

# Here Comes the Son

CAN BASHAR ASSAD  
BRING PEACE AND  
PROSPERITY TO SYRIA?

By Charmaine Seitz

DAMASCUS, SYRIA

**D**amascus is most striking in its slow pace and dignity. Despite its population of nearly 2 million, there is none of the chaos of Cairo or the sprawl of Amman. Unlike other Arab capitals, this city conveys a sense of permanence and pride.

That atmosphere is crucial in understanding the forces at work in Syria today. When 35-year-old Bashar Assad assumed the presidency this summer after his father's death in June, Syrians held their collective breath. After taking power in a quiet 1970 coup, Hafez Assad had led Syria through 30 years of stability—sometimes ruthlessly, always with slow calculation.

Now his little-known son, trained as an eye doctor in London, must fill those shoes. In spirit, Bashar Assad has been a more modest leader, not encouraging as many of the billboard-sized portraits and fawning children's songs that were a trademark of his father's administration. Practically, his reforms have touched everything from the economy to freedom of expression to Syria's relationship with the outside world.

Arguably the greatest challenge facing Syria today is the alleviation of poverty and the state's introduction to the world economy. Syrians say they support the slow moves toward economic privatization and government deregulation, but point to the dire straits of the ex-Soviet bloc as reason to go slowly. The country's per capita annual income is currently less than \$1,000, as compared with Israel's \$17,500. An estimated unemployment rate of 25 percent remains cloaked in government overhiring. The public sector, including 400,000 soldiers and 200,000 in internal security, is the

largest employer, with 40 percent of the national budget going to those two sectors alone.

For the average Syrian, the lack of economic growth stalls the normal flow of Arab life. Even middle-class employees who take home \$100 a month cannot afford to rent an apartment in Damascus. Land is expensive and scarce, and as such, young people put off getting married in hopes that windfall will bring them the means to provide a comfortable life.

Under Bashar Assad, however, moves to free up the economy, as well as rein in government corruption, seem to have begun in earnest. A new law allows Syrians who have studied abroad and then stayed outside the country to avoid mandatory conscription to return home by paying a fee of several thousand dollars. The move is intended to bring Syrian professionals home to invest the wealth they have earned abroad.



On the streets of Damascus.

JOSEPH BARRAK/AFP

Other legislation has opened the door to auto imports that have been restricted since the '60s—provided, of course, that buyers pay a steep import tax. And the government is also loosening its hold on information capital. Satellite hook-ups have been available for five years, making state television obsolete. Assad has made an early commitment to adding nearly 200,000 Internet lines. In September, home lines became available to those with the proper government contacts, and while some e-mail portals are blocked by the state, Internet cafés provide complete access to those who Yahoo!

These economic reforms have come hand in hand with a shifting political climate. Not only were 99 intellectuals able to issue a statement in Damascus earlier this year calling on the government to release its estimated 1,500 political prisoners, but in mid-November Assad actually freed 600 of those jailed. Additional amnesty was given on November 22 to thousands of convicted deserters and smugglers.

While these bold strokes may appear to be those of a son eclipsing his father, it is clear that Bashar is still growing into his pivotal role. Surrounded by his father's longtime advisers, the younger Assad continues to move cautiously and with their council. He knows that the greatest challenges are yet to come—from outside and perhaps from home.

Syrians take very seriously the social contract they have with the state. "We have security," says one young man (who like most Syrians asked that his name not be published). "As long as you stay away from politics, no one will bother you."

He and others tout the safety of their communities and the comfortable mixing of classes and religious backgrounds as evidence of Syria's social freedom. Indeed, unlike many places in the Arab world, both the clearly religious and the chic secular crowd frequent the same Damascus cafés. But that social contract is a product of a history of repression. In the early '80s, the government wiped out its religious opposition, killing thousands in the city of Hama and then bulldozing over the remains of the battle as if it had never happened.

Since "the events," as Syrians refer to that period, all mosques (with the exception of the great Ommayyid mosque in the heart of Damascus) have been closed during non-prayer times to prevent illegal meetings. "Here, if you go to the mosque two or three times in a row, your name is recorded with the secret police," says one man who was a teen-ager at the time of Hama. "When I pray, I pray at home."

Even though this devotion is practiced privately in the secular state, this man says that Syrians are more religious than they were 15 years ago. "The secret police and all that has let up a lot," he explains. "People know not to make problems."

