

THE WAYS OF SYRIA - STASIS IN DAMASCUS
By **Fouad Ajami** May/June 2009 - **Itamar Rabinovich**

In one of his sweeping insights, Henry Kissinger once captured the forces at play in Syrian history. "Damascus is at one and the same time the fount of modern Arab nationalism and the exhibit of its frustrations," he wrote. "Syrian history alternates achievement with catastrophe. . . . The injustice of foreigners is burned deep into the Syrian soul." A big and commanding new book of history and diplomacy by the Israeli scholar Itamar Rabinovich takes readers deep into the world of the Syrian state -- and into that mix of pride and injury that has shaped its modern history. Rabinovich tracks the twists and turns of Syria's political journey in recent decades, its transformation from the plaything of outside powers into a player of consequence in the Levant. No other writer has dug as deep into such material as Rabinovich has in this book, a distillation of a lifetime of concern with the ways of Syria.

What the great historian Edward Gibbon once called "the most disgusting of pronouns" -- the writer's "I" -- hardly appears in this rich and luminous book of essays. Yet although it draws on historical material, including memoirs and archives, in Arabic, English, French, and Hebrew, it is also enriched by personal experience. In 1993, the late Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin gave Rabinovich the opportunity of a lifetime: he pulled him out of the academy and appointed him ambassador to Washington and also (and more important for the purposes of this book) chief negotiator with Syria.

To my knowledge, Rabinovich has not walked the streets of Damascus and Aleppo. But his passion for Syria's life runs through this volume. For Rabinovich, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Syrian Baath Party, Syria has always been achingly close yet a forbidden land across a hostile border. His four decades of scholarly and policy work, it could be said, have been a relentless quest to document and understand the puzzle of Syria.

FATHERS AND SONS

The rogues and coup makers whose conspiracies have wrecked Syria's history walk out of Rabinovich's pages. Rabinovich provides a full and vivid chronicle of the way the French mandate in the interwar period tried -- and failed -- to shape and order the Syrian state. Other writers may tell in the most general of ways how the Alawis, a community of heterodox, historically marginal mountaineers, emerged as the masters of this fragmented land. But Rabinovich carefully reconstructs their odyssey, as they rode on the coattails of France through service in its colonial troops, then made their way through the Baath Party and the military to the commanding heights of the political order.

In 1970, an Alawi peasant-soldier, Hafez al-Assad, emerged from a rapid succession of coups d'état. On the face of it, there was nothing to suggest that this coup maker would succeed where others before him had failed. But he was to rule for three decades and bequeath to his son Bashar a political kingdom. Rabinovich provides a subtle portrait of Assad senior, no doubt the last century's most consequential Syrian leader.

To most of Syria's proud urban Sunni community, the Alawis are a people of dissimulation and concealment, and Hafez al-Assad was thought to be an embodiment of his community's ways. He was "deliberate, patient, and cool-headed," Rabinovich observes. As a "grey, slow, somewhat awkward politician," he would tame his once-turbulent and difficult country -- and put in a serious bid for hegemony over the Lebanese and the Palestinians as well. He built his authority "stone by stone," getting what he wanted "by stealth." Rivals were struck down, and many perished in Syria's notorious prisons.

Assad died in 2000, at a ripe old age, and was laid to rest in his ancestral village. The vast majority of his people had known no other ruler. They wept for him, and no doubt for themselves as well: he had given them stability.

But that stability was bought at a terrible price. A country of deep and rich traditions -- Greco-Roman, Islamic, Mediterranean -- had become a cultural and intellectual backwater. To rule Syria, Assad had broken its spirit, denied it the culture and possibilities of modernity. The Baathists had once been dreamers at war with the economic and political hierarchies of the Fertile Crescent. Yet the world that Assad left to his son Bashar was mired in sectarianism: a minority of Alawis ruling a resentful Sunni majority.

