

12-1-2018

Naomí Ramírez Díaz. *The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: The Democratic Option of Islamism*. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Aliaksandr Filipau Ph.D.

Belarusian State University of Culture and Arts, Minsk, alexfilippov1983@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Filipau, Aliaksandr Ph.D. (2018) "Naomí Ramírez Díaz. *The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: The Democratic Option of Islamism*. New York: Routledge, 2018.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 10 : No. 1 , Article 25.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol10/iss1/25>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of International and Global Studies* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Naomí Ramírez Díaz. *The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: The Democratic Option of Islamism*. New York: Routledge, 2018.

The ideology and activities of the various political groups currently operating in Syria have aroused academic and analytical interests of many scholars and experts across the world. Studying their agenda, as well as their role in modern Syria's development, can help answer important questions about Syria's future.

The book *Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: The Democratic Option of Islamism* by Naomí Ramírez Díaz belongs to this kind of research. The author attempts to analyze the political agenda and activities of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) from the point of view of their adherence to democratic ideas and principles.

The academic and practical importance of the book is clear. The success of the al-Nahda party in Tunisia, as well as Mohamed Morsi's short presidency in Egypt, made a quite different picture of Islamism and particularly its policies in real conditions. As the author points out, these recent developments in the Arab world lead us to revise our attitude towards the agenda of those Islamist movements which have never been in power, including the SMB.

Taking into consideration that the future of Syria remains uncertain, the Syrian crisis is not resolved and the SMB is one of the political players in the country's arena with potential to share power after the crisis is over, the study has a definitely significant practical dimension.

The book consists of six chapters and four annexes (the translations of the SMB's major political documents). The author follows the chronological approach, i.e., she traces the history of the SMB from its origins in the 1940s through to the present day, including the SMB's involvement in the Syrian crisis.

The first chapter serves as an introduction, where the author makes an attempt to define the concepts of "Islamism," "post-Islamism," and "democracy," including "liberal" and "illiberal" democracy. The researcher comes to the conclusion that all these concepts have a significant variability, while no common definition can be found in academic literature.

Thus, Díaz tries to emphasize a set of general parameters, which, as she believes, are similar in Islamism and democracy. They are "accepting the existence of differences, and consequently, pluralism; equality among the different components of society, who are considered citizens; an alteration system that avoids perpetuation in power..." (p. 20).

Here, I believe, we face a significant methodological flaw in the whole research. The author takes some elements from one vague concept (Islamism) and tries to find some close or similar elements from another vague concept (illiberal democracy) in order to demonstrate their relevance to each other.

It seems, that to a certain extent a democratic option can be found in the agenda of any political force which is acting in the contemporary world. How it helps us to understand the real ideology and political agenda of different Islamist movements, including the SMB, remains unclear. Moreover, it seems that this approach slightly confuses the reader, emphasizing the elements which are unlikely to be of the highest priority for the SMB activists or target foreign, mainly Western, publics.

Chapters 2-6 consider the history of the SMB from its origins to the present day. The scholar provides us with a great number of interesting and important facts, including her personal findings, interviews and website analysis. Some periods of the SMB's activities are covered perfectly, while other periods (particularly, after the Hama massacre of 1982) need further study. However, the lack of reliable and verified sources was one of the author's great obstacles and I can only congratulate her with the success.

Focusing on “democratic dimension” in the SMB’s ideology, which was definitely not in the core of its agenda, Díaz pays less attention to the early periods of the SMB’s history. For example, discussing the key elements of its ideology in the 1940-1950s, it should be important to consider them within the frame of the general development of Arab political thought in that period. Particularly, a clear similarity between the SMB’s and early Baath’s ideology is omitted in the research. In spite of the significance of the sectarian issue in Syria, the author does not discuss sufficiently the SMB’s position on that issue. The picture of the Syrian political system regarding the inclusion or exclusion of all ethnic and religious groups in the SMB’s agenda seems to be discussed in more details as well.

Some suggestions need more arguments. For example, the author’s presumption that the SMB’s idea on ‘*mu’min*’ (believer) as the head of the state does not necessarily imply that this person should be a Muslim (p.31) seems very doubtful. The term ‘*mu’min*’ within the Arab and Islamic tradition has a clear reference to a faithful Muslim. Studying the Syrian political thought in 1940-1960s I have never faced a situation to use this term for denoting non-Muslims.

