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WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR SYRIA?

[Eyal Zisser*](#)

This article is part of a paper originally written for a project and conference on "Stability, Crises, and Democratization: The Arab World's Direction and the European Interests," co-sponsored by the GLORIA Center and The Military Centre for Strategic Studies (CeMiSS) of Italy.

This article examines Syria's historic and present power structure analyzing the likely alternatives for Syria's future. With a less capable leader, an internal Islamist challenge, and a serious international conflict with both the United States and neighboring Iraq, Syria is potentially a very unstable country.

In November 1970, Hafiz al-Asad seized power in Syria and ruled the country for nearly thirty years, until his death in June 2000. During his long rule Asad established a powerful and effective repressive regime. Under his rule Syria enjoyed unprecedented political stability that enabled Hafiz al-Asad to turn that state from a weak political entity lacking legitimacy into an influential and respected regional power.[\[1\]](#)

Asad's regime had a clearly personal character since it revolved so completely around the personality and image of the man who created it. At the same time, it had a familial (Asad) and tribal (the Kalbiyya tribe from which the Asad family stemmed) character. Finally, it had a communal character as well since Hafiz al-Asad belonged to the Alawite community. Thus, the family, the tribe, and the community provided the backbone that supported the Syrian regime and made possible its stability and survival for such a long number of years.

At the same time, Hafiz al-Asad's regime also had an ideological

dimension. It was committed to the ideology of the Ba'th Party, in whose name Asad seized power. This party maintained, and continues to maintain to this very day, an Arab nationalist and largely secularist worldview that was in the past even anti-religious. The Ba'th adopted the Soviet model of a single all-controlling political party that held all government positions in its hands and did not allow any public debate or criticism.[2]

The secular approach of Hafiz al-Asad's regime inevitably brought it into conflict with the Islamic circles in Syria. The latter found themselves on a collision course with the Ba'th Party and its worldview from the moment the party took power in March 1963. From 1976 to 1982, Syria experienced an Islamic revolt against its regime, the first of its kind in the entire Arab world. This revolt was suppressed with great severity and bloodshed. The suppression of the Islamic revolt demonstrated that when it was a matter of a secular Arab nationalist regime struggling with an Islamic movement, the regime still had the upper hand.[3]

Hafiz al-Asad died on June 10, 2000, and his son, Bashar al-Asad, took his place. Both in Syria and abroad, Bashar's rise to power was viewed as a breath of fresh air, since many hoped that the young heir would soften somewhat the hard line and the introversion that had characterized Syria in both the foreign policy and the social and economic policy realms in the days of his father. Thus, many Syrians looked forward to greater political openness and to an opening of Syria's gates to the wider world so as to allow its integration into the revolution of globalization, which seemed to have passed the country by until then.[4]

However, the hopes that Bashar al-Asad would change things were disappointed. Instead, Syria's condition deteriorated, and matters went from bad to worse. Today, six years after Bashar's accession to power, there is a real question as to whether he will be able to continue to lead his country. A similar question is being asked regarding the ability of the reigning Ba'th regime to survive for very much longer and to maintain the political, social, and economic order it has imposed in Syria for nearly forty years.

During the thirty-year long reign of Asad the father, such questions were never raised. Now that they have been brought up, they have roused latent Islamic forces and even reformist liberal tendencies from their slumber. Today these differing viewpoints are struggling for the soul of Syria, that is, for the support of the Syrian public, and beyond that, for the rule of the state. Still, despite the emergence of these forces, it would seem that there is an even more threatening challenge confronting the Syrian regime, one that comes essentially from within. This threat is connected to the desire that is becoming more and more evident in Washington to bring about the fall of the Ba'th regime in Damascus, just as the United States overthrew Saddam Hussein's Ba'th regime in Iraq in the spring of 2003.[5]

However, the Iraqi experience taught the Americans, and in fact the

whole world, that toppling a regime is one thing--and as a rule, the simplest and easiest part to implement--while the establishment of an alternative regime in its place, one that will be strong and stable, is an entirely different matter. This was true in the case of Iraq, and if matters do indeed reach the point of an American undertaking aimed at toppling Bashar al-Asad's regime, it would seem that it would hold true in the case of Syria as well.

In any case, the so-called "struggle for Syria" that was carried on for many years after that state achieved its independence, and which seemed to have come to an end with Hafiz al-Asad's rise to power, has now been revived. This struggle is about who will rule the country, what path it should take, and, indeed, about the country's very existence. Only the future can tell who will emerge victorious from the battle and, more fundamentally, what Syria will look like at its end.

THE STRUGGLE FOR SYRIA - HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

For many years, in fact, starting from the moment the Syrian state gained its independence from the French Mandatory regime in April 1946 until the rise to power of Hafiz al-Asad in November 1970, Syria was often viewed as a symbol or model of a state lacking in political stability. This impression was derived from the frequent changes of government the country experienced from the 1940s to the 1960s that became the most prominent identifying mark of its political life. Moreover, Syria appeared to the outside observer, and to its own citizens as well, to be a state given over not only to continuous and ceaseless struggle for power domestically, but also to endless struggle over the very path the country should follow and the orientation and the policies it should adopt vis-a-vis the regional and international arenas. Perhaps preceding all these was the issue of Syria's very existence, that is, whether Syria had the necessary ability and the backing of its own population in order to continue to exist as an independent and legitimate state entity.

This struggle, which was labeled the "struggle for Syria,"^[6] was explained over the years as deriving from the fact that Syria was a state lacking historical roots--a territorial state created out of nothing, in total contradiction to the will of its population, by the French Mandatory authority, with the aim of serving the imperialist interests of France (precisely as in the cases of Iraq and Trans-Jordan, and to a certain degree, Lebanon as well.) Most of the Syrian population wanted Arab unity or, alternatively, a state extending over geographical or historical Syria (*Bilad al-Sh'am*), and so they rejected the state proposed to them by the French.

Aside from this, the independent Syrian state, established on April 17, 1946, had to deal with other complex challenges, challenges that stemmed from its demographic composition and other social and political characteristics: First, Syria's geographical location constituted a crossroads in the Middle East. For this reason, Syria was the battleground for clashes in inter-Arab and international

conflicts.

The second cause was ethnic and sectarian division and, particularly, the existence of compact minorities that constituted local majorities. The majority of the population of Syria was Sunni Arab, constituting some 60 percent of the total, half of them living in the cities and the other half in the rural areas and the periphery. Christians accounted for some 13 percent of the population; Alawis, some 12 percent, residing mostly in one region; Druze, approximately five percent, living mostly in Jabal Druze; Kurds and Turkomans, some ten percent, living mostly in the Jazira area; and finally the Ismaili population, which accounted for less than one percent.

