, the dividing lines are not primarily doctrinal. Broadly speaking, Sufis and Salafis have a long history of theological disagreement, but those differences are relatively stable. The present struggle concerns control over pulpits, endowments, curricula, the issuance of fatwas, religious education, grants and access to foreign funding – the resources and institutions that, taken together, confer the power to represent Syria’s Sunnis. But doctrinal language is often used to frame these struggles and mobilise constituencies around them.

“Ultimately it’s a divide over legitimacy,” the Syrian academic and former representative of an Islamist group said. “The real dividing line within the religious establishment is between those who remained in regime-held areas and performed their religious role under Assad’s authority, and those who went to opposition-held areas or into exile. A Sufi from the anti-Assad Syrian Islamic Council may therefore find himself closer to a Salafi from the north than to a Damascene Sufi who served under Assad.”

The lack of institutional reckoning is already visible in the public behaviour of former Assad-era clerics. Responding to the limited debate over the involvement of Sufi sheikhs in the Assad regime’s rule, former loyalist Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Khatib in 2025 urged the Ministry of Religious Endowments to act against what he described as the defamation of Sufism. Among broad segments of society, criticism of a sheikh tends to be understood as criticism of religion itself – something religious authorities are well aware of.

From the perspective of the government in Damascus, as with transitional justice more broadly, it remains unclear whether deeper reckoning is desired. Some of the hesitation may simply reflect a country still preoccupied with the rough stitching needed to hold itself together. But there are political incentives for leaving the finer work undone as well. The Assad regime built structures that turned parts of the religious establishment into instruments of rule. Why dismantle structures that can be put to work for a new order? Moreover, many of those who would be expected to lead truth-seeking and reform are themselves part of the religious or political establishment in question.

Prelude to reform – or case closed?

Something has nevertheless changed. The debate over the political responsibilities of the religious establishment, previously largely confined to social media, now has a legal dimension: Ahmad Hassoun’s trial moved the issue from the realm of moral blame towards legal responsibility, with the office of the Grand Mufti itself named as having served the Assad regime. Whether this marks the beginning of institutional truth-seeking, or whether a few prominent figures will be made to stand for a system left largely unexamined, remains to be seen.

A glance at international examples offers some perspective. The reckoning of Germany’s Christian churches with their role under National Socialism shows that systematic institutional self-examination can take decades to emerge. Perhaps Syria need not follow the same path of

avoidance. It certainly can draw on reform-oriented voices within its religious sphere to encourage an open debate that wasn’t possible in Germany’s hierarchically organised churches at the time.

Over time, the idea of a Truth Commission on Religious Affairs could gain momentum. Its purpose would be to create a record and archive, gathering testimony and documenting the mechanisms of cooperation, co-optation and subordination as a safeguard against their recurrence. Institutional reform could then take several forms. The Office of the Grand Mufti could be separated from the executive authority by requiring the Grand Mufti to be elected by a group of peers (rather like the Pope), as opposed to the current practice of appointment by presidential decree. The creation of the 14-member Higher Fatwa Council, announced by the President in March 2025, which includes a balance of Salafists and Sufis, was meant to democratise the issuance of fatwas. It could serve as Syria’s Sunni answer to the Cardinal Electors. Alternatively, the position could be abolished as a sovereign state office altogether: a state governed by a civil code may have little need for official fatwas.

The Ministry of Religious Endowments could move away from doctrinal guidance and concentrate on the administration of properties and services. Many experts that *Syria in Transition* spoke to supported the idea of turning the ministry into an independent commission headed by a non-clerical technocrat. The rationale was simple: since the Ministry of Religious Endowment’s main task was to generate revenue to maintain schools and mosques, this should not be in the hands of a cleric who may preference his own networks and belief-group over others. Unified sermons and loyalty pledges that have done much to discredit the Sunni clerics could likewise be abolished, allowing greater religious pluralism while retaining reasonable boundaries against incitement. Drawing those boundaries would require considerable *finsterspitzengefühl*. It is, after all, part of the much broader question Syria now faces over where freedom of expression ends and incitement begins.

The Syrian academic and former representative of an Islamist group argues that the religious establishment needs to be disentangled from the state to protect the faith. “For me, the measure of the new Syria is not its ability to produce obedient sheikhs. That is the easiest thing to do, and the current government’s predecessors mastered it. The measure is whether it can tolerate a sheikh who tells it: ‘No.’”

