

Magazine

The Enigma of Damascus

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The opera house in Damascus was a long time coming. Hafez al-Assad, the iron-willed military man who ruled Syria for three decades, was in power just a few years when he laid the cornerstone. But lack of materials and equipment, hard economic times and a devastating fire delayed the project year after year. It fell to Assad's son and successor, Bashar, to finish the job. He opened Al Assad opera house with his wife, Asma, last year. Decorated with paintings and sculptures by Syrian artists, offering up classical concerts and works by Arab playwrights, the building expresses something of the elder Assad's vision of Damascus as the Arab capital of cultural, if not political, enlightenment. The name of his controlling party, Baath, means resurrection, and nothing could better reflect an Arab renaissance than achievement in the arts.

For a dance performance one evening last month, a mixed crowd streamed through the doors. Women with showy hairstyles mingled with others in head scarves; men came in suits or jeans. One teenage boy wore a T-shirt that admonished in English, "Your game is still as ugly as your girl." As curtain time approached, Syria's power couple walked in.

President Assad wore a black suit and a charcoal shirt without a tie; Mrs. Assad, a sea-foam green sweater over a sheer top and a white skirt. Her long, honey-colored hair was uncovered. Together they made a kind of visual rhyme with the building: tall, slender and young, they seemed the essence of secular Western-Arab fusion, the elegant doctor-turned-president out on the town with his dazzling British-born Syrian wife, the former J. P. Morgan banker whom Syrians call their Princess Diana.

For the Bush administration, many European leaders and many reform-minded Syrians, this is a mirage. Some of them had hopes for this Assad when he came to power after his father's death five years ago. But since then, what they have seen as a pattern of empty promises, nasty oratory and bloody tactics has turned them against the Syrian regime. Since Saddam Hussein's rule ended in Iraq, no other Arab government has come in for as much pressure and disdain from the Bush administration. In December 2003, President Bush imposed economic sanctions on Syria. This February, the administration recalled its ambassador, who has not returned to Damascus. It acted after a powerful bomb in Beirut killed Rafik Hariri, the former Lebanese prime minister and a critic of the Syrian regime. International pressure soon forced Syria to end its military occupation of Lebanon, which began in 1976 during Lebanon's civil war.

By ideology, inclination and geography, Bashar al-Assad's regime looms as a rock in the road to fulfillment of the Bush administration's foreign policy, if not its philosophy. It is the one

government in the Middle East that has not recognized that Bush is serious about comprehensive reform, a senior administration official told me, speaking on condition of anonymity. To the administration, Assad is a murderous proxy warrior, permitting or even encouraging jihadists to stream eastward into Iraq, and allowing Iranian weapons to stream westward to the guerrilla group Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Bush administration accuses him also of encouraging terrorism to the south, against Israel, by permitting militant Palestinian leaders to operate in Damascus. It sees him as a dictator interrupting a new expansion of democracy from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. If, as Bush has said, "in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty," then Syria's relative stability, after 35 years, may be due to run out.

or Assad, however, it is the Bush administration that is sowing chaos in the region and reaping new extremists who menace Syria as well as its neighbors. Assad contends that he is opening his economy and preparing for a day he can be peacefully voted out. Although he is viewed in Washington as possibly a mere figurehead, he says he is just at the point of consolidating control by removing the so-called old guard of his father's government and installing change-minded technocrats. While his Syrian critics see him as trapped in the system created by his father, or complicit in it, or simply uncertain what to do, Assad insists he has a plan but is implementing it at a rate that Syria can manage, given its turbulent past and social divides. In any event, he is acting like a man with plenty of time. His unhurried pace may be a sign of a self-assurance that his critics insist he lacks, or else of a dangerous complacency, or possibly of both.

When he paused on his way through the opera house to say hello, I asked if he was concerned about a report that American troops were again operating in western Iraq, near the Syrian border. The report had renewed rumors in Damascus of an imminent American invasion. Assad shrugged. "The United States is a very powerful country," he said -- one that could strike as easily from the Mediterranean as from Iraq. "It's not a matter of where they are," he said. "It's a matter of how they behave."

Well, was he worried that they may indeed strike from somewhere? "No," he said, as a wry smile formed on his lips. "I think the experience in Iraq has not" -- he hesitated for a beat -- "worked out." His wife flashed a warm smile and deftly flicked me away. "We're off duty," she said in her plummy English.

The show proved not to be the ballet I anticipated but a kind of Orientalist pageant, with jingling Bedouin headdresses, flashing scimitars and barefoot women. It was a story of good versus evil, the good led by an elderly sheik and his strapping son in a black-and-gold robe, the evil led by a sinewy man with a shaved head and a snake tattooed over his left shoulder blade. He wore a sort of leather singlet studded with chrome buttons, and he brandished the biggest sword onstage.

