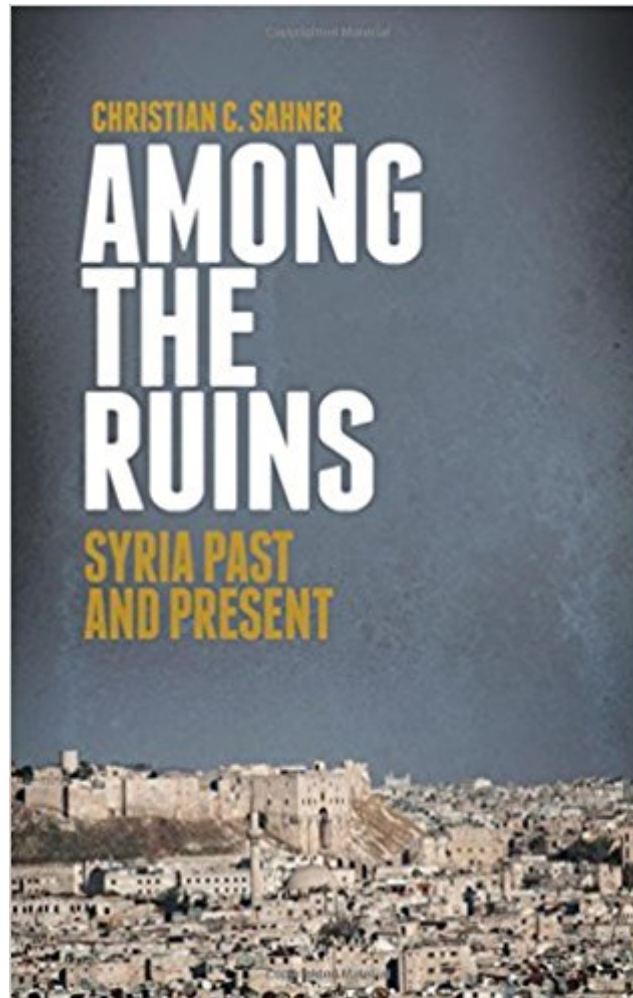




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# Among The Ruins: Syria Past And Present



## Synopsis

As a civil war shatters a country and consumes its people, historian Christian C. Sahner offers a poignant account of Syria, where the past profoundly shapes its dreadful present. *Among the Ruins* blends history, memoir and reportage, drawing on the author's extensive knowledge of Syria in ancient, medieval, and modern times, as well as his experiences living in the Levant on the eve of the war and in the midst of the "Arab Spring". These plotlines converge in a rich narrative of a country in constant flux - a place renewed by the very shifts that, in the near term, are proving so destructive. Sahner focuses on five themes of interest to anyone intrigued and dismayed by Syria's fragmentation since 2011: the role of Christianity in society; the arrival of Islam; the rise of sectarianism and competing minorities; the emergence of the Ba'ath Party; and the current pitiless civil war. *Among the Ruins* is a brisk and illuminating read, an accessible introduction to a country with an enormously rich past and a tragic present. For anyone seeking to understand Syria, this book should be their starting point.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 256 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (September 1, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199396701

ISBN-13: 978-0199396702

Product Dimensions: 8.6 x 1 x 5.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 17 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #663,059 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #81 in [Books > History > Middle East > Syria](#) #626 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Middle East](#) #1284 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics > Middle Eastern](#)

## Customer Reviews

"In his beautiful patchwork of recent experience and academic history, [Sahner] gives a truly original portrait of contemporary Syria without shirking the social problems, physical ugliness or political realities many Westerners often want to deny...Sahner gives a long historical arc, going back to pre-Islamic, Byzantine Syria, before going on to produce a moving and highly readable account of the country today. His close attention to the buildings and geography of Syria, together with

accounts of his many friendships, bring the country into sharper focus than textual sources alone can do." -- The Times Literary Supplement"Among the Ruins is a uniquely vivid evocation of the past of Syria and a prescient record of its present state. Deeply humane and drawing on subjects from all walks of life, Sahner has a gift for presenting them against a past that is as varied and as ancient as the country itself. We are brought to the edge of the precipice over which, alas, a magnificently diverse society appears to have stumbled. We will be both better informed and wiser for reading it." -- Peter Brown, Rollins Professor Emeritus of History at Princeton University"Sahner's writing engages all the reader's senses without wasting a word. His precision keeps the story moving at breakneck speed, leaving the reader with essential insights while eliding potentially distracting factual minutiae. The combination is sheer brilliance. The book is especially impressive given the magnitude of Sahner's intellectual task and the grace with which he accomplishes it." -- Brock Dahl, The Witherspoon Institute"With an academic expertise in late antiquity in the Middle East, Sahner gives even the seventh and eighth centuries important proximity. In light of the re-emergence of nihilistic and extremist language from the likes of the Islamic State, which promotes a distorted version of Islam's past, Sahner's history is all the more important." -- The Cairo Review"This excellent little book, a mixture of 'deep' history and travelogue, is essential reading for anyone who wants to gain a better understanding of the current situation in Syria and the Middle East, beyond newspaper headlines." -- LSE Review of Books"Among the Ruins is a veritable pleasure to read, despite the poignancy of its subject matter. Combining an account of its author's travels through a Syria now largely destroyed by the ravages of war with a reflection on the causes and course of the Syrian revolution which began in March 2011, the Baathist regime's ruthless response, and the country's subsequent descent into civil war, it is both elegantly written and judicious in its opinions. Informed by Christian Sahner's deep knowledge of classical and medieval history, eastern Christianity and Islam, and enlivened by his travel writer's eye for the telling detail, it will make a useful primer for those seeking to place Syria's current predicament in historical perspective." -- Andrew Arsan, University Lecturer in Modern Middle Eastern History, St John's College, Cambridge"In the tradition of Thomas Friedman's *From Beirut to Jerusalem* and William Dalrymple's *From the Holy Mountain*, Sahner's travelogue blends memoir and history to provide a rich and colorful background to Syria's current struggle." -Al Jadid

