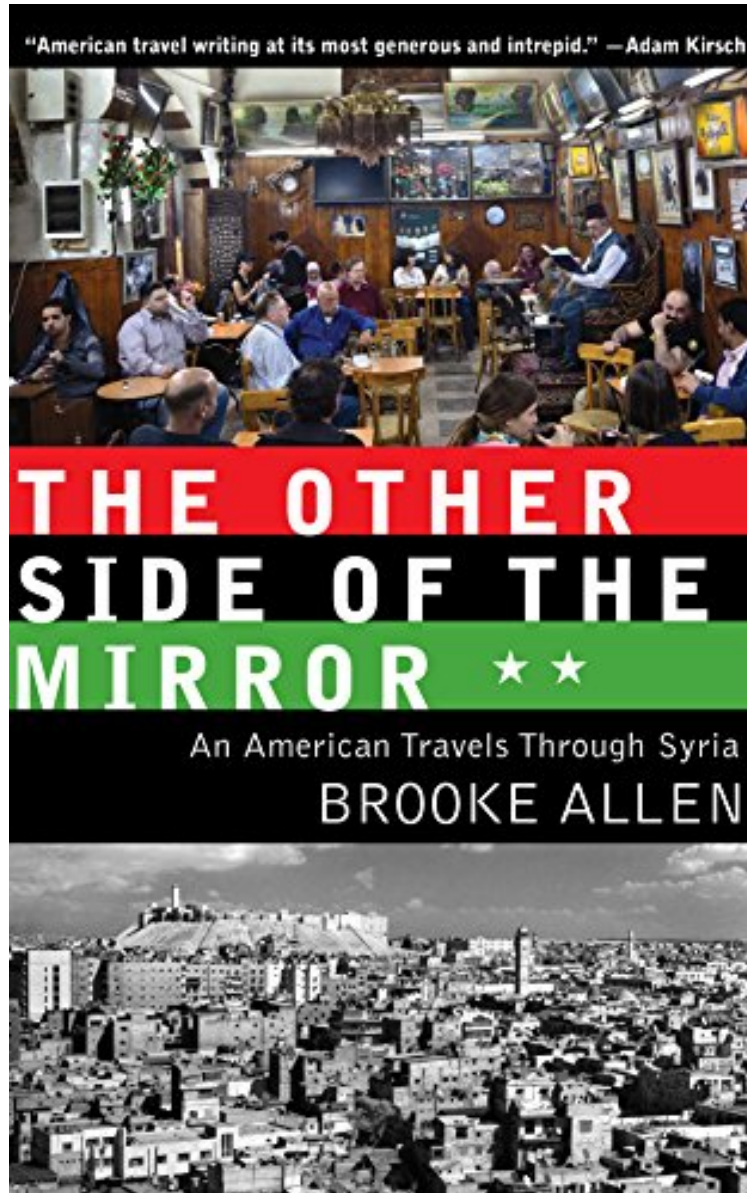


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# The Other Side of the Mirror: An American Travels Through Syria

*Brooke Allen*

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**Brooke Allen : The Other Side of the Mirror: An American Travels Through Syria** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Other Side of the Mirror: An American Travels Through Syria:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Insightful and Expansive Travel Memoir of the Syria That Americans Should Have Seen. By mirasreviews I discovered The Other Side of the Mirror: An American Travels

