

Winds of Change in Syria: An In-Depth Report

Dr. Marc Gopin, Director

January 2005

Despite the tragic assassination in Lebanon and the political fallout from it, there are reformers in Syria who are being ignored in current Western policy. Let me share with you some astonishing events that took place in January that have not yet been made public in the West. The events I am about to describe to you were reported on national television, national radio, and major national newspapers, but the story has yet to be told outside of Syria.

In between speaking at two seminars in Israel in January 2005 regarding the future of peace in the region, I slipped out of the country into Jordan and then into Syria without telling anyone except my wife and a couple of colleagues who helped me across the border. It was a difficult crossing for a few reasons, including the fact that my ears were injured by the overseas flight, I was sick, and I had to therefore take a complicated land route with two passports. I had worked with an extraordinary Syrian/Canadian attorney by the name of Hind Kabawat who I had met at the World Economic Forum. She planned with me an unprecedented private and public set of engagements in Damascus, raising publicly for the first time in forty years the subject of peace in the Middle East.

We raised these issues through the lens of culture and religion, a less threatening approach than pure political discourse, and, most importantly, I would raise these issues as a scholar of conflict resolution with a cultural background as a religious American Jew. Whatever my abilities may be in public speaking and private dialogues, the fact is that this effort was so politically complicated that only a person of political talent like Hind could have pulled this off. She displayed a fascinating combination of intense national pride, deep commitment to peace, political savvy and public relations know-how that really should be studied as a textbook example of how to open up dialogues of civilizations when they have been closed for generations.

We were breaking boundaries and taboos on public discourse in this political environment, but at the same time it was from a cultural and religious perspective that allowed for a broad ethical discussion on shared values and an attempt at a shared vision of the future. Most important of all, everything was approved at the highest levels even though all the engagements refeatured officially unofficial. Wreaking havoc on my academic categories of analysis, I never understood the boundaries of what was official and what was unofficial. For example, I was greeted at the border by a representative of the Minister of Information, who gave me an official talk summed up by the words, "...our President has offered a full peace to Israel and normalization of relations, and we are waiting to hear from Prime Minister Sharon." It was as if I was supposed to respond to that in some official way. The discourse was strangely formal for an informal event, and yet it was accompanied by a sense of warmth and hospitality that never ceased for the entire eight days that I was in Syria. In fact this hospitality was the defining and most hopeful characteristic of the Syrian people that could form a basis for a thaw in relations with traditional adversaries.

My mouth dropped upon hearing the words of this ministry official because I was hardly coming as an official. These were also the last words I expected to hear from a Syrian governmental representative--I was just hoping to be tolerated in Damascus--and yet I was being treated like a king after having great difficulty getting over the Israeli border. We sat at the border in a massive single room building set up for V.I.P.'s, surrounded by high walls, ornate couches and chairs, presented with the requisite bitter coffee, and two massive side-by-side portraits of Hafez and Bashar Assad staring me in the face.

One rather cynical former American diplomat told me before I left the U.S., "Take in Old Damascus, it is quite a sight, but the Syrians will bore you." It was already turning out to be the most intriguing cultural odyssey of my life, and I immediately sensed why American and Western diplomacy had failed to penetrate this extraordinary, intricate, if troubled civilization. I could sense right away the ancientness of this culture, the diversity of its people, the arrested glory of so many past civilizations, and the embarrassing hints of poverty adjacent to past grandeur. I sensed from this official's speech, and many other things that I would learn in eight days of private talks, that President Assad was looking to extricate Syria from the burdens of recent history and to recapture ancient glories. He was looking to re-enter history after the Cold War's devastating isolation of his country. He was searching for glory not as a conqueror of lands but as a leader of an ancient culture trying to open up Syria to the world. The question was how to do this given entrenched interests standing in the way.

