

The Truth About Syria

Barry Rubin

Editor's Note: We are pleased to make available an extract from Barry Rubin's new book *The Truth About Syria* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) with the kind permission of Palgrave Macmillan. The extract is copyrighted © 2007, by Palgrave Macmillan.

*

"It is my pleasure to meet with you in the new Middle East," said Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in a speech to the Syrian Journalists' Union on August 15, 2006. [1] But Bashar's new Middle East was neither the one hoped for by many since Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's 1991 defeat in Kuwait nor expected when Bashar himself ascended the throne in 2000. Actually, it was not even new at all but rather a reversion, often in remarkable detail, to the Middle East of the 1950s through the 1980s. The Arab world, now accompanied by Iran, was re-embracing an era that was an unmitigated disaster for itself and extolling ideas and strategies which had repeatedly led it to catastrophe.

No Arab state had more to do with this important and tragic turnabout than does Syria, this development's main architect and beneficiary. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other Arab states wanted quiet; Iraq needed peace to rebuild itself. Even Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi, pressed by sanctions and scared by his Iraqi counterpart Saddam's fate, was on his good behaviour. Only Syria remained as a source of instability and radicalism.

Thus, a small state with a modest economy became the fulcrum on which the Middle East shifted and which, in turn, shook the globe. Indeed, Bashar's version of the new Middle East may well persist for an entire generation. Does this make Bashar a fool or a genius? That cannot be determined directly. What can be said is that his policy is good for the regime, simultaneously brilliant and disastrous for Syria, and just plain disastrous for many others.

To understand Syria's special feature, it is best to heed the all-important insight of a Lebanese-American scholar, Fouad Ajami: "Syria's main asset, in contrast to Egypt's pre-eminence and Saudi wealth, is its capacity for mischief." [2] In the final analysis,

the aforementioned mischief was in the service of regime maintenance, the all-encompassing cause and goal of the Syrian government's behaviour. Demagoguery, not the delivery of material benefits, is the basis of its power.

Why have those who govern Syria followed such a pattern for more than six decades under almost a dozen different regimes? The answer: Precisely because the country is a weak one in many respects. Aside from lacking Egypt's power and Saudi Arabia's money, it also falls short on internal coherence due to its diverse population and minority-dominated regime. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein used repression, ideology, and foreign adventures to hold together a system dominated by Sunni Arab Muslims who were only one-fifth of the population. In Syria, even more intense measures were needed to sustain an Alawite regime that rules based on a community only half as large proportionately.

To survive, then, the regime needs transcendent slogans and passionate external conflicts that help make its problems disappear. Arabism and, in more recent years, Islamism, are its solution. In this light, Syria's rulers can claim to be not a rather inept, corrupt dictatorship but the rightful leaders of all Arabs and the champions of all Muslims. Their battle cries are very effectively used to justify oppression at home and aggression abroad. No other country in the world throws around the word 'imperialism' more in describing foreign adversaries, and yet no other state on the globe follows a more classical imperialist policy.

In broad terms, this approach is followed by most, if not all, Arab governments, but Syria offers the purest example of the system. As for the consequences, two basic principles are useful to keep in mind:

It often seemed as if the worse Syria behaved, the better its regime does. Syrian leaders do not accept the Western view that moderation, compromise, an open economy, and peace are always better. When Syria acts radical, up to a point of course, it maximizes its main asset – causing trouble – which cancels out all its other weaknesses. As a dictatorship, militancy provided an excuse for tight controls and domestic popularity through its demagoguery.

Success for the regime and state means disaster for the people, society, and economy. The regime prospers by keeping Syrians believing that the battle against America and Israel, not freedom and prosperity, should be their top priority. External threats are used to justify internal repression. The state's control over the economy means

RUBIN | The Truth About Syria

lower living standards for most while simultaneously preserving a rich ruling elite with lots of money to give to its supporters. Imprisoning or intimidating liberal critics means domestic stability but without human rights.

Nevertheless, the regime survived, its foreign manoeuvres worked well much of the time, and Syrian control over Lebanon was a money-maker as well as a source of regional influence. But what did all of this avail Syria compared to what an emphasis on peace and development might have achieved? Thus, this pattern might be called one of brilliantly successful disasters. The policy works in the sense that the regime survives and the public perceives it as successful. But objectively the society and economy are damaged, freedom is restricted, and resources are wasted. Unfortunately, this type of thing is thoroughly typical of Arab politics.

Syria, then, is both a most revealing test case for the failure of change in Middle East politics and a key actor – though there is plenty of blame to go around – in making things go so wrong for the Arab world. If Damascus had moved from the radical to the moderate camp during the 1990s or under Bashar's guidance, it would have decisively shifted the balance to a breakthrough toward a more peaceful and progressing Middle East. Syria's participation in the Gulf war coalition of 1991, readiness to negotiate with Israel, severe economic and social stagnation, and strategic vulnerability, all topped off by the coming to power of a new generation of leadership, provoked expectations that it would undergo dramatic change.

It was a Western, not an Arab, idea that the populace's desperation at their countries' difficult plight would make Hafiz al-Assad, Syria's president between 1971 and his death in 2000 – and Saddam, PLO leader Yasir Arafat, and other Arab or Iran's leaders, too – move toward concessions and moderation. But the rulers themselves reasoned in the exact opposite way: faced with pressure to change they became more demanding.

Often, at least up to a point, this strategy worked as the West offered Syria more concessions in an attempt to encourage reforms, ensure profitable trade, buy peace, and buy off terrorism. Of course, they were acting in their own interests but what is most important is that these included solving the issues which had caused conflict, building understanding and confidence, and proving their good intentions toward the peoples of the Middle East.

Yet to the dictatorial regimes this behaviour seemed not the result of generosity or proffered friendship but rather from Western fear of their power and an imperialist desire to control the Arabs and Muslims. Frequently, too, it is seen as a tribute to their superior tactics which fool or outmanoeuvre their adversaries. This perception encouraged continued intransigence in hope of reaping still more benefits. Eventually, this process destroyed any possibility of moderation, though not always Western illusions.

Here are two examples of such thinking. In 1986, at a moment of great weakness for Syria and the Arabs, Hafiz told the British ambassador to Syria, “If I were prime minister of Israel with its present military superiority and the support of the world’s number one power, I would not make a single concession.” [3]

Yet at that time and thereafter, the United States was working hard to bring the PLO into a negotiated agreement that would make it head of a state. And a few years later, when in even a stronger position, Israel negotiated with the PLO and made massive concessions because it wanted peace. The intention was to solve the conflict by finding some mutually acceptable compromise solution. On the other side, however, the interpretation was either that it was a trick of Israel and America that should be rejected or a sign of weakness that should be exploited.

Precisely 20 years after his father’s remark, Bashar made his most important speech to date at the journalists’ conference, August 15, 2006. Only power and violence, he argued, forced the other side to make concessions, negotiate, or even pay attention to the issue. Speaking about the international reaction just after the Israel-Hizballah war he said, “The world does not care about our interests, feelings and rights except when we are powerful. Otherwise, they would not do anything.” [4]

The remarks by Hafiz and Bashar tell a great deal. In the absence of pressure, their regime would become bolder in seeking its goals. When fearful it retreats to consolidate and survive. Consequently, the only way to get Syria to be moderate in behaviour was by applying credible pressure to convince it – at least temporarily – that trouble-making did not pay. This model was most clearly applied when Syria was weak in the 1990s, by Turkey in forcing Syria to stop sponsoring terrorism against itself in 1998, and immediately after the September 11, 2001 attacks when it appeared as if a U.S. war against terrorists and their sponsors might embroil Syria, too.

