Delve Deeper into Return to Homs

A film by Talal Derki

This list of fiction and nonfiction books, compiled by Erica Bess, Susan Conlon and Hanna Lee of the Princeton Public Library, provides a range of perspectives on the issues raised by the POV documentary Return to Homs.

A look behind the barricades of the besieged Syrian city of Homs, where, for 19-year-old Basset and his ragtag group of comrades, the audacious hope of revolution is crumbling like the buildings around them. Winner of the first George Polk Documentary Film Award.

ADULT NONFICTION


Gelvin, James L. Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999. James L. Gelvin brings a new and distinctive perspective to the perennially fascinating topic of nationalism in the Arab Middle East. Unlike previous historians who have focused on the activities and ideas of a small group of elites, Gelvin details the role played by non-elites in nationalist politics during the early part of the twentieth century.


Lynch, Marc. The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East. New York: Public Affairs, 2012. This is an examination of the uprisings that began in Tunisia and continue on in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria and what the rise of the Islamist movements in these emerging democracies mean to their neighboring countries and for the West.

Martin, Kevin W. Syria's Democratic Years: Citizens, Experts, and Media in the 1950s. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016. The years 1954–1958 in Syria are popularly known as "The Democratic Years," a brief period of civilian government before the consolidation of authoritarian rule. Kevin W. Martin provides a cultural history of the period and argues that the authoritarian outcome was anything but inevitable.

Rogan, Eugene. The Arabs. New York: Basic Books, 2009. In this definitive history of the modern Arab world, award-winning historian Eugene Rogan draws extensively on Arab sources and texts to place the Arab experience in its crucial historical context for the first time.

Sahner, Christian. Among the Ruins: Syria Past and Present. Oxford (England); New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Among the Ruins blends history, memoir and reportage, drawing on the author's extensive knowledge of Syria in ancient, medieval, and modern times, as well as his experiences living in the Levant on the eve of the war and in the midst of the Arab Spring.

Salamandra, Christa. A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. In contemporary urban Syria, debates about the representation, preservation, and restoration of the Old City of Damascus have become part of status competition and identity construction among the city's elite. In theme restaurants and nightclubs that play on images of Syrian tradition, in television programs, nostalgic literature, and visual art, and in the rhetoric of historic preservation groups, the idea of the Old City has become a commodity for the consumption of tourists and, most important, of new and old segments of the Syrian upper class. In this lively ethnographic study, Christa Salamandra argues that in deploying and debating such representations, Syrians dispute the past and criticize the present.

Salamandra, Christa and Leif Stenberg, eds. Syria from...
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Reform to Revolt, Vol II: Culture, Society and Religion. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015. As Syria’s anti-authoritarian uprising and subsequent civil war have left the country in ruins, the need for understanding the nation’s complex political and cultural realities remains urgent. The second of a two-volume series, Syria from Reform to Revolt: Culture, Society, and Religion draws together closely observed, critical and historicized analyses, giving vital insights into Syrian society today.

Wedgeen, Lisa. 1999. The Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. In Syria, the image of President Hafiz al-Assad is everywhere. In newspapers, on television, and during orchestrated spectacles, Assad is praised as the “father,” the “gallant knight,” even the country’s “premier pharmacist.” Yet most Syrians, including those who create the official rhetoric, do not believe its claims. Why would a regime spend scarce resources on a cult whose content is patently spurious?

Khalifa, Khalid. In Praise of Hatred. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2014. Set in the 1980s but resembling the turmoil in modern-day Syria, this novel centers on a young girl narrator who is protected from the political and social upheaval of her country by the walls of her family’s home. When the country’s civil unrest becomes insidious, she decides to join the radical rebellion and fight against the regime in the name of religious and social freedom.

Khalifa, Khalid. No Knives in This City’s Kitchen. Cairo: Dar El-Ain Publishing, 2013. Khalifa explores the mechanics of fear and disintegration over half a century in No Knives in This City’s Kitchen. Through the story of one Syrian family, the author depicts a society living under tyranny with stifled aspirations.

Shannon, Jonathan Holt. A Wintry Day in Damascus; Syrian Stories. New York: Nawfara, 2012. David, a Syrian-American living in Damascus, wakes one wintry morning to rare snowfall in the Syrian capital. The snow is a harbinger of things to come as David makes his way through the city streets, where chance encounters not only have the potential to change his life, but could also change the course of Syrian history.

Sukkar, Suki. The Boy from Aleppo Who Painted the War. London: Eyewear Publishing, 2013. Adam is a 14-year-old boy with Asperger Syndrome trying to understand the Syrian conflict and its effect on his life, so he paints his feelings. Yasmine, his beautiful older sister devotes herself to Adam, sacrificing her true happiness as she tries to protect the ones she loves. But Yasmine herself has to cope with her own traumas when she is taken by soldiers. Their three brothers, too, struggle—on whether or not to take sides, and the consequences of their choices.

Fiction for Younger Readers

Leeuwen, Joke van. The Day My Father Became a Bush. Minneapolis, MN: Gecko Press, 2014. Toda, a girl living in an unnamed war-torn country, lives with her father above a donut shop. When he is called away to fight in the war and the situation close to home becomes too dangerous to stay, her grandmother sends her across the border to live with her mother, whom she doesn’t even know. This book is a poignant account of families affected by the implications of war.


Woodson, Jacqueline. Peace, Locomotion. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2009. Through letters to his little sister, who is living in a different foster home, sixth-grader Lonnie, also known as “Locomotion,” keeps a record of their lives while they are apart, describing his own foster family, including his foster brother who returns home after losing a leg in the Iraq War.

Nonfiction for Younger Readers

Berlatsky, Noah. Syria. Farmington Hills, Mich: Greenhaven Press, 2014. This title in the Opposing Viewpoints series examines the ongoing conflict in Syria, exploring such topics as what is the United States’ role in the Syrian civil war, the status of the Syrian resistance, the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, and Syria’s relationship with the rest of the world.

Haerens, Margaret, and Lynn M. Zott. The Arab Spring. Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2013. This volume in the Opposing Viewpoints series explores the topic of the Arab Spring, the revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests occurring in the Arab world that began in late 2010, by presenting varied expert opinions that examine many of the different aspects that surround this issue.

Yomtov, Nelson. Syria. New York: Scholastic, Inc, 2014. This book describes the geography, history, economics, government, religion, plants and animals, and culture of Syria, a country in the heart of the Middle East, with photos, sidebars and statistics throughout the book.