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When the Press Gathers in Damascus

By Andrew Tabler

JUNE 2005

DAMASCUS, Syria—As my mobile phone began ringing repeatedly at 6:40am on June 6, I awoke with the realization that the day had finally come — the opening of the 10th Party Conference of the Syrian Ba'ath Party regional command.

“We are just waiting around outside the Ministry of Information for our badges,” said Hugh Macleod, assistant editor at *Syria Today*, a monthly English-language magazine I founded in 2004 with a Syrian colleague. “There is no schedule, and no one knows if we will have access to the conference center. It’s chaos.”

I was hardly surprised. In fact, I had purposely ignored the Ministry of Information’s instructions to arrive in front of Dar al Ba’ath, the ministry building, before boarding buses out to the conference. It was not out of laziness, but rather based on my experience covering official Syrian events. About a month before, for example, I attended the official visit of Turkish President Ahmet Sezer to Syria. Arriving at 8am as instructed in a full suit, I waited with the rest of Syria’s press corps for two hours for Information Ministry officials to show up. When they finally arrived, we were simply told a bus would take us to the Presidential palace for the arrival ceremony. No schedule was available. We were simply told we would be unable to leave the palace until the talks were over. The next nine hours of my life were spent sitting in the hot sun, getting a fabulous tan from the neck up, punctuated only by a brief press conference by the two leaders that permitted no questions.

The wake-up call on June 6, and its message, would characterize my attempts to understand the Ba’ath Party Conference, its decisions, and the potential for an authoritarian party to reform itself under increasing foreign pressure.

Ahead of the conference opening were many expectations. In the days following former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al Hariri’s assassination in Beirut, Syrian President Bashar al Assad responded to Lebanese accusations of Syria’s involvement in the murder in a speech before the Syrian parliament. It was only Assad’s second speech before the body, the first being his inaugural address in July 2000, when he encouraged Syrians to “respect the opinion of the other”. These words were understood by many Syrians to mean that a political opening was at hand, causing them to form “discussion” groups to debate the country’s problems in the name of the President.

When I first arrived in Syria in early 2001, Syrians were nothing short of euphoric over the regime’s apparent sudden change of course from the authoritarian grip of Bashar’s father, Hafez, and the Ba’ath Party, which, under Hafez, had become Syria’s dominant political party. When some discussion groups began suggesting changes to the constitution, and debated the sectarian nature of the Syrian leadership, these groups were swiftly closed in late 2001 and early 2002. Only one group, led by Jamal al Atassi, was allowed to remain open. The “Damascus Spring”, so it was called, was over.

As outside pressures mounted from the United States, Europe and the Arab World for Damascus to remove its forces from Lebanon and reform domestically,

many in Syria hoped a new opening was at hand. Once again, Syrians looked to their president for guidance. After denying Lebanese accusations of Syria's involvement in Hariri's murder, Assad finished his speech by saying that the government was actively preparing for the June Ba'ath Party conference. A few days later, he spoke of a "significant leap forward" resulting from the conference.

Expectations were immediately raised, and Damascus was abuzz with rumors in April of big changes ahead. One rumor said the political system would be opened up to allow for independent political parties, and that Law 49 outlawing the Muslim Brotherhood, suppressed by Hafez al Assad in the 1980s, would be repealed. Another said the conference would conclude with a recommendation by the party that Article 8 of the Syrian constitution, which says that the Ba'ath Party leads the state, should be amended or repealed. Yet another said about 200,000 Kurds without citizenship in Syria, based on a census taken in 1962, would be granted full rights. Some even said the Ba'ath Party would change its name or even dissolve itself.

