

# **Roots & Consequences**

## ***Further explorations into the Syrian Uprising***

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(1905-1999 )

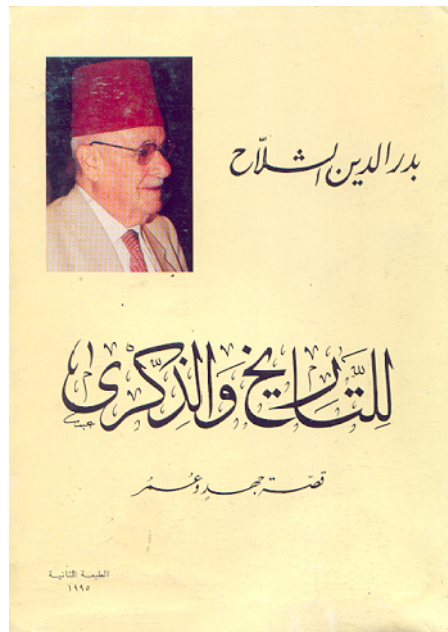
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**Book Review - Omar Imady:**

**Lil-Tarikh wa-al-Dhikra, Qisat Jihad wa-'Umur**

**(For History and Memory, the Story of a Struggle and a Life)**

**By Badr Deen Al Challah (Damascus, 1990)**



In 729 pages permeated with memories, speeches, personal letters, photographs, travel journals, and insights on everything from Syria's politics to Syria's agriculture, Al Challah succeeds in producing a work, which mirrors the person one would encounter in real life. For those who have had the opportunity to meet Al Challah, as I have on several occasions, you cannot help but visualise him sharing fragments of this book over tea at his farm in the Ghuta. Al Challah loved to talk. It was a gift that his listeners, regardless of their background, appreciated. I have watched him impress my American grandmother just as I have watched him impress hard core Baathists. There was something endearing about his willingness to share everything, regardless how personal or even embarrassing, and all this comes out clearly in his memoirs. Al Challah was born in 1905, when Damascus was still very much an Ottoman city. His father, Haj Salim Challah was a well-known merchant of fruits and vegetables based in Damascus, but with a regional network that covered cities in Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and Hijaz. Guided by his father, Badr Deen, along with his brother Shafiq, entered the world of entrepreneurship at a young age and learned carefully the delicate art of buying, selling and investing, first under Ottoman rule and subsequently under the French Mandate. His father was a notable Free Mason, who appears to have had ties with the anti-Ottoman Arab movement in the period prior to World War I. His clandestine support to the rebels may have been the reason he was exiled for a short period to Ankara. Badr Deen, too, would join the Free Masons, and despite the fact that freemasonry after the 1940s had become branded in popular Arab perception as a 'tool of Zionism', Badr Deen is not embarrassed of his association with freemasonry and in fact includes a picture of himself in full Masonic regalia.

Perhaps the most significant part of Al Challah's memoirs (to those interested in Syria's recent political history) are those segments which focus on his relationship with President Hafez al-Asad. It is here that we encounter first hand that distinct Damascene sensibility, which had come to terms with the fact that because of the Alawite control of the army (from the late 1960s onwards) they will either be ruled by the extreme leftist branch of the Baath party (headed by Salah Jadid), which made clear its hostility to everything Damascenes cherished, or by the more moderate branch headed by the pragmatist Hafez al-Asad. None of this is articulated bluntly, however, it is not difficult to understand that what Al Challah is in essence saying is that he had succeeded in impressing this Alawite general who came from a rural background. Not only did he manage to impress him, but most importantly, he managed to gain his trust; and that he did all this because he wanted to continue to be a successful merchant, who contributes to his country's development and progress. Al Challah makes no reference to the events of the 1980s and his instrumental role in convincing Damascene merchants to not join in the boycott that was called for by the Muslim Brotherhood. But in describing the various projects that he continued to embark on, and the various charities that he continued to fund throughout the 1980s, he in essence confirms the point that what he did was the wise thing to do, at least from the perspective of a Damascene merchant. He would confide to his close visitors that in his mind, his 'wise approach' had succeeded in protecting Damascus from a similar fate to that of Hama.

Though Al Challah covers several important conferences that he participated in and documents the visit of President Carter to his farm in 1987, the best parts of his memoirs, the

ones in which he seems entirely un-inhibited and flowing with eloquence are those in which he describes his travels, from his trip to the UK in 1954 and all the way to his trip to China in 1981. In his UK trip, he visits his son Rateb (who later becomes the President of the Chamber of Commerce) in Oxford and visits Manchester, Leeds and the lake District, in addition of course to London; all the while documenting the smallest details (from how much he paid for his hotel room in London, 20 shillings, to meeting Nizar Kabani, who at the time was a diplomat stationed at the Syrian Embassy in London, to the various Syrian families he met in Manchester).

Al Challah concludes his memoirs with a paragraph printed in bold in which he expresses his grave concern for the future of the Arab world. He wrote this in August 1990 right after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. He beseeches God to guide Arab leaders to interact wisely with this crisis that they may be protected from death and destruction. One cannot help but wonder what he would have said had he lived to see the hundreds of thousands killed, the millions injured and displaced. A country dismembered and violated from land and air. Would he have regretted his alliance or would he have blamed his countrymen for not holding on to the path of wisdom that he believed himself to have pursued?



## About Our Authors

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