The very dynasticism of the succession was a rebuke to all that the Baathists had once thought about themselves. The succession would stick, but the son, a pampered child of privilege, lacked his father's touch. His coming-out, the defining act by which the outside world came to know him and his style, was the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, in February 2005. In the days leading up to Hariri's brazen murder, which happened in broad daylight, outside Beirut's seafront hotels, Bashar and his principal lieutenants had openly bullied and threatened Hariri.

Bashar himself had warned that he would "break Lebanon" over Hariri's head if Hariri ran afoul of his wishes. The Syrians did not even bother with a convincing cover-up; an early United Nations investigation, led by a meticulous German prosecutor, Detlev Mehlis, made official and public the involvement of both the Syrian regime and its closest Lebanese satraps. (An unedited version of the report named Bashar's younger brother Maher, his brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat, and high functionaries of the Syrian intelligence services.) Hafez, it was understood, would have gotten his way without outright murder. The father had secured hegemony over Lebanon in a meticulous, deliberate drive that took well over a quarter century. The son lost that dominion in the blink of an eye. He had misjudged the world around him. Pax Americana was right next door, in Iraq, determined to punish the Syrian regime for its subversion of the Iraqi-Syrian border, and Hariri was a friend of powers beyond -- France and Saudi Arabia.

Five years earlier, there had been hopes that the young man, who had had some exposure to the West, would open up his country: U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who had turned up for the father's funeral, returned from Damascus with praise for Bashar -- he was a "modernizing reformer," part of the Internet generation, she and her advisers said. The inquiries into Hariri's murder shone a floodlight on the workings of the Syrian regime. This was less an organized government than a huge criminal and financial enterprise held together by a security apparatus built around the children and in-laws of Hafez al-Assad and the intelligence barons. In Damascus, it is the rule of the Sopranos.

PRESENT AT THE CREATION

It is not just the style of the incumbent ruler that has put the Syrian state at odds with the order of nations. The flaw lies, Rabinovich notes, in the origins of the independent Syria that arose in 1946. It was born "weak and beleaguered" and has remained a brittle, uncertain state, oscillating between claims of grandeur and a feeling of being persecuted by mightier powers.

"Syria," Rabinovich points out, "has had adversarial relations with all its neighbors -- Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinians." The Syrian nationalists who secured the state out of the remains of the Ottoman Empire and the doings of an uncertain French colonial policy were never content with the hand that history had dealt them. They had irredentist claims in Lebanon, Palestine, and Turkey. A big idea of a "greater Syria" tugged at them, and the delusion of Damascus as the seat of a pan-Arab state was toxic.

There were also deep troubles within -- restive minorities of Alawis, Druze, and Kurds to assimilate and a fault line between the Sunni urban population of the principal cities and the communities of the hinterland. Syria was an agrarian society outgrowing the land and pressed by explosive population growth: when the older Assad claimed power, Syria's population was six million; by the end of his reign, it was 18 million.

Syria's rulers escaped from these burdens into political fantasies and adventures. A Lebanese state had arisen on their western border, midwived by French diplomacy in 1920, with the Christian Maronites as the principal bearers of its national ethos and no small role for the Sunnis. Lebanon was truly a land apart, with its geographic core of Mount Lebanon long accustomed to political independence from the plains below. But the Syrians began to ceaselessly war and intrigue against the sovereignty of this Lebanese state. Additionally, in the late 1930s, a region of mixed population of Arabs and Turks on the Turkish-Syrian frontier -- Alexandretta, with Antioch as its principal city -- had been annexed by Turkey, with French acquiescence. Its "restoration" would also become part of the heritage of Syrian nationalism.

Nor, of course, could the Syrian nationalists reconcile themselves to the triumph of the Zionists in the struggle for Palestine. There was a particularly Syrian refusal of Israel that went beyond the wider regional rejection of Israel's statehood. Israel's territory was "southern Syria," Hafez al-Assad once openly proclaimed in 1974. "Consequently," Rabinovich writes,

"Syria's position in the Arab-Israeli conflict emanates not only out of pan-Arab solidarity, as in the case of Egypt or Iraq, but out of direct relationship of one part of Greater Syria to another part of the same entity."