In May, reform hopes faded. Reform-minded participants in the Party's working committees dealing with Arab nationalism and unity, socialism, freedom and democracy, and the reorganization of the party lost early Party elections, meaning they would not attend the Party conference and put forward their ideas. Rumors that the Ba'ath would dissolve itself were dismissed, and analysts throughout the Syrian capital became extremely pessimistic. As a seeming harbinger of things to come, eight leading members of the Jamal al Atassi discussion group — the last remnant of the Damascus spring — were arrested in late May for reading a press release issued by the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. An outspoken Kurdish Sheikh critical of the regime's handling of the brewing Kurdish issue, Mohammad Maashuq al-Khaznawi, was found dead on May 30, his body delivered to his family by the Syria authorities with signs of torture. The interior ministry insists the Sheikh was in fact captured and killed by a "criminal gang" that is now in custody. On June 2, Samir Qassir, one of Lebanon's most prominent anti-Syrian journalists, was killed by a bomb planted in his car in Ashrafiye, Beirut.

Such bad news was another reason I failed to report at the Ministry of Information the morning of June 6. Returning from my morning workout at "Unity Club", a Ba'athist sport complex in Damascus, I received another call from Hugh at 8:30.

"There are no badges after all," Hugh said. "We are now sitting on busses that are supposedly going to take us to the conference's media center. The ministry people are not even sure we will have access to the center for Bashar's opening speech. It's a pretty grim scene."

I knew from Hugh's words, and subsequent phone calls from a host of other foreign journalists that had

turned up in Damascus for the conference, that the regime did not want the conference and its proceedings to be understood by the Syrian or international community. It was an old trick the regime had pulled time and time again. Allow journalists to come into the country, greet them kindly at the ministry of information, and send them back to their five-star hotels without any clue about the basics — most notably anything resembling a schedule.

That's exactly what happened. Finishing my morning coffee, I began to receive more telephone calls from correspondents freshly arrived in the country. Like Hugh, they had made the journey out to the conference center with the hope of attending and listening in on the conference's opening address by President Assad. Instead, they were herded into a "media center" about 2 kilometers away in the new Damascus Exhibition Center. The "center" was in fact a room with some chairs and three computers hooked to a 128k ADSL internet connection with stand-alone printers. A number of TVs broadcasting Syrian programs were blaring. No food, water, coffee, tea was available. All this was somehow supposed to sustain about 300 Arab and foreign correspondents for four days.

When word got out that only cameramen would have access to the opening session, the army of correspondents poured out of the media center and boarded buses back to Damascus. All were disillusioned. As one Arab correspondent told me "How can I write a story running up to the conference when I know nothing about it?"

I left my house at 9am for the short walk to the *Syria Today* offices in the Damascus Free Zone. When I am in Damascus, I normally stop at the office to check my e-mail on the magazine's high-speed internet connection, talk about the news of the day with the magazine's staff, and drink a strong cup of coffee. Upon arrival, I was greeted by Obaida, a member of the magazine's editorial staff.

"The Ministry of Information says the opening speech will begin at noon. Let's turn on the television and see if there is any news," Obaida said in his usual cheerful voice.

News bulletins on Syria's satellite news channel about the upcoming conference raced across the screen. Listening carefully, I discovered the opening speech would be aired in only 15 minutes, at 10am. A few minutes later, Hugh and a correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* arrived, looking haggard.

The time had finally come. We all piled into the office meeting room, readying notebooks and tape recorders for Assad's speech. As Hugh described the appalling inadequacy of the media center, a TV commercial for a local brand of cheese was suddenly blacked out. A few seconds later, a video graphic of Ba'athist and Syrian flags appeared, complete with triumphal music blaring in the background. Coverage then cut to a smiling and waving President Assad strolling down the stairway of the Ebla Cham

Conference Center. As he took his position at the main podium, everyone in the Syria Today office settled into their chairs and got ready for perhaps the most anticipated speech of the presidency of Assad *films*.

