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Manon-Nour Tannous, Chirac, Assad et les autres. Les relations franco-syriennes depuis 1946

(Chirac, Assad and the others. French-Syrian relations since 1946),
(Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2017), pp. 464, ISBN: 978-2-13-078977-2

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It may seem old-fashioned to focus on bilateral relations in international studies nowadays. Bilateralism is rarely considered to be an issue in itself, and is often portrayed as a step towards something else – most notably multilateral dialogues or institutions. Yet, in this book, which is a redesigned version of her PhD thesis defended in 2015, Manon-Nour Tannous definitely challenges this view and offers a refreshing analysis of French-Syrian relations. In doing so, she offers one of the first academic pieces on these relations in the contemporary period, contributing both to historical debates – around the so-called French diplomatic expertise over Syria – and very current ones – the logics of the French position towards the Syrian conflict since 2011.

The empirical contribution of Tannous's work is striking. French-Syrian relations in the period following the independence of Syria in 1946 were very often overlooked in international studies. One may explain this either by the focus on the Mandate history between the two countries, or by the bipolar interpretation of interstate relations during the Cold War, which did not allow any reflexion on such a “banal” diplomatic relationship (p. 12) – between the French middle power trying to build its influence in the Middle-East, and the Syrian state often marginalised because of its “nuisance” strategies. Tannous deals with this issue by drawing on an impressive set of interviews with French and Syrian officials, and a collection of very informative archives. The conceptual contribution of this book is also worth expanding on, as a new insight is given on bilateral relations. Bilateralism is first a type of diplomatic practice, whose specificities consist of the limited amount of actors and the importance of informal relations between them – this is what constitutes the bilateral “method” (p. 17). These specificities allow these actors to substantively deal with a wide range of issues, and lead the author to consider the second aspect of bilateralism – the bilateral “content”. The French-Syrian relation is described as “unequal” (p. 21), “loosely institutionalized” (p. 22) and conducted by actors who are few in number. Tannous's main thesis is that there is a “gap between the use of the bilateral framework as a method and the limited impacts on the strict French-Syrian relations” (p. 17). According to her, the latter are to be understood through the

idea of “lever diplomacy” (*diplomatie de levier*, p.17), in which both actors use their relations with the other as a means towards third actors, issues and goals.

The concept of lever diplomacy is not irrelevant in the analysis of French-Syrian relations. It is heuristic in the way it encapsulates some of their underlying logics. It provides a very useful tool to interpret French strategy towards the Assad regime starting from 1970. Benefiting from the stability of the newly established regime, French actors of Foreign policy considered the possibility of establishing good relations with it, in a way that would, on the one hand, strengthen France’s position on the war of 1973, and on the other enhance the rapprochement between Syria and Europe. These experiences were conclusive to an extent that, in order to conserve their good relations, French decision-makers went as far as minimising the role of Syria in the attacks launched by Syrian-backed groups such as Hezbollah, emergent in the 1980s.

However, this concept does not pass the empirical tests suggested by the author. If French-Syrian bilateralism proved itself efficient in the 1996 international negotiations over Lebanon in a way that might have undermined American ambitions in the area at that time, the two countries were unable to find any agreement on Lebanese domestic issues later on, and would only collaborate briefly in the context of the War on Terror. This leads me to question the scope of lever diplomacy as a concept. Perhaps it is more a subjective category, rather than an objective one. Put another way, while being limited as an analytical tool of French-Syrian relations, it is definitely a useful tool to describe the way French decision-makers and diplomats framed Syria as a potential partner, or as Christian Lequesne would put it, where Syria was located in their “mental maps”.¹ French diplomats actually used to see Syria as a lever, or a ‘Pivotal state’ in the Middle-East, and to consider, as Hubert Védrine puts it, that the “Syrian-Lebanese or Syrian-Israeli issue is fundamental” (p. 147).

