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Paradox Lost

By Andrew Tabler

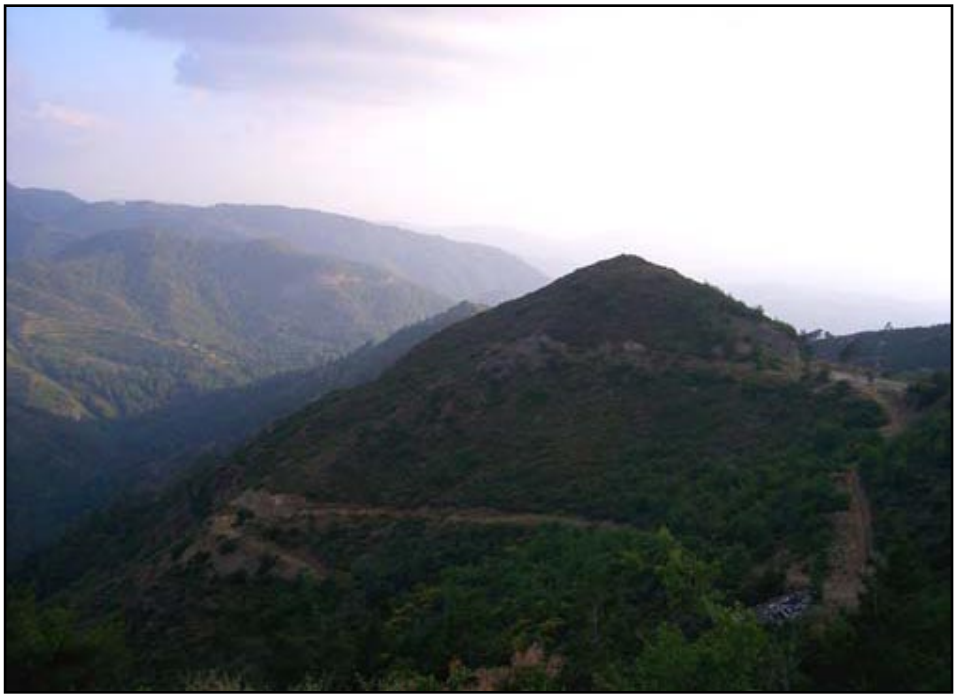
JUNE 2006

AL-QURDAHA, Syria – Syrian opposition activist and Orthodox Christian Michel Kilo noticed something last spring about the obituaries of people in and around his native port city of Latakia. "You rarely see military service in the obituaries of coastal urbanites, while those of their rural mountain counterparts have no civilians — except for those who were 30- or 40-years-old at the time of the March 8 [1963] Revolution and were too old for military service!" Kilo wrote in an article in the London-based Arabic daily *Al-Quds al-Arabi* on May 14.

Syria's leadership and its Alawite sect hail from these coastal mountains. Al-Qurdaha, a picturesque hilltop village about 40 kilometers southeast of Latakia, is the birthplace of the late-president Hafez al-Assad — Syria's most famous and highly secular modern leader. Struggling to climb out of poverty, Assad walked miles to secondary school on the coast every day before enlisting in the army's air corps — embarking on a career that decades later would take him to Syria's top post.

The regime arrested Kilo the next day for "weakening nationalist sentiment" and "inciting sectarian conflict" as well as "undermining the state," "disseminating false news" and "defamation." Many say the regime considered the article the last straw of his political activism over the last year (see AJT-10).

Kilo used the obituaries to make a political point: that Alawites from the mili-



Syria's coastal mountains — homeland of the ruling Assad family and its Alawite sect — have also spawned some of the Arab World's most famous and secular literati.

tary continue to dominate Syrian political life. He had an axe to grind — the regime of President Bashar al-Assad recently launched its widest opposition crackdown in five years. As valid as Kilo's point may be, however, his example captured only a part of the region's rich history of producing influential people. The mountains towering above the Syrian coast — the rocky residue of the African and Asian continents rubbing together — have not just produced military men. They also have spawned some of the Arab World's most famous secular writers, poets and social critics.