But the Syrians, and Assad in particular, knew that the verdict of 1948 could not be reversed. They were no match for Israel, and their quest for parity was always hopeless. Soon, however, they would have a narrower claim of their own: the loss to Israel of the Golan Heights in the Six-Day War of 1967. Syrian diplomacy was now faced, as Rabinovich elegantly frames it, with a delicate challenge: how to separate the "problem of 1967" (the Golan Heights) from the "problem of 1948" (the bigger question of Palestine). Syria's leaders found a way, of sorts: ideological and rhetorical belligerence combined with exquisite, unsentimental diplomacy. And what better proof of that diplomacy than the peace that has held on the Israeli-Syrian frontier since the guns fell silent in October of 1973? The cease-fire that then Secretary of State Kissinger secured has not been breached. Syria can have it both ways.

Rabinovich is as subtle as the Syrians themselves in his depiction of Syria's motives and shifts of tactics. There has been little give on the Golan Heights: the diplomacy of three decades has not reversed the verdict of the Six-Day War. Everything on the Golan seems to preclude sweeping changes. There is no moral or political crisis there of the kind that has tormented Israel in the West Bank and Gaza. Nor are there vast expanses of territory that could be traded for peace, as was the case in the Sinai. There have been costs to maintaining the status quo, Rabinovich observes, but the costs -- and the risks -- of change would be greater for both protagonists. There was an opening in the early 1990s, the possibility of a deal between Rabin and Assad. But Assad was cautious to a fault. He would not countenance the public diplomacy of Egypt's Anwar al-Sadat, which changed Israel's opinion vis-à-vis Egypt. Assad thus could only watch as Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinians stole a march on him and left his regime with the dubious mantle of Arab rejectionism.

Rabinovich is right in assigning the weight he does to Assad's minority background. The Alawi stepchild could not risk arousing the skepticism or the ire of the Sunni majority. The political tradition in Syria hemmed him in. As the preminent Lebanese Druze chieftain of his era, Kamal Jumblatt, once put it, whoever rules Cairo is a pharaoh, and whoever rules Damascus is a wali, a provincial governor.

THE STEADY STATE

Nowadays, those who know Syria (and often those who do not) are full of certitude and suggestions about the kind of diplomacy that would "peel off" Syria from the Iranian theocracy and turn it into a normal nation at ease with the world. The new U.S. administration is full of optimism about remaking the world. The regime in Damascus has been identified as a target of opportunity, a brigand regime that was cast aside and needlessly thrown into Iran's orbit by the policies of George W. Bush. American liberals are invested in this view, and the French, with a sense of their special knowledge of Syria and Lebanon, have subscribed to the idea of the urgency of courting and "engaging" the Syrian regime. Rabinovich's inquiry is, on the whole, skeptical of major changes in the conduct of Syria.

To be sure, Rabinovich has a healthy regard for the ability of the Syrian regime to pull off sudden reversals of policy and yet still survive. After all, it is a cold-blooded dictatorship, indifferent to zeal and ideology. Thus it was able to back both the Shiite movement Hezbollah in Lebanon and a Sunni insurgency in Iraq. This is the quintessential "swing state," a regime of Alawi schismatics, secular to the core, yet allied for the last three decades with the Iranian theocrats. In the standoff between the conservative coalition of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia on the one side and the Iranian state and its tributary movements on the other, Syria rides with Iran but always hints that it is open to a deal. Rabinovich provides an important insight into Syria's ride with Iran: whereas Assad senior was able to cultivate a relationship of great convenience to Damascus, the "less dexterous" son has not fared as well. Over the last decade, the alliance has begun to "resemble a patron-client relationship."