Like Big Macs or a fully convertible currency, news of the end of history and the triumph of liberal capitalism has not reached Syria. Although Assad has begun to update it, the ideology of the Arab Socialist Baath Party -- less a vehicle for political participation than a far-reaching instrument of state control -- pulls at the economy, politics and society. The dance evoked the romantic pan-Arab dream that still burns in Syria, and in the Baath Party, long after it has faded through most of the Arab world. This once-revolutionary dream of a border-erasing, secular-leaning Arab union, promoted by the Assads and historically centered on Damascus, is now being squeezed between two more dynamic movements: its longtime, bloody Islamist rival, the vision of

a renewed, border-defying caliphate; and the countering demand by Bush and Arab democrats for a Middle East of defined borders and democratic governments.

During the performance, the bad guys at first had the good guys on the ropes, stealing their women and abusing them. But then the Arab tribes united and stood up to the villains. Clearly enchanted, the man in the seat next to me leaned over and whispered, "This is our history."

"Syrian history?" I asked.

"Arabic history," he replied.

The audience burst into applause and whoops when a chorus figure lip-synched a warning: "Do not make peace with them, for they are truly evil!" In the ensuing battle, Snake Tattoo killed the sheik's son by stabbing him in the back. Then came despair and a funeral, followed by the happy arrival of a handsome stranger from another tribe to marry the sheik's daughter. The performance ended with the wedding, a tableau of celebration and Arab unity despite the evil that remained unvanquished. Nobody mentioned Israel.

The Assads' applause never ventured beyond the perfunctory. After the bows, the actor who portrayed the sheik began the inevitable chant -- "In our blood, in our souls, we sacrifice for you, Bashar" -- but Assad did not pause in his exit from the theater, and the chant quickly died. Once outside the hall, the couple stopped to shake hands and chat. Scores of audience members clustered by the president's Audi sedan. Some held high their cellular telephones -- legalized by Assad only three years ago -- to snap digital photographs. "God protect you!" one woman called. Then Asma al-Assad climbed into the passenger's seat, Bashar al-Assad slipped behind the wheel, and they drove off alone into the jostling traffic and the balmy Damascus night.

The next day, when I asked Asma al-Assad what she thought of the dance, she winced. "I think there was a lot of talent," she said carefully. But, she added, "I don't think it portrayed what Syria is, in any era."

Yet what Syria is -- what it means to be Syrian -- is at the center of the debate over the country's future. To the extent that Syria has had a national identity, it has been based on the dismissal of a local Syrian identity in favor of its grander claim, to be "the beating heart of Arabism." Along with the presidency, Arab socialism, the occupation of Lebanon, a network of corruption and the security state, Hafez al-Assad bequeathed that perplexing legacy, and the question of what, if anything, to do about it, to his son, who had expected to be an eye doctor.

I spoke with the Assads on successive days in the same setting, their private office in a small, sand-colored villa on the western hills overlooking Damascus. On the first occasion, Assad was waiting alone in the doorway. He ducked his head slightly as we shook hands. Perched atop that attenuated body, his head and features seem small; his deep- and close-set eyes make his default expression one of worry. That morning, his mustache, the essential accessory of the Baathist male, was shaved to a bar of stubble above his lip. He led me to the office, where he sat on a black leather sofa. An interpreter sat across from him, but Assad, who spoke in English with a slight lisp, would turn to him for a word only a handful of times over the next two hours. Hafez al-Assad

was notorious for lecturing visitors for hours on end, testing their patience and their bladders. His son waited politely for my first question.

I began by noting that there was a debate in Washington over whether he was in control of his government. I asked his view. He laughed. "That was before our conference," he said, referring to the Baath Party congress that had just ended. Several senior figures had stepped down; Assad had now replaced all but 6 of the 21 members of the Syrian Baath Party's top panel, its Regional Command, and in replacing them, he had whittled their total number to 15.

Assad said he had been following the Washington debate. "There are maybe two different articles," he said. " 'He is not in control' -- but in the other article, 'He is a dictator.' So there is a contradiction." Neither description fit, he said. "By law and by constitution, the president of Syria has a lot of authority. But if you take a decision by yourself -- it doesn't matter if it's a big decision, an important decision or a normal decision -- you do a lot of mistakes. You must consult everybody. This is my way. Second, they say, 'He's reluctant, not in control,' because I take my time. I'm not hasty." He pointed to another change made at the Baath congress, the substitution among the party's goals of a social-market economy for socialism. That change was 18 months in the works, he said. I knew that, in the past, Assad had asked for patience from Americans by indicating that the old guard -- remnants of his father's regime -- were thwarting him. But now he brought up the members of the old guard only to dismiss their influence. "Now they're gone," he said. "We made that change."

Under Bashar al-Assad, Syria is more isolated in the world than it has ever been. Hafez al-Assad made his share of mistakes; he did not fully emerge as the "lion of Damascus" until years after taking control. Yet the father had the Soviet Union and cold-war gamesmanship to fall back on. He also had on-again-off-again peace talks with Israel, which gave him a framework for talking with the United States. Bashar al-Assad has had neither of these tools. He came into power after talks collapsed in 2000 over the return to Syria of the Golan Heights, which Israel occupied in 1967, in the Six-Day War. Soon a new Palestinian intifada was raging. And then came Sept. 11, 2001. In the eyes of the Bush administration, Assad set about digging himself a deeper hole. His father supported the Persian Gulf war, but Bashar al-Assad opposed the war with Iraq in 2003. He pushed the Lebanese to change their constitution to extend the term of President Emile Lahoud, an Assad loyalist. Then, on Feb. 14, 2005, Rafik Hariri and 19 other people died in the Beirut bombing.

