

## Assad's Syria

BY GEORGE E. GRUEN

The Syria of Hafez al-Assad comes steadily closer to the society of contradictions portrayed by George Orwell in 1984. The official slogan of the ruling Ba'ath party is "unity, freedom, and socialism." Yet as one Western diplomat stationed in Damascus recently pointed out, the salient characteristics of Syrian life are the antithesis of these high ideals.

Power is concentrated in the hands of a clan of Alawites, a Shi'ite offshoot considered heretical by the Sunni Muslim majority. The most overt opposition is that of the fanatical, fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood, which has attempted to assassinate Assad and has succeeded in killing hundreds of officials and supporters of the regime. The government has unleashed the special Defense Brigades, under the command of Assad's brother Rifaat, and allowed the *Mukhabarat*, the secret police, to conduct a reign of terror and intimidation, including searches without warrant, detention without trial, torture, and summary execution. The result has been increased resentment against the regime among the majority of the population.

Stanley F. Reed, III, an American scholar who visited Syria last year, concluded that "through its characteristically heavy-handed tactics, the *Mukhabarat* has made itself a greater menace to the citizenry than the Muslim Brotherhood ever was." The Syrian Constitution, based on French legal principles, is the very model of respect for fundamental human freedoms—on paper. In reality the Constitution has been suspended since the Ba'ath took power in 1963 and decreed a state of emergency. In June, 1978, the General Conference of the Syrian Bar Association adopted a resolution calling for the lifting of the State of Emergency and the special laws enacted under it, for abolition of the State Security courts, for the "release or fair and open trial by civilian courts and with all due rights of defense of all political prisoners" (estimated as high as five thousand), and for the establishment of a human rights commission. The lawyers called on their members to boycott the State Security courts.

It should be noted that these peaceful demands were

made at a time of relative internal calm and a full year before a disgruntled Sunni officer, who had been passed over for promotion, plotted the massacre of some sixty Alawite cadets at the Aleppo military academy—the incident the government used to justify its intensification of Draconian extralegal measures. On January 14, 1980, the Damascus Bar Association reiterated its demands and called for a general strike at the end of the month if they were not met. The International Commission of Jurists and Amnesty International endorsed the Syrian lawyers' demands in public statements and appeals to President Assad. The general strike was postponed until March 31 after the prime minister and minister of justice had met with the head of the Bar Association and had given assurances that human rights would be restored.

Although some detainees were released in February, repressive measures continued. In March, Assad demanded that all professional organizations issue statements supporting his policy of "all-out war against 'reactionary elements' in Syria." Lawyers, doctors, and engineers refused to give the government such a blank check, and on March 31 they joined in a general strike. The government responded by issuing a decree dissolving the councils of the three professional associations. Amnesty International noted in its June 9, 1980, report on "Repression of Lawyers in Syria" that several prominent lawyers were killed and their bodies reportedly mutilated by security forces. Twenty-nine leaders of the Syrian Bar Association and of the League for the Defense of Human Rights in Syria were thrown into jail in April, 1980. The U.S. State Department confirms that a year later they were still being held.

### DISSENSION AT HOME AND ABROAD

In matters economic, corruption is a far more pervasive influence in Syria than socialism. Not only does bribery sap productivity and add to the cost of doing business, but 50 per cent of state expenditures now go to defense. Inflation is running at 30 per cent and balance of payments deficits are mounting, according to Jonathan C. Randall's dispatch in the *Washington Post* (February 18, 1981).

A major drain on Syria's economy and a source of popular discontent has been maintenance of some 22,000 Syrian troops in war-torn Lebanon since 1976, ostensibly as an Arab peace-keeping force among the Christian militias and the leftist Muslim and Palestin-

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ian elements. Assad's opponents see the intervention as a misguided attempt to achieve the dream of a Greater Syria, encompassing Jordan and Palestine (including Israel) as well.

If Syria is wracked with dissension at home, it finds itself internationally isolated and far from the Ba'ath dream of unity within the Arab world. Some of the tanks used to ring Aleppo in the spring of 1980 were removed only in November, when the government concentrated some thirty thousand troops along the Jordanian border in order to pressure King Hussein to stop harboring agents of the Muslim Brotherhood—a charge denied by the king—and to deter the Jordanian monarch from joining with President Sadat in negotiating a peace treaty with Israel. Saudi mediation and strong warnings from Israel deterred Assad from crossing the border.