The speech lasted about 15 minutes — a blink of the eye in the Arab World. He began by praising the role of the Ba’ath Party in Syrian life, and the concerted efforts the different working committees had made running up to the conference. “The Ba’ath party remains a vanguard force in the life of our people and our country,” Assad said. “Some of the writings and proposals that preceded the congress caught my attention.Whether or not we agree with some of these propositions, and whether they take an upbeat approach to the party or not, and whether they are appreciative or critical of the party, they go to show that the Ba’ath Party is a popular force, central to Syrian life....”

Given the fact that reformers had not won in elections of the working committees, I immediately assumed that Assad in fact had opposed some of the more radical reform suggestions concerning changing the constitution, etc. I moved closer to the TV set, making sure I heard every word. Perhaps Assad was going to break free and set a new course for the party himself.

It was wasted effort. Assad surprisingly began his speech with a critique of the communications and Information-Technology revolution.

[This] revolution has made room for theories and projects, as well as lifestyles that have overwhelmed Arabs and threatened their existence and cultural identity, and has increased doubts and skepticism in the minds of young Arabs. The forces behind these events have created an illusionary virtual reality that inspires our feelings in a way that drives us in a direction identified by others.... This leads in the end to the cultural, political and moral collapse of the Arab individual and his ultimate defeat, even without a fight.

I immediately thought how strange these words seemed coming from a President who has been hailed as the father of Syria’s IT revolution for the past five years. The speech then went from bad to worse. Assad then continued the state’s mantra that economic reform in the country was progressing, but was simply hamstrung by personnel problems. According to Assad, there is nothing wrong with the Ba’ath Party or its ideology — “individuals,” rather, were responsible for its failings. A new initiative to combat the country’s rampant corruption problems was then given lip service by the President.

In conclusion, the President seemed to fire a warn-



The long awaited Ba’ath Party regional conference began when Syrian TV suddenly cut to a waving and smiling Bashar al Assad.

ing shot over the heads of those who might cooperate with the United States in its efforts to promote “reform” in the region.

I call upon you to exercise your role in a courageous and responsible manner by pointing out both our limitations and our achievements, by addressing the shortcomings we suffer from as well as the successes we enjoy, and by brining as honest as possible in your discussions and proposals about the concerns and aspirations of the public, *bearing in mind that every decision you take and every recommendation you make should express only our internal needs, regardless of any consideration which aims at pushing us in directions which harm our national interests and threaten our stability.*

Much more interesting than the speech was what was going on around me in the *Syria Today* meeting room. Hugh and the *LA Times* correspondent understand less Arabic, so they relied on the translation services of Obaida and the magazine’s other editorial assistant, Dalia. As the speech continued, a sort of struggle emerged between Hugh and Obaida that spoke leagues about the speech’s content. Obaida had begun by translating the speech word for word, which Hugh and the *LA Times* correspondent wrote down studiously. After only a few moments, Obaida stopped his attempt at simultaneous translation and went silent, switching to summaries of a few words following what seemed like each of the speech’s main sections.

“Obaida, why aren’t you translating?” Hugh asked, visibly annoyed. “This is a major address by the President.”

Obaida did not immediately answer, continuing his brief summaries. At a certain point, Obaida stopped and looked at Dalia, who in turn began translating word for word. Af-

ter a few moments, Dalia began to summarize as well.

Hugh, even more annoyed, asked Obaida and Dalia why they were not simultaneously translating the speech. This time, Obaida spoke.

“There is nothing of substance to translate,” Obaida said. “There is nothing.”

Assad’s speech was followed by speeches from the head of each of the parties of the National Progressive Front (NPF), the body of ten loyalist opposition parties formed in 1972 under the umbrella of the Ba’ath Party. As each leader delivered speech after speech praising the Ba’ath and its role in society, we speculated on the outcome of the conference.

“There is not going to be much,” I said. “Political reform will be limited, outside pressures do not affect internal reforms, and individuals are the problem and not the Ba’ath Party. He didn’t even mention trade.”

“See?” Obaida said. “Nothing.”

