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Article 1.

NYT

# The Tony Awards

Roger Cohen

May 12, 2011— Every few years along comes a brilliant Jewish writer called Tony with challenging views on Israel, and this great city — on all other matters the most open in the world — gets tied in knots over what can or cannot be said. After “L’Affaire Judt” we have “L’Affaire Kushner,” but with different outcomes that suggest a shifting American Jewish discourse.

The late Tony Judt, author of the brilliant study of late 20th-century Europe called “Postwar,” saw his New York persona changed with the appearance in 2003 in The New York Review of Books of an article called “Israel: The Alternative.” It posited the creation of a single binational state of Jews and Palestinians and suggested a Jewish state was anachronistic.

The calls to his office began — “Tell Tony Judt this is Hitler calling and he says, ‘Congratulations.”’ Years later, an event featuring Judt at the Polish Consulate got canceled at the last minute after its organizers apparently came under pressure from prominent New York Jewish groups.

To this day, in the city this British-born Jew came to love for its clamorous diversity, Judt’s luminous oeuvre sometimes seems overshadowed by a single polemical piece.

I disagreed with Judt: No alternative binational state of Palestinians and Jews is imaginable in the Holy Land, at least not this side of utopia. History demonstrates that Jews need a homeland called Israel. Amos Oz, the Israeli author, has noted that, “When my father was a young man in Vilna, every wall in Europe said, ‘Jews go home to Palestine.’ Fifty years later when he went back to Europe on a visit,

the walls all screamed, 'Jews get out of Palestine."' A Jewish refuge is just and necessary.

But the imperative, inescapable accompaniment to Israel is Palestine. A two-state solution is the only strategic and moral answer to the wars since 1948 that have left countless Palestinians bereft of home and dignity, living under an Israeli dominion as corrosive of its masters as it is punishing to its victims.

Judt, who later suggested the binational idea was utopian, penned a provocation. Its spark was that the current impasse is untenable: Israel cannot be at once Jewish and democratic if it permanently disenfranchises millions of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank. While I disagreed with his proposed resolution, I agree that the occupation is untenable and I found the hounding of Judt, who died last year of Lou Gehrig's disease, an appalling instance of the methods of the relentless Israel-right-or-wrong bullies.

Enter the second Tony of this saga, Tony Kushner, the Pulitzer-prize winning author of "Angels in America." His honorary degree from the City University of New York gets blocked on May 2 after a trustee called Jeffrey Wiesenfeld — like Judt from a family of Holocaust survivors — suggests Kushner is an "extremist" opponent of Israel.

Wiesenfeld, by the way, is not sure Palestinians are human given that they "worship death for their children."

For anyone familiar with the Judt saga, Kushner's travails have a familiar ring. He's interested in historical facts, which include Palestinians being driven from their homes in 1948; he's appalled by the ongoing Israeli settlement policy and is a board member of an organization that has supported boycotting West Bank settlements (although Kushner told me he's against a boycott); he's mused about one state.

That's heresy enough for Wiesenfeld. This time, however, the counter-wave was powerful. J Street, an organization not around in 2003 that supports Israel but opposes the settlements, issued a statement calling CUNY's action "unacceptable." Former mayor Ed Koch, of impeccable pro-Israel credentials, weighed in. Within days CUNY reversed itself and approved Kushner's degree.

Now Wiesenfeld is under pressure to resign. He should: No university is well served by a trustee who values taboo over debate and doubts an entire people's humanity.

Kushner told me he believes "there is a very significant change underway." Americans are realizing there is "a terrible need for a dose of debate" on Israel and that "silent acquiescence" to those "whose politics are based substantially on fantasy and theological wishes" is dangerous.

Criticism of Israel is not betrayal of Israel. The Kushner affair, like the Judt affair before it, is important in that Israel's political compass is guided to some degree by its sense of the American mood. That mood, beginning in the White House, is of growing impatience.

Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, will address Congress this month. He has responded to tumultuous events in the Middle East with vapid tactical sound bites. The speech to Congress is his chance to lay out a strategy for two states. I doubt he'll ever locate his inner statesman — in which case the world's irritation and futile Palestinian unilateralism will harden.

Yitzhak Rabin did not stand on the White House lawn with Yasser Arafat for a photo-op. The Israeli warrior understood the necessity of a two-state peace. To get there at last, "It's essential that we become more sophisticated and braver in what we're willing to say and think," Kushner said.

Amen to that — and Tony Judt, great man, requiescat in pace.

Article 2.

Project Syndicate

# Democracy's Dawn in Tunisia and Egypt?

Alfred Stepan

2011-05-12 -- CAIRO – With protests fading in Tunis and seeming to have peaked in Cairo, it is time to ask whether Tunisia and Egypt will complete democratic transitions. I have been visiting both countries, where many democratic activists have been comparing their situation with the more than 20 successful and failed democratic-transition attempts throughout the world that I have observed and analyzed.

One fear should be dismissed immediately: despite worries about the incompatibility of Islam and democracy, more than 500 million Muslims now live in Muslim-majority countries that are commonly classified as democracies – Indonesia, Turkey, Bangladesh, Senegal, Mali, and Albania. But, for almost 40 years, not a single Arab-majority country has been classified as a democracy, so a democratic transition in either Tunisia or Egypt (or elsewhere in the region) would be of immense importance for the entire Arab world.

Tunisia's chances of becoming a democracy before the year ends are, I believe, surprisingly good. A key factor here is that the military is not complicating the transition to democracy. Tunisia has a small military (only about 36,000 soldiers), and, since independence in 1956, it had been led by two party-based non-democratic leaders who strove to keep the military out of politics.

Moreover, the current civilian-led interim government engages in at least some negotiations about the new democratic rules of the game with virtually all of the major political actors who generated the revolution and who will contest the elections.

