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Rally 'round the Flag

By Andrew Tabler

APRIL 2005

DAMASCUS, Syria – Demonstrations and protests in the Arab World can be exciting to watch, but are not always good indicators of actual popular sentiment. In places like Lebanon and Syria, however, where communal and business alliances prop up political façades often built of irony and paradox, demonstrations are social safety valves where citizens can vent their spleens and politicians can demonstrate their legitimacy from the number of heads counted and the amount of bile spilled.

In Lebanon, the world watched as a Hizbollah-organized rally in Beirut's Riad al Solh Square on March 8 attracted hundreds of thousands of Lebanese supporting Syria's role in Lebanese affairs. Since the estimated headcount at the rally surpassed that of the opposition protest of late February, Omar Karami, who had resigned as prime minister following the February 28 protests, accepted the invitation of pro-Syria Lebanese President Emile Lahoud to form a "rescue government" that would include "loyalist" members as well as the opposition.

Not to be outdone, the opposition launched counter-demonstrations on March 14, the one-month anniversary of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination. Hundreds of thousands of protestors from throughout the country and from all of Lebanon's 17 religious "confessions" rallied in Beirut's Martyrs' Square in what some newspapers dubbed the largest public demonstration in the country's history. The battle of "whose demonstration is the biggest", and therefore which camp truly reflected "the will of the people", quickly came to a



A Syrian family in Damascus protests US intervention in Syrian affairs. When I told them I was American, they begged me not to take it personally.

halt, with each side proclaiming victory.

The Syrian hat was thrown into the demonstration ring on March 9, the day following the Hizbollah rally. Thousands of students and public-sector workers gathered along the Mezze Autostrade, Damascus' largest modern-suburb thoroughfare, for a two-kilometer walk to nearby Malki, site of President Bashar al-Assad's personal residence, the U.S. embassy, and the diplomatic headquarters of many other Western countries. The area is named after Col. Adnan Malki, the deputy chief of staff and Ba'ath Party member who was assassinated in 1955 by a sergeant loyal to the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) — a fascist-like party advocating the creation of "Greater Syria", a political and cultural union of what is today Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Syria and Cyprus. SSNP leaders were subsequently either imprisoned or had to flee the country, ending their political influence in the country.

This was not the first rally I had ever witnessed in Syria, but it certainly was the largest. As I walked to the rally, I could hear music and drums up to a half-kilometer away. Rounding the first corner onto the autostrade, I immediately ran into a middle-class Syrian family in modern dress with signs of "No U.S.A." in English dangling around their necks. I couldn't resist the opportunity to challenge them a little on what that exactly meant, and poke a little at both our countries in the process.

As I approached the family, their eyes widened to saucer-size. I stopped two feet in front of them, and with an expressionless face blurted out, "I'm American. I'm angry!"

The father instantly extended me his hand as his children looked clearly frightened. "We don't have anything against the American people, only against the government! Please, don't take it personally!," he said quite nervously.

I couldn't hold a straight face for more than a second, and laughed a little as I shook his hand. "I know, it's okay. But your sign makes it look like you are against the whole United States. What are you protesting against?"

"Bush meddling in our affairs," he said. He shook my hand, and walked off.

Until that moment, I'd thought the march was to support pro-Syrian Lebanese "loyalists" such as Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, Prime Minister Omar Karami, Parliamentary Speaker Nabil Berri, and last but not least, Hezbollah. After all, I thought, this was all about Hariri's assassination, and the Lebanese opposition's attacks on Syria's role in Lebanon.

Instead, the March 9 rally was a march against "Foreign interference" — an increasingly popular term lately in Syria. Damascus has been under U.S. sanctions since

it was placed on Washington's first list of sponsors of terrorism in 1979, when it was labeled as a primary backer of various Palestinian militant groups carrying out hijackings and similar attacks against U.S. targets throughout the region. When Syria supported the U.S. in ousting Saddam Hussein's armies from Kuwait in 1990 (while Washington turned a blind eye to Syria's military efforts to end the Lebanon War), the U.S. adopted a policy of "Constructive Engagement" with Damascus. Syria was the only country on the list of state sponsors of terror with which the U.S. had full diplomatic relations. Following the Gulf War of 1990-91, Washington even encouraged U.S. oil companies like as ConocoPhillips to invest millions of dollars in the development of Syria's gas production.

Last but not least, the George H.W. Bush and Clinton Administrations called Syria's military forces in Lebanon a "presence" — not an occupation.

