1997 Malcolm H. Kerr Dissertation Award

Committees
Humanities: Dwight Reynolds (Chair), Julia Clancy-Smith, Lucy Der Manuelian
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Winner, Humanities
White Banners: Contention in ʻAbbāsid Syria, 750-877
PAUL M. COBB, *University of Chicago*

ABSTRACT: This study examines the socio-political unrest of the ʻAbbāsid province of Syria in the period 132-264/750-877, seeking to understand why Syrians in this period so frequently used violence to make claims on the central and local governments and on one another. By analyzing a variety of Arabic and non-Arabic sources and especially the rich local-historical traditions of Syria itself, this study argues that there is no single way to properly account for Syrian contention in the ʻAbbāsid period; rather, the motives and opportunities for a given rebel depended largely on that person's position within the dynamic of provincial power in ʻAbbāsid Syria.

In this dynamic, the central government in Iraq worked out a relationship with Syrian society that diffused power throughout society and created a milieu in which contention was an inherent facet of provincial life for all. The provincial governors, the highest-ranking members of local society, used their own followings on the Syrian frontier to engage in the dynastic politics of the ʻAbbāsid court. Syria's local notables, the *ashraf* and factional leaders, used factional conflict to ensure an equitable (or at least favorable) distribution of the government's privileges. Occasionally, some remaining members of the Umayyad family took advantage of Syrian factionalism and, aided by vague but pervasive notions of Umayyad legitimacy, sought to provide genuine alternatives to ʻAbbāsid rule. The lower strata of Syria's urban and rural populations rebelled primarily to uphold customary notions of political order. In addition to armed revolt, members of the lower strata also took up arms as bandits to simply cope with adversity.

As a result of this study, the complex web of contention in ʻAbbāsid Syria emerges less as a simple peculiarity of the inhabitants of the former Umayyad heartland than as a feature common to the whole system of ʻAbbāsid provincial government expressed in uniquely Syrian terms.

Honorable Mention, Humanities
Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muhammad Majdhûb, Scriptural Islam and Local Context in the early 19th-century Sudan
ALBRECHT HOFHEINZ, *University of Bergen, Norway*

ABSTRACT: This thesis analyzes the internal expansion of the influence of scriptural Islamic norms on the edges of Muslim literary culture. As a case in point, it situates the oeuvre of one of premodern Sudan's most prolific authors, Muhammad Majdhûb (1795/6-1831) within his practice and the local settings (Medina, Suakin, and northern Nilotic Sudan) where he produced and used his texts.

Majdhûb serves as an example of Muslim "inner missionaries," men who had a background in urban-based literary learning, but mostly preached in smaller towns and rural areas. There, they sought to spread knowledge of and commitment to the fundamentals of religion among commoners rather than the elite. This expansion of Islam's

internal boundaries had quantitative and qualitative aspects. Increasing numbers of people were exposed to scriptural norms; and the internalization of these norms (their integration into the superego of the commoners) gave every individual, not merely the religious experts, the right and duty to control their effective application, first and foremost in their own lives. Mystical traditions and a Prophet-centered piety were catalytic to this process by providing the emotional bond necessary for the internalization of norms. Recourse to the scriptures ("primary" sources) helped to challenge established hierarchies, to promote the interests of upwardly mobile peripheral groups, and ultimately to narrow the "ideological gap" between towns and countryside by extending the validity of urban norm systems as a frame of reference within which ever more people came to define their outlook on the world and determine their actions in it.

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Winner, Social Sciences
Nationalism and the Politics of *Za'ama*:
The Collapse of Republican Syria, 1945-1949
JOSHUA LANDIS, *Princeton University*

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ABSTRACT: Syrians failed to develop a shared sense of political community after independence or to overcome the bitter regional competition for power which undermined national unity. Even before Syria's republican government was overthrown by a military putsch in 1949, the fragile political center in Syria had collapsed.

In contrast to works which focus on the politics of Syria's Sunni urban elite, this study begins by examining the two rural communities of the Alawites and Druzes, their attempts to resist domination by Damascus, and their efforts to develop alternative versions of Arab nationalism. This approach sheds new light on questions of nationalism and communal identity in Syria. Leaders of both communities refused to accept President Quwwatli's Sunni version of Arabism. Druze leaders fought vigorously to preserve their political autonomy, and they embraced King 'Abdallah's notion of Greater Syria.

Alawites followed an alternative strategy for communal advancement. When traditional Alawite leaders failed to establish an independent Emirate in western Syria, young Alawites flocked to the Ba'th Party. Zaki al-Arsuzi, the leader of the Alawite wing of the party, propounded an "Alawite" version of Arab nationalism, designed to promote the political interests and cultural affinities of his co-religionists.

The last chapters describe the different national identities promoted by the elites of Syria's two great cities: Damascus and Aleppo. They also explain how "the politics of *za'ama*" frustrated efforts to create national political parties and inculcate respect for the constitution and the rule of law. Syria remained a segmented society following independence in which regional, sectarian, and tribal loyalties continued to define politics. Syria suffered not from an excess of class-consciousness but from its dearth.

The army's rise to power must also be understood within the context of the politics of *za'ama*. President Quwwatli drew the army into the center of the political process in order to promote his leadership and to avoid compromise with his Aleppine opponents. Political instability during the first decades of Syrian independence was caused by the fierce competition between regional elites, the different interpretations of the nation each promoted, and their inability to embrace a common national identity.