Assad denies having anything to do with the Hariri assassination. He told me that allies of Syria had also been killed in Lebanon, and no one had figured out who was responsible. "There are always assassinations in Lebanon," he said. "Hariri was an international businessman. We don't know anything about his relations." I asked if he agreed with a recent op-ed column in the Arabic press by one of his ministers, Buthaina Shaaban, suggesting that American or Israeli intelligence was responsible. "Even if I want to blame any other international or regional party, I can't say it as president," he said. "That's why we supported the international investigation."

Responding to claims made in Washington, Assad said Syria had complied completely with a United Nations Security Council resolution calling on it to withdraw its soldiers and intelligence agents. When I asked if he would help the United Nations fulfill another component of that resolution -- the disarming of Hezbollah -- he shrugged. "They asked Syria not to interfere in Lebanon, so it is not our issue." What did he think the Bush administration wanted from him? "I

don't know," he said. "This is the problem." He said that all he heard from the Americans was about sealing the Iraqi border, which runs more than 300 miles through the desert. "They say, 'You do not do enough,' but we ask what is the meaning of 'enough'?" American officials have acknowledged that the Syrian government provided valuable intelligence in the aftermath of Sept. 11. But they said Assad repeatedly dragged his heels when it came to combating the insurgency in Iraq. They said that in January, when Richard L. Armitage, then the deputy secretary of state, gave him a list of former Iraqi officials hiding in Syria, Assad did nothing. The Syrian version is quite different. A senior Syrian official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told me that after the Armitage visit, Syria arrested and turned over a suspected insurgent leader, Saddam Hussein's half-brother Sabawi Ibrahim al-Hassan al-Tikriti, and more than 20 others. But he said that the Syrians, while seeking nothing in return, asked to keep their cooperation quiet for fear of alienating Arab opinion and angering extremists. The arrest by Syria made headlines worldwide, and the disclosure was seen in Damascus as double-dealing. Syria immediately denied any involvement.

The senior Bush administration official, by contrast, characterized the Syrian arrest of Hassan as one more attempt by Assad to play his father's hedging game, trading a chit sought by the Americans for the freedom to work against Bush policies elsewhere. Assad simply did not realize that the Bush administration would not play this game, the official said.

Assad told me he had arrested more than 1,500 extremists who tried to cross the border, to or from Iraq. He said his repeated offers of border cooperation with the Bush administration had gone ignored. "First of all, who to cooperate with?" he asked. "If you go to the border, there are only Syrian guards on our side. But if you look at the Iraqi side, there is nobody. No Iraqi guards, no American guards. Nobody."

I asked if he considered the violence in Iraq to be legitimate resistance. He sidestepped, saying he had put the same question to Iraqis. "Of course, about suicide bombers and killing tens every day, nobody considers it legitimate resistance anywhere in this region," he said. "But at the same time, they talk about Iraqis attacking allied forces -- they consider it resistance." Despite their shared ideology of Arab unity, the Baathists of Iraq and Syria were always trying to kill each other off, plotting coups and countercoups. Hafez al-Assad supported Iran in its war with Iraq, a decision that Bashar al-Assad listed for me as an instance of his father's farsightedness. Assad told me he did not regret his own opposition to the latest war with Iraq. He said he was against war on principle, and that he knew that Syria would "pay the price of any side effects of this war in Iraq." He said Syria was now paying that price. Days before our interview, the Syrian government announced that it had arrested one man and killed two others who had been planning an attack in Damascus on behalf of an organization called Soldiers of Al Sham, a reference to a "greater Syria" that would include Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. Assad now provided new details. He said that the group intended to send a 3-year-old girl laden with explosives into the crowded Ministry of Justice. He also said that the Syrians had foiled a planned attack last year on the American Embassy by a man "with a bomb and machine gun." Assad said the Americans did not understand what he called their common enemy, the forces of religious extremism and intolerance he said Syria had been fighting since the 1950's. "This state of mind is dangerous for everybody, for East and West, for everybody," he said, and as he talked he laid out what amounted to a three-step formula for his governance. He said that his top priority was stability. To achieve that, to dispel rising extremism, he needed to achieve a new prosperity. To achieve prosperity, he needed

democracy. The adjectives he used throughout our conversation were "open-minded" and "closed-minded." Emphasizing the former, he said, was his key to prosperity. "When you talk about upgrading society, you talk about open-minded," he said. "When you talk about open-minded, you mean freedom. Freedom of thinking."

