

**SYRIA UNDER BASHAR (II):
DOMESTIC POLICY CHALLENGES**

11 February 2004



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SYRIA UNDER BASHAR (II): DOMESTIC POLICY CHALLENGES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Bashar al-Assad's presidency has failed to live up to the hopes for far-reaching domestic reform that greeted it in 2000. After a brief opening, Syria clamped down on dissent, and economic change remains painfully slow. Many who once viewed Bashar as a potential partner, open-minded, and Western-oriented, now perceive him as, if anything, more ideological than and just as tied to the Baathist regime as his father. Both assessments are overly simplistic and poor guides to dealing with a Syria that is at a crossroads. Syrian officials hint at significant steps in mid-2004, including possible changes in the Baath Party hierarchy and doctrine and moves toward a more open and inclusive political system. Scepticism is in order, as such pledges have repeatedly been made in the past only to be ignored. But with reform now a strategic imperative, Syria should turn hints into reality and the international community should find ways to encourage and to assist it.

There is good evidence that Bashar came to office aware that bold economic measures were needed to rationalise public administration, curb corruption and otherwise modernise the country. But his legitimacy and power base are closely tied to the Baathist system. However much he may understand that his plans cannot succeed with the current regime, he fears that he may not long survive without it. It is not a question of merely ridding the system of remnants of his father's rule. The system has been shaped by powerful constituents – a political/economic elite entrenched in the public sector, the army, security services and a vast, lethargic bureaucracy accustomed to benefit from the status quo. Far more than his father, Bashar has to share authority with multiple power centres, as Syria's "pluralistic authoritarianism" becomes less authoritarian, more pluralistic. An aspiring reformist,

the President realised that his longevity was tied to the stability of the regime he sought to reform.

In the past, foreign policy dividends – income generated by aid from Iran in the 1980s, from the Gulf in the early 1990s, and from illicit trade with Iraq since then – made up for domestic shortfalls. Those days are gone. Syria urgently needs domestic change. Its economy is plagued by corruption, ageing state industries, a volatile and under-performing agricultural sector, rapidly depleting oil resources, an anachronistic educational system, capital flight and lack of foreign investment.

The image of a regime that owes its durability solely to repression and a narrow, sectarian base is wide of the mark; the Baathists built support from a cross-section of Syria's socio-economic and religious groups. Still, the regime is by no means immune to internal challenge should the economy continue to deteriorate. At the least, a flagging economy will gradually undercut its legitimacy and undermine its support, and shrinking economic resources will reduce the availability of rents and economic privileges that have been used to ensure backing from key groups.

Syria's foreign reserves should not be used as a pretext to defer reform but rather to put in place the safety net necessary to protect the population from hardships that will inevitably accompany restructuring. To be effective, however, economic reform must be accompanied by political liberalisation. Without greater accountability, transparency and a freer media, it will be extremely difficult to break the cycle of corruption and inefficiency. And with fewer economic resources to distribute, it is all the more important to build a stronger domestic consensus through greater public participation.

Any reforms will, no doubt, be gradual and carefully managed; even so, some argue that they will spark unrest and open the door to radical Islamism. While the history of the Muslim Brotherhood's violent activities in Syria certainly is cause for concern, the available evidence suggests that the rise of militant Islam has been nurtured by a repressive, closed system that prevents free expression and association and has badly damaged the bond of trust between citizens and state. The stifling of political participation and the discrediting of official ideology leads to a vacuum that radical Islamic discourse is best equipped to fill.

This report is published simultaneously with another on Syria's foreign policy challenges.¹ The two subjects are interconnected. A strengthened domestic Syrian consensus, including national reconciliation and renewed political legitimacy for its leadership, will make it possible for Syria to play a more effective and confident role on the regional scene. Conversely, what happens internationally affects Bashar's domestic standing and ability to push through reform.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Syria:

1. Promote national dialogue and reconciliation by:
 - (a) issuing a general amnesty for political activists, including members of the Muslim Brotherhood, in Syria and in exile, who have not engaged in violence and allowing the return of exiled opposition figures who have not engaged in violence;
 - (b) convening a national conference of political parties, opposition figures and political activists to discuss the process of national reconciliation and commit to non-violence and the forsaking of extra-judicial retribution for prior abuses; and
 - (c) removing the ban on the Kurdish language, allowing Kurds to organise their own cultural activities and revoking census results so as to extend

full and equal citizenship rights to all Kurdish "non-nationals" (*maktumin*) and their offspring.

2. Begin political liberalisation by:
 - (a) lifting the state of emergency;
 - (b) giving civil society and political organisations the space to organise and establishing a more transparent legal framework that enables NGOs to be recognised and operate more freely; and
 - (c) encouraging freer media coverage of public policy issues.
3. Accelerate economic reform by:
 - (a) drawing up and implementing an administrative reform plan and making economic management more transparent, including by initiating a strong anti-corruption campaign and taking steps to reduce collusion between state and businesses;
 - (b) establishing a transparent tender mechanism for public procurement and one-stop licensing procedures; and
 - (c) drawing on foreign exchange reserves to help finance job-creation and poverty alleviation programs.

To the Members of the Syrian Opposition:

4. Promote political change only through non-violent means, and in particular:
 - (a) repudiate any past resort to violence and pledge not to engage in extra-judicial retribution for past regime abuses; and
 - (b) pursue an open dialogue with the Baath Party, avoiding inflammatory rhetoric.

To the European Union (EU), its Member States, and Japan:

5. Bolster reformers within the Syrian leadership by promoting administrative and institutional reform, focusing on the presidency and on ministries or ministerial secretariats led by reformists.
6. Offer assistance to help cushion hardship caused by economic liberalisation, for example by providing funds and expertise to assist the Syrian Agency for Combating Unemployment.

¹ ICG Middle East Report N°23, *Syria Under Bashar (I): Foreign Policy Challenges*, 11 February 2004.

7. Provide assistance for civil society development and capacity-building and press Syria on human rights issues – including individual cases and measures such as lifting the state of emergency – and, in the case of the EU, identify mechanisms to follow up on the clause on democratic principles and human rights in the Association Treaty.

To the U.S. Government:

8. Lift opposition to Syria entering negotiations aimed at joining the World Trade Organisation.
9. Increase people-to-people contacts, particularly in the area of education.

Amman/Brussels, 11 February 2004

SYRIA UNDER BASHAR (II): DOMESTIC POLICY CHALLENGES

I. BACKGROUND: THE OTHER BAATHIST REGIME

A. THE ORIGINS OF ASSAD'S SYRIA

The history of modern day Syria is closely identified with that of both the Baath Party, an organisation that aspired to Arab unity on the basis of socialism and nationalism,² and the army, which came to play a key role in political affairs.

The Baath, which was active in Syria, Iraq and other parts of the Fertile Crescent, originally appealed to lower middle class intellectuals and ethnic religious minorities that felt marginalised. In Syria, this meant Druze, Christians, and principally Alawis.³ During the mandate period, the French promoted communal identity, encouraging "separatism and . . . the widening of the gap between the Sunni-Moslem majority and the various minorities".⁴ After independence in 1946, Alawis and Druze faced an effort by the Sunni-dominated regime to curtail their autonomy and influence. Minority and marginalised groups were attracted to the Baath's pan-Arab, socialist, secular message and to the military as a means of social

mobility and protection against Sunni dominance. "The Ba'ath recruited all those who were outside the system of connections, patronage and kin on which the old regime was built".⁵ While it would be wrong to reduce either the Baath or the military to one sectarian group, a mutually reinforcing system of recruitment meant that Alawi Baath Party members were disproportionately represented in the army's senior officer corps.

The Baath Party came to power on 8 March 1963 following a tumultuous period of internal strife, competition between rival political organisations and military conspiracies. Though the officers who spearheaded the coup belonged to several Arab nationalist parties, Baathists took the lead. The twenty-man National Council for the Revolutionary Command had twelve Baathists and eight Nasserists and Independents.⁶ Over time, and by virtue of Baathist control of key military and security positions, party members consolidated their power and eliminated their rivals, acquiring influence that far exceeded their political weight in the country at large. The Baath Party remained an important political actor throughout the 1960s, both a key decision-maker and a means of promoting a new leadership from the rural population. The multi-party system that had existed since 1946 came to an end, and the Baath gained a virtual political monopoly as the "leading party" (*al-hizb al-qa'id*).⁷

Still, from very early on the Baath suffered from a deficit of political legitimacy and deep internal divisions based on personal ambition as well as

² See ICG Middle East Report N°6, *Iraq Backgrounder: What Lies Beneath*, 1 October, 2002, pp. 4-5.

³ Alawis, who are roughly 12 per cent of the Syrian population, live principally in the mountain chains in the northwest, along the Mediterranean coast. There are various accounts of their religious origins, though the most likely is that they are an offshoot of the Twelver Shiites. See H. Laoust, *Les Schismes dans L'Islam* (Paris, 1977), p. 147. For a long time, Alawis were a poor, rural community ostracised and discriminated against by the rest of Syrian society. When he became president, Assad sought the help of Imam Musa al-Sadr, a leading Shiite Cleric in Lebanon, to certify that Alawis were Moslem Shiites. Al-Sadr issued a *fatwa* to that effect. Patrick Seale, *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (1988), p. 173.

⁴ Ma'oz, Ginat and Winckler, "Introduction: The Emergence of Modern Syria", in *Modern Syria* (1988).

⁵ Raymond Hinnebusch, "Party and Peasant in Syria," quoted in *ibid*, p. 3; see also Eyal Zisser, "Appearance and Reality", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, May 1998.

⁶ Seale, *Assad*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁷ Between 1945 and 1963, Syria experienced intense political competition and organized multiparty elections – with the exception of 1958-1961 when it was merged in union with Nasser's Egypt.

regional, clan, religious and ideological splits. In 1966, a faction led by two officers, Hafez al-Assad and Salah Jedid, pushed aside the party's historic leaders, Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar. This further exacerbated intra-party tensions, and factions became surrogates for rival officers. Alliances within the army increasingly formed along confessional and regional lines. The centre of power had moved from the political arena, to the army, to the Baathists within the military and, from 1966 on, to those Alawi officers who held dominant positions in both party and army. As one observer noted, those who held power "were a fraction of what was itself a minority, a military splinter group of a semi-defunct party without popular base".⁸

By 1970, the faction led by Defence Minister Hafez al-Assad had gained control over all vital military and security branches. In November, he staged a successful coup that was dubbed the "Corrective Movement" in an attempt to claim the mantle of Baathist legitimacy. The coup, which marked the supremacy of the military over the party, also began a new phase in Syria's modern history. Emerging from the traumatic experience of the 1967 Six Days War, Assad chartered a more pragmatic path, in which the foreign policy priority was to recover the Golan Heights from Israeli occupation. Domestically, it ushered in an era of unprecedented stability that was based on a systematic effort at state and institution-building and revolved around Assad's own authoritarian, highly personalised power, in contrast to past collective leadership. After year of battles between political parties, within the Baath and within the military, Assad represented a "firm, centralised and stable rule".⁹

B. THE STRUCTURE OF THE REGIME

Though in some respects founded on a narrow communal base, the regime represents far broader constituencies and is governed by an elaborate system of institutions. Assad meticulously built a hybrid: personalised rule coexisted with highly structured state and party institutions; a narrow Alawi, family and personal power base coexisted with a broader inter-religious coalition and social contract; and a sophisticated, omnipresent military-security apparatus coexisted with a strong political

party and powerful social relays.¹⁰ When it deemed it necessary for survival, the regime did not hesitate to resort to brutal violence to crush dissent; Assad's "was a government which grew out of seven years of bloody struggle, and its foundations were and would remain the army, the security services and the party and government machines".¹¹ But importantly, the regime also coalesced around itself an array of constituents by offering economic opportunities, co-opting segments of the population via patronage and channelling social forces through a corporatist system involving the creation of popular organisations, professional associations and unions; in short "the regime [was] more representative of the population as a whole, its constituent parts, and their balance of strength than is commonly assumed".¹²

Core elements – particularly sensitive military and security positions – remained in Alawi hands, more specifically members of Assad's Qalbiyya tribe. Assad's rule marked the first time that Alawis were openly the pre-eminent power-holders; earlier Alawi leaders had preferred to remain behind the scenes. Assad relied heavily on a "'jama'a' of personal followers, often his kin, appointed to crucial security and military commands."¹³ But Alawi dominance was far from uniform; he carefully placed Sunnis in top positions, including the defence ministry, the vice presidency and the foreign affairs ministry.¹⁴

¹⁰ Syria's security services and intelligence agencies include the *Amn as-Siyyasi* (Political Security), the *Mukhabarat al-'Askariyya* (Military Intelligence) – subdivided into the "Palestine Branch", "Investigative Branch", "Regional Branch" and "Airforce Branch" – and the *Mukhabarat al-'Ama* (General Security) –subdivided into the "Investigative Branch", the "Domestic Branch" and the "Foreign Branch". Each of these agencies operates its own prisons and interrogation centres in near-complete independence from the judicial and penal system. ICG interviews with Syrian human rights activists and lawyers in Damascus, July 2003. One estimate puts the number of people working for these agencies at one of every 153 adult Syrians. See Alan George, *Syria, Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London, 2003), p. 2.

