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## Shadowland

Poised to play a pivotal new role in the Middle East, Syria struggles to escape its dark past.

By Don Belt

There's a passage in *The Godfather* in which a young Michael Corleone, living abroad, realizes that with his older brother suddenly and violently deceased, he now stands anointed—doomed is more like it—to take over the Mafia empire his aging father has built from scratch. "Tell my father to get me home," he says to his host, resigned to the role he is now fated to play. "Tell my father I wish to be his son."

If there was a moment like that for Bashar al Assad, the current president of Syria, it came sometime after 7 a.m. on January 21, 1994, when the phone rang in his rented apartment in London. A tall, scholarly ophthalmologist, Bashar, then 28, was doing a residency at Western Eye Hospital, part of St. Mary's Hospital system in Britain. Answering the phone, he learned that his older brother, Basil, while racing to the Damascus airport in heavy fog that morning, had driven his Mercedes at high speed through a roundabout. Basil, a dashing and charismatic figure who'd been groomed to succeed their father as president, died instantly in the crash. And now he, Bashar, was being called home.

Fast-forward to June 2000 and the death of the father, Hafez al Assad, of heart failure at age 69. Shortly after the funeral, Bashar entered his father's office for only the second time in his life. He has a vivid memory of his first visit, at age seven, running excitedly to tell his father about his first French lesson. Bashar remembers seeing a big bottle of cologne on a cabinet next to his father's desk. He was amazed to find it still there 27 years later, practically untouched. That detail, the stale cologne, said a lot about Syria's closed and stagnant government, an old-fashioned dictatorship that Bashar, trained in healing the human eye, felt ill-equipped to lead.

"My father never talked to me about politics," Bashar told me. "He was a very warm and caring father, but even after I came home in 1994, everything I learned about his decision-making came from reading the notes he made during meetings, or by talking to his colleagues." One of those lessons was that, unlike performing eye surgery, running a country like Syria requires a certain comfort with ambiguity. Bashar, an avid photographer, compares it with a black-and-white photograph. "There's never pure black or pure white, all bad or all good," he said. "There are only shades of gray."

Syria is an ancient place, shaped by thousands of years of trade and human migration. But if every nation is a photograph, a thousand shades of gray, then Syria, for all its antiquity, is actually a picture developing slowly before our eyes. It's the kind of place where you can sit in a crowded Damascus café listening to a 75-year-old storyteller in a fez conjure up the Crusades and the Ottoman Empire as if they were childhood memories, waving his sword around so wildly that the audience dives for cover—then stroll next door to the magnificent Omayyad Mosque, circa A.D. 715, and join street kids playing soccer on its doorstep, oblivious to the crowds of Iranian pilgrims pouring in for evening prayers or the families wandering by with ice cream. It's also a place where you can dine out with friends at a trendy café, and then, while waiting for a night bus, hear blood-chilling screams coming from a second-floor window of the Bab Touma police station. In the street, Syrians cast each other knowing glances, but no one says a word. Someone might be listening.

The Assad regime hasn't stayed in power for nearly 40 years by playing nice. It has survived a tough neighborhood—bordered by Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey—by a combination of guile and cozying up to more powerful countries, first the Soviet Union and now Iran. In a state of war with Israel since 1948, Syria provides material support to the Islamist groups of Hezbollah and Hamas; it's also determined to reclaim the Golan Heights, a Syrian plateau captured by Israel in 1967. Relations with the United States, rarely good, turned particularly dire after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, when George W. Bush, citing Syria's opposition to the war and support for Iraqi insurgents, threatened regime change in Damascus and demonized Syria's young president as a Middle Eastern prince of darkness.

It's been nearly a decade since Bashar took office, and it's fair to ask what, if anything, has changed. It's also a good time to take stock, as Syria—responding to overtures from a new U.S. administration hungry for success in the Middle East—seems poised to resume a pivotal role in regional affairs. Henry Kissinger

famously said you can't make war without Egypt or peace without Syria, and he's probably right. Like it or not, the road to Middle East peace runs right through Damascus. Yet even Bashar acknowledges that it will be hard for Syria to move forward without tending to its crippling internal disrepair.

Outside the ancient Hamadiya market in Damascus, a photograph of Hafez al Assad as tall as a three-story building once stood. Marked by a high forehead and poker player's eyes, the president's giant head peered out over his traffic-choked capital of four million people, as it did from billboards and posters all over Syria. Modeled on the totalitarian cults of the Soviet imperium, this Big Brother iconography always gave Syria the feel of being sealed in amber, trapped in an era when dictators were really dictators, the days of Stalin and Mao. This is the Syria that Hafez left behind.