Bashar al-Assad was a spare, not the heir. His elder brother, Basil, was groomed to lead. Growing up under their own Baathist father, the Assad brothers of Syria were never like the wilding Hussein boys of Iraq. Neither had a reputation for personal corruption or cruelty. Yet they were very different from each other. Old friends and teachers of the Assad children remember Basil as charismatic and commanding, Bashar as self-effacing. Bashar had fewer, though long-lasting, friends. Basil was a champion equestrian and followed his father's path into the military. Bashar chose medicine, the profession his austere father had dreamed of pursuing as a boy. When Basil died in a car accident in 1994, Hafez al-Assad summoned his second son home from his studies in London, dispatched him to the army and began promoting him through the ranks. As president, Assad has chosen to decorate his office with paintings and sculptures of horses drawn from his brother's collection. Bearded, eyes blanked by aviator sunglasses, Basil's face still haunts many walls in Damascus.

When asked about himself, Assad tends to drift into using the second person -- a kind of grammatical step away from oneself, the opposite of the embracing royal we. When I asked if he sometimes wished he was pursuing his chosen profession, ophthalmology, he replied that he was accustomed to Syrians turning to him, as his father's son, for help. "You're maybe just an ordinary person, but they don't consider you as ordinary," he said. "They want you to help them. So this is since you are young. So you get attached to the problems of the general people." Assad seems to draw a line between himself as a person and his attempt to perform his father's self-designated job of Arab spokesman. In May 2001, while greeting Pope John Paul II in Damascus, Assad suggested that Christians and Muslims make common cause against those "who try to kill the principles of all religions with the same mentality with which they betrayed Jesus Christ." Yet in the crowd at the funeral of that pope this year, Assad reached out to shake the hand of Israel's president, Moshe Katsav. Even when they were negotiating with Israelis during the Clinton presidency, Syrian officials resisted any public handshakes. "God made him," Assad said of Katsav when I asked him about the handshake. "Anybody God made should be recognized.

"As Syrians," he added, "we have never been closed-minded."

Assad told me he had moved to open general debate in Syria, permitting new criticism of the regime. When I asked if he really believed that people felt free to speak their minds now, he said: "No, we don't say that we achieved democracy. We don't allege that. It's a long way. But we are going this way. The situation today, the question that we should ask, Is the situation today like the situation, say, 10 years ago? It's definitely not the same. So it's a road. You should walk the road." He added, "They want us to jump." But, he said, "if you jump, you will fall on your head." I said that some Syrian reformers, after watching him for five years, concluded he was not serious about political change. He said that his priority had to be economics, and he grew impatient: "What should I feed them? Statements? Or paper? They want to eat food." He had to act against corruption immediately, he said. "If we don't have a new party today, we can have it two years later, nobody will die. But if you don't have the food today, they will die tomorrow."

The next day, when I sat in the same seat across from Asma al-Assad, she seized the initiative. What had I expected from my visit to Syria? What had I found? My first, vague response was met with polite impatience. "Away from the cosmetic," she emphasized. "I mean underneath." She went on to surprise me -- and to flatter my line of work -- by describing the difficulty of promoting development in a nation without a free press or, as she put it, "in a country like Syria, where the media hasn't reached its full potential."

She went on to say, "The employee will give you his perspective as a government employee -- he wants modernization, but he doesn't want the government to be able to fire him." The businessman, she added, "wants development, but he wants the market to remain closed, because he's benefiting." So "everybody's looking at development from within his own aspect, rather than seeing a country's development." The media "gives it a national perspective, rather than a community perspective."

So could Syrians expect to see a free press soon? "Absolutely." How soon? She hesitated, then smiled to acknowledge the impending evasion. "Let me start by telling you a bit about myself."

The daughter of a Syrian cardiologist, Asma al-Akhras grew up in London and graduated from the University of London. She did stints as a banker in New York, first with Deutsche Bank and then with J.P. Morgan, where she worked in mergers and acquisitions. She loved New York, and while she lived in a corporate apartment uptown, she wants it to be understood that she preferred to hang out downtown. She also worked in Paris, and she speaks French and Spanish. She has relatives in Houston. She had been accepted to Harvard's M.B.A. program when she chose to return to Syria and marry Assad, less than a year after he succeeded his father. The couple have two boys and a girl; the eldest, Hafez, is 3 1/2. The Assads had just begun speaking English with Hafez, having focused on his Arabic first. They have no professional day care and rely instead on the extended family. Asma al-Assad is 29 years old, 10 years younger than her husband.

But all that came later in the conversation. It turned out that in saying she wanted to talk about herself, she had a particular aspect in mind, one that seemed meant as a caution to an outsider asking about change, and maybe to an American administration hoping to reshape the Middle East. "I came to live in Syria for the first time five years ago," she said, "and I haven't even touched the surface. The fact that I speak the same language means nothing. The fact that I understand the culture means nothing. Because I didn't know what the mechanics of the society were."

