

*Sympathetic Stereotypes:
The Syrian Uprising in Western Media and Scholarship*

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Preface

***Sympathetic Stereotypes:
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Omar Imady

In this new issue of *Syria Studies*, Katty Alhayek (Ohio University) and Billie Jeanne Brownlee (University of Exeter), examine the way in which the Syrian Uprising has been explored and represented by Western journalists and scholars. Not only do these two studies explain why Western representation has failed to capture the ‘true story’ as it were, but also they move on to provide the type of field-level documentation from which a far more reality-consistent representation can be attained.

In *"I must save my life and not risk my family's safety!": Untold Stories of Syrian Women Surviving War*, Alhayek provides several case studies of Syrian women whose lives were irreversibly changed as a result of the events that unfolded after March 2011. The stories of these women vividly illustrate how difficult it is to come up with a neat and easily accessible profile for the suffering of Syrian women. Yet, this is precisely what Western media, albeit sympathetic, has attempted to achieve. Stories on child brides being sold to wealthy old men from the Gulf, though on the surface highlighting the suffering that Syrian women have undergone, are shown by Alhayek to have grossly misrepresented not only Syrian women, who are in fact as complex and multi-faceted as their Western counterparts, but also Syrian families for being willing to take part in such arrangements in the first place. Through interviews with six Syrian women, Alhayek brings home the idea that our understanding of the Syrian Uprising must be based on stories that are collected from below rather than on stereotypes imposed from above. The case studies defy any simplified narrative that one may wish to impose on them. In one case study, for example, the army is directly responsible for killing civilians, while in the other the army is shown to have been very respectful of women, especially in the early phase of the Uprising.

In *The Revolution “From Below” and Its Misinterpretations “From Above”: The Case of Syria’s Neglected Civil Society*, Brownlee reminds us that civil society in the Arab world in general, and in Syria in particular, was not born in the Arab Spring, and perhaps more important, it was not eliminated even after the Uprising evolved into an armed conflict. Through various case studies, Brownlee documents not only how well established the civil society experience in Syria was, but also how resilient it has been to the various attempts by both sides of the conflict to crush it. Yet, as Brownlee’s findings illustrate, Western scholarship is generally captive to an Orientalist approach, which presupposes an attractive and easily accessible narrative, again seemingly sympathetic, and proceeds to explore reality through its prism. Hence, Western media created a bipolar narrative according to which the Syrian population rose in unity against an oppressive regime. This is not only an oversimplification, but it also ignores very important facts that cannot be reconciled with it. Aspects of the narrative that are deemed too complicated however, as Brownlee documents, are simply censored, even when the crisis continues to evolve in a manner that is markedly inconsistent with the bipolar narrative Western media is attached to.