In its place today, flanked by the city's Roman-era walls, is a large white billboard with a photograph of Syria's first postmodern president, waving. Bashar is shown with a buoyant grin on his catlike face, squinting over his whiskers into a bright sun. "I believe in Syria," the billboard says reassuringly. But it will take more than a smile and a slogan to reinvent his country, and he knows it. "What Syria needs now," Bashar told me, "is a change in the mentality."

The home village of the Assad family, Al Qardahah, sits on a mountainside facing west, sheltered and aloof as hill towns often are, yet so close to the Mediterranean that on a clear day you can see the fishing boats of Latakia, Syria's largest port, and the seabirds circling like confetti in the western sky. A modern, four-lane expressway rises like a ramp from the coast and delivers supplicants to the remote mountain village, where the streets are paved, houses upscale, and off-duty regime officials—large men in their 50s and 60s who carry themselves like Mafia dons on vacation—pad around town in their pajamas.

Hundreds of years ago Al Qardahah was an enclave of destitute Shiites who followed the Prophet's son-in-law and successor, Ali, so fervently that centuries before they'd been declared heretics by other Muslims and driven into the mountains of northwest Syria, where they came to be known as Alawis. Then in 1939, one of their own—a whip-smart, nine-year-old boy named Hafez—was sent down the mountain to get an education. He lived in Latakia while attending schools run by the French, who had taken over this part of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, in the great carving up of historic Syria (which included present-day Israel, Palestinian territories, Jordan, Lebanon, western Iraq, and southern Turkey) that Britain and France had plotted in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916.

Quiet and tall for his age, Hafez was driven to succeed and ultimately to rule. After Syria gained its independence from France in 1946, he joined the Baath Party, a secular Arab nationalist movement that would seize control of Syria in 1963. Hafez rose through the ranks of the air force and was eventually appointed defense minister. From that position, in 1970, he mounted a bloodless coup with a trusted coterie of military officers, many of them fellow Alawis. Since then, followers of this tiny Shiite sect have managed to hang on to power in this complex, ethnically volatile nation of 20 million people, 76 percent of whom are Sunni—a scenario that one diplomat likens to the Beverly Hillbillies taking charge of California.

Hafez al Assad survived by becoming a world-class manipulator of geopolitical events, playing the weak hand he was dealt so cleverly that Bill Clinton called him the smartest Middle Eastern leader he'd ever met. Inside Syria, Hafez was a master at downplaying the country's potentially explosive religious identities and building an adamantly secular regime. He discouraged the use of the term Alawi in public and changed the name of his home region to the Western mountains; it is still considered impolite to ask about a Syrian's religion today. He also went out of his way to protect other religious minorities—Christians, Ismailis, Druze—because he needed them as a counterweight to the Sunnis.

Hafez was ruthless toward his enemies, especially the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist movement eager to remove the apostate Alawis from power and make Syria an Islamic state. To counter them, he built an elaborate internal security apparatus modeled after the communist police states of Eastern Europe. When the Brotherhood launched a series of attacks in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Hafez sent his air force to bomb densely populated neighborhoods in the group's stronghold in Hama. His army bulldozed the smoking remains. Between 10,000 and 40,000 people were killed, and thousands more were jailed, tortured, and left to languish in prison. Despite criticism from human rights organizations, the regime soon unleashed its internal police on all political opponents.

When Hafez al Assad died in 2000, his body was returned to Al Qardahah and placed near that of his firstborn son, Basil, whose adrenaline-charged exploits on horseback, in uniform, and behind the wheel set him apart from his studious younger brother, a soft-spoken health nut whose musical taste runs to Yanni and the Electric Light Orchestra. Yet any suggestion that Bashar is a pushover is an illusion, says Ryan Crocker, who served as U.S. Ambassador in Damascus during the transition from father to son. "Bashar is so personable that it's easy to underestimate him," Crocker says. "But rest assured: He is his father's son."

A young man in an imitation black leather jacket was drawing in my notebook, launching a sailboat on a choppy sea with careful strokes of a blue pen. We were at a café overlooking the stony hills of northern Syria, watching cloud shadows play across a landscape of red soil and silver-green olive trees. Freedom, the man was saying. That's what we need.

"I'm not talking about political freedom," he said, glancing over his shoulder to be sure there were no *mukhabarat*, or secret police, about. "I mean the freedom to do things," he went on, "without getting strangled in rope by bureaucrats. In Syria, for guys like me, there's no incentive to try anything new, to create something. No way. You could never get approval from the government, or even the permits to think about it. Here it all comes down to who you know, what clan or village you're from, how much Vitamin Wow is in your pocket."

"Vitamin Wow?" I said, recalling that there is an Arabic letter pronounced "wow."

"*Wasta!*" he said, laughing. Money! Bribes!

"Where is your sailboat going?" I asked, nodding at his sketch.

"Nowhere," he said, grinning. "I've got no Vitamin Wow!"

