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Michele Dunne, Editor
Julia Choucair, Assistant Editor

Syria: Reform or Repair?

Sami Moubayed

When the Baath Party held its conference in Damascus on June 6-9, it had no intention to reform Syria. It wanted to repair Syria. This distinction is critical to interpreting what is going on. The Arabic word for either reform or repair is “*islah*,” which means literally “to restore to sound condition after damage or injury.” Reform, on the other hand, means to form again, which in Syria 's case would mean to begin a non-Baathist political era.

Before the conference, speculation was rife about a “jasmine revolution,” in which President Bashar Al Asad would launch a peaceful coup against everyone and everything Baathist, akin to what President Anwar Al Sadat of Egypt did after coming to power in 1970. Among other things, Syrians were hoping for a general amnesty, pardon for political exiles, creation of a multi-party system, retirement of the so-called old guard of the Baath, and abolishing article 8 of the Syrian Constitution, which enshrines the Baath as the ruling party. Instead, the message that emerged from the conference was that the Baath would do what it took to survive, and was here to stay.

Among the major announcements of the conference was that a law authorizing independent political parties would be issued soon, thereby apparently ending the 40-year Baath monopoly. While in itself a positive step, there were two catches. First, there was never any intention of amending the constitutional article on Baath supremacy. Second, the law would prevent the emergence of any Islamic party. The two conditions for licensing are that new parties must be neither Islamic nor based on sub-Syrian nationalism (Kurdish for example). The Baath regime was threatened by the Muslim Brotherhood twice, in 1964 and 1982. Since then, Islamists have been rooted out of public political life in Syria, moving underground. The continued refusal to allow Islamists legitimate political participation will only lead to increased militancy.

The other significant result of the conference was the retirement of nearly all the old-timers in the regime, a move warmly received by the Syrian people. Among those to lose their jobs were former chief of staff Ali Aslan, former chief of military intelligence Hassan Khalil, former director of political security Adnan Bader Hasan, former vice president Abd Al Halim Khaddam, former prime minister Muhammad Mustapha Miro, former defense

minister Mustapha Tlas, former assistant secretary generals of the Baath Party Abdullah Al Ahmar and Sulayman Qaddah, former speaker of parliament Abd Al Qadir Qaddura, and generals Shafiq Al Fayyad and Ibrahim Al Safi. The average age gap between the young president and these retired officials is 30 years. The other major change came one week after the conference when Al Asad replaced Bahjat Sulayman, the powerful director of interior security, with Fouad Nassif, an officer from military intelligence. With the exception of Foreign Minister Farouk Al Shara, the only ones to stay behind in the Baath Party are relatively new faces who emerged under Bashar such as Prime Minister Muhammad Naji Al Otari, Speaker of Parliament Mahmud Al Abrash, Defense Minister Hasan Turkmani, Finance Minister Muhammad Husayn, and Minister of Expatriate Affairs Buthaina Shaaban.

This shake-up puts a lot of responsibility on the shoulders of the Syrian president. It also suggests that perhaps he has been in control all along. Many Syrians have believed that their president truly wanted reform but was prevented from carrying it out by aged politicians who did not want to upset the status quo or share power. Whether that was true or not, President Al Asad now clearly is free to surround himself with reform-minded officials and create the sort of Syria he wishes. The majority of the Syrians are still waiting and willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

The Syrian regime has decided to reform, marginally, and used the party conference — intended to increase Al Asad's popularity and restore disgruntled Syrians' confidence in the party and the state—to create a united front and ward off U.S. pressure. In any case, democratic reform in Syria has not generally been a priority for the United States. With the exception of Secretary of State Rice's June 20 remarks in Cairo, not one senior U.S. official has come out to harangue Syria for its one-party regime. On the contrary, the United States generally criticizes Syria about foreign affairs issues (the resistance in Palestine, Hezbollah operations in south Lebanon, and Iraq) on which there happens to be a consensus between President Al Asad and the Syrian people. Al Asad has now dealt handily with U.S. pressure and shown Syrians and the world that the Baath may indeed repair itself, but it will not step down, and sees no need to “re-form” Syria.

Dr Sami Moubayed is a Syrian political analyst. He is the author of Damascus Between Democracy and Dictatorship 1948-1958 (University Press of America 2000) and Steel & Silk: Men and Women Who Shaped Syria 1900-2000 (Cune Press 2005).