Currency confusion

Syria's redesigned bank notes have erased two zeroes and the Assads' portraits. They have also confused locals and foreigners alike



Removing two zeroes from Syria's currency was supposed to make money simpler. But the shorthand Syrians use for prices can turn both 75,000 and 750 pounds into the same spoken 75. Add a missing five-pound note and multiple currencies still alive in people's heads, and everyday transactions require rather more mental arithmetic than expected.

Ahmad al-Sharaa issued a presidential decree formally launching Syria's new national currency on December 24 2025. A week later, on January 1, a new set of Syrian bank notes began entering circulation across the country. The new notes, with a new set of denominations, replaced Assad-era imagery with designs featuring agricultural and livestock motifs – wheat and sparrow (500 note), olives and the Arabian horse (200), cotton and gazelle (100), oranges and conch shell

(50), mulberry fruit and swallow (25), and rose with butterfly (10). According to Al-Sharaa, the move away from designs featuring individuals (Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad featured on the old currency) was “an expression of the new national identity and a move away from the veneration of individuals.”

While the new currency is certainly colourful, and the removal of Assad-family references a refreshing break, some Syrians have crit-

icised the new designs for lacking a sense of history, of occasion and of place; distinct Syrian personality, one might say. The old notes, for example, carried images referencing Syria's rich cultural, historical and archaeological heritage, such as the Norias (water wheels) of Hama, the Umayyad Mosque and Ugarit and Ebla tablets.

More significant than the designs, however, was the Syrian pound's redenomination at a ratio of 100:1, effectively removing two zeroes from

the currency. After a seven-month transition period – extended from an initial three-months – in which the old and the new currencies operated concurrently, as of 31 July the new currency became the only legal tender in Syria.

Confusing system

As a foreigner living in Syria, the new currency, along with the ongoing legacy of the old currency and the continuation of an existing practice of Syrians using shorthand totals when referring to monetary amounts, makes for confusion.

First, on the shorthand.

In the main, at least outside official institutions like banks, Syrians use a shorthand when referring to monetary amounts. Let's say that under the old currency, before the redenomination, a kilo of fruit cost 75,000 Syrian pounds. On the street, and in common parlance between Syrians, that value would be referred to as simply 75 (khamseh wa saba'een). The three zeroes would be ignored verbally and as a way of understanding value, but a quantum of 75,000 pounds would still change hands. Under the new currency, that same kilo of fruit is now officially worth 750 pounds, but the



same shorthand number is used (75). 75,000 used to be 75. Now 750 is 75. Depending on the circumstance, all three might be used to refer to the same value.

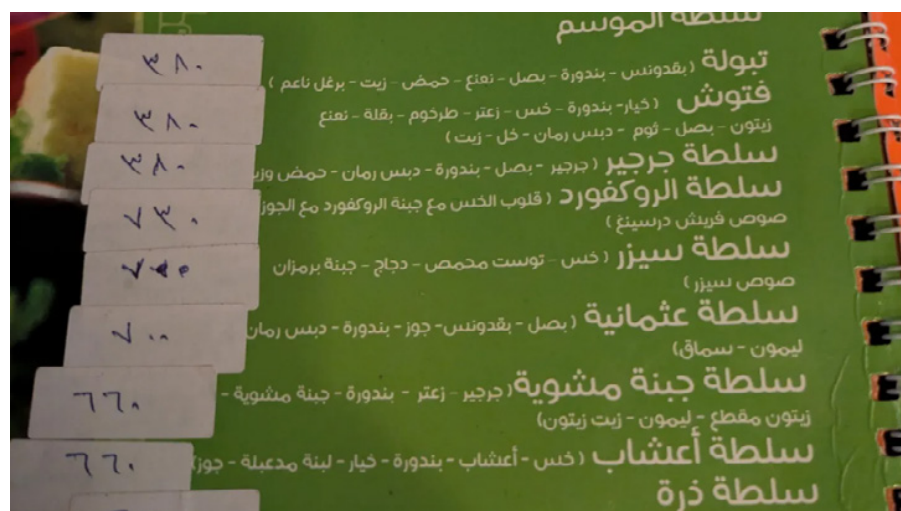
Mastering the shorthand system can be a challenge. A foreigner asking a seller in Arabic how much something costs may be given the shorthand figure and, unfamiliar with the actual value of the goods, hand over precisely that amount in new notes – 60 pounds, say, for something costing 600. The seller then has to translate between two currencies and one shorthand convention to explain what is actually owed. Still following?