## Preparing for War?

As part of its slow internal transition, Syria repeatedly has signaled that it is ready and willing to negotiate the terms of a peace treaty with Israel. In June, Syrian defense minister Mustafa Tlass said publicly that efforts were already underway with Washington on restarting bilateral peace talks that had foundered under the late Syrian President Hafez Assad. Then the Israeli media was full of accolades for Syria's new leader, Bashar Assad, who it saw as a fresh face with exciting ideas.

Now Israeli descriptions of Bashar Assad are much less flattering. The Israeli-Syrian front "is liable to flare up at any moment because Bashar Assad is driving down a slope in a car that has lost its brakes," wrote Amir Oren on November 10 in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*.

After the July breakdown of Palestinian-Israeli talks at Camp David, Syria turned down new Israeli peace proposals, says Azmi Bishara, an Arab member of the Israeli Knesset. "Syria did not agree to play that game," he says, "and this is one of the most important reasons for the Israeli rage against Syria."

Israeli intelligence and defense assessments seem to be preparing for war. It is useful here to remember what happened in 1967, with Israel's creeping occupation of demilitarized zones along the Syrian border. Knowing that it could not win a full war with Israel, and not really believing that Israel would strike back, Syria allowed Palestinian guerrillas to fight as its proxy in those zones. Eventually, Israel did strike, drawing Egypt and Syria into a battle that cost them land, defeated and neutralized powerful Egyptian leader Jamal Abdul Nasser, and eventually paved the way for peace with both Egypt and Jordan.

The land Israel occupied in 1967 became its bargaining chip for regional survival. Now, as Israel fights daily battles in the West Bank and Gaza, it is again watching those northern borders. The Lebanese guerrilla group Hezbollah continues to launch attacks on Israeli targets, and Syria's hold on Lebanon is such that Israel blames it for those attacks.

Oren's article argues that Israeli and U.S. defense officials "think Bashar Assad is preparing to fire missiles as a first resort—in

retaliation for an Israeli attack on Syrian assets in Lebanon, which could come in response to another terrorist action by Hezbollah." The logic is backward but clear: Israel may move to attack Syria in Lebanon, thus drawing a Syrian response.

What would Israel gain by drawing Syria into war? Bishara says that Israel wants to frighten Syria toward a peace deal and away from its renewed relationship with Iraq. "One of the reasons for Israel's anger is the possibility of Syrian strategic thinking about the future of Iran and Iraq and Syria," he says. "Israel thinks this is a real threat, unlike the Palestinian issue."

Right now, Assad is showing himself to be moderate on all issues—except Israel. His overtures of friendship throughout the region are proving key to concerted Arab steps against Israel. "Syria is not interested in war at all," Bishara says. "Syria is planning its economy for the next 10 years. But it is not going to give up its principal national positions just to satisfy Israel or the United States for the sake of a flourishing economy."

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But one person's "problem" is another's struggle—and here in the Middle East, renewed religious fervor almost always seeks political expression. Despite the participation of independents in the political process, the Baath party remains the lone Syrian state party. Only two years ago, a deadly bomb—believed by some to have been planted by the Muslim Brotherhood—exploded next to the downtown Damascus tourism ministry. Pressures toward integration with the West—and subsequent normalization of relations with

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Israel—are a *cause célèbre* for Islamist movements that oppose Western and capitalist hegemony.

The Syrian government—unlike Jordan and Egypt—has managed to deflect possible internal criticism by remaining stalwart in its objectives for regional peace. For one, Syria is host to 450,000 Palestinian refugees. But unlike other Arab states, the Syrian government has provided the refugees with the rights and means to move in society, to work and buy land, thus preventing the formation of a disenfranchised, radicalized minority.

In peace talks, Syria has been flexible on timetables and details, but refused to budge in its demand that Israel completely withdraw from the Golan Heights it has occupied since the 1967 Six Day War. Only then, Syria says, will it offer peace and normalization. These positions have protected Damascus from the criticism aimed at Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinians that peace was given too quickly, with few Arab gains. Now that the Palestinians and Israelis again are in open conflict, calls for Arab governments to act have amplified and Syria can claim its policies were correct.

Still, even Damascus is not immune to the current radicalization of the Arab street. In the first week of renewed Palestinian-Israeli clashes, demonstrations in Damascus refugee camps were broken up violently by Syrian police. At the first full Arab summit since the Gulf War, Assad spoke quietly but pointedly of cutting ties with Israel—but he notably did not call for war (see "Preparing for War?" page 26).