RUBIN | The Truth About Syria

Yet even on each of these and other such occasions – except for the narrowly focused Turkish intervention – Damascus was allowed to get away with the kind of things which would have brought the roof down on most states. Thus, frequent Western attempts to negotiate, bargain with, or appease Syria only worsened the situation when that regime decided it had nothing to fear. This is what happened when Syria came to understand at the end of the 1990s and after the September 11, 2001, crisis that the United States was not going to go after it. Syria then turned the tables and became even more subversively aggressive.

This brings us to Bashar's task when he succeeded to power on the death of his father in 2000. Since the 1980s, Syria has faced big problems. Its Soviet ally and arms supplier collapsed; the economy has not done well, domestic unrest has increased, Israel has widened the conventional military gap to its own advantage, and Saddam was overthrown by the Americans.

Bashar's father and predecessor, Hafiz, manoeuvred very well. He participated in the 1991 battle against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait enough to win help from the rich Gulf Arabs and the United States. His involvement in negotiations with Israel also helped, though he refused to make an agreement in the end. Then, Hafiz died and passed on the presidency to his inexperienced son.

Clearly, Bashar is no Hafiz. His father was a far better strategist. In contrast to Bashar, he probably would never have finally withdrawn from Lebanon in 2005 and would have been more careful to avoid friction with the Gulf Arabs and America. He would never have let Iran turn Syria into something like a client state. And he treated Syria's client Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah like one of the hired help rather than, like Bashar did, as an equal.

Yet the Assad genes are still working. Bashar withdrew from Lebanon but kept the security and economic assets in place. Almost 20 major bombings and assassinations in the year after Syrian troops left have shown Lebanese that Syrian interests must be attended. By killing Rafiq Hariri, the former Lebanese prime minister, in February 2005, Bashar got into some apparent trouble but he had also eliminated the only man with the stature to unite Lebanon, mobilize Western support, attract massive Saudi financial backing, stand up to Hizballah, and defy Syria. By helping drag Lebanon into war with Israel in 2006, he strengthened Hizballah's chances for seizing power in the country.

Bashar's risk-taking seemed to pay off. On the Iraqi front, starting in 2003, he waged war on America at almost no cost to himself. Syria equipped, trained, and sent into battle terrorists who killed thousands of Iraqis and hundreds of Americans without any threat of international action or even condemnation.

Then, on the Lebanese front in 2006, he mounted from behind the scenes what was basically a conventional war against Israel using his Hizballah proxies, again with no cost to himself, though plenty for the Lebanese. In this case, most of the arms and money comes from Tehran, with Syria getting a free ride. In Damascus, Bashar became a hero for confronting Israel at Lebanese expense. He has also piled up considerable credit with radical Islamists by being their friend and ally in Iraq, Lebanon, and – by backing Hizballah and Islamic Jihad – among the Palestinians.

The whole thing might well blow up against Bashar some day through international pressure or domestic upheaval. For the moment, though, he was riding high. And maybe that answers the question about Bashar: someone who acts like a fool in Western terms may well be a genius as a Middle East leader.

So how did this young, new leader and his relatively small, weak country help turn the Middle East – and indeed the world – in such a different, bloody, and dangerous direction?

After 1991, there had been hopes in the West, Israel, and also among many people in the Arabic-speaking world, that dramatic changes around the globe and in the region would produce a new Middle East of pragmatism, reform, democracy, and peace. Given the USSR's collapse, Saddam's defeat, trends toward democracy elsewhere, America's emergence as sole superpower, and other factors, a better world seemed to be in birth. A generation of Arabs had experienced defeat, tragedy, and stagnation. Surely, they would recognize what had gone wrong and choose another path.

Bashar took credit for killing this dream of something different and better, though he perhaps overstated that achievement's difficulty. "It was not easy at all to manage to convince many people about our vision of the future," he explained. His goal was to destroy the 'cherished Middle East' of the West, Israel, and moderate Arabs which he viewed as being 'built on submission and humiliation and deprivation of peoples of their rights' In its place he would put, 'A sweeping popular upsurge... characterized by honour and Arabism...struggle and resistance.' [5]

RUBIN | The Truth About Syria

It is all very familiar. After the 2006 Hizballah-Israel war the Middle East has clearly and probably irreversibly entered a new era with a decidedly old twist. The possibility of a negotiated Arab-Israeli peace and for Arab progress toward democracy is close to dead; radical Islamism, whether or not they achieved political power, radical Islamist groups set the agenda. For a half-dozen years, things had been certainly heading in this direction, heralded by the Palestinian and Syrian rejection of peace with Israel in 2000; the turn to a terrorist-based intifada; the fall-out from the September 11, 2001 attacks on America; the post-Saddam violence in Iraq; the Arab regimes' defeat of reform movements; and electoral advances by Hamas, Hizballah, and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, along with many other developments.

One of the most visible features of this new, decidedly unimproved, Middle East is an Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas alliance seeking regional hegemony, the destruction of Israel, and the expulsion of Western influence – all the old goals – under the slogan of resistance. Once again the political line is the traditional one of extolling violent struggle in pursuit of total victory rather than viewing moderation as pragmatic; compromise as beneficial; or social progress and economic construction as the highest priority.

Only on two points does the new era of resistance represent a sharp break with the past: unprecedented levels of Iranian involvement in Arab politics and the creation of an Arab nationalist-Islamist synthesis for which Bashar has been the main promoter and advocate. When one takes into account the fact that Bashar is not really a Muslim, though he plays one on television, the accomplishment is stupendous in its audacity. [6]

All of this makes it no less strange to see the revival of policies so spectacularly unsuccessful the first time around, whose disastrous repercussions are still being felt by Arab societies, the Middle East, and the entire globe. True, this worldview's elements have all been tested by time but they failed the exam by a wide margin.

Consequently, this leaves an intriguing question: why do Bashar, his allies, colleagues, and clients have an interest in revitalizing a worldview and program that failed so miserably and disastrously, leading the Arab world into years of defeat, wasted resources, dictatorship, and a steady falling behind the rest of the world in most socio-economic categories?

A large part of the answer is that this new state of affairs serves the two groups that matter most in Arab politics: the Arab nationalist dictators and the revolutionary Islamist challengers seeking to displace them. The Arab regimes rejected reforms because change threatened to unseat them. Using demagoguery enabled them to continue as both dictatorships and failed leaderships while still enjoying popular support. On the other side, radical Islamist forces, far more able to compete for mass support than the small though courageous bands of liberals, sought a new strategy to expand their influence and gain power.