¹¹ Seale, *Assad*, op. cit., p. 178.

¹² Zisser, "Appearance and Reality", op. cit.

¹³ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution From Above* (New York, 2001), p. 67.

¹⁴ According to Zisser, "approximately 60 per cent of the cabinet ministers, the members of the People's Assembly and the deputies to the Party Congress are Sunnis. . . . The informal ruling cadres, by contrast, attest to the real power and predominance of the `Alawis: Close to 90 per cent of the officers commanding the major military formations are `Alawis, and so are most of the top echelons in the various security services". Zisser, "Appearance and Reality", op. cit.

⁸ Seale, *Assad*, op. cit., p. 85.

⁹ Zisser, "Appearance and Reality", op. cit.

Efforts to reach out to non-Alawis went beyond bringing them into the regime. Non-Alawi constituencies and social forces were promoted and co-opted, including other minorities (Druze, Christians, Isma'ilis) for whom Alawi control meant protection from Sunni dominance, and rural Sunnis who had traditionally been excluded from economic and political power. Breaking from Baath socialist traditions, Assad gave greater latitude to the private sector, dominated by the Sunni urban economic and commercial elite, particularly in Damascus. Liberalisation intensified with the passage of Investment Law no. 10 in May 1991, which provided generous fiscal incentives to domestic and foreign private investors.¹⁵

As a result of this limited economic opening (*infatih*) and with the growth of collusive state-business relations, some large entrepreneurs allied themselves with the regime. In turn, high state officials gained a foothold in the private sector, largely via their children (the *awlād al-mas'ūlin*, children of the powerful).¹⁶ The regime felt confident enough about the new bourgeoisie's support to allow them to contest elections and fill "independent seats" designated for non-Baathists.¹⁷

The regime, therefore, was constructed at the political level around an Alawi/Sunni contract and at the socio-economic level around a compact that benefited "Sunni Moslem peasants, the new middle class, 'blue collar' workers, and residents of the remote provinces. To those one should add the over one million Baath members and their families who also owe allegiance to the regime and its policies".¹⁸

Financial assistance from Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia in particular, helped the Baathist regime

further broaden its basis of support.¹⁹ Such revenues poured in especially after Syria sided with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia against Iraq in the Gulf war of 1991 and contributed troops to the U.S.-led coalition.²⁰ Rising oil revenues since the early 1990s also provided much-needed foreign currency.²¹ Syria developed a quasi-corporatist system, built around patron-client relations and a widespread network of economic allegiance and corruption. The regime promoted the creation of a myriad of professional associations and trade unions – for peasants, workers, teachers, students, artists, engineers, and so forth – that rapidly became instruments of both personal enrichment and political surveillance.

Politically, the regime mixed harsh repression and tight control by multiple security services with an almost obsessive adherence to institutional procedures and symbolic political gestures. Having consolidated his rule, and alongside the shadow power structure, Assad insisted on an appearance of legitimacy by following formal rules enshrined in a constitution, with clear lines of authority between presidency, parliament and government. He promoted the National Progressive Front, an umbrella group that included the Baath and other parties allowed to contest elections²² but the Baath enjoyed a highly privileged status. For instance, it alone could recruit in the army and universities.

From the outset, the regime's most potent foe was the powerful Islamist opposition led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Islamists were particularly influential

¹⁵ See Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Assad* (London, 1995), p. 58.

¹⁶ See Bassam Haddad, "The Formation and Development of Economic Networks and Their Institutional and Economic Reverberations in Syria", in Steven Heydeman (ed.), *Networks of Privilege: The Politics of Economic Reform in the Middle East*, (Palgrave-St Martin's Press, forthcoming).

¹⁷ In 1990 the number of seats was raised from 165 to 250 to allow non-partisan delegates to enter parliament. Most were newly successful businessmen. Two-third of the seats remained reserved for the Baath and officially recognised parties.

¹⁸ See Aslan Abd al-Karim, "An-Nizam as-Shamuli", in Arab Commission for Human Rights, *Al-Huquq al-Insan wa ad-Dimuqratiyya fi Suriyya* (Paris, 2002).

¹⁹ Hinnebusch, *Syria*, op. cit., p. 7 describes Syria as a "partial or indirect rentier state".

²⁰ Estimates put the aid Syria received from Gulf countries directly following the war at U.S.\$2-3 billion. See Eyal Zisser, *Assad's Legacy: Syria In Transition* (London, 2001), pp. 190-191.

²¹ With international prices for crude at high levels, Syrian oil exports peaked in 1996 at 353,000 barrels a day. See OAPEC, <http://www.oapecorg.org/images/DATA/>.

²² Established in 1972, the National Progressive Front (NPF) was comprised of five parties that, with the exception of the Syrian Communist Party, all belonged to the nationalist Arab current in its Baathist and Nasserite incarnations. Although the 1973 Constitution provides these parties with a formal leadership role in the country, they remained wholly subject to Assad's rule. Subservience to the Baath led to disagreement and division. Jamal Atassi's faction of the Nasserist Arab Socialist Union promptly joined the ranks of the opposition; a wing of the communist party (called Communist Party – Political Bureau or CP-PB) led by Riad al-Turk rejected the NPF and also joined the opposition. In 1980, most of its leadership, including al-Turk, was arrested.

in Sunni urban centres such as Homs, Hama and Aleppo, where resistance to the notion of an Alawi military leader was strong. By the end of the 1970s, the struggle had turned violent; the Brotherhood and splinter factions including Islamic Vanguard (*at-Tali'a al-Islamiyya*) assassinated members of the Baath and Alawi officers and launched several attacks in Damascus and elsewhere. This culminated in 1982 with the tragic events of Hama.²³ A violent uprising by Islamist militants was met with brute force. The price of the regime's victory was high; estimates of the dead range from 10,000 to 30,000. Bloodied, divided and with its leadership either killed or exiled (in Europe, Iraq and Saudi Arabia), the Islamist movement no longer presented a threat.²⁴ One key to its defeat was that the movement was circumscribed to Sunni towns in the north. "The rural Sunni population, the minorities, and even the urban Sunnis of Damascus remained supportive of the regime, or at least firmly refrained from acting against it".²⁵

In the wake of the Hama atrocities, Hafez al-Assad faced another serious challenge, this time from his brother Rifaat al-Assad, who began plotting when the president fell ill. After an armed clash between Rifaat's 55,000-strong Defence Brigades and Special Forces and regular army units in February/March 1984, Rifaat was temporarily promoted to the largely ceremonial position of vice president and soon thereafter effectively expelled from Syria.²⁶

In the early 1980s, the non-religious opposition organised around the trade unions and left-wing parties called for democratic reform as a third way between Baathist authoritarianism and Islamism.²⁷ The decade

was marked not only by the regime's success vis-à-vis the opposition (religious and secular) but also by its effective use of repression to deter potential adversaries. In a political and ideological arena that had become "empty . . . torn apart [and] demoralised", Assad could present himself as society's sole "arbiter and saviour."²⁸ By the mid-1990s, the regime was able to lift some of the more repressive aspects of its rule and released groups of detainees, including some members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

At his death on 10 June 2000, Hafez al-Assad had ruled Syria for nearly 30 years, longer than any predecessor. The regime had survived a powerful Islamist revolt, an internal insurgency, the collapse of its Soviet ally, separate major Israeli agreements with Egypt, the Palestinians and Jordan and an economic crisis, not to mention the many regional challenges presented by Israel, Iraq, Iran and Lebanon.

C. BASHAR AL-ASSAD AND THE BIRTH OF A HEREDITARY REPUBLIC

That his son Bashar succeeded him was not a surprise, though it was a novelty in the region, the first Arab republican hereditary regime.²⁹ The strength of the father's rule also was the regime's principal weakness: extreme dependence on the president and the balance of power he had carefully crafted. The influence and political-economic weight of the different circles within the regime were measured by proximity to the president. Were the system to be modified, it could unravel into sectarian and socio-economic rivalries.

All major components of the political system agreed that the son's accession was indispensable to sustain it. Bashar was the only candidate around whom they could rally without jeopardising political equilibrium and provoking a new round of internal strife. As a Western diplomat who witnessed the transition put it: "Bashar was picked as president because he did not

²³ For a detailed analysis of events in and leading to Hama see Hans G. Lohmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand in Syrien*, (Hamburg 1995).

²⁴ On the role of Islamists today, see below III.B.1.

²⁵ Zisser, *Assad's Legacy*, op. cit.

²⁶ In 1992 Rifaat al-Assad returned to Syria to engage in business activities. However, in 1999, violent clashes occurred between men loyal to him and regime security forces in the port of Lattakiya, after which he returned to London. See Alan George, *Syria*, op. cit., p. 115.

²⁷ In 1980, professional unions led by the Bar Association entered the political arena by publicly calling for the end of martial law imposed since 1963 and establishment of the rule of law and a multiparty system. In response, the regime disbanded the unions' elected executive councils, undertook large-scale arrests of union heads and replaced them with Baathists. Simultaneously, left-wing opposition parties, led by Jamal Atassi's party and Riad Al-Turk's Communist Party-Political Bureau, joined forces in the National Democratic Alliance (*al-tajammu al-watani al-dimuqrati*)

and issued demands mirroring those of the unions. The regime once again responded with arrests, most of which affected the leadership and cadres of the Community Party-Political Bureau.

²⁸ B. Ghalioun, "La fin de la 'revolution' baasiste", *Confluences Méditerranée*, N°44, Winter 2002-2003, p. 13.

²⁹ Hafez al-Assad originally had groomed his elder son Basil to be his successor, but he was killed in a car accident in January 1994.

pose a challenge to any of the factions in power”.³⁰ A system that traditionally operated at an unhurried pace amended the constitution in record time to enable Bashar – younger than the minimum legal age – to become president and inherit all his father’s key titles, including Secretary General of the Baath and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces.³¹

Bashar was left with more than titles; he also inherited the regime his father had built. The tailor-made power structure outlived the dead leader. Yet, more than before, the regime rested on multiple pillars, “a system of pluralist authoritarianism”.³² Bashar depends on the same constituencies as his father but is less able to control them. Any effort to modify radically the political architecture of which he is both product and captive would imperil the power relationships upon which he depends to endure.