Assad is in a difficult position. One of his policy initiatives has been to smooth over a previously uneasy history with Jordan and Egypt. Neither of these states would look well upon a Syrian push for more serious measures that could inflame their constituencies at home. But Syria also backs the Lebanese group Hezbollah. While Damascus says officially that Hezbollah acts independently, the presence of some 30,000 Syrian troops on Lebanese soil means that the group could not operate without Assad's blessing.

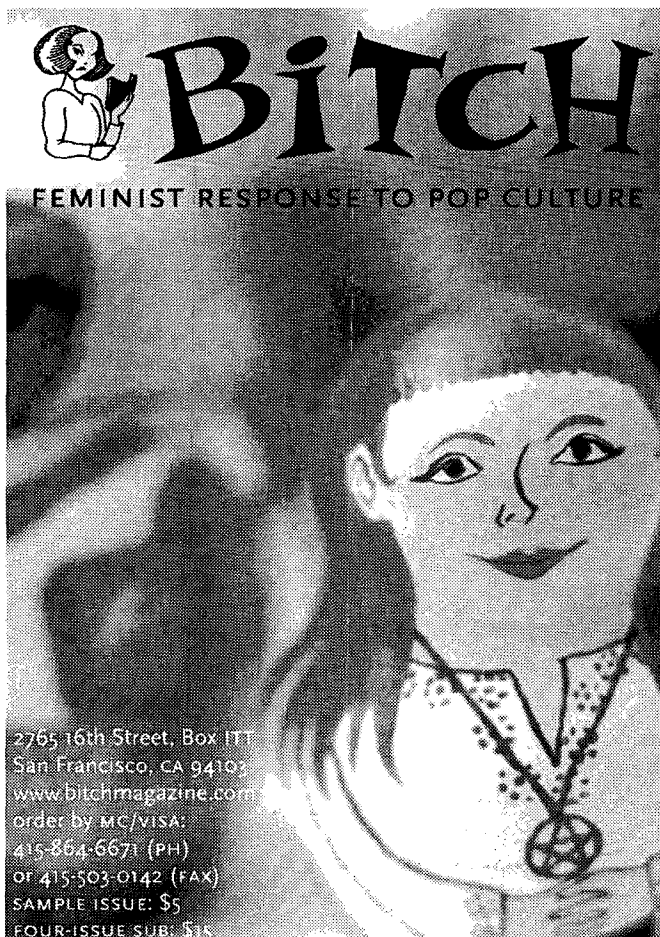
While Israel did unilaterally withdraw its army from Southern Lebanon last year, a bone of contention remains. Israel refuses to pull back from the Shabaa Farms area (what Israel calls Har Dov), saying that this was Syrian land and hence, not up for discussion until peace is made with

Damascus. But in a recent letter to the United Nations, Syria submitted that the land was Lebanese. As such, Hezbollah has continued to stage attacks there, the most recent one on November 26 that killed an Israeli officer. As promised, Israel responded, striking Lebanese targets from the air. Hezbollah also holds three Israeli soldiers and one alleged intelligence operative as bargaining chips for the release of its own men in Israeli jails.

Diplomatic efforts are being made to secure the return of the soldiers. Until then, Damascus is caught in the middle. "We hold Syria—as well as Lebanon—responsible for the quick resolution [of this issue]," Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said when the soldiers were first taken. "We maintain the right to respond with the time and means and force we find necessary."

All of these challenges have come hard and fast upon Bashar Assad. At least where Israel is concerned, he seems cautious in plotting his course. "Peace is in [Syria's] interest," says a Palestinian official in Damascus, "but we will not do it at their subjugation, as if we were lesser. It will take time, but it will come." ■

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# Not Quite Bowled Over

By David Moberg

Even if the business of America is business, it takes more than money to make a society tick. Capitalism requires both financial and physical capital (that is, money and machinery). But a dynamic capitalism, it is commonly

## **Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community**

By Robert Putnam  
Simon & Schuster  
541 pages, \$26

## **Better Together**

The Report of the Saguaro Seminar:  
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argued, also needs new ideas, or intellectual capital, and workers' skills, or human capital. In his recent book—the elaboration of much-debated earlier articles—and in *Better Together*, a new report by the Saguaro Seminar at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, political scientist Robert Putnam makes the case that societies also need “social capital,” and that the United States has suffered from a decline in social capital over roughly the past four decades.

Reviving a term used off and on over the past century, Putnam defines social capital as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” It’s “civic virtue” that is “embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations.” Social capital represents the idea of “community” adapted to a large-scale capitalist society. Not surprisingly, social capital is more abundant in small communities than in big cities, but networks that constitute social capital develop in churches, unions, PTAs, neighborhood clubs, fraternal organizations and even bowling leagues (which have declined in the United States, even as “bowling alone”—or as a pick-up group—has increased).

