

MERIA

WHY SYRIA MATTERS

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*The emergence of the HISH alliance (Hizballah, Iran, Syria, Hamas) has changed the direction of the Middle East in several respects. This group has formulated a new ideology merging Arab nationalism and Islamism, which can be called "National Islamism." It has sought hegemony in Lebanon and Iraq as well as an intensified struggle against the United States and Israel. What is especially interesting is how its strategy, tactics, and world-view correspond so thoroughly with the dominant—and failed—equivalents during the 1950s-1980s period. Syria has become the most important Arab state due to its involvement in these matters.***

"It is my pleasure to meet with you in the new Middle East," said Syrian President Bashar al-Asad in a speech to the Syrian Journalists Union on August 15, 2006.¹ Yet Bashar's new Middle East is neither the one hoped for by many since Saddam Hussein's 1991 defeat in Kuwait, nor is it actually new at all. Actually, it is a reversion, often in remarkable detail, to the Middle East of the 1950s through the 1980s. The Arab world, now accompanied by Iran, is re-embracing an era that was an unmitigated disaster for itself and is extolling the ideas and strategies that led it repeatedly to catastrophes.

No Arab state had more to do with this important and tragic turnabout than does Syria. It was the main architect and beneficiary of this change. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other Arab states wanted quiet; Iraq needed peace to rebuild itself. Even Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi, pressed by sanctions and scared by his Iraqi counterpart Saddam's fate, was on his best behavior. Only Syria remained as a source of instability and radicalism.

Thus, a small and not particularly wealthy country proved the fulcrum on which the Middle East shifted and which, in turn, shook the globe. Is Syrian President Bashar al-Asad a fool or a genius? That cannot be determined directly. What can be

said is that his policy is beneficial to him, simultaneously brilliant and disastrous for Syria, and just plain disastrous for many others.

To understand Syria's special feature, it is best to heed the all-important insight of a Lebanese-American scholar, Fouad Ajami: "Syria's main asset, in contrast to Egypt's preeminence and Saudi wealth, is its capacity for mischief."² Mischief is in the service of regime maintenance, the all-encompassing cause and goal of the Syrian government's behavior. Demagoguery, not the delivery of material benefits, is the basis of its power.

Why have those who have governed Syria, under some very different regimes, followed such a pattern over a half-century? Precisely because the country is a weak one in many respects. Aside from lacking Egypt's power and Saudi Arabia's money, it also lacks internal coherence due to its diverse population and minority-dominated regime. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein used repression, ideology, and foreign adventures to hold together a system dominated by Sunni Arab Muslims who were only one-fifth of the population. In Syria, an Alawite regime rules based on a community that is only half as large proportionately.

To survive, then, the regime needs

transcendent slogans that make this problem disappear. Arabism and, in more recent years, Islamism, are its solution. In this light, Syria is ruled not by a rather inept, corrupt dictatorship, but by the leaders of all Arabs and the champions of all Muslims. These battle cries are very effectively used to justify oppression at home and aggression abroad. No other country in the world throws around the word “imperialism” more in describing foreign adversaries, and yet no other state on the globe follows a more classical imperialist policy.

In broad terms, this approach is followed by most, if not all, Arab governments, but Syria offers the purest example of the system. As for the consequences, two basic principles are useful to keep in mind:

First, the worse Syria behaves, the better its regime does. Syrian leaders do not accept the Western view that pragmatism, moderation, compromise, an open economy, and peace are always better. When Syria acts radical (up to a point of course), it maximizes its main asset—causing trouble—rather than its weakness in terms of a bargaining position. As a dictatorship, tight control and popularity achieved through demagoguery work better.

Second, success for the regime and state means disaster for the people, society, and economy. The regime prospers by keeping Syrians believing that the battle against America and Israel, not freedom and prosperity, should be their top priority. The state’s control over the economy means lower living standards for most, while simultaneously preserving a rich ruling elite with large amounts of money to give to its supporters. Imprisoning or intimidating liberal critics means domestic stability, but without human rights.

This pattern might be called one of brilliantly successful disasters. The policy

works in the sense that the regime survives and the public perceives it as successful. Objectively, however, the society and economy are damaged, freedom is restricted, and resources are wasted. This pattern is the bane of the Arab world while also being the basis of its ideologies and governance.

Syria, then, is both the most revealing test case for the failure of change in Middle East politics and the key actor—though there is plenty of blame to go around—in making things go so wrong for the Arab world. If Damascus had moved from the radical to the moderate camp, it would have decisively shifted the balance, making a breakthrough toward a more peaceful and progressing Middle East. Syria’s participation in the Gulf war coalition of 1991, readiness to negotiate with Israel, severe economic and social stagnation, and strategic vulnerability—all topped off by the coming to power of a new generation of leadership—provoked expectations that it would undergo dramatic change.