In the three years since he came to office, views regarding Bashar have changed dramatically. Initially hailed as a Western-oriented, sophisticated reformer – including by U.S. officials who met him early on³³ – he currently is perceived by many in Washington as both less pragmatic and more ideological than his father.³⁴

The most common view at the outset was that he was a reformist prisoner of the “old guard,” the Baathists who had surrounded his father and who, desperate to hold on to their privileges and power, were seeking to prevent any genuine change.³⁵ Early in the Bush administration, many U.S. officials believed Bashar was relatively open-minded and

aware of Western realities and that the views he expressed were depended significantly on whether he was the sole Syrian official at a given meeting.³⁶

As he engaged in what Washington considered repeated missteps, the perception took hold that he was perhaps too inexperienced and lacking his father’s sophistication and policy flair.³⁷ Over time, views significantly hardened, prompted chiefly by Syria’s posture toward the Iraq war and its defiance of U.S. demands regarding support for radical Palestinian groups,³⁸ though failure to carry out meaningful domestic reforms also played a part. Increasingly, U.S. officials appear inclined to see in Bashar “more of Nasrallah [the head of Hizbollah] and Khomeini [the Iranian Supreme Leader] than of Assad [the father]”,³⁹ an ideologically committed pan-Arab. Bashar is believed to see the U.S. occupation of Iraq and broader presence in the region as a strategic threat to Arab interests.⁴⁰

In their black-and-white characterisations, both the former and current assessments appear off the mark. The categorisation of new-versus old guards is misleading on several counts. The assumption upon which it is based – a generational gap between reformers and those who seek to maintain the status quo – is flawed. As a Western diplomat put it, “it has nothing to do with generations. It has to do with mindsets”.⁴¹ While some more recent members of the regime (the “new old guard”) are no less repressive or corrupt than their predecessors, many older

³⁰ ICG interview with Western diplomat, Damascus, 27 September 2003.

³¹ A week after Hafez al-Assad’s death, the Baath Party held its first congress since 1985 to elect Bashar secretary general. Simultaneously, the constitution was amended to lower the minimum age and allow Bashar (then 34) to become president. On 17 July 2000, Bashar delivered his presidential inaugural address. See S. Boukhaima, “Bashar al-Assad: Chronique d’une succession en Syrie”, *Maghreb-Machreck*, N°169, July 2000.

³² ICG interview with Robert Springborg, head of Middle East Institute in London, 9 October 2003.

³³ ICG interviews with former U.S. officials, September 2003.

³⁴ ICG interviews with U.S. officials, September-November 2003.

³⁵ Among Middle East analysts, the notion of a rivalry between an “old guard” and a “new guard” has become fashionable, invoked to explain power struggles among Palestinians, Syrians and others. See ICG Middle East Briefing, *The Meanings of Palestinian Reform*, 12 November 2002, p. 7.

³⁶ ICG interviews with current and former U.S. officials, Washington, May-June 2003.

³⁷ Hinting at this view, the White House characterized Bashar al-Assad’s leadership as “relatively new” and “relatively untested”. Press Briefing, Ari Fleischer, 30 April 2003. Most Israeli commentaries went further, “Assad’s father had an acute sense of smell for danger. The son has none whatsoever. He has not yet undergone a formative experience”, *Yediot Ahronot*, 13 April 2003. For a similar but more detailed argument see Eyal Zisser, “Does Bashar al-Assad Rule Syria?”, *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2003.

³⁸ See ICG Report, *Bashar’s Syria (I)*, op. cit.

³⁹ ICG interview with U.S. official, Washington, September 2003.

⁴⁰ Rejecting the notion that Bashar is held back by his father’s entourage, a Syrian businessman said, “This story of an old guard that prevents some reforms is nonsense. Bashar manipulates everybody and this serves him as a cover, especially for intoxicating European officials who believe in him. He is the son of his father by belief and methods.” ICG interview, Damascus, April 2003.

⁴¹ ICG interview with Western diplomat, Damascus July 2003.

generation officials and civil servants are frustrated with the slow pace of reform.⁴² Personal and ideological rivalries exist within generations, and alliances cut across them; much of the domestic paralysis results from a vast, lethargic bureaucracy accustomed to the status quo.⁴³

Furthermore, the distinction between old and new guards wrongly assumes that positions on reform are fixed, regardless of the stakes or issues. Yet, an official can be a proponent of a free market economy when a family member stands to benefit from a state concession to a private company and turn “socialist” when privatisation plans threaten jobs of those under his patronage. Nor is economic reform talk all that new: it was first announced after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and has repeatedly surfaced, though it has rarely amounted to much. Ultimately, “the old and new guard paradigm, whether in Palestine or Syria, has the sole virtue of re-labelling as political analysis what is mere demographic tautology: that young generations will succeed older ones”.⁴⁴

But to see in Bashar an unreconstructed pan-Arab nationalist, resistant to economic and political reform is equally questionable. There is little doubt that he remains dependent on the regime he inherited and of which he is a quintessential product. He may have received part of his medical instruction in the UK, but his entire political education is Baathist as are the foundations of his rule. He has yet to devise or implement a coherent project or strategy of his own, domestic or foreign. At the same time, there is good reason to believe that Bashar, more than many others within the regime, is aware that its longer-term stability requires change, modernisation and foreign help to salvage the country from an economic crisis generated by widespread corruption, a vast and unproductive public work force, outdated socialist laws and considerable red tape.

Ultimately, Bashar seems a reluctant, albeit willing captive – an aspiring reformist who realises that his longevity is tied to the stability of the Baathist regime, which, in turn, is tied to the perpetuation of certain domestic and regional policies.⁴⁵ His approach is ideological in the sense that ideological fidelity is an important ingredient in a pragmatic strategy of regime survival. In foreign policy, this has meant avoiding any radical departure from his father’s approach, which would have exposed him to strong domestic criticism; resisting what are perceived as hostile U.S. regional moves; and banking on the U.S. bogging down in Iraq and failing on the Israeli-Palestinian front. Domestically, this has meant initial, modest steps to modernise and rationalise public administration, streamlining the public sector without challenging the economic, let alone political system as a whole.

⁴² Vice-President Khaddam, for example, a reputed hawk on foreign policy matters, reportedly has advocated a more open economy. ICG interview with Syrian economist, Damascus July 2003.

⁴³ Osama Ansari, a London-based Syrian banker, explained: “It is not just hard-core socialists, but civil servants” who are resisting change. Quoted in *The Washington Post*, 23 November, 2001. According to an EU estimate, the public sector employs 73 per cent of the labour force but contributes only 33 per cent to the Gross Domestic Product. Euro-Med Partnership, “Country Strategy Paper 2002-2006”, no date.

⁴⁴ ICG interview with Middle East analyst, London, December 2003.

⁴⁵ ICG interviews, Beirut, Damascus, June-September 2003.

II. THE FATE OF REFORM

A. THE DAMASCUS SPRING

Syrians were optimistic that Bashar would preside over the regime's liberalisation. This was largely based on his youth, that he had studied three years in London, his stated intention to modernise the country and tolerate "constructive criticism" and his insistence on transparency and fighting corruption.⁴⁶ His government took steps to end nearly four decades of state monopoly over banking and foreign exchange, introduced legislation to encourage foreign investment and relax rent control, spearheaded efforts to enhance the autonomy of state-owned enterprises and undertook some educational reforms, including private schools and universities. For the first time in at least three decades, the government presented its annual budget *before* the start of the year. There were also hints of political change such as the decision, publicised in July 2003, that "party institutions and comrades should stay away completely from the daily implementation [of state policies] and refrain from intervening in the work of institutions ... of the state".⁴⁷

From June 2000 to August 2001, Syria's long-silenced civil society took advantage of this changed atmosphere to call, from within the country or via the relatively free Lebanese press, for a democratic opening. Poets, writers, academics and artists entered the political arena, speaking up on such once taboo topics as public freedoms, human rights, corruption, the right of citizens to participate in decision-making and the fate of detainees and exiles.

Meetings, communiqués, forums for public discussion (*muntadayat*) and informal groupings flourished. In September 2000, leading intellectuals signed the "Manifesto of the 99" demanding the

lifting of the state of emergency and martial law imposed in 1963, a general amnesty for all political prisoners and the return of political exiles. The petition also called for freedom of expression, freedom of the press and "the freeing of public life from the restrictive chains imposed on it".⁴⁸ Signatories included the poet Adonis and writers Sadiq al-Azm and Abd al-Rahman Munif, who count among modern Arabic literature's foremost. Soon, 1,000 intellectuals went further, demanding free elections and the end of the Baath political monopoly.⁴⁹ Nizzar Nayouf, a human rights activist, told a Lebanese newspaper that it was his "dream to get rid of the remnants of dictatorship and totalitarianism in Syria".⁵⁰

Opposition parties also became more active. In May 2001, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood published a National Charter in London that called for a modern and democratic state and rejected political violence.⁵¹ Left-wing parties, nationalist and Marxist, held debates on such topics as the rule of law, democratisation and independence of the judiciary. Non-Baathist members of parliament such as Riyad Seif and Ma'mun al-Homsî spoke in favour of sweeping reforms, measures to stamp out corruption and the need for greater civil liberties. Calls for change also emanated from official and quasi-official institutions; 70 lawyers of the Baath-dominated Bar Association urged the state to clear the way for more political parties.

The regime's initial response was encouraging. It pardoned hundreds of political prisoners, including communists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, shut down the notorious al-Mazza and Palmyra prisons, allowed other parties in the National Progressive Front to publish and sell their own newspapers and approved a license for publication of two private magazines, *Ad-Dumari* and *Al-Iqtisadiyya*.

But the liberalisation drive came to a rapid and sharp halt. Beginning in February 2001, senior officials began accusing activists of facilitating a "neocolonialist movement".⁵² In a memorandum, the

⁴⁶ In his inaugural address, Bashar pointed at the lack of a clear economic strategy during his father's rule and the need for reforms based on "accountability", "transparency", "active participation", "administrative reform", "the rule of law" and "democratic thinking". The latter, he explained, is "based on the principle of accepting the opinion of the other". Yet Bashar added that "Western democracy" culminated from historical events different from Syria's own evolution: "We [therefore] have to have our democratic experience which is special to us, which stems from our history, culture, civilisation and which is a response to the needs of our society and the requirements of our reality". *At-Thawra*, 17 July 2000.

⁴⁷ Decision 408, cited in *Al-Iqtisadiyya*, 8 July 2003.

⁴⁸ The full text of the letter was printed in the Lebanese daily *As-Safir* on 27 September 2000.

⁴⁹ See *As-Safir*, 11 January 2001.

⁵⁰ Cited in *Mulhaq an-Nahar*, 21 July 2001.

⁵¹ See *Al-Hayat*, 4 May 2001.

⁵² As then Minister of Information Adnan Umran put it: This "neocolonialism no longer needs armadas and armies. It relies on other and cheaper means, such as the civil society

Baath Party attacked them for weakening or discrediting state institutions and perpetuating the economic crisis.⁵³ The government tightened censorship, placed strict restraints on political activities (in particular contacts with the outside world) and arrested key figures. It also issued new guidelines on publications, banning the printing of any information that might “harm national security, unity of society, security of the army, the country’s international ties, the country’s dignity and prestige, the national economy and monetary security”, and threatened violators with three years imprisonment and fines up to U.S.\$20,000.⁵⁴ Baath Party members were dispatched throughout the country to accuse activists of “harming the stability and unity of Syria” and “collaborating with Syria’s enemies”.⁵⁵ Organisers of meetings were ordered to submit in advance lists of participants and agendas. When Riad Seif held a meeting without seeking permission, he was immediately arrested.⁵⁶ Others shared his fate, including the head of the dissident Communist Party, 71 year-old Riyadh al-Turk;⁵⁷ former University of Damascus economics professor Aref Dalila, a free-market advocate and frequent speaker at various gatherings; and Ma’mun al-Homsi, a member of parliament.

B. AFTER IRAQ

In the immediate aftermath of the Iraq war, speculation was rampant about the fate of the

movements that are paid for by foreign embassies”. Cited in *An-Nahar*, 9 February 2001.

⁵³ See *Al-Hayat*, 19 March 2001.

⁵⁴ The new press law was issued in September 2001. For an analysis see Human Rights Watch, “Memorandum to the Syrian Government, Decree N°50/2001: Human Rights Concerns”, 31 January 2002.

⁵⁵ The Baath party reportedly issued an order for its members to attend meetings and forums to express these accusations. See *Al-Hayat*, 9 February 2001.

⁵⁶ Others believe that Seif crossed the regime’s line by accusing the government of corruption in the decision to issue two mobile phone company contracts, at heavy cost to the state treasury. ICG interview with Syrian political analyst, Damascus, July 2003. For Seif’s memorandum to parliament (4 August 2001) see “‘Aqd al-Khaliwi yadi’u 400 milyar Lira ‘ala ad-Dawla as-Suriyya”, Appendix 2 in Arab Commission for Human Rights, op. cit.