The shorthand system is not restricted to Arabic-speaking Syrians. Tourists speaking in English may find themselves confronted with Arabic shorthand amounts, English new currency amounts, or a combination thereof. Ask for the price of a litre of water in the heart of Damascus's Old City and the answer may be "sab'a" – seven in Arabic – quickly followed by "seventy" in English.

The shorthand system is also confusing in reverse. Syrians are so accustomed to the shorthand that new currency amounts can befuddle them. After a foreign visitor paid 450 new Syrian pounds – about US\$3.70 – for a bowl of fetteh in Mezze, he later asked a Syrian friend whether the price was reasonable. "You paid 450 for a bowl of fetteh?! Why didn't you call me? You paid too much!" came the response. A second later, the penny dropped: "Oh, you mean bi al-jadeedeh!" – by the new currency. "Yes, it's a good price, I think." She had instinctively interpreted 450 as shorthand, which would have meant roughly US\$37 for breakfast. Anyone would have been shocked.

The missing five pound note

The absence (currently) of a 5-pound note (about 40 US cents) is also caus-



ing issues. Buy a litre of mango juice priced at 180 new Syrian pounds and hand over 200, and the change may be 25 rather than 20 simply because the seller lacks two ten-pound notes. The opposite happens too: 30 pounds owed in change may become 25. There is talk that a five-pound note will eventually be introduced, making smaller transactions easier. There is certainly demand for it.

Anecdotal, the absence of a 5-pound note is a big issue for Syrians. Asked about the missing denomination, an economics student at Damascus University was unequivocal. “We need it”, he said. “The government said they will do it, but it’s the government”, he said dismissively. Asked whether people actually wanted the note, his answer was equally clear: “Yes, we need it.” A local *dukan* owner agreed, “It’s a big problem. It would help with small transactions.”

Change and continuity

For now at least there’s no sign that the redenomination of the Syrian currency will bring the shorthand system to an end. Asked why he continued using shorthand instead of stating prices in the new currency, one fruit seller offered a straightforward explanation: “If I tell people the amount in the new currency, they will think my fruit is expensive.” Fair enough.

Nor has the introduction of the new currency changed the dire economic reality faced by Syrians. A satirical meme that spread following the introduction of the new currency gestures at this, with a humorous Damascene voice seeking a loan asking “give a few olives” and “lend me some wheat”, a mocking reference both to the agricultural produce that beautifies Syria’s new bank notes and its inability to alleviate existing eco-

nomic hardship. Satirical redesigns of the notes suggesting a more accurate representation of Syria’s cultural heritage can also be found online, with a fulsome plate of mashawi (grilled meat) replacing wheat on the 500-pound note, and a large bowl of fattoush replacing mulberry fruit on the 25-pound note.

One thing is clear: Getting more wealth into Syrians’ hands will be a more meaningful marker of progress than redesigned and redenominated banknotes – and, unfortunately, a much harder one for Syria’s transitional government to achieve in the short term.





Who can afford a burger in the new Syria?

A restaurant review of Cali in Damascus



Our restaurant critic Nadim al-Sufra has an eye for people, an appetite for good food, and opinions about both.

I had spent a long day wandering the labyrinthine old city of Damascus, accompanying a visiting friend along the well-trodden path of Syrians returning to see their country for the first time in years following the fall of the Assad regime. One never quite gets enough of the old city, but it can be exhausting to spend a day there in the July heat. So when my friend suggested dinner at Cali, I accepted with little persuasion.

Cali is the kind of place one likes to scoff at: a restaurant named after the American state of California, billing itself as Italian and Japanese while serving a host of internationally recognisable staples besides. At the back of its lovely terrace, a two-tone blue-and-white Volkswagen camper van from the 1970s, converted into a matcha bar, offers no fewer than eight kinds of this beverage that has conquered much of the world and refused to leave even this once isolated, war-torn country untouched. At the same time Cali is a very Syrian restaurant. It is the sort of place where many middle- and upper-class Syrian families

like to spend their leisure time, much more than at an old courtyard-house-turned-restaurant in the old city. For us, having paid sufficient tribute to heritage earlier in the day, a place like Cali was just what the doctor ordered.

The 'Yalla Go' driver dropped us off in front of the restaurant and, no sooner had we climbed the three steps to the terrace, our backs to the Saudi embassy compound across the street, than a few dozen heads rose in unison. Their owners subjected us to the swift but searching appraisal at which Damascenes excel: one part Sherlock Holmes exercising his art of deduction, one part St Matthew establishing an immaculate register of who begat whom. Satisfied with their preliminary findings, most quickly turned back to their fellow diners, some muttering words that perhaps echoed those of their forebears: they no longer recognised anybody in this city.

