

SYRIA'S CHALLENGES AFTER THE ELECTION YEAR

IS BASHAR AL-ASAD PART OF THE PROBLEM OR PART OF THE SOLUTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

DESAFÍOS DE SIRIA DESPUÉS DEL AÑO DE LA ELECCIÓN
¿EL PARTIDO BBASHAR AL-AASAD PARTE DEL PROBLEMA
O LA PARTE DE LA SOLUCIÓN EN EL MEDIO ORIENTE?

Carsten Wieland¹

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Abstract

The months after the parliamentary elections of April 22, 2007, could be decisive for young Syrian president Bashar al-Asad. Although the term "election" by the Baath Party may not mean much in a dictatorial system like Syria's, many things have changed since Asad came to power and started his first seven-year-term in July 2000, a few weeks after his father Hafez al-Asad had died amidst crucial peace talks with Israel about the Israeli occupied Golan Heights. Before turning to the current conditions and challenges of the Baathist regime in Syria, we will look at some historical notes on the emergence of the Baath party and its relevance today.

Key words: *Syria, Middle East, terrorism, Israel, USA, Baath, pan-Arabism, secularism, Bashar al-Asad*

1 Dr. Carsten Wieland is a Middle East scholar and journalist. He studied history, political science and philosophy at Humboldt University in Berlin, at Duke University in North Carolina, at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New-Delhi, and was a visiting fellow at Georgetown University in Washington DC. He has specialized in nationalism and international relations. Currently he is director of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Colombia. E-mail: carsten.wieland@gmx.de

Resumen

Los meses posteriores a las elecciones parlamentarias del 22 de abril de 2007 podrían ser decisivos para el joven presidente de Siria Bashar al-Asad. Aunque se dio la "elección" por el partido de Baath, esto puede no significar mucho en un sistema dictatorial como Siria. Muchas cosas han cambiado desde que Asad llegó al poder y comenzó su primer periodo de siete años que terminaron en julio de 2000; algunas semanas después su padre al-Asad de Hafez había muerto en medio de negociaciones cruciales de paz con Israel sobre las alturas de Golan, ocupación israelí. Antes de dar vuelta a las condiciones y a los desafíos actuales del régimen de Baathist en Siria, miraremos algunas notas históricas sobre la aparición del partido de Baath y de su importancia actual.

Palabras clave: Siria, Medio Oriente, Israel, Estados Unidos, secularismo, Bashar al-Asad

The roots of the Baath Party: Anti-colonialism, pan-Arabism, secularism

The Baath Party was founded after Syrian independence on April 7, 1947. In November 1952, the organization merged with the Arab Socialist Party (ASP) to become the Socialist Party of Arab Rebirth (*hizb al-Baath al-'arabi al-ishtiraqi*) with the slogan "Unity, Freedom, Socialism." The ASP was the first peasant movement in Syria. Thus the Baathists considerably extended their social base and political program. Rural players, especially from the middle class and influential families, began their march through the Baath institutions.²

This new start took place in turbulent times. World War II had just ended; the Cold War and the Soviet socialist period had begun in Eastern Europe; the Arab League was founded as the first practical result of pan-Arab ideas; and in 1946 the last French soldier had left Syrian soil. Finally, a hopelessly overtaxed England surrendered its mandate over Palestine to the United Nations like a hot potato. In 1948, the UN decided to divide the piece of land and pave the way for a Jewish-Israeli state.

The Baath Party was not the only secular voice in independent Syria. There were communists, socialists, Syrian nationalists (many of whom also thought in pan-Arab categories), and naturally conservatives and Islamists in

2 Concerning the details on the composition of the peasantry and their role in Syrian politics, see: Batatu, H. (1999), *Syria's Peasantry: The Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics*, Princeton/Oxford.

the other camp. But the organization of the Christian history teacher Michel Aflaq and his Sunni colleague Salahadin al-Bitar became more and more powerful, especially after the 1954 elections regarded as the first free ones in the Arab world.³

In the years after independence, hopeful democratic intermezzi and military coups alternated at a rapid pace. Syria became the synonym for instability and chaos in the region. On March 8, 1963, the Baathists staged their decisive putsch in Damascus. This date is still a national holiday today.

Particularly young people from minorities such as the Alawites, Druze, or Ismailites were attracted to the Baath Party. Its radical pan-Arab ideology and social reform agenda gave them an opportunity to integrate into the young nation. Uprooted Alawites from the province of Alexandretta (the area around Iskenderun and Antakya), which France had ceded to Turkey in 1939, and Palestinian refugees—both victims of imperialist policies—saw their political home with the Baathists.⁴ The Baathists were also able to win the support of those who were tired of the old elite and critical of the encrusted and unjust social conditions.

The main driving forces in Syria in the 1950s and 1960s were a combination of pan-Arab ideology and the struggle for an overdue land reform. The Baath Party skillfully combined the two elements, which broadened its base and mobilized the peasants according to the national agenda. The national revolution therefore became, in turn, a social one. Those who prospered were the small and medium-sized farmers who profited significantly from the redistribution of land.⁵ The Baath Party today still has a significant number of rural supporters, in addition to workers, students, and members of the lower urban middle classes. Even though the economic benefit of the land reform, which dragged on for two decades, is controversial among scholars, it did in fact fulfill its social and political purpose. "Without it," writes Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria would probably be ruled today by the kind of military regime in alliance with the landed class against the peasant masses found in many areas of Latin America."⁶

3 Perthes, V. (1990), *Staat und Gesellschaft in Syrien 1970-1989*, Hamburg, p. 49.

4 Hinnebusch, R. (2001), *Syria: Revolution from Above*, London/New York, p. 31.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 120.

6 Hinnebusch, R. (1989), *Peasant and Bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: The Political Economy of Rural Development*, London, p. 99.

Pan-Arab nationalism and socialism, however, have two very different grounding social principles. Pan-Arabism and Syrian nationalism are rooted in ethno-national thinking where members of the nation are classified according to primordial characteristics, i.e. according to external and a priori principles based on lineage. In contrast, socialism takes social classes that come into being through socio-economic development as a starting point. In spite of this contradiction, the Baath Party incorporated both Arab nationalism and socialism in a difficult balancing act.

Socialism was only the vehicle of Arab nationalism, as the founders of the Baath Party themselves admitted. Michel Aflaq wrote, "Our socialism is thus a means of building up our nationalism and our people, and it is the door through which our Arab nation will make its new entry into history."⁷ The Christian Aflaq was, of course, irreconcilably opposed to atheistic Marxism. In this context, socialism was scarcely more than a diffuse but understandable call for social justice.