The main public dialogue on Thursday night, January 6, 2005, excerpts of which were nationally televised, was attended by three hundred distinguished guests, government officials, artists, professors, professionals. It took place in the most prestigious building of Damascus, the Assad Library, and guests included the American, Canadian, and Swiss ambassadors, the Syrian ambassador to the U.S., assistants to President Assad and representatives of various ministries, especially the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Expatriates, in addition to many professors, professionals, and officials from Lebanon.

The event was preceded and followed by television, newspaper, and radio interviews, and it was done from the beginning with the approval of President Assad. Nothing of this sensitive a nature would have proceeded without his approval. In fact, his aides asked some of the pointed questions after the talk, and we were very pleased to send his wife, as well as about fifteen other officials who I met that week, a copy of my book on the role of religion and culture in the future of peace in the Middle East.

The atmosphere of the public dialogue, simultaneously translated between English and Arabic, was electric in many ways, with great anticipation of how a public dialogue would proceed with three hundred people on the most sensitive issues of war and peace. This is not an easy task anywhere in the world, let alone in this unprecedented encounter. I was treated with immense respect, but, at the same time, some in the audience had the opportunity to vent a great deal of anger at what they saw as the victimization of Syria and the Palestinians. Others expressed deep appreciation for my willingness to come and listen. We had a great, tough dialogue. I knew I was setting myself up for a great deal of anger because I made it clear to the audience that I was a religious Jew and I quoted many times from the Bible and Talmud.

Those two hours of questioning were among the hardest of my life, in terms of dealing constructively with anger, and with a delicate balance of agreement, sympathy, solidarity, honest confrontation, positive vision. I withheld many things I had to say to some of the more angry statements. I knew the political leadership was watching every word to see if this experiment of public dialogue between civilizations would fly and be a precedent, and I knew the American ambassador was watching too. As if the pressure was not great enough, the host and everyone else expressed through word and deed their sense of astonishment, nervous fear, hope, that something utterly new was happening.

The words that Hind Kabawat said publicly by way of introducing me were far more important than mine because she is an insider/outsider/reformer to the culture. She is the kind of catalyst that can change history nonviolently because she is from within the privileged group that leads the country, and yet she is an agent of change. The question hovering over the entire trip was would the West listen to her words, would the West engage a complicated Syria and support its best reformers, or would it cynically ignore her and others. Would it see the side of President Assad that is honestly trying to make change, or would it focus instead on the supporters of Hezbollah and other violent incursions in the region.

I was troubled all along by the blithe way in which the West is often divided up between those countries who tend to intimidate troubled cultures into compliance and submission, and those who simply take advantage of troubled cultures while pursuing selfish objectives. Where is there room in diplomacy and statecraft for the strengthening of reformers is the question that preoccupied me.

I was amazed to watch history unfold there on that Thursday night. For me speaking there was a very tough assignment, but I try not to dwell too much on momentous occasions because it would negatively affect my ability to be spontaneous. It was my friends and hosts, however, that made me feel the trepidation, the historic weight of the event, and it started to terrify me by the end of that night. What right do any of us have to interfere this way in another culture, I asked myself. What right do we have to put people at risk this way? Ever since the talk on Thursday night, this question became my number one pre-occupation: would everyone who made this event possible be safe, or would they incur the wrath of an Old Guard who did not want change? Before the talk I was driven to move forward as if by a magnet drawing me in, but immediately afterward it was as if I awoke to what I had done, and who I may have put at risk.

Despite the fears, I am convinced of what I saw in Syria in the course of so many private meetings. I saw some winds of change at the heart of this extraordinary culture, winds that the West is missing or failing to take advantage of. In fact, my biggest problem since I left Syria was that no one in Israel believed that the event actually took place, nor that a religious Jew would be treated this way in the capital of Israel's fiercest foe. Fortunately we made a videotape, and yet the sense of disbelief refeatures palpable. I said this to one Syrian, and she said in a generous way that is typical of the culture, "It's ok, we could hardly believe it ourselves, how could we expect others to believe it."