Third, there was a deep and ancient gap between urban and rural stock. The rivalry between the urban centers of Damascus (in the South) and Aleppo (in the North) constituted a fourth cause. Finally, there was the legacy of Western rule: the acute challenge of the West and, likewise, its cultural and political influence and legacy.[\[7\]](#)

As a result of this instability, Syrian public opinion found it difficult in the first decades of independence to come to terms with the state's very existence, and tended to question its future. Many Syrians instead leaned toward a more sweeping type of identification, one not circumscribed by Syria's territorial borders, such as "pan-Arabism," or, among more limited circles, "pan-Syrianism" and the notion of a "Greater Syria." At the same time, the individual's primary loyalty focused on the regional, sectarian, tribal, and, sometimes, familial framework.[\[8\]](#) Lacking stability, Syria became prey to increasing involvement on the part of inter-Arab and Western forces in its affairs. Indeed, Syria's Arab neighbors, Israel, and the superpowers sought to assure themselves a hold on the Syrian state that was viewed, as aforesaid, as an important key to attaining influence and regional hegemony. In 1958, the crisis that began with independence peaked when the Syrians decided to merge with Egypt in forming the United Arab Republic (UAR). Yet what at first seemed national suicide ultimately turned out for the best. Disillusioned with the merger's aftermath, the Syrians decided to dismantle the UAR in September 1961. From that point on they were resolved, come what may, to adhere to the political framework of an independent Syria.[\[9\]](#)

Until the mid-1960s, four different worldviews stood at the center of the struggle over Syria. Each tried to win the support of the country's population. Each can be characterized as radical and without a doubt expressed the attitudes prevailing among the Syrian public at that time, which were based upon long-standing and deeply rooted anti-Western feelings. Each approach reflected and gave expression to the social forces that stood behind it and sought with their help to make its way to the center of the political stage in Syria. The four worldviews were:

Pan-Arabism: This was the approach in whose name the Ba'th Party

fought for power in Syria. At its core stood a commitment to Arab nationalism and, consequently, to Syria's Arab identity, as well as the desire to achieve pan-Arab unity in which Syria would play a leading role.[\[10\]](#)

Pan-Syrianism: This worldview, adopted by the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP), was committed to Syrian territorial nationalism. Its aspiration was to bring about the establishment of a state of greater Syria encompassing the whole region of geographical or historical Syria.[\[11\]](#)

Communism: The Communist Party advocated the Communist worldview. Its concern in the Syrian context was with the struggle for social justice, liberation from the yoke of Western imperialism, and the removal of the remnants of Western presence in the region. This approach was naturally connected with a political and ideological commitment to the Soviet Union, whose example, it was felt, should be followed and with whom Syria should identify.[\[12\]](#)

Pan-Islam, or at least, an Islamic approach: The Muslim Brothers movement (also called the Muslim Brotherhood) gave expression to this worldview in Syria. It was based upon a commitment to Syria's Islamic identity, and perhaps also the desire ultimately to turn Syria into a state governed by Muslim religious law (Shari'a).[\[13\]](#)

One, however, could not find any party favoring a Western democratic and liberal approach among the political forces struggling for power in Syria in the years up to the mid-1960s. The liberal worldview remained shelved like "goods with no takers" in the public debates and among Syrian public opinion of those years. In this connection, it should be remembered that Syria was created by the French Mandatory authority towards the end of the 1920s as a parliamentary republic. Among the Syrian elite of those days there were those who supported this form of government. This elite was based upon the prominent urban families residing mainly in Damascus and Aleppo.

For hundreds of years they had held in their hands control over the social and economic life in the Syrian region. To be sure, these prominent families adhered to the values of republicanism out of a desire to preserve their power and status, and not necessarily out of any genuine and honest commitment to liberal and democratic values. Nevertheless, they chose to create a type of regime that was basically democratic, and even remained loyal to it during the 1940s and 1950s. However, the power of the traditional notable families' elite was in decline, and this elite quickly lost control of the country to its rivals. These came from the rising forces in Syrian society, members of the minority ethnic groups, and members of the Sunni community from the village areas and the periphery. As noted above, these forces adopted radical ideas as the platform for their social and political mobility. Consequently, they rejected Western liberal democracy and did not consider it to be a desirable system of government.[\[14\]](#)

Among the political parties competing for position and influence in Syria, the Ba'th Party was the one that ultimately emerged victorious. It took power by means of a military coup in March 1963 and has ruled the country ever since. The Ba'th Party's successful ascent to power, and the consequent defeat of the SSNP, its primary rival in the 1940s and the early 1950s, could be attributed to several factors:

1. The Ba'th Party platform reflected the mood of a majority of the Syrian public who accepted the notion of an Arab national identity and Pan-Arabism as its world view. This was in pronounced contrast to the SSNP, which was perceived as anti-Arabist in light of the publicly stated Pan-Syrian as well as anti-Arabist rhetoric of its leader, Antoun Sa'ada;
2. The Ba'th Party carefully refrained from delegitimizing Islam, which would have characterized it as anti-Muslim. By contrast, the SSNP declared war on religion, both Muslim and Christian. A careful reading of Michel Aflaq's published work leaves the inescapable impression that he wanted to displace Islam from its dominant position in the life of the state, society, and the individual, but at the same time he acknowledged Islam as an important element in the Arab heritage and culture.[\[15\]](#)

The Ba'th Revolution of March 8, 1963 overturned Syria's traditional pyramid of authority as the Sunni urban elite, which had hitherto dominated political, social, and economic life, gave way to a broad coalition of new political and social forces. These forces represented sectors of Syrian society that had previously been denied access to political or economic power, or to political and socio-economic mobility.[\[16\]](#) Although the Ba'th Party founders, Michel Aflaq (Greek Orthodox) and Salah al-Din Bitar (Sunni) hailed from the urban middle class, the party drew its strength from society's lower classes--members of the minority communities and rural and peripheral regions. Against this background, the Ba'th regime's rise to power encountered fierce opposition from various sectors in Syrian society who had lost ground with the changes in government. Spearheading this opposition were the Islamic circles in Syria whose mainstay was the middle classes of the state's Sunni urban sector.[\[17\]](#)

The Syrian Ba'th regime experienced a bitter internal feud during those years as well. On one side was a group of young military officers, mostly members of minority communities, called "the Military Committee" (*al-Lajna al-Askariyya*), who were behind the March 1963 Ba'th Revolution. This group of young officers, known also as "the neo-Ba'th," adopted radical political views, especially with regard to society and economy. This group was at odds with Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar and their supporters--founders and veteran leaders of the party.