The very issue of socialism soon threatened to split the Baath Party. On one side were Aflaq, Bitar, and their supporters who advocated moderate socialism with democratic liberties, and who primarily followed their pan-Arab program. This also included a revival of Syria's union with Nasser's Egypt that became reality in 1958 only to fall apart three years later. On the other side were the more radical young intellectuals who saw Marxism and Leninism as the main pillars of the Baath Party. For them the social revolution in one country had priority over the distant goal of a pan-Arab state. Thus representatives of Greater Arabia were lined up against supporters of a social-revolutionary "Syria first" vision.⁸

In 1966, the old guard around Aflaq and Bitar were driven from their positions of power in a bloody internal coup in the Baath Party staged by the officers Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Asad. The left-wing neo-Baathists now had a free hand for their "revolution from above." Its motor was set in motion by a quasi-Leninist cadre party.⁹ They went ahead with the land reform, nationalized banks and firms, and the monopoly for international trade was given to the state. These measures won the neo-Baathists support from rural and urban lower classes but antagonized businessmen and traders in the urban

7 Lobmeyer, H. G. (1995), *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien*, Hamburg, p. 35.

8 Hinnebusch, R. (2001) *op. cit.*, p. 47ff; Lobmeyer, H. G (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 101ff; Kienle, E. (ed.) (1994), *Contemporary Syria: Liberalization between Cold War and Cold Peace*, London, p.10ff.

9 Hinnebusch, R. (2001), *op. cit.*, p. 52ff.

middle class. Also as “representatives of the Palestinian cause”, they adopted a sharper tone toward Israel. But, as already mentioned, an accelerated secularization in the Marxist-Leninist sense did not go far beyond rhetoric.

A year later, the Arab countries experienced a traumatic defeat in the Six-Day War against Israel. Another year later, the branch of the old Baathists staged a coup in Iraq. After some hesitation, Aflaq emigrated to Baghdad in 1970 and became secretary-general of the Iraqi Baath Party. He was Saddam Hussein’s deputy for a time. The all-embracing National Command (*al-qiada al-qawmiyya*) of the Baath Party had degenerated into a farce. Since that time, the power in Syria has been held by the Regional Command (*al-qiada al-qutriyya*). The “national” level of the Baath Party still exists. As an institution it might be roughly compared to the idea of the Communist International, maintaining its pan-Arab claim only symbolically.

The schism between the old guard and the neo-Baathists increased due to the personal enmity between the two stubborn egos of Hafez al-Asad and Saddam Hussein. It was also about regional power politics and about who blazed the trail of the Baath ideology in the Arab world. This was a crucial question of internal legitimacy, especially for the Syrian regime. Paradoxically, this brotherly hatred between Syria and Iraq only ended in the last years and months before the Anglo-American attack on Iraq in 2003.

The enmity of the Baath regimes lingered on even after the so-called socialist revolution in Syria suffered another setback. In 1970, Hafez al-Asad from the nationalist wing, a pilot and head of the Syrian Air Force, finally emerged the winner of the power struggle among the leading Baath figures, consisting of, above all, the Alawite, Druze, and Ismailite military. He dismissed President and acting Prime Minister Nureddin Atasi, who held doctrinaire neo-Marxist views in what was termed the progressive wing of the Syrian Baath Party, but had adopted a less militaristic and irreconcilable stance toward Israel. At that time, nobody would have foreseen that it would be the last coup in Syria till this day. Asad did not call it a coup but merely a “corrective movement” (*al-harakat at-tashihyya*).

Asad, the clever son from a mountain farming community, mainly corrected the socialist economic policy, thus forming an alliance with the bourgeoisie. In the 1970s, Syria experienced an economic boom by opening up its market to the outside world (*infatih*). In the following years, Asad went ahead with industrializing the country. He invested in infrastructure, urban construction, the health sector, and the education system. This contributed to create a relatively broad middle class, increased Syrians’ economic mobility and dras-

tically reduced illiteracy.¹⁰ Asad turned the Baath Party into an organization with mass appeal. The number of members skyrocketed from 65,398 in 1971 to 374,332 in 1981, and 1,008,243 in 1991 in a country that had approximately thirteen million inhabitants in the early 1990s.¹¹

After his coup, Asad initially began a limited liberalization of domestic politics and reduced the powers of the feared secret services (which, however, lasted a short time only because of the confrontation with the Muslim Brothers). Most Syrians welcomed the changes with great relief. In 1971, Asad had himself elected president by an appointed People's Council of Baathists, Nasserists, and communists with 99 percent of the vote. A new era had begun.

Since then, the country has been marked by pragmatism aimed at maintaining power and stability both in domestic and foreign policy. Lobmeyer writes, "Since November 16, 1970, Syria's politics has been largely de-ideologized and Baathism has declined into a mere ideology of justification and a reservoir for propagandist phrases".¹² The initial euphoria disappeared and was soon tempered by a hard line in domestic policy. Instead of liberalization, Syrians experienced a "presidential monarchy".¹³ Asad fostered a gigantic leader cult. Streets and squares were dominated by statues and posters of the "leader throughout all eternity" (*al-qa'id ila al-abad*). "In the end it was his personal authority and that alone which held the country together," writes Asad's biographer Patrick Seale. "He was the only pole that held up the tent".¹⁴

It was therefore not self-evident that the tent would not collapse on June 10, 2000, when Asad died of leukemia. But the death of the "leader" and "constructor of modern Syria" again threw open a question that had been smoldering for a long time: What actually happened to the ideology of the Baath Party? What about its two substantial components: pan-Arabism and socialism?

10 Literacy doubled between 1960 and 1989. In 1960 only 37 percent of the Syrians lived in towns; but in 1990 it increased to 50.5 percent. Hinnebusch, R. (2001), *op. cit.*, p. 104.

11 Batatu, H. (1999), *op. cit.*, p. 177.

12 Lobmeyer, H. G. (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 184.

13 Hinnebusch, R. (1990), *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'thist Syria: Army, Party, and Peasant*, Boulder, p. 145.

14 Seale, P. (1988), *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, London, p. 440.

The answer is simple as far as state socialism is concerned. It went bankrupt after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. It is true that Syria still offers a touch of communist nostalgia in dusty government offices, subsidized food and medicine, five-year plans, one-party rule, an inflated civil service, government propaganda, shaky Soviet military jeeps, and other anachronisms such as US vintage Chevys from the 1950s that create a Cuban-like atmosphere (due to once horrific import duties on automobiles). But this is only a distorted picture of an increasingly modern and capitalist reality. Pragmatic as always, Hafez al-Asad had already started looking westward as the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.¹⁵

Most of the members of the communist opposition in Syria have long since changed direction and now call themselves secularists or humanists. Apart from elements of a planned economy, the main thing that remains from Baath socialism is in fact Syrian secularism—or let us call it the qualified social liberalism that is so remarkable for the Middle East. However, it also runs the risk of getting worn down. Even the socialist facade is crumbling more and more. Since mid-2004, the state media no longer refers to leading members of the Baath Party as “Comrade” but simply as “Mister.”