⁵⁷ Al-Turk was sentenced in June to 30 months in prison for attempting to change the constitution. Bashar subsequently ordered his release on 16 November 2002 for “humanitarian reasons”. Al-Turk suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure.

neighbouring Baathist regime, particularly in Washington.

At first blush, there are striking similarities: authoritarian and secular regimes both, with significant power in the hands of a hegemonic political party and a minority group (Alawi in one case; Sunni in the other), strong roles for the military, and numerous security and intelligence agencies. Both featured a Republican Guard, drawn heavily from the privileged minority group and akin to a praetorian guard tasked with defending the capital and protecting the regime against a coup or popular uprising.⁵⁸ The military and special forces had been used in both cases to subdue rebellions: the 1982 uprising in Syrian Hama and the 1991 intifada in southern Iraq. Another similarity, particularly during Hafez al-Assad’s presidency, was the personality cult, with typical symbolic manifestations (statues, monument, giant portraits, hymns). Under both regimes, the state and public sectors played central economic roles and corporatist central control was exercised through trade unions, professional associations and the like. Both faced a Kurdish problem, though far more intensely in Iraq.⁵⁹ Moreover, if the first “dynastic presidency” was in Syria, Saddam Hussein was clearly grooming his sons.

Yet, the similarities went only so far, and to read Syria’s future through an Iraqi lens would be a serious mistake. Significant differences go well beyond the important personality distinctions between Saddam Hussein and Hafez al-Assad.⁶⁰ They relate to the genesis and development of the state structures and societies. Notwithstanding the atrocities committed in the early 1980s, Syria never witnessed the degree of perpetual state repression and sheer brutality of Iraqi Baathism. Several explanations have been offered. As noted, authoritarian rule in Syria required cooptation of

⁵⁸ Maher Assad, the President’s brother, is responsible (together with Bashar) for the Republican Guard forces deployed in the mountains around Damascus and supervises the regime’s security apparatus.

⁵⁹ Kurds are present in northeastern Syria and in big cities, and are roughly 9 per cent of the population.

⁶⁰ “Saddam Hussein’s cult, like his person, is flamboyant and audacious....He is physically youthful and vigorous. Assad is emphatically not charismatic; he is not even particularly energetic. His speeches are deliberate and slow....Assad is cautious, a politician known for his cleverness rather than his bravado”. Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago, 1999), p. 28.

many forces beyond the regime core. In part because the Alawi minority is only 12 per cent of the population, it has sought arrangements with other important groups, especially constituencies among Sunnis, who are not a politically, socially or culturally homogenous group. Damascus holds a unique place in this political architecture. The regime constantly has striven to ensure the loyalty of its commercial and religious institutions, and it was virtually the only significant urban centre not to experience the bloody events of the 1980s. Syria's relatively meagre oil resources also arguably required it to seek domestic tranquillity by complementing economic patronage and state-violence with negotiation and compromise:

Unlike Iraq, where Saddam's domestic and regional ambitions were matched by his financial means, our country is poor. That is why the Syrian regime has had to display the flexibility and tactical deftness that its Iraqi alter ego so clearly lacked.⁶¹

Ironically, the Syrian regime has become far more embedded in the nation's social fabric than was its Iraqi counterpart *because* of its comparative limitations and weaknesses.

Still, the political impact of Saddam's ouster on the Syrian regime was palpable, not least of all because it shattered the myth of the omnipotent authoritarian Arab state.⁶² To a number of Syrians, "the way Baghdad fell, without much resistance, was humiliating. It shed a new light on how things were here at home, how vulnerable the regime was, how empty its slogans"⁶³ "Iraq, which in the eyes of the Arab world once embodied the myth of military, police and technological power, crumbled at lightning speed! Today, the strength that our regimes claimed to represent is a sheer lie that no longer fools

anybody".⁶⁴ Fear of the Syrian state – already markedly diminished with Hafez al-Assad's death – eroded further. In the immediate aftermath of the war, many Syrians displayed far greater willingness than openly to question their political system. Expectations of rapid change were widespread among the intellectual opposition: "In Syria, we do not need a war to achieve regime change! The regime can fall very quickly: at the first sign of trouble, the oligarchy will almost certainly flee with the money it has stolen and already safely placed abroad".⁶⁵

A prominent Syrian opposition figure explained:

After Iraq, the ordinary Syrian citizen expects a change, expects that things will move. The authoritarian regime in Syria died with the U.S.'s victory in Iraq. Since that time, one can sense a growing politicisation of Syrian society and a genuine desire to have a role in public life. People are much more eager to speak out.⁶⁶

Also notable, including among some early Baath Party founders, was a certain satisfaction at the collapse of what they considered a betrayal of Baathism – Baathism as an instrument of social coercion. Another regime critic and leading Baathist from the 1940s-1950s, said:

Nothing would give me more satisfaction than the definitive elimination of the Baath and its obliteration from the Arab world. In Syria, since the February 1966 coup, it has become a loose assortment of incompetent individuals without a genuine sense of identity, nothing more than clientele ready to be bought ... What matters today is that my children can eat...If you give people the freedom to think, to write and to decide, maybe new and competent elites will emerge who will be able to govern this country.⁶⁷

⁶¹ ICG interview with journalist belonging to Syrian opposition, Damascus, April 2003.

⁶² As the war unfolded and its outcome became clear, Syrian officials went out of their way to distinguish their regime from the Iraqi. Buthayna Shaaban, then spokeswoman of the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and close advisor to President Bashar, wrote: "The Iraqi crisis provides from the outset proof that the Iraqi people is the victim of a bloody dictatorship . . . The regime had . . . mobilized the country's resources as well as its human and cultural capital at the service of a handful of people unworthy of representing their country and their people". *As- Sharq al-Awsat*, 18 April 2003.

⁶³ ICG interview with Syrian analyst, Damascus, July 2003.

⁶⁴ ICG interview with Syrian movie director, Damascus, April 2003.

⁶⁵ ICG interview with university student, Damascus, April 2003. Some went so far as to predict that, sensing the regime's demise, a challenger would come from the inside. "Should a Chalabi or a Karzai emerge in Syria, he probably would come from within the regime itself, and not from the current opposition". ICG interview with Islamist militant, Damascus, April 2003.

⁶⁶ ICG interview with Riyyad at-Turk, Damascus 22 April 2003.

⁶⁷ ICG interview, Damascus, April 2003.

Calls for greater freedom, heard during the Damascus Spring but then quickly silenced, once again were voiced by Syrians at home and via the Lebanese press. Seeking to invoke the Iraqi events in a way that might be more acceptable to the regime, and fearing association with the U.S., whose Middle East policies were hugely unpopular,⁶⁸ opposition figures called for a national awakening and democratic opening precisely in order to stave off foreign intervention. Opposition members made clear they would not challenge the Syrian regime “on the back of an American tank”.⁶⁹ In one petition, 120 members of the exiled and internal opposition wrote:

The United States has never dared occupy a country where there exists minimal harmony between those who govern and those who are governed. All U.S. wars have been wars against weak, illegitimate regimes that are cut off from their people and incapable of embodying national unity against foreign threats ... The war against Iraq demonstrated the inability of the single party and of the security apparatus to defend national independence, sovereignty and dignity . . . People living under oppression cannot protect and defend their country.⁷⁰

In another, 287 intellectuals and political activists denounced the U.S. intervention in Iraq and Israeli aggression, which “place Syria between two enemies with forces it has never seen before”.⁷¹ The only way to face this challenge is to mobilise “a free society”, hold a national conference with the participation of all Syria’s political figures and respect human rights:

Today, we are facing a dilemma: either the dictatorship continues indefinitely, or we go down the Iraqi road with the risk of chaos and long-term foreign occupation. I am afraid for my country and it is important for me that it not collapse into a cycle of violence, vengeance and pillage. The only wise course is for everyone to take his responsibility and work

for a change that is not accompanied by a national catastrophe.⁷²

Signalling a degree of tolerance for this approach, Syrian television aired a call by Tayyib Tizini, a philosophy professor, for “national reconciliation”.⁷³ General Bahjat Suleiman, head of the security services and a central regime figure, implicitly praised Syria’s opposition on the grounds that, unlike its Iraqi counterpart, it was not seeking to overthrow the regime or willing to cooperate with the U.S.⁷⁴

The regime proclaimed several positive steps over the six months following the war. In April 2003, the ministry of education dropped the 30-year old mandatory military uniform for students from kindergarten to high school and the “military training” module from the national curriculum⁷⁵ and dismantled several Baath Party youth organisations.⁷⁶ Schools were allowed to accept assistance in English-language training from the U.S. embassy⁷⁷ and, breaking a tradition of tightly state-controlled higher education, two private universities were licensed to operate in the provinces.⁷⁸ NGOs working on “soft” issues such as the environment and women’s rights were allowed to operate.⁷⁹ The

⁶⁸ ICG interviews, Damascus July-September 2003.

⁶⁹ Haithem al-Manna’, a veteran critic of the Syrian regime, as quoted in Arabicnews.com, 25 August 2003. Manna’ was allowed back into Syria in August 2003 after having lived in Paris in exile since 1978. ICG interview with Haithem al-Manna’, Damascus, August 2003.

⁷⁰ *Akhbar as-Sharq*, 23 April 2003.

⁷¹ For the full text of the petition, see *Akhbar as-Sharq*, 1 June 2003.

⁷² ICG interview with a signatory of the “Manifesto of the 99”, Damascus, April 2003.

⁷³ This occurred on 3 May 2003, and was aired on Syria’s satellite television station.

⁷⁴ “In Syria, the regime does not have enemies but ‘opponents’ whose demands do not go beyond certain political and economic reforms such as the end of the state of emergency and of martial law, the adoption of a law on political parties and the equitable redistribution of national wealth”. *As-Safir*, 15 May 2003.

⁷⁵ See *Middle East International*, 16 May 2003.

⁷⁶ See *The Washington Post*, 12 May 2003.

⁷⁷ ICG interview with U.S. diplomat, Damascus August 2003.

⁷⁸ The Syrian Minister for Higher Education, Hassan Risheh, openly considered inviting the American University in Beirut to open a branch in Syria. He also called on the U.S. to increase student exchanges. See *As-Sharq al-Awsat*, 25 August 2003. One of the newly licensed universities is owned by a cousin of Bashar al-Assad. ICG interview with Syrian economist, Damascus August 2003.