She was accustomed to working in a large bank with a clear objective, where "the system doesn't allow you to go away from that objective or go out of that focus." Syria lacked institutions, she said, and even basic habits like "absence of leave" forms: "Here, in Syria, if somebody wants to take a day off -- 'Where is he? Don't know, hold on, let me find out. Where is his contact number? Oh, let's ask admin.' And they've got a number that's 20 years old." Every ministry, she said a few minutes later, was "a one-man show." The dearth of competent administrators was a refrain for both Assads.

Asma al-Assad has given almost no interviews; yet it was hard to imagine the wife of any other head of state in the region speaking with such easy assertiveness. Like an American first lady, she has focused on family issues, particularly economic empowerment and education. She said she

gathered complaints and ideas and studied those around her to see, for example, if Syrians were following a new seat-belt law (they were not, she said). She presented herself as a full partner to her husband. When I asked if she passed this information on to him, she said: "Of course. We exchange it, not only pass it on."

She said that she initially approached Syria's problems as a businesswoman but added, with a laugh to drain the pomposity, that Assad "gave me back my humanity." Cutting state jobs, however necessary it was, meant hurting families. "We've got to make sure there's opportunity someplace else," she said. "It's about finding the right balance between creating opportunity and managing risk. And that's for me what Syria is about today, and that's the transition process we're going through."

As the sentences paraded smartly by, I thought of Syrians I had met who spent years in prison for opposing Hafez al-Assad, of the stories of torture I had heard. I thought of accusations of murderous policies pursued under Bashar al-Assad, of corruption among his relatives. It made for a jarring juxtaposition with this earnest talk of bureaucratic reform. You grew up in a capitalist democracy, I said at last. Didn't Syria seem kind of crazy to you when you moved here?

"Um," she said, momentarily searching. When she began again, she spoke more slowly. "It's a process. And I know. I've seen the end of the process, if you like, and we are moving toward that objective."

What did she say to Syrians who considered this a repressive government that jailed political opponents? "How many political prisoners and how many have been released?" she shot back. Assad has released hundreds of people imprisoned by his father, though he has also jailed some of his own. "How many prisoners do you have in the U.S., political or otherwise? It doesn't mean you're a repressive society either. But just by focusing on one, you skew the picture."

I noted that in Washington her husband was called a dictator who did terrible things. What was it Americans did not understand about him? Leaning forward on the sofa with her hands clasped in front of her, she sat silently for 13 seconds. "I don't know which angle to take it from," she said at last. Another pause. "I think people need to see the man behind the presidency," she said at last. "They need to see what values he has. What his work ethics are. What his personal characteristics are. And then they can understand more about who he is and what he's trying to do." As I left the villa, I thought her initial inquiry was still the most important. What was, in fact, cosmetic, and what might be underneath?

ime has not forgotten Damascus, but it seems to have remembered it only on special occasions -- the invention of the tail fin, for example, or of the Soviet-style apartment block or, more recently, the rediscovery of the latte. But as Assad's stop-and-go changes open cracks in the socialist economy, money and modernity are trickling in. A few Internet cafes have opened their doors. People can now use credit cards. "Kingdom of Heaven" was playing downtown. One afternoon, a man in a Spider-Man suit was hawking Tweety Bird balloons outside the Scuzzi Café. "Hi," he said, when he caught me staring.

Culturally, the atmosphere is far more open than it is in much of the Arab world. Lovers hold hands and cuddle in the parks. Over a sushi lunch one day, I watched the Syrian couple at the next table suck down six Scotches between them. It is a dissonant environment, of a policed liberalism

confined to religious and cultural life and banned from politics. White-gloved policemen are everywhere directing the clogged traffic. They are obeyed. Syria's state of emergency, dating to 1963, gives them the power to arrest anyone with no stated cause. Some reformers hoped Assad would cancel the emergency law, but he told me he planned to change it "to have more security, less abuse of the people." He cited as a model the Patriot Act.

The poverty is stark. Unemployment is said to stand at 20 percent. Maybe even more dangerous to the regime than American pressure is that the oil is running out. Nabil Sukkar, an economist and business consultant in Damascus, told me that Syria may become a net importer of oil by 2008. Sukkar said that he used to believe the regime could separate political and economic reform, but that it had now run out of time and had to do both over the next two or three years. "You can't have the party monopolizing decision making," he said. Sukkar said that gulf investors were eager to build in Syria, but the Baathist ideology was scaring them off.

In his documentary "A Flood in Baath Country," the Syrian filmmaker Omar Amiralay gives a chilling look at a society stunted by Baathism. As his camera stares, children in uniform in the barren classroom of a rural village mouth their slogans: "We the Vanguard of Light salute our leader, Bashar." Together, the children chant: "We are the voice of the proletariat. In sacrifice, we eat little." The film is banned in Syria. Like everyone else there, I watched it on DVD.

I met Amiralay at a Damascus coffeehouse with walls banded in black and white marble. As a fountain splashed nearby, backgammon pieces clicked and Madonna warbled, he told me his story of long-term cultural resistance. He came to politics after the Arab defeat in 1967, and to filmmaking and Marxism on the barricades in Paris in 1968. His first film was a celebration of a giant dam that Hafez al-Assad built across the Euphrates. "As a Marxist, I found it something to honor," he said wryly, in French-accented English. For the new film, he visited villagers relocated to make room for Lake Assad.