The balance sheet does not look much better where pan-Arabism is concerned. In spite of its claims, the Baath Party has never grown beyond its role as the Syrian national party. Pan-Arab ambitions have failed. The union of only two Arab states—Egypt and Syria—ended in a debacle. Other union plans did not come into being in the first place. The Baath brothers Iraq and Syria ground each other down in jealous competition and symbolic trench fighting. Finally, with the Iraq war in 2003, pan-Arabism—the second historic pillar of the Baath Party—ceased to exist altogether. Arab states have always formed temporary political alliances, even against each other with the help of non-Arab states, as was shown particularly in the Gulf War and, of course, in the Iraq war. The principles of behavior among Arab states are based on the sovereignty of nation-states and on independence from pan-Arab stipulations. Petro-dollars count more than revolutionary pipe dreams. In its history, the Arab League has more often been the stage for inter-Arab disputes than for pan-Arab cooperation. Neither has there been talk of Arab unity in the Palestinian issue or on a comprehensive policy toward Israel.¹⁶

15 Concerning the opening of Syria after 1991, see: Kienle, E. (ed.) (1994), *op. cit.*

16 Concerning the failure of pan-Arab practice, see: Mufti, M. (1996), *Sovereign Creations: Pan-Arabism and Political Order in Syria and Iraq*, Ithaca/London, and Dawisha, A. (2003), *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*, Princeton/Oxford.

One positive effect of Baath ideology today is less pan-Arabism and more nationalism, which serves as a common umbrella for religious minorities who can feel integrated into the state concept. The majority of Sunnis who reject a sectarian policy also equally identify with it. However, the idea of "common Arabness" ignores the problem of ethnic minorities such as the Kurds. Here is a predetermined breaking point in the ethno-nationally connoted "Arab Republic of Syria" that has begun to creak, especially since the recent war in Iraq.

Crisis of the Baath Ideology: Emergence of an Islamist neo-pan-Arabism

Bashar al-Asad is aware of the ideological crisis of the Baath Party. He lacks his father's charisma and therefore needs all the more institutional and ideological foundations. Party committees have been set up at various levels to discuss the role of the Baath Party in today's Syria. Observers report fierce debates between the president and other Baath functionaries, where Bashar is said to have often appeared openly frustrated. What is surprising is that even opposition members from the Civil Society Movement have been invited to these debates. The big question in Damascus remains whether a reform of the Baath ideology is possible despite its many inherent contradictions.

Apart from the intellectual debates about direction and ideology, critical voices also question the party base. Baath member and former friend from Bashar's youth, Ayman Abdul Nour, points to increasing contradictions within the Baath Party as well as a lack of leadership. "In the Baath party are Muslim Brothers, intellectuals, businessmen, trade unionists, soldiers and what have you. It's not a party but a collective movement. There is no ideology anymore."¹⁷ Yet, the party should not be underestimated as a power factor, warns analyst Samir Altaqi. "The ideological role of the party is weakened, but the party is still the main kitchen for cooking up loyalty."¹⁸

Recently, during the Iraq war, pan-Arab ideology has gained support from an unexpected corner. In search of a direction for his foreign policy, Bashar has used the Anglo-American attack on Syria's neighbor to revive pan-Arab

17 Interview with the author in Damascus on April 28, 2005.

18 Interview with the author in Damascus on May 7, 2004.

rhetoric. It is debatable whether this has helped or hindered him. Many people wonder how Hafez al-Asad would have acted in this situation. Some consider Bashar's policy to be even more ideological than his father's in this respect, for in the end most Syrians were glad that Saddam was overthrown.¹⁹ Why should Syria have suddenly lent support to the Iraqi dictator, its Baathist archrival? Michel Kilo is convinced that "Hafez al-Asad would have avoided the conflict with the United States. Now this can only mean the last battle."²⁰

It is too early to say if Bashar is really more ideological than his father. His hard-line position on the Iraq issue may possibly be more an expression of a search for a political orientation that would most benefit Syria, a learning process concerning foreign policy rather than an entrenched ideology. It is scarcely surprising that it was the Baath cadres in particular that are said to have advised Bashar to adopt such a strict pro-Iraq and anti-American position. For them it was a welcome opportunity to begin to replenish the empty reservoir of the Baath ideology in a time when they are otherwise running out of answers.

Hinnebusch justifies Syria's stance with ideological *raison d'état*: "Opposition to the US was a collective decision that would have been taken by any nationalist leadership in Damascus. Not only did the invasion threaten vital Syrian interests in Iraq, but it was also an egregious affront to the Arab nationalist values so ingrained in Syrian thinking." After all, the invasion of Iraq was also in Israel's best interest.²¹

Syria's critical position in the Iraq war is also embedded in a wider context. 9/11 has had fatal repercussions in the Arab world. "The September 11 attacks hit us Muslims as much as it did the United States," said Minister Buthaina Sh'aban. "It was the most terrible thing that has happened to our region."²²

Of course, first of all 9/11 was a severe blow to Americans that caused great pain, physically and psychologically. But by overreacting to the attacks in rhetoric and action, which is felt as a collective punishment to the Islamic world, the Bush administration has provided terrorists with the platform they

19 International Crisis Group (ICG) (2004), Middle East Report No. 23/24: *Syria under Bashar*, Amman/Brussels, February 11, Vol. II: *Domestic Policy Challenges*, p. i.

20 Interview with the author in Damascus on May 5, 2005.

21 Hinnebusch, R. (2004, March), "Syria after the Iraq War: Between the Neo-con Offensive and Internal Reform," *DOI-Focus* No. 14, , p. 12.

22 Interview with the author in Damascus on March 29, 2004.

need to gain broader support for their Islamist hate campaigns. In addition, US policy has caused many moderate Muslims to lose their orientation, as they are wavering between revulsion toward the September 11 attacks and indignation at Washington's perceived insensitive, "neo-colonial" policy.

These factors have given a boost to a new pan-Arabism today. It is a pan-Arabism of a much stronger Islamic or even Islamist hue fed by anti-Americanism. An ideology believed to be almost dead has returned to the political agenda with Washington's help. Arab politicians are exploiting it in order to distract people from their own contradictions, weaknesses, and unresolved problems.

Syria finds itself in this interplay of forces, in which the Baathists have to perform another ideological bridging feat. If they want to swim with the tide of Islamic neo-pan-Arabism, they will have to play down their secular concept of pan-Arabism that grants Islam a cultural role only. This shows how watered down—or flexible if expressed in positive terms—the Baath ideology has become.

The big question in Syria is: Will this neo-pan-Arabism cum anti-Americanism be sufficient to give Bashar al-Asad the backing he needs to negotiate the many crags of domestic and foreign policy that lie ahead of him? Or will pragmatism prevail in the end?