Around 9 that evening, I invited a group of correspondents to dinner at the Damascus “Journalists’ Club”, an institution sponsored and supported by the Journalist Syndicate of the Ba’ath Party. It is a place with cheap beers, good mezze (oriental salads) and grilled meat and chicken — the staple main course in Damascus. Sitting around the table were three correspondents from the *New York Times*, and one each from the *Economist*, *Christian Science Monitor*, Associated Press, Reuters and the Oxford Business Group.

After only one day of covering the conference, all were lost as to what kinds of stories would be possible to write with such little information. All had filed stories that day outlining Assad’s speech, describing it as falling short of expectations. Throwing back whiskeys and Barada Beer (Syria’s staple brew, which is reminiscent of *weissbier*, or wheat beer) — the group shared frustration about understanding exactly what the conference was all about. A few hours and many more drinks later, we decided to head home. Incidentally, the bill for eight persons for food and drink came to a whopping 1000 Syrian Pounds (\$19). While we might not have understood the Ba’ath Party, we enjoyed some of its subsidies, for sure.

Day TWO

I awoke at 7 am the morning of June 7, wondering how we

would be informed of what was going on in the conference’s different working committees. I sprang to my desk and tried to connect to the internet about a dozen times before it finally connected went through. I visited the website of the Syrian State Information Service (SANA) — born during Syria’s Soviet-leaning Cold-War years — in search of news on what to expect. Only an English-language translation of Assad’s speech was available. I made a few early morning phone calls to Arab journalist friends who might have information on press conferences, possible conference-access times. Not a single one answered. Not a good sign, I thought.

I then tuned-into Syria’s satellite-TV station. The 9am newscast talked extensively about the president’s “important and historic” speech, with numerous snippets from the address. The newscaster simply said that the various working committee would begin their deliberations that day. No mention of press conferences.

I turned to BBC World, hoping to find out what was going on elsewhere in the world. Suddenly I saw a still picture of Syrian Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam, under which appeared a box reading “resignation.” That got my attention. BBC gave no details, only to say that Khaddam had resigned from “all party and government affairs.”

After a brisk walk to the *Syria Today* offices, I was greeted at the door by Obaida.

“Khaddam resigned,” I said.

“Really?,” Obaida answered. “There’s nothing in the Syrian media about it. But remember, all members of the regional command resign on the first day of the conference. Maybe it’s just a rumor, and he’s staying.”

I checked the *Al Hayat* newspaper website for de-



The resignation of Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam (to Assad’s immediate left) and other top Ba’athist officials has strengthened the President’s hand.

tails. Damascus correspondent Ibrahim Hamidi reported that Khaddam had indeed resigned on the first day of the conference.

“Some people were saying yesterday there will be a 2:30pm and 9:30pm press conference each day,” Obaida said. “Maybe we will get some details then. Bouthaina Shaaban will apparently head each one.”

Perhaps more than any other person, Bouthaina Shaaban is the best-known international spokesperson for Syrian affairs. A former translator for late President Hafez al Assad, Shaaban is a member of Syria’s Alawi sect of Islam, Assad’s own group and source of many of his — and his son’s — top aides. With a doctorate from the University of Exeter complete with multiple Fulbright fellowships, Shaaban’s friendly but proud manner made her the favorite of international journalists around the time of the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. As the then-spokesperson for the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Shaaban’s excellent English and ties to the regime landed her telephone interviews on CNN, BBC and other major English-language news services.

Following a reported fall-out with Foreign Minister Farouq as-Shara, Shaaban was “kicked upstairs” by the President and made the country’s first Minister of Expatriates. Charged with bringing talented Syrians back to their homeland, Shaaban’s ministry building was set up in the new Damascus neighborhood of Dummar, about a 30-minute trip in Damascus traffic. She has been traveling the world ever since, the human face for Syria’s estimated 15-million diaspora community.