⁷⁹ ICG interview with Syrian NGO activist, Damascus July 2003. Syria counts approximately 500 to 600 officially recognised and functioning NGOs, a strikingly small per capita number as compared to most countries in the region. ICG interview with Haithem al-Maleh, Syrian human rights activist, July 2003. See also Karim Abu Halawa, “At-Tahuwwulat al-Mujtama’iyya wa Dawr al-Munazamat al-Ahliyya”, in Arab Commission for Human Rights, op. cit. Other more politically oriented NGOs, such as human rights organisations, operate in a legal limbo.

government also abolished the notoriously corrupt and harsh “economic security courts” and lifted strict penalties on illegal trading in foreign currencies.⁸⁰ Even the security forces were widely seen by civil society activists to have relaxed their stringent surveillance and interrogation techniques.⁸¹ In early 2004, the regime released 123 political prisoners, primarily members of Islamist parties and the Iraqi Baath but also Fares Murad, a communist activist detained since 1975.⁸²

Despite early expectations, however, there was no fundamental change. The March 2003 parliamentary elections were held under basically unaltered rules and the Baath Party won 167 of 250 seats, leaving the previous allocation basically unmodified. Draconian emergency laws stayed in effect while roughly 1,000 political prisoners and the ten activists of the Damascus Spring remained behind bars.⁸³ Fourteen other civil society activists, arrested in August 2003 on their way to a lecture on the “state of emergency”, currently are on trial before a military court in Aleppo.⁸⁴

C. WHAT DOES BASHAR WANT?

The more recent setback, like the period that followed the Damascus Spring, led to a host of interpretations regarding President Bashar and the nature of the political system. The most commonly advanced explanation by Syrian opposition activists is that, having built centralised, authoritarian rule, Syrian officials – reform-minded or not – feared that changing one aspect of the system could pull it all apart. A signatory of the “Manifesto of the 99” said:

The *islahi* (reformist) current grew out of Bashar’s inaugural address. At the end of the day, however, it chose to close ranks with those in the

regime who favour the status quo rather than with elements of Syrian society who aspire to change. No doubt, this had to do with power relations and political calculations. But it chiefly had to do with the fear they all shared of losing the power and privileges inherited from Assad-the-father.⁸⁵

In this, the economic and the political are interlinked: deep public sector reforms would undermine patronage and clientelism.⁸⁶ Likewise, widespread corruption is a central feature of the system, affecting all administrative levels and regulating entire facets of the economy. In the public sector, extremely low wages have made it a virtual necessity. What is relatively new is that private sector businessmen who took advantage of economic liberalisation have become major beneficiaries of corruption. As a result, they have monopolised most of the new lucrative markets and compete directly with the traditional bourgeoisie of Aleppo and Damascus that Hafez al-Assad had studiously tried to co-opt.⁸⁷ Ironically, because they have been so limited, the economic reforms may have done as much harm as good. A businessman explained: “Everyone benefits from corruption, the old guard as much as the so-called new. The sons of regime officials have thrown themselves into the business world and have carved out privileged zones. Corruption has become all-encompassing, whereas under Assad-the-father, it was at least somewhat constrained”.⁸⁸

That said, and as stated above, a strong case can be made that Bashar came into office intent on modernising Syria and if not halting then seriously reducing corruption, and aware that this would require bold economic and perhaps even political steps. During the first two years of his presidency, three quarters of the roughly sixty top political, military and administrative office holders reportedly have been replaced.⁸⁹ Among those Bashar promoted are persons educated in the West who share a more reformist outlook and, in several instances, are not members of

⁸⁰ ICG interview with Syrian economist, Damascus, August 2003.

⁸¹ ICG interview with Syrian political and human rights activists, Damascus July-September 2003.

⁸² *Bayan*, 1 February 2004.

⁸³ ICG interview with Haithem al-Maleh, Damascus August 2003. Syria’s longest held political prisoner is Imad Chiha who has been in prison for 28 years, allegedly for membership in the unauthorized Arab Communist Organisation.

⁸⁴ The group includes two prominent political activists, Fateh Jamus and Safwan ‘Akkar, who earlier spent fifteen years in prison for membership in the illegal Communist Action Party. The fourteen claim to have been tortured during their interrogations. See Jama’iyyat Huquq al-Insan fi Suriyya, *Bayan*, 26 January 2004.

⁸⁵ ICG interview with Syrian movie director, Damascus, 30 April 2003.

⁸⁶ ICG interview with Syrian opposition member, Damascus, April 2003.

⁸⁷ See Joseph Bahout, “Les Entrepreneurs Syriens. Economie, Affaires et Politique”, *Cahiers du CERMOC*, N°7, Beirut 1994.

⁸⁸ ICG interview with leading Damascus businessman, Damascus, April 2003. Nabil Sukkar remarked: “Hesitant reforms will get us nowhere. Either you have an old-style socialist economy or a modern capitalist one”. Quoted in *National Review*, 2 December 2002.

⁸⁹ See Volker Perthes, *Syria Under Bashar al-Assad: Modernization and the Limits of Change*, (London, Adelphi Paper, Forthcoming).

the Baath. By the same token, it almost certainly is the case that, particularly in the early days of his rule, and unlike his father, Bashar has had to share authority with other power centres, including the political/economic elite that is entrenched in the public sector, the army and security services.⁹⁰ He lacks any permanent cadre to help him.

The result is two-fold. At one level, people resisted Bashar and his attempted economic and public sector reforms. Although unconfirmed, Damascus is replete with rumours of presidential decisions thwarted by the system – party, security services or elite.⁹¹ Describing how the system ignores the president, a member of parliament said: “Bashar is akin to the traffic signs in this country. It is in principle forbidden to use your horn and yet the noise is overwhelming”.⁹² At another level, Bashar was resisting his own earlier impulses, recognising both that changes could imperil regime stability and that perpetuation of patronage and clientelism could buttress it. Hence, he put the brakes on the former and turned a relative blind eye to the latter.

The crackdown engineered in the wake of the Damascus Spring and the decision to slow reform in the aftermath of the Iraq war appeared to reflect a

compromise: political change was blocked while some limited economic reforms were allowed to proceed. As justification, the latter were portrayed as prerequisites to subsequent political liberalisation.⁹³ Even non-political reforms have run into trouble. According to a recent study by the University of Damascus, some 1900 decrees, laws and administrative orders carrying Bashar’s signature have been issued since 2000.⁹⁴ Yet very few have been implemented, a result of bureaucratic inertia or outright opposition by high-ranking officials, but also because the measures were not underpinned by an overall, coherent reform vision.

All told, many reforms advocated by the president were relatively modest. But they would have created their own momentum and might well have had unplanned consequences had their implementation been facilitated.

⁹⁰ Volker Perthes in “Emerging Syria 2002”, part of the Emerging Markets Series, prepared by the Oxford Business Group, pp. 28-29.

⁹¹ As illustration of the Syrian regime’s ability to block political reforms, observers point to Bashar’s apparent backtracking on his June 2003 promise to grant individual amnesty to returning exiled opposition members. According to various reports, the move was blocked by Syria’s intelligence and security services. ICG interviews with Syrian journalist, political analyst close to the regime and Syrian opposition figures in Damascus and London, September 2003. Another instance of alleged behind-the-scenes infighting involved decision 408 spearheaded by Bashar and adopted by the Baath Party Regional Command in June 2003, which called for a strict separation between party institutions and state daily policies. The decision was widely perceived as an attempt by Bashar to pave the way for the appointment of more non-Baathists to government positions; yet in the new cabinet, formed almost two months after Bashar had first announced his intention to appoint a reformist government, the share of Baathist ministers increased, and some of those closest to Bashar were not appointed, including Ratib Shalah, the Syrian Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry and economist Nabil Sukkar – both of whom were rumoured as possible choices for prime minister. ICG interviews with European diplomat and Syrian observers, Damascus September 2003. See also Muhammad Jamal Barut’s analysis in *Akhbar as-Sharq*, 13 October 2003.

⁹² ICG interview, Damascus August 2003.

⁹³ As stated by Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam: “The Europeans experienced real democracy only after citizens’ economic needs had been addressed....As there is yet no economic maturity in Syria, there can be no democracy”. Cited in *Al-Hayat*, 10 July 2001.

⁹⁴ ICG interview with Syrian academic, Damascus July 2003. One example of an ill-fated law involves the decision to hand back to their original owners land exploited by state farmers. According to several accounts, the ministry of agriculture resisted, arguing that the land had been owned by the state for nearly 40 years and that the state farmers were all “good party members”. The decision reportedly was cancelled because of excessive controversy. ICG interviews, Damascus, July 2003. See also Volker Perthes, *Syria Under Bashar al-Assad*, op. cit.

III. THE DEBATE ABOUT REFORM

A. AN URGENT NEED FOR CHANGE

Plagued by widespread corruption, ageing state industries, a volatile and under-performing agricultural sector, rapidly depleting oil resources, an anachronistic educational system, capital flight and a lack of foreign investment, Syria's economy has become unproductive. The country once was able to make up for this through what may be called "foreign policy dividends," income generated by aid from Iran in the 1980s and the Gulf in the early 1990s (in both cases largely in appreciation for Syria's role in countering Iraq), and more recently through trade with Iraq in violation of UN sanctions. "The regime's foreign policies were Syria's main export product".⁹⁵ No such safety valve now exists. Moreover, if extraction continues at the current rate, oil resources risk running out within the next ten years.⁹⁶

While regime elements have been the staunchest opponents of reform, they also are likely to be the first victims of its absence because the economy is gradually undermining the regime's support base. Insufficient job creation is one clear indicator of problems ahead. With slackening growth and annually over 300,000 new jobseekers, unemployment is high and increasing.⁹⁷ Government job-creation programs are unable to keep pace. There also is anecdotal but compelling evidence of growing income disparities⁹⁸ and of significant and rising poverty.⁹⁹ Together, these developments cannot but

⁹⁵ ICG interview with Syrian academic, Damascus July 2003.

⁹⁶ For estimates of Syria's oil reserves, see U.S. Department of Energy, EIA, "Country Analysis Brief: Syria", March 2003. For recent discussions of Syria's economic crisis see Nabil Sukkar in *As-Safir*, 14 and 16 June 2003; Hanadi Salman in *As-Safir*, 31 July 2003; Hussayn al-Qadi, *Al-Islah al-Iqtisadi fi Suriya, Ila 'Ayna?* (Damascus, 2002).

⁹⁷ Official estimates vary but some suggest that unemployment reached 15 per cent in 2003. See *Tishrin*, 7 May 2003. For a discussion of official statistics see Muhammad al-Rifa'i in *Tishrin*, 18 August 2003. According to independent estimates, the figure is closer to 20 per cent. ICG interviews with Nabil Sukkar, Damascus, July 2003 and Lebanese economist Kamal Hamdan in Beirut, September 2003.

⁹⁸ An estimated 5 per cent of the population is believed to control some 50 per cent of national income. See Volker Perthes, *Syria Under Bashar al-Assad*, op. cit.

⁹⁹ Unofficial estimates of poverty vary widely between 25 and 60 per cent of the population. See Hanadi Salman in *As-Safir*, 31 July 2003; Violette Dagher, "Muqadamma", in Arab

erode regime support among the poorer and lower middle classes that have been among its most important constituencies. In their eyes, Syria has become a country of "neither bread nor freedom".¹⁰⁰

In other ways, too, the political repercussions of a cash-strapped economy are already at work. A shrinking real economy reduces the availability of bribes, rents and economic privileges, thereby undermining regime ability to rely on patronage and economic control. Tribal challenges to Baathist supremacy used to be contained by distributing "business" opportunities and oligopoly positions in customs collection, cattle export to Saudi Arabia and local transport companies. In mid-2003, reduced revenues from all these sources triggered intensified rivalry, culminating in gang warfare and score-settling between tribes in Aleppo, each of which appeared to be backed by local branches of the secret service (*mukhabarat*).¹⁰¹ Inability to preserve law and order further turned locals against the regime.¹⁰²

Finally, according to reports, the effects of corruption can be felt in foreign policy: the provision of military hardware to Iraq prior to the war, and the turning of a blind eye to the infiltration of militants across the border in its aftermath both have been attributed in part to personal initiatives by officials or well-connected elites motivated by financial gain. This apparent privatisation of foreign policy in a system formerly known for highly centralised control must be another concern, particularly in a volatile international environment.

Judging from the regime's own discourse, the need for change is gradually becoming more widely acknowledged in official circles.¹⁰³ Reformist

Commission for Human Rights, op. cit.; 'Amr Mahmud, "Al-Iqtisad bayna al-Waqi' wa al-Aafaq", in Arab Commission for Human Rights, op. cit.

¹⁰⁰ Alan George, *Syria*, op. cit.

¹⁰¹ The tribes involved were the Basri and Hamidi. Several persons are said to have been killed in daylight assassinations. ICG interviews in Aleppo, August 2003.

¹⁰² "As tribal conflicts were played out on the streets people realised that the government's influence was waning, and they got angry. So they embraced Islamist slogans denouncing the local authorities' corruption and incompetence." Ibid.

¹⁰³ The Lebanese *Daily Star* published a Syrian state-sponsored dossier entitled "Syrian Arab republic: A New, Proactive Direction" that stressed the virtues of economic liberalisation and Syria's vast potential for foreign investors. See *The Daily Star*, 22 April 2003. For the government's official reform drive, see Syrian Arab Republic, "The Ninth

elements within the regime also seem to recognize the strategic benefit from enhancing Syria's international stature. Yet, there still is insufficient awareness of the gravity of the problem and its potential political impact. Some seem to harbour a belief that foreign currency reserves are sufficient to stave off an economic crisis;¹⁰⁴ a diplomat explained the complacency by observing: "Syria's economy basically thrives on two factors: rain and oil. For now, both are ok".¹⁰⁵ In fact, the availability of financial resources means that the time is ripe to initiate serious reforms while a safety net can be put up to limit attendant economic hardships.¹⁰⁶

For other officials, genuine change is impossible to contemplate as it would threaten their privileged positions. An important implication is that absent genuine political reform – greater accountability, transparency, public participation and a freer media, all of which would create new instruments of legitimate rule – it will be extremely difficult to introduce the necessary economic changes and break the cycle of corruption and inefficiency.