In February 1966, the struggle was decided with the triumph of the neo-Ba'th faction under the leadership of Salah Jadid. However, the radical social, economic, and foreign policy of Syria's new and

inexperienced rulers quickly came to be regarded as divorced from reality and on the road to ruin. This policy widened the political gap in Syrian society and reawakened with increased vigor against the regime broad sectors of the population led by the Islamic circles. The foreign policy of Jadid and his colleagues pushed Syria into isolation in the Arab world and ultimately propelled the entire region into the Six-Day War of June 1967.^[18] Syria's defeat in the war put an end to the neo-Ba'th regime in Syria. The top echelon quickly showed signs of wrangling. Acting Defense Minister Hafiz al-Asad led the military faction of the Ba'th Party, which proposed restraint and discretion in the face of the harsh reality at home and abroad. From 1969 to 1970, the quarrel climaxed as Asad, with the army and security forces backing him up, overcame his rivals and seized control of the state. For the first time, a single authority governed Syria, sharing rule with no one and, in effect, free of contenders or rivals.^[19]

SYRIA UNDER HAFIZ AL-ASAD

The Corrective Movement (*al-Haraka al-Tashihyya*) that brought Hafiz al-Asad to power in Syria on November 16, 1970 constituted a turning point in this state's history. Asad's political acuity and talents, combined with convenient circumstances within Syria's borders and beyond, facilitated his founding of a centralized and powerful regime. The ensuing political stability and economic prosperity, unknown in the past, made Syria a regional power.

Many scholars attribute this success to two principal causes. One was the clear sectarian nature of the Syrian regime--it depended on the support of President Asad's own Alawi community, whose members controlled the military and security forces. The second is the regime's dictatorial and violent nature. In the course of suppressing the 1976 to 1982 Islamic challenge, Asad's regime (and, likewise, Asad himself) acted in three orbits: Alawi, Syrian, and Arab. Alawi by background and origin, Asad was Alawi within, Syrian without, and Arab in his soul. These orbits also shaped the character of the regime. The Alawi orbit gave it its internal core; the Syrian orbit its outer shell or body; and the Arab orbit, its soul, its *raison d'être* and the legitimacy for its authority.

The Alawi Orbit: The Syrian regime was a personal one that surrounded President Asad and constituted in significant measure the work of his own hands. At the same time, it was also a family or even tribal regime, owing to the central role played in it by members of Asad's family and likewise members of his tribe, the *Kalbiyya* tribe. Yet Asad's regime was also a sectarian one: It depended on the support of the Alawi community. The latter was an important binding agent for the rest of the regime's components. From this perspective, the regime was the clear product of the Syrian Alawi community's rise from the humble status of minority community to preeminence. Until the early 1960s, the Alawi community was at the bottom of the social ladder and in the margins of Syria's political and economic system.

The Syrian Orbit: The roots of the Syrian regime under Asad spread beyond the Alawi community. This regime was the result of the social and political revolution that took place in Syria since the Ba'th Party seized power in 1963, and as such, it well reflected the ensuing socioeconomic and political order in the state. Central to this order was the coalition of forces that tore down the previous order, which had rested on the hegemony of the Sunni urban elite. At the core of this were the members of the Alawi community. This dominant factor, by dint of its strength and relative advantage over its partners, guarantees the coalition's unity and perseverance. Members of the Sunni community constitute a senior partner of this coalition. They hailed from the rural areas and the periphery. The coalition also included members of the other minority communities in Syria: Christians, Druze, and Ismailis. They all regarded Alawi dominance as a guarantee of their own status and security.

The Arab Orbit: While the Alawi and Syrian orbits gave the regime its outer shell, or body, the Arab roots from which it drew sustenance gave it its soul. Indeed, the Syrian regime presented itself as an ideological one, genuinely committed to its worldview and vision. This commitment is a source of inspiration as well as legitimacy at home and abroad. True, more than a few scholars had responded that Asad was a cynical, unprincipled leader whose thoughts focused entirely on the goal of ensuring his authority within Syria, and if possible also in the territorial expanse surrounding it ("Greater Syria"). Examination of Syria's recent history, Asad's personal background, and especially his regime's political record shows that pan-Arabism, not pan-Syrianism, had been the worldview to which Asad paid allegiance. This did not gainsay what, in Asad's opinion, was a necessary interim stage for the realization of this vision, namely, the establishment of Syrian hegemony in the expanse surrounding it: Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and over the Palestinians as well.[\[20\]](#)

It bears mention in this context that, for years, the regime (and especially the man at its helm) needed this ideological coloration in order to pay allegiance to its worldview and vision. The various components of the ruling coalition in Syria, led by the Alawi element, had only recently arrived in the corridors of power. They were inexperienced and unprepared, and they lacked confidence. The ideological allegiance that the regime showed over the years provided legitimacy for its authority. It was also an essential means to a sense of belonging and full acceptance in Syrian society by the other groups who made up the Syrian mosaic, and of course by the Sunni urban element. Furthermore, this ideological commitment served to consolidate ranks within Asad's coalition by providing them with a platform or a common basis for action around which broad consensus could crystallize.

By all accounts, one of Hafiz al-Asad's most definitive achievements during his 30 years in power, was the establishment of a strong and stable regime. This gave Syria unprecedented political stability, enabling Asad to turn the country from a weak, ineffectual entity lacking legitimacy into a regional power of stature

and influence. By the mid-1980s, President Asad had reached the peak of his career and, conceivably, had attained repose and security, having managed to overcome rivals and enemies at home and abroad and acquire the status of a prominent and admired leader of the Middle East.

However, by the late 1980s, cracks began to appear in the strong and secure image projected so successfully by Asad's regime during the thirty years of his rule. A series of factors were responsible for this setback, including the collapse of the Soviet Union--Syria's close ally and patron; the ascendance of the United States to the status of the world's sole superpower; the spread of globalization, whose effects began to be palpable even in Syria; a spiraling birth rate and a stagnant economy that burdened the country increasingly during the 1990s; and Hafiz al-Asad's deteriorating health, which led to his decline and seclusion.[\[21\]](#)

Nevertheless, so long as Asad retained his grip on power in Damascus, his presence served as a deterrent to any threat to the stability of his regime. On June 10, 2000, Hafiz al-Asad passed away and his role as president of Syria was taken over by his son Bashar. Thus, Bashar's rise to power came at a time when Syria faced a crossroads--if not an impasse--in light of a series of challenges, some of them existential, in the realms of domestic political, social, and economic policy. This reality inevitably raised questions about the ability of the Ba'th regime to continue functioning in its present format. At the very least, it raises the question of whether the Asad dynasty, which has ruled the country over the past three decades, can retain its power in the aftermath of the demise of its founder.

WILL THE BASHAR AL-ASAD REGIME SURVIVE?

