



## Syriana, or The Godfather, Part IV

Few countries are at once so officially frigid and yet so compulsively fascinating as Syria. Partly to avoid the many hurdles of applying for a visa, my wife and I joined a British travel group to reclusive Syria last October. Our party of seven was supposed to receive visas on the spot at Akça, an overland border crossing from Turkey. Yet Turkish immigration officers seemed unable to fathom why any British or American traveler might sanely wish to go to Syria, whose border officials proved equally suspicious. Eventually, in a scene worthy of a vintage film, we were allowed to lug our bags over railroad tracks, dated 1912–14, into sovereign Syria, where the baffled driver of our minivan had been waiting for hours.

We did not complain. To spend a fortnight in Syria is to span the millennia from the early Bronze Age, sharing routes once traveled by Abraham, continuing through the glory years of the Silk Road, followed by the din of the Crusades, before lurching incongruously into Latakia, the pampered equivalent of Iraq's Tikrit for Syria's ruling Baath Party. The landscape is everywhere strewn with surprises. On a day trip from Aleppo, which together with Damascus lays claim to being the world's oldest continuously inhabited city, we proceeded to the Byzantine basilica honoring St. Simeon Stylites, who dwelled for decades atop a pillar. We then navigated among hundreds of enigmatic Dead Cities, each a barren shell abandoned by early Christians, the result conjecturally of climate change, deforestation, or earthquakes. On returning to Aleppo, we paused in the musty taproom of the Baron Hotel, still much as it was when T. E. Lawrence left an unpaid chit for champagne, or when his royal ally Prince Feisal spoke from the hotel balcony in 1920 to proclaim Syria's independence (prematurely, to be sure, since Feisal was peremptorily deposed by the French, compelling his British patrons to create a new throne in Iraq).

Above all there is Aleppo's souk, the oldest and grandest bazaar in the Islamic world. It is a labyrinth of underground tunnels and cobbled streets covering 20 square miles, its byways plied by honking motorbikes and donkeys beaten by small boys. Westerners are greeted by the song of the souk: "Where are you from?" "Here's a gift for your mother-in-law." "Monsieur, why not a fez?" But the ambience is wholly ecumenical. We spotted a whole street of boutiques featuring the severe ankle-length black coats meant to lure pious shoppers from Iran. Not far away were bars of olive soap piled in the shape of a crenellated fortress, and strings of walnuts interspersed with starfish near a shop redolent of the lemony scents of Araby, mixed to order and sold in clay vases whose shapes have not changed for a thousand years.

Jonathan Raban, a Briton who lives in Seattle, reminds us in *My Holy War* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006) that Mohamed Atta of 9/11 infamy wrote his thesis for a Hamburg technical college while living near this souk. And it was in Aleppo, while contemplating the city's perceived corruption by Westernized development, typified by the aggressive vulgarity of the towering Chahba Cham Palace, that Atta came to abominate American-style skyscrapers, the fateful first step to the World Trade Center.

Leaving Aleppo two days later, we encountered the Bronze Age ruins of Ebla, whose astonished Italian excavators in the 1970s came upon an archive of 17,000 tablets that may

(or may not; it is in dispute) include the actual names of Old Testament cities like Sodom. The wedge-shaped letters in Ebla's tablets derived, in turn, from the oldest known alphabet, found not far away at Ugarit, believed to be the world's earliest international port, its wealth confirmed by French archaeologists, who bared its elaborate sewage system, fine dwellings, and imposing tombs. From these recently unearthed sites, we proceeded to Krak des Chevaliers, whose extant walls, gates, stables, and even latrines, exhaust superlatives. Krak was the martial anchor of the Crusader kingdoms, and its fall to a Mameluke sultan in 1271 signaled the eventual Muslim victory over Christian invaders.