In the world of Ba’ath Party politics, however, Shaaban still carries weight as a member of the Ba’ath’s 50-member Central Committee — the body immediately under the party’s ruling “Regional Command” (“regional” in this case meaning Syria, since Ba’athist Pan-Arab ideology considers Syria only a “region” of the “Arab Nation”). Given her experience and position, it was no surprise to me that Shaaban was tapped as the party’s official spokeswoman for the conference.

I called the Public Relations Office of the Ministry of Information for clarification of the press-conference times. The assistant, Ahed, confirmed the rumor about the times for the conferences. After I hung up, I looked at Obaida. “Now we wait,” I said.

And we did just that. As the morning dragged on, I combed newspapers in search of details about Khaddam’s resignation and information on the conference agenda. The three state-owned daily newspapers carried only excerpts of the president’s speech, along with a full spread of photos. No other information was available, other than



Press conferences with spokesperson Bouthaina Shaaban were the world’s only window to the conference’s proceedings.

the names of the four working committees.

Around 2:30pm I switched on the TV and tuned into the Syrian satellite channel. The transmission quickly cut to reporters greeting Shaaban as she sat down at the head table. She’s on the short side, so the 40 or so microphones positioned in front of her nearly eclipsed her face.

Speaking in Arabic, Shaaban outlined some of the points of the President’s speech the previous day. She also informed the audience that the President had ordered that some of the proceedings of the working committees would be broadcast on national TV stations. When one Syrian journalist asked which committees would be broadcast and when, Shaaban replied “It will be announced.”

“The conference will discuss everything of importance to the Syrian citizen,” Shaaban announced in a loud voice. “The slogan of this conference is flexibility and steadfastness.”

Foreign journalists attending the press conference were already lost, due largely to the fact that no simultaneous-translation services were available. Those from major media relied on their “fixers,” or local helpers, to translate all questions and answers. After a few more questions, a foreign journalist asked if translation services could be made available for the press conference, given the number of non-Arabic speakers.

“Today, if the question is in English, I will answer in English,” Shaaban said. “In the next press conference, translations services will be available.”

Shaaban then was then asked about Khaddam’s resignation, and if it was indeed permanent.

Laughing, Shaaban replied “Well, yesterday at the conference Khaddam spoke for one hour. When he was

asked why his speech took so long, while each person was only allotted five minutes, he replied 'because I am a member in the regional command of the Ba'ath Party.' So I believe he is still in the party."

With that strange answer the ten-minute press conference was over. What did her answer about Khaddam mean? We might have something at 9:30, I guessed. About 30 minutes later, Obaida called me to his desk, excited.

"The 'all4syria.com' news service says there was a fight between Khaddam and Foreign Minister Shara yesterday," Obaida said.

Sure enough, on the screen in front of us were details of the 'hour-long speech' Shaaban spoke of. Apparently, Khaddam declared that what Syria needs now is "democracy", and went on for some length about how opening the political system was the best way to confront the country's problems. Shara, openly miffed at Khaddam's out-of-turn statements, asked the VP to submit his criticisms to the political committee for consideration.

But that was not all. After Khaddam's speech, a member of the political committee, Journalist Ali Jamalo, stood up and asked Khaddam some tough questions.

"You are calling for democracy," Jamalo reportedly said. "You were in power for almost 40 years... what did you do for democracy when you were in power? You complain about Syria's handling of the Lebanon crisis. But you were the one who established Syria's presence in Lebanon. We want this free market for the economy. Why didn't you do anything about it? When you call for democracy, it is we, the young blood, that demand democracy. What did you do for 40 years? Don't bring us your faults and frustrations."

That afternoon, calls continued to come in from foreign correspondents wanting to know about the possibility of meeting or having dinner. Most added the caveat that they would need either to attend or monitor the press conference at 9:30pm. So I left most appointments open, and made plans to be at home to tune into the press conference myself.

In the meantime, I turned on TV to see which committee proceedings were being broadcast. None were featured. Channel One was running a feature about pets.