Rough winds in Bashar's first years of reign

During his first seven years in power, Bashar al-Asad's reign has been marked by two main features. Domestically, he has drifted away from his reformist course and has reduced reforms to some administrative and economic adjustments. Hopes for political reforms have not been met and the oligarchic nature of Syria's politics and economy has remained intact. Internationally, Syria's foreign policy environment has changed to the country's disadvantage. Both developments are interlinked. There are good reasons to believe that Syria's international isolation accounts partly for its domestic stagnation and the oppression of the opposition.

Only a few months into Asad's reign, in September 2000, the second Intifada swept across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip after a provoking visit of Israel's then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. This shattered the visions of a peace within reach also between Israel and

Syria. Moreover, the Intifada brought the new instrument of suicide bombings into the scene of Palestinian resistance. Apart from an ethic disqualification of Palestinian goals, this escalated the conflict and gave rise to new vocabulary with the focus on international terrorism instead of the problem of occupation and resistance in the Middle East. Syria stood with the Palestinians because of its pan-Arab ideology and its own territorial problems with Israel.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, gave another blow to Syrian foreign policy. Henceforth, the catchword terrorism became the overall standard of US foreign policy and it delivered the prism through which the conflicts in the Middle East were viewed, too. "The September 11 attacks hit us Muslims as much as it did the United States," says Syrian Minister of Expatriates, Buthaina Sh'aban. "It was the most terrible thing that has happened to our region".²³

First, 9/11 looked like a chance for Syria to finally play out its strength as a champion in the fight against Islamist extremists. Since the 1970s Syria has been fighting radical Muslim Brothers and other Islamists more determinedly than most other Arab states. After the famous massacre in Hama in 1982, the Muslim Brothers have not been able to gain a foothold in Syrian politics. This stands at a stark contrast to the rising Islamization throughout the region. Along these lines, Syria has been delivering valuable information about Islamists to Western intelligence services. But Asad was unable to transform the fruitful US-Syrian cooperation on the security level into better political relations. Partly, the US was not interested in giving too much credit to Syrian efforts to catch al-Qaida members and prevent new attacks on US citizens because Washington's political priority is clearly with Israel. And Syria has a standing territorial and political conflict with Israel.

This is why Syria has failed to achieve a Pakistani U-turn in the wake of the 9/11 terrorists attacks. Pakistan's leader, General Pervez Musharraf, has positioned himself as America's ally and a staunch opponent of Islamist terrorism—despite the fact that the Taliban originated in Pakistan and Pakistani intelligence continues to play a questionable role in the country's official stance against Islamists. But Syria, which has been committed to excluding Islamic fanatics from political and social life, has encouraged moderate Islamists and provided the United States with important intelligence against Islamist terrorist organizations, has merely ended up being added to an expanded "axis of evil."

23 Interview with the author in Damascus on March 29, 2004.

A major problem between Washington and Damascus is the definition of terrorism. As recently as 1990, the US government was on the same page with Syria, which held that violence in the Israeli-occupied territories was resistance, not terrorism. But since the Second Intifada and 9/11 the Bush administration has adopted Israel's definition, which makes no such distinction.²⁴ Since Damascus refuses to expel Palestinian organizations from Syria, it has been disqualified by Washington and has essentially become part of the post-Sept. 11 "terrorist camp."

Finally, the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in March 2003—a war of choice rather than of necessity—has completely ruined US-Syrian relations. Objecting to the war was in the Syrian national interest. Damascus feared the US as a neighbour in the east while being exposed to Israel in the south-west and US-friendly Jordan in the south. However, also critics from within Syria have criticized the increased ideological pan-Arab rhetoric from Damascus. Bashar al-Asad went over the edge with his pan-Arab populism and thus isolated Syria even further. Robert Rabil writes: "Ironically, where the senior al-Asad had sacrificed Arab nationalism at the altar of Syria's national interest in general and regime security in particular, the Syrian leadership today has been advancing Arab nationalism with the objective of countering US plans in the region."²⁵

In a nutshell, because of a series of unfavourable events, Bashar al-Asad's foreign policy has remained reactive instead of proactive. International confrontation and stigmatization have taken away the regime's air to breathe and to take on domestic reforms. The regime in Damascus has put security before experiments. In such a situation, progress in the fields of political pluralism, human rights, and economic perestroika are hardly to be expected.

24 Rabil, R. G. (2006), *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East*, Westport/London.

25 Rabil, R. G. (2006), *op. cit.*, p. 135

Asad between popular support and international isolation

On the other hand, Asad can fall back on broad popular support among the Syrians, especially after the confrontations in Iraq and the war between Israel and Hezbollah in July and August 2006. Rulers and ruled in Syria share a strong feeling of anti-Americanism, nurtured by the insensitive US approach on Iraq, as well as disgust about Israel's warfare in Lebanon and the West's double standards in its Middle East policy. Asad has become the champion of the Arab street far beyond Syria. But this pillar of regime legitimacy is very emotional and not very sustainable. In the long run, he will face headwind from two directions: On the one hand from ideological hardliners and beneficiaries of the present regime, and on the other hand, from increasingly impatient reformers within the regime, the more or less organized opposition, and parts of the Syrian public.

Hardliners and regime profiteers are losing confidence in Asad's capability of safeguarding the "national interest" and their privileges, among them key representatives of the oligarchic bourgeoisie and members of his extended family clan. In their eyes, Asad has gambled away too many political battles, the most severe blow being the humiliating withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in April 2005 after the murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.

On the other side, reformers doubt whether the President is still able *and* willing to pursue the economic and political reforms that he announced and pursued shortly after he had come to power in the summer of 2000. Meanwhile, he has replaced almost all of the old functionaries in government, administration and army and has to take full responsibility for the sluggish process himself. There are not many people left to blame, at least not in official positions. Despite surprising recent economic growth rates, the living standard of many Syrians has not matched raised expectations. Sure, it is hard to overcome the structures of a decade-old closed and socialist economy. But many problems lie less in the technocratic realm than in political failures and rampant corruption that Asad has repeatedly promised to tackle. In addition, Syrian oil resources, which contribute to almost half of the national budget, will not last longer than the next decade.

This scenario is interrelated to foreign policy: The less Syria's economy can catch up with the region, the more Syria has to fear normal relations with Israel and an open regional market. Bashar al-Asad is busy finding out how he can secure the last pieces of his father's political heritage. Despite many

challenges abroad—above all in public diplomacy—his main battle fields lie at home. But he needs successes in the international realm in order to strengthen his own position against the hardliners and the extended family clan at home who profit from the status quo, partly because a pluralist polity and an open economy would endanger their long held privileges.