How can one area produce two so seemingly different types of people? In search of the answer, I visited Syria's secluded coastal mountains last month and asked local residents about the origins of this seeming paradox. I also wanted to know why their best and brightest — unlike much of the Arab world — tend to focus on this life instead of the next.

Persecution, Colonialism, Gumption

For some, it's a question of geography.

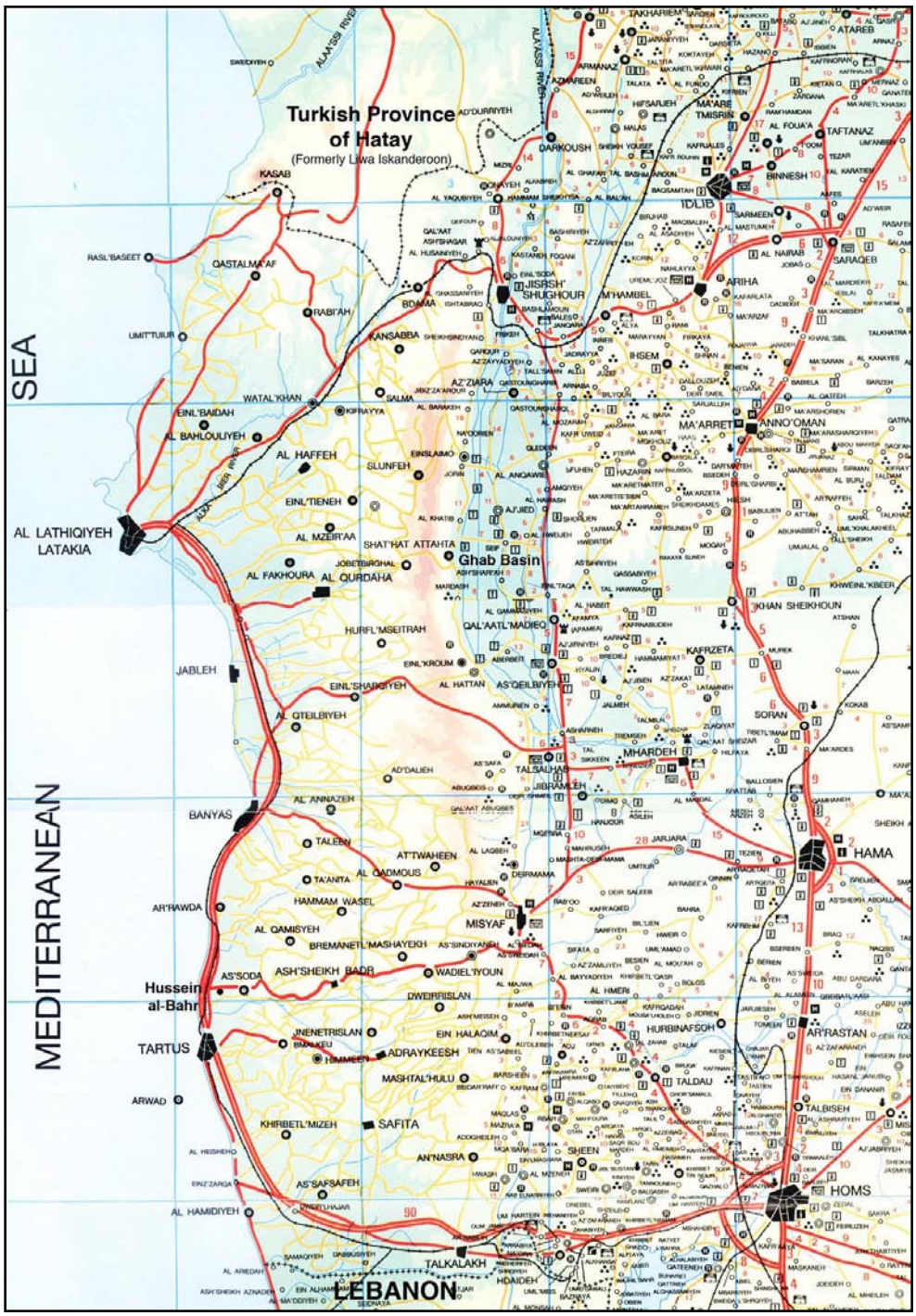
"Your villages produce good playwrights, novelists, diplomats, politicians, administrators and army generals," Hafez al-Assad once said to Lutfallah Haidar, a native of the Alawite village of Hussein al-Bahr and former Syrian ambassador to the United Kingdom and China. "What is so special about them?"