In addition to this world view's utilitarian aspects, the analytical emphasis on 'resistance' to foreigners rather than reform at home builds on a very strong foundation: a half-century-long indoctrination overwhelmingly dominating Arab discourse in claiming that all the Arab world's problems are caused by Israel, America, and the West. One aspect of this approach's appeal is that the idea that their problems are not of their own making and that they can be heroic by fighting back makes people feel good. It is an opium for the masses, especially those who can vicariously experience battle by watching others – Iraqis, Israelis, Lebanese, and Palestinians – getting killed as a result.

Another attractive point is the belief that victory will be relatively easy because Israel, America, and the West are really weak. An Egyptian Islamist wrote that Americans are cowards while Muslims are brave: 'The believers do not fear the enemy....Yet their enemies protect [their] lives like a miser protects his money. They...do not enter into battles seeking martyrdom....This is the secret of the believers' victory over their enemies.' Indeed, the fact it is the infidels' cowardice that leads them to 'bolster their status by means of science and inventions.' [7] It is almost as if technical advances and social progress are for sissies. The fact that this statement was published in a state-controlled Egyptian newspaper, al-Gumhuriya as an immediate reaction to September 11, shows how Arab nationalist institutions collude to promote 'Islamist' ideas that feed the resistance mentality.

If Arabs and Muslims are willing to sacrifice themselves or even their whole societies as martyrs, they can achieve victory. In this respect, Hizballah leader Nasrallah, Palestinian Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, Bashar, and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sound eerily like Palestinian leader Arafat, Egyptian President Nasser, Iraqi President Saddam, and Syrian Presidents Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Assad in the 1960s and 1970s. It was this kind of thinking that led to the Arab defeat in the 1967 war and in a number of conflicts thereafter.

RUBIN | The Truth About Syria

Recognizing what had happened, many Arabs in the 1990s concluded that this strategy did not work. “We had given up on the military option. We believed this belonged to history,” stated Hani Hourani, head of the New Jordan Research Center. Yet by 2006, most notably in regard to the Israel-Hizballah war of that year that thinking was either forgotten or deemed to have been wrong. In Hourani’s words, “Hizballah created a new way of thinking about the whole conflict in the region: Israel is not that invincible. It could be beaten. It could be harmed....Hezbollah, even if we don’t agree with its ideology, was suggesting a different option to the Arab people.” [8]

Evidence was provided to validate this claim but on examination the data did not support the conclusion. The Palestinian intifada that began in 2000, like its predecessor two decades earlier – did not gain a Palestinian state, much less destroy Israel. Its main effect was to wreck the infrastructure on the Gaza Strip and West Bank, causing massive Palestinian casualties, a loss of international support, and a long postponement for any dream of having a Palestinian state. For Fatah, the group mainly responsible for these events, that strategy brought its downfall. Unless one’s goal was to ‘hurt’ Israel regardless of the cost, the Palestinian situation should not have been an attractive example.

Another example cited was that of Iraq. Again, while some Americans were killed, the great majority of the victims were Arab Muslims. Iraq’s society and economy were driven into the ground. As if that were not enough, communal hatreds were heightened to the point of civil war, a war which the Sunni Arab insurgents would not only lose eventually but one that could cause the massacres of their own community. Again, as with the September 11 attacks, if the goal was to hurt Americans then some success was achieved. Yet the cost to the people of Iraq – and Afghanistan, too, whose government was also overthrown by the United States and which also faced bloody civil strife – was far higher.

The 2006 Israel-Hizballah war was supposed to be the ultimate example of this strategy’s success. Yet it is easy to see that Israel won in the terms by which wars are usually judged. It did not feel the need for a quick ceasefire, inflicted much higher costs on the enemy army, and captured the battlefield. On the negative side, Israel suffered damage from rocket attacks – though this was in no way disabling – and military casualties, which happened in all wars including those that saw its biggest victories. Yet the common Arab perception was that the war provided the viability of a military option against Israel.

Certainly, a strategy that functions mainly by making one feel good about supposedly making one's enemies feel bad should not be the basis for a serious or successful political program. It certainly is no substitute for social progress or economic development. In the absence of material victory, one is left hoping for miracles – the intervention of God or of a demigod in human form.

This requires the revival of still another element of belief which consistently failed in the past: faith in a political superhero who will lead Arabs and Muslims to victory. In the 1950s and 1960s, there was Nasser; in the 1970s, Arafat and Hafiz; in the 1980s and 1990s, it was Saddam; and then Usama bin Ladin. All failed, all were defeated. The result should be the rejection of such a spurious hope. Instead, it has been simply to acclaim new candidates for the job. Still, of the last three self-proclaimed great heroes, Saddam was in a prison cell, bin Ladin hiding out perhaps in a cave, and Abu Musab al Zarqawi, leader of the Iraqi insurgency, was dead. Yet the enthusiasm for the next candidate lives on.

Iran's President Ahmadinejad in 2006 was a resurrected Nasser from 1966, threatening the West, confidently predicting Israel would be wiped off the map, and toying with war as a way of achieving a quick, easy victory. Bashar reinvented himself as an Arab Clark Kent, merely disguised as a mild-mannered young man of gangly frame and failed moustache but actually a superhero of the resistance. He promises to achieve the impossible and persuade millions of people that he will succeed.

Finally, the new 'resistance' axis promises to solve all problems quickly and simply, albeit through large-scale bloodshed. Why compromise if you believe you can achieve total victory, revolution, and wipe Israel off the map with armed struggle and the intimidation of the West? Why engage in the long, hard work of economic development when merely showing courage in battle and killing a few enemies fulfils one's dreams. Victory, said Bashar in his August 15, 2006 speech quoted above, requires recklessness. If nobody remembers where this kind of mistaken thinking led before, they are all the more ready to embrace it anew.

In many ways, then, what is happening now is like the revival of a play which bankrupted its backers and ruined the reputation of all the actors involved. But in the sequel, Arab Victory Over Imperialism II, all the old parts are cast with a new generation of political actors. Iran plays the role of revolutionary patron in 2006 that Egypt purported to do in 1966. Syria takes the part of patron of Arab

RUBIN | The Truth About Syria

nationalism and revolutionary terrorism that Syria did in 1966. Hizballah and Hamas are the new PLO, promising to destroy Israel through non-state violence.

This experience of past tragedy has not, to paraphrase Karl Marx's remark on repetition in history, discouraged the farce of this second go-round. Indeed, the sad history of such past endeavours seems to have no impact on the majority of Arab thinkers, writers, journalists, and others celebrating the revival of intransigence in search of total victory.

True, a small liberal Arab minority is horrified by the turn toward radicalism and increased confrontation with the West and Israel in the name of heroic resistance. It is both hard and dangerous for them to make the case against this world view and strategy. Emperors do not like it when some of their subjects announce their nakedness. Societies, especially undemocratic ones, do not like to see their most cherished beliefs questioned.

The same principle applies to more moderate, but still dictatorial, regimes which eschew open, or at least very loud, opposition to the resistance doctrine. They want to use the radical ideas in their own interest – rationalizing their regimes; mobilizing their people for resisting foreigners rather than reform – while also preventing it being used against themselves. At the same time, the rulers of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia also remember a lot more about how this ideology failed in the past than they pretend.

Just as Nasser and Saddam posed threats to them in the previous era, the new tyranny of Tehran and sword of Damascus are direct challenges to their survival today. They often use and reinforce the new ideas but also hope to blunt the edge, at least when their own interests are concerned. Yet in seeking to avoid being victims of the revolutionary tidal wave, they are loathe to confront this ideology directly and often even play along with it to promote their own interests.