Tunisia's interim government has announced that elections to a Constituent Assembly will be held on July 24, 2011, and, crucially, that as soon as the votes are counted, it will step down. As in the classic democratic transitions in Spain and India, the newly elected Constituent Assembly will immediately have the responsibility of forming the government.

The Constituent Assembly will be free to choose a presidential, semi-presidential, or parliamentary system. A consensus is emerging among political leaders to choose the same system as the ten post-communist countries that have been admitted to the European Union: parliamentarianism.

Finally, Rachid al-Ghannouchi, who leads the largest Islamic-inspired political party, Al Nahda, went out of his way to tell me that he has signed an agreement with some secular parties that he will not try to change Tunisia's women-friendly family code, the most liberal in the Arab world. While many party leaders do not fully trust Ghannouchi, they believe that in the new democratic environment, the political costs to Al Nahda would be too great for it to risk trying to impose Islamic rule. They also increasingly believe that the most democratically effective policy toward Al Nahda for secular parties is accommodation, not exclusion.

Democratization in Egypt in the long term is probable, but it does not share the more favorable conditions found in Tunisia. One of the biggest differences between the two countries is that every Egyptian president since 1952 has been a military officer. Eighteen generals lead the Post-Mubarak interim government, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). They unilaterally issue statements about what they see as the rules of the game for future elections. Key civil-society and political actors repeatedly told me that they had little access to, and almost no politically serious negotiations with, the SCAF.

The clashes in Tahrir Square on April 9-10, which led to the deaths of two protesters, were the most serious to date between activists and the Army. The distance between the Army and young democratic activists grew further on April 11, when a military court sentenced the first blogger since the fall of Mubarak to prison for criticizing the military.

In the SCAF's March 30 "Constitutional Declaration," it became absolutely clear that, unlike Tunisia, the parliament to be elected in September will not form a government. Articles 56 and 61 stipulate that the SCAF will retain a broad range of executive powers until a president is elected. Instead of Parliament acting as the sovereign body that will write a constitution, Article 60 mandates that it is to "elect a 100-member constituent assembly." The big question now is how many non-elected outside experts will end up in this "constituent assembly" and how they will arrive there.

Of course, many still fear that Islamic fundamentalists will hijack Egypt's revolution. But I see that as an improbable outcome, given the growing diversification of Muslim identities in the new context of political freedoms, secular parties' efforts to keep the Muslim Brotherhood within electoral politics, and the profiles of the three leading presidential candidates, none of whom want the Egyptian Revolution to be captured.

In short, a successful democratic transition is possible in Tunisia, and not impossible in Egypt. That fact, alone, should bolster the hopes of Arab democratic activists elsewhere as well.

*Alfred Stepan is Professor of Government at Columbia University and the author, with Juan J. Linz and Yogendra Yadav, of the recently published Crafting State Nations.*

Article 3.

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

# A Decade of Struggling Reform Efforts in Jordan: The Resilience of the Rentier System

## Summary + Conclusion

(The full text: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/jordan_reform.pdf)

**Marwan Muasher**

May 2011 – On February 1, 2011, after weeks of protests that preceded the uprisings in both Tunisia and Egypt, King Abdullah II dismissed the unpopular government of Samir Rifai and entrusted Marouf Al Bakhit, an ex-army general and former prime minister, with forming a new government. Bakhit's major task would be "to take speedy practical and tangible steps to unleash a real political reform process that reflects [Jordan's] vision of comprehensive reform, modernization and development." While the references to political reform abounded in this newest letter, they were far from new.

Since acceding to the throne in 1999, the king has entrusted almost every appointed government with some aspect of political reform. What was novel about this particular letter was his candid admission that "the process has been marred by gaps and imbalances" and that these were the result of "fear of change by some who resisted it to protect their own interests . . . costing the country dearly and denying it many opportunities for achievement."

In several speeches and press interviews over the last few years, the king has hinted at his frustration with those who did not wish to embrace change. The words in this letter, however, marked the clearest attack yet on those who resisted reform. The accusation was explicit: the motives behind resistance to change from such groups, which had in fact been created and sustained by the system over

many decades, stemmed from their desire to protect their own private interests—even at the expense of the state.

Could reform efforts have taken a different course in Jordan? In a country where the king has broad powers over all branches of government, his expressed frustration over the struggling reform efforts begs the question of why the status quo remains intact. This decade-long process, initiated by the king, has been largely ignored by an ossified layer of elites seeking to protect their own interests. The clear discrepancy between the king's directives to the seven prime ministers he had entrusted to form governments in his twelve years of power—and the actual record of reform completed by these respective governments—points to a structural problem that is all too often ignored.

Much research has been done on the creation of rentier and semi-rentier systems in the Arab world, whereby the state relies on rents from such nonproductive sources as oil or external assistance. Such rents, however, are also specifically utilized to provide privileges to the political elite in exchange for its loyalty. These groups, developed by many Arab systems over decades, support the existing order because it occupies a privileged position that would be compromised by merit-based systems, rather than ones based on clientelism and patronage.

In the case of Jordan, this group has become so entrenched, powerful, and ossified that it is now not only resisting such reform from below but—more dangerously—from above. In other words, these elites have become recalcitrant, self-appointed guardians of the state who believe they alone should decide how the country ought to evolve. They have no qualms about opposing the directives of the leaders or systems that created them in the first place if those leaders are seen as adopting policies that threaten their interests.

An examination of the political reforms conducted by successive governments in Jordan over the last decade suggests that, in most cases, the king's directives were ignored, diluted, and, at times, directly opposed. This does not imply that the objectives of this class and the monarch were always in contradiction, but suggests that the rentier system has, over time and through entrenchment, created monsters who will only acquiesce as long as the system perpetuates the old policy of favors.