Shortly after Bashar returned from London, he diagnosed Syria as suffering from an overdose of Vitamin Wow. After taking office in 2000, he launched a tough anticorruption campaign, firing a number of ministers and bureaucrats and vowing to replace old, *wasta*-loving ways with the "new mentality" he was seeking to instill. Swept up in the spirit of reform, he went on to release hundreds of political prisoners and eased the restrictions on political dissent—a so-called Damascus Spring that quickly spread from living rooms to a growing subculture of Internet cafés. It was Bashar himself who had made this last trend possible, working with like-minded technocrats to computerize Syria even before he became president. Over the objections of the country's powerful military-intelligence complex, Bashar had persuaded his father to connect Syria to the World Wide Web in 1998.

He also took steps to reboot Syria's stagnant economy. "Forty years of socialism—this is what we're up against," said Abdallah Dardari, 46, a London-educated economist who serves as deputy prime minister for economic affairs. Bashar has recruited Syria's best and brightest expatriates to return home. The new team has privatized the banking system, created duty-free industrial parks, and opened a Damascus stock exchange to encourage more of the private and foreign investment that has quickened the pulse of the capital and launched dozens of upscale nightclubs and restaurants.

"My job is to deliver for the people of Syria," said Bashar, who is known for occasionally dropping by a restaurant, leaving the bodyguards outside, to share a meal with other diners. In his push to modernize, Bashar's most potent ally is his wife, the former Asma al-Akhras, a stylish, Western-educated business executive who has launched a number of government-sponsored programs for literacy and economic empowerment. Daughter of a prominent Syrian heart specialist, Asma was born and raised in London. She and Bashar have three children, whom they're fond of taking on picnics and bicycle rides in the hills around the capital—a marked contrast to Hafez al-Assad, who was rarely seen in public. "You only know what people need if you come in contact with them," Bashar said. "We refuse to live inside a bubble. I think that's why people trust us."

For more than 4,000 years, the city of Aleppo in northern Syria has been a crossroads for trade moving along the Fertile Crescent from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean. Guarded by a towering hilltop Citadel, Aleppo's 900-acre Old City has remained essentially intact since the Middle Ages. Today, entering its covered suq, the largest in the Arab world, is like stepping across some cobblestone threshold into the 15th century—a medieval mosh pit of shopkeepers, food vendors, gold merchants, donkey carts, craftsmen, trinket peddlers, beggars, and hustlers of all stripes, moving in a great colorful clanking parade of goat bells and sandaled feet. If Aleppo bureaucrats had gotten their way, much of this would be gone.

During the 1950s, urban planners in Aleppo began implementing a modern development plan, dissecting the Old City with wide, Western-style streets. In 1977, local residents, led by an Old City architect named Adli Qudsi, fought back and eventually got the government to change its plan. Today the Old City has been preserved and its infrastructure overhauled, with funds from both government and philanthropic sources. Once considered a crumbling relic, old Aleppo is now cited by Bashar as a prime example of the new mentality he's seeking, a model for how Syria's past, its greatest asset, can be retooled and made into a future.

"Syria has been a trading nation for millennia, so what we're trying to do is return the country to its entrepreneurial roots," said Dardari. "But it's not going to be easy: 25 percent of the Syrian workforce still draws a government paycheck. We've inherited an economy that runs on patronage and government money, and we can't keep it up."

To see what Dardari and the modernizers are up against, I toured a government cotton-processing plant in Aleppo reminiscent of factories in the Soviet Union, vast and crumbling monuments to rusty machinery. The plant manager rambled on like a good apparatchik about the aging factory's production figures and impeccable safety record—unaware that a group of workers had just told me about the lost fingers, crushed feet, and lung damage they had suffered. When I asked if the factory made a profit, he looked at me as if I were speaking in tongues.

By allowing private investment in state-run industries, starting with cement and oil processing, Bashar and his reformers hope to modernize their operations and run them more efficiently. Many jobs have been lost in the process, and prices, no longer subsidized, have soared. But so many Syrians depend on government-supplied incomes from the cotton industry—a primary source of export revenue—that it remains mostly state run.

In many respects, the Syria that Bashar inherited bears all the signs of an antique enterprise, ready for the wrecking ball. Built by the Syrian Baath Party in the 1960s, the system of state enterprises and government jobs raised living standards and brought education and health care to rural villages, but its foundation resembles the corrupt and moribund Eastern-bloc socialism that collapsed under its own weight in the early 1990s. The Syrian bureaucracy is even older, having been erected from the fallen timbers of Ottoman and French colonial rule.

Education reform is also on Bashar's drawing board, and not a moment too soon. Syrian schoolchildren are taught by rote memorization from aging textbooks, and judged, even at the university level, by the number of facts they know. In Damascus, once revered as an intellectual capital of the eastern world, it's hard to find a bookstore that isn't stocked with communist-era treatises penned by Baath Party ideologues.