After thinking for a moment of life in his hometown, about 15 kilometers north of Tartus, Haidar replied, "Well Mr. President, we live on hilltops overlooking the sea and the plains below. Perhaps it's because we see the mountains and the sea are in our hands."

Assad smiled slyly and shot back, "But there are thousands of hilltops like yours in Syria. Why don't they produce such people too?"

Syria has other peaks, but the coastal mountains are the country's most hauntingly spectacular. Geologists estimate that the coastal mountains formed some 65 million years ago at the beginning of the current Cenozoic period from a slow collision between the African and Arabian tectonic plates. As they subsequently pulled apart, a fault formed that today encompasses Syria's Ghab Basin, Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, the Jordan River Valley and the Dead Sea — known collectively as the northern tip of the Great Rift Valley.

The Ghab — fed by the Al-A'asi River (also known as the Orontes) — is Syria's most fertile valley. In Ottoman times (1415-1918), large Sunni Muslim landholding families based in the cities of Idlib, Hama and Homs made their fortune in the Ghab, while minorities who fled religious and



ethnic persecution — including Alawites, Ismailis, Christians, and Armenians — toughed it out on rocky peaks to the west. When Alawites came down the mountain in search of work, many were virtually sold into servitude to landed Sunni families. Some say the Sunni were simply taking advantage of the Alawites' poverty. Others claim the Sunnis regarded the Alawites — today considered a Shiite Muslim sect — as "kufar" (apostates) and therefore not entitled to the Koran's moral protection as "People of the Book" (who include Jews and Christians).

The Alawite faith is a bit of an enigma. Like all Shiite Muslims, Alawites regard the descendents of Ali ibn Abi Taleb (the prophet Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law) as the rightly guided leaders of the Islamic faith. (Sunni [traditional] Muslims select their religious leaders based on a consensus of Muslims in a geographic area). Alawites take Ali a bit more seriously, but there is controversy over just how much. The sect traces its origins to followers of the Eleventh Shiite Imam Hasan al-Askari, and his "door" or representative Ibn Nusair (leading them to be branded "Nusairis" by other religious sects). Some sources say Alawites consider Ali as "the purpose of life and the divine knowledge of the Prophet Mohammed." Others claim they regard Ali as "hulul" (a vehicle of divine incarnation or simply divine).

Alawites traditionally worship in shrines dedicated to religious leaders or martyrs. While they seem like small mosques at first glance, none of the standard prayer rugs and minbars (pulpits) can be found inside. At the 500-year-old Sheikh Daher shrine in Al-Qurdaha, a small antechamber with a message in a "lost" language (but in Arabic script) is hewn in stone above the door. The domed inner sanctuary only contains three sarcophagi draped with green ornamented tapestries. On the facing wall, a black wall hanging with the name "Ali" embroidered in gold thread is embellished with phrases praising his name. They resonate outward like spokes of a wheel.

Al-Qurdaha's Sheikh Daher Shrine — a 500-year-old Alawite place of worship situated in an ancient grove of wild oak.

"You are saved from hell for the sake of Ali" reads a phrase from an embroidered wall hanging inside the Daher shrine. "Ali is the best of mankind, and whoever denies this is an infidel" reads another.

Muslims are still fighting over how to consider Alawites, very much like Christians struggle to classify Mormons. Lebanese Shiite Imam Musa as-Sadr officially settled this issue in July 1973 when he declared Alawites to be followers of the Twelfth Shiite Imam Muhammed al-Mahdi — Shiite Islam's largest and most accepted sect. Assad — who seized power in October 1970 — needed Sadr's backing to ensure his grip on the Syrian presidency, a position the constitution says must be held by a "Muslim".