A number of people both during the session and afterwards expressed enormous gratitude to us for stimulating this first-ever public debate and discussion. Almost as important were at least six

or seven beautiful dinners, hosted by prominent families throughout the city, including one at Hind's house, attended by officials, reformers, many doctors, and some problematic wealthy individuals. This lasted over the course of eight days in which many discussions ensued on the most vital topics regarding the future of Syria and the region. We had an interesting time managing my Kosher needs, all the while ordering vegetarian food wherever possible. My greatest challenge was not any anti-Jewish prejudice but rather how secular this culture is; rituals of religious practice were not easily explained. It reminded me very much of Tel Aviv and Manhattan, and I found it humorous and strangely gratifying as a religious scholar to be opening up a bridge between secular civilizations in Syria, Israel and the U.S.

We also visited over a period of days with Sunni and Shi'ite leaders as well as Christian leaders. The hospitality and friendliness was absolutely astounding, and I did not feel a single hint of anti-Judaism the entire time, only a feeling of sadness that most of Syria's Jews were no longer there. I knew well the history of Jewish tragedies there in the recent past, but these were people most of whom knew the old Jewish families, and several had kept up with those families in Brooklyn and elsewhere. This was a diverse culture that had been torn asunder and drained by the Arab-Israeli wars, as well as the Cold War.

The Shi'ite leader, Sheik Shahadi, was astonishingly tolerant, describing to me a life and a set of writings committed completely to religious pluralism. When I admitted to him that I was a rabbi he was astonished and said that there is only peace when a rabbi (hacham) participates in the deliberations, truly an unnecessary compliment that shocked me in its generosity of spirit. I have attended hundreds of interfaith events in my life, it is my business as it were, or my academic specialty. No one ever said that to me, and the last place I expected to hear that was in Syria, and yet there it was. I have always felt as an analyst that the Arab/Israeli wars had triggered a great deal of anti-Judaism, but that it was thin, a political weapon not a foundation of culture. A much more complicated challenge of anti-Semitism lies at the heart of European culture in the West and Wahabism in the East. There was not an idea I expressed that Sheikh Shahadi was not saying at the same time. Hind was translating between us, and at one point she could not believe that I said something in English and the Sheikh said something in Arabic at the same time and it was the same spiritual idea. None of these Syrian religious encounters touched directly on political matters, and I was keenly aware that everyone I was with was viscerally opposed to Israeli policies regarding the Palestinians. Yet, I sensed how much everyone wanted an end to war and the beginning of normal relations even with Israel.

All this touched me deeply, even as I was fully aware that Hamas and Islamic Jihad offices were hidden somewhere nearby in Damascus. I slept each night in a four hundred year old Christian home, enveloped in the atmosphere of the ancient Old City, a city inhabited continuously for over thirty thousand years. I was very close to the gate where Paul preached just two thousand years before, and yet it never escaped me that I was in the heart of a city that had been at war for my entire life with my ancient homeland, with Israel, and therefore a threat to my cousins and family members there. I lived with paradox at every moment. At every moment I was aware of intense generosity, unbelievable respect, gratitude to me, far more respect than I received in Israel from fellow Jews, and yet we were in this no man's land of history, Jew and Arab, struggling for friendship, solidarity, even unity of purpose. I sensed their passion for a new, free, prosperous Syria, and it is that yearning that I addressed in my speeches and talks, because for

me these were legitimate moral and spiritual yearnings of an ancient and proud people who had blessed the world thousands of years ago with its first languages and arts. But Hamas was still down the street, and I can never be blind to the complex reality in which even the most hopeful and courageous people, religious and secular, civilians and officials alike, must live and function.

Syria has some serious problems with entrenched interests keeping reformers from moving forward. After extensive interviews with key figures, I am convinced that Bashar Assad is serious about reform, even if his methods of proceeding forward are agonizingly slow. We are missing the key signals, and also not thinking through the ways to quietly help move things forward. The U.S., Japan, and other investors should seize the opportunity at this time in history to find a creative way to support the reformers in Syria, including President Assad, and they should learn who to support, who not to support, and who to try to pressure through negotiations into change. Some of the worst offenders there were clever enough to get American contracts in Iraq even as Congress is slapping the whole country and culture with sanctions.