Amiralay said that one of the Arab satellite networks had bought "A Flood in Baath Country" Since Bashar al-Assad had permitted satellite television, this meant the movie would be shown in Syria after all. Amiralay said he had asked the network to include a dedication to a friend, Samir Kassir, a Lebanese journalist and critic of the Syrian regime who was killed on June 2 by a bomb hidden in his car. The dedication seemed tantamount to accusing the regime of the murder, and I asked Amiralay how he could be sure he was not going too far. He touched his right index finger to his nose. "It's an animal sense," he said. But he also said that times had changed: "There was a demystification after the death of Hafez al-Assad of the fear, because he personified this power, this charisma and this capacity of violence. There was a psychological release, because the people felt the state was not controlled as before, and because the state is confused."

The journalistic shorthand for Syrian critics of the regime is the "opposition." It is the wrong word. It suggests coherence, organization and political leverage that do not exist. It suggests the existence of leaders with followers. A better word might be "dissidents," with its connotations of moral authority and solitude. They are a mix of Baathist reformers, communists, Islamists and even one or two Syrian-style neoconservatives. In Arabic and English, they have seized the tools of communication that Assad has permitted: the Internet and satellite television. Assad told me he had hoped to foster a productive conversation about reform and that he kept track "from time to time" of the Internet chatter. "Some people, they just talk because they want to talk," he said.

"Some people, they just hate. And some people, they want to criticize because they need a better country. That's what you want."

Ayman Abdel Nour, 40, puts himself in the last category. A Baathist, he issues an e-mail bulletin bird-dogging corruption and promoting change within the movement. He attacks senior Baath figures by name. He sees himself as strengthening Assad's hand. When I visited him at his apartment, he was enthusiastic about the sacking of Baath leaders during the party congress. Now, he said, "we expect that the decisions will be more radical, and faster." He said that Assad was now in "100 percent full control," which meant he also had complete responsibility for delivering and no more excuses. Abdel Nour told me there would certainly be multiparty elections by 2007, when Assad is to run for a second term. (Assad did not commit to this when I asked him about it. He said he would need a year or two to build consensus for a new multiparty law. "We should give it time," he said.) There may be limits even to Abdel Nour's faith. When I asked if he believed that Assad had a clear idea of what he wanted to do, the brazen reformer gave his response in baby talk, and addressed it to the infant son he was cradling in his arms. "This is a question," he told the baby. "I don't know."

Some Syrian intellectuals have a darker view. "I think the Arab regimes will live a very long life, and a prosperous life," said Mohamad Shahrour, an engineer who writes about Islam. "Because freedom as a value does not exist in our consciousness." He blamed this on "Islamic culture." In Syria and some other Arab nations, he said, regimes should fear only religious uprisings. "The government could arrest 5,000 people now in one day, and it will not be afraid of an uprising. But if in any city they will take the veil, the hijab, from 1,000 women, they will be afraid of an uprising."

Given focus by the chaos in Iraq, that is a vision of the end days of this regime that many Syrians fear. A green-domed mosque in the hills above Damascus marks the spot where Cain is said to have slain Abel. The city took its name from the stream of blood that ran down. There are those who think that a time of violent reckoning with sectarian hatreds may be necessary. Ammar Abdulhamid, 39, runs the Tharwa Project, which tracks treatment of minorities in the region. He had a fellowship at the Brookings Institution in Washington last fall, and he has decorated his Damascus office with photographs from his walk to work along Connecticut Avenue. One shows the American flag through the bare limbs of trees. When I stopped by, he called the regime "defunct" and the Baathists "idiots" and "morons" while we were still settling into our seats. He saw no alternative in civil society either. "They all want a leader or a messiah," he said. He did not advocate "bloody revolution," he said. But he also said that the civil strife accompanying regime change in Iraq might be the only way forward in the region. "Stagnation is killing our souls and our minds," he said. "Hopefully, this baptism by blood and mayhem will teach us to cherish the liberties."

A few days before I spoke with Assad, I received an e-mail message from Joshua Landis, an assistant professor of Middle Eastern studies from the University of Oklahoma who is living for the year in Damascus. Landis writes an indispensable blog about Syria, Syriacomment.com. He is married to a Syrian woman who is a member of the same esoteric Islamic sect as the Assads, the Alawites, who believe in the divinity of Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. Alawites were oppressed as infidels for centuries by other Muslims.

Landis's e-mail message recapitulated a remarkable petition he came across while researching his dissertation, which is to be published next year as a book, "Democracy in Syria." In 1936, as the French were debating how to carve up their League of Nations mandate in the region, a group of Alawite notables urged that their northern mountainous redoubt not be annexed to Syria, which would surely be dominated by Muslims. "The spirit of hatred and fanaticism imbedded in the hearts of the Arab Muslims against everything that is non-Muslim has been perpetually nurtured by the Islamic religion," the petition read. "Therefore, the abolition of the mandate will expose the minorities in Syria to the dangers of death and annihilation, irrespective of the fact that such abolition will annihilate the freedom of thought and belief." According to Landis, one of the six signers was Suleiman al-Assad, Bashar's grandfather.