Whatever the case, the great inequality of wealth between different sects near the Ghab would have deep implications for modern Syria. After the Ottoman Empire's defeat in the First World War, in September 1920 the nascent League of Nations awarded France Ottoman areas encompassing today's Syria, the Turkish province of Hatay (known in Syria as Liwa Iskanderoon or to historians as Alexandretta), and Lebanon as "Class-A Mandates." Since these areas had "reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized," France was obliged to the inhabitants of the territory and to the League of Nations to provide "advice and administrative assistance… until such time as they [the mandates] are able to stand alone."

In practice, France ruled the mandates — officially named "Syria and Lebanon" — as colonies and quickly altered their political boundaries. Lebanon grew (see

AJT-7), while Syria split into five autonomous territories: Damascus, Aleppo, the Druze Mountains (south of Damascus), Alexandretta, and "Alaouites" — a homeland for the Alawites in the mountains and plains along the Syrian coast.

Forbidden by the League to raise a mandate army, France instead formed the *Troupes Spéciales du Levant* — an armed force under French command made up predominately of minorities (mostly Circassians and Armenians) opposed to Sunni Arab nationalists dominant in Syria's major cities. France allowed Alawites to enlist in the troupe and supported the coast's political autonomy and aspirations for independence. Then in May 1930, Paris renamed the Alawite territory "The Government of Latakia" after the coast's major port and capital. Independence was short-lived, however, as France came under pressure by Arab nationalist parties in Damascus to unify the territories. The mandate authorities incorporated Latakia into the new Republic of Syria on February 28,1937.

The coastal mountains became an integral part of Syria that day, but the effects of France's colonial machinations lingered for decades. Nabil Soulaiman, a writer, critic and native of Latakia, says that the Alawites suddenly saw a way out of persecution and obscurity.

"In Ottoman times, people from the Syrian coastal mountains lived in isolation," Soulaiman said. "The elite had only limited access to culture and foreign languages. French colonialism broke this with force. The mountain suddenly communicated with the coast…. Parties, schools and roads became active in different regions until they ended the cities' monopolization of politics, the nation and its culture. This may unveil the secret — or part of the secret — behind the appearance later of so many generals who were heavily armed with their political hopes."

Years after his meeting with Assad, Haidar sees his family's career path as part of coastal Syrians' struggle for human development.

"We thought we could find the answer through education," Haidar said. "We were bookworms — we read no less than 20-30 books a summer. After high school, some, like my brother, chose a military career, while others chose cultural pursuits and higher education."

Two Tracks Down the Mountain

The best known of those following the path of the humanities was Hussein al-Bahr, native-son Saadallah Wannus. Born in 1941, Wannus' climb to stardom is not simply a story of a country boy who succeeded in the big city, but of a man who brought rural egalitarianism to the world.

"Saadallah talked with everyone he met from a very early age," Wannus' mother, Khadija Abu Diab, told me. "He liked to listen to everyone's point of view. He was a very simple person — you would never know he was important."

Thirsty for knowledge of the ways of the world, Wannus came down the mountain to Tartus, where he graduated from secondary school in 1959. With a state scholarship in hand, he then sailed to Egypt for advanced study in journalism at Cairo University. Wannus fulfilled the scholarship's service commitment upon return with the daily newspaper Al-Ba'ath and the Ministry of Culture, where he wrote short stories, essays, theatre critiques and plays.

Playwright and author Saddallah Wannus' patented hat and scarf in stone relief marks his grave in his hometown of Hussein al-Bahr, a hilltop village 15 kilometers north of the port city Tartus.

In 1966, Wannus sought further study in Paris, where his work made the leap from storytelling to social critique as Syria journeyed through one of its most turbulent political periods. When a military coup brought the Ba'ath Party to power in March 1963, it declared "emergency rule" to end raging political instability that beset Syria following independence in 1946. Multiparty life ground to a halt, but a struggle within the Ba'ath emerged along sectarian lines. The same year Wannus headed to France, Alawite military officers Hafez al-Assad, Mohammed Omran and Salah Jadid

The coastal mountains' famous native-son, the late-president Hafez al-Assad, took his first step on the path to the presidency when he joined Syria's military academy in 1952.

seized control of the Ba'ath, expelling party co-founders Michel Aflaq (Orthodox Christian) and Salah Eddin Bitar (Sunni Muslim) in favor of the Alawite Zaki Arsuzi (who the junta declared the "Socrates" of the party).