Blanket condemnations and boycotts of a society of 18 million people are useless and just create solidarity with the hardliners in their midst. The enormous power of American economic might should be used judiciously and skillfully, not as a blunt instrument. No matter how busy U.S. congressmen may be getting reelected, serving local constituencies, and doling out funds that affect the lives of hundreds of millions of people in the U.S. and around the world--and I respect the challenge they face--confronting any foreign society with a blunt instrument is foolish and always backfires. A subtle, informed and morally defensible approach to confrontation is called for here.

There should also be a secret channel created to the military and security services. I had several conversations about this in all three countries. Today we stand at a stage of relationship between Jordan and Israel, for example, in which there is actually a five-year old society of former generals who meet regularly. Almost all of those generals are now leading peacemakers who have the unique political cache of being able to influence military and security thinking.

There is no way to move forward in opening up closed states without some in the military starting to buy into the startling, utterly radical notion that you can have a strong military that is also beholden to democratic safeguards and civilian control. That is the essence of democratization, and yet we never think creatively about how to quietly cultivate this stance within militaries and police forces that need to change. We cannot expect President Assad to go it alone, to magically and single-handedly move entrenched economic/military interests forward. We need to help this along in quiet ways, in economic ways, in political ways of creating strong incentives and rewards. The evolution of military and police forces is essential to any substantive change that moves toward liberalization.

Another missing ingredient between the U.S., Israel and Syria is imagination and vision. So many people in Syria, in the middle East in general, feel stuck, with no way out, no way out of poverty for average people and no way to escape an impoverishment of their culture. So many in America and Israel are plagued by fear of terror, of the nightmares of what the world can do to them, but these nightmares can stifle the very tools of finding a way forward. We tried to offer a vision of the future, one in which an open Middle East would be a boon for Syria in particular

but also for the whole region, and for Muslims, Jews and Christians across the world. The country is just waiting for millions of tourists to discover so origins of several civilizations. Old Damascus is a goldmine of civilization and yet it is empty of tourists. I believe in our lifetimes that this will change radically, but it must be a vision that everyone, East and West, embraces.

There is something to tourism that addresses human needs at much deeper level than we imagine. Tourism addresses our need to wander, to find more than one home, to return to places of ancient origin. I sensed a longing in Syria, for example, for the land of Palestine, a romantic recollection of a previous century in which Syrians freely roamed East and South. Some will call this imperialism and a wish to conquer Israel, and for many in the current circumstances perhaps that is the case. But it is also a longing for home and belonging. Tourism and open borders are deeply human, ancient, nonviolent forms of conquest and ownership. There is a way in which people around the Middle East, including Israelis, long for that openness and wandering to ancient homes. We need a nonmilitary imagination of how everyone can do just that, how everyone can reach Jerusalem and the ancient Holy Land without violence or conquest, and how Jews and Christians can visit ancient roots across the region. This was the vision that we shared that night in Damascus, and it is a vision that is both spiritual but also profoundly material, a way to generate new prosperity and dignity for populations that might otherwise be carried away by the false promises of ultra-nationalism and religious fascism.

One of several mistakes I made in Syria was speaking too much about religious conflict. They are proud of the fact that there is more freedom of religion in Syria than most places in the Middle East, a place in which secular people and women have absolute equality of opportunity. In fact, a refrain from many Arabs over the last few years is the fact that the United States and the West have attacked the two places in the Middle East that had the most freedom of religion, and the most equality for women, Iraq and Syria, while siding with Saudi Arabia which has single handedly invested billions of dollars undermining traditional Islam's approach to issues of tolerance. They see a religious American administration, aligned with conservative Christian efforts to spread the Gospel globally, also making an alliance with Saudi Arabia, the most aggressive state in the region that proselytizes for radical Islam, and then America attacks the two places that are secular! They wonder what kind of collusion of religious extremists is at work here. Now I know the readers will be astonished and say to themselves that these folks are just ignoring Saddam's genocides, Syria's horrific slaughter of innocents in Hamas, and the support for key terrorists groups. But it is worth hearing this perspective from educated people who live in the Middle East. Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood do not really affect their own lives in Syria, and Syrian citizens cannot begin to understand an American society championing democracy and freedom that would side with those who are ushering Islamic extremism into the Middle East. No one is naïve about the power of oil and therefore why America would coddle Saudi Arabia, but the outrage at this hypocrisy is palpable, really it is beyond words--and I am speaking about the rage of democrats. It seems that everyone, here and there, is caught in the web of state interests that turn a blind eye to the devastations of religious extremism, its incitement, its imperialism, and its terrorism.