"My 11-year-old daughter is so confused," said Dardari. "She hears from me at home about free markets and the way the world works, and then she goes to school and learns from textbooks written in the 1970s that preach Marxism and the triumph of the proletariat. She comes home with this look on her face and says, 'Daddy, I feel like a Ping-Pong ball!'"

When a son goes into the family business, the old way of doing things can be very hard to change. And even though the eldest son, Basil, was considered more like his father, Bashar has ended up following in his footsteps—in more ways than one. A year into his presidency, planes hit the World Trade Center in New York City, and suddenly the threat to secular, "non-Muslim" regimes like Syria's from al Qaeda and its cousins in the Muslim Brotherhood appeared stronger than ever. The U.S. invasion of Iraq—and subsequent saber rattling toward Damascus—inflamed Syria's Islamists even further, while swamping the country with some 1.4 million Iraqi refugees, most of whom never returned home. Some believe that Bashar, in a move reminiscent of his father, diverted the widespread rage in Syria away from his vulnerable regime toward the Americans across the border in Iraq, allowing jihadists to use Syria as a staging area and transit point.

Even before 9/11, Bashar had backtracked on political reform and freedom of expression. His anticorruption drive had stalled, undermined by the shady business dealings of his own extended family. Investigations into the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in Beirut led to Syria's doorstep; shortly thereafter Bashar rearrested many of the political prisoners he'd released just a few years earlier. And last year, in an ironic twist for a self-confessed computer nerd who brought the Internet to Syria, Bashar's government banned a long list of websites, ranging from Arabic news sites to YouTube and Facebook. In all this, some see Bashar as the victim of reactionary elements within the regime—the youthful idealist dragged down by forces he is powerless to resist. Others see a young godfather learning to flex his muscles.

Bashar blames the U.S. invasion of Iraq for pushing the region, and Syria, into a dark corner and defends his tough internal security measures as vital weapons in the struggle to survive. Whether he's talking about the survival of Syria, or his regime, is unclear. "We're in a state of war with Israel," he said. "We've had conflicts with the Muslim Brotherhood since the 1950s. But now we have a much worse danger from al Qaeda. Al Qaeda is a state of mind. It's a CD, it's a booklet. And it's very hard to detect. This is why we need a strong internal security."

Members of the opposition, nearly all of them underground or in jail, don't buy that argument, having heard it used for 30 years to smother any spark of dissent. While acknowledging that today's repression is administered with a lighter touch, the activists I talked to consider the differences between Bashar's

regime and his father's to be cosmetic. "Bashar seems like a pretty nice guy, but the government is more than one person," said a young human rights activist I met secretly with in a tiny, book-lined apartment on the outskirts of the capital. He'd been interrogated a half dozen times by various agencies of state security. "Living here is something like a phobia," he went on, smoking a cigarette, dark circles under his eyes. "You always feel like someone's watching. You look around and there's no one there. So you think, I shouldn't have this feeling, but I do. I must be crazy. This is what they want."

Whatever its purpose, Syria's shadow of fear, the cloud that blocks its sun, is pervasive. To protect my sources for this article, I've left a number of people unnamed, fearing that they'd be arrested once it's published. An academician I met in Aleppo, for example, was harshly interrogated after attending a conference where Israeli scientists were present. After trying to browbeat him into informing on others, the interrogators let him go with a warning not to breathe a word or his file would be reopened. In Idlib, an Islamic fundamentalist hotbed south of Aleppo, a merchant compared living in Syria, with its internal security apparatus, to "walking sideways with a ladder, always having to think ahead and watch every little move you make."

One morning in Damascus, I was talking to a group of day laborers in a park, scruffy guys in their late teens and early twenties who were looking for work. Most were from southern Syria around Dara, and we were debating what kind of city Dara is. They were bad-mouthing it as a dry and dirty hellhole; I was defending it, having passed through a number of times on my way to Jordan. While we were bantering, a bullish, middle-aged man in a green polo shirt and wraparound sunglasses drifted over and listened in. As the workers became aware of him, our discussion murmured to a halt.

"Dara is a truly great city," the newcomer finally said, with an air of steely finality. The others moved away, suddenly afraid of this man. To see what he would do, I told him I was scheduled to see the president and asked if he'd like me to convey a message. He stared at me for a long moment, then went over and sat on a bench, scribbling in a notebook. I figured he was writing a report on me, or perhaps issuing some kind of ticket. A few minutes later, he was back.

"Please pass this to the president," he said, handing me a slip of paper folded so many times it was the size of a spitball. Then he turned and walked away. On it he had scrawled his name and phone number and a message in rough Arabic: "Salute, Dr. President Bashar, the respected. This paper is from a national Syrian young man from Al Hasakah who needs very much a job in the field of public office, and thank you."

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