What this means, as well, is that to succeed the reform movement (whether within the regime or the opposition) will need to reach out to a broader segment of Syrians than thus far. While most criticism for the failure of reform to date must fall on the regime, the opposition is not exempt. In explaining the failure of the Damascus Spring, some Syrians note that the educated, urban middle class that spearheaded it had few if any ties to the broader public, particularly in rural areas. This also holds for efforts after the Iraq war. Both appeared to be instances of elite movements that neither spoke nor listened to the concerns of the vast majority of Syrians. One Spring activist lamented:

Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social development for the Years 2001-2005", Damascus, March 2002.

¹⁰⁴ Syria's foreign currency reserves are estimated at a comfortable U.S.\$14 billion but they are dwindling (in 2002, they were U.S.\$ 23.5 billion). ICG interview with Syrian and foreign economists, Damascus and Beirut August-September 2003. The 2002 figure is from Syrian Arab Republic, Central Bureau of Statistics, "Syrian Statistical Abstract 2002", Damascus, 2003. "With reserves like these and its tight fiscal policy, Syria has effectively implemented an IMF program without the IMF". ICG interview with foreign economist, Beirut October 2003.

¹⁰⁵ ICG interview, Damascus, December 2003.

¹⁰⁶ As a diplomat posted in Damascus put it, "in another five or six years, the situation may be very different". ICG interview, Damascus, December 2003.

The forums were a good beginning but we were largely talking to ourselves. A clear or real alternative to the regime's policies failed to emerge and so very few actually listened to what we were saying. But what can you expect? For 35 years they have effectively been killing political society. The great leader was thinking for us all.¹⁰⁷

Some participants in the Damascus Spring also acknowledge that they may have pushed too far, too fast, issuing maximalist demands that provoked a sharp response. The key, they say, is to persuade regime officials that reforms will not necessarily threaten their survival.¹⁰⁸ Some opposition figures suggested that human rights abuses committed at the height of the armed clashes between the regime and the Islamists in the early 1980s should be the subject of a mutual amnesty. Others have proposed that the Baath retain its dominant role during a transitional period to a multi-party system,¹⁰⁹ thus giving the opposition the chance to show it could "behave responsibly."¹¹⁰ Some reform-minded Baathists have called for splitting the party into two factions as a first step toward controlled pluralism.¹¹¹

B. THE FEARS

Pressed about the need to accelerate economic and especially political change, Syrian officials cite a number of fears.¹¹² They need to be taken seriously; though sometimes feigned and often exaggerated, they reflect concerns genuinely felt even by many who support the reform movement.

¹⁰⁷ ICG interview with Syrian opposition figure in Damascus, 22 July 2003.

¹⁰⁸ ICG interviews with Syrian opposition figures in Damascus and London, July-December 2003. See also Burhan Ghalyun, *Al-Ikhtiyar ad-Dimuqrati fi Suriyya*, (Damascus, 2003), p. 154.

¹⁰⁹ Youssef al-Faysal, the secretary general of the legalised faction of the Communist Party, said: "Some of the leaders of the *muntadayat* (discussion forums) were too extremist and proposed changing the system or the constitution, like Article 8 [stipulating the Baath's leading role in state and society] ... This extremism invited a similar reaction from the Bath party". Cited in Hanadi Salman, *An-Nahar*, 31 July 2003.

¹¹⁰ ICG interview with Syrian opposition figure in Damascus, December 2003.

¹¹¹ ICG interview with Baath party member, Damascus, December 2003.

¹¹² For an interesting discussion of the regime's fears, see Ghalyun, op. cit. Although officially banned, the book is available in Damascus bookstores.

1. The Islamist Threat

The argument against opening up the political system most often repeated is the risk of an Islamic fundamentalist takeover.¹¹³ It is often made to Western audiences; as a close advisor to Bashar put it, “Islamism is a real danger threatening Syrian society. Veils are present everywhere. The West should help us confronting that danger. Democracy will only allow these forces to mobilise”.¹¹⁴ The argument carries weight with some U.S. and European diplomats, who see the secular Syrian regime as a bulwark against a far more dangerous, radical, Islamist takeover.¹¹⁵

For many Syrians, unquestionably, the memory of the earlier confrontation with the Islamists remains vivid. Equally undeniably, Syrian society has lately become more Islamic, evidenced by the increased number of veiled women (*muḥajabat*), skyrocketing mosque-construction, a thriving religious literature market, significant growth in Islamic charity organisations and rising attendance at informal home Koran classes.¹¹⁶ Political Islamism as such lacks any active organisational structures. The Muslim Brotherhood, plagued by prolonged leadership struggles, forced into exile and with the death penalty hanging over membership, never recovered from the crackdown of the early 1980s.¹¹⁷ Operating between Jordan and European capitals, it claims “thousands of members” but all outside Syria.¹¹⁸

That said, it appears to retain a large reservoir of dormant sympathy, especially among lower middle class Sunnis. A leader of the secular opposition described it as still “the most credible” of Syria’s opposition forces, a view echoed by some religious leaders.¹¹⁹ This can at least partly be explained by the regime’s almost obsessive denunciation of the party since the 1980s. A schoolteacher recalled, “When I grew up we were forced to shout slogans at school against the Muslim Brotherhood. Not having any idea who they were or what they stood for, we began to like them because it was the regime that was making all our lives miserable”.¹²⁰ Over time, the Brotherhood’s social base appears to have changed, from the business classes to the urban underclass, urbanised villagers, merchants, in effect mimicking the Baath’s own populist origins. An advisor to President Bashar remarked that, through changes in its social base and its ideological transition from free-market adherents to populist advocates of state control, the Brotherhood had become “very much a replica of the Baath.”¹²¹

But the belief that opening up the system might pave the way for a violent, extremist form of Islamism raises several questions. While immediate free elections might indeed prove destabilising and therefore inadvisable, there is a strong case that the rise of Islamism in Syria has been fuelled precisely by the lack of economic opportunity, the closed nature of the political system and the deficit of democratic representation, all of which have led Syrians to search for alternative channels of expression and forms of social assistance. Many developments have been important in enhancing the appeal of Islam, including particularly anger at U.S. policies.

But the domestic situation should not be overlooked and, indeed, the combination of the two is potentially explosive: “There is no doubt that islamicisation has been given a boost by U.S. policies in Iraq and by its bias in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Because people are unable to express themselves freely, they give rise to their anger by turning to religion”.¹²² In this respect, “although they lack a legal political organisation, the Islamists make use of the entire religious

¹¹³ Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam told civil society activists in 2001, “We will not allow you to turn Syria into another Algeria”. Cited in *Al-Hayat*, 19 February 2001. “If elections were to take place in Syria, there is a good chance we would find ourselves in the same position as Algeria. Americans have such short-term perspective!” ICG interview with high-ranking Syrian official, Damascus, May 2003.

¹¹⁴ ICG interview, Damascus 23 April 2003.

¹¹⁵ ICG interviews, Damascus, July 2003.

¹¹⁶ ICG interviews with Syrian journalists, political activists and imams, Damascus July-September 2003. See also Hanadi Salman in *As-Safir*, 29 July 2003, Thanna’ al-Imam in *An-Nahar*, 23 January 2002. Shaaban ‘Abbud in *An-Nahar*, 30 December 2003. “Before, people who fasted in observance of Ramadan were subject to ridicule. Now, it is the other way around”. ICG interview, Damascus, November 2003.

¹¹⁷ For an analysis of post-1982 divisions within the Muslim Brotherhood, see Anwar Abd al-Hadi Abu Taha et al., *al-Ahzab wa al-harakat wa al-jama’at al-Islamiyya*, (Damascus, 2000), pp. 296 ff.

¹¹⁸ ICG interview with Syrian Muslim Brotherhood’s *murshid al-‘am* (Supreme Leader), Ali Bayanuni, London 28 June 2003.

¹¹⁹ ICG interview with Riyyad at-Turk, Damascus 22 April 2003; ICG interview with imam, Damascus, September 2003.

¹²⁰ ICG interview, Aleppo, August 2003.

¹²¹ ICG interview, Damascus, August 2003.

¹²² ICG interview with Syrian journalist, Damascus, November 2003.

infrastructure, including mosques and charitable institutions, which allows them to spread their influence and lay the groundwork for future political activism".¹²³ Stifling of political participation and discredited official ideology lead to a vacuum that Islamic discourse is best equipped to fill.

Informal religious schooling, which tens of thousands of Syrians – mainly women – are believed to attend, is an example. Impossible for the *mukhabarat*, to control fully, it offers a rare space for Syrians to discuss politically sensitive issues openly. At the same time, it helps cushion the effects of poverty, as participants may set up joint funds from which all can borrow in turn. As an indication the phenomenon may be spreading, the *mukhabarat* reportedly arrested individuals who attended home classes to discourage others.¹²⁴ With the most popular Islamic tutors, such as Munira al-Qubaysi, who has virtual star status among segments of the population, the regime's margin of manoeuvre appears to be constrained.¹²⁵

Moreover, despite its secular ideology, the regime itself has from the early 1980s sought to co-opt religious discourse as a means of compensating for the fragility of its popular support. The strategy has antecedents in Egypt and Algeria but to an extent backfired in both by encouraging a demand for religion that government was not qualified to satisfy and so promoting militant Islam without buttressing the regime's credentials. The Grand Mufti of Damascus, Sheikh Ahmad Kaftaru, has received large subsidies that have allowed him to spread an increasingly conservative variation of Sunni Islam via a host of Koranic schools, religious centres and mosques.¹²⁶ Some Baath officials themselves have sought to highlight their religious beliefs, "forming a new movement in the regime, Islamist but who favour the status quo".¹²⁷

The regime appears particularly concerned about moderate forms of political Islam, suggesting that it fears the growth of a potentially powerful rival.¹²⁸ Several imams who sought to initiate local community projects or criticised the regime in Friday sermons were either fired or transferred to remote areas.¹²⁹ In April 2003, 24 persons were arrested who, citing Moslem values, had taken an initiative to sweep the streets and remove rubbish in their neighbourhood in Darya, near Damascus, and videotaped this as an example for others.¹³⁰ Likewise, the regime rejected requests by moderate Islamists, including Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, to establish political parties. By suppressing vehicles for peaceful expression of political Islam, a source close to the government warned, the regime is playing with fire:

Anti-Americanism is rising in virtually all segments of society. When mixed with Syria's gradual islamisation, it becomes only a matter of time before such sentiments get translated into violent forms of *jihadism*. Faced with this threat, the regime is making various concessions, for example by tolerating fierce anti-U.S. verbal attacks in mosques, thereby only making the situation worse. It would be better advised to allow mainstream and moderate Islamist groups into parliament and the government, so as to channel this energy peacefully.¹³¹

and military-style marches in black uniforms in Aleppo. After reports surfaced that the movement had been infiltrated by Syria's secret service, it quickly fizzled. ICG interviews, Damascus-Aleppo, July-August 2003. In this instance, according to several sources, the regime had allowed or perhaps even encouraged the movement in order to identify radical militants who might otherwise have formed their own clandestine organisations.

¹²³ The regime also has taken repressive measures against so-called Jihadist groups such as Hizb al-Tahrir. ICG interviews with NGO activists and political analysts, Damascus, August 2003. They form the bulk of Syria's political prisoners. See Syria chapter, in "Amnesty International Report 2003".

¹²⁹ ICG interview with Syrian Imam, Damascus, September 2003.

¹³⁰ ICG interviews with Syrian human rights activist and observer, Damascus July 2003. The Human Rights Association of Syria reported that eleven members of the group were tried in military court without proper defence and sentenced to three to four years in prison on charges of taking part in an illegal demonstration. See "Human Rights in Syria", HRAS Newsletter, January 2004.

