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## Arab Reform Bulletin نشرة الإصلاح العربي

*Arab Reform Bulletin*

November 2006, Volume 4, Issue 9

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### **Syria: Interview with Ayman Abd Al Nour, political analyst and former economic advisor to the Baath Party**

**Please review President Bashar Al Assad's record on political reform so far.**

Bashar Al Assad's regime began with a great outpouring of enthusiasm to implement social, political, administrative, judicial, and economic reforms. Reforms in the economic and legal sectors took off quickly; 1,200 laws and ordinances were issued to organize the reform process, all in his first two years in power.

At the beginning of his term, President Al Assad initiated freedom of expression for all, the effects of which were clearly seen in the statements of intellectuals and writers. There were forces within the regime, however, that took advantage of the immaturity of oppositionists to suggest they raise their demands to include constitutional—or even regime—change and free and fair elections, as opposed to gradual change. This caused the regime to crack down and arrest a number of opposition figures led by two members of parliament, Riad Sayf and Ma'moun Homs, in September 2001. The regime maintained this tough stance for a year and a half until the opposition relaxed its demands, and then it began inviting people to the Baath Party 2005 conference, at which point it resumed preparations for another round of reforms and the opposition got moving again.

But just when the regime was ready to implement reforms that would have effected a qualitative change in Syrian political life, former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated, leading to a freezing of the reform process. With the German investigator [Detlev] Mehlis naming prominent figures in the regime as potentially involved—and threats of an international trial, sanctions, even regime change—the regime closed in on itself. The regime began depending only on its inner circle and giving security top priority, completely halting economic reform.

## **What is the impact of the exiled opposition, particularly the National Salvation Front?**

The regime feels that it is strong and on firm ground. It believes that the international actors that could exert pressure on it, headed by the United States, are tied up with numerous problems because of the Iraq war. Moreover, the regime feels assured that military intervention in Syria to change the regime is impossible because of what has happened in Iraq. The political opposition, whether inside or outside Syria, does not want to ride in on an American tank, with the Iraqi example fresh in their minds. Collaboration between opposition forces inside and outside the country is very weak, and internal opposition forces cannot hold meetings or mass rallies because of the emergency law.

Internal opposition forces have no money for their activities and no access to media to spread their message. Additionally, the opposition has no one with charisma or leadership qualities who might capture the attention of Syrians, particularly young people. Their leaders are often over 65 years old, and still use traditional rhetoric unsuitable for the new generation, while 57 percent of Syrians are under 19! The opposition needs new blood; they need people who speak foreign languages and wear stylish clothes, who go to conferences and mix with the younger generation in the streets, restaurants, and parks.

## **If the Syrian regime feels confident, why has it arrested human rights and civil society activists in recent months?**

The Syrian regime is currently in a defensive posture, feeling besieged from the international community as well as Arab countries. Arab regimes that used to be allies, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, no longer are, and now side with Jordan despite Bashar Al Assad's efforts to revive the Syrian–Egyptian–Saudi axis. The international community, headed by Europe and the United States, has isolated Syria, leaving the regime no recourse except to Iran. Due to the perception of external threats, the regime has closed in on itself—freezing political reforms and undermining opposition-affiliated media and organizations—so it can devote its attention to the outside. [Human rights activists] Michel Kilo and Anwar Al Bunni were arrested due to regime fear, but not fear of change from inside. The regime is not afraid of the opposition, as it understands that even if the opposition were to go to the streets, Syrians would not unite and call for revolution to change the regime. Rather, these arrests among the opposition give the regime the opportunity to catch its breath and concentrate on the radical Islamic forces currently present in Syria, as well as on external threats.

## **President Al Assad has said that his country is open to negotiating with Israel on the Golan Heights. How would resumed Syrian-Israeli negotiations affect prospects for internal political reform?**

President Al Assad and other senior officials have said several times that Syria is ready for peace talks with Israel, and there are forces within Israel who want talks as well. Actually it is the United States that vetoes the idea, in order to prevent Syria from breaking out of its international isolation. Negotiations between Syria and Israel about the Golan, when they start, will greatly strengthen the regime, and also improve its international and local stature. Negotiations would vindicate the regime's defiant stance and build capital in the Syrian street. It would also take the Golan card out of the hands of opposition parties, whether inside or outside Syria.

If negotiations were to resume, we can expect that within a year political parties and platforms would begin to develop. The regime would not have to fear these parties because on every issue—whether the Golan, political reform, economic reform, or social issues—the regime has an agenda with which to preempt the opposition.

**What are Syrian reformists' current priorities?**

Reformists—university professors, Baath Party members, clerics, independents—are pushing for greater freedom, municipal and parliamentary elections, media freedom, and loosening of the grip of the executive on other powers. All of these demands were fully presented at the Baath party conference and led to resolutions, but they never materialized on the ground. Now demands are growing to implement the conference resolutions by putting into place an election law and political parties law, broadening political participation, amending Article 8 of the Constitution [which sets up a single party system], and easing licensing of television stations and the press. Once all of this is done, there will be a complete transformation in Syrian political life.

**What about your own website [[www.all4syria.org](http://www.all4syria.org)], which discussed reform issues?**

My website has been blocked since 2004. After that we tried sending out the information and articles via e-mail. The problem is we can't get ads to pay for the continued existence of the site because businesses are afraid to get into trouble with the regime. We experimented with having electronic subscriptions, but people weren't used to paying money for something intangible. The regime has now resorted to putting out publications and launching websites in which government officials write under pseudonyms. They have discovered that the average Syrian is only online for a maximum of an hour a day, and so they decided to fill that hour with stories that will distract Syrians from their real problems.

*This interview was conducted by Michele Dunne and translated from Arabic by Judd King.*