Even the apparent threat to the more moderate regimes has its advantages for them. They have a good reason for not making or intensifying peace with Israel since this situation lets them use the continuing conflict as an excuse for their dismal domestic system. The same point applies to keeping their distance from the United States, using that country as a scapegoat for their own failings. Equally, they can eliminate the democratic challenge and repress domestic criticism since fair elections or open debate might strengthen radical Islamists.

Democratiya 10 | Autumn 2007

And what is this new era that sweeps all before it, at least in terms of rhetoric?

Briefly, it is characterized by the following points:

- A rise in radical Islamist movements, though the Arab nationalist regimes are still holding onto power and might well not lose it.
- Growing hatred of the United States and Israel, at least compared to the levels in some places during the 1990s.
- The belief that total victory can be achieved through terrorism and other violent tactics.
- A euphoric expectation of imminent revolution, glorious victories, and unprecedented Arab or Muslim unity.
- A disinterest in diplomatic compromise solutions, as unnecessary and even treasonous. To concede nothing is to lose nothing because you still have the claim to all you want and have thus left open the possibility of getting it.
- The death of hopes for democracy due to both regime manipulation and radical Islamist exploitation of the opportunities offered by some openings in the system.

While the Islamist and Arab nationalist movements are often at odds over power, their basic perceptions and goals are quite parallel. Bashar argues that there is no contradiction at all and in his resistance doctrine he brings out the common themes:

- The Arab/Muslim world faces a U.S.-Israel, or Western-Israel, or Zionist-Crusader conspiracy to destroy it.
- A secondary enemy is the majority of Arab rulers whose relative moderation shows them to be traitors. Only those who preach intransigence and struggle are upholders of proper Arab and Muslim values. In the 1950s and 1960s, this distinction pitted Egypt, Syria, and Iraq as the progressive states against ‘reactionary’ Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other monarchies. Today, it is Iran and Syria against Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.
- Since the main enemy is purely evil, there can be no compromise with it.
- By the same token, pretty much all types of violence are justified. Such attacks are said not to be terrorism because they are merely defensive, responsive, necessary, and against a satanic foe.
- Total victory is achievable and therefore accepting anything less is treasonous.
- Consequently, the people must unite under governments with the proper ideologies and able to mobilize the entire society, i.e., a dictatorship. The priorities for these regimes should be to destroy Israel, defeat America, and reject Western cultural and intellectual influences.
- And because this is all so necessary and workable, anything other than struggle and resistance – such as more citizen rights, reform, modernized economic

RUBIN | The Truth About Syria

- structures, etc. – is a distraction. Only after total victory is achieved can these luxuries be arranged. Actually, while the Islamists still promise material benefits the Arab nationalist rulers hardly even make a pretence about providing better lives any more.
- In contrast, the idea of liberalism and reform is a Western contract, at odds with Islam or the Arab nation's interests, essentially an enemy trick.

In general, though, while Islamists and Arab nationalists compete for power, sometimes even violently, they simultaneously mutually reinforce the intellectual system and world view that locks the Arab world into the very problems they purport to remedy.

One feature of the new era very similar to that of the 1950s-1980s period is the expectation of imminent transfiguration, a millenarian sense that dramatic change is about to happen. The idea is that the future will defy the past, that such things as balance of forces or politics as the 'art of the possible' will be overcome by the hand of God, the proper ideology, or the right military strategy.

This idea was very much in evidence during the period beginning with the 1952 coup in Egypt and particularly after the 1956 Suez war which catapulted Nasser into being the closest thing there has ever been to a leader of the Arab world, the hero able to unite all the Arabs. Soon he had followers in every country. Nasser asserted Egypt's pride and strength; ridiculed Western powers; smashed Islamist rivals and the Marxist left at home; intrigued the intellectuals; and intimidated Arab regimes that opposed him. "We would clap in proud surprise," recalled Tawfiq al-Hakim, "when he delivered a powerful speech and said about [the United States] which had the atomic bomb that 'if they don't like our conduct, let them drink from the sea,' he filled us with pride." [9]

Hakim made a devastating critique of the original resistance mentality:

Are the people made happy because they hear socialist songs although they are submerged in misery which everyone sees?...Masses of people wait for long hours in front of consumer co-operatives for a piece of meat to be thrown to themOr take Arab unity....Did the revolution succeed in bringing it about by political means? Did it bring it closer and strengthen it, or rather did it scatter and weaken it by policies which included intervention, pretension to leadership, domination, influence-spreading, showering money in the

planning of plots, fomenting coups d'état, and in the Yemen war inducing Arab to kill Arab, and Arab to use burning napalm and poison gas against Arab? [10]

At the time, though, few paid attention to this kind of critique. And this particular emperor's nakedness was only revealed in the 1967 defeat and more particularly after his death in 1970. Hakim's book was entitled, *The Return of Consciousness*. But today it seems as if the age of the coma has returned since many have now forgotten this outcome. It is also instructive to recall that Nasser's victorious reputation rested mainly on the 1956 Suez War which was actually a military humiliation for Egypt. Only American and Soviet diplomatic intervention saved Nasser, a situation paralleling the Lebanon war 'victory' of Nasrallah, rescued by international pressure for a ceasefire that left Hizballah armed and in place.

Ignoring all this history, supporters now make the comparison of Nasrallah and Nasser in a positive sense, playing on the similarity of both men's names to the Arabic word for 'victory.' In Cairo, their pictures were carried in demonstrations together, though their views on Islam in politics were opposite. It was also noted that the Lebanon 'victory' took place on the fiftieth anniversary of the Suez one. What was not mentioned was that a half-century after Nasser first took power has not brought much progress in Egypt. Even getting back the Sinai Peninsula captured by Israel in 1967 had not been achieved by struggle but rather through friendship with America and a peace treaty with Israel.

Another revived concept is that the balance of forces or technology – military, industrial, or electronic – is not really important but that spirit overcomes all these things. As early as 1947, Fawzi al-Qawukji, commander of the Syrian-backed People's Army fighting to prevent Israel's creation, explained that the Arabs would win by saying, "More than the arms I value the people who will be conducting this holy war" [11] In the rhetoric of a 1960s' radical slogan, 'The power of the people is greater than the technology of the man.' This is the idea behind the celebration of Hizballah and Hamas, the Iraqi insurgency, the celebration of the suicide bomber and the rock thrower as capable of achieving victory against apparently overwhelming odds.

Thus, both Arab nationalists and Islamists cite the Koranic verse, 'If Allah grants you victory, no one will be able to defeat you' as evidence of their certain victory. 'He who has faith, awareness, will-power and readiness to become a martyr can never

RUBIN | The Truth About Syria

be defeated,' claimed the Syrian newspaper Tishrin. Foreign Minister Muallim exulted, "Where there is a people with the will to resist, they will triumph." [12]

Arab nationalists, aside from their own past exploits, looked to the Cuban and Chinese revolutions as well as Vietnam and South Africa for proof that the weaker side could win through determined resistance and steadfastness. [13] It was all very 1960s' retro. 'Long live the victory of people's war,' said the Chinese back then, while the Cubans had their 'Year of the Heroic Guerrilla.' These ideas live on for the Arab world as if in a time capsule.

