

**Preludes to the Islamic State:
Contextualizing the Rise of Extremism in the
Syrian Uprising**

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Syria Studies

Syria Studies

An open-access, peer reviewed, & indexed journal.

Published online by the
Centre for Syrian Studies (CSS),
University of St Andrews.

Raymond Hinnebusch (Editor-In-Chief), &
Omar Imady (Managing Editor).

© 2014 by the University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies Published by the University of St Andrews, Centre for Syrian Studies,

School of International Relations Fife, Scotland UK

ISSN: ISSN 2056-3175

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Preface

**Preludes to the Islamic State:
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Omar Imady

In this new issue of *Syria Studies*, two scholars, Stephane Valter and Naomi Ramirez, help us understand the background against which the Islamic State (IS) emerged as the most powerful player fighting against the Syrian regime. Undoubtedly, there is far more to this context than these two studies share. Nevertheless, the contributions of Valter and Ramirez are part of a larger field of scholarship that is not only very recent, but that is also attempting to analyse a phenomenon that unfolds and changes on an almost daily basis.

In *Syrian War Representations*, Valter reminds us of the inbuilt hostile attitude against the Alawite community that Sunni traditionalism never formally disregarded. This attitude was not only confined to works of jurisprudence, but it regularly manifested itself into anti-Alawite campaigns during the Ottoman period. This not only helps us understand the deep mistrust held by Alawites towards Syrian Sunnis, but more important, it at least partially explains the religious foundation which extremist Sunni groups, such as IS, used to legitimise their attitudes and actions against Alawites. Granted the majority of Sunni scholars in Syria do not identify with these sectarian positions, however, few have ventured into directly addressing the foundations of these sectarian views in an attempt to categorically demonstrate their incompatibility with what might be called enlightened Sunnism. Valter also sheds light on some of the early sectarian manifestations of the Syrian Uprising, which were destined to become the dominant mode of expression of both the opposition as well as regime loyalists. Valter's work was completed prior to the events of the last six months when IS managed to create a large entity stretching

over Iraq and Syria and declare a caliphate. But the narrative Valter shares is clearly a prelude to something far more dramatic, and in this sense it is a prophecy that has already been fulfilled.

In *The Strategy and Goals of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian Revolution*, Ramirez analyzes the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian Uprising. As the largest organised opposition group in Syria prior to March 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood was expected to play a far more significant role in the Uprising, indeed one that involved leadership and mobilisation. Though the Brotherhood, as Ramirez shows, was quick to get engaged and may have been responsible for the initial Facebook page that rallied Syrians to protest against the regime, the Brotherhood was unable to articulate its positions in a manner that was at once inclusive as well as sensitive to the level of brutality which the protestors confronted. The narrative of Ramirez points to the fact that the regime succeeded in outsmarting the Brotherhood, placing it in an impossible position where it had to choose between its popular base and the support of secular Sunnis and minorities. The Brotherhood's plight was further complicated by regional dynamics involving Saudi/Qatari rivalry. The irony of course is that having succeeded in making it very difficult for the Brotherhood to survive as a prominent leader of the protesters, and later fighters on the ground, the regime now has to deal with a far more powerful player which has none of the inhibitions that the Muslim Brotherhood once had, the Islamic State.