

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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DEATH AND HOPE IN SYRIA

Dear Peter,

The sudden death of an heir-apparent can blight a nation's mood unbelievably quickly and in Syria last month a swelling ebullience over the peace possibilities raised by the Clinton-Assad talks in Geneva seemed to disappear almost overnight.

Baseel Assad, the eldest son of President Hafez Assad, was for many Syrians a shining hope for liberalization. On January 21 he was killed in a still-unexplained car accident and left a widespread sense of hopelessness in a nation that had -- perhaps unconsciously -- been counting on him to improve the nation's political climate.

The 33-year-old son of the president, a major in the Syrian army and a prize-winning horseman, Baseel was widely expected to succeed his father as ruler of Syria, one of the most influential countries in the Middle East region.

That winter Friday, I sat with an Aleppo family and watched in stunned silence as regular programming on the country's only two television stations was suddenly halted for a special reading of the Koran. The image faded to black and an Arabic text in white scrolled across the screen, announcing the death of "the nation's loyal son, a beloved of God."

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As the late afternoon sun sank behind the dusty northern city, church bells throughout Aleppo rang out in mourning and at mosques, imams read from the Koran: the atmosphere was of doom and national disaster.

The Syrian faces around me paled. As many friends told me later, their first thought was that the president had died. When the name of Major Baseel Assad appeared on the screen, one of the men in the family shuddered visibly and left the room. The two women beside me began to cry. Television mirrored the general despair by showing images of Baseel superimposed on the worried 'Syria,' the final Arabic letter looping around to form a giant teardrop bearing the name 'Baseel.'

The usually jammed streets of the nation's second city were all but deserted that Friday evening and many families stayed home to talk about the implications of the young Assad's death.

"An important door was closed today," a Syrian lawyer told me. "Baseel was young and kind and he would have been a very great leader of our country."

"Syrian under Baseel would have been more liberal," said another Syrian.

"Even though I didn't know him personally, this is like the death of a friend. He was young and bright and athletic and I loved him." mourned a young woman sports coach.

For the next several days, shops and restaurants throughout the nation were closed in sincere mass mourning for Baseel. Many streets were lined with black banners and pictures of Baseel were posted on cars and buildings. Music in public places and in transport buses was replaced by solemn readings of the Koran and the church bells continue to sound day after day. In a Damascus sermon the following Sunday a Syrian pastor spoke of Baseel. He stressed the importance of unity in times of crisis and the need for strength during mourning for a death in the family. Many residents of Aleppo and Damascus wore black, as did television newscasters, who aired footage of Baseel's funeral again and again, to the accompaniment of classical dirges.

Although the president's son had only been an army major and more active in sports than in politics, many Arab heads of state rushed to Syria to pay their respects to the young Assad and comfort his visibly shaken father.

Starting from the day of my arrival in Syria I had seen Baseel's face alongside his father's on key chains, bumper stickers and posters throughout the country and daily in the national media. Until that day, I thought this young man was just another authoritarian member of the Assad family, to be feared and unquestioningly obeyed.

His father has ruled Syria with such a steely grip since 1971 that Syrians refer to their nation as "Assad's Syria." The name Hafez Assad stirs memories of the harshness with which Damascus dealt with the Muslim-Brotherhood-dominated Islamic opposition in the early 1980s. Almost without hesitation, President Assad flattened the country's fourth largest city, Hama, (which even now resembles post-war Beirut), as well as a fair portion

of Aleppo in an attempt to wipe out the Islamists. At least 15,000 people were killed in the massacre, and many thousands more wounded.

Syria now seems to be reaping the benefits from that grim time -- it is quiet and stable -- at a time when other Arab nations reverberate with internal violence, and it is attracting Western visitors frightened by attacks on tourists by Islamic militants in nearby Egypt. But President Assad's methods have left behind a legacy of bitterness and fear.

For much of the nation, the younger Assad represented the possibility of a kinder future. He personified the hopes and aspirations of a nation worried by tension in the Golan Heights and exhausted by seemingly endless talk of peace - with few concrete results. The past decades have brought major and often violent upheavals to Syria's people, divided by religious and ethnic differences but largely united in their dreams of liberty, peace with Israel and stability in Lebanon.

Recent moves toward peace with Israel have brought a cautious yet unmistakable optimism to the many Syrians who have grown up with images of the war in Golan. Israel seized and subsequently annexed the Golan Heights from Syrian in 1967, although on Syrian maps (which do not show Israel), Golan remains Syrian territory.

Only days before Baseel's death, the mood had been ebullient as Syrian families and friends gathered to watch the Clinton-Assad talks, which were broadcast with Arabic subtitles on local television. Although Syrian television broadcasts seemingly endless footage of the peace talks and the politicking that accompany them, many Syrians seem tired of discussing the political ins and outs of the process.

"It's useless to spend energy talking about peace. When the process started in Madrid [two years ago] we were all excited. We talked about it every day and late into the night. Then the answer came from Norway and we realized that the big decisions are quiet, they are not made on TV like this," explained one Syrian a week before the Assad-Clinton meeting. "It is clear that peace will come, we just have to wait for it."

Yet the night of the talks, the enthusiasm was palpable.

"Peace, peace, peace. It's wonderful that it's finally happening. This means the market will open up and our young men won't have to spend quite as long in the military anymore," the owner of an Aleppo shoe shop said.

"Look around. The tourists are starting to pour into the country, the economy is slowly opening up, peace is the natural next stage, and it's about time," said a Syrian building contractor.

Many Syrians said they envisioned a land-for-peace deal concerning the Golan Heights similar to that made between Egypt and Israel in 1979, when Israel agreed to return Sinai to the Egyptians in exchange for peace. None of the Syrians I spoke to said they would object to an international peacekeeping force in the Golan Heights such as that permanently stationed in the Egyptian Sinai peninsula.

"We don't expect to get the Golan back for nothing. If recognizing Israel means peace, we're ready. Better concessions than this endless fighting," a young Syrian told me. He added that he hoped one day soon obligatory military service would be cut down to two years from the current two and a half year minimum service.

Syrian enthusiasm for a land-for-peace solution to the crisis is particularly remarkable since the similar agreement pounded out by Israel and Egypt resulted in the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and remains widely criticized in Egypt and throughout the Arab world.

No Arab leader has taken a harder line against Israel than Hafez Assad, whose remarkably quick change in stance has even some Syrians baffled. Yet if he is sincere in his recent public remarks about "normal peaceful relations" with his long-time foe, he clearly has the support of many of the Syrian people.

While the death of Baseel Assad underlined the fragility of optimism in a region so long devastated by violence, his life proved that the visions of the peaceful Syria he came to represent remain very much alive.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. B. A.', followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Katherine

P.S. An edited version of this newsletter has appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

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