Nasrallah is now, as Arafat once was, compared to Che Guevara, the romantic but failed Cuban revolutionary leader, who like Nasrallah did not overthrow any governments but appears on many t-shirts. Islamists pointed to such examples as the Islamists' victory over the Soviet superpower in Afghanistan (forgetting the U.S. role in helping that campaign) and such 'successes' as September 11 or the Iraqi insurgency. They also claim Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon and the Gaza Strip as triumphs. The Iranians can add their own revolution, the U.S. embassy hostage crisis and their standing up to Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war, which they nonetheless really lost.

Yet in fact these alleged victories are illusory ones in more ways than one. After all, this doctrine prompts aggressive violence and rejection of peace which produce the Lebanese, Iraqi, and Palestinian casualties whose suffering allegedly creates the need for resistance in the first place. There is, however, a good reason why weaker states usually avoid provoking or going to war against stronger ones: they lose. History is full of examples of high-spirited, ideologically motivated states that simply could not overcome the odds of reality. Remember World War Two, when the relatively mighty Japanese were defeated despite having suicide-prone kamikaze pilots and soldiers and ended up with their own cities in ruins?

In this light, the Arab memory of losing so many wars and conflicts in the past should be not a sign of cowardice to be expunged by more fighting or a litany of victories inspiring more bloodshed but a valuable political experience which should be heeded. Having spent so many years of suffering, dictatorship, and squandered resources in the twentieth century's second half should have been used to teach the lesson that intransigence and violence did not work, that extreme goals brought about far-reaching disaster.

When in the 1990s, many Arabs faced this sad story more honestly and directly they were inclined toward rethinking their future. Knowing what doesn't work tells you what needs to be done. If Israel could not be destroyed and the conflict was so costly, perhaps it was better to make peace. If America was so powerful than it would be better to get along with that country than to fight it. If the Arabs were falling behind in every economic, scientific, and social category, comprehensive reform seemed necessary. If exporting terrorism turns on you and poisons your own society, reject this path. The idea of change was on the agenda, challenging all the assumptions that had been made, tried, and found wanting.

Now, however, this process has gone down the memory hole. A new generation – which does not remember history and has no one to remind it – and a hybrid ideology, which discounts Arab nationalism's past dreadful experiences as not applying to itself, repeats all these mistakes. In Bashar's version of history, three generations of Arabs fought Israel and lost, leading to the expectation that the desire to fight would decrease over time. But, Bashar said, now a fourth generation was ready for battle and the desire for struggle was in fact increasing over time. [14]

The Arabs did not make mistakes; the radicals explain, but simply did not struggle enough or follow the proper ideology. It is as if someone has been hitting their head against a brick wall, briefly considered the possibility that this was detrimental behaviour, and then after brief consideration concluded they simply had not been knocking it hard enough.

As a result, the greater destruction one inflicted on one's own people, the higher the praise seemingly merited. 'Oh, Master of Resistance,' the Syrian state-run newspaper Tishrin on August 3, 2006 intoned in an ode to Nasrallah, the man who launched a war with Israel that set Lebanon back 20 years in political and economic terms, 'You have cloaked yourself in honour merely by writing the first page in the book of deterring and defeating the Zionist-American invaders, along with all those who are hiding behind them. No one thinks that the [war] will be won today, tomorrow, or [even] next year—but it is the beginning of the end, and the road towards victory has begun....' [15]

And so the Arab-speaking world in general, with Syria leading the march, steels itself for still another phase in a long, long road of conflict. Perhaps in a few decades another generation will learn for itself what it should have been taught by its predecessor and there will be another chance for change. The need for many

RUBIN | The Truth About Syria

years of suffering might well be inescapable as the resistance mentality has already shredded much of the memory of what really happened in the twentieth century's second half. Only another generation-long ordeal might be required to recreate that discarded understanding. Another chance for real progress can only be built on the basis of new defeats and failures.

All of this travail should be unnecessary. A serious assessment of the balance of forces would show that conflict with the West is a big mistake since it is so much more powerful in military and technological terms. But this is only an illusion, say the prophets of resistance. Muslim spiritual power or Arab courage can triumph because America is a paper tiger; the West is beatable. This contest does not necessarily require war, indeed if the United States and West are so weak they will back down if merely faced with threats. As Winston Churchill said of Soviet methods in his 1946 speech noting the beginning of the Cold War, 'I do not believe that Soviet Russia desires war. What they desire is the fruits of war and the indefinite expansion of their power and doctrines.' [16]

For the West in general and America in particular is perceived by Syria not only as too craven to fight but so stupid as to be easily outmanoeuvred. While experience gives some reasons for thinking this way, it is still the same mistaken argument Saddam Hussein made from the late 1980s, through the 1991 Kuwait crisis, and up to the moment he was overthrown in 2003, and the one that Usama bin Ladin said was proven by the success of the September 11, 2001 attacks before being driven into hiding. Doesn't the story's outcome disprove this assumption? Not if it is ignored, it doesn't. The fate of Iraq's dictator did not prevent Ahmadinejad from calling America a 'superpower made of straw' [17] or the head of Iran's powerful Council of Guardians, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, saying that America 'is weaker than a spider web....If the Islamic countries act like Hizballah, and stand up to America like men, America will be humiliated....' [18]

Viewing the West and America as weak and easy to defeat did not originate with September 11, 2001, or Hizballah's 2006 war in Lebanon. Like the ideas of destroying Israel without breaking into a sweat or violence redeeming Arab honor it has been around since the 1950s. The internationally renowned, and sometimes dissident, Syrian poet Adonis wrote, for example, a poem in praise of Iran's revolution in 1978: 'I shall sing for Qom [Khomeini's city and a center of radical Islamism], that it may transform itself in my ecstasy / Into a raging conflagration which surrounds the Gulf / The people of Iran write to the West: / Your visage, O

West, is crumbling / Your face, O West, has died.' [19] Thirty years later, however, the West was still around and stronger than ever. Yet the idea of a Western collapse seems to persist eternally in the mentality that dominates discourse in the Arabic-speaking world.

Saddam thought the same way. Speaking at the Royal Cultural Center in Amman, Jordan, on February 24, 1990, he explained that the Americans had run away from Vietnam and Lebanon (in 1983), and abandoned the shah of Iran. He argued that they would not fight or at least would not long endure in a battle. Khomeini agreed with him on this point, if on nothing else, and famously noted on November 7, 1979 that America 'could not do a damn thing' to stop Islamist revolution. [20]

Bin Ladin himself explained, "[Those who] God guides will never lose....America [is] filled with fear from the north to south and east to west.... [Now there will be] two camps: the camp of belief and of disbelief....Every Muslim shall...support his religion." [21] And, after all, the entire September 11 attack was designed to puncture the myth of American power, to show how vulnerable it was. In terms of Muslim perceptions on this point, the September 11 attack and the other acts of 'resistance' did achieve a great deal of success.