Rising to power against this background, Bashar al-Asad was perceived by many Syrians as the hope for a new path, different from that of his father, Hafiz al-Asad. Indeed, when Bashar came into office, the main question for many Syrians and foreign observers was how long it would take Bashar to institute the political, social, and economic reforms he had promised, whose aim, he said, was to advance Syria into the 21st century.

However, as the months and years passed, it became clear that Bashar did not have the capacity to bring about the hoped-for changes. His efforts to introduce limited political openness (the "Damascus Spring") ended in a fiasco, with Bashar himself repudiating the forces of reform in Syria that he had encouraged in their struggle at the beginning of his reign. The attempt to bring about social and economic changes also failed. Economic activity in Syria remained frozen; the promises, and sometimes even the decisions taken by governmental institutions in Damascus, to move the economy away from the socialist track and convert it into a market economy, ultimately remained a dead letter.[\[22\]](#)

Against this background, many began to raise the question of whether Bashar was really in charge of the Syrian state. They speculated that perhaps the regime was actually in the hands of the "old guard," the friends of Bashar's father who were still in control of the reins of power. The tendency of these people would be to prevent Bashar from introducing any changes whatsoever in the status quo that had existed in the country for several decades already. Today, six years after Bashar's becoming president, one of the big questions still occupying both the people of Syria and foreign observers is whether Bashar has the power to survive for very much longer. This question has become especially acute in view of the strategic difficulties into which Syria has been thrown, or, to be more precise, that Bashar has brought upon himself and his country.[\[23\]](#)

Indeed, during his six years in power Bashar has wrecked many of his father's achievements. There are even those who would argue that he has destroyed his father's whole life's work. Syria is no longer the stable and strong state it was when Hafiz al-Asad died. Domestically, the threats to the regime's stability have increased--even if they have not become imminent. For the moment, they find expression mainly in the unprecedented increase in incidents pitting the Syrian security forces against radical Islamic groups seeking to topple the regime and turn Syria into a state under Islamic law.

Regionally, Syria has lost its position in Lebanon after being in control there for a quarter of a century. It seems that Syria's formerly very close relations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt have also been reduced greatly.

Internationally, Europe, led by France, has turned its back on Damascus. The American administration, on the other hand, does not hide its aspiration to bring about a change of regime in Damascus, even if at this stage Washington may still hope that the change will come about by itself, as a result of domestic developments within Syria, and not as the result of external intervention.[\[24\]](#)

The year 2005 was especially catastrophic for Bashar al-Asad and could be seen as reflecting upon Syria's deteriorating strategic situation. A preface to 2005 came in the form of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559, passed in September 2004, calling for the withdrawal of all Syrian forces from Lebanon. The year 2005 itself began with the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, in February. This murder was blamed on Syria, and in its wake, in March 2005, Bashar was compelled to order the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. The troublesome year continued in September with the mysterious suicide of Syrian Minister of the Interior Ghazi Kana'an, a senior official in the Syrian security apparatus and the man responsible for conducting Syria's affairs in Lebanon for many years. Finally, as 2005 came to an end, in October and December, Detlev Mehlis, the German judge appointed to investigate Rafiq Hariri's murder, turned in the interim reports of the international commission he headed.

According to the Mehlis Report, senior Syrian figures, led by Bashar's brother, Maher, and his brother-in-law, Asaf Shawkat, organized the killing of Hariri. Shawkat is head of Military Security, the more important internal security organ in the state, and he acts as Bashar's right-hand man in all matters connected with the security and survival of the regime. The report also implicated other senior personalities, especially Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara, who was accused of covering up the truth and giving false testimony to Mehlis.[25]

This series of developments tends to rouse the feeling that Bashar al-Asad's days as ruler of Syria are numbered. Indeed, what has been happening to the Syrian president is reminiscent of the parable about the straw that broke the camel's back. None of the incidents that have occurred have been in themselves capable of toppling the regime. Yet sooner or later the collection of mishaps being experienced by Syria is liable to accumulate into a critical mass--critical and dangerous to Bashar and his regime.

Still, it seems that Bashar's hold on power in Syria is far less threatened, at least domestically, than Western observers tend to indicate. After all, Bashar has survived in power for almost six years. The evidence indicates that Bashar also succeeded, to one degree or another, in getting the various branches of the Syrian government to accept his authority. He did this by appointing certain confidantes and loyalists to senior positions in the governmental institutions (if not in the security apparatuses and the Ba'th Party's bodies). At the same time, some of Bashar's relatives took up leading positions in the Syrian security apparatus. Bashar's brother-in-law, his sister Bushra's husband, Asaf Shawkat, should be mentioned in particular. Asaf became head of the Military Security Department, the most important domestic security body in the country. Bashar's younger brother, Mahir, also became a key figure in Syria's military and security apparatuses.[26]

With all this, it is not clear whether Bashar himself has become stronger, or only some of his family members. Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that reports have multiplied in Damascus about increasing tension within the ruling family. These reports indicate that Asaf Shawkat, or even Mahir, have given signs of wanting to take over from Bashar when the appropriate time comes, in light of Bashar's assumed personal weakness. Against such background it can be understood why some observers express the view that the real threat Bashar should be concerned about is one coming from within his regime. Opposition to him could emerge from powerful segments of the army and the party, and almost certainly from among the members of the Alawi community. The danger is that these Alawi generals or party members might conclude that the continuation of Bashar's regime is endangering them and their standing in Syrian society. Alternatively, there are those who might try to exploit the vacuum in the upper echelons of the Syrian regime that has not been filled since the death of Hafiz al-Asad. However, it is the nature of internal processes such as these--taking place within the highest echelons of a regime like the one in Syria--to

unfold behind the scenes, slowly and gradually.

However, all things considered, it would seem that the threat presented by the United States is really the most severe and dangerous menace facing Bashar al-Asad's regime. Quite surprisingly, Bashar does not manifest any signs that he is particularly worried. Moreover, he shows even less signs of any regret for his actions and the course he had followed that had brought about this situation of crisis. Bashar's course is based on the assessment that the danger to his regime--whether from the United States or domestic threats--is not as great as commentators in the West try to make it out to be. Moreover, in Bashar's opinion, the best stance for him to take is persistent resistance to American pressure and to manifest defiance toward the Americans; such an approach will win him the support of the Syrian public, and even Arab support at large, and ensure the survival of his regime for many years to come.

THE ARAB OPTION

Bashar al-Asad's path has been devoted to the option of pan-Arabism and preserving Syria's Arab face. This finds expression in his repeated statements stressing his commitment to Arabism and also in his emphasizing the threat presented by the United States, not only to Syria, but to the entire Arab world as well. In this way, Bashar has tried to win the heart of the Arab public throughout the Arab world, and, of course, the heart of the Syrian public, which in the past had been well known for its commitment to the Arab cause.