Sectarianism and the passions of the Sunni-Shiite struggle have not been the sole (or principal) drivers of this regional standoff. The Iranian-Syrian coalition has made ample room for Hamas and has winked, when necessary, at the most bigoted of Sunni jihadists. The men in control in Damascus know that the Sunni jihadists from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen who land in Syria and then are "escorted" to the Iraqi border are sworn enemies of theirs who see the

Alawis as godless heretics. But this kind of doctrinal purity does not detain the Syrian rulers. These are men without illusions: they know that Sunni urban society (both inside and outside Syria) disdains them, but they rule by guile and the sword. Brute military force, papered over by Baathist pretensions, brought them from crushing poverty to supreme political power in their land. The late Assad barely bothered to travel outside his country; he never journeyed to the United States, and successive U.S. presidents, from Richard Nixon to Bill Clinton, called on him in his capital city or met him halfway, in Geneva. He had no use for the world beyond. For the Alawi peasant-soldier, it had been enough to claim and subdue Damascus.

COURT POLITICS

A United Nations tribunal, now sitting in The Hague, is on Bashar al-Assad's trail for the murder of Hariri. Once an ally of Syria with an exquisite relationship with Assad senior, Hariri ran afoul of the son. Lebanese critics of Syria have long had a habit of falling to assassins' bullets or massive car bombs, with little or no consequences. But Hariri's murder, in contrast, will not go away; it helped drive Syria out of Lebanon. A perfect storm blew apart the Syrian dominion. U.S. diplomats who had been willing to live with a Syrian sphere of influence in Lebanon and had seen it as the best of a bad lot were determined to make Syria pay for its mischief in Iraq. History here had irony: Syria's conquest of Lebanon occurred in the time of Hafez al-Assad and George H. W. Bush; it was reversed in the time of Bashar al-Assad and George W. Bush.

For Damascus, the road back to Lebanon is now blocked. True, Syrian assassins, and their Lebanese proxies, can still kill or maim those in Lebanon who believe in the sovereignty of their land and want nothing to do with Syria. And the regime in Damascus has a strategic partnership with Hezbollah, which has guns and followers aplenty. But the spell is broken, and the border between the two countries has been redrawn.

When the Syrian edifice in Lebanon came apart, there were speculations that the regime's authority would crack at home. Nothing of the sort happened. The regime rode out the crisis and the spectacle of its humiliation. The terror at home intensified. Now, for Syria, there is no way out. Before the time of Hafez al-Assad, 14 presidents came and went in the space of two decades. In the fashion of the time and the place, each announced the birth of a bright new world only to be sent into exile or to fall to new conspirators. That kind of instability is a thing of the past. There is only political sterility now: the rule of the Assads and the false and feeble challenge of the Muslim Brotherhood as an expression of Sunni resentments.

In his inaugural address, U.S. President Barack Obama said that he was ready to reach new diplomatic accommodations with regimes willing to "unclench" their fists. George W. Bush's "diplomacy of freedom" -- which unnerved the autocrats -- was thus given a decent burial. For Syria's rulers, however, calculations of power are theirs alone to make. For them, there are gains to be had from opening up their country. But the costs and the risks are substantial: open up the floodgates, and the realm could be swamped.

Rabinovich has not written a strategic cookbook for those eager to pronounce on Syria's choices and possibilities. But his knowing and authoritative historical account of the origins and the predicament of the Syrian state offers cause for caution -- and for limited expectations on the part of those who turn up at Assad's doorstep. Assad has not been brilliant in the way he has handled the inheritance his father bequeathed to him, but the Assad dynasty and the intelligence barons and the brigade commanders who sustain the regime can be relied on to fight for what they usurped. After all, they stole it fair and square