These groups are therefore more likely to pursue policies that are antithetical to political reform, thus resulting in the gaps and imbalances lamented by the king's latest letter. These rentier systems have already proven to be difficult to maintain and, in an Arab world that is increasingly demanding better governance and greater accountability, such ossified systems will come to pose significant threats to stability, particularly in resource-poor countries such as Jordan

## Conclusion

After a decade of political reform efforts in Jordan, it does not appear that the process has made any significant advances. In fact, as is clear from some of the key indicators above, the process seems not only to have stalled, but regressed as well. Reversals in civil liberties and political rights caused Jordan to lose significant international standing. In the annual Freedom House rankings, Jordan declined from a rank of 4 in 2001 (partly free) on a scale of 1 to 7 (1 being most free) to a rank of 6 (not free) in 2010. Corruption has also become a major issue in the country in the last few years. From 2003 to 2007, the Jordanian Center for Strategic Studies asked citizens in its annual poll to rate their priorities for the country. Over the four year period, they consistently ranked corruption among their top priorities; it came in a close second to poverty and unemployment.

Jordan also fell in the rankings of the highly respected Transparency International Corruptions Perceptions Index from 37 (1 being the least corrupt in about 180 countries studied) in 2003 to 50 in 2010. It is clear that Jordan's political establishment has no interest in implementing the king's explicit orders to move ahead on political reform and, in most cases, took measures that set the process back. The uprisings that Jordan is A Decade of Struggling Reform Efforts in Jordan: The Resilience of the Rentier System witnessing today are not all instigated by groups that are seeking reform in the traditional liberal sense. Some are led by groups that support the rentier-system model-the source of many of their livelihoods-and are concerned that the state may move away from such a system. The king's own policies on political reform-often aimed at striking a balance between the traditional elements and the reformers-have not borne fruit, and almost always resulted in appeasing traditional elements at the expense of reform. Reform needs reformers who are cognizant of the need for an orderly, gradual process but are also committed to a serious roadmap that would lead to true power-sharing through strong legislative and judicial bodies. The selection of several prime ministers did not lead to serious progress on reform, precisely because they were neither true believers in its value, nor did they have a critical mass of reformers inside their governments able to counterbalance the traditional elements who wanted to preserve the status quo at all costs. Thus, instead of holistically addressing all needed areas of reform, reform programs were instead reduced to ad-hoc initiatives that did not add up to any serious and structural changes in governance systems. The king's practice of handing a prime minister a plan for reform that the latter does not believe in and expecting him to deliver on it regardless has simply failed. The National Agenda, an example of such a holistic and gradual program to move toward a more inclusive and democratic system, was never

implemented; now, current demands have gone beyond it. The king himself has expressed frustration many times over this, both in domestic speeches and in international appearances. When Fareed Zakaria asked him about the future of reform in Jordan in a World Economic Forum debate aired on CNN on February 7, 2010, the king volunteered the following answer regarding the reform process over the last ten years: "Sometimes you take two steps forward, one step back. There is resistance to change. There is a resistance to ideas. When we try to push the envelope, there are certain sectors of society that say this is a Zionist plot to sort of destabilize our country, or this is an American agenda. So, it's very difficult to convince people to move forward." The king faces a formidable task any time a reform process is initiated, as he must confront, address, or co-opt the traditional constituency of the regime. Finding a way of doing this-whether through attempting to arrive at a consensus among the different societal forces, changing the make-up of his coalition, substituting certain benefits to the traditional constituency with others, or convincing the political elite that the status quo is unsustainable-will determine to a large degree whether a serious reform process will ever gain traction. The various attempts to put economic liberalization in the country ahead of political reform did not succeed either. While it is easy to argue that citizens want bread before freedom, economic liberalization took place without the development of a system of checks and balances and resulted in the benefits of economic reform being usurped by an elite few. To the average citizen, neither bread nor freedom was attained. As a result, the public has come to view liberalization and globalization negatively. Economic reform must be accompanied by political reform, such that institutional mechanisms of accountability are developed to monitor excesses and ensure benefits are made available to all. Finally, no reform process can be effective without sustained

implementation. Frequent changes in governments, plans, and priorities have all contributed to the failure of the reform process in Jordan over the past decade. In view of the recent uprisings in the Arab world, the political elite must recognize that the only way they can retain power is by sharing it, and governments will have to acknowledge that substituting serious implementation with reform rhetoric fools no one. Given that Jordan enjoys a rather distinctive position-its monarchy enjoys widespread legitimacy and plays a role in stability that is acknowledged by all sectors of society, including the opposition-the king is in a unique position to lead a serious reform process. The choice in Jordan seems to be similar to that of other countries around it: either lead a reform process from above in a gradual, orderly, and serious way, or watch it take place in the streets below with uncontrolled consequences.

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Article 4.

Foreign Policy

# Syria: Too Big to Fail?

Aaron David Miller

MAY 12, 2011 -- If you're a bit confused about U.S. President Barack Obama's passivity in the face of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's brutal repression of domestic opposition, don't be. Syria isn't Libya. The Assad regime is just too consequential to risk undermining.

Although the fall of the House of Assad might actually benefit U.S. interests, the president isn't going to encourage it. For realists in the White House, Assad's demise carries more risks than opportunities. Great powers behave inconsistently -- even hypocritically -- depending on their interests. That's not unusual; it's part of the job description. In fact, in responding to the forces of change and repression loosed throughout the Arab world, flexibility is more important than ideological rigidity.

The last thing America needs is a doctrine or ideological template to govern how it responds to fast-breaking changes in a dozen Arab countries, all of which are strikingly different in their respective circumstances.