Indeed, the basic approach of Bashar's new Middle East permeated throughout the Arab world, from Yemen's president advocating immediate war with Israel to Sudanese President Umar al-Bashir boasting that he would rather fight the UN than let its forces into Darfur, where his troops have been murdering ethnic minorities. "We've done the math....We've found out that a confrontation is a million times better for us." [22]

Bashir's 'math' regarding Sudan taking on the entire world does not add up but Bashir's intention was not to battle UN forces any more than Bashar wanted to fight a war on his own soil with his own army. Bashir's calculation was that the world does not care about the government's massacre of civilians in his Darfur province or would soon grow tired of having peacekeeping forces there, a fatigue heightened by the threat of inflicting casualties on them, and go away.

Bashar holds parallel views about Iraq and Lebanon. He hoped the West would give Syria control over Lebanon in exchange for his restoring order there. After all, that is what happened for most of the preceding quarter-century. And both Bashir and Bashar also know that demagogically daring to take on America and the world

RUBIN | The Truth About Syria

will win them support at home as well as cheers (and perhaps aid) from other Arab publics and groups.

But beyond plaudits and passions, is fighting a panacea? Isn't developing ultimately better than dying, building better than battling, industry preferable to infanticide? Western history is full of those who made this mistake but the West succeeded largely to the extent that it transcended such thinking.

Indeed, does war really even restore Arab honor? This was claimed in the late 1960s with the PLO, after the 1973 war, two Palestinian intifadas, and on other occasions. In addition, the argument was made that Hizballah forced Israel out of south Lebanon and Hamas did so from the Gaza Strip thus redeeming Arab honor.

The historical problem is that after each highly publicized restoration of Arab honor it soon seems to be tarnished, or perhaps insatiable, requiring another round of repairs. Reformers often tried to persuade their fellows that the true way to raise Arab honor and dignity was not through fighting Israel or the West but by putting the priority on building a productive economy, higher living standards, equality for women, a free society, independent courts, an honest media, and good educational and health systems. Yet these things have once again been pushed off the agenda. Indeed, the philosophy of resistance breeds the most resistance to the changes the Arab world really needs.

A superb example of this kind of thinking is provided by Youssef al-Rashid, a columnist for the Kuwaiti daily *al-Anba*, who wrote that 'the Lebanese people may have lost a lot of economic and human resources [in the 2006 war]...but [aside] from figures and calculations, they have achieved a lot of gains' because Lebanon's 'heroic resistance fighters have proven to the world that Lebanese borders are not open to Israeli tanks without a price. Lebanon was victorious in the battle of dignity and honor.' [23]

Upon examination, however, what this really says is that billions of dollars in damage, death, suffering, the return of Syrian influence to Lebanon, the rise of inter-communal tensions to the brink of civil war, and the setting back of that country's economy are all worthwhile because it made people feel better about themselves. And even then, he couldn't say that Lebanese borders are closed to Israeli tanks, it's just that they cannot enter at no cost whatsoever.

This kind of statement has been common in modern Arab political history. To choose only one example, a 1966 internal Syrian Ba'th party document stated that the struggle against imperialism and Zionism was so important that it was worth sacrificing everything the party and the Syrian people had achieved: 'We have to risk destruction of all we have built up in order to eliminate Israel!' It was all very well, the Ba'th party explained, to have summit conferences and make military preparations but there had to come a moment when this plan for war would be implemented. [24] next year, with the 1967 war, these leaders got their wish, and fell from power.

Part of this calculation, a dangerous underestimate of their enemy, never seemed to be corrected. When Nasrallah and other extremist Islamists spoke about Israel they echoed word for word what Arafat and Arab nationalists said in the 1960s. Basically, it boiled down to this: If enough Arabs or Muslims are only ready to become martyrs, wiping Israel off the map would be easy. Israel only continued to exist because Arab rulers were too cowardly and traitorous.

This mistake resulted in four decades of disaster for the Arab world. In 1948 and again in 1967 Arab leaders announced they would defeat Israel and throw the Jews into the sea. But it was the Arabs who suffered a humiliating loss. Next, Arafat and others bragged that guerrilla warfare would do the trick, an idea which brought him one defeat after another, not Israel's defeat but civil wars in Jordan and Lebanon, more defeats on the battlefield, years of suffering, and the waste of billions of dollars in resources. The Gaza Strip was wrecked by this idea from three uprisings in 15 years. The Arab states remained virtually the sole place in the world exclusively ruled by dictatorships, since only authoritarian governments, it was argued, could defeat Israel and expel Western influence. And so it went, down through Saddam Hussein's three costly wars and Usama bin Ladin, to present-day Hizballah and Hamas.

When intellectuals and leaders are irresponsible there are consequences. Zaghlul al-Najjar, a columnist in al-Ahram – not an Iranian publication or some crackpot al-Qaida site but the flagship newspaper of the moderate Egyptian government which had a peace treaty with Israel for more than a quarter-century – wrote on August 14, 2006:

Imagine what would [happen] to this oppressive entity [Israel] if an oil embargo was imposed on it, if its air force was destroyed in a surprise attack,

RUBIN | The Truth About Syria

and if all the Arab countries around it fired rockets on it simultaneously and decided to put an end to its crimes and its filth. [If this happens], this criminal entity which threatens the entire region with mass destruction will not continue to exist on its stolen land even one more day. [25]

To show that the publication of that article was no fluke, the same newspaper carried a similar article by Anwar Abd al-Malek, an Arab nationalist, on August 29, 2006, about the miracle of Hizballah proving Israel could be easily defeated. [26] Does Egypt want war with Israel? No. But engaging in this kind of demagoguery gives Egypt a degree of immunity from radical criticism at home and abroad while having the dangerous consequence of reinforcing the disruptive resistance ideology even further.

During all these flights of fantasy and failure the idea that the inability to destroy Israel should make real peace an attractive alternative never took hold. In part, this was because conflict was the superior option from the point of view of protecting the regimes. At the same time, Arab nationalists and Islamists let their desire for Israel not to exist persuade them that it was weak, divided, cowardly, and would soon crumble.

Here is Arafat in 1968: “The Israelis have one great fear, the fear of casualties.” This principle guided PLO strategy: Kill enough Israelis by war or terrorism, and the country would collapse or surrender. A PLO official in 1970 said the Jews could not long remain under so much tension and threat; “Zionist efforts to transform them into a homogeneous, cohesive nation have failed,” and so they would leave. [27] On September 12, 1973, just before his country and Egypt attacked Israel, the Syrian ambassador confided in a Soviet official that Arab states would need 10 to 15 years to destroy Israel but would soon launch an attack to destroy the myth of Israeli invincibility and undermine foreign investment and Jewish immigration. [28]

Yet while the Arabs did well at the war’s start and claimed afterward that they had restored their honor, more than 30 years later all the same issues of Israeli invincibility, a belief that Israeli society could be undermined, and victory would be certain if Arab self-confidence restored remained. Here is Nasrallah on July 29, 2006: “When the people of this tyrannical state lose faith in its mythical army, it is the beginning of the end of this entity.” [29] But Israel suffered far heavier losses fighting PLO terrorists in the 1960s – when the country’s population was far

smaller – than in the 2006 Lebanon war and the latter conflict actually produced more national unity and higher morale.