A courteous waiter sporting a moustache led us to the only table for two that was available outside without a reservation – the indoor area remains largely deserted during the summer months. After stopping to say hello to two acquaintances, we settled into our seats, my back to the Volkswagen matcha bar. Next to us, a group of over a dozen Syrian teenagers from well-to-do families were enjoying dinner while conversing in Arabic and English, and on the other side of their table sat a Turkish businessman with his dinner companion.

The rest of the clientele consisted of deep-pocketed Damascenes. Some had never left the country during the war; others had stayed, and were frequent international travellers. There were businessmen confidently talking politics and the economy, and families trading light-hearted gossip. Scattered among them were the occasional non-Syrian who works for the UN or a foreign embassy. Often in Cali someone stands out: a person interesting enough to attract attention, yet not enough of a regular to blend into the furniture. On this occasion, it was one of the newly appointed Members of Parliament – one of New Syria's latest innovations, whose positions inspire remarkably little envy at home or abroad. Few, if any, of the other diners appeared to recognise the MP. Their facial-recognition software, so to speak, had yet to receive the latest update.

I have been to Cali a few times since returning to Syria. The restaurant opened in 2019, a little more than five years before the fall of Assad. While I do not know who was frequenting it back then, I suspect that it was not much different from now: those who stayed yet managed to weather the overwhelming pauperisation of the Syrian people, and those who had built lives abroad while still returning regularly long before the fall of the regime.

It was time to order. I like Cali's food, although I do not find it uniquely exquisite. "If all the year were playing holidays," Shakespeare has Prince Hal say in Henry IV Part I, "To sport would be as tedious as to work," and the same goes for the food in Syria. Even the delicious feasts of cold and hot mezzes performing the opening act for grilled and spicy meats can become repetitive and dull after a while. Cali continues to serve alcohol, despite being in a majority Muslim neighbourhood and the country being in a precarious transitional period, when one cannot take such personal freedoms fully for granted. There are no cocktails, but they have local and Lebanese wine and beer. As for food, we ordered a couple of appetisers to share, followed by a Schnitzel and a burger for mains. My friend smoked a shisha.

I apply a different standard to international dishes like burgers depending on where I am eating them. In Damascus, the burger was sufficiently elegant and enjoyable – though it may not have been something to write home about had I been trying it in New York City or Chicago. The thick beef patty with melted cheddar and crisp beef bacon came enclosed in a glossy brioche bun with a side of fries and cornichons. It hit the right notes. I liked the overall taste and so far I have not tasted a much better burg-

er in Damascus. The schnitzel consisted of two generously sized chicken fillets coated in crisp golden breadcrumbs and served with thick-cut fries, a handful of rocket, cherry tomatoes and a wedge of lemon. I liked that they call it 'Schnitzel' on the menu, and not the catch-all French term 'escalope,' as this sort of dish is so often labelled in Syria and Lebanon.

As we were eating, the Turkish businessman approached the teenagers' tables and histrionically introduced himself, asking them where he could find the best nightlife scene in Damascus. The friendliest suggested Z Bar, on the rooftop of the Omayad Hotel. After a somewhat labored attempt to keep the conversation going, the man returned to his table.

After finishing our plates, we skipped dessert or coffee, and it was time to pay. The damage came to about \$30 per person, by no means an insignificant sum, and we could have had a luxurious Syrian meal at several other places

for less than that. As in most Syrian restaurants, the bill includes taxes and items customers may not have explicitly ordered, such as bottles of water. We also factored in about 10% for tip, which I usually hand directly to restaurant staff, after several workers told me that tips left with the bill are not always divided fairly among them.

Cali is out of reach for the majority of Syrians – and it does not pretend otherwise. The restaurant is unapologetically geared towards local families and others who do not look out of place among them. Its Instagram page communicates exclusively in English. While not left with members-only clubs like their counterparts in Aleppo, the elite of Damascus are still trying to maintain strongholds where familiarity can be reserved during yet another period of transition, even if that familiarity now rests on purchasing power.

If one is not willing to spend a considerable sum of money on such an escapist culinary venture, I suggest going to Cali in the morning (they open around 9:30) or a leisurely afternoon for a coffee or a fresh juice. Although you may be able to eat better elsewhere for less money, Cali remains a pleasant place, and few cafés in Damascus offer a better vantage point from which to observe what is – and, even more, what is not – changing in the new Syria.