However, following an increase in antigovernment terrorism, Syrian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Abdel Halil Khaddam declared on January 8 of this year that in the next confrontation "no mediation will be able to save the regime in Amman." Speaking at a rally in Damascus marking the sixteenth anniversary of the founding of al-Fatah, the leading Palestinian guerrilla organization, Khaddam pledged that Syria would help the Jordanian people rise against their government and make it possible for Palestinian commandos to reestablish bases in Jordan for operations against Israel. They had been driven out by the Jordanian Army in 1970.

Traditional rivalry between the Syrian and Iraqi branches of the Ba'ath has also increased recently, with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein accusing Assad of openly supporting Khomeini's Iran in the Iraq-Iran conflict. Typical of the risky actions that the once cautious Assad has undertaken to break his isolation and deflect attention from the domestic turmoil was his sudden flight to Tripoli last September to conclude a merger with the erratic Muammar al-Qaddafi. The flamboyant Libyan leader reportedly offered a billion dollars to shore up Syria's economy and help Assad pay for new weapons from Moscow. Of potentially far graver significance was the signing by Assad in October of a formal Friendship and Cooperation Treaty with the Soviet Union, giving Moscow added influence and possibilities for intervention in time of crisis. The number of Soviet advisors in Syria already exceeds three thousand and, according to some intelligence estimates, is as high as five thousand.

All this is in marked contrast to the relative stability and liberalization Assad had brought to Syria after he came to power in a bloodless coup in November, 1970. In the mid-'70s, Assad sought contacts with the West and made tentative feelers of friendship to the U.S. (Today he is an outspoken opponent of the American-sponsored Camp David peace process.) He liberalized the domestic economy, removed some of the harshest restrictions on Syria's Jewish minority, and promised as part of his policy to minimize ethnic and religious differences and treat all Syrian citizens—including Jews—equally under the law. Today no one is secure in Syria—not even in his own home.

## GETTING OUT

In its section on Syria the U.S. State Department's latest review of human rights practices cites "reliable reports that security forces dragged people from their residences and brutally beat them during house-to-house searches." The use of force "was protested, to no avail, to a high level of the Syrian government by local delegations from the affected cities" of Aleppo, Hama, and Homs.

A crucial difference between Jews and other Syrians is that Jews are denied the option of leaving the country. The violence, lawlessness, and economic instability have prompted increasing numbers of Syrian Muslims and Christians to go abroad. According to State Department sources, there are some 2,500 Syrians currently studying in the U.S. Other sources estimate that at least 400,000 to 500,000 Syrians are working abroad, mainly in the oil-producing states of the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf.

But this is not a possibility for Jews. The term "Musa'wi," follower of Moses, is entered on their identity cards and they are barred from traveling even to neighboring countries. In March of 1974 four young Jewish women were raped and murdered and two young men were killed as they attempted to flee to neighboring Lebanon. A protest funeral march by Jewish women brought the tragedy to world attention. In response to numerous international interventions, including a personal appeal by then President Jimmy Carter, fourteen young Jewish women were permitted in July, 1977, to come to the United States to marry. Despite Assad's promise to Carter in May, 1977, that additional Syrian Jews would be permitted to leave "on a case by case basis," in the four years since then only a handful, most of them ill or aged, have been permitted to leave.

In recent years a number of Jews had been able to obtain passports and exit visas. However, they had to post exceptionally large bonds, often upwards of \$6,000, and leave close family members behind as further surety against their return. Since the average annual per capita income in Syria is \$800, only a small segment of Syrian Jewry could take advantage of the opportunity. Even so, just last March, the authorities suddenly cancelled the exit permits of the handful of Jews who were holding valid passports. The government has been seizing the property of Jews who leave "illegally" and it is taking for itself the inheritance of any Jewish heirs who are abroad. Recently in Aleppo property was seized even from Jews then traveling abroad on valid passports. Their close relatives have had to pay rent to the government to live in their own homes.

Are Assad's days numbered? His brutal repression may have crippled the extremist opposition—at least for the moment. But the domestic violence, in which several thousands have already been killed, and the continuing violation of fundamental human rights have engendered widespread and lasting bitterness. This has further alienated Assad from the professional and commercial leaders of the country, who once held high hopes that he would restore fundamental freedoms and put an end to the cycle of coups and military dictatorships that have plagued their nation for so long. [WV]