That the administration's response often seemed like a giant game of whack-a-mole, with a new problem popping up daily, was inevitable. And so was the variety of U.S. responses. In Bahrain, where the United States had established the headquarters of the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, and in Yemen, where counterterrorism is king, interests trumped values. You didn't hear Obama make any "Qaddafi must go"-style speeches directed against Bahrain's ruling Khalifa family or Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

The contradictions and anomalies of U.S. foreign policy have also been on stark display in the Obama administration's differing responses to Qaddafi's and Assad's repression of their own people. Beating up Qaddafi proved doable and necessary to prevent what was viewed as potential atrocities by his forces in Benghazi. Libya had few significant air defense systems and no friends; it was relatively easy to construct a coalition of the (semi-)willing in the United Nations, NATO and the Arab League to oppose the man President Ronald Reagan once dubbed the "mad dog of the Middle East" -- a tin pot and often bizarre dictator who opposed reform and political change. If you wanted to construct a more vulnerable target in a laboratory, you couldn't have done much better.

Syria presents a profoundly different situation. U.S. policy has always been driven by the hope that the Assads would change and the fear of what might replace them if they fell. Three additional realities ensured a U.S. response quite different from the one for Libya.

First, Syria was hard. It's a country with a sophisticated air defense system, chemical and biological weapons, and a great many friends -- including Iran and Hezbollah, which are capable of striking back. Marshaling support at the United Nations, mobilizing NATO, and getting buy-in from the Arab League in the way that made the Libya intervention possible are not in the cards. Some of America's closest friends, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, are also not at all sure that Syria without Assad would be better than with him.

Second, for most U.S. presidents -- Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush being the exceptions -- Syria has served as a kind of unholy diplomatic grail. Since Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, U.S. policymakers had viewed the Assads as pragmatists capable of facilitating or blocking U.S. policy in Lebanon and the Arab-Israeli peace process.

If only the Syrians could be brought around, presidents have believed for generations, life would be so much easier. The United States wasn't alone in this illusion -- the Israelis, Arabs, Europeans, and Russians felt the same way. Like the Wall Street banks, Syria was then, as it is now, judged as simply too big to fail. There was something perversely comforting about having the Assads around.

I had my own fair share of illusions during my government career, but the Assads were never one of them. I could never quite understand my colleagues' fascination with the brutal Syrian regime. To me, Bashar al-Assad was a brutal dictator who wanted to be the Frank Sinatra of the Middle East -- obsessed with doing things his own way to the point that he priced himself out of peace with Israel and a relationship with the United States. It's striking that every other Arab state, with the possible exception of Libya, managed to establish a close relationship with the United States. Not Assad.

Third, Obama's approach toward Syria has been managed by the realists. This stands in contrast with his Libya policy, where liberal interventionists in the administration and neocons outside clamored for action. This group of realists includes the president, who knows his options on Syria aren't great. He's being told that American leverage isn't great and that if he calls for Assad's head and the Syrian despot survives, he'll have lost access to a key player in the region. And after all, what could he do that would deter a regime in a fight for its life? Pull U.S. Ambassador Robert Ford from Damascus? Impose a travel ban on Assad and his family? Press the Europeans to freeze Assad's money?

In a world of symbols, these steps may make an important point about American values. However, none of them will make a difference in how events play out in Syria.

Simply put, the Obama administration is worried about creating a worse situation if Assad falls. Take your pick of scary scenarios:

civil war, a Sunni fundamentalist takeover, or a new base for al Qaeda.

Of course, there would also be an upside to Assad's demise. A brutal regime would have fallen; Iran would be denied an Arab patron and a critical window into Lebanon and the Arab-Israeli arena; Hamas would likely drift further into the orbit of Egypt and Saudi Arabia; and Hezbollah -- though hardly defanged in Lebanon -- would lose a critical patron. At this point, however, the administration clearly judges that the risks of U.S. action outweigh the potential benefits. Bad options, bad outcomes. So, for now, we watch and wait to see where the arc on the Assads is headed -- north or south. But if the Assads do survive, it wouldn't surprise me in the least if Washington at some point resumes a business-as-usual posture with the only surviving repressive Arab dictator that's too big to fail.

*Aaron David Miller is a public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. His book, Can America Have Another Great President?, will be published in 2012.*

Article 5.

The Daily Star

# Syria fortifies Obama in his indecision

Michael Young

12 May -- The New York Times gave readers a double-whammy of Syrian statements on Tuesday. Its correspondent in Beirut, Anthony Shadid, landed interviews with presidential adviser Bouthaina Shaaban and with Rami Makhlouf, the powerful maternal cousin of President Bashar Assad, who represents the financial front of the regime.

Shadid was allowed into Syria for only a few hours to conduct the interviews. You have to wonder whether this provoked much debate in the newspaper's offices. The condition transformed the correspondent into a stenographer, and the New York Times into a platform, for the dual messages emanating from Damascus. This irked quite a few people. However, it's also fair to say that Shadid has kept the Syria story on the front pages of his daily, at a moment when the attention in the United States has been drifting elsewhere.

What did Shaaban and Makhlouf say? The essence of Shaaban's remarks was that the Syrian regime had gained the upper hand against the uprising. "I think now we've passed the most dangerous moment. I hope so, I think so," she said. Shaaban repeated the government line that Syria faced an armed rebellion, and disclosed that she had been tasked with initiating a dialogue with dissidents. "We see [the Syrian events] as an opportunity to try to move forward on many levels, especially the political level," she added.

Makhlouf's comments sounded more ominous. "If there is no stability [in Syria], there's no way there will be stability in Israel," he warned. "No way, and nobody can guarantee what will happen after, God forbid, anything happens to this regime." He observed that the

regime had opted to fight, insisting that all its members were united: "We will sit here. We call it a fight until the end." He also issued a transparent threat: "They should know when we suffer, we will not suffer alone."