That all changed early on the morning of October 5, 2003, when Israeli jets bombed a Palestinian training camp in Syria, only a handful of kilometers outside Damascus. To most Syrians' surprise, the United States supported the attack, citing Israel's right to defend itself against a terror attack claimed by Islamic Jihad two days earlier, on October 3. As Syria hosted public-relations offices for Islamic Jihad and other militant Palestinian groups, the administration of Bush *père* claimed that Syria should be held accountable for the attack. A day later,



The statue of Adnan Malki, the Ba'athist Colonel assassinated in 1955 by a member of the SSNP.

the Bush Administration lifted its two-year opposition to a Congressional Bill that outlined a number of penalties for a long list of perceived Damascus transgressions, including its alleged role in supporting Iraqi insurgents, its role in Lebanon and its support for terrorism.

Called the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSA), the bill outlined five potential punishments, including a ban on U.S. exports to Syria, U.S. investment in Syria, Syrian airline flights to the U.S. and restrictions on the movement of Syrian diplomats on U.S. soil. On December 15, 2003, Bush signed the bill into law, and six months later slapped Syria with the U.S.-export ban and the ban on Syrian flights to the U.S. Bush also added a few other possible penalties to the list, including using other legislation to list the Commercial Bank of Syria, Syria's largest private-sector bank and one of the largest in the Arab World in terms of assets, as a money-laundering institution. An additional sanction allowed for seizure of the property of Syrian officials involved in "terrorism."

Pressure has been building ever since. It increased following Syria's influence in extending the term of Lebanon's pro-Syria President Emile Lahoud and the international community's response: the passage of Security Council Resolution 1559, which demanded that Syria withdraw its army and intelligence services from Lebanon and that Hezbollah, a Shia Muslim party credited with pushing Israeli forces out of Southern Lebanon, be disarmed.

When former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al Hariri was assassinated in Beirut on February 14, Syria and its Lebanese allies took a direct political hit, and have been held responsible for the slaying. France and the U.S. now seem to be in agreement that "negative pressure" — threats, direct penalties, the offering of no "carrots" for compliance — is the best course to pursue. Without a political leg to stand on, Syrian President al-Assad promised to withdraw all military and intelligence units from Lebanon by April 30 — well before the upcoming Lebanese parliamentary elections whose date is still unknown.

The international media have covered the Lebanese crisis well, but little has been written about how these pressures function in the opaque world of Syrian politics. The Syrian rally of March 9 showed some interest-



Uncommon at Syrian protests, English language placards hammer home the message "Leave us alone."

ing developments. First, popular sentiment is firmly behind the President. The Lebanon crisis has made everyday Syrians fully aware of the pressures bearing down on their country. When U.S. sanctions were announced against Syria last year, Syrian officials and the media were able to point to a number of points on which Washington's penalties would have little effect. Syria's trade with the U.S. is only about \$350 million a year, and Syrian companies would be able to obtain products from other sources, most notably China and Europe. Besides, most Syrians argued, the Europeans were divided on the issue of pressuring Syria, and numerous European Union programs have actively supported Syrian reform.

United Nations Resolution 1559 and its pressures have changed all that, if for no other reason that everyday Syrians know their country's forces are pulling out of Lebanon en masse. "We are in big trouble," said one friend to me recently. "We know we are in trouble because we can't go to Lebanon anymore without fear that someone will attack our cars or insult us. Lebanon, and what it offers, is an important part of our everyday life, and everyone knows that."

EXTERNAL PRESSURE AND INTERNAL CONSOLIDATION

I can't tell you the number of Syrians who have asked me, "How did we get into this mess?" or "How could the leadership have extended Lebanese President Emile Lahoud's term when so many other Maronite Christians, who always hold that post, were available for the job?"

It's a good question indeed, and one for which there



Syrians are rallying around President Bashar Al Assad as external pressures mount.

are no clear answers. Bad decisions on such a major level usually smack of extreme compromise. It's generally accepted that Syria suffers from severe internal political divisions, and popular awareness of them has grown since Bashar al-Assad took over Syria's leadership following the death of his father, Hafez.

As to what shape the divisions actually take, no one is sure. The popular terms that are used to describe the divide are "New Guard" and "Old Guard." The former refers to President al-Assad and the "reformers" surrounding him. "Old Guard" refers to more conservative officials left over from the reign of Hafez al-Assad who "resist" change.