The Syrians I met tend to underestimate the danger in their own midst of Islamic extremism, and that it is only extreme state control that is holding it back. We heard reports while I was there of clerics in the countryside urging young Syrians to go and kill any foreigners in Iraq. My friends

there remind me of many in the U.S. and in Israel who never wanted to face the power of religious passions, and the vital strategic importance of marshalling those passions for democracy and human rights, not shunting aside religious issues. They underestimate the devastating price that all states are paying for using religious passions--Muslim, Jewish, and Christian--when it is convenient and then being crushed by the unleashing of those passions as they backfire on states. Yet it was hard to argue with the moral outrage felt there by those who had heard from many Iraqis streaming across their borders, tales of serious abuse by American soldiers. Unfortunately this reality tempered any sense there that the clerical extremists advocating war in Iraq needed to be confronted. On a certain level my friends there are absolutely right, Syria really has a remarkable level of religious pluralism and equality for women. At another level, however, they will need to confront these challenges eventually in much the same way the every state in the region needs to.

Democratic reform is yearned for in Syria by many people, there is eagerness for normalization of relations with Israel, let alone the U.S., if and only if the historic wrongs to the Palestinian people are addressed, a new era of dignity and equality emerges, and the Syrian people themselves are actually freed to live a new life. The one thing holding back reform, supporting hardliners and corrupt individuals, is the ongoing hostilities. Thus we are left as always with the chicken and the egg, reform needing peace and peace needing reform.

We stand at a dangerous and hopeful crossroads in the course of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Despite all the good news and the obvious course of de-escalation, Israel could, for the first time in its history, experience a Jewish violent fracture in its identity which must keep Ariel Sharon and the Likud, the great designers of aggressive Jewish nationalism, awake at night. Many feel that it would be political suicide for him to open right now an Arab/Israeli track, specifically with Syria, specifically involving giving back the Golan. Yet can the Palestinian/Israeli track proceed with Hezbollah, a client of Syria and Iran, doing everything it can to disrupt the peace process, even threatening the President of Palestine's life, according to some intelligence sources?

What Assad needs most, what Sharon needs most to avoid derailment, what Abbas needs most, what America needs most, is not the immediate start of Syrian/American/Israeli negotiations, but a palpable thaw in relations, a firm direction away from belligerence by proxies, and toward gestures of political and economic improvement that can set the stage for a new relationship between Syria and the West, as well as new relationship between Israel and the Arab world. This is the order of the day and it cannot wait.

Everything I saw and heard in Syria suggests to me that there is an address for peace there, a partner in generating a new future for the Middle East. But it is a beleaguered partner, a partner that is still suffering the after effects of Cold War political and military structures, in addition to being at the mercy of widespread anti-American and anti-Israeli popular feelings that might be ameliorated by a conscious Western effort to demonstrate a new set of rules for engagement between Israel and Arab populations and between America and Arab populations. What the U.S. and Israel rightly expect in return is a slow and steady about-face on the use of terror by proxies as a pressure tactic against the West. The much needed bargaining between the sides on these issues is self-evident, but only actions of trust-building with Syria's Assad can set the stage for

this. The next step then in an impending thaw must be working out what those bilateral actions will be. I have reasonable hope that the diplomatic corps of the United States, Israel and Syria are up to the task, and that other forward thinking Western diplomats will lead the way with innovative ideas.