Some have suggested that the two messages reveal a split in the Syrian regime. That's not convincing. The messages were not that different, and to put Shaaban on the same level as Makhlouf is absurd. Shaaban is viewed as a spokesman for the president, but she plays no central role in the Assad-Makhlouf constellation. She doubtless needed a green light to go ahead with the interview, one that required some measure of approval by Makhlouf and Assad's younger brother Maher, both of whom have taken an eradication approach to the protests. Makhlouf, in turn, needed no authorization whatsoever.

What Shaaban said was likely intended to be interpreted in the United States as a marginally soft statement by Bashar Assad. In contrast, Makhlouf offered the harsher alternative if the president's approach was rejected by the international community. It was a classic good cop, bad cop routine, and those familiar with Syrian manners will be little surprised by the ploy. That's why it seems far-fetched to assume that we are witnessing a fundamental rift in Syria's ruling family.

The reason for this is that there is no serious alternative to what the Assads and the Makhloufs are doing today. They can either stand together behind repression, or fall apart. That's hardly to justify the regime's butchery of hundreds of unarmed civilians. Rather, it's to affirm that the Syrian leadership is incapable of undertaking anything different. There simply is no reform option, and there never was. Genuine reform means dislodging the bricks holding up Assad-Makhlouf authority. Bashar Assad's open-ended presidency, the crony capitalism practiced by his cousin and other members of Syria's elite, the abuse practiced by the all-powerful security

services, even Alawite predominance, would never survive a system shaped by free elections, the rule of law, and the existence of independent media.

The New York Times interviews were made possible by the deep uneasiness in the Obama administration with moves that might destabilize the Assad regime. The Syrians are good judges of their adversaries' weaknesses, and what they see in Washington is a president who prefers the Assads to the possibility of chaos. They realize that the measures taken until now by the United States and Europe have been relatively gentle, therefore wholly ineffective. Add to that the [redacted]. Security Council's recent failure to condemn Syria and official Arab support for Syrian stability, and you will grasp why the Assad regime saw an opening to reinforce American paralysis. Nor can the Obama administration ignore that the Syrian leadership regards American dithering as a sign of implicit approval of its actions. Indeed, Shaaban described the recent statements of President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Syria as "not too bad," and the sanctions against Syria as manageable. That can only mean one thing: If Washington fails to clarify its views on the carnage in Syria through effective policies, the killing and the arrests there will continue, with the U.S. bearing partial responsibility. The White House's uncertainty can be measured in human lives.

The Syrian protesters are right in not pursuing their salvation in Washington, let alone Brussels, Paris, or London. This is not an American administration overly outraged by the viciousness of dictatorships. Even in Egypt, Obama only turned against Hosni Mubarak when he was left with no other choice – although doing so against an old ally while sparing Assad suggests that Obama is like the coward who will yell at his wife to avoid a brawl with the neighbor.

What all this could also mean, however, is that the Syrian regime is wrong in pursuing its salvation in foreign capitals. Ultimately, Assad, his legitimacy in tatters, will have to win out against his own people. That will not be easy, not when the president has had to order the military occupation of several of his major cities. The regime's behavior is a daily insult to Syrians, one they will not readily forget.

*Michael Young is opinion editor of THE DAILY STAR and author of "The Ghosts of Martyrs Square: An Eyewitness Account of Lebanon's Life Struggle" (Simon & Schuster), listed as one of the 10 notable books of 2010 by the Wall Street Journal.*

Article 6.

New York Review of Books

# Storm Over Syria

Malise Ruthven

*The Other Side of the Mirror: An American Travels Through Syria*
*by Brooke Allen*
*Paul Dry, 259 pp., $16.95 (paper)*

June 9, 2011 -- "Damascus has seen all that has ever occurred on earth, and still she lives," wrote Mark Twain after visiting Syria's capital in the 1860s. "She has looked upon the dry bones of a thousand empires, and will see the tombs of a thousand more before she dies."

The turmoil in Syria, where hundreds of unarmed protesters have been mown down by the forces of President Bashar al-Assad, who comes from the country's Alawi minority, is much more menacing than the generally peaceful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, from which the Syrian protesters drew their initial inspiration. The regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia capitulated in the face of spontaneous demonstrations sparked by the self-immolation of a twenty-six-year-old man who had been reduced to scratching out a living as a humble street vendor. Ben Ali, along with his hated wife and family, chose to go into exile before a single shot had been fired. In Egypt, if press reports are to be believed, the generals unseated President Hosni Mubarak after tank commanders refused his orders to fire on civilians. The Egyptian revolution, which has seen some resistance from the military and police, has now taken a constitutional turn, with the country approving a series of amendments that could lead to the emergence of a parliamentary

democracy. Much will depend on the willingness of the military to allow an open political process to take place.

The Syrian government's response to the Arab world's turbulent spring, by contrast, has been both violent and vacillating. Its initial response was to characterize the protests across the country as the result of a global conspiracy fomented by a clutch of unlikely allies, including the US, Israel, and Arab enemies in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, working with former regime officials and homegrown Salafists, or fundamentalists. Then President Assad tried to defuse the opposition by receiving protest delegations and announcing the lifting of long-standing emergency laws, apparently acknowledging the existence of legitimate grievances. But this proved no more than a gesture. In effect the government's response has been contradictory to the point of incoherence: as the Brussels-based International Crisis Group points out in a report released on May 3:

The regime has lifted the emergency law but has since allowed the security services to conduct business as usual, thereby illustrating just how meaningless the concept of legality was in the first place. It authorises demonstrations even as it claims they no longer are justified and then labels them as treasonous. It speaks of reforming the media and, in the same breath, dismisses those who stray from the official line. It insists on ignoring the most outrageous symbols of corruption. Finally, and although it has engaged in numerous bilateral talks with local representatives, it resists convening a national dialogue, which might represent the last, slim chance for a peaceful way forward.