Like so many of the Arab regimes’ policies during the second half of the twentieth century, Syria’s strategy was both brilliant and useless. The regime survived, its foreign maneuvers worked well much of the time, and Syrian control over Lebanon was a money-maker. However, what did all of this avail Syria compared to what an emphasis on peace and development might have achieved?

It was a Western idea that desperation at their country’s difficult strategic and economic plight would make Hafiz al-Asad (as well as Saddam, Arafat, and other Arab or Iranian leaders) move toward concessions and moderation. Yet the rulers themselves reasoned in the exact opposite way: Faced with pressure to change, they became more demanding and intransigent.

Often, at least up to a point, this strategy

worked as the West offered more concessions in an attempt to encourage the expected reforms, ensure commerce, buy peace, and buy off terrorism. Of course, such actions are carried out in the context of Western interests but they also signal the desire to define those interests as enlightened ones. The purpose is to uproot the issues causing conflict, build understanding and confidence, and prove their good intentions.

Yet to the regimes this behavior seemed not the result of generosity or proffered friendship, but rather from Western fear of their power and an imperialist desire to control the Arabs and Muslims. Frequently, too, it is seen as a tribute to their superior tactics, which fool or outmaneuver their adversaries. This perception encouraged continued intransigence in hope of reaping still more benefits. Eventually, this process destroyed any possibility of moderation, though not always Western illusions.

Here are two examples of such thinking. In 1986, at a moment of great weakness for Syria and the Arabs, Hafiz told the British ambassador, "If I were prime minister of Israel with its present military superiority and the support of the world's number one power, I would not make a single concession."³

Yet at that time and thereafter, the United States was working hard to bring the PLO into a negotiated agreement that would make it head of a state. A few years later, when in even a stronger position, Israel negotiated with the PLO and made massive concessions, because it wanted peace. The intention was to solve the conflict by finding some mutually acceptable compromise solution. On the other side, however, the interpretation was either that it was a trick that should be rejected or a sign of weakness that should be exploited.

Precisely 20 years after his father's remark, Bashar made his most important speech to date at the journalists' conference, August 15, 2006. Only power and violence, he argued, forced the other side to make concessions, negotiate, or even pay attention to the issue. Speaking about the international reaction just after the Israel-Lebanon war he said, "The world does not care about our interests, feelings and rights except when we are powerful. Otherwise, they would not do anything."⁴

The remarks by Hafiz and Bashar tell a great deal. In the absence of pressure, their regime would become bolder in seeking its goals. When fearful, it retreats to consolidate and survive. Consequently, the only way to get Syria to be moderate in behavior was credible pressure to convince it—at least temporarily—that trouble-making did not pay. This model of Syria retreating into relative moderation under pressure was most clearly visible when a weak Syria was pressed into a peace process with Israel in the 1990s; by Turkey in forcing Syria to stop sponsoring terrorism against itself in 1998; and immediately after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on the United States.

Yet even on each of these and other such occasions (except for the narrowly focused Turkish intervention), Damascus was allowed to get away with the kind of things that would have brought the roof down on most states. Thus, frequent Western attempts to negotiate, bargain with, and appease only worsened the situation when Syria decided it had nothing to fear. This is what happened when Syria came out of the 1990s and understood that the United States was not going to go after it, and that the Europeans would give it benefits. It turned the tables.

This brings us to Bashar's task. Since the 1980s, Syria has faced big problems. Its

Soviet ally (and arms supplier) collapsed; the economy has not done well, domestic unrest has increased, Israel has widened the military gap, and Saddam Hussein was overthrown by the Americans.

Bashar's father and predecessor, Hafiz, maneuvered very well. He participated in the battle against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait enough to win help from the rich Gulf Arabs and the United States. His involvement in negotiations with Israel also helped, though he refused to make an agreement in the end. Then, Hafiz died and passed on the presidency to his inexperienced son.

Clearly, Bashar is no Hafiz. His father was a far better strategist. In contrast to Bashar, he probably would never have withdrawn from Lebanon and would have been more careful to avoid friction with the Gulf Arabs and America. He would never have let Iran turn Syria into something like a client state or treat Hizballah leader Hasan Nasrallah on an equal basis.

Yet the Asad genes are still working. Bashar withdrew from Lebanon but kept the security and economic assets in place. Almost 20 major bombings and assassinations have shown Lebanese that Syrian interests better be attended; and by killing Rafik Hariri, the former Lebanese prime minister, Bashar got into some apparent trouble, but eliminated the only man who could unite the country and stand up to Hizballah.

Bashar's risk-taking seemed to pay off. On the Iraqi front, starting in 2003, he has been waging war against America at almost no cost to himself. Syria is equipping, training, and sending into battle terrorists who are killing hundreds of Iraqis and Americans without any threat of international action or even condemnation.