Exactly who is a member of each camp is difficult to determine. A number of reform-minded ministers, such as State Planning Commission head Abdullah Dardari, are well known to be supported by the president. Presidential Advisor Nibras al Fadel is in charge of judicial reform, among other reform issues. After that, things tend to get a bit hazy. Finance Minister Mohammed al Hussein is considered a New-Guard reformer, but his origins are in the Old-Guard Ba'ath Party. A visit to his offices indi-

cates he and his staff truly believe themselves to be part of Assad's reform efforts. But the slow pace of reform coming out of that ministry, especially in dealing with serious issues in finance and banking reform, indicate a cautious approach to change that is closer to the conservatism of the Old Guard.

Concerning the legendary Old Guard itself, it's difficult to compile a list of suspects. The most frequently mentioned is Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam. A former foreign minister who dealt extensively with Lebanon during the darkest days of the Lebanon War, Khaddam wields vague power in Syria. His sons are some of the most savvy, western-leaning businessmen in Syria. Khaddam was also a close friend of the late Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik al Hariri, and was well known to have opposed the extension of Lahoud's presidential term. Khaddam's family hails from the coastal city of Tartous, and is one of Syria's best-known Sunni families.

Foreign Minister Farouq as Shara is often also included on the Old Guard list. Like Khaddam, Shara is Sunni, but hails from Houran, the area south of Damascus toward the Jordanian border. A visit to his office is a visit to a system of careful order, efficiency and tight security. While Shara is best known for his tough talk on Israel and his often aggressive statements in the press concerning U.S. foreign policy in the Arab World, some officials in his ministry, including Deputy Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, are well known to

be working with the President to defuse the current crisis in Lebanon, as well as start possible peace talks with Israel.

Beyond this short list, it's hard to determine which minister falls into what camp. Every ministerial office I visit has a person or department that deals with external relations, and all profess to be following the President's reform vision. They are controlled, by and large, by sort-of "assistants at large" — graduates of the Faculty of English Literature of Damascus University who speak a foreign language or two, and who deal with foreigners who happen to walk through their ministry doors. They are powerful people, especially for ministers that do not speak foreign languages, as they are the link between EU and UN reform programs in the country and decision-making.

During every visit to whatever ministry, I am presented with a number of executive summaries of reform plans kept in large black binders that outline draft legislation or presidential decrees that are always "about to be signed." These efforts have borne fruit: hundreds of pieces of legislation dealing with a wide variety of eco-

conomic, social and even political issues have been passed.

But implementation has been slow on all counts, and problems are piling up. Syria's private banks, which opened in January 2004 some 40 years following the banking sector's nationalization, continue to be burdened by the state's inability to deal with issues like "stamp taxes" — fiscal charges on common transactions, which remain high — and caps on interest rates and foreign-currency regulations. Following the passage of the private-banking legislation in April 2001, the state dragged its feet on implementing it in the name of "getting the regulatory environment correct" for the profitable operation of private banking. Two years and nine months' work produced a system that most of Syria's private bank managers knew would not allow them to make a profit. With every complaint filed with the Central Bank of Syria or the Ministry of Finance have come promises to "deal with" the problems, post-haste. Now, well into 2005, most the issues have yet to be resolved.

The question is, Why? What is holding up Syrian reform? To the people attending the rally of March 9, the answer was simple. "It's the Old Guard," said one protester when I asked him who was responsible for the current crisis over Lebanon. "President Bashar wants to change, but the people around him from his father's rule don't want to."

Indeed, today most Syrians seem rallied around the

president. It's hardly a unique phenomenon: When social or political groups are placed under external pressure or threat, time-honored dicta say that decision-making is centralized in the hands of one or a few persons in order to deal effectively with the threats at hand. It is analogous to the powers U.S. President George Bush received with the passage of the Patriot Act following the attacks of September 11, 2001: Centralized command over different bureaucratic structures in the name of national security.

Something I learned long ago was that, even in dictatorships, popular sentiment still matters to a certain degree. It simply gives the leadership more room to maneuver. This is especially useful in the case of Syria, where a *de-facto* oligarchy has slowly appeared over the last five years following the death of Hafez al-Assad in June 2000. In the immediate aftermath, everything in Syria seemed to be done in the name of Bashar al-Assad — from reform legislation, to the holding of a simple conference on eyeglasses ("Dr. Bashar" was trained as an ophthalmologist in the U.K.). By mid-2002, many Syrians began to express skepticism that the pace of reform would be fast enough to reform effectively.