Over seven hundred people have been killed so far, more than a hundred of them in the southwestern city of Deraa, near the Jordanian border, where the Omari mosque—a center of resistance—has been closed to worshipers after being shelled by tanks and taken over by snipers. Some ten thousand people are now said to have been

detained by elite security forces backed by the army. According to Amnesty International, detainees have been beaten with sticks and cables, and sometimes deprived of food. Unlike in Libya there are no NATO forces to protect Syria's cities or parts of the country from the murderous attacks inflicted by a regime that is now losing the last threads of international legitimacy. Assad has a more effective army than Qaddafi and powerful friends in Iran, Lebanon, and Iraq.

In contrast to Libya, military action in defense of Syria's beleaguered population would barely attract a shred of international support. While the Arab League voted unanimously for the no-fly zone to protect the people of Benghazi, in the case of Syria it has not even mentioned the country by name, merely declaring that pro-democracy protesters "deserve support, not bullets."

As The New York Times pointed out in an editorial, the UN Security Council "hasn't even been able to muster a press statement. Russia and China, as ever, are determined to protect autocrats." Israel has been watching and waiting with alarm as the outcome of the unrest in Syria becomes more and more uncertain. Despite his alliance with Iran and refusal to recognize the Jewish state, Assad is the devil it knows best. Prolonged instability or a Salafist regime could only make matters worse.

On the ground it is far from clear what is happening, since foreign reporters have been banned from entering the country, Internet service has been shut down, and cell-phone coverage limited to satellites or systems outside government control. Nevertheless the protests—spurred by funerals of victims and gatherings at Friday prayers, the only occasions on which large numbers of people are permitted to assemble—have spread from Deraa to at least a dozen other cities including Baniyas and Latakia on the Mediterranean coast, as well as to the northern city of Homs and some suburbs of Damascus.* With the Alawi-dominated regime under threat, the

struggle is showing ominous sectarian overtones. At Baniyas, where the army moved scores of tanks and armored vehicles into the city's southern outskirts, paramilitary groups were said to have massed in Alawi-populated northern suburbs. The city centers of Damascus and Aleppo, however, remained relatively quiet, as the government appeared to be organizing rallies of its own supporters, with activists claiming that efforts were being made to bus pro-government demonstrators from Alawi-dominated regions. Grainy cell-phone images sent in clandestinely from Homs to the al-Jazeera TV network showed a speech by a senior defector from the ruling Baath party being greeted with shouts of Allahu Akbar (God Is Greater), often regarded as the jihadist war cry.

At first sight the defection of more than three hundred members of the ruling Baath party in protest at the crackdown would suggest that Syria's one-party state, in place since 1963, is beginning to unravel. What some people are calling the Facebook Revolution, an unprecedented wave of visible public protest, is led by a generation of media-savvy young people, more aware of the outside world than their parents were, who are demanding an end to the system of repression, corruption, and privilege that has been the hallmark of the authoritarian Arab regimes lying between the Atlas Mountains and the Persian Gulf.

Yet unlike the Muslim Brotherhood's rebellion in Hama, which shook the government of Bashar al-Assad's father Hafez in 1982, the Facebook rebellion seems curiously faceless. There are some signs of opposition violence with "plausible reports of security forces being ambushed by unidentified armed groups, as well as of protesters firing back when attacked," according to the International Crisis Group. But these appear to be small and random incidents. The vast majority of casualties are the consequence of the regime's brutality. The protests are largely spontaneous. There seem to be no controlling

organizations or identifiable leaders, and the opposition's ideological focus is unclear, beyond slogans calling for an end to corruption and repression.

Optimists see this as an implicit acceptance of democratic values and assumptions. Despite the increasingly desperate efforts of the region's authoritarian governments to keep their people in the dark about the realities of the outside world by restricting information, the younger generation identifies with its peers in the liberal West and it knows what it is missing in access to material and educational benefits as well as civil and democratic rights. The problem is that while the Facebook generation knows what it doesn't like, it is far from clear that there are structures in place, or being planned, that could provide the basis for an alternative political system if the regime collapses. Pessimists envisage a scenario encapsulated in the phrase "one man, one vote, one time" leading to a Salafist takeover and a settling of scores against minorities (including Christians) who were protected by the regime or benefited from its pluralist approach. More than 70 percent of the Syrian population are Sunni.

How did Syria come to this pass? While some observers see in recent events a parallel with 1989, with the break-up of the East European–style system introduced by the Baathists in the 1960s, this is no velvet revolution, nor is Syria like Jaruzelski's Poland. The regime's violence is not ideological. It is far from being the result of an emotional or philosophical commitment to a party that long ago abandoned its agenda of promoting secular Arab republican values and aspirations. The regime's ruthless attachment to power lies in a complex web of tribal loyalties and networks of patronage underpinned by a uniquely powerful religious bond.

The Alawis of Syria, who make up only 12 percent of its population, split from the main branch of Shiism more than a thousand years ago. Before the twentieth century they were usually referred to as

Nusayris, after their eponymous founder Ibn Nusayr, who lived in Iraq during the ninth century. Taking refuge in the mountains above the port of Latakia, on the coastal strip between modern Lebanon and Turkey, they evolved a highly secretive syncretistic theology containing an amalgam of Neoplatonic, Gnostic, Christian, Muslim, and Zoroastrian elements. Their leading theologian, Abdullah al-Khasibi, who died in 957, proclaimed the divinity of Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, whom other Shiites revere but do not worship. Like many Shiites influenced by ancient Gnostic teachings that predate Islam, they believe that the way to salvation and knowledge lies through a succession of divine emanations. Acknowledging a line of prophets or avatars beginning with Adam and culminating in Christ and Muhammad, they include several figures from classical antiquity in their list, such as Socrates, Plato, Galen, and some of the pre-Islamic Persian masters.