It’s an appealing and useful concept, a metaphorical challenge to conventional market mania in a business-oriented culture that has trouble taking anything other than capital seriously. But its fuzziness limits its value. For example, at various points Putnam identifies social capital as the equivalent of *fraternité* in the French revolutionary triad with *liberté* and *égalité*, or the application of the “golden rule,” or “generalized reciprocity” (where we do things without the expectation of immediate payback), or the idea of solidarity, or Tocqueville’s “self-interest rightly understood.”

These different social acts and norms are important, but they’re not exactly equivalent. Are the social connections that bind a longstanding reading group or bridge club together the same as the solidarity of a group of workers on strike, the communality of religious belief, the warmth of family dinners together, or even the utilitarian bonding of a neighborhood organization or environmental group?

Putnam makes some distinctions: He argues that the most

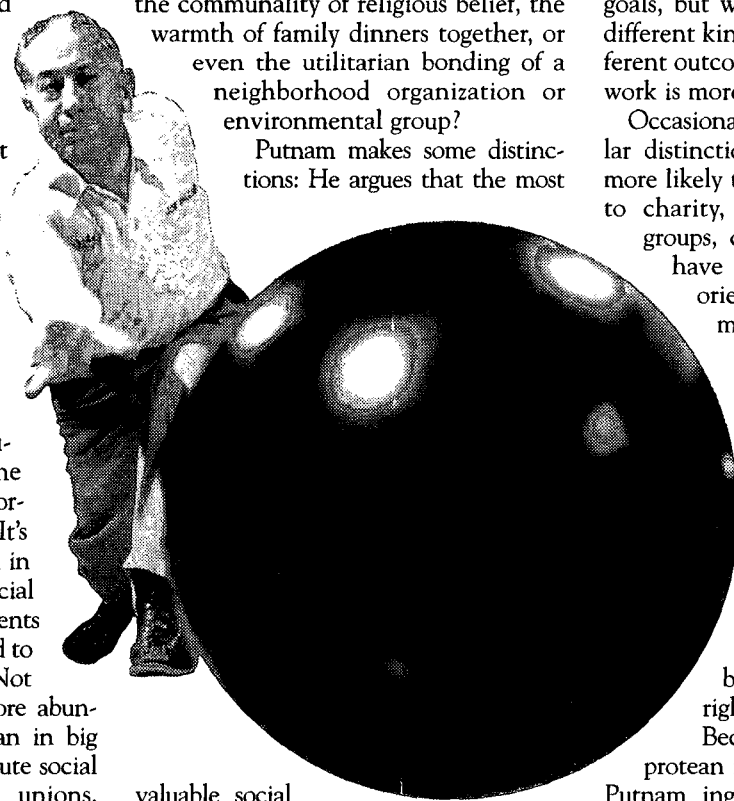
that some groups—like the Ku Klux Klan—don’t fit that correlation neatly. Indeed, he argues that there are two distinct types of social capital—bonding, which links like individuals with each other, and bridging, which links different groups. The two can be at odds.

On the whole, however, Putnam argues that societies are better off in all ways if they have more social capital, whatever the type: “Social capital makes us smarter, healthier, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy.” He amasses an intriguing body of supportive research, showing how declining social participation is linked to declining health and satisfaction with life as well as economic growth.

But what if we looked at this activity not as capital, metaphorically building on the business model, but as work? The same kind of case could be made, for example, that the work of self-organization yields many benefits for society, even beyond its immediate goals, but we might distinguish among different kinds of work as producing different outcomes. We might decide some work is more important or effective.

Occasionally Putnam does make similar distinctions. “Joiners” are 10 times more likely to contribute time or money to charity, for example, but secular groups, compared to religious ones, have a bigger, more community-oriented effect. The “capital” metaphor can interfere with critical thinking about how different social bonds and activities affect the way people make their society. Partly because he lumps most social connections together, Putnam appeals to both conservative and progressive partisans of community, while often generating skepticism from both leftist libertarians and rightist free-marketeers.

Because social capital is such a protean notion, it’s hard to measure. Putnam ingeniously mines archives of data on everything from voting behavior to consumer preferences and comes up with a vast array of indicators. Together they strongly suggest that Americans were increasingly involved in a wide vari-



valuable social capital involves long-term, direct personal relationships. While showing that societies with higher social capital generally tend to be more tolerant and egalitarian, he acknowledges