Instead of capping his pen as a member of the ruling sect, in 1968 Wannus wrote "A Party for the Fifth of June," in which he argued that the only way that Arabs could avoid another disaster like that of the June 1967 War was through greater domestic freedoms. A year later, he produced one of his most famous works, "The Elephant, O Lord of Ages," in which Wannus says as long as Arabs are afraid of their leaders, they will never be able to reign in their transgressions, or those of the people who work for them.

Reminiscent of his penchant for talking with the common man, Wannus' screenplays called on actors to ask the audience pointed questions — breaking the so-called "fourth barrier" between performers and spectators. He went on to write over 25 provocative plays, short stories and books criticizing state and society before his death in 1997 following a five-year battle with cancer. Despite decades of Wannus criticism of Assad's authoritarian regime, the late president is said to have personally financed Wannus' chemotherapy treatments.

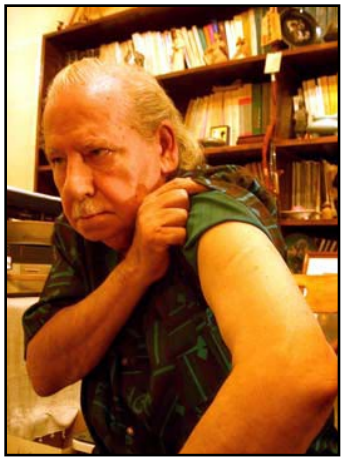
Wannus is but one of many men (and women) of letters hailing from the heights overlooking Syria's Mediterranean coast who have caused a stir, including poets Badawi al-Jabal, Nadim Mohhammed, Nabeeha Haddad and Adonis (Ali Ahmad Sa'id), and writers Bou Ali Yaseen, and (Orthodox Christian) Elias Mourkos. While the subject matters vary, the red thread running through their works is a distinctly secular approach. The works of author Haidar Haidar — another product of Hussein al-Bahr — focus on tyranny and a lack of basic freedoms, democracy and social justice in the Arab World. Following the publication of his staunchly secular book "A Feast of Seaweed," Egyptian Islamists accused Haidar of blasphemy. (I invited Haidar numerous times for an interview, but he was too busy fixing his summer home to accept).

Alawites pursue political activism as well. Author and former Dean of Damascus University's Economics Faculty Aref Dalila remains in prison (now in ill health) after delivering a speech in September 2001 criticizing rampant corruption in the state and Ba'ath Party and advocating democracy and transparency as the cure for Syria's political and economic ills. Recently, Communist Labor Party leader Fateh Jamous was arrested on charges of "publishing news undermining the state" and "contact with Anti-Syrian foreign groups working with foreign states." Jamous previously served over 18 years in prison for belonging to an unlicensed political party. Both were arrested under Syria's 43-year-old and counting Emergency Law (see AJT-10).

Poverty, Partition, and Dialectical Materialism

Latakia-native, author and Orthodox Christian Hanna Mina believes the coast's staunch secularism stems from the grinding poverty of mountain life.

"I suffered from Ophthalmia (neonatal conjunctivitis) when I was born," said Mina, whose eyes remain cloudy, distant and grey. "We lived on the street. The local cure for it was to put the afflicted's urine in a jar, place it for a day in the sun, and then rub it into their eyes. When that didn't work, my mother applied heated tomato slices. I wasted my childhood in misery."



The abject poverty of author Hanna Mina's childhood in Liwa Iskanderoon (Alexandretta) led him to radical politics, and a later encounter with a knife-wielding assassin in Latakia.

While Syria experts often say that the coast was historically the country's poorest, local resi-

The Syrian coast's secular outlook seems to be rooted in its historic role as a nexus between inland caravans and seafaring trade.

dents say they suffered just like everyone else.