Nusayrism could be described as a folk religion that absorbed many of the spiritual and intellectual currents of late antiquity and early Islam, packaged into a body of teachings that placed its followers beyond the boundaries of orthodoxy. Mainstream Muslims, both Sunni and Shia, regarded them as ghulta, "exaggerators." Like other sectarian groups they protected their tradition by a strategy known as taqiyya—the right to hide one's true beliefs from outsiders in order to avoid persecution. Taqiyya makes a perfect qualification for membership in the mukhabarat—the ubiquitous intelligence/security apparatus that has dominated Syria's government for more than four decades.

Secrecy was also observed by means of a complex system of initiation, in which insiders recognized each other by using special phrases or passwords and neophytes underwent a form of spiritual marriage with the naqibs, or spiritual guides. At this ceremony three superior dignitaries represent a kind of holy trinity of the figures who

feature in other Nusayri rituals, namely Ali, Muhammad, and Salman al-Farisi (the Persian companion of Muhammad who in several Islamic traditions forms a link between the Arabs and the wisdom of ancient Persia). Nusayri rituals, performed in private homes or out-of-the-way places, include a ceremony known as Qurban—almost identical to the mass—where wine is consecrated and imbibed in the Christian manner. As Matti Moosa, a leading scholar of the Nusayris, states in his seminal study Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects (1988):

The Christian elements in the Nusayri religion are unmistakable. They include the concept of trinity; the celebration of Christmas, the consecration of the Qurban, that is, the sacrament of the flesh and blood which Christ offered to His disciples, and, most important, the celebration of the Quddas [a lengthy prayer proclaiming the divine attributes of Ali and the personification of all the biblical patriarchs from Adam to Simon Peter, founder of the Church, who is seen, paradoxically, as the embodiment of true Islam].

Moosa suggests that like other schismatic groups residing in Syria, such as the Druzes and Ismailis, the Nusayris do not take their beliefs literally, but understand them as allegorical ways of reaching out to the divine. While this may be true of the educated naqibs, or spiritual elders, such belief systems may have different ramifications for semiliterate peasants, reinforcing a contempt or disdain for outsiders who do not share these beliefs. Like the Druzes and some Ismailis, Nusayris believe in metempsychosis or transmigration. The souls of the wicked pass into unclean animals such as dogs and pigs, while the souls of the righteous enter human bodies more perfect than their present ones. The howls of jackals that can be heard at night are the souls of Sunni Muslims calling their misguided co-religionists to prayer.

It does not take much imagination to see how such beliefs, programmed into the community's values for more than a millennium, and reinforced by customs such as endogamous marriage—according to which the children of unions between Nusayris and non-Nusayris cannot be initiated into the sect—create very strong notions of apartness and disdain for the "Other."

The great Arab philosopher of history Ibn Khaldun, who died in 1406, elaborated the concept of 'asabiyya—variously translated as clannism or group solidarity—that provides a more adequate explanation of the political systems operating in many Arab countries than notions based on imported ideologies such as communism, nationalism, and socialism. Ibn Khaldun's analysis was based on his native North Africa, but it can be adapted to the conditions of the Mashreq, or Levant—where similar historical conditions prevailed. As Albert Hourani explained in his magisterial History of the Arab Peoples (1991), 'asabiyya is a force that informs the patriarchal family order that still underpins the structure of power in many Arab societies.

In the past, as Hourani pointed out, a ruler with 'asabiyya was well placed to found a dynasty, since the merchant classes of the cities, untrained in the military arts and without powerful corporate structures, tended to lack this quality. Moreover, when dynastic rule achieved in this way was stable and prosperous, city life flourished. But in Ibn Khaldun's time every dynasty bore within itself the seeds of decline, as rulers degenerated into tyrants or became corrupted by luxurious living. In due course power would pass to a new group of hardy rulers from the margins after a period of turbulence often described as fitna, or disorder (a term with overtones of sexual disharmony, for in the family context, fitna is seen as the outcome of sexual misconduct).

The rise and possible fall of the Assad dynasty would provide a perfect illustration of the Khaldunian paradigm under recent postcolonial conditions. Under Ottoman rule the Nusayris were impoverished outsiders struggling on the social margins. In addition to feuding among themselves, they were fierce rivals of the Ismailis, whom they expelled from their highland refuges and castles, forcing them to settle in the more arid lands east of Homs. The Ottoman governors regarded them as nonbelievers and tools of the Shiite Persians: they were not even accorded the dignity of a millet, or recognized religious community.

When the French took over Greater Syria after World War I (including modern Lebanon and parts of modern Turkey), they flirted briefly with the idea of creating a highland Alawi state of 300,000 people separate from the cities of the plains—Homs, Hama, Damascus, and Aleppo—with their dominant Sunni majorities. The French rightly believed that the Sunni majority would be most resistant to their rule. Like other minorities the Alawis, as they preferred to be called, saw the French as protectors. In 1936, six Alawi notables sent a memorandum to Leon Blum, head of France's Popular Front government, expressing their loyalty to France and their concern at negotiations leading to independence in a parliamentary system dominated by the Sunni majority. The memorandum includes the following points:

• The Alawi people, who have preserved their independence year after year with great zeal and sacrifices, are different from the Sunni Muslims. They were never subject to the authority of the cities of the interior.

• The Alawis refuse to be annexed to Muslim Syria because in Syria the official religion of the state is Islam, and according to Islam the Alawis are considered infidels.