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**Cali is out of reach for
the majority of Syrians –
and it does not pretend
otherwise.**

Cali Café, Nizar Qabbani Street, Abu Rummaneh, opposite the Saudi Embassy, Damascus. Reservations: +963 11 335 4086 or +963 957 777 138. Instagram: @calicafe.sy

UK support to Syria's new chapter

Peter McDermott, the outgoing Development Director for Syria at the FCDO, takes stock of the UK's aid response



As I finish my time as the UK Government's Syria Development Director, I leave with a deep sense of humility about what Syrians have endured, and cautious optimism about what they can now build.

For years, Syria was discussed through the language of crisis: conflict, displacement, terrorism, drugs, sanctions and stalled diplomacy. Those realities mattered, but they never captured the whole story. They did not capture the teacher reopening a classroom in a damaged building; the farmer restoring land after drought; the mother seeking healthcare for her children; or the young Syrian asking whether it is finally possible to come home.

The political change of December 2024 opened a new chapter. But Syria's recovery will depend on building an inclusive and stable country in which all communities and regions can participate, contribute and feel they have a stake in the future. Lasting stability cannot be imposed; it must be built on opportunity, trust and inclusion.

The scale of the challenge remains immense. Fourteen years of conflict displaced millions of Syrians and left much of the country's infrastructure damaged or destroyed. Millions of people still require assistance. Returning families

often face stretched services, scarce jobs and damaged infrastructure. Sustainable return requires safety, dignity, livelihoods and schools that work. Yet this moment also offers a path from crisis towards recovery, stability and greater self-reliance.

That is why the UK's support has focused on two things at once. We continue to help meet urgent needs, including food, water, shelter, healthcare and protection. Alongside this, we are helping rebuild livelihoods, support learning, strengthen local systems and work with the Syrian Government to build institutions for the longer term.

Sanctions relief is helping remove barriers to legitimate trade, investment and recovery. Combined with reform, transparency and accountability, it can help businesses create jobs, encourage investment and give families a tangible stake in peace and prosperity.

Development can sound abstract. In Syria it is tangible: an irrigation channel repaired before planting; quality seed reaching a farming family; a child catching up after years out of school; a clinic moving from emergency provision towards a system that can last; and stronger accountability so assistance reaches those most in need. UK devel-

opment aid focuses particularly on agriculture, education and health because these are foundations of long-term recovery.

Agriculture matters because it means food, income, dignity and resilience in a country affected by climate shocks, water scarcity and disrupted markets. Education matters because Syria's future will be shaped by a generation recovering lost years of learning. Recovery cannot be built on weakened services and exhausted families. Nor can it succeed if people are excluded from shaping the future. Women and girls must be central as leaders, workers, decision-makers and citizens. An inclusive transition – one that meaningfully involves all of Syria's communities, including women, in shaping the country's future – is not only the right course; it is essential for lasting stability and prosperity.

Good development also requires listening. International partners can bring finance, expertise and support, but lasting solutions must be grounded in Syrian realities

and shaped by Syrian voices: national and local authorities, civil society, communities, teachers, health workers, farmers, entrepreneurs, women's groups and young people. Syria's future should be defined by Syrians themselves. The role of international partners is to be practical, reliable and respectful partners in that journey.

As I leave this role, I am struck most by the determination of Syrians themselves. After so much loss, many are choosing to rebuild, teach, farm and imagine a different future. They deserve sustained international engagement that matches that determination with seriousness and respect.

The UK has stood with Syrians through years of crisis and will continue to support them through recovery, helping meet urgent needs while supporting a more stable, inclusive and prosperous Syria.