"The Syrian coast wasn't any poorer than Damascus," said Hassan M. Youssef, columnist with the daily Teshreen newspaper and a native of the Alawite mountain village of Ad-Dalieh. "*Bilad as-Sham* (The countries of Damascus) were exploited by the Ottoman Sultans, who drafted local people into the military and seized harvests. All of Syria was exhausted — just like Palestine."

Syria's loss of Liwa Iskanderoon — which had sizeable Alawite, Orthodox Christian and Armenian populations — to Turkey in a disputed plebiscite in 1939 prompted poor coastal Syrians to join leftist political parties, which had an early foothold in area.

"The first communist party office in the Arab World was established by the French in Iskanderoon," said Mina, who was born in Latakia in 1924 but spent his childhood and adolescence in Syria's lost province. "When I got a job sweeping the party's office floors, I got involved in politics. At a demonstration over the arrest of [Ba'ath party founder] Zaki Arsuzi, the French forces fired into the crowd, killing a friend standing right beside me. After the conspiracy [plebiscite], I fled to Latakia. When I tried to form a trade union there, someone tried to murder me with a knife. Despite all this, I didn't look back."

Old Habits

Some coastal writers attribute their homeland's secular tradition to the Alawites' practical approach to faith.

"Those living in the Alawite mountains don't have religious institutions to govern them," said Nabil Saleh, a writer from Latakia and editor of Al-Jamal website. "Alawite sheikhs (religious leaders) only preside over marriages and funerals. Alawites also do not force their children to practice Islam before adulthood. Whether they choose to be religious or not, they are judged by their behavior and ethics, not on how well they practice their religion…. That's why people from the coast love freedom and are so sensitive about defending it."

While this answer cuts close to the coast's secular heart, it doesn't explain what is motivating coastal Syrians of other faiths, including Sunnis, Ismailis and Christians. Could the coast's secular tradition predate monotheism as well?

"The Syrian coast is one of the oldest cradles of human civilization," said Youssef. "The border of today's Latakia governorate is the same as the ancient Ugarit Kingdom (1800-1200 BC) — home of the world's oldest alphabet and system of musical notation."

Excavations at Ras Shamra, a few kilometers north of Latakia, have uncovered an ancient cosmopolitan city with prehistoric remnants dating back to 6000 BC. Like ancient Ur in Mesopotamia, Ugarit was where desert caravans met the wider world.

"The Ugarits were people of the sea, which is a symbol of open-mindedness everywhere in the world," Youssef said. "[The sea] doesn't just bring shipwrecks, it also brings new cultures. On the sea, you always see new horizons. That is why people from the Syrian coast are usually a bit more open-minded."

Like the Maronite Christian and Druze areas of Mount Lebanon, Syria's Alawite peaks produce ambitious and defiantly independent people. Be it the result of land, sea or history, coastal Syrians continue to unapologetically make their secular impression on an increasingly Islamacized Arab World. So it might come as no surprise that one Al-Qurdaha resident simply shrugged off Kilo's controversial article like neighborhood gossip.

"Unfortunately, people wrote more about Shakespeare after he died than when he was alive," said 69-year-old Naji Mohammed al-Kuzi. "Kilo should focus on the living and not the dead." ❑

This article would not have been possible without the assistance of Hussein al-Bahr-native Dalia Haidar of Syria Today *magazine, who helped me navigate the peaks, valleys and shores of one of the Arab World's most secluded places.*

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Current Fellows and their Activities

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005 - 2007) • INDIA

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Kay Dilday (October 2005-2007) • FRANCE/MOROCCO

An editor for the *New York Times*' Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her jouralistic life as city-council reporter for Somerville This Week, in Somerville, MA.

Nicholas Schmidle (October 2005-2007) • PAKISTAN

Nicholas is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion and politics in Asia. He is spending two years in Pakistan writing on issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he has reported from Central Asia and Iran, and his work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and others. Nick received an M.A. in International Affairs - Regional Studies from American University in December 2005. He lives with his wife, Rikki.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • SYRIA/LEBANON

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the Economist Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • GERMANY

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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