

Republic of Caution

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Articles & Testimony

Coca-Cola is banned in Syria. The country's ruling Baath party justifies this prohibition on the grounds that the Coca-Cola Company markets its beverages in Israel. Hence, when I toured all of Syria's 14 provinces recently, I found all sorts of cola, but no Coke -- that is until I stopped at the Ghazali Restaurant on the Damascus-Jordan highway. The owner of this facility, the only rest stop on the busy 140-kilometer highway, is Rostom Ghazali, Syria's intelligence chief in Lebanon (until the Hariri assassination). What is more, the Coca-Cola I sipped at the Ghazali rest stop was from Lebanon. If you want a Coke in Syria, you go to Ghazali, whose job is to simultaneously ban Coca-Cola while smuggling it into Syria.

The Baath regime in Syria is no longer about socialism or Arab nationalism of the 1970s. Rather, this is a regime interested in maintaining its monopoly of Syria's wealth through a network of intertwined military and economic posts.

"Corruption is the largest sector of the Syrian economy, ahead of industry and tourism," explained one Western diplomat whom I met in Damascus -- and he wasn't talking about petty baksheesh business. Members of the Baath party, like Ghazali, use their monopoly over political and military power to dominate import, export, and goods distribution businesses. One university professor I spoke with pointed at "the overlap between the 100 richest people in Syria and the 100 most powerful people in the Baath regime." Take for instance Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's cousin Ramy Makhoul, who owns the only chain of duty-free shops at the country's airports and border crossings. This business and other interests have made Makhoul and his uncle billionaires.

Large-scale corruption is pervasive across Syria. A restaurant owner in the old city of Damascus told me he was forced to pay officials bribes of \$10,000 in order to open his business. In Aleppo, the country's second largest city, I was told that the town's previous mayor owned eight brand new Mercedes cars, despite earning an official salary of \$500 per month.

Across the country, I heard similar stories. Syria is not quite a republic of fear, where people are afraid to talk about the government. With the exception of Kurdish Kameshli in the northeast, a town under military lockdown, Syrians freely criticize the Baath regime on issues ranging from corruption to the failure to deliver prosperity.

The defection of former Syrian vice president Abdul Halim Khaddam to France is one reason so many people feel emboldened to criticize the regime. After Khaddam started speaking against the Baath party, suggesting he may be better suited to rule Syria, the government aired his dirty laundry in an attempt to embarrass him.

This approach, however, only hurt the Baath party. At a crowded restaurant in Hama, I witnessed peoples' reactions to Syrian government TV news about Khaddam's misdeeds. The report said that Khaddam had accepted German bribes to bury nuclear waste in the Syrian desert. The people at the restaurant shook their heads, saying, "Khaddam is the regime." For them, the Baath party was confessing that it had endangered the health of the Syrian people in return for money. Khaddam's defection has started a public discussion in Syria on the ills of the regime.

A waiter at a small roadside restaurant near Homs, a conservative Sunni Arab city, testified to this fact. He said that

Syria's intelligence apparatus, the mukhabbarat, has pulled out of the streets. "Accordingly, people feel free to talk about the regime in ways not possible a few years ago," he said, but then hedged his statement. "We know the mukhabbarat has only taken one step back. In other words, if we were to act, they would quickly come back to crush any opposition."

Hence, even if the Syrians are no longer afraid of the Baath party, they are, nevertheless, cautious. With the exception of Kameshli, where people are emboldened by the prospects of an independent Kurdish state next door in Northern Iraq from where they receive support, people avoid challenging the government through political action.

What's more, the Baath regime is preventing liberal intellectuals from channeling popular discontent into organized dissent. Independent thinkers are harassed and intimidated on a daily basis. I was told by a diplomat that outspoken liberals are jailed if they develop a habit of meeting Westerners.

With no access to the government-run media, liberals are unable to reach out to the Syrian people. Accordingly, they are unknown outside of the intellectual and expatriate circles of Damascus.

Take, for example, dissident journalist Kamal Elabawani, who was arrested last year by the government. Currently, Syria-watchers in Washington are circulating a call for a House resolution asking Damascus to release Elabawani. Yet Elabawani is hardly a household name in Syria. Across the country, I asked people if they knew Elabawani's story. No one I spoke with had.

On the other hand, the ashraf (the notable urban families who formed Syria's elite class until the rise of the Baath party in the 1960s) have a great deal of name recognition. There is nostalgia for these old Damascene and Aleppine families; most Syrians see them as a clean alternative to the regime. "We know who has blood on his hands and who does not," said a shopkeeper in Aleppo's old souk. Few ashraf names are in politics, though, at least for now.

With liberals in jail and the ashraf out of politics, Islamists are flourishing, using existing networks, such as mosques and charities, to appeal to people who are fed up with the Baath regime. The Muslim Brotherhood's rhetoric of "clean religious government" is attracting many supporters, particularly in desert towns such as Deir-Zor, and the Sunni heartland.

The Muslim Brotherhood went underground after Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad, crushed the group in 1982; but they are resurfacing today. I met many people in the Sunni heartland and the desert who expressed sympathies for the Brotherhood -- a brave confession, since membership in the group is punishable by death. The Brotherhood has the only country-wide structure to oppose the Baath regime.

Radical Islamists such as the Salafists, Wahhabists, and Hizb-ut Tahrir are also thriving. Though small in numbers for now, these groups, which shun not only the Baath but also the Brotherhood (for "being insufficiently Muslim") seem popular in a number of Sunni towns, such as Idlip. During a morning tour there, I encountered so many telltale signs of Salafist activity that I decided to leave town early.

Supporters of democracy in Syria are between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, the regime is oppressing them; on the other hand, the Islamists are growing because they are able to avoid the government's steel claw from the security of their mosques and charities. So long as the regime refuses to make political room for the liberals and the ashraf, the discontent of the Syrian people will continue to energize the Islamist movements.

"If there were free elections in Syria, the Baath would not get more than 10 percent of the vote," said a cab driver in Aleppo. If things stay as they are, the Baath might as well deliver Syria on a silver tray to the Islamists. "To us, Islamists are lesser of the two evils. Better them than the West," said a senior Baath official in Damascus. This is Washington's dilemma in Syria: preserving the status quo will likely replace one anti-Western regime in Damascus with another.

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