There is no question that Bashar has succeeded in enlisting the support of the Syrian public in his opposition to the United States. Indeed, the Syrian public already had well-formulated views on the United States and needed no convincing. Its hostility to America and the West was quite well known. Nevertheless, there may be a change from the past. It is not clear whether the present anti-Westernism stems, as it did in the past, from the commitment to Arab identity and, consequently, to the pan-Arab cause, or whether it is now connected with a commitment to Islam. It seems that the Syrian public in general prefers a continuation of the existing status quo in Syria, because it fears what the future might bring and because no genuine alternative to Bashar's regime is visible. The people on the streets of Damascus are particularly concerned about the possibility of the Iraqi scenario repeating itself in their country: disintegration of the Syrian state, anarchy in the realms of government and security, the strengthening of radical Islam in Syrian society, and fundamentalist terror fostered by al-Qa'ida.

An example of Bashar's worldview can be found in a speech he delivered to a conference of Arab lawyers held in Damascus on January 21, 2006, with the aim of expressing solidarity with Syria. In his speech Bashar explained that American policy:

is meant to target Syria and Lebanon as part of an integrated project to undermine

the region's identity and reshape it under different names that finally meet Israel's ambitions to dominate the region and its resources.... But what is targeted are [not only Syria and Lebanon, but all] the Arabs and even the Islamic nation.... What is happening now [with Syria and Lebanon] is part of a big conspiracy, as [the occupation of] Iraq is part of this conspiracy... and as the Israeli disengagement [from Gaza] also was... and as [the Oslo Agreement] was.... Of course they [people in the West] will say now that Arabs always have a psychological complex, a conspiracy complex, but if we go back to the past century [we will also see evidence of a conspiracy like this,] starting from the Sykes-Picot Agreements, to the occupation of Palestine in 1948, to the invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the occupation of Iraq [in the spring of 2003], and the intervening events and what is happening now with Syria and Iraq.... Maybe they don't consider these events as a conspiracy... maybe they consider them as part of durable developments for the region or part of charity actions, and we have to send them a cable of gratitude....

[\[27\]](#)

In another speech that Bashar delivered before representatives of Arab political parties who gathered in Damascus in March 2006 to express their solidarity with Syria, Bashar added:

I congratulate you here in Syria, which many Arabs call the "throbbing heart of Arabism." But in order for the heart to throb, blood is needed, and you are the blood that arrives from all parts of the Arab body, carrying with it all the vital Arab components that supply power and stamina to the heart. And these components are based on two main things: The first is Islam, which is tightly and strongly bound to Arabism, which will never be separated from Islam. The second thing is Christianity, which emerged from our midst and was spread about the world in an Arabic language, that is, Aramaic.

[\[28\]](#)

Thus, Bashar is trying to survive by adhering to Arabism. Ostensibly, Bashar's commitment to Arabism required no substantiation. He frequently stressed his loyalty to the Arab nation

in public statements and depicted Syria as a fortress of Arabism. As *Tishrin* wrote in 2002:

Bashar al-Asad is the clearest and most explicit national voice today, articulating the goals of the Arab nation and its values and principles with vigor and courage but also with logic, wisdom and discretion. He represents not only Syria, which in itself constitutes an Arab and a regional force of importance, but the aspirations of the [Arab] nation wherever it is, from the [Atlantic] Ocean to the [Arabian] Gulf, its hopes and its fears.[29]

Bashar himself explained, in this context:

Many have tried in the past to destroy the Arab national perception by attempting to position it in confrontation with feelings of "local patriotism" which ostensibly are contaminated by separatism. Some tried to position Arabism in confrontation with Islam.... Others even tried to turn Arabism into the equivalent of backwardness and isolationism.... But none of this, of course, is correct.[30]

Still, despite his resolute statements regarding his commitment to Arabism, Bashar was sometimes perceived as having a Syrian nationalist identity no less salient, and perhaps even more pronounced, than his Arab identity. This was not far-fetched, for he had grown up in "Asad's Syria," a state unencumbered, as it had been in the past, by insecurity over its capacity or even its right to exist as an independent entity. His commitment to this state, therefore, was free of any doubt or impediment. Indeed, statements by Bashar over the years, starting before his rule, reflect a Syro-Arab ideology that sanctifies the territorial Syrian state and views it as a cornerstone of the regional policy formulated by Damascus, albeit with an Arabist coloration. Notably, the world view that drew its inspiration from a perception of "historic Syria" or "Greater Syria" (*Bilad al-Sh'am*) became widespread in Damascus in recent years. This was evident in the cordiality shown by the Ba'th regime to the representatives of the SSNP, which espouses this perception. [31]

THE BA'TH PARTY

In order to understand Syria's commitment to the Arab cause, one must understand the status of the Ba'th Party in the country. Not only is it the ruling party but, like the Communist Party in the former Soviet Union, it developed into an indispensable instrument used by the regime to maintain its hold over the state. The party also serves as an important foundation upon which the regime rests

its legitimacy, since the Ba'th became the "flag bearer" and "guardian of the walls" of Arabism in the country.

The Syrian constitution grants the Ba'th Party a preferential status in the country's political life. Article 8 of the constitution states: "The Ba'th Party is the leading party in society and the state and heads the Progressive National Front, which works toward consolidating the power of the masses and harnessing it to serve the aims of the Arab nation."^[32] Extensions of the Ba'th Party are to be found throughout the state. These branches, departments and cells facilitate the spread of the party's message to all parts of the country. Every four years, the party branches elect delegates to the party congress, which in turn elects the members of the party's two bodies: the Central Committee (*al-Lajna al-Markaziyya*), consisting of 90 members; and the Regional Command (*al-Qiyada al-Qutriyya*), with 21 members. The Regional Command is the party's supreme body and thus the most powerful institution in Syria. This status is reflected in the method by which the president of Syria is elected: The National Leadership recommends the presidential candidate, the candidate is then brought to the People's Assembly for approval, and, with the granting of approval, a national referendum is held. The party is headed by a secretary-general, a post held today by Bashar al-Asad.