At which point, Syria's contemporary drama burst into our itinerary. On October 12, the bloodied corpse of Interior Minister Ghazi Kenaan, formerly Syria's proconsul in Lebanon, was found sprawling in his Damascus office. According to Syrian authorities, the disconsolate minister had ended his life with his own Smith and Wesson revolver. Two days later, as we headed to Latakia, while stopping for roadside coffee we watched as a phalanx of generals and cabinet ministers, most wearing military berets and dark glasses, converged at the same wayside to greet and embrace each other en route to Kenaan's funeral. An astute onlooker offered his theory: "It was very probably a Roman suicide. They needed to toss a bone to the United Nations team investigating the murder of Rafik Hariri [formerly Lebanon's long-serving prime minister, slain for seeking an end to Syria's 30-year occupation of his country]. They probably told Kenaan that if he killed himself, his family would be taken care of and he would be honored with a state funeral. Otherwise his fate might be more unpleasant." And who, we wondered, were "they"? On arriving in Damascus two days later, we heard a plausible theory.

### *The Godfather State*

Driving through Syria was to this writer reminiscent of traveling in Eastern Europe during Cold War days. Foreign newspapers and books are hardly to be seen, and the English-language *Syrian Times* grovels to the ruling Baathist elite with an ardor that would have embarrassed even Leonid Brezhnev (the paper solved the problem of Kenaan's putative suicide by initially ignoring the event). It had been hoped that a more liberal era would commence in June 2000 when the presidency passed from Syria's perennial tyrant, Hafez al-Assad, to his Western-oriented son Bashar. At first, Bashar did indeed release political prisoners, permit a measure of free speech, encourage some privatization, and allow qualified access to the Internet. But the Syrian spring passed all too quickly; the reforms foundered and the curtains once again closed—stimulating, as in the old Soviet bloc, a cottage industry of irreverent jokes, pungent gossip, and paranoid conspiracy theories. So what happened?

"To understand Syria," confided a well-placed informant, "keep in mind the Godfather films. You will recall that the old don's chosen heir was Sonny, while his younger brother Michael was expected to lead a normal civilian career. But when Sonny was killed in a shootout, the crown passed to Michael, who now had to prove his virility. It was like that here. In 1994, Hafez's favorite son and anointed heir, Basil, died in a high-speed car accident, requiring his younger brother Bashar to abandon his medical career in Britain. He dutifully came home, attended the military academy, earning the highest possible grades—he doubtless dazzled his examiners—and emerged as a colonel. When the old don died, Syria's constitution was instantly changed to permit Bashar's legal succession at age 34. Once in power, as expected, the new godfather awarded key jobs to his family and tribe—tellingly, after the Hariri killing, Bashar named his brother-in-law, Gen. Asaf Shawkwat, as new head of military intelligence. And need I remind you that in Arabic 'assad' means lion, curiously like Corleone?"

Doctrinally, the Assads are Alawites, an esoteric offshoot of the Shia whose adherents constitute around 12 percent of Syria's 18 million inhabitants. Under the Assads, the Alawites have been as firmly in the saddle as their Iraqi counterpart, the Tikrit-based Sunni minority, was under Saddam Hussein. The Alawites live mostly in Latakia, a northern region notable for its ports, seaside resorts, fine highways, and sheltering mountains. Everywhere in public places a visitor sees iconic pictures of the hometown dynasty. In the otherwise plushly Westernized lobby of the Côte d'Azur Cham Palace Hotel which looks out on a spotless Latakia beach, guests are greeted with a life-size portrait of Hafez Assad presiding benignly over the martyred Basil on his right, and the devoted Bashar on his left. In an oft-heard local joke, it is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Yet however stifling the cost, the Assads have imposed a rough-and-ready stability on an exotic patchwork of subcultures. Although less violent and aggressive than Saddam Hussein, the elder Assad also preferred fear to affection. He let blood flow when challenged. In 1982, the British correspondent Robert Fisk was present in the ancient city of Hama when Syria's special forces under the command of Hafez's brother, Rifaat, put down a Muslim Brotherhood uprising. As Fisk recalls in *The Great War for Civilisation* (New York: Knopf, 2005), "I stood by the river Orontes, as Syrian battle-tanks shelled the ancient city; I saw the wounded, covered in blood, lying beside their armoured vehicles, the starving civilians scavenging for old bread. Up to 20,000, it was said, died in the underground tunnels and detonated buildings. The real figure may have been nearer 10,000, but most of the old city was destroyed." Nowadays Hama, otherwise known for its still surviving, groaning waterwheels, remains the reputed home base of Syria's Islamic militants.