Before I had the chance to bring up the petition, Assad volunteered that his grandfather had petitioned the French with other Alawite leaders to "go back to our mother country, which is Syria." He said: "They knew that if we divide the country we would have wars. So it's better to be, to mingle, with the others." I had the spooky feeling that someone else was reading my e-mail.

I said that I had heard the petition proposed separation. "No, no, no, no, no," Assad replied. "It's the opposite." Setting aside that question, the petition in favor of separation helps explain the profound appeal of Baathism, with its message of an embracing Arab unity, to a man like Hafez al-Assad, a member of a brutalized minority. Baathism could be the way to bring together all religions and races -- or else the means for minority domination. It could also be the bandage beneath which sectarian wounds healed or festered. As to which effect it has had in Syria, no one can know unless the bandage is pulled off, as it has been in Iraq.

The Syrian Baathists have dealt with sectarian differences through official denial. The education system teaches one vanilla brand of Islam. Yet sectarianism is never far from the surface. Within Syria, some who blame the regime for the killing of Hariri see it as a sectarian play that cost Assad international support but strengthened him internally. Hariri, a Sunni, had money, influence and contacts with Syria's Sunnis to potentially foster an alternate power structure. (Others dismiss this theory as crediting Assad with a cunning he has not otherwise displayed.) Unlike Lebanon, Syria has a clear majority -- Sunnis -- and some view them as the potential foundation of a stable democracy. Farid Ghadry, who has set himself up in Washington as a regime opponent and has been invited in for discussions by the State Department, presents a candidly sectarian vision of Syria's future. He speaks of a state with minority rights but also argues, "We need to give Muslim Sunnis a country -- a legitimate country -- from which to launch the war on ideology," meaning extremism. Yet the new mosques that have sprung up across Syria in recent years -- another kind of patient resistance -- may well be preparing believers for a different war. They just happen to be fighting it now in Iraq.

Hafez al-Assad maneuvered endlessly to co-opt Syria's Sunnis. He reserved top posts in his government for Sunnis. Land reform helped ally him with rural Sunnis against the urban Sunni elite. Through intricate sectarian balancing, he created what Landis calls a supertribe. "You're substituting party ideology for blood," Landis told me over coffee, "but it's very similar." When this method broke down -- when the Muslim Brothers, Sunni extremists, rose against him in the 1970's -- Hafez al-Assad used his Alawite-dominated security forces to crush them. In 1982, he leveled the old town of Hama, the city where their resistance was based.

Anwar al-Bounni, a 46-year-old lawyer in Damascus, was living in Hama in 1981, when Syrian forces first moved in. Bounni is a Christian, but he was bearded, and soldiers grabbed him as a suspected Muslim Brother. As the soldiers began beating him, Bounni said, neighbors ran up to identify him. Pinning Bounni's hands behind his back, the soldiers set his beard on fire, then let him go. Bounni now does the Sisyphean work of representing political prisoners. To finance his work, he was preparing to sell his office; he had already sold his car. As we talked among his packed boxes, a beaming young man with a bouquet of flowers entered. He was Abdel Nasser Kahlous, a 33-year-old accountant for General Motors in Syria. He had just been released after a week in prison. He and eight other members of a dialogue group called the Atassi Forum were arrested after one of them read a statement by the Muslim Brothers, e-mailed by their leadership in exile, during a meeting. It is a capital offense in Syria to belong to the Muslim Brothers. "We thought it was open and modern," Kahlous said of the statement. He said that, once arrested, he expected to get at least three years in prison. But he took heart when, at the initial detention center, he glimpsed Bounni on satellite TV speaking about the case.

When I raised the Atassi Forum arrests with Assad, I thought he might call them a mistake. He did not yield an inch. "When you know in the United States that somebody has a relationship with Al Qaeda, what do you do?" he asked. "You arrest him." The Muslim Brothers, he said, "are terrorists. They killed more than 15,000 in Syria." (That is the official number. It is believed to be lower than the number killed in the regime's crackdown.) He said that Atassi group members were released after they said "they wouldn't do it again." As of this writing, the member of the Atassi Forum who actually read the e-mail message aloud, Ali al-Abdullah, is still in jail.

The subject of sectarianism creates a bind for the regime. On the one hand, it would like to argue that it has succeeded in easing sectarian tensions; on the other hand, it would like to argue that these tensions are a terrible threat. In the interview, Assad did both. When I cited the historic oppression of the Alawites and asked if he believed that such wounds ever healed, he responded with a rather airless tautology. "The proof is that I am in power," he said. He did not mention it, but in another way he clearly is evidence of assimilation: his wife is a Sunni. Yet Assad also argued that sectarian tensions in the Middle East recognized no borders. "There is a domino effect, not only in Syria but in the region in general," he said. "This domino effect will start from the Mediterranean -- Syria and Lebanon -- and go south to the gulf region and the Red Sea and east to Middle Asia and north to the southern borders of Russia. All these societies are linked with one another. So the answer is yes, very clearly yes. We always worry about the effect of this conflict."