At 9:30 Syria satellite TV cut its transmission to cover the press conference. Shaaban began by giving small briefs about the working of each committee. The economic committee, for example,

discussed tourism projects, how to better deal with expatriates, and about efforts to combat corruption. Shaaban added that loss-making state companies would be privatized — in line with the recommendations of the State Planning Commission.

Shaaban went on to say the political committee was trying to find "a formula for national participation in the framework of national unity" for new political parties. No parties would be tolerated based on religion, sect, or ethnicity.

She then added that the political committee had discussed a new media law that would help "change Syria's image" abroad. The private sector would be allowed to set up satellite-TV and radio stations, internet services, and other electronic media. Last but not least, Shaaban said the name of the Ba'ath Party would stay the same.

After making her statements, Shaaban was bombarded with questions about Khaddam's resignation, as well as basic questions on what she'd said in here statement.

"My words from earlier today were clear about the VP," she said. "You will get answers to all your questions. On the final day, we will tell you everything."

DAYS 3-4

Looking back, that was essentially the last major event until the final press conference on June 9 following the closing ceremony. It did not seem so at the time, so I monitored Syria TV around 2:30pm and 9:30pm each day. The much-promised broadcasts of committee sessions were in fact only ten-minute excerpts and were not worth following, and, the first press conference was canceled. On June 8, the 9:30pm press conference was not convened.



Small portions of the proceedings of party working committees were broadcast on Syrian TV, despite the fact that President Assad had ordered coverage of the deliberations.

Those conferences that were held featured no major announcements, other than the creation of a “Higher Media Council” to help promote media expansion and modernization through greater private-sector participation. And the promised simultaneous-translation services at press conferences never appeared.

The net effect of the lack of coherent information coming out of the conference was the inability of any of the army of foreign correspondents to produce stories. In fact, by the end of day two, most didn’t even go to the center. Wire services such as Reuters ran small stories on the decision to privatize loss-making companies. But major newspapers like the *New York Times* failed to cover the conference. It was, as one correspondent told me, a “missed event.” After all, as most of the argued, how can you write about something you cannot understand?

Cut to 3:30pm, Thursday June 9, the conference’s final day. My mobile rings.

“Ministry of Information says the conference ends today,” Obaida said, referring to speculation that the event might drag on until Saturday. “The press conference is scheduled for 7pm.”

Finally, I thought. Now the internal debate whether to attend the conference, or not. After a few hours of back-and-forthing with myself, I decided not to make the trip out to the media center. I knew very well that the chances the press conference would be delayed, or not held at all, were high. I had a number of journalist friends working for wire services for whom attendance was mandatory, so I asked a journalist friend attending the event to call me. That evening, I sat in my living room reading about the recently returned Lebanese leader Michel Aoun.

I fell asleep around 10:30pm, papers scattered around me. Around 11:15pm, my mobile rang. It was my friend. The much-awaited press conference was about to finally happen. I tuned in.

Bouthaina Shaaban strolled out to the press conference table, smiling and greeting people as she sat down. By the look on her face, I could tell the message was going to be short and sweet.

“We have so much ground to cover, it is impossible for me to give you everything now,” Shaaban told those in attendance. So much for her promises all week that everything would be crystal clear at the end.

“These recommendations cover all the life domains,” Shaaban said. “The economic committee took a long time in its deliberations, and decided Syria would have a social-market economy. We will have an independent com-



Non-Ba’athist and pro-Assad reform State Planning Commission Chief Abduallah Dardari was appointed Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs immediately following the conference — another sign Assad is consolidating his power.

mission to combat corruption in order to attract more Arab and international investment. Women will play a greater role in decisions, and we will form an independent judiciary.”

Shaaban’s statements continued broad and vague. A “new parties law” would be issued, but would be based on “national unity” and would not permit parties based on sects, religion, or ethnicity. Article 8 of the constitution, which says the Ba’ath Party leads the state, was not touched. The emergency law, in place since the Ba’ath took power in 1963 (and installed Assad *pere* — until then a military attache at Syria’s embassy in Argentina — as chairman of a National Council), would be reviewed with the idea of limiting certain issues to “state security.” The situation of Kurds without citizenship in the country would be reviewed, with an eye toward granting most their full rights.