Throughout, the old lion was peacekeeper rather than peacemaker. Domestically, he offered protection, in exchange for submission, to a steamy pot of unassimilated subcultures—comprising not just Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds, Turkmen, Druze, Alawites, and Ismailis (the latter being ancient patrons of the lethal Assassins, another Syrian contribution to our lexicon), but as well a spectrum of Christian faiths: Orthodox Armenians and Greeks, Roman and Maronite Catholics, and various Protestant denominations, not forgetting an Aramaic-speaking sect in Maaloula, a hilltop town near Damascus, where in a candlelit chapel we heard a young monk recite the Lord's Prayer in what is said to be the language of Jesus.

Internationally, Hafez Assad kept a low profile, pragmatically enticing Soviet bloc arms during the Cold War but veering Westward after the Communist collapse, even joining the U.S.-led coalition that reversed Saddam Hussein's seizure of Kuwait. After 9/11, Syria shared intelligence on Islamic extremists with Washington, while keeping fences mended with Iran's ayatollahs by sheltering Hizbollah's anti-Israeli guerrillas. However, on the pivotal and most difficult matter—relations with Israel—the old lion proved a timid tease. For two decades, Washington's mighty wooed him, beginning with Henry Kissinger and ending with Madeleine Albright, but Assad could not bring himself to reach a compromise settlement with Israel. Playing the anti-Zionist card and keeping alive a unifying sense of victimhood was seemingly essential to the legitimacy of a godfather state.

Even taking a cursory glance at Syria's modern history helps explain why.

### *The Matrix of History*

A wise friend once astutely warned about false analogies, citing the Fall of Man as an example, i.e., the serpent promised that Eve and Adam would be "as" a god if they tasted the apple. In the Middle East, during the critical years 1914–20, both Britain and France were seduced by two misleading analogies. Having acquired mastery of much of Asia and Africa, they assumed that the provinces of the decaying Ottoman Empire might also be carved up

and governed as readily. Moreover, perceiving the beginnings of Arab nationalism, they saw it as their validating mission to nurture the creation of new nations, giving Christian Europeans a mandate to establish frontiers, teach the arts of governance, and win the hearts of their new and grateful subjects. But as an American missionary, the Reverend John Van Ess, presciently cautioned Gertrude Bell, an architect of a unified Iraq: “You are flying in the face of four millennium of history if you try to draw a line around Iraq and call it a political entity! Assyria always looked to the west and east and north, and Babylon to the south. They have never been an integrated unit. You have got to take time to get them integrated; it must be done gradually. They have no conception of nationhood yet” (quoted in H. V. F. Winstone, *Gertrude Bell* [London: Bazan, 2004], p. 336).

Similarly, the French in occupying Syria and Lebanon carried with them a surgical kit for shaping two new states. Their triumphant outlook was expressed by Gen. Henri Gouraud, France’s commander and later high commissioner in the Levant, when he entered Damascus in July 1920. Pausing at the tomb of Saladin in the Grand Mosque, the general kicked it and spoke, so he thought, for the ages: “Awake Saladin, we have returned! My presence here consecrates the victory of the Cross over the Crescent.” The French then applied their surgical tools. As Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau had promised to the British, the oil-favored Mosul was stripped from Syria and awarded to Iraq, while other territories went to British-ruled Palestine and Transjordan. Simultaneously, the old Ottoman province of Lebanon was enlarged at Syria’s expense to create a Greater Lebanon, thereby ensuring that the dominant Maronite Christians would over time become a minority, unwittingly triggering a calamitous civil war. In a final cut, the coastal area north of Aleppo, including the site of ancient Antioch, was ceded to Turkey. By the time the French withdrew formally from Syria in 1946, the republic comprised some 185,000 square kilometers, compared with the 300,000 square kilometers occupied by the former Ottoman province. To this day, even Syria’s tourist maps show lost lands within “temporary boundaries.”