The third chapter discusses the issue of the radical wing in the SMB and its attitude towards the political development of Syria during the Baath party rule. The author emphasizes a very important point on the economic rather than religious contradictions between the ruling elite and the Sunni majority in the country. At the same time an important religious issue, concerning the Alawites’ integration into the Syrian political system and their relationship with the ethnic and religious groups, is discussed. Díaz provides important and in many aspects unique data on the SMB’s internal development in this period, as well as of its attempts to negotiate with the government and establish alliances with other political forces.

However, in some aspects the author idealizes the SMB’s political agenda. In particular, she emphasizes its alleged commitment to free elections. One may assume that such declarations by the SMB served mainly as a form of criticism against the ruling party rather than a real political ideal promoted by the SMB. Moreover, the movement’s leadership was completely sure that the result of real free elections would be their decisive victory since people would never choose anything but Islamic rule. The same is true regarding the SMB’s stance on equality. People are equal, but only within Islamic rules, which are quite specific towards the equality of non-Muslims.

The fourth chapter considers the SMB’s activities during the presidency of Bashar al-Asad. The chapter concentrates on the SMB’s attempts to return to Syria as an official political force, as well as on its further ideological development. Díaz thoroughly analyzes the concept of “Civil state within Islamic reference (framework)” proposed by the SMB in that period. However, as with the cases of many other of the SMB’s ideas, these concepts seem to be extremely vague and undefined in the movement’s ideology. Moreover, they do not answer the crucial questions of the Syrian political transformation and the issue of ethnic and religious groups’ political participation. Actually, the description of the “Civil state within Islamic reference” in the SMB’s agenda is 90% of what it is not rather than what it is.

In spite of the very useful and unique information contained in the chapter, some of the scholar’s statements appear questionable from an academic standpoint. For example, discussing Bashar al-Asad’s speculations on the special democratic option/path for Syria, the author refers to him as “Bashar I of Syria.” However, the democratic option of the SMB does not lead to comparisons of such kind.

In some cases the comparisons made by the scholar could be perceived by the reader in an accurate way. For example, she rightfully argues that the SMB refused the theocratic model identified with the Iranian system, since the source of all power for the SMB is the *umma* (p.84-86). However, the conclusion that the SMB refused the theocratic model in general needs more arguments. The above mentioned difference between the sources of

power is the difference between the Sunni and Shiite Islam, not between the theocratic and non-theocratic models and definitely not between democratic and non-democratic dimensions.

The fifth chapter considers the SMB's activities after the beginning of the Syrian crisis. The chapter contains a lot of the author's most important and unique observations, including the SMB's activists' posts in various social media. Díaz avoids any detailed discussions on the SMB's relationship with the most radical movements, including al-Qaeda, Jubha(t) al-Nusra or the Islamic State (IS), as well as its attitude towards terrorism and the growth of terrorist attacks. The SMB's negative attitude towards the IS is briefly mentioned in the next chapter.

In one case the scholar uses a very strange term, "the Orthodox Pope" (p.112), while the Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus' (who is implied in the text) has never been referred to as "Pope" during the whole history of the Russian Orthodox Church. He is referred to as "Our Most Holy Father" only in particular prayers, which definitely does not equate to using the term "Pope."

The suggestion that use of the word "*qutr*" (meaning region or country) instead of the words "*balad*" (country) or "*dawla(t)*" (state) demonstrates the SMB's aspiration to the creation of some form of federation between Arab states (p.122) needs further arguments. I doubt that the term "*qutr*" proves it per se in the Syrian context. It has been used widely throughout the 20th century by different political forces (including the Baath party), seemingly opposing the term "*bilād al-Shām*," which referred to a much wider region than Syria.

The sixth chapter considers the generation cleavage within the SMB as well as the movement's complicated position and uncertain future in the framework of the continuing Syrian crisis.

The book is completed with conclusions, four annexes and an index.

Despite these shortcomings of the work it is necessary to commend the courage of Díaz and her brilliant academic skills for coming out with a book on the complicated development of the SMB's ideology and political agenda. It will definitely complement other existing literature on the problem of various Islamist movements, including the existing political forces in Syria, as well as on the perspectives of this country in the future. A reader would find good and relevant information and a solid analysis of many of the important political, economic and social processes which have been occurring within the SMB's development throughout its history.

Aliaksandr Filipau PhD
Belarusian State University, Minsk
alexfilippov1983@gmail.com