Through Syria after reading Brooke Allens balanced short biography of Benazir Bhutto for s icon series, and Im really glad that I did. I admired Allens ability to create a complex portrait against a tumultuous background in a short space in Benazir Bhutto. The Other Side of the Mirror allows her more freedom to let her thoughts flow but also features extensive research. This is a travel memoir, in the tradition of countless other travel memoirs. There is a bit of intrepidity to it, not because it is in any way difficult to travel in Syria, but because Americans usually dont. I was last in Syria as a child in the 1970s, when my family lived in Lebanon. Before the Lebanese Civil War, it was more common for Americans to visit Syria, and I was curious to know what the country is like now.Or rather, I was curious to know what Syria was like before the Civil War that began in 2011, about the time this book was published. Brooke Allen made two trips to Syria in 2009, one in the spring with her husband and teenaged daughters and one in the fall with a female friend, who had a particular interest in St. Simeon Stylites, an ascetic monk from 5th century Aleppo. Syria is as rich in history as any country could be, and Allen and her companions trekked all over in search of the cultures ancient and modern history. There is quite a lot of it. Allen offers historical background, literary references, sometimes the accounts of travelers from other eras for comparison, and her own experiences and observations about the places she visits, people she meets, and culture that surrounds her as she visits markets, museums, hotels, ruins, churches, mosques, and restaurants.The book is organized loosely by topic: The Destination, Time, Ruins, Faith, Fighting, Leaders. Allen doesnt follow a chronological order. Her two trips are presented more or less as one, not sequentially. Faith is by far the longest chapter and includes some history of Syrias heterogeneous religious communities, from now-extinct pagan cults through Christianity, the Middle Ages, and the spread of Islam, visiting churches, monasteries, mosques, and museums. The introductory chapter includes Allens thoughts on the warm welcome she received and some of the obvious problems facing modern Syria, like suburban sprawl. The chapter entitled Time catches some topics that didnt fit elsewhere but are evidence of Syrias extraordinary history. Damascus and Aleppo have been inhabited for 8 millennia, after all, and Syria is a direct heir to Greco-Roman culture.Ruins is self-explanatory, though it doesnt confine itself to Roman ruins. Allen begins with the story of the Baron Hotel, in which she stayed, nice enough but past its heyday. She visits Palmyra, Mari, Dura Europos, Ugarit, Bosra. The chapter on Fighting begins with the Tishreen Panorama Museum and its peculiar North Korean design- and moves on to sites from the Crusades: Krak des Chevaliers, Qalaat Saladin, Aleppo Citadel, Damascus Citadel, the mosaic museum at Maarat al-Numan. In her final chapter, Leaders, Allen addresses the origins of the ubiquitous presidential portraits, which seem at odds with the image Bashar al-Assad has tried to cultivate, at least before the war. She touches on the history of the first four Caliphs and the balance of the qualities of invincibility and humility that Muslim cultures still expect in their leaders.Brooke Allen didnt expect what she found in Syria, a country whose reality confounded all my preconceived notions and inspired me to seek out many historical and literary sources for enlightenment. That makes this travel memoir all the more poignant and, since Syria has been in the news, all the more relevant. In some instances, we see the seeds of discontent that turned to protest that opened the door to violence in the many over-educated but unemployed men forced to scrape together a living any way they can. They are the casualties of the rapid adoption of neo-liberal economic policies under Pres. Bashar al-Assad, which eroded social safety nets, sanctions against Syria since it refused to support the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and 1.5 million Iraqi refugees that subsequently poured in. A sad predicament for a country with so much potential.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Do read this written by an American Jew who took ...By Chief TatelliDo read this written by an American Jew who took her family with rebellious looking teen age children to Syria and was welcome everywhere. She returned months later with a woman friend and traveled the whole country unmolested. After reading this you will understand that the so called civil war in Syria was instigated from forces outside the country that funnelled arms and foreign fighters into the country to create another so called Arab Spring.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Syria: A changing perspectiveBy Thomas W. MulkeyIn 1982, I saw beautiful land filled with a generous, industrious people. One could easily trace the history of numerous people of antiquity through its treasure trove of archaeological sites. At the time, I felt many of its treasures had been looted. Seeing the destruction and chaos currently underway, It is comforting to know that many of those splendid artifacts are safely on display in museums and art galleries in other countries.

"A well-written, well-researched, and engaging introduction to contemporary Syria."Library Journal (starred review)"American travel writing at its most generous and intrepid."Adam Kirsch"A nuanced appreciation of the sights, sounds, and historical densities that make Syria one of the most rewarding countries on Earth. Like the great cities of Damascus and Aleppo, The Other Side of the Mirror is a thing of layered beauty and a source of endless surprise and stimulation."Ben Downing"EngagingI can vouch for the accuracy of her descriptions."Malise Ruthven, New York Review of Books"Brooke Allen's The Other Side of the Mirror is a hugely welcome piece of travel literatureAnyone with a curiosity about this fascinating nation will be well served."Tom BissellBrooke Allen first traveled to Syria in 2009, expecting it to be much as American news media routinely depicted itan ultra-conservative Muslim society, a rogue nation committed to an anti-American stance. She found, instead, a welcoming and captivating country where she and her family were treated with courtesy and gentleness.She soon returned for a more leisurely trip through

Syria's rich historical and archaeological treasures: the ancient cities of Aleppo and Damascus, the great Crusader castles, the Bronze Age ruins of Ebla and Mari, the Greco-Roman cities of Palmyra and Apamea. With her keen and appreciative eye (and ear) Allen introduces us to Syria's people, culture, and history. Published in spring of 2011 at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, the book has taken on a new resonance. Brooke Allen's critical writings appear frequently in the New York Times Book Review, the Atlantic, and the Nation. Her Twentieth-Century Attitudes was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year. Her most recent book is Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers.

Praise for Brooke Allen and *The Other Side of the Mirror* "A well-written, well-researched, and engaging introduction to contemporary Syria." *Library Journal* (starred review) "American travel writing at its most generous and intrepid." Adam Kirsch "A nuanced appreciation of the sights, sounds, and historical densities that make Syria one of the most rewarding countries on Earth. Like the great cities of Damascus and Aleppo, *The Other Side of the Mirror* is a thing of layered beauty and a source of endless surprise and stimulation." Ben Downing "Engaging I can vouch for the accuracy of her descriptions." Malise Ruthven, *New York of Books* "Brooke Allen's *The Other Side of the Mirror* is a hugely welcome piece of travel literature Anyone with a curiosity about this fascinating nation will be well served." Tom Bissell