Nevertheless, Bashar and Nasrallah still insist, as Arafat did periodically over almost forty years, the fighting has shown, in the latter's words, Israel's army to be 'helpless, weak, defeated, humiliated, and a failure.' [30] Of course, this is propaganda aimed to win the masses' cheers and the cadres' steadfastness, but the leaders, too, believe it. After all, this is the assessment on which they base their policy.

The big hope of Arafat then and Bashar, Nasrallah or Hamas now was to terrorize Israeli civilians. This is why they use terrorism, not because they are intrinsically evil but rather because they think it will be effective. By attacking civilian targets, Arafat said in 1968, the PLO would 'weaken the Israeli economy' and 'create and maintain an atmosphere of strain and anxiety that will force the Zionists to realize that it is impossible for them to live in Israel.' [31] Or, as an article in a PLO magazine explained in 1970, if all Israelis would be made to feel 'isolated and defenceless,' they would want to leave, and Israel would cease to exist. [32]

What Bashar, Nasrallah, and Iran say today sounds like PLO documents from a quarter-century ago, like one entitled, 'Guidelines for attacking civilian targets in Israel' which called for, 'Using weapons in terrifying ways against them where they live,' including for example attacking tourist facilities 'during the height of the tourist season,' [33] which is what happened in the 2006 war. And in calling for Israel's destruction, Ahmadinejad echoed what Arab leaders were saying at the time he was a mere lad, with no real success.

Similarly, the other main strategic idea of the Iran-led alliance today is precisely the same one developed in the 1960s, in which terror-sponsoring states assaulted Israel through another country and client groups. Syria used Jordan and Lebanon for this purpose in 1947, even before Israel's creation, when Damascus wanted to hide its involvement in the fighting. [34] The whole history of the PLO and more than a dozen Palestinian terrorist groups is largely based on the principle of state sponsorship and safe havens. Again, it didn't work.

The Arab reaction to the 2006 war in Lebanon follows an old tradition in which military defeats are turned by verbal gymnastics into victories, partly based on the fact that Arab forces won some battles and fought bravely. In effect, fighting and dying simply becomes a substitute for the lack of success elsewhere; blood purges

RUBIN | The Truth About Syria

failure in politics, society, and economy, like the student who flunks exams and redeems himself by becoming a suicide bomber. The Lebanese poet Abbas Beydoun, who writes on cultural matters, cheered Hizballah by saying it “has erased a guilt, and corrected the world’s memory, in order to compensate for Arab frustration and expunge a sense of shame.” [35]

The 1956, 1973, 1982, and other wars have been already transformed in this way. A superb example of this pattern is what happened at Karama, Jordan, in March 1968. Israel’s army crossed the river, drove through Jordanian army units, then attacked and destroyed the main Fatah camp there. Arafat fled, leaving his men to fend for themselves. Israel lost 21 men while Fatah had 150 killed. The battle was an Israeli victory and the main credit for resistance belonged to the Jordanian army.

But Arafat persuaded Palestinians and the Arab world that Karama was a great victory for Fatah, making it appear heroic next to the Arab armies’ apparent cowardice and incompetence a year earlier in the 1967 war. Thousands begged to join Fatah and Nasser invited Arafat to come to Cairo and be his protégé. Arafat’s career, and the tragedy of the next 35 years of tragedy and bloodshed, was set.

Egypt itself used the 1973 war in this manner. While the Egyptian offensive at the start of the war was indeed brilliant and its use of new antitank weapons (another parallel with Lebanon in 2006) successful, Egypt lost the war. By the end of the fighting, the international community needed to rush in and save Egypt when Israeli forces crossed the Suez Canal and surrounded its Third Army. At least, Sadat used the war as a basis for his peace bid, turning the claimed victory to some productive use. But few in the Arabic-speaking world today view the war in that context.

A more typical case of how things work was the PLO’s handling of its disastrous defeat in Lebanon in 1982, which ended with that group being driven from the country. Arafat called it a victory and his colleague, Khalid al-Hassan, modestly proclaimed, “We should not become arrogant in the future as a result of this victory.” [36]

There was some dissent on this point. Isam Sartawi, the PLO’s leading moderate, presented a different perspective, demanding an investigation of the PLO’s poor performance in the fighting. He urged the PLO to ‘wake up’ and leave the ‘path of defeat’ that had led to the 1982 debacle. Sartawi ridiculed the wishful thinking that

claimed that war to be a PLO victory. “Another victory such as this,” he joked, “and the PLO will find itself in the Fiji Islands.” [37]

Yet what happened between Arafat’s fantasy and Sartawi’s realism? Twenty years later, Arafat was still leading the PLO. Two months after voicing his complaints, Sartawi was murdered by Palestinian terrorists from a group headquartered in Damascus that often served as an instrument of the Syrian regime. Repression, then, is one way to discourage anyone from pointing out the huge holes in the resistance mentality.

Here can be seen a brilliantly designed mechanism that safeguards the radicals and regimes, a weapon wielded brilliantly by Bashar. If anyone dissents or ridicules these ideas, say that this proves them traitorous lackies of the West and Zionism. This is an inescapable fact of life in the Arabic-speaking world. A Lebanese Shia asked in this regard, “How should I react to...people...that tell me that they are ready to kill themselves, their kids, see their houses destroyed and their jobs nonexistent, while looking at me [and implying], if “you are not willing to do the same, thus you are an American-Israeli agent?” [38]

The same treatment is given governments or groups if they seek outside support to protect themselves from the radicals, since that means turning to the West. Sometimes, of course, the threat is so grave that the taboo is broken – as when the Saudis and Kuwaitis got Western help to save them from Saddam in 1990.

Yet there is a terrible reckoning afterward, since this decision was a major factor in the rise of bin Ladin’s international jihadism. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat made peace with Israel in 1979 and was assassinated in 1981. The same fate befell Jordan’s King Abdallah in 1951, for merely attempting to do so, earlier and Lebanese President Bashir al-Gemayel in 1982.

This same trick is used by Bashar against other countries which have interests diverging from those of Syria and as a way to show his own people that he is the noblest Arab of them all. In his August 15 speech, Bashar called the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia mere ‘half-men,’ midgets who lacked his courage, and even outright traitors. Just as this policy plays with fire by inciting war against Israel it also fomented conflicts among the Arabs themselves. By advocating unity only on his terms, Bashar ensured that there would be none.

RUBIN | The Truth About Syria

As significant, and perhaps even more important, Bashar's resistance strategy was meant to kill off the possibility of democratization of politics and liberalization of society. After all, if the priority is on resistance, reform is at best a distraction, at worst it is treason. Thus, struggle excuses stagnation. What matters is the glory of resistance rather than the banality of economic reform, improving the school system, and developing an honest media or independent judiciary. 'In a state of war,' wrote the dissident Egyptian playwright Ali Salem whose works are banned in his own country, 'No one argues...or asks questions.' They are told that this is not the right time to talk about free speech, democracy, or corruption, and then ordered, 'Get back to the trench immediately!' [39]

And when in March 2001, Ba'th party members asked Syrian Vice-President Abd Halim Khaddam at a public meeting why the regime did not do more to solve the problems of corruption, incompetence and the slow pace of reform, his answer was that the Arab-Israeli conflict permitted no changes at home. 'This country is in a state of war as long as the occupation continues.' [40] The irony of this argument was that the regime had turned down Israel's offer to return the entire Golan Heights a year earlier.