• The granting of independence to Syria…constitutes a good example of the socialist principles in Syria…. [But] as to the presence of a parliament and a constitutional government, that does not represent individual freedom. This parliamentary rule is no more than false appearances without any value. In truth, it covers up a regime dominated by religious fanaticism against the minorities. Do French leaders want the Muslims to have control over the Alawi people in order to throw them into misery?
• We can sense today how the Muslim citizens of Damascus force the Jews who live among them to sign a document pledging that they will not send provisions to their ill-fated brethren in Palestine. The condition of the Jews in Palestine is the strongest and most explicit evidence of the militancy of the Islamic issue vis-à-vis those who do not belong to Islam. These good Jews contributed to the Arabs with civilization and peace, scattered gold, and established prosperity in Palestine without harming anyone or taking anything by force, yet the Muslims declare holy war against them and never hesitated in slaughtering their women and children, despite the presence of England in Palestine and France in Syria. Therefore a dark fate awaits the Jews and other minorities in case the Mandate is abolished and Muslim Syria is united with Muslim Palestine…the ultimate goal of the Muslim Arabs.

One of the signatories to this document was Sulayman al-Assad, a minor chief of the Kalbiya clan and father of Hafez al-Assad.

The ‘asabiyya of the Alawis was carefully exploited by the French, who polished the Khaldunian model by giving them military training as members of the Troupes Spéciales du Levant. In the turbulent years that followed full independence in 1946, their military know-how proved valuable. Bright members of the sect such as Hafez al-Assad, whose families could not afford to send them to university, joined the armed forces and were drawn to secular parties, such as the

Baath (renaissance) party jointly founded by two intellectuals, Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar, with an agenda explicitly aimed at overcoming sectarian divisions.

It would be wrong to suppose that the Alawis deliberately sought to subvert or take over the Baath or the armed forces. Their primary impulse was their own security. After independence the Syrian parliament abolished the separate representation for minorities instituted by the French, along with certain judicial rights. Nusayri sheikhs and notables encouraged young men to join the Baath because they believed its secular outlook would protect them from Sunni hegemony and persecution. Other minorities, including Christians, Druzes, and Ismailis, tended to join the Baath (or in some cases the Communist Party and Syrian Socialist National Party) for similar reasons. The eventual dominance achieved by the Alawis may be attributed to their highland military background and the default logic by which ‘asabiyya tends to assert itself in the absence of other, more durable structures.

The first three military coups that followed Syrian independence were engineered by Sunni officers. This was followed by the disastrous union with Nasser’s Egypt in 1958 when Baath party leaders, following their pan-Arabist nationalist logic, merged their country’s identity into that of their more powerful Sunni neighbor. After Syria formally united with Egypt, Nusayri officers who had joined the Baath party became increasingly alarmed that Arab nationalism, for all its secular rhetoric, was really a veil concealing Arab Sunni supremacy. They formed a clandestine military committee led by Salah Jadid, an Alawi, which took power in a military coup in 1963. Hafez al-Assad, trained as a fighter pilot, became air force commander. Some seven hundred officers were purged, and most of their positions were filled with Nusayris. A further coup against the Baathist old guard brought Assad into the

cabinet as defense minister in 1966, a position he cleverly exploited after Syria's defeat by Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967, after which it was alleged that the regime had had secret dealings with the Jewish state. A "palace coup" inside the leadership brought Assad to power as president in 1970.

Thereafter the power of the state was firmly concentrated in Alawi hands. Of the officers commanding the 47th Syrian Tank Brigade, which was responsible for suppressing the Muslim Brotherhood's rebellion in the city of Hama in 1982 at a cost of some 20,000 lives, 70 percent are reported to have been Alawis. When Hafez al-Assad died in June 2000, the constitutional niceties were rapidly dispensed with to ensure the succession of his son Bashar, who had studied ophthalmology in England. Fearful that Hafez's exiled younger brother Rifaat al-Assad, who had commanded the Hama operation, would try to take over, a hastily convened session of the People's Assembly voted to lower the minimum age for a president from forty to thirty-four, the exact age of Bashar al-Assad.

In the welter of violence now accompanying the regime's determined efforts to suppress the demonstrations, its achievements should not be forgotten or ignored. While its massacre in Hama was horrendous and it has an abysmal record on human rights, engaging in torture and severe political repression, it had a good, even excellent one when it came to protecting the pluralism of the religious culture that is one of Syria's most enduring and attractive qualities. Some of these virtues are captured in Brooke Allen's engaging account of her travels in Syria, The Other Side of the Mirror, where she meets ordinary people from different backgrounds and rejoices in the natural friendliness of Syria's people and the extraordinary richness of its past. Instead of the Soviet-style grayness she expected to find from accounts in the US media, she discovers a sophisticated cosmopolitan society where

life is being lived in many different styles and varieties, “totally unselfconsciously, just as it has been for thousands of years.”
In Aleppo, a jewel among cities, with its commanding citadel and labyrinthine, covered souk, she sees fully veiled ladies, exotic bedouin women displaying bright spots of color, and wealthy Gulf Arabs wearing white robes rubbing shoulders with men riding donkeys and mixing with “trophy girlfriends” in miniskirts teetering perilously on the ultra-high-heeled shoes that Aleppans evidently consider to be the height of fashion.
Having been in Aleppo recently, I can vouch for the accuracy of her descriptions. Visiting several mosques, churches, and shrines, she provides impressive testimony of the country’s religious diversity and the regime’s commitment to religious freedom. It would be tragic if the pursuit of democracy led to the shredding of this bright human canopy, where religious and cultural differences seem to have flourished under the iron grip of a minority sectarian regime.
—Rome, May 11, 2011

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