Such disappointments were added to similar sentiments over a crackdown on "discussion forums" that have sprung up in the country following Bashar's coming to power. These groups were unlicensed but tolerated, based on the President's acceptance speech before parliament in July 2000. In the speech, Assad asked Syrians to respect the opinions and positions of "the other" — a line many activists believed signaled his desire for a political opening.

By late 2001, these groups were closed slowly, one by one, by the security services on grounds they were advocating changing the constitution, among other offenses. When one prominent group tried to register under the Associations Law as an NGO (Syria refers to NGOs simply as "associations"), the security authorities became even more alarmed and closed down all but one group. Leading the crackdown was, reportedly, Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam. He has been considered part of the Old Guard ever since.

When the U.S. invaded Iraq, tensions in Syria rose, and the influence of Syria's security services increased. The pace of internal reforms slowed even farther, as ministers and employees seemed increasingly reticent to make decisions. Syria has seven major security agencies, including military, air force, political and external security. Exactly how they get in the way of reform decisions is generally unknown, but we have a few hints.

Security agencies in Syria are involved with monitoring individual activity. They have good



insight into the country's true economic activities, especially growing private-sector activities. Because Syria's legal environment remains rooted in socialist doctrine, private-sector actors have learned to skirt the law with a nod and a wink from state officials, leading to increased corruption over the last five years. Foreign-currency restrictions, for example, continue to force many Syrians to use the black market for everyday business. This activity is well known to the state: When some \$23 million recently went missing from the "informal currency market", which moves hard currency between Lebanon and Syria, the matter was openly reported in the Syrian state press. Security services and police apprehended the culprits a few days later, and reportedly returned the money to its rightful owners. Strange activity indeed, for a state that strictly forbids transferring hard currency out of Syria.

One friend recently told me that, since Security services deal with such issues, individual agents can hold these legalities (and illegalities) over the culprits' heads, making them worry about what the State has in store for them. Syrians therefore have to pay tribute up the chain of command, draining away profits and making business all that more difficult to conduct. Many businessmen tell me that that, in turn, forces them to chase after larger contracts with many "strings" attached — thus perpetuating the corruption circle.

Much of Syria's inability to reform derives from the regime's inability thus far to create positive incentives. The new private banks, for example, pay higher salaries than other businesses in Syria. They also provide solid international training via the bank's Lebanese and Jordanian partners. But so far only three banks are operating, and their impact is still limited. State financial institutions, which suffer from massive overstaffing, are receiving increased training as well, but not the kind of expertise needed to transform these dinosaurs into efficient institutions that serve the Syrian market. Public-sector salary increases over the last few years have helped the situation, but the amounts the employees take home are still far short of those of their private-sector counterparts.

The government has also failed to create incentives for Syrians to pay taxes. The reasons are clear: As the state has relied on oil revenues to fund government expenses over the last 30 years, Syrians have become quite skillful in avoiding the taxman. Oil production has declined below 500,000 barrels per day and is set to be depleted in ten years, so the state knows it will have to improve tax collection in order to balance its books in the near future. In autumn 2003, the Ministry of Finance issued a law drastically reducing and simplifying the tax code. This piece of legislation was drafted in conjunction with the chambers of commerce and industry, which formally represent Syria's business community. While this came as good news, an unexpected piece of legislation increasing the powers of the Ministry of Finance to carry out spot tax

inspections and setting harsh penalties for tax evasion has angered the business community. The objection was so strong that the Ministry of Finance was forced to back-pedal considerably, saying that the measures would be implemented "slowly."

Last but not least, the reforms have failed to address issues of accountability.

"We don't trust the state to provide services," says one Syrian entrepreneur. "After all, what kind of say do we have in how the state operates? It just does whatever it wants, and when it does, it's just not good."

Most Syrians say they want greater state accountability, something Washington says is directly related to the degree of democratization. But Syrians who spoke out at the March 9 rally said that while they want democratization, they didn't want it at the barrel of a gun.

"Reform is slow in Syria, and we are frustrated," said one protestor. "But we don't want it 'Iraqi style'. It has to come from within, not from outside."