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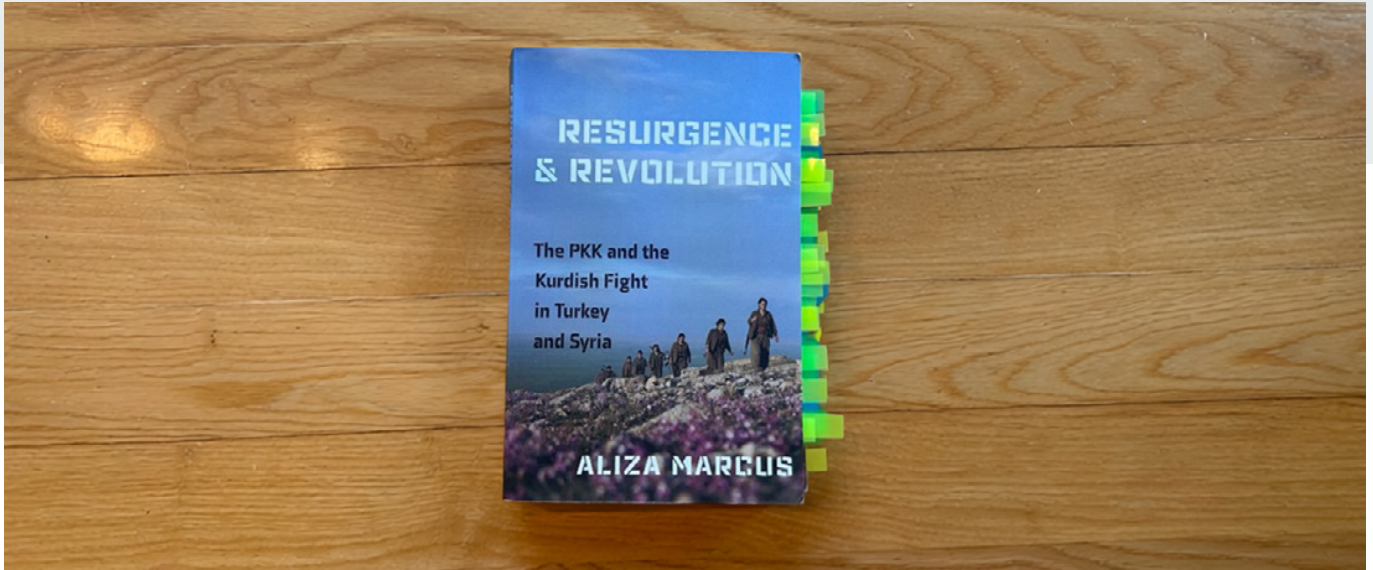


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Revolution without reckoning

A review of Aliza Marcus's book 'Resurgence & Revolution: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight in Turkey and Syria'



Aliza Marcus's latest book offers a useful timeline of events and insightful interviews with PKK figures; but the darker stains remain woven into a compelling liberation narrative instead of being allowed to disrupt it – leaving empty some much-needed space between romanticisation and demonisation.

Anyone looking for critical literature offering an inside view of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), particularly its Syrian affiliate, encounters a familiar problem. Even accounts not written by former People's Protection Units (YPG) fighters themselves and presented as scholarly studies tend to carry distinctly activist undertones.

A recurring strand of this literature draws on a Western-centric and often racist view of the "Arab" Middle East as a region of backwardness and violence. Against this backdrop, the PKK's socialist project, and especially the Rojava project of its Syrian affiliate, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), is cast as a beacon of emancipatory progress and democracy. This framing is as romanticised as it is widespread in Western intellectual circles and has repeatedly surfaced in Western media debates on Syria

since the early years of the war, suggesting an almost natural convergence between Western political preferences and Kurdish political aspirations.

Published by New York University Press in April 2026, Aliza Marcus's *Resurgence & Revolution: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight in Turkey and Syria* promises a combination of reportage and scholarship, drawing much of its authority from extensive testimony and insider knowledge. Across six chronologically structured chapters, Marcus traces the movement from Abdullah Öcalan's imprisonment in the late 1990s and the ensuing PKK crisis through its regional reorganisation and expansion in Syria, and Assad's fall in late 2024. Syria remains a key focus throughout, particularly the rise of the PYD and the painstaking construction of the self-proclaimed revolutionary project in Rojava. Its

dissolution in the spring of 2026 came too late to make it into the book.

Reportage or scholarship?

Despite offering revealing insights into the PKK's inner struggles, justifications and perspectives, the book invites a rather less generous assessment when measured against the scholarly standards implied by its publication with New York University Press and its billing as a combination of reportage and scholarship. This is not to say that lengthy methodological discussions are a prerequisite for scholarly research. Salwa Ismail's 'The Rule of Violence', among others, demonstrates as much. Marcus's book, however, outlines neither an analytical problem nor a research gap or thesis, while the book's broad guiding question on the PKK's trajectory is primarily historical and descriptive. Indeed, Marcus explicitly frames *Resurgence & Revolution* as a continuation of her 2007 book *Blood and Belief*, which ended with Öcalan's capture in 1999.