The regime needed the continuation of the conflict with Israel to rationalize its own dictatorship, corruption, and even continued rule. But this allowed endless chances for posturing bravely. Bashar roared in a 2001 speech, "An inch of land is like a kilometre and that in turn is like a thousand kilometres. A country that concedes even a tiny part of its territory, is bound to concede a much bigger part in the future....Land is an issue of honor not meters." And he added that this was his inheritance: "President Hafiz al-Assad did not give in," boasted Bashar, "and neither shall we; neither today nor in the future." [41]

Today, radical Islamism – with an assist from the nationalists – is recapitulating the history of Arab nationalism in remarkable detail, including the wildly exaggerated promises of victory, the intoxication with supposed triumphs, the putting of resources into struggle instead of constructive pursuits, and so on. The old con game of offering battle against foreigners to discourage struggle against one's own dictator – as a substitute for democracy, reform, and material progress – was presented afresh as if it had never been used over and over in the past.

In some ways, this world view does not correspond with reality and is very damaging. But there is much method in the 'madness' of those who promulgate it.

The resistance mentality is an excellent tool for regime preservation. Ultimately, the main victims are the Arabs themselves. The main beneficiary among governments is Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian regime.

Bashar was ecstatic. Seeing, ‘millions of youngsters waving’ the flag of resistance proved ‘that this nation is on the brink of a new phase in its history.’ [42] Perhaps true, but it is the same as the old phase, and ultimately so will be its results. In the meantime, the Syrian regime remained stable and became even more popular. Unless he made a major miscalculation, it was springtime for Bashar.

Barry Rubin is an advisory editor of *Democratiya* and the author of *The Long War for Freedom*, *Yasir Arafat*, *The Tragedy of the Middle East*, and *Hating America*. His articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, and many other publications. He has been a Council on Foreign Relations Fellow and is the editor of the *Middle East Review of International Affairs*.

Notes

- [1] Syrian Arab Television, August 15, 2006. Translation in U.S. Department of Commerce, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (hereafter FBIS).
- [2] Fouad Ajami, “Arab Road,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 47, Summer 1982, p. 16.
- [3] Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, (NY, 2005), p. 212.
- [4] Syrian Arab Television, August 15, 2006. Translation in FBIS.
- [5] Syrian Arab Television, op. cit.
- [6] Many writers and scholars routinely refer to Alawites today as Shia Muslims but there is almost no basis for this statement, aside from regime propaganda. Hafiz al-Assad persuaded the Lebanese Shia cleric Musa Sadr to accept this assertion, but Sadr was highly respected as a political leader, not as a theologian, and his opinion has not been formally endorsed by many others. Alawites in the past openly rejected the idea that they were Muslims and their religious beliefs were very much at variance with those of Islam. It is appropriate to treat the idea that Alawites are Shia Muslims as a political myth even if Alawites (at least in public) and other Muslims, though not all, accept this notion at present.
- [7] *Al-Gumbhuriya*, October 7, 2001. Translation in Middle East Media Research Institute (hereafter MEMRI) No. 289, October 19, 2001, http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP28901#_edn1.
- [8] Quoted in the *New York Post*, September 3, 2006.
- [9] Tawfiq al-Hakim, *The Return of Consciousness* (NY, 1985), p. 50.
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Text of UPI interview in British Foreign Office, FO371 E8124/951/31, August 16, 1947.

RUBIN | The Truth About Syria

- [12] *Tishrin*, August 14, 2006. Translation in MEMRI No. 1250, August 16, 2006; *al-Mustaqbal*, August 7, 2006. Translation in MEMRI No. 1239, August 9, 2006, <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP123906>
- [13] See, for example, Buthaynah Shaab, *Tishrin*, August 14, 2006. Translation in FBIS GMP20060814627003.
- [14] Syrian Arab Television, op. cit.
- [15] *Tishrin*, August 3, 2006.
- [16] Speech of March 5, 1946. Text in: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/churchill-iron.html>.
- [17] IRINN TV, February 1, 2006. Translation in MEMRI, Clip #1019, <http://www.memritv.org/Search.asp?ACT=S1>.
- [18] Sermon broadcast on Iranian channel one television, September 1, 2006. Translation by MEMRI.
<http://www.memritv.org/search.asp?ACT=S9&P1=1261>.
- [19] Khalid al-Maaly, "Two Faces of Arab Intellectuals," *Berliner Zeitung*, September 14, 2006. Translation at:
<http://www.signandsight.com/features/993.html>
- [20] Text in *FBIS*, November 8, 1979.
- [21] Al-Jazira television, October 7, 2001.
- [22] Interview on Al-Jazira television, August 1, 2006. Translation in MEMRI No. 1217, August 1, 2006; Al-Jazira television, August 29, 2006. Translation in MEMRI, Clip #129.
<http://www.memritv.org/search.asp?ACT=S9&P1=1255>
- [23] Associated Press (hereafter AP), August 17, 2006.
- [24] "The Palestinian Problem in the Internal Political Report of the Extraordinary Regional Congress," March 10-27, 1966. Text in Abraham Ben Tzur, *The Syrian Baath Party and Israel*, (Givat Haviva, 1968), p. 19.
- [25] *Al-Abram*, August 14, 2006.
- [26] *Al-Abram*, August 29, 2006.
- [27] Yassir Arafat, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (April 1986), and also South, January, 1986, p. 18; al-Anwar symposium of March 8, 1970, cited in Y Harkabi, *The Palestinian Covenant and its Meaning*, (London, 1979); p. 12; Arafat statement, May 1969, *International Documents On Palestine 1969* (IDOP), op. cit., pp. 691-692.
- [28] Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World*, (NY, 2005), pp. 203-4.
- [29] Al-Manar television, July 29, 2006. Translation in MEMRI #1224, August 1, 2006.
<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP122406>.
- [30] Ibid.
- [31] Interview, January 22, 1968 in IDOP, 1968, p. 300.
- [32] *Filastin al-Thawra*, January 1970.
- [33] Raphael Israeli, *PLO in Lebanon: Selected Documents* (London, 1983) p. 31.
- [34] The details are discussed in Barry Rubin, *The Arab States and the Palestine Question* (Syracuse, 1982), pp. 187-188.

- [35] *Al-Safir*, July 28, 2006.
- [36] *Al Madina*, August 31, 1982, FBIS, September 9, 1982.
- [37] Muhammad Anis, "An interview with `Isam Sartawi," *al Musawwar*, March 25, 1983; Avner Yaniv, "Phoenix of Phantom? The PLO after Beirut," *Terrorism*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1984).
- [38] Abu Kais, "Loving Life, Loving Death," in *From Beirut to the Beltway*, August 26, 2006, http://www.beirutbeltway.com/beirutbeltway/2006/08/loving_life_lov.html
- [39] Ali Salem, "My Drive to Israel," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Winter 2002. The full text is available at: <http://www.meforum.org/article/130>.
- [40] *New York Times*, March 12, 2001.
- [41] *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, February 8, 2001. Translation in MEMRI No. 49, February 16, 2001, http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=ia&ID=IA4901#_edn1
- [42] *Al-Ushua*, August 14, 2006.