Ever since Hafiz al-Asad took power, and especially in the last two decades of his rule, the Ba'th Party expanded rapidly. According to a report published for the sixth Ba'th Party Congress, held immediately after Hafiz al-Asad's death in June 2000, the membership of the party was 1,409,580, of whom 406,047 were full members (*Adw Amil*)--the highest category of membership (followed by trial member [*Murshshah*] and supportive member [*Nasir*]). In May 2005, on the eve of the coming Party Congress, it was reported that the number of members had already reached 1.8 million. Notably, in 1971 the membership was 65,398, in 1981 374,332, and in 1992 1,008,243.^[33] The 2000 report cited 67.18 percent of the members as below age 30, and 18.75 percent ages 30-40. Approximately 35.70 percent were students, 16.50 percent farmers, and 20.60 percent civil servants. Women constituted 29.14 percent. The army had 27 party branches, 212 sub-branches, and 1,656 clubs, with a total of 25,066 members. Additional data pointed to the absolute hegemony of the party in many social sectors. For example, 998 of the 1,307 sitting judges in Syria were members, and apparently most of the intellectuals in the country were at the service of the party: 56 percent of the lecturers at the University of Damascus were party members, as were 54 percent at the University of Aleppo, 79 percent at Tishrin University in Ladhqiyya, and 81 percent at al-Ba'th University in Hums.^[34]

The immense growth of the party did not necessarily indicate the extent of its support or popularity in the population or the attractiveness or relevance of its ideology. Rather, it pointed to pure opportunism on the part of the new members, for whom the party had become a favored and convenient track to social, economic, and political advancement. Notably, side by side with the party's vast

numerical growth came a loss of its ideological vitality in light of the collapse of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe along with the collapse of Syria's economy. Cracks also appeared in the commitment to Arabism and Arab solidarity in the face of the regime's preparedness to advance the peace process with Israel and its dialogue with the West, as well as the development of a statist tendency on the part of the regime's leadership. Lastly, demographic changes in Syria, especially the country's accelerating urbanization, posed a challenge to the party in terms of preserving its relevance for sectors of the population destined to play a decisive role in Syrian life, especially the populations of the poverty-stricken neighborhoods surrounding the large cities.

Nevertheless, the Ba'th Party as an organizational body still lives, breathes, and kicks. At the very least, it is the only organized force acting in Syria today. Therefore, it would seem that Bashar wants to continue to use it, as it is a convenient and readily available instrument. Yet this is mainly because he has no substitute for it that is as capable of enlisting broad public support for him and his policies throughout the country, and particularly in the peripheral areas and among social sectors such as the farmers and laborers. This situation also supplies another reason for keeping faith with the pan-Arab ideology of the Ba'th Party, which constitutes a necessary cloak for the regime.

OTHER VOICES IN SYRIA

It appears that the difficulties in which the Syrian regime finds itself--which include feelings of weakness and failure, that a vacuum exists in the highest echelon, while the ideological path has been lost--are reviving the struggle for Syria that seemed to have been resolved and terminated during the reign of Hafiz al-Asad. Indeed, against the background of the Syrian regime's difficulties--the political challenge of the regime losing its hold on the state and the ideological challenge of the regime seemingly having lost its way--opposition forces have begun to make themselves heard both within and outside Syria in recent years. They seek to challenge the regime and offer alternatives to it. Their ranks include both liberal and Islamic fundamentalist voices.

Does Syria Have a Liberal Option?

At the height of the winter months of the year 2000 in Damascus, the seasons of the year suddenly changed, and spring weather began to be felt throughout the city and all throughout Syria. For the first time since the Ba'th Party seized power in Syria in March 1963 loud voices of Syrian intellectuals began to be heard, demanding the establishment of a democratic and liberal government in place of the Ba'th regime that had been ruling Syria high-handedly for nearly forty years.

All over Syria dozens of political, cultural, and social forums even sprang up with the aim of advancing a reform and even liberal and democratic agenda. It should be noted that it was Bashar al-Asad

himself who encouraged the emergence of these forums, where the participants discussed the need to advance democracy in Syria, among other things, in a relatively open atmosphere. Bashar's evident support for the forum phenomenon encouraged intellectuals in Syria to begin to speak out and criticize the political system operating in their country. Some of them got together and published a series of petitions. One was signed by nearly one thousand prominent Syrian intellectuals. A group of intellectuals even established an ideologically-motivated political framework, the "Civil Society Committees," whose aim was to advance the idea of a civil society in Syria. The fact that thousands of intellectuals who were willing to take part in moves to advance a liberal agenda were to be found in the country is, of course, a matter of some significance.[\[35\]](#)

However, the tendency toward openness was quickly blocked. In mid-2001, Bashar found himself leading, or perhaps he was pushed into leading, the regime's counterattack against the supporters of reform. Spokesmen for the regime, and even Bashar himself, very soon portrayed the reformists as "agents of the West, whose only aim is to undermine Syria's internal stability from within, in the service of the state's enemies."[\[36\]](#) At the height of this counterattack the regime gave orders to close down all the forums that had sprung up all over Syria at the beginning of Bashar's rule. Some of the reform camp activists who were particularly vocal in their criticism of the regime were even thrown in jail.[\[37\]](#)

This short "Damascus Spring" aroused a great deal of interest among foreign observers. Some argued that not much significance should be attributed to this brief interlude. After all, the Syrian regime managed to end the affair in a very short time. Still, one might quite rightly wonder about the roots of this phenomenon. The scope and power with which these roots broke to the surface would seem to indicate the existence of a trend of liberal secular thought in Syria whose example it would be hard to find in other Arab states. This trend would seem to be deeply rooted among the Syrian public, even if it raised its head only in recent years.

At the same time, one must admit that the relative ease with which the Syrian regime brought an end to the "Damascus Spring," was rooted first and foremost in the fact that the reformist group that had stood up against it was fragmented and divided and found it difficult to agree on the agenda it wanted to promote. Its members came from different backgrounds. Some of them were businessmen whose main interest was the creation of a Western-style democracy and a free economy that would serve the socioeconomic stratum to which they belonged. Others were intellectuals belonging to the leftist camp and had a Marxist background. Many of them were elderly people in their mid-seventies some of whom had lived abroad for many years and were to a great extent cut off from the Syrian experience.