What may initially appear a pedantic objection takes on greater significance as the book progresses. Sources that might challenge Marcus' account are rarely brought into the discussion, while tensions within the material she herself presents are rarely pursued to their analytical conclusions. This matters because Marcus hardly shies away from the PKK's authoritarian record. She documents Öcalan's extraordinary authority extending even beyond the walls of Imrali prison, as well as assassinations of former members, the repression of rival Kurdish groups and the PKK's dominance over the supposedly grassroots democratic project in Syria.

In other words, the book provides the ingredients for a critical inquiry without carrying it through. What is missing is a systematic analytical progression towards conclusions that confront the PKK's ideological claims with the political order it built in Syria and try to make sense of the contradictions between the two. Instead, Marcus mainly recounts events, lending them immediacy through insider testimony, mostly from PKK members and US diplomats. As the analytical problem the book seeks to address remains unclear, there is no framework through which the evidence might be worked into an argument. That feels like a missed opportunity given

the scarcity of structured and balanced examinations of the PKK and its affiliates.

The PKK and the Assad regime

One of many analytical questions the book could have examined concerns the PKK's relationship with the Assad regime. Tracing the PKK's history in Syria from the 1980s onwards, Marcus naturally addresses its peculiar relationship with the regime, which sheltered Öcalan until 1998. She notes that Syria "had been a stable and relatively secure place for the PKK to recruit, train, and meet foreign observers", yet does not reckon with the full extent of this bargain and its implications for a movement claiming to fight Kurdish oppression. The contradiction deserves attention as Syrian Kurdish grievances were effectively subordinated to the PKK's war in Turkey: the PKK commodated with the Baathist regime despite the latter's long record of denying Kurdish political and cultural rights.

Marcus recounts the regime's repression in Qamishli in 2004 and gives Kurdish activists space to describe their experiences in Assad's dungeons. But although she acknowledges criticism of the PKK's cooperation with the Assads and points to the regime's instrumental interest in its presence, she does little to examine the deeper contradiction inherent in this relationship. The PKK occupied a privileged position as the only Kurdish political movement granted such room to operate by the Assad regime, and joining its ranks could even exempt young Syrian Kurds from conscription into the Syrian military. Assad's support went considerably further than passive tolerance: Syria's *mukhabarat* reportedly supplied Öcalan and the PKK with money, weapons and false documents, using the organisation as leverage against Turkey and Iraq.

An analytical approach would have to set this relationship against the brutal record of anti-Kurdish politics rooted in the uncompromising Arabism of Syrian Baathism. Baathist ideologue Muhammad Talab Hilal, later Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform under Hafiz al-Assad, was a principal architect of policies restricting Kurdish citizenship, education and cultural autonomy, and of the repressive Arab Belt project that dispossessed tens of thousands of Kurdish families. For the arrangement with Damascus to function,

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the PKK maintained a conspicuous silence on this history of repression and refrained from directing its struggle against those responsible for it. More than that, operating under Assad's protection required some accommodation with the regime's own denialist premises, which Öcalan himself reproduced quite explicitly in 1996 when he claimed that most Kurds in Syria were refugees from Turkey.

Given the PYD's tactical accommodation with the Assad regime from 2011 onwards and the consequences this had for the Syrian conflict, the PKK's selective blindness would have deserved closer examination, both for its strategic roots and for what it reveals about the PKK's self-conception. The issue surfaces again in Marcus's own account of the 2021 dispute between the Qandil leadership and Mazloum Abdi's camp over reconciliation with Damascus. PKK co-founder Cemil Bayik defended rapprochement by invoking the movement's historically close relationship with the Assad family – precisely the paradoxical continuity that Marcus leaves unexplored but which would have been valuable to examine both historically and for what it may tell us about current and future debates on transitional justice.

Democracy of the vanguards

That Qandil remained in charge of major decisions concerning the PKK and its regional affiliates matters because it casts doubt on the movement's claim to have transcended nationalism. It also raises fundamental questions about the emancipatory promise of grassroots 'democratic communalism'. Marcus repeatedly describes Öcalan as the centre of the organisation, the sovereign gatekeeper of virtually every major decision, yet she does not confront the glaring contradiction between the near-totalitarian personality cult behind this structure and the movement's democratic self-description and its claim to "represent every aspect of Kurdish society."