After the war in Lebanon last summer, signs point into the direction that Syria may be able to escape its international isolation. Several European foreign ministers have visited Damascus since then, and in December a high profile group of US politicians, including Democrat John Kerry, have followed. The new US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, is known to have uttered deliberations about including Syria and Iran in an effort of regional conflict resolution. The Iraq Study Group chaired by former US Secretary of State, James Baker, and ex-congressman Lee Hamilton has argued along the same lines. But nothing practical has followed yet from these initiatives. Opinions are divided if Syria is part of the solution or part of the problem in the Middle East. A lot will also depend on how much Syria tries to raise its market value.

Syria's constructive contributions

The following discussion will both focus on constructive elements of Syrian politics and society for the region and on destructive elements of Syrian politics during the past months and years.

One of the constructive elements has already been mentioned: experience and willingness in the fight against Islamist extremists. By isolating and stigmatizing Syria, the United States has lost a valuable partner in the fight against religious fanatics. Interestingly, Syria has always had more sympathies in the ranks of the intelligence communities in the West, especially in the US and Israel, than in the ranks of political decision makers in those countries. As many critics have argued, also in the United States, the war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq had less to do with fighting Islamist terrorism than following a strategic agenda in the Middle East whose main focus is the security of Israel.²⁶ Ironically, champions of the most radical form of Islam like Saudi

26 The most debated and provoking thesis of this kind was written by Mearsheimer, J. J./ Walt, S. M. (2006, March), *The "Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy"*, Kennedy School of Government Research Paper, Harvard University.

Arabia, count as reliable and staunch allies of the West, whereas secular Syria is shunned as a rogue state.

When it comes to Syria, it is important to include a societal level of analysis. Not only with regard to security, also with regard to civil law and social life, Syria counts among the most "Western" countries of the Arab world. Some people in the Syrian government have used this argument as well, presenting themselves as a partner of the West in view of growing international pressure. "If the United States seriously wanted the Middle East to be peaceful, safe, and prosperous, Syria would be the most obvious partner in the region," says Minister Sh'aban. "It's the only secular regime in the region. We have a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society like in the United States. For forty years, we have had the best policy in the Arab world for promoting women's rights. I can't see why the United States would have any problem with us. If you take Israel out of the equation, I can't see any collisions of interests."²⁷

Secularism combined with religious tolerance, have been strong assets of Syrian politics and society. This tradition is much older than the rule of the pan-Arab Baath Party since the 1960s. Syrians, and especially Damascene people, are historically known for their composure and tolerance. This, however, has been strongly challenged in the past years and decades by Wahhabite influence, financed by Saudi petro-dollars. The influence of conservative Islamic scholars and the numbers of women in head scarves have visibly increased in recent times. Nevertheless, a variety of lifestyles and customs have endured in Syria that are not exclusively based on religion. Many restaurants and bars sell alcohol, not only in the Christian areas. It is not uncommon to see long manes of hair, skintight T-shirts and leggings, audaciously low necklines, and provocative make-up on university campuses in Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, or Lathakia, as well as in the streets and shopping quarters. The contrasts in Syrian society are sharpening.

Muslims, Christians, and the few remaining Jews live peacefully door to door in the old quarters of Damascus, instead of dwelling in more or less homogeneous ghettos. In other countries in the region such as Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, and even in the politically more open Lebanon, religious communities have withdrawn into separate shells, cut themselves off, and become encrusted. They have entered into a competition of identity whose own dialectic momentum has created the compulsion for people to assign themselves more and more clearly along religious or ethnic cleavages.

²⁷ Interview with the author in Damascus on March 29, 2004.

By contrast, in Syria Muslims shop at their Christian neighbors on Fridays and Christians visit Muslim markets on Sundays. Loudspeakers that deliver the muezzin's prayers from mosques have been restricted by law to one mosque per district, so that the noise does not upset Christians or more secular Muslims. The Civil Code of 1949, which to a large extent still applies today, was modeled on the secular French code. Women are allowed to file for divorce, which is far from the customary convention, as debates in Egypt have shown. They enjoy equality with men in the eyes of the law and receive equal pay for equal work, which is not always the case even in some Western countries. There is a large number of Syrian women in middle-management positions, and women account for more than half of the students in the universities. Since 1980, the military is no longer an exclusively male domain, and since 1983, boys and girls have been taught in common classrooms.²⁸ Recently, the Islamic Sharia regulations have been softened, and religious minorities can apply different laws of inheritance, according to their philosophy. Catholics, for example, have reacted promptly and granted men and women equal share.

Unlike in Iraq, political cleavages do not run along religious lines (yet). An old mosaic manufacturer in the Old City of Damascus replied when he was asked whether he was not happy that Iraqi refugees increased the number of Christians in Syria: "I don't care if they are Christians or not. Here, we Damascene people trust each other, Christian, Muslim, Jew, or whoever. We know each other and each other's families, we live together, and we do fair business with each other. The Iraqis are different. I don't trust them." But despite the influx of several hundreds of thousands Iraqi refugees, many of them Christians, no major social unrests have occurred in Syria. Iraqis enjoy free health care and education as Syrian citizens. With this peaceful absorption of religious and ethnic minorities in times of scarce means, Syria has delivered a model to the Middle East. This also showed when Syria hosted some 200,000 Lebanese refugees, most of them Shi'a, with extraordinary helpfulness. Even human rights organizations have acknowledged this endeavor, although they usually have many good reasons to condemn Syria's human rights violations when it comes to gagging dissenters.

In this context, two aspects must be put forward that qualify the above remarks. First, apart from religious freedom, Syria still has an ethnic problem. The regime has remained reluctant to grant citizenship to about 200,000 members of its Kurdish population that mostly live in the northern provinces

28 Lobmeyer, H. G. (1995), *op. cit.*, pp. 353, 355.

bordering with Turkey and Iraq. Many Kurds have assimilated and are no champions of separatism like many of their fellows in today's Iraq. However, this situation could change when rising pan-Arab rhetoric and regime stubbornness clashes with increased Kurdish activism from across the border. The second problem with regard to Islamism and secularism is an escalating paradox: While Syria has been trying to fight Islamism at home, it has allied itself with Islamist forces abroad, i.e. with Sunni Hamas in the Palestinian territories, with Hezbollah and Iran on the Shi'a plane. This contradiction creates tensions also within Syria. In its present state of weakness, the regime in Damascus cannot afford a second front at home. As a result, Islamists have an increased leeway of action and are eroding Syrian secular society.

Among the constructive elements that Syria contributes to the region one has to mention its relative socio-economic balance thanks to its rest-socialism with free public services and regulated prices of basic goods. Slums and visible poverty like in Egypt, for example, do not exist in Syria. This however, is may change with increased strains through economic reforms, rising real estate prices, and the influx of Iraqi refugees who are in need of quick housing solutions. Syria has a strong and reasonably educated middle class. Among them are many moderate Sunni merchants who are more interested in business than in Islamist rhetoric. This is a healthy back bone for a possible pluralist or even democratic development.