It is also possible that they enjoyed only limited public support and much of what they said did not touch the hearts of the Syrian

public, which was mainly preoccupied with its economic problems. Finally, the early stages of the reform movement coincided with the Palestinian intifada. Popular rage on the Arab street in general and in Syria in particular made it difficult for the reformists who in essence wanted to promote totally Western ideas to arouse feelings against a regime whose anti-West and anti-Israel policies were a true reflection of the mood of the Arab man-on-the-street. It is therefore no wonder that one of the Syrian intellectuals was quoted as having said, "Bush and Sharon have provided the Syrian conservatives a valuable gift that allowed them to convert 'spring' into 'bitter winter' in Damascus."[\[38\]](#)

It would also appear that most of the Syrian intellectuals have in the end remained mainly party loyalists. Data published in honor of Ba'th Revolution Day in March 2000 reveal that the vast majority of university lecturers are members of the Ba'th Party and are dependent on the party and regime for their livelihood. This includes 56 percent of the lecturers at the University of Damascus; 54 percent of the lecturers at the University of Aleppo; 79 percent of the lecturers at the Tishrin University in Ladhqiyya; and 81 percent of the lecturers at al-Ba'th University in Hums. Witness to this is borne out in the strong words hurled at the participants in a meeting at one of the liberal forums in late 2000 by the secretary of the Office of Youth and Students of the Ba'th Party Regional Command, Fa'iz Izz al-Din who accused them of wanting only to strike out at members of the Ba'th Party: "You cannot come to me and say that as one who is a member of the Ba'th Party for over forty years, I am worthless, and expect me to take this quietly and with a smile."[\[39\]](#) Husayn al-Zu'bi, a lecturer at the University of Damascus, reminded those present at the meeting that if it were not for the Ba'th Party "I could not have studied and become a university lecturer. My father was a simple peasant exploited by feudal lords and the bourgeoisie. Therefore one cannot claim that the regime in power in Syria has done nothing positive."[\[40\]](#)

Another significant development was the establishment of Syrian opposition parties outside Syria. The most prominent was the Syria Reform Party (*Hizb al-Islah al-Suri*), whose establishment was announced in late 2003. The head of the party is a Syrian American businessman, Farid Nahid al-Ghadiri. In January 2004, the party, which enjoyed the blessing of the American administration, held a meeting in Brussels to which all opposition parties that operate outside Syria were invited. It even tried to establish an alliance of the parties--the alliance for the democracy (*al-Tahaluf min ajl al-Dimuqratiyya*)--but it seems that it has no real foothold in Syria, and its effort to gather around itself opposition elements to the Ba'th regime did not succeed. Indeed, the then Foreign Minister (and current Vice President) Faruq al-Shara reacted to the establishment of this party by saying that its leaders were trying to present themselves as an alternative to the regime in Syria but in reality could not even run an elementary school.[\[41\]](#)

However, in light of intensified American pressure on Syria, the party could no longer be dismissed. Its representatives, who were

prominent critics of the Syrian regime in Washington and in the capitals of Europe, were invited to a meeting at the U.S. State Department in March 2005 to discuss their position on the chances of forming a democratic system of government in Syria.[42] Shortly beforehand, Abd al-Aziz Sahhab Muflat, another American businessman of Syrian origin, announced the formation of an additional Syrian opposition party in Washington, the Democratic Awakening Party (*Hizb al-Nahda al-Watani al-Dimokrati*).[43] Furthermore, protests and demonstrations by human rights organizations became daily events in Damascus and other cities in Syria, and in 2005, the formation of two new liberal organizations was announced: the Liberal Foundation (*al-Takhaluf al-Libarali*) and the *Sawasiyya* (equality) Organization for Human Rights.[44]

However, even with these instances one can question whether these forces have any genuine support within Syria. There is also no doubt that the identification with the United States deters many in Syria from climbing on the liberal bandwagon, because, as one of them explained, no one in the opposition wants to come to power riding on an American tank.[45]

From all that has been said above one can draw the conclusion that Syrian liberalism does indeed have a degree of support among the population, especially among the intellectual elite. The extent of this support seems to be much greater than in Iraq. Nevertheless, it is difficult to envision any future for the liberal opposition without the support and backing of an outside force willing to spill its blood, or more precisely, the blood of its soldiers, on behalf of the liberal forces in Syria.

The Islamic Opposition

With this background in mind, observers turned their attention to the Islamist forces in Syria. They were, in fact, given a sharp reminder of the presence of these forces when the number of incidents pitting the Syrian army and security forces against Islamist cells began to increase noticeably.[46] These incidents indicate an intensification of Islamic feelings and the existence of an Islamist infrastructure among the Syrian population, although it is difficult to estimate its extent. In addition, alongside the increase in Islamist terror, there has been a noteworthy tendency toward Islamization of the Syrian street, previously known for its secularism. Despite these developments, the Islamist forces are not yet organized well enough to challenge the regime. However, the incidents of violence that have taken place in recent years do indicate the degree of damage they can inflict and the potential threat that they represent to the stability of the Syrian regime.

It is pertinent to recall here that a revolt against the Syrian regime took place from 1976 to 1982. At its height, the rebel forces seemed to have the clout to topple the regime. However, the government finally crushed the Islamist revolt ruthlessly. This failure of the Islamist forces indicates several of the limitations or even basic weaknesses of political Islam in today's Arab world. The failure in

Syria had to do, first of all, with the failure of the radical religious forces to break out of the circle of their traditional supporters and attract additional sectors of the population. They failed to extend their appeal even to many religious figures, some of whom had reservations about the revolt.

Perhaps even more important was the fact that they failed to attract the intellectuals, urban middle class (business circles in particular), and military officers. The hold of the Syrian Ba'th regime on these groups and on the Sunni rural sector remained as strong as previously. Moreover, it would seem that the difficulties that the structure and character of Syrian society present to the radical circles have not diminished over the years. The ethnic diversity and, even more, the increasing role of members of the minority religious communities in various aspects of Syrian life will continue to constitute obstacles to any effort by the religious circles to test their power or challenge the existing political and social order in the country.

Nevertheless, despite these facts, which have ostensibly rendered the renewal of radical Islam impossible, to say nothing of its gaining control over Syria, one cannot ignore the socioeconomic processes that this country has undergone in the past several decades that have contributed to the changing face of Syrian society. As is known, the Ba'th regime's support base is in the rural population, whether Sunni or members of minority groups. In the past, the regime succeeded in integrating this population in Syria's various apparatuses, mainly in the security-military and the political apparatuses. This integration gave the rural population a means of progress and social mobility that they had never known in the past. The population of rural areas and the periphery repaid the regime by lending it their support in difficult times. For example, during the Islamist rebellion, there was almost complete tranquility in the rural areas, including among the Sunnis. However, the accelerated process of urbanization in Syria in the past several years has threatened to turn things around since the masses of immigrants from the rural areas into the towns are no longer committed to the Ba'th Regime. On the contrary, because of the difficulties they have encountered in integrating into life in the large towns, poverty, hardship, and misery has aroused in them a sense of being neglected by the establishment, and thus the regime controlling it. This has resulted in a return to religion.^[47]

Thus it is clear that the concept of "secularism" that had been the guiding light of the Syrian regime for many years is now facing bankruptcy, or at least irrelevancy in everything regarding the man-on-the-street in Syria. It appears that Syria reflects a trend in the Arab world, mainly the Islamization of the daily life of the individual and of society. Political Islam whose aim was to bring down Arab regimes has totally failed, but the fact remains that the populations in most of the Arab world feel closer to Islam than they did in the past.