Marcus repeatedly documents the group's relentless pursuit of hegemony, which shaped Rojava's supposedly self-governing project. Local cadres remained embedded in a hierarchy answerable to Qandil, and meaningful power rested with the Qandil elite and the cadres it sent to Syria. She describes the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) as a system of "interlocking and sometimes parallel representative bodies", but avoids a scholarly discussion of how this system actually worked. She does not engage with the distinctly Leninist logic behind this arrangement, in which the party vanguard claims to know the path towards emancipation and enforces it; or how such rule was experienced from below,

particularly in Arab-majority areas. This may partly reflect Marcus's choice of interviewees: those who ruled under years of PKK hegemony are given space, while those who were ruled are absent.

What these substantial discrepancies between universalist claims and political practice meant for subjects of this rule is left open. The fact that attempts to reshape society according to Öcalan's ideological model of democratic confederalism at times took on distinctly colonial features, with Arab communities portrayed and treated as socially backward, should have prompted a much deeper discussion of the movement's pluralist and participatory claims. The AANES struggled to impose reforms such as the prohibition of polygamy in the face of heavy resistance from locals and, in several cases, responded to such resistance from Arab tribes with coercion and repression, but also co-option.

Human rights organisations have levelled serious allegations against the PKK/PYD-led project of abuses including ethnic cleansing in rural Hasakah and the disappearance of political opponents, journalists and activists. There have also been allegations of torture and mass killings in detention facilities holding former ISIS members, as well as war crimes during the many battles against

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ISIS's caliphate, culminating in the 2019 battle of Baghouz – ISIS' last stand – where observers were barred and the site, along with an unknown number of bodies, was quickly bulldozed.

The near-total silence on the repressive side of governing Arab-majority areas deprives the book of depth, as confronting these tensions would have been central to testing the movement's claimed rejection of ethnic nationalism. Looking at the evidence of more than a decade of PKK/PYD rule in Syria, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Kurds were *primus inter pares*: communal democracy was always framed by Kurdish predominance, with the PKK forcibly monopolising what Kurdish identity itself meant.

Feminist agency under revolutionary discipline

This privileging extends to women's liberation, one of the ideological trademarks of the PKK, which Marcus describes as "half the fight" of the group's struggle for emancipation. But whose liberation is actually at stake deserves closer scrutiny. Marcus does not discuss that the political representation and institutional empowerment offered by the PKK and its Syrian project came as part of an ideological package that also entailed PKK hegemony, which many Syrians, including Arab women living under AANES rule, rejected. In other words, female emancipation was tied to buying into a model of strict hierarchy and personality cult centered on a man. And it was a model under which, according to allegations by human rights organisations, sexual violence against women accused of supporting rival factions was no isolated occurrence.

Marcus's narrative focusses on the difficult path through which Kurdish women entered the movement's fighting ranks and later gained political representation in Rojava. Seen largely through the perspective of selected PKK women themselves, the story is framed primarily as one of success. Marcus records some of the constraints

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of cadre life, yet rarely turns them into the harder question of what kind of emancipation a militant organisation produces when its bargain of freedom comes with strings attached: critical research points to widened female agency, but also to recruitment practices that capitalised on the aspirations of young women, including minors, seeking to escape restrictive social environments, alongside strict regulation of sexuality and constant party oversight.

The PKK's achievement in giving women even a conditional degree of political visibility within a deeply patriarchal environment deserve recognition, no question. A critical account should nevertheless have examined how women's empowerment became a powerful propaganda tool for securing Western sympathy, while simultaneously existing within authoritarian practices and ultimately broadening the pool of people willing and able to carry a gun for the cause.

Lessons for the future?

Marcus does draw broader lessons from the story she has told, but primarily in strategic and organisational terms. She criticises the return to war against the Turkish state in 2015 and Öcalan's rigid leadership that was unable to adapt to changing circumstances or develop an effective civilian political leadership. The deeper questions of the movement's emancipatory integrity and ideological coherence, and the conditions necessary for meaningful reform, however, remain unaddressed, even as Marcus rightfully portrays the PKK as an unavoidable actor in any future settlement, and in the achievement of wider regional stability.

What remains is a hero's journey, with its darker stains woven into the story rather than allowed to rupture the liberation narrative. Reconstructing the history and self-image of a militant movement on the basis of statements from its participants can undoubtedly yield insights, even in the absence of systematic academic analysis. Yet knowledge can accumulate without yielding much analytical clarity. An honest discussion of the achievements *and* failures of the revolutionary experiment could have provided the basis for concrete lessons about what a movement claiming authority in Kurdish emancipation should preserve, abandon or fundamentally rethink. It might also have given more substance to the case that neither demonisation nor glorification of the movement serves the legitimate Kurdish struggle for self-determination.