Another positive aspect that is even conceded by members of the opposition is law and order in Syria. The country is a police state, and according to one estimate there is one secret service member for every 153 Syrians over the age of fifteen.²⁹ The overall crime rate remains extremely low, and Syria ranks among the safest countries in the world. The reasons are not only found in the strong state machinery, but also the still largely intact traditions and a strict code of values despite the growing challenge through social change. The looting and excesses of violence in post-war Iraq have made even more evident its contrast to the tranquility in Syria. The situation is likewise worse in Lebanon due to its greater social and sectarian divisions.

Finally, the tradition of Syrian pragmatism is an asset in the region. Damascus, unlike Tehran, is not a place filled with ideological hardliners, and certainly not with religious fanatics. Despite enhanced ideological rhetoric by Bashar al-Asad, particularly since the Iraq war, the pragmatism of the elder Asad has not necessarily been buried. Syria opened diplomatic relations with

29 George, A. (2003), *Neither Bread Nor Freedom*, London, p.2. The data refers to the year 2001.

Iraq's new government, which many in Damascus see as a US puppet, faster than expected. Since 2003, Assad has repeatedly offered Israel direct peace negotiations. He has even abandoned his demand that Israel deliver on a promise murdered former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin once made to return almost the entire Golan Heights to Syria.

There are potential openings that could be used to entice Syria to abandon the Hezbollah-Tehran axis:

- When push comes to shove, the Syrians, even under former President Hafez Assad, have always been willing to place their interests ahead of the Palestinian cause. This suggests that Syria might even be prepared to sign a peace treaty with Israel if the Israeli-Palestinian question had not yet been satisfactorily resolved.
- Syria's Baathists are no fans of, and in fact actively combat, Sunni extremists. Indeed, the Syrians would not permit Hamas to open an office in Damascus until a few years ago. The war in Iraq and the US's emergence as a common enemy have given secularists and Islamists a common denominator—but one that is not necessarily permanent.
- The Syrian regime's ties to dogmatically radical Shiites like Hezbollah and the regime in Tehran are just as tenuous. Its current alliances are dictated by foreign policy constraints. If these constraints are set aside and Syria manages to find other allies, even its partnership with Iran and support of Hezbollah could crumble.
- As already mentioned, the Syrian people are highly intolerant of religious fanaticism. Peaceful coexistence among various religious groups has a longer tradition in Syria than the Baath party, and the ruling Alevites see religious diversity as an important aspect of their legitimacy.

Syria's destructive side

Having said this, the regime in Damascus has also played destructive roles in the region, especially since shortly before the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005. Asad's personal fallout with Hariri in Damascus in September 2004 started the tragedy. In an attempt to display political strength, Asad used harsh means to change the Lebanese constitution for the purpose of prolonging the term of pro-Syrian President Emile

Lahoud. Hariri, who used to be a rather moderate and integrating politician, opposed this move and after his rough treatment by Bashar drifted toward the anti-Syrian camp in Lebanon. Whoever was behind Hariri's murder, Asad has to take political responsibility for the fact that the political atmosphere escalated and hate campaigns against Hariri were on the march.

Asad widely underestimated the international reaction after Hariri's assassination. After he realized that military sanctions against his country were a real scenario, he finally announced the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, which was completed before the international deadline in April 2005. With its military engagement, the Syrian regime had ended the civil war in Lebanon in 1989, but in the new foreign policy environment pressure has been rising on Syria, especially by the United States and France, to grant Lebanon its full sovereignty and independence.

After this humiliating experience, the Syrian regime has reacted like a snubbed child. In his speech in front of the Parliament when he announced the Syrian withdrawal, Asad missed the opportunity to reconcile the Lebanese people who celebrated their independence. Ayman Abdul Nour, once a friend from Asad's youth and a Baath member with a critical voice, said in frustration that "Bashar's speech was a golden opportunity to address the Lebanese people, especially the younger population. He should have played his age and said 'I'm young like you, I also want freedom, I can understand you, my country also needs freedom.' Instead, he threatened that problems will arise in Lebanon when Syria leaves."³⁰

Since then Syria has tried to keep up its influence in Lebanon with political allies such as Hezbollah and the influence of a mysterious web of Syrian intelligence. Murders of anti-Syrian intellectuals and politicians have followed, although it has never been clearly established if they were ordered from high up the Syrian command chain, if low-level Syrian and Lebanese officials played their complex game of interests, or if it was even Israeli operations that intended to blackmail Syria during this sensitive period, as many Syrians claim.

After the Hariri assassination the Lebanon issue has become a red rag for the regime. A sense of panic and helplessness seems to be in the air in Damascus. Syria has been reluctant to recognize Lebanese sovereignty, to demarcate mutual borders, or to come to friendly terms with the government

30 Interview with the author in Damascus on April 28, 2005.

in Beirut. Whereas Syria's alliance with Hezbollah and increasingly Iran can be explained by a foreign policy rationale and *raison d'état*, more subversive activities like the killing of anti-Syrian voices in Lebanon and the arming of pro-Syrian Palestinian refugee militias is playing with fire. Syria brought stability to Lebanon, but Syria could also break it again.

Instead of playing a conciliatory and stabilizing role in the neighboring democracy, the regime has arrested well-known intellectuals of the oppositional secular Civil Society Movement in Syria who signed a declaration in favour of normal relations with the Lebanese neighbor. Journalist Michel Kilo, human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bounni, and other intellectuals from Syria were jailed in May 2006 because they had drafted the Damascus-Beirut Declaration together with Lebanese counterparts. Thus they crossed the red line. Aggravating the situation was the fact that the petition appeared on the eve of a UN Resolution draft put forward by the US, France, and Britain in the Security Council. Resolution 1680 stipulates the necessity to take measures to prevent the entry of Syrian arms into Lebanon, the demarcation of the border between Lebanon and Syria, and the exchange of ambassadors.

The regime may have inferred—or looked for a pretext to infer—that the signatories of the Damascus-Beirut Declaration have lined up with the foreign powers in this matter. But those who know Kilo and most of the other intellectuals will agree that this is a highly constructed nexus. In this way the regime has further estranged moderate secular forces that are Syrian patriots and potential allies. Kilo, for example, tried to push for a technocratic solution that would lead into a more pluralist political system. He, like many others, has repeatedly distanced himself from US attempts to establish democracy in the Middle East by forced and ill-considered regime change and refused any form of cooperation with US-supported opposition figures. Kilo is at least as pan-Arab as the Baathists. His arrest symbolizes the short-sighted decisions taken by the regime in recent months. Asad has not only gambled away the goodwill of many moderate opposition figures but he has also lost leeway in pursuing foreign policy strategies of his own.