Concerning the party’s powerful “Regional Command,” the position of Prime Minister and Speaker of Parliament would be Party Members. In the past, only individuals were appointed to the Regional Command. This, Shaaban said, would “enhance relations between the Party and the government.” A Higher Media Council would be established to help “correct Syria’s distorted image” abroad.

Last but not least, Shaaban said the President was pleased with the conference’s outcome.

Her statements lasted a mere ten minutes. She entertained a few questions from reporters, to which she provided vague answers or said would be outlined at a later time. And that was it.

I sighed in disgust, switched off the TV, and went to

bed. "They don't want to be understood," I thought.

Shaaban's slogan of "flexibility and steadfastness" in many ways was the correct way to describe the 10th Ba'ath Party Conference. The Ba'ath was not making a great leap forward, as the president seemed to indicate on the eve of Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, but was rather simply stretching its boundaries a bit. Since Article 8 of the constitution was not touched, and whatever political opening that is on the way will not be permitted along sectarian, ethnic or religious lines, the Ba'ath was standing fast to its principle that Syrians are first and foremost Arabs, and will organize politically as such as long as the Assad regime is in power.

The dreaded emergency law — which justifies about anything the state wants to do, including detaining Syrians without charge — will be reviewed, but many questions remain about what "national security" means in today's Syria. Also, who will define national security still remains in the hands of the leadership. Syria's media sector will continue to be opened, but all in the name of improving the country's image. But can such a formula cultivate a properly functioning fourth estate? Making the position of Prime Minister and Speaker of Parliament members of the Regional Command would on the surface seem significant. Or does this move only guarantee the Ba'ath Party's hold over the state, even in the event of having an independent Prime Minister — something that has been promised for years?

But it's not like anyone in the international community will know anything about it. For example, the correspondent for the *New York Times*, Hassan al Fattah, filed a 900-word story on the conference's recommendations. The foreign desk in New York determined that the conclusions were so minor that the piece was cut down to a 100-word news brief. All but one wire service ignored the event.

END OF AN ERA?

This is strange behavior for a regime under intense international pressure that always complains it is misunderstood. But perhaps not so odd after all, given current conditions in Syria. The most important outcome of the conference, the retirement of major political figures, was not emphasized in any way by the regime, and in turn was ignored by the Syrian and foreign media.

In many ways, the conference marks the end of a five-year transition period for the Ba'ath marked by a struggle between the "old generation" of the late President Hafez al Assad (commonly referred to as "Bashar's uncles") and the "new generation" of the president. During the transition, the old generation, or "old guard" as it is often known, hindered President Bashar's reform efforts largely through "loyalist networks" formed throughout the senior Assad's three decades in power. These figures included: Two vice-presidents; Abdul Halim Khaddam and Zuher Masharqa; Two long-time regional-command members, Abdullah Ahmar and Suleiman Qadah; Former parliamentary speaker Abdul Kader Qadora; and former Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass. Their exit from party life at the conference seems to have strengthened the current President Assad's grip on power, and the new generation's ability to carry out reform in the country. The aging Foreign Minister, Farouq as-Shara, is still around, however, and reportedly will be appointed Vice-president soon.

In fact, just as the final conclusions of the conference were finally published in the state-dailies five days after the event, the President appointed lead reformer and State Planning Commission Chief Abdullah Dardari as Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs. A day later, he quietly removed Bahjat Sulieman, head of the powerful General Security intelligence department. While the Ba'ath Party conference might have been a non-event, something is happening in the blackness behind the scenes of Syrian politics. Perhaps "flexibility and steadfastness" was less a slogan for the conference and more a code reference to the President's quiet efforts to wrestle greater control of the regime. □

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