ISRAEL'S DILEMMA IN DAMASCUS JERUSALEM'S VIEW ON THE SYRIAN UPRISING

Itamar Rabinovich April 10, 2011

In January, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad sat down for a rare and expansive interview with The Wall Street Journal, in which he boasted of the contrast between the crisis then raging in Egypt, which would ultimately topple Hosni Mubarak's regime, and the apparent stability prevailing in Syria. That changed on March 19, when riots and demonstrations began in the cities of Deraa and Latakia and then spread through the country, echoing the calls issued across the Arab world for political reform and freedom. In particular, demonstrators demanded

an end to Syria's stringent emergency laws -- in place since 1963 -- which ban opposition to the ruling Baath Party, censor the media, and authorize the government to monitor and arrest individuals at will. In their efforts to quell the unrest, Syria's security forces are estimated to have killed more than 100 civilians since the protests began.

While the uprising festered, Assad at first remained silent, probably due to inter-regime squabbling about how to respond. When he finally spoke on March 30, instead of ending the emergency law or offering any reforms, he turned to an all-too-familiar trope. "Syria is a target of a big plot from outside," he said. "Our enemies' aim was to divide Syria as a country and force an Israeli agenda onto it, and they will continue to try and try again." In other words, Assad argued, those protesting against the regime are doing so in the service of Jerusalem and Washington.

It is curious and significant that while Assad attempts to paint Israel and the United States as the masterminds behind Syria's problems, Israel itself is ambivalent about the future of his rule. This hesitation stems from the fact that for the past two decades the Israeli-Syrian relationship has unfolded along two, often contradictory, tracks. One has been the quest for a political settlement, launched during the 1991 Madrid conference -- a gathering of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinians convened by George H.W. Bush's administration in the aftermath of the first Gulf War -- and continued under Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in the mid-1990s. Skeptical of the Israeli political system's capacity to absorb simultaneous major concessions on two fronts -- the Palestinian and the Syrian -- most Israeli prime ministers since Madrid have adopted a phased approach to peacemaking, often attempting to strike an agreement with Syria first. According to that logic, the Israeli-Syrian conflict would prove easier to solve. As opposed to the Palestinian Authority, Syria represented a coherent state with more reliable leadership. Syria, in turn, expressed equal interest in a peace deal, hoping to regain territory lost to Israel and improve relations with the United States.

Israel and Syria fleshed out the shape of a settlement during the 1990s, modeling it after the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979. Israel would fully withdraw from the Golan Heights -- the territory it conquered from Syria during the 1967 Six-Day War -- in exchange for security guarantees and a peace treaty. Negotiations proceeded encouragingly for some time, but the countries could not synchronize their respective desires to strike a final deal. The talks finally collapsed in March 2000, during U.S. President Bill Clinton's ill-fated summit in Geneva with Hafez al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad's father, during which Clinton presented Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's final offer. Assad, in the final weeks of his life and focused on transferring power to his son, rejected the bid.

Like other countries in the region, Israel wonders what the alternative to Assad might be.

Assad died in June of that year, leaving behind a complex legacy. He built a powerful state in a country previously riddled with instability and military coups. He also became an important regional actor, allied with the Soviet Union and master of Lebanon. But Syria's stability had feet of clay. Assad hailed from the Alawite minority community, which comprises 12 percent of Syria's population, and his family found it perennially difficult to win approval from the country's Sunni majority. When the Muslim Brotherhood revolted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Assad ruthlessly quashed the rebellion, killing nearly 20,000 civilians in the Brotherhood stronghold of Hama to secure his rule. That brutal episode has had a paradoxical effect: it cowed Syria's opposition, keeping it fearfully silent until now, but instilled in it a lasting desire for revenge.

Fearful of being massacred as a result of losing power, the Alawite military and civilian elite closed ranks. These generals and security chiefs restricted Bashar al-Assad's attempts to liberalize when he came to power. Chastened by the existing order, which viewed him as ineffectual and moody, it took Assad years to establish his authority.