¹³¹ ICG interview, Damascus, December 2003.

¹²³ ICG interview with member of Syrian opposition, July 2003.

¹²⁴ ICG interview with a prominent imam in Damascus, September 2003.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ For a study of Kaftaru's Islamic teachings and institutions, see Annabelle Boettcher, *Syrische Religionspolitik unter Assad* (Karlsruhe 1998). Muhammad Sahrur, a controversial liberal Moslem thinker, stressed the danger represented by the state-sponsored conservative religious establishment. ICG interview, Damascus, July 2003.

¹²⁷ ICG interview with Syrian activist, Damascus, July 2003. Moreover, on the eve of the Iraq war, a "Jihadist" group led by Sheikh Abu Ka'ka was given permission to hold rallies

Much debate in Syria regarding the Islamist threat has to do with the nature of the Muslim Brotherhood. Clearly responsible for terrible acts in the early 1980s, and suppressed by the regime, the Brotherhood is still viewed by the Baath as a violent foe intent on imposing an extremist, theocratic system. Contacts between the regime and the Brotherhood were initiated in the mid-1990s after the organisation's former leader, Abd al-Fattah Abu Ghudda, was granted permission to retire in Syria. But negotiations aimed at allowing members to return failed.¹³²

Through its statements and political program, the Muslim Brotherhood clearly has sought to dispel its former image. It has stopped insisting on the right to use violence, no longer calls for the introduction of Islamic law (*shari'a*) and claims to espouse democratic principles. In the same vein, it has ceased to play openly the communitarian card and appeal for Sunni mobilisation against the Alawi – an attitude that backfired in the 1980s. Riyyad at-Turk, along with a number in the secular opposition, believes that the Brotherhood:

has reached a certain political maturity and is prepared to accept the democratic game. Of course, more extreme trends exist among them, but they can be contained through political competition and pluralism. Islamists always prevail during transitional phases because they are the best organised: they have the mosque and do not need to go underground like all other political forces. But I am convinced that their status will decline once democracy is introduced.¹³³

¹³² According to the Muslim Brotherhood's Supreme Leader, Ali Bayanuni, the principal stumbling block was the regime's position that there would be no general amnesty but rather a case-by-case process pursuant to which each returning Muslim Brotherhood member would have to repent for past crimes. ICG interview with Ali Bayanuni, London, 28 June 2003. The regime disputed the movement's sincerity in asserting it wants to become a moderate, peaceful organisation, claiming it was driven by tactics or lack of funds. See, for example, Sha'ban Abbud in *An-Nahar*, 7 September 2002.

¹³³ ICG interview with Riyyad at-Turk, Damascus, 22 April 2003. An assistant to the Grand Mufti, Sheikh Kaftaru, commented that "at some point, the Muslim Brotherhood would be a potential candidate for a party, perhaps under another name". ICG interview, Damascus, August 2003.

Others take the view that Syria is, in effect, already in a post-Algeria phase, in that the traumatic experience of the 1980s has hurt the regime but also discredited an Islamist state. "Even in Hama, which witnessed the worst of the regime's brutality, the people blame both sides for the tragic events".¹³⁴

While the regime should do its part to co-opt more moderate Islamic forces, for example by extending an amnesty to political activists, including Brotherhood members, who have not participated in acts of violence,¹³⁵ the Brotherhood also needs to take steps. It has not yet publicly accepted responsibility for its share of violence in the 1970s and early 1980s.¹³⁶ It also remains ambiguous as to whether it will still seek retribution for past human rights abuses against its members, thereby fuelling concerns within the regime.¹³⁷ It should make absolutely clear its commitment to non-violence, democracy and respect for the rule of law, and that it excludes any score-settling.

2. Sectarian and Ethnic Strife

Sectarianism is seldom discussed openly.¹³⁸ The opposition treads carefully: "the confessional question is absent from the opposition's discourse. To a large extent it has to do with fear of the regime's reaction, but it also reflects a desire not to undermine national unity".¹³⁹

Yet, beneath the surface, anxieties and tensions are palpable. Alawis close to the regime fear a sectarian backlash in the event of political change and question their future in a Sunni-dominated country.

¹³⁴ ICG interview with Syrian opposition member, Beirut, July 2003.

¹³⁵ An advisor to Bashar claimed he had been pressing this point, so far to no avail. ICG interview, January 2004.

¹³⁶ In an interview with ICG, Ali Bayanuni took a step in that direction: "We didn't start the violence. It was a reaction to the terrorism of the regime. We couldn't isolate ourselves from the public sentiments at the time. But, yes, it was a mistake to get involved in violence". ICG interview, London 28 June 2003. Secular opposition groups are united in their demand that the Brotherhood recognise its responsibility as well. ICG interviews, Damascus, August 2003.

¹³⁷ Bayanuni acknowledged that some in the regime fear what might happen to them in the event the Muslim Brotherhood were to return amidst a process of reform. "But the Syrian people should decide what we will do with the past. If the regime's victims will call for prosecuting them in courts we will not stop them." Ibid.

¹³⁸ See Burhan Ghalyun, *Al-Ikhtiyar*, op. cit., pp. 142 ff.

¹³⁹ ICG interview with Riyyad al-Turk, op. cit.

Memories of the Muslim Brotherhood's violent campaign against Alawis in the 1970s – during which they were denounced as apostates (*kuffar*) – understandably remain fresh.¹⁴⁰ How well founded these worries still are is uncertain. As previously noted, the lines between Alawis and Sunnis are not as clearly drawn, and the regime has been relatively successful in co-opting Sunnis in the military, state bureaucracy and the business class. When asked, opposition members are quick to dismiss the prospect of inter-sectarian strife, arguing that the Alawis are not, as a community, in power:

Power is not being used by the Alawis; rather, the Alawis are being used by those in power. The regime is built around a core group whose members tend to come from a single confessional group, particularly in the security and intelligence services, but they do not represent the Alawis in their entirety. Indeed, all religious groups are more or less represented in the regime.¹⁴¹

Haysam al-Maleh, an Islamist human rights activist, echoes this view: “it is not the case of a confessional community that governs; instead it is the case of a group that uses a confessional group to govern”.¹⁴² Syrians also note that just as the regime has strong allies within the Sunni community, so too are many of its opponents Alawis. One such explained: “The Alawis don't rule Syria. We all live under the same regime. Indeed, Alawis are highly over-represented among Syrian political prisoners”.¹⁴³ On this issue, too, however, the Muslim Brotherhood has yet to distance itself clearly from past behaviour.¹⁴⁴

In the view of some officials, another unwanted consequence of political liberalisation could be the demand by Kurds – roughly 10 per cent of the population – for autonomy or even independence. During the Iraq war, some in the regime appear to have feared the example set by Iraqi Kurds. Officials reportedly urged Syrian Kurdish leaders to state

opposition to the U.S. invasion. Several Kurds were arrested and peaceful Kurdish demonstrations suppressed prior to, during and directly following the war.¹⁴⁵ Even some members of the opposition accused Syrian Kurds of espousing a “Kurdish chauvinist reading of history”.¹⁴⁶

Like their Sunni counterparts, however, a number of Kurdish leaders with genuine popular followings have become part of prominent state institutions, with Sheikh Kaftaru, the Grand Mufti, perhaps the most prominent example. Kurds have grievances – including the denial in 1962 of Syrian nationality to up to 200,000 born in Syria and their offspring,¹⁴⁷ the government ban on Kurdish language and cultural expressions, and the harassment and arrest of Kurds for organising cultural activities, such as the *Nawruz* (new year) celebrations. But for the most part, and aside from minority views predominantly held in the exile community, Syria's Kurds have not echoed their Iraqi counterparts' demands and have framed their claims in terms of equal citizenship rights.¹⁴⁸ Keeping Kurdish activism away from nationalist demands should be possible, but will require something other than the regime's at times heavy-handed approach.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ ICG interview with Syrian human rights activist, Damascus July 2003. See also The Human Rights Association in Syria, “The Effect of Denial of Nationality on the Syrian Kurds”, Damascus, November 2003, p. 10.

¹⁴⁶ See Akram al-Bunni in *Al-Hayat*, 24 September 2003. Similar accusations were levelled by Sham'un Danhu in the opposition newspaper *Akhbar as-Sharq*, 13 October 2003. Danhu argued that as a result of events in Iraq, Syrian Kurds increasingly use the terms “West Kurdistan” and “Syrian Kurdistan” and are “distorting and ‘kurdinising’ Syrian history”.

¹⁴⁷ In 1962, a census taken in al-Jazira province deliberately failed to register up to 200,000 Kurds in an attempt to “arabise” the region. Among other things, these Kurds (*al-maktumin* – the “unregistered”) have been denied the right to hold a passport, vote, own property and officially register their marriages. See Human Rights Watch, “Syria: The Silenced Kurds”, October 1996, The Human Rights Association in Syria, “The Effect of Denial of Nationality”, op. cit.

¹⁴⁸ One Kurdish group in exile, the Western Kurdistan Association, insists on full independence within a larger Kurdistan. It dismissed the view that Kurds would be satisfied with equal treatment, saying, “Kurds in Syria can't speak their minds freely”. ICG interview, London, October 2003. The civil rights agenda was most clearly articulated by Faysal Youssef, the leader of the Syrian branch of the Kurdish Progressive Party (KDP). See *An-Nahar*, 8 August 2003.

¹⁴⁹ In June 2003, eight Kurdish civil rights activists were arrested after demonstrating in front of the UNICEF building in Damascus. Their trial is scheduled for February 2004. Two

¹⁴⁰ See Hans G. Lohmeyer, *Opposition und Widerstand*, op. cit., pp. 199-200, 269, 278.

¹⁴¹ ICG interview, Damascus, April 2003.

¹⁴² ICG interview, Damascus, April 2003.

¹⁴³ ICG interview, Damascus, April 2003.

¹⁴⁴ Asked about the issue of sectarianism, Moslem Brother leader Bayanuni blamed the regime for “ruling as a minority”, while adding, “We are a majority”. He then claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood has excellent relations with non-Sunni opposition members. ICG interview with Ali Bayanuni, London, 28 June 2003.

President Bashar promised improvements and, in August 2002, paid an unprecedented visit to the predominantly Kurdish province of Hasaqa, during which he reportedly agreed that the 1962 census was “a big mistake”.¹⁵⁰ Practical follow-up is needed.

3. The Fear of Economic Dislocation

One of the strongest arguments against economic reform is that it is virtually certain to involve painful, immediate socio-economic repercussions, including more unemployment and poverty. Reforms will mean labour cuts in state-owned enterprises¹⁵¹ while food prices are likely to increase as subsidies and price controls are lifted. Avoiding necessary reforms now, however, will only postpone them to what probably will be a more precarious moment, when fewer resources will be available with which to fund a safety net. The economic blow should be cushioned with intensified job-creation programs, which the international community should help with by co-funding. At the same time, measures to fight corruption and collusion between the state and private businesses, combined with steps to increase commercial opportunities for medium and small-sized businesses could help improve competitiveness and redistribute income. Should reform occur in a climate of improved relations with the U.S., moreover, as advocated in the companion ICG report, the economy could be strengthened by increased tourism and, especially, the opening of Iraq's market to products from Syria's labour-intensive industrial and service sectors.¹⁵²

other Kurdish activists were arrested in a similar demonstration in December 2002 and have been held incommunicado. See Amnesty International, “Syria: Kurdish Prisoners of conscience must be released immediately”, 9 January 2004.

¹⁵⁰ Cited by Faysal Youssef in *An-Nahar*, 8 August 2003. On the census, see fn. 145 above.

¹⁵¹ A European businessman based in Syria explained that reforms would be “very painful. State companies that currently employ 5,000 people may well end up with only 400 on their rolls. You can't implement a reform program without taking this element into account. This is the big issue”. ICG interview, Damascus, July 2003.

¹⁵² ICG interviews with Syrian economist and academic in Damascus, July 2003.

C. THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

As with many Middle East issues, differences between U.S. and European policies toward Syria have grown starker after President Bush's election and the events of 11 September 2001. European countries have maintained a strategy of engagement, seeking to nudge Syria to reform by offering technical and economic assistance. In particular, the EU negotiated an Association Treaty with Syria that includes political, economic, commercial, social and cultural provisions. Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy commented, “the agreement will help Syria better integrate into the world economy, and paves the way for other initiatives, including possible future membership in the World Trade Organisation.”¹⁵³ The EU also expressed the hope that clauses “regarding respect for human rights, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and fight against terrorism will enhance our ability to engage with Syria on these important issues”.¹⁵⁴

In contrast, and at roughly the same time, President Bush – frustrated with Syria's non-responsiveness to repeated demands to change its regional policies – signed into law the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSA) pursuant to which U.S. assistance can only resume if Syria ceases its support for Palestinian and other groups regarded as terrorist, stops sending or allowing volunteers into Iraq, ends its occupation of Lebanon and halts development of WMD and allows UN and other observers to verify the dismantling of any such weapons.¹⁵⁵

Whether and to what extent third party involvement – pressure or engagement – can encourage political and economic change is a matter of debate among Syrian reformers and opposition. There is a growing – if grudging – recognition that it may be needed for real change, particularly on the political front. “Syrian society does not seem capable of initiating indigenous changes that will modify our system of governance. Reform will materialise as a

¹⁵³ “EU-Syria: Conclusion of the Negotiations for an Association Agreement”, http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/syria/intro/ip03_1704.htm.

¹⁵⁴ Chris Patten, Commissioner for External Relations, in *ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ See http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=108_cong_public_laws&docid=f:publ175.108.pdf.

result of outside involvement”.¹⁵⁶ But even Syria’s staunchest reform advocates and most opposition members alike argue that in the present climate U.S. pressure is more likely to backfire than to help.¹⁵⁷ In light of terrorism-related sanctions and SALSA, moreover, there is little in terms of immediate, positive incentives that Washington is in a position to provide.

While on the foreign policy side the U.S. role is critical, on the domestic side the EU and Japan are in the lead¹⁵⁸. In particular, the Association Treaty (subject to signing) gives the EU an important tool. There is little doubt that Syria, and especially Bashar, are “very keen” to conclude the agreement.¹⁵⁹ The EU should use it to seek commitments on issues such as respect for human rights and reforms generally. European and Japanese efforts should be based on the following principles:

Bolstering reformers within the Syrian leadership. Starting from the premise that President Bashar is a genuine reformer thwarted by a recalcitrant and incompetent bureaucracy, France sent senior experts on administrative reform to audit the state administration and recommend actions. Still in its initial stages, the project aims at encouraging him to establish a strong presidential office staffed by a small but capable team of reform-minded

advisors. It has recommended an inter-ministerial “General Secretariat” “to coordinate and rationalize the activities of the different administrations”.¹⁶⁰ This initiative should be followed in particular by an increase in the EU budget for administrative reform in Syria (currently €21 million) and for improving structures of ministries or ministerial secretariats led by reformers.¹⁶¹ Similarly, the EU could assist on judicial reform. More generally, it should initiate a dialogue on political and administrative prerequisites of economic reform.

Syria’s partners should examine how to cushion immediate reform hardships. Under the Association Treaty, both parties gradually would lift trade barriers to allow freer trade. As a result of years of neglect and low productivity, Syria’s industrial and agricultural sectors risk being destabilised by European competition.¹⁶² To mitigate these short-term effects, the EU should provide funds and expertise to assist the Syrian Agency for Combating Unemployment, which has yet to meet expectations but has proven it can make a difference.¹⁶³ Egypt’s Social Fund for Development, which provides micro-credits and water sanitation programs and seeks to create employment, has shown that such efforts can have genuine, if modest, results.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁶ ICG interview with Syrian opposition member, Damascus, July 2003.

¹⁵⁷ Riyadh at-Turk’s view is fairly representative in this respect. Describing U.S. assistance to the Syrian opposition to bring about reform as undesirable, he said, “We want the citizens of the country to be the force behind any change because we’re not ready to forfeit our independence and sovereignty”. Cited in *An-Nahar*, 29 September 2003. The leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood noted, however, that he would welcome “U.S. pressures on Syria to reform”, though he added that he was sceptical that it would be genuinely forthcoming: “We have witnessed so far that U.S. pressures have little to do with domestic reform. The U.S. talks about what happened in Halabja [where the Iraqi regime reportedly killed some 5,000 people] but it does not mention Hama [where the Syrian regime killed perhaps 10,000 to 30,000]”. ICG interview with Ali Bayanuni, London, June 2003.

¹⁵⁸ Japan’s International Cooperation Agency is by far the largest donor in Syria. It primarily finances technical development projects in healthcare, industry and agriculture. In terms of institutional and economic reforms, the European Union sees itself as “only donor capable of making the necessary interventions”. Euro-Med Partnership, op. cit., pp 19-20.

¹⁵⁹ ICG interview with European diplomat, Damascus, December 2003.

¹⁶⁰ ICG interview with French diplomat in Damascus, January 2004. The secretariat was launched in October 2003.

¹⁶¹ These could include the ministry of economy and trade, led by Ghassan Rifa’i, the ministry of labour and social affairs, led by Siham Dallulu, the ministry of tourism, led by Sa’adallah Agha al-Qal’a, and the ministry of education, led by Hani Murtada.

¹⁶² The olive, vegetable and textiles industries – all major contributors to Syria’s GDP – will be particularly endangered. ICG interview with Ratib Shalah, Damascus July 2003. One reason for the delays in negotiations was that Syria wanted a longer grace period for its industries. See interview with former Minister for Industry Issam Za’im in *Al-Hayat*, 16 December 2001.

¹⁶³ This office was established at the end of 2001 and provides micro-credits and educational programs for the unemployed. With a budget of U.S.\$1.5 billion and considerable administrative independence, it claims that its financing of hundreds of projects through 2002 created around 16,000 new jobs. See *Tishrin*, 7 May 2003. In parallel, the European Investment Bank announced it will provide €40 million for financing projects of Syrian small and medium-sized companies. See European Commission’s Delegation in Syria, “EIB Sets up an Innovative €40 Million Scheme”, 10 September 2003.

¹⁶⁴ See World Bank, “Poverty in MENA”, August 2003. <http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/mna/mena.nsf/Sectors/MNSED/>

Europe should press Syria on political reform.

This could be done via the Association Treaty, which contains a clause requiring respect for democratic principles and human rights¹⁶⁵ but does not specify serious follow-up or monitoring mechanisms as in other fields of cooperation.¹⁶⁶ The EU should consider steps to broaden debate on political reform and strengthen Syria's civil society and human rights activists, for example through people-to-people exchanges or the organisation of conferences.¹⁶⁷ Technical aid could be provided to train NGOs and encourage Syria to modify restrictive laws regulating their operation.¹⁶⁸ The European Commission's human rights assessment – being prepared in anticipation of Syria's possible application for assistance under the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights – could serve as an appropriate starting point for a dialogue.¹⁶⁹

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¹⁶⁵ In most such agreements, the clause reads: "Relations between the two parties, as well as the provisions of this Agreement itself, shall be based on democratic principles and fundamental human rights as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guides their internal policy and constitutes an essential element of this agreement". Taken from the Association Treaty with Lebanon, Article 2.

¹⁶⁶ See for example Amnesty International, "Algeria: When Token gestures Are Not Enough: Human Rights and the Algeria-EU Accord", 19 April 2002. In April 2003 the European Commission signaled the need for strengthened EU actions on human rights and democratisation in the region but, thus far, there have been no concrete proposals. See Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, "Reinvigorating EU actions on human rights and democratisation with Mediterranean Partners", 8 April 2003.

¹⁶⁷ The German Friedrich Naumann Foundation initiated an awareness raising program on "citizenship" in the region which includes Syrian civil society activists. It also organised practical training workshops for NGO staff in Damascus and invited Syrian civil society activists to Europe. In December 2003 the Konrad Adenauer Foundation organized a debate in Damascus on the Arab UNDP report and the Canadian embassy co-sponsored a conference on Arab women's rights. ICG interviews with European diplomats and Syrian civil society activists, Damascus, November 2003-February 2004 and telephone interview with Uli Vogt, representative of the Naumann Foundation, on 15 January 2004.

¹⁶⁸ During an NGO training workshop held on 11 October 2003, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Siham Dello said she was preparing to change the NGO law in 2004. "Yet her ministry is weak and she is crying for help". ICG interview with European diplomat in Damascus, 1 December 2003.

¹⁶⁹ Like others, Syria may voluntarily apply for funding for human rights-related projects under the European Initiative for

Recognising the limited potential for U.S. intervention, there remain areas where it could be effective, especially in concert with the EU. In particular, the U.S. should drop opposition to the opening of Syrian membership negotiations with the World Trade Organisation. As European officials have recognised, such membership would require a major revision of Syria's economic and political structures and so encourage the kinds of economic reforms – including transparency and rule of law – that would strengthen reformers. The failure even to start WTO talks was a setback for reformers – including the president – who, after a long internal debate, had overcome the resistance of many conservatives within the leadership.¹⁷⁰

The U.S. also should consider making an exception to allow private funding for Syrian NGOs and for exchanges and assistance in education, along the lines of its Lebanon policy. As a former official in the Bush administration remarked, "right now, our policy does not even allow U.S. government funds to go to civil society activists or micro-entrepreneurs in Syria because of the prohibition on any U.S. government money going to a state sponsor of terrorism. This prevents us from engaging and empowering reformists in Syria".¹⁷¹ Under current legislation, aid has effectively ceased to be available as a U.S. foreign policy tool with Syria. To remedy this, the president should at least be enabled to resume assistance when he certifies this to be in the U.S. national interest.

Democracy and Human Rights by presenting a "National Action Plan". See Commission of the European Communities, 21 May 2003.

¹⁷⁰ ICG interview with Ratib Shalah, Damascus July 2003.

¹⁷¹ Testimony by Flynt Leverett, U.S. Senate, 30 October 2003.

IV. CONCLUSION

Syria faces difficult regional and domestic challenges and is at a turning point. Over three years, President Bashar appears to have consolidated his position and enhanced his powers but whether for lack of will or capacity, the reform agenda has stalled. What change there has been will not suffice either to revive the economy or broaden regime support. Economic development, popular participation and government responsiveness are all necessary to ensure longer-term stability and allow Syria to play a more effective regional role.

Much depends on the international community's ability to offer Syria concrete alternatives if this is to happen.¹⁷² ICG's two reports outline the steps the international community, and particularly the U.S., ought to take in this respect.

But much, too, depends on Syria. The institutions and political actors that have formed the backbone of the regime – the army, security services, Baath Party and political-economic elites – have navigated repeated domestic and foreign crises for three decades, providing the country unprecedented stability. Wary of change and attached to a formula that so far has served them well, they will be hard to persuade of the merits of a course change. Nor should their fears of an Islamist take-over, sectarian or ethnic conflict, and renewed and prolonged instability be taken lightly. Even assuming Bashar wishes to take bold steps, it would be unrealistic to expect a rapid transformation.

Nevertheless, with a failing economy, endemic corruption, growing income disparities, shrinking popular support base, and regional changes that increase external pressures while reducing outside sources of income, there is no guarantee that the old recipe will work much longer.

Syria's challenge is to revitalize, even if only gradually, its political and social contracts. That begins with but must go beyond the modernisation efforts currently spearheaded by the president.

Officials hint to ICG that 2004 will see major political and economic transformations, possibly including modification of Baath Party doctrine, a renewal of leadership, an opening of the political arena and the convening of a national conference to which some opposition groups would be invited. Such utterances have been made in the past to little effect but it is important that this time they become reality. For President Bashar, reform should be viewed not as a luxury but as a strategic imperative that can broaden his popular support and enhance his country's stature and stability.

Amman/Brussels, 11 February 2004

¹⁷² Some observers have noted that progress on the Arab-Israeli peace process has tended to strengthen the more reform-minded elements in the regime while the reverse has bolstered hard-liners. Volker Perthes, "Syrie: Le Plus Gros Pari d'Assad", *Politique Internationale*, Vol. 87 (2000), pp. 177-192.

APPENDIX A MAP OF SYRIA



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