The President is lacking vision and strategic sensitiveness. He is riding on a wave of popular support, thanks to ill-conceived US foreign policy and his increased pan-Arab rhetoric. He has taken up his role as the “defender of Arab interests” when he opposed the Anglo-American invasion in Iraq as strongly as no other Arab leader, although Saddam Hussein for many years counted as one of the staunchest enemies of Bashar's father Hafez al-Asad. Whereas his father never really depended on domestic public opinion, Asad started to ride on popular support and even took along Islamists as well as

parts of the moderate opposition who share the common denominator of Anti-Americanism. In lack of other successes that he could present the Syrian public—such as economic progress, including the long overdue association agreement with the European Union, or political glasnost—he has become one-dimensionally dependent on this form of populism.

Syria's strategic interests

The drawbacks of Asad's reliance on populism have become obvious during his first public speech after the cease fire between Hezbollah and Israel in August 2006, after which German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier cancelled his planned visit to Damascus. It was expected that Asad congratulated Hezbollah for its "victory" against the Israeli army. But Asad went over the board when he declared that peace with Israel was impossible and resistance was the only answer. He spoke to a domestic audience in the first place. But neglecting international ramifications shows a lack of political instinct.

Moreover, with this speech Asad contradicted his own policy. Newer Syrian school books mention the Madrid Peace Process and describe a fair peace with Israel as a "strategic choice of Syria." Apart from that, it was Asad who has offered peace negotiations to Israel several times since 2003. Until the end of 2006 he never got a constructive response from Tel Aviv. Israel has had no reason to take Asad seriously as long as Syria is being softened up by the United States. Time has been on Israel's side since Syria's position has become weaker.

Meanwhile, Asad has qualified his heated remarks from August in media interviews. In the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, he said: "I am interested in negotiations and achieving peace with Israel" and "The result of this victory [of Hezbollah against Israel] is the hope of conducting negotiations with Israel."³¹ According to British sources, Asad is reported to have said to Nigel Sheinwald, senior foreign policy adviser of Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, during his visit in Damascus, that Syria would give up support for Hezbollah and Hamas if it got support to regain the Golan Heights.³² Although this has been rejected by official Syrian sources, the above statements show a general

31 *Der Spiegel*, September 24, 2006.

32 *Akhbar al-Sharq*, November 5, 2006.

inclination to negotiate outstanding bills. The price that Syria demands is clear: most parts of the Golan Heights.

Asad cannot afford more foreign policy disasters or even renounce Syria's claim on the Golan after the withdrawal from Lebanon. Quietly, he has already ceded the Antakya province to Turkey which has been officially regarded as Syrian territory since the French colonial administration decided to cede it to Turkey in 1939. With this pragmatic move, Asad has contributed to rekindle relations with its northern neighbor since 2004 after both countries had been at the brink of war in the late 1990s.

Lebanon will always remain crucial for Syria. This is less for catering pan-Arab rhetoric that Lebanon be part of a greater Syrian nation. The reasons why Lebanon is important are more of practical nature. Lebanon means strategic depths for Syria. When the Israeli army invaded Lebanon in the early 1980s, they swiftly stood some 20 kilometers away from Damascus. Furthermore, Lebanon has always been the cultural and economic window to the world as much as Hong Kong has been for China. Legal and illegal trade is nurturing Syria's closed economy. Lebanon has also been a backyard for experiments of free speech. Syrian opposition figures could publish their criticism freely in the Lebanese press. Even if newspapers of a particularly day might have been banned in Damascus, the message always reached the ones in power. Finally, Syria is afraid that Israel tries once again to win over the Lebanese government as an ally like it attempted during the civil war.

Therefore, the West should consider it as a legitimate interest of Syria to have close relations with Lebanon. In turn, the West can demand from Syria that it stops manipulating Lebanese domestic politics and that it recognizes Lebanon as an independent and sovereign state. A further demand could be that the regime in Damascus grant citizenship to the rest of its Kurdish community.

On top of Asad's agenda stands—apart from negotiations about the Golan—a face saving way out of the investigations on Hariri's assassination. Whoever will be proven culpable by the UN investigation led by Detlev Mehlis and then Serge Brammertz, this incident changed the political game board and atmosphere in Damascus. Asad has hard decisions ahead of him. He may soon face the choice between covering up close family members against allegations of murder and thus isolating Syria even further or handing them over to the international community as real culprits or scapegoats. Both alternatives will put his political—and maybe personal—survival at stake. In oppositional circles in Damascus, Asad is being described as nervous

and as a president who hardly leaves his office any more. This implies the danger of an increasing loss of reality and autism. Further consequences of this back-to-the-wall dilemma are fatalistic scenarios like heated war rhetoric from Damascus with regard to a forceful liberation of the Golan Heights, and the forging of dangerous alliances with Islamists abroad.

In order to regain strength and independence from his corrupt extended family clan, Asad needs successes in the foreign policy arena. As already mentioned above, one of these could be the ratification of the long-planned free trade agreement with the European Union. This would boost reformers in the government and benefit the Syrian economy. The EU Parliament has already followed this path and argued for the agreement to be enacted soon. Otherwise, Syria will continue to strengthen links with or look for new partners like Iran, Russia or even Venezuela. Anti-Americanism has become the common denominator and driving force of pragmatic extended alliances.

Opposition against the Baath regime and democratic options

If one holds the opinion that Asad, in his deep conviction, is still a reformer as he was in 2000, then it would make sense to strengthen his position and to involve his reformers in government. At the moment, there are not many alternatives besides him. The domestic opposition is silenced and has not produced a charismatic leader. On the other side, more radical Syrian opposition figures have formed alliances abroad and work against the regime from Paris, London and Washington. Among them are such unlikely alliances as the Salvation Front led by the leader of the banned Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Sheikh Bayanouni, and Syria's defected long-time Vice-President Abdul Halim Khaddam. Others like the Washington-backed neo-conservative Farid al-Ghadry have no sympathy within Syria and have hardly lived there. They or some of their followers may become dangerous for the Baathists but none of them would be a solution for Syria and a promising actor for democratic change.

Far too little attention has been paid by the West and particularly the US to Syria's secular opposition who are embedded in Syrian society and history of thought or Syria's moderate Muslim activists who are members of parliament, entrepreneurs or scholars. The latter take Turkey as their model, and some of them carry the wish to found a political party that would resemble the moderate Islamist AKP. Both secularists, moderate Islamists and even the chastened

Muslim Brothers in London have taken steps toward "national reconciliation" by signing common documents such as the Damascus Declaration in October 2005. However, ideological and personal rivalries have increased in recent months. The domestic opposition strongly opposes any collaboration with Al-Ghadry in Washington and with Khaddam in Paris who had been largely responsible for blocking many of Asad's reform endeavors and for oppressing the reform movement during the Damascus Spring 2001.