You could blame bad intelligence for it all. In 1915, a member of a Damascus secret society opposed to the rule of the dying Ottoman Empire made his way to British intelligence headquarters in Cairo. As recounted in David Fromkin's history, "A Peace to End All Peace," claims by this young man persuaded the British officers that Arabs would rise in revolt against the Turks in exchange for commitments about the postwar Middle East. Not much of a revolt materialized, but the commitments and the borders that they led the Western powers to demarcate helped create the crisis of legitimacy that Middle Eastern regimes are still facing. Nowhere is this crisis greater than in Syria, where those postwar borders have always been scorned as imperialist artifacts. Syria has such a weak commitment to its own national identity that it once willingly surrendered its sovereignty, giving itself away in 1958 to Gamal Abdel Nasser's short-lived United Arab Republic. "What constitutes a nation?" asked Georges Jabbour, a Baathist parliamentarian.

"Is it modern Syria, now? Or is it Greater Syria? Or is it the Arab nation, as the Baath Party says? Or is it the Islamic nation, as the Muslim Brotherhood says?"

Throughout the region, the struggle to clarify and legitimize borders is reaching a new pitch. The Israelis and Palestinians are edging toward another division of historic Palestine. In Iraq, the Bush administration is trying to create a government with the legitimacy to resist sectarian fragmentation and preserve the postcolonial boundaries. In Lebanon this spring, there were hints of a national patriotism that transcended ethnic and religious divisions. And in Syria, by default, design or desperation, Assad is taking steps as well. He has withdrawn his soldiers from Lebanon and moved to clarify Syria's borders with Jordan and Turkey. He has erected a berm that for the first time defines the border with Iraq.

Assad defended the pan-Arabism that his father relied on, though he described it today as more a feeling of connectedness than a desire for shared government. "The practice is more, now, open-minded," he said. Some who watch him most closely say they have detected a significant change. "There is a sort of transformation within the party," argues Jabbour, a onetime aide to Hafez al-Assad. Referring to a speech by Bashar al-Assad before the party congress, he told me: "President Assad did not talk about Arab unity. He talked about Arabism in general, the Arab identity." Ayman Abdel Nour, the Baath reformer, made a similar argument. " 'Unity' doesn't mean that you have to conquer all the Arab countries and absorb them and occupy them," he said. "No. It means to raise the standards of cooperation, of economic cooperation." Amiralay, the filmmaker and opponent of Baathism, says he also sees a change. "I think this is absolutely the end of this sorrowful page in the Syrian history," he told me. "I think that with the new era in which we are entering today, there is a redefining of the borders. They will be definite for the first time." He added, "It will be a mercy killing of Arab nationalism."

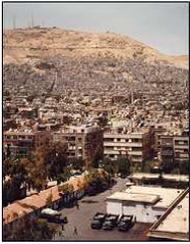
Yet if Assad sees this, he has yet to spell it out. "It's a crab-walk," Landis says. "They're backing toward this. It's not an articulated, conscious thing." It looks, much like his moves on reform or on Lebanon, more improvised than strategic. A defined Syrian nationalism could be a bulwark against sectarian chaos, a source of legitimacy and regional stability. It could also help bring home the skilled expatriates whom Assad is trying to woo, the ambitious Syrians who fled the smothering state to seek fulfillment abroad. But to achieve it, Syrians would need something to be proud of besides a threadbare pan-Arabism and their periodically glorious history.

The crab-walk is certainly not impressing the Bush administration. Bashar al-Assad is in a box. If he makes what the administration would consider concessions, he would confirm its view that only pressure can move him. "If you give, you convince them that pressure works," argues Robert Malley of the International Crisis Group, which is closely monitoring Syria. "If you don't give, you convince them they need to put more pressure on." Flynt Leverett, a former C.I.A. analyst and Bush official and the author of a new book on Assad, "Inheriting Syria," told me that this approach was carrying the Bush administration along a fixed path. "I think this administration is basically moving in the direction of a regime-change policy in Syria," he said. Yet while some administration officials see the regime as ultimately doomed -- unable to reform because to do so would be to surrender the privileges of the ruling clique -- they also see no alternative now for governing Syria. Outside of the Baath Party and the security apparatus, Syria, like Iraq before the war, has no institutions for sustaining national coherence and channeling political expression. If he wants to build a modern Syria, Assad must -- like the American president he confronts -- develop a strategy that breaks radically with his father's.

James Bennet is a staff writer for the magazine. His most recent article was about Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president.



President Bashar al-Assad and his wife, Asma, at their private office overlooking Damascus.
Taryn Simon for The New York Times



Damascus, at once politically isolated and culturally connected (via satellite television).
Taryn Simon for The New York Times



Omar Amiralay, a Syrian director. His latest film criticizes the regime.
Taryn Simon for The New York Times