This is the main criticism I would address to this work: Tannous’s choice to focus on the ideas of bilateralism and lever diplomacy may overshadow the potential of this book as a diplomatic history of French-Syrian relations. When I mention diplomacy, I refer both to the spirit, the “essence”² of diplomacy as being the activities whose purpose is the “management of separateness” between two entities or groups; and to the practices maintained to achieve this purpose.³ Among the latter, the gathering of information about the other party, dialogue and negotiations, as well as all the symbolic mechanisms; which show the other party that their political and cultural specificities are being considered.

The separations between the Syrian and French states are plural. Firstly, there is a cultural separation, between two countries but also two diplomatic bodies, shown best by this celebration of the 14th of July hosted by the French Embassy in Damascus in 1972, during which the ambassador is surprised to notice that Syrian diplomats prefer by far drinking whisky rather than arak, the national alcoholic drink in Syria (p. 76). Secondly, this separation is ideological. How does one handle a relation with a partner who belongs to a regime whose nature is so different? Here,

1 LEQUESNE, Christian. *Ethnographie du Quai d’Orsay*. Paris: CNRS éditions, 2017.

2 JÖNSSON, Christer, HALL, Martin. *Essence of Diplomacy*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

3 SHARP, Paul. *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

French diplomacy stands out by its realism, making sure the Assad dynasty is stable, as its main concern is to remain in power, which makes it rather predictable.

Finally, a structural separation, between a bureaucratic state and a state relying on different *'asabiyya'*: familial, tribal or communal networks which often prevail over official institutions and actors.⁴ Keeping this analytical framework in mind, it is possible to benefit from a considerable contribution from Tannous's work. Indeed, without specifically naming it, it makes for a detailed and subtle narrative of the stages of a diplomatic relation between two originally opposed actors; from the encounter, the discovery, to the rupture, following the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005.

The first chapter of the book is dedicated to "the building of an interstate relation" (*La construction du relation interétatique*, p. 29). The emphasis is focused on the means through which French and Syrian actors get acquainted and establish a trust relationship, and on France's understanding of Syrian politics. A subtle depiction of domestic contexts and perceptions allow us to understand the nature of this encounter, rather than resorting to a bipolar analysis originating from the Cold War. The author expands on the French concern after Syrian independence to see a new elite emerge whose position vis-à-vis France is not clear, while the Syrian people, driven by a pan-Arabist impulse, worry about the Algerian situation until 1962. This date will eventually mark a shift in the process of acquaintance between the elites, and more largely the French and Syrian societies; that will earn Général de Gaulle a very favourable reputation among the Syrian public.

In this light, the book also constitutes an important account of France's developing understandings of Syria, which allowed France to acquire solid expertise on Syrian domestic politics, through which the rise of Hafez al-Assad would later be examined. Relying on "field diplomacy" (p. 203), this expertise enabled the French actors to understand their Syrian counterparts and to deal with them, despite their political differences. This is the exact opposite of the rising 'neo-conservatism' in American Foreign policy of the 1990s.

Following this reflexion, I would say that the shift in French-Syrian relations happened before the cooling of 2003 – and the total rupture in 2005 – as is suggested by the author. Rather, one can find this shift in the Syrian policy of Jacques Chirac after Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000. Considering himself as the "tutor" (p. 156) of the new Syrian President, Jacques Chirac engaged a strong-willed policy towards Syria, encouraging economic and administrative changes, through the release of the Bechtel-Fournier report, and the opening of a "Syrian ENA" (p. 154), the 'Institut national d'administration' (INA). Tannous rightly observes the tendency to try to bring Syria closer to the French model at that time, but her approach takes it as an amplification, an "idealisation of bilateralism" (p. 168). Instead, a focus on diplomacy would allow for an interpretation in this new policy of a shift in the light by which the French position towards Syria following 2011 can be better understood. Moving away from diplomacy as the management of relations with a partner who is different, the French decision-makers tended to index their relations with Syria to the ability of the Syrian elite to resemble them, and to adapt to the evolving context of Foreign Policy – towards a more *idealist* approach.

4 SEURAT, Michel. *Syrie: L'Etat de barbarie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012.