As U.S. pressure has increased, so has Syrian sentiment opposing U.S. intervention. Journalists and media figures in Syria are paying more attention to pressure from Washington. While I was meeting friends at a party last week, a translator for one of the local daily newspapers approached me and asked detailed questions about the Bush Administration's policy of "constructive instability." I was taken aback: The only place I'd seen this term was on the website of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the influential Washington think tank sponsored by the American Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC). Two different reports by the Institute's director, Robert Satloff, describes how the Assad regime is "brittle" and should be pressured into submission. The journalist cited me almost verbatim a subsection of the text called "The Road to Damascus". It is an interesting read:

"As the administration works through the daily diplomacy on Lebanon, it needs to keep one eye on events in Damascus. The Assad regime is probably the most brittle in the Middle East; while the Egyptian and Saudi regimes, for example, may bristle at U.S. pro-democracy efforts, there are built-in brakes on U.S. pressure as well as deep reservoirs of institutional support in both countries. Syria, however, is different. The United States has no interest in the survival of the Asad regime, which itself is a minoritarian regime built on the fragile edifice of fear and intimidation. Cracks in the Syrian regime may quickly become fissures and then earthquakes, in a way that the same cracks in other countries could be contained.

*Given how remarkably puerile Syrian foreign policy has been under Bashar al-Asad, it would be useful for U.S. planners to **dust off old studies of possible***

sources of domestic instability and their likely implications” (emphasis added).

It shocked me. Bureau chiefs for foreign Arabic newspapers in Damascus usually are aware of U.S. policy, but a translator? As I milled around the party, other Syrians were discussing the policy as well, as if a fire had suddenly ignited.

“What do they mean by ‘sources of domestic instability’,” asked one employee of a mobile phone company. “Are they planning to cause problems here?”

I frankly didn’t know what to say. Until recently, I always discounted accusations against Washington of purposely stirring up trouble in the Arab World, the case of Iraq excepted. I always felt that pressure was usually placed on regimes through sanctions, letters of protests, etc. Given the crowd’s intimate knowledge of the Washington Institute website, and the article’s use of the phrase “The Bush Administration’s policy of ‘constructive instability’ in the Middle East...” in its opening line, it’s hard to argue otherwise. Whatever the case, the message is getting through to more Syrians than ever before.

The Jasmine Revolution

How will these pressures impact Syria? It is anyone’s guess at this point, but there are some interesting indications. The rally of March 9 was distinguished in that there was hardly a Ba’athist flag in sight. For sure, it was in response to the rallies in neighboring Lebanon, where protesters left their party flags at home in favor of national unity under one banner. Even the statue of Adnan Malki, which sits near the Presidential residence, was without Ba’athist decoration. Ba’athist marching songs were completely replaced by the songs of the famous Lebanese singer, Fairouz, who often sings of Lebanon and Syria’s natural beauty.

The only Syrian party flags at the rally were those of the SSNP, which features a black field adorned with a white circle and a red, swastika-like insignia. It is not a reference to Nazism, for sure, but rather an indication that Syria’s Ba’athist days are dwindling. Ba’athism is in and of itself a pan-Arab doctrine for Arab political unity in the name of confronting the problems facing the Arab World, most notably, the issue of Israel. Now, symbols seems to be shifting toward something more limited, more area-specific. The SSNP also has a vision for political unity, but it does not have the authoritarian stigma that has come to represent Ba’athism. SSNP doctrine is something Syrians and Lebanese both understand, and



Syrians say they want greater democracy, but not on the back of an American tank as it came to Iraq. In the background, a flag of the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) — the only party flag present at the March 9 rally.

many support. Maybe not political union these days, but something that emphasizes the historical, culture and linguistic ties that undeniably bind Syria and Lebanon together. A sort of lesser, ‘Greater Syria’.

Damascus is now rife with rumors about the upcoming Ba’ath Party conference, which the regime announced would be held in early June. While many remain pessimistic that the conference will produce anything at all, President Assad is reportedly about to launch what some have dubbed “The Jasmine Revolution”. Some media groups are already planting the aromatic flower, native to Syria and Lebanon, all over Damascus in anticipation of the event. The movement is to include, among other things, changes in the constitution to allow for multiparty elections (parties not based on ethnicity or religion, however), as well as the expansion of NGOs and similar other associations. The latter has been in the works for some time, under the auspices of First Lady Asma al Assad. The former, however, is something that has not been seriously discussed in over 40 years. □

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Current Fellows and their Activities

Alexander Brenner (June 2003 - 2005) • CHINA

With a B.A. in History from Yale and an M.A. in China Studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex is in China examining how the country is adapting to economic and cultural globalization following its accession to the World Trade Organization.

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 will spend 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.

Cristina Merrill (2004 - 2006) • ROMANIA

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and will now spend two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

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 worked as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship will base him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • SOUTHEAST ASIA

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation, Matt spent two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt examined long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

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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