Assad's weakness was particularly visible in his conduct of foreign policy. His father was a master of the dual game: he talked to Washington and allied with Iran; negotiated with Israel and supported Hezbollah's anti-Israeli offensive in Lebanon; participated in the Madrid process but encouraged a campaign against the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, accusing him of selling out to Israel by joining peace negotiations. He excelled in taking advantage of Syria's

value to Israel and the United States as a key player in Arab politics and as the symbolic stronghold of radical Arab nationalism.

Bashar al-Assad has tried to play similar double games in Iraq and Lebanon but has failed to do so as artfully as his father, bringing him into a head-on collision with U.S. President George W. Bush. Although his father had achieved an equal partnership with Iran, Assad appeared more a client than an equal in his relationship with Tehran. Under his rule, Syria became a crucial component in the so-called axis of resistance built by Iran, alongside Hezbollah and Hamas. This alliance set out to foil U.S. and Israeli interests in the Middle East, arguing in favor of violence, rather than peace negotiations, and pitting itself against the more pro-Western camp led by Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.

Assad also pursued his father's two-track line with regard to peace talks with Israel. He has argued that he would like to sign a treaty with Israel in return for its full withdrawal from the Golan Heights, but he has also stated that he is prepared for war should the diplomatic option fail. To bolster his claim, Assad boosted his armed forces and struck a secret nuclear deal with North Korea to send North Korean engineers to construct a secret reactor near the Syrian-Iraqi border. Furthermore, Assad has supported Hezbollah and Hamas in their activities against Israel. Together with Iran, he helped Hezbollah amass an arsenal of 40,000 rockets and missiles and helped turn Gaza under Hamas (whose external headquarters is in Damascus) into a second pro-Iranian base on the Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, Israeli attitudes toward Assad have shifted over the course of his rule. It is important to note that in recent years the greatest support within Israel for a Syria-first deal has come from the defense establishment, which believes that a peace treaty with Syria could represent a crucial step in reducing Iran's regional clout and reversing the darkening landscape in Lebanon. This view -- a formula of territory for strategic realignment -- represents a shift from past negotiations, which entailed territory for peace. The Syrians have proven unwilling to shift away from Hezbollah and Iran, making clear in conversation with U.S. and Western officials that while they may gradually reorient (provided they receive the expected benefits from Israel and the United States), they will not undertake a dramatic change in their allegiances.

Israel's political leadership has pursued the defense establishment's zeal for a treaty with varying degrees of effort. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon focused on the Palestinian issue and refused to negotiate with Syria, which suited the George W. Bush administration. Ehud Olmert, who succeeded Sharon and maintained his predecessor's close relationship with Bush, did negotiate with Assad through Turkey and helped Syria break the diplomatic siege laid by Washington in the wake of Syria's meddling in Iraq and Lebanon. But Olmert had no qualms about destroying the North Korean-built nuclear reactor in September 2007 or about launching further covert operations within Syria. Negotiations through Turkey ultimately broke down in December 2008, when plans to hold a three-way meeting in Ankara collapsed and Israel launched Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, which Turkey severely criticized. Since then, little diplomatic traffic has occurred. Although U.S. President Barack Obama has called for engagement with Syria -- recently sending an ambassador to Damascus for the first time since 2005 -- he has focused on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has also directed his efforts to the Palestinian front, showing little interest in providing Turkey with a fresh role in Arab-Israeli diplomacy through further mediation of an Israel-Syria treaty.

Israel's view of the crisis raging in Syria must be seen against this backdrop. Israeli leaders believe that Syria and the Iranian axis have been weakened by the domestic unrest plaguing Assad's regime. But like others in the region, they wonder what the alternative to Assad might be. Although they are aware of pro-democracy and human rights groups active inside Syria and abroad, they naturally fear the power of the Muslim Brotherhood. With precious little ability to affect internal developments in Syria, Israel can only watch with apprehension as events unfold. Going forward, Israel may wish that it had as much power to influence Syria as Assad claims it does.