Nevertheless, in a self-delusory trance, the French saw their occupation of the Levant as a success, as measured by improved rail networks, modernized ports, newly built schools and factories, and other indices of presumed progress. Hence the shock in 1925 when a revolt raged through Syria and Lebanon, precipitating the bombardment of the ancient city of Damascus. “When the smoke lifted,” writes the Harvard historian Joyce Laverly Miller, in a detailed analysis, “much of Damascus was in ruins; the reported loss of life and property appalled world opinion and galvanized Arab dissidents. A torrent of violent and emotional criticism was unleashed. In some quarters, it was even hinted that the League of Nations would remove [its] mandate from French control.” Yet within a year, the insurgency ebbed, and the world’s attention moved on.

According to Miller, writing in the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (vol. 8, 1977, pp. 545–63), the roots of the revolt lay in the imposition of an artificial nation-state on Syria’s divided groups with their long tradition of self-governance in local affairs under the Ottomans. In her words: “The early French administrators in Syria, in their efforts to develop and modernize a Syrian nation were of necessity inflaming groups which had always mistrusted one another within the Ottoman Empire and had coexisted only because ‘the nation,’ the empire, was weak. In short, the revolution of 1925 was not the nationalist revolt of a united people against a French oppressor but a power struggle among and within divisive groups in an artificial state who could agree on only one thing: the French must go.” Tellingly, the revolt had its origins in a Druze state of 50,000 inhabitants whose leaders were outraged by a French administrator’s efforts to inculcate the blessings of modernism, including a museum that displayed pagan (and nude) classical statuary.

Doubtless much has changed in Syria and Iraq since the 1920s. But one is struck by the persistent tunnel vision among those who presume to know what is best for foreigners whose language they cannot speak and whose customs they cannot comprehend. In Aleppo, we asked a Syrian Christian of Greek origin what he thought about the U.S. intervention in Iraq. “Very frankly,” he responded, “we look across the border with alarm and horror. When we hear that some officials in Washington would like to liberate people like me, my alarm turns to panic. Please tell Mr. Bush that I don’t want his military help, that whatever our problems with Damascus—and we have plenty—we have to find our own way, in our own time.” Cautionary words, surely, from a Syrian whose life and fortune is at risk should Washington attempt a more muscular policy to bring down an isolated regime already stumbling in its own tangled traps.

As cautionary was our final trip from Damascus to ancient Palmyra, with a midway stop at the Bagdad Café, not far from the Iraqi border, its Disneyfied attractions, including a chuck-wagon, viewable on the Internet ([www.bagdadcafesyria.tk](http://www.bagdadcafesyria.tk)). How curious then to come upon the stunning immensity of Palmyra, a classical prototype of Forest Lawn, Las Vegas, the Merchandise Mart, and Yankee Stadium. Located at a strategic desert crossroad, vied over by a dozen ancient empires, the home of the Middle East’s greatest warrior queen (Zenobia), and devoted to its own indigenous pantheon, Palmyra could not be visited without an armed escort until the 1930s. Its antiquities were unprotected and strip-mined even in the 1970s, yet the site is so inexhaustible that new tombs and treasures continually turn up. Some of Palmyra’s best art is fortunately preserved in the National Museum in Damascus (where one can also see the Dura Europos synagogue, found by British troops in the 1930s and uniquely decorated by frescoes depicting Old Testament characters).

And there it is: Syria’s prodigious witness to the fragility of empire, its awesome testament to human ingenuity and ferocity, and its obsession with tombs, from its Bronze Age cities to the baroque Assad family vault in Latakia. In the present squeeze on this Baathist tyranny, Washington is certainly right to hold its godfathers to account for the killings of Syria’s principal critics in Lebanon, and to press for Security Council sanctions if necessary. But to threaten or use force would seem the surest way of uniting a fragmented country against its would-be Western saviors. ●

—Karl E. Meyer