Christian C. Sahner is an historian of the Middle East. He graduated from Princeton University and the University of Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. He is completing his doctorate at Princeton, focusing on the role of non-Muslims in Islamic societies. Sahner's writing has been

published in The Times Literary Supplement and The Wall Street Journal, among other publications.

I give a full five stars to Christian Sahner's book, *Among the Ruins: Syria's Past and Present*. Personally, I have been working in the Middle East as a professor for almost twenty years, five of which my wife and I spent living in Jordan. Since 2005, I have made many trips in and through Syria, and have traveled to almost all of the western half of Syria. My experience mirrors that of Christian Sahner to the tee. In other words, I can vouch for the observations and statements that he makes in this book. I like the way he combines historical information, current events, and personal experiences in a way that makes for a stimulating reading pleasure. On top of that, the author's style of writing is excellent and holds your attention very well. I never felt bored for a moment. I highly commend this book to anyone who wishes to have a good introduction to Syria's history, current struggles, and understanding of the various religious and political sects that underlie her present situation. Like the author, I can only hope and pray that the horrible war raging in her ancient towns will somehow be brought to an end.

This is an excellent book about Syria based on the author's time there while learning Arabic. He made many friends and had planned to return to Damascus but the war intervened. It is very informative about life there before the war and about the history of the country. His travels are an additional source of information. Highly recommended.

*Among the Ruins* is a tour of the history of Syria often told with reference to modern anecdotal experiences by a serious western scholar who lived there and who writes with scrupulous care and candid balance about its highly complex religious diversity and how that came about. Few in the west are aware that Syria was the original headquarters of the Christian religion, that Syria was almost entirely Christian for about 500 years until the Moslem conquest, and that Islam consists nearly completely of borrowings from Judaism and Christianity, but this book makes all that clear as well as also probing the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Syrian population.

*Among the Ruins* seamlessly weaves a history of Syria, its development, its religious and political history, and its current climate via the travels and reflections of the author, Christian Sahner, in that country. Sahner approaches the topic with thoughtfulness. While written to be accessible, the book showcases his deep knowledge of the region and its political, architectural, and religious history. Sahner's language is beautifully crafted; and throughout you feel his empathy and passion for the

region and her people. Among the Ruins was an easy and enjoyable read, and I came away with a deeper and more vivid view of Syria and the broader region.

Terrific introduction to Syrian history and its heterodox culture and peoples. Written warmly by erudite hand, Mr. Sahnner covers Syria's religious history and the basics of its political situation since independence. At less than 200 pages it's a great introduction that never veers into esoterica or needless detail.

This 2014 book from Oxford University Press should have received far more attention than it did. Christian Sahnner was in the Middle East working on his Ph.D. thesis on the role of non-Muslims in Islamic societies when the Arab Spring and the present civil war in Syria broke out. He is an historian, not a journalist, but his deep knowledge of the history, art, and architecture of the region along with his personal experiences living in Syria and Lebanon, make him a wonderful guide to these places and these events. This is the book I had been waiting for as a way to address my ignorance: what is the difference between the Sunnis and the Shias? What is an 'Alawite (the Muslim sect of the Assad family, recent dictators of Syria)? What is a Druze? Why were the Maronite Christians the ruling elite of Lebanon for so long (they were closely associated with colonial France and involved in Lebanon's separation from Syria in the mid twentieth century)? What were the issues of the Lebanese Civil War thirty years ago, and how do they reflect the issues in the present Syrian civil war? This is a wonderful, informative yet personal introduction to the history of Greater Syria. Sahnner tells how Syria was the center of the early Islamic empire, and how, while it is a Sunni nation, the head of Hussein, the prophet's grandson and hero of the Shia, is entombed in Damascus. He alternates this lively, many layered version of history with personal story that center on real people like his Arabic teacher, the pious Muhammad who is later caught up in the vicissitudes of the Syrian Civil War and ends up as a refugee. The book makes no predictions about the political future, which truly appears grim, but offers us the history and the culture and the people-- and at least a little hope that some of this will be preserved..

I'm reading the book now, but would like to dispute a sentence. On page 47, the author states that the fortress (St. Symeon) lies in the limestone Massif south west of Aleppo. When I was there in 2008 it was slightly northwest of Aleppo. It is a small issue, but it makes me wonder about other possible errors in the book.

I have been following activities in the middle east since 1976 when I was there with the U. S. Navy. Syria has always been one of those 'out of the way countries sitting n the corner'. "Among the Ruins" puts Syria into perspective and helps me understand the region even better. Superb.

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