Syria's opposition would benefit from a reduced pressure on Syria. If the regime gets air to breathe and is accepted again as an equal partner in the Middle East peace efforts, Asad may feel comfortable again to pick up the loose ends and embark on more sweeping reforms. It will be his last chance to deliver and to reestablish his credibility domestically and abroad.

If Asad had the courage, he would pull off a major coup and call for free and direct elections of the president. Without any doubt he would win today. This would considerably broaden his leeway and liberate him from many clientelistic bonds. After all, he has the support of the minorities who account for nearly a third of the population. "These people may be the most unsecular of all in their way of thinking," says a businessman in Damascus, "but they have to pretend to be secular because it is necessary for their financial and political survival." If we add ten percent of progressive Sunnis to the minorities, we come to a secular base of 40 percent of the population. "Syria is perhaps the only country in the region that can regard itself as secular. Even Turkey and Israel are becoming less and less secular," the businessman continues. Nevertheless, Turkey has just demonstrated how well democracy can work in its effort to head off external political pressure. When the parliament in Ankara voted against supporting the United States in the Iraq war, even against the will of the Turkish government, Washington had no choice but to accept it grudgingly. The voice of the people had spoken.

The United States would also have to modify its tone toward Syria if it was led by a freely elected president, even if the country continued with its old foreign policy. But this is just hypothesizing. Bashar may not dare to hold a free election, let alone push it through the machinery of power. This would deprive Baathist rule and the entire political system of their foundations. An alliance with the people against the corrupt power elite, with or without elections, may seem too risky at this point. But if Bashar wants to remain part of a solution instead of being washed away by the political tide, such a popular alliance may turn out to be the only option for him to stay in power and maybe to protect Syria from worse. One day this may lead to the point that he has to risk his personal survival in order to ensure his political survival (or

simply choose the former and give up power). Bashar's fate will also testify to whether in this region a person with a weighty heritage can stay in power without being an unscrupulous and brutal power politician himself.

Future scenarios: Regional peace or escalation?

Baath member and reformer Ayman Abdul Nour suggests a different scenario for the time after the elections of April this year. In his eyes, the president has become tired of the old structures, despite the fact that he relies on them. Already in 2004 he said: "Bashar needs the Baathists for now. Otherwise, who will reelect him in 2007? But after that, he will try to get rid of the Party and found a party of his own. He is playing with time but feels the pressure because the US demands an immediate de-Baathification of Syria."³³ A new party law that would permit parties to be founded and operate independently of the Baath Party and its National Front has been drafted long ago and is collecting dust in the drawers of the Presidential Palace in Damascus. Asad could finally enact this law as a first step toward pluralization.

Whether the President has this master plan in mind or not, it is time for him to act. Otherwise he will downgrade himself to a puppet of his family clan with vested economic interests and remain prisoner to an encrusted and unable state bureaucracy. An open and creative economic policy is necessary to keep up with the fast population growth and rising consumer prices. When the oil reserves run out in the next decade, Syria needs alternative and diversified sources of income. So far, the foreign policy scenario has been very unfavorable to encourage bold steps toward reform.

In addition, Asad has made many mistakes of his own that have damaged the perspectives of a soft transition toward a more pluralist Syria. It remains to be seen if he can re-establish broken ties with Syria's secular opposition in order to ally against Islamists and bureaucratic obstructionists. Syria has an intelligent, moderate and little belligerent opposition. The regime has not been able to make use of this resource. Instead, it has estranged potential partners.

33 Interview with the author in Damascus on April 28, 2005.

In a less positive scenario, Asad will try to maintain the course of the Chinese model: economic reforms without political concessions. Much will depend on the policies in Washington if he can get away with this. To be fair, one must concede that countries like Egypt or Jordan—let alone Saudi Arabia—who are allies of the West, have not much of a democratic character either. Their record of human rights is not much better. Egypt, for example has a number of political prisoners more than thirteen times higher than Syria today.³⁴

In an even less positive scenario, Syria's regime would implode under international pressure, and the political vacuum would be filled with those who already dispose of a strong societal infrastructure: Islamists. Opinions are split if this scenario is exaggerated or not. Skeptics point to the fact that the regime paints the ghost of Islamism and lets the Islamist problem simmer for the purpose of demonstrating "it's either those or us." They also refer to Syria's moderate Sunni tradition and merchant class that would prevail. Those who hold this scenario to be realistic point to the experiences in Iraq and to the auto-dynamics of sectarianism in an ill-managed and chaotic transition.

Syria's future, like that of the whole region, will depend considerably on the course of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This includes the development of radical Islamism, which has been nurtured by this decade old conflict and recently by Washington's neo-conservative policies in the Middle East.

Although after the war in Lebanon Western politicians have approached the Baath regime again as a smaller evil to more dangerous problems in the region, a feeling of injustice and spite prevails in Damascus. Injustice because the West does not seem to appreciate Syria's constructive sides that it contributes to the region: its secularism, its domestic fight against Islamism. The regime's spiteful attitude stems from a perceived lack of alternatives, given the US foreign agenda in the Middle East, and the grudging confession of own mistakes.

An attempt to escape from the Middle East quagmire must include all regional actors that are treated on the same eye level, Syria included. Every country involved has legitimate security interests that have to be taken into account. Recently, hopeful signs have come from Israel. Defense Minister Amir Peretz and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni have repeatedly mentioned the

34 Kasseem, M. (2004), *Egyptian Politics: The Dynamics of Authoritarian Rule*, London, p. 156; *Al-Ahram Weekly* (2005, March 3-9); Landis, J. (2004, August 11), "Is Syria Holding Fewer Political Prisoners than any other Major Middle Eastern Country?", in: <www.syriacomment.com>.

necessity or at least the possibility to talk to Syria. Even Prime Minister Ehud Olmert made a surprising statement two days after Christmas last year that the also wished negotiations with the adverse neighbor, under the precondition that Syria ends its collaboration with Hezbollah and Hamas as well as with Iran. This plays the ball into Syria's court for the first time after the young Asad came to power. However, Olmert so far has remained quite ambivalent about his willingness to restart official negotiations with its neighbor and has rejected repeated overtures by various Syrian protagonists, including Asad himself. As long as Syria is being softened up by US isolation and sanctions, time is on Israel's side.

The United States remain as the only player that sticks to its isolationist policy toward Syria. As long as a regional approach is rejected by Washington because of ideological reasons, every step such as UN Resolution 1701—which ended the Israeli-Hezbollah war and called in international troops to monitor southern Lebanon—remains nothing but patchwork efforts that treat symptoms instead of root causes. A fair peace with Syria, including creative territorial and water agreements in the Golan, would mean a crucial improvement for Israel's security. On the other hand, it is up to Asad to cease the window of opportunity in order to free himself from the strings of frustration and isolation, with the help of some European governments. The window may close soon again.

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