At this stage, it seems that the Syrian Regime has succeeded in

dealing with the process of Islamization that Syrian society is undergoing because of its readiness to cooperate with religious circles just so that they do not challenge it and do grant it legitimacy. This was borne out in the spring of 2003 in the regime's unprecedented willingness to allow soldiers to pray while on army bases.[48] Of course the question is: Will this approach allow for long-term coexistence between the Ba'th regime and Islamic circles, hungry for power and influence, energetically trying to grant an Islamic tinge to the lives of the individuals, the society, and the state? The latter have apparently not said the last word, and in any future crisis that may break out in Syria they might once more fulfill an important function since they already enjoy increasing power and status within important sectors of the population.

Indeed, Syrian spokesmen have over the past several years renewed their warning against the wave of Islamism that is apparently waiting for the right moment or might exploit the relative political openness in Syria following the rise of Bashar to the presidency and turn Syria into another Algeria, as explained by a Syrian intellectual: "The young in Syria who have been exposed to the empty slogans of the Ba'th Party, feel lost and without a path, and this pushes them into the arms of fundamentalist Islam." [49]

For this reason, the regime campaign against reformists in Syria in spring 2001 was supported by many as explained by Muhammad Aziz Shukri of the University of Damascus:

The problem is that the leaders of the reformist camp want to achieve everything all at once, but the sudden announcement of elections would create a confrontation between the Ba'th Party and Islamic circles in Syria, and one must ask what the results would be and what would happen afterwards? I don't want to jump from a reality in which we find ourselves today to the kind of "rotten" situation existing in Algeria, in which everyone is trapped between the army and the Islamic circles and no one knows who is killing whom and why.[50]

One may thus suppose, in light of the tendency toward Islamization spreading on the Syrian street, that if the governmental system crashes and a vacuum is created in Syria, it will be the Islamic forces that will fill the void. One should not be too impressed by the fact that the Islamic forces are not adequately organized. After all, the existing network of mosques and Islamic charitable and social associations could serve them as an organizational infrastructure and source for enlisting activists and supporters, the likes of which no other Syrian organization has.

With all these considerations in mind, one can understand why the Muslim Brothers movement (whose leaders reside in London) is

now working to gather under its wings all the opposition forces in Syria, including the liberals. Contacts have even been made between the Muslim Brothers and former vice-president Abd al-Halim Khaddam, who resides in exile in Paris. The aim was to offer an Arab national alternative to the existing regime, with the aid of both liberal and Islamic opposition factors. The danger is (as happened with the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979) that the liberal forces, and even the Arab national forces, are liable to discover that the Islamic tiger upon whose back they seek to ride is by no means a paper tiger. Incidentally, it is very possible that this Islamic tiger might not be connected at all with the Muslim Brothers organization, whose power in Syria is on the decline, but rather with more radical Islamic movements which draw their inspiration from Salafism and, even more, from Wahhabis.[\[51\]](#)

In sum, in recent years the Syrian regime has been confronted with real challenges to its existence, not to mention its stability. People advocating liberal views have been heard in the country to an unprecedented extent. However, what has become evident most prominently is the increasing strength of the Islamic forces, which are impinging more and more upon the historical and traditional hold of the Ba'th Party over Syrian life. Nevertheless, the Syrian regime is still stable and evidently enjoys the support of the population, which is anxious about the future and therefore clings to what is presently in place.

Thus, the first and necessary condition for an Islamist takeover of Syria would be the collapse of the present regime in Damascus and the creation of a governmental and political vacuum in the country. Yet such a scenario would be likely to occur only if there were foreign intervention, such as an American military campaign to topple the regime. We may suppose that in any other case the regime would be wise enough to survive the challenges facing it.

Does this mean that, in spite of his regime's weaknesses, Bashar al-Asad will continue to sit securely in the president's chair for a long time to come? This, of course, is a difficult question to answer. However, one may assume that he will find it very difficult to repeat his father's success and stay in power for the next thirty years.

Nevertheless, the reality of the old Syria under Hafiz al-Asad is not likely to return. The era of Hafiz al-Asad has been relegated to history, and restoring it would be difficult if not impossible. The process of change that had begun in the country may have been slow, and at times imperceptible, for it took a zigzag course. Still, the process seemed durable, even if its limitations were obvious. The Syrian intellectual Sadiq al-Azm, warning the regime not to act against the civil society movement, pointed out: "The intellectuals are better at articulating the country's problems than the man in the street, but the problems they raise are the same problems that the man in the street deals with, so that repressing the intellectuals will not be productive." Azm urged the regime to learn from the events in the East European states, where the repression of the intellectuals

by the regime turned them into the spearhead of the struggle against it.[\[52\]](#)

Indeed, anyone observing what is going on in Syria could get the impression that the end of the road is not necessarily the fulfillment of the reformists' dream, i.e., making Syria into a country with a Western democratic system and an active and vibrant civil society. Yet perhaps it is rather the fulfillment of the dream of the Islamists waiting patiently for their turn, thriving on and even increasing their strength from the ever-increasing socioeconomic crisis in Syria over the past several years, which is destined to grow worse in the future.

The answer to the question of what the future holds for Syria is a great deal of uncertainty and lack of stability. True, the Syrian state and the Ba'th regime have revealed great survival skills and ability in recent years, but they now find themselves under the shadow of a rising and very threatening Islamic challenge. One way or another, while the key to Syria's future in the short-term may lie in the hands of the president of the United States, in the long term it lies in the hands of the Syrian street, a street that is currently changing its face, as are other parts of the Arab world.

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NOTES

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[5] Robert G. Rabil, *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East* (Westport, Connecticut: Parger Security International, 2006) pp.139-96.

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[25] Al-Jazeera TV, February 14, March 5, September 9, and October 21, 2005; Reuters, September 1 and 3, 2004 and October 21, 2005.

[26] *Al-Hayat* (London), January 23, 2005 and October 24, 2005; *al-Nahar* (Beirut), October 22, 2005.

[27] *Tishrin* (Damascus), January 22, 2006.

[28] Sana (Syrian Arab News Agency), March 4, 2006.

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[31] For more see Eyal Zisser, "Who's Afraid of Syrian Nationalism?, National and State Identity in Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (March 2006), pp. 179-99.

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[45] See interview with Syrian oppositionist Riyad al-Turk, *al-Nahar* (London), August 24, 2003.

[46] Al-Jazeera TV, April 6, 2004 and January 23, 2005.

[47] Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'thist Syria*, pp. 276-300.

[48] Zisser, "Syria: the Ba'th Regime and the Islamic Movement," pp. 67-80.

[49] *Al-Nahar* (Beirut), March 10, 2001.

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