Then, on the Lebanese front in 2006, he mounted what was basically a conventional

war against Israel—again at no cost to himself, though plenty for the Lebanese. In this case, most of the arms and money comes from Tehran, with Syria getting a free ride. Today in Damascus, Bashar is a hero for confronting Israel at the Lebanese expense. He has also piled up considerable credit with radical Islamists by being their friend and ally in Iraq, Lebanon, and among the Palestinians.

The whole thing might well blow up against Bashar some day through international pressure or domestic upheaval. For the moment, though, he is riding high. Maybe that answers the question about Bashar: Someone who acts like a fool in Western terms may well be a genius as a Middle Eastern leader.

So how did this young, new leader and his relatively small, weak country help turn the Middle East—and indeed the world—in such a different, bloody, and dangerous direction?

After 1991, there had been hopes in the West, Israel, and also among many people in the Arabic-speaking world, that dramatic changes around the globe and in the region would produce a new Middle East of pragmatism, reform, democracy, and peace. Given the USSR's collapse, Saddam's defeat, trends toward democracy elsewhere, America's emergence as sole superpower, and other factors, a better world seemed to be in birth. A generation of Arabs had experienced defeat, tragedy, and stagnation. Surely, they would recognize what had gone wrong and choose another path.

Bashar took credit in killing this dream of something different and better, though he perhaps overstated the difficulty of that achievement. "It was not easy at all to manage to convince many people about our vision of the future," he explained. Yet the "cherished Middle East" of the West, Israel, and moderate Arabs, he views as being

“built on submission and humiliation and deprivation of peoples of their rights.” In its place is arising “[a] sweeping popular upsurge...characterized by honor and Arabism,” of struggle and resistance.⁵

It is all very familiar. After the 2006 Hizballah-Israel war, the Middle East has clearly and probably irreversibly entered a new era with a decidedly old twist. The possibility of a negotiated Arab-Israeli peace and for Arab progress toward democracy is dead; radical Islamism, whether or not it achieves political power, sets the agenda. For a half-dozen years, things had been certainly heading in this direction, heralded by the Palestinian and Syrian rejection of peace with Israel in 2000; the turn to a terrorist-based intifada; the fall-out from the September 11, 2001 attacks on America; the post-Saddam violence in Iraq; the Arab regimes' defeat of reform movements; and electoral advances by Hamas, Hizballah, and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, along with many other developments.

One of its most visible features of this new, decidedly unimproved, Middle East is an Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas alliance seeking regional hegemony, the destruction of Israel, and the expulsion of Western influence—all the old goals—under the slogan of resistance to aggression. The emergence of this new axis represents a sharp break with the past only regarding two issues: unprecedented levels of Iranian involvement in Arab politics and the creation of an Arab nationalist-Islamist synthesis for which Bashar has been the main promoter and advocate. When one takes into account the fact that Bashar is not really a Muslim, though he plays one on television, the accomplishment is stupendous in its audacity.

It is rather strange to see the revival of policies that were so spectacularly

unsuccessful the first time around, and which instead produced disasters whose repercussions are still being felt for Arab societies, the Middle East, and the entire globe. The Arabic-speaking world is often said to have a long memory. Yet what is as bizarre as the enthusiastic revival of failed ideas is that virtually no one seems to notice that this is what has happened. The points made in this article have been mentioned by few Arab authors, even those critical of the “new” thinking. All the elements of this world-view have certainly been time-tested, but the problem is that they failed the exam.

Bashar's version of the new Middle East may well persist for an entire generation. What turns it from merely an extremely remarkable into a truly amazing phenomenon, however, is that this shift marks a return, often down to the smallest details, to the Arab thinking and strategy of the 1950s-1980s period. Once again the political line is the traditional one of extolling violent struggle in pursuit of total victory rather than pragmatism, democracy, compromise, and economic construction. Sometimes this will simply be used in demagogic terms; at other times it will actually be implemented.

Why, then, revitalize a world-view and program that failed so miserably and disastrously, leading the Arab world into years of defeat, wasted resources, dictatorship, and a steady falling behind the rest of the world in most socio-economic categories?

A large part of the answer is that this new state of affairs serves the two groups that matter most in Arab politics: the Arab nationalist dictators and the revolutionary Islamist challengers seeking to displace them. The Arab regimes rejected reforms, because change threatened to unseat them. Using demagoguery enabled them to continue as both dictatorships and failed

leaderships, while still enjoying popular support. On the other side of the rivalry, radical Islamist forces, far more able to compete for mass support than the small though courageous bands of liberals, sought a new strategy to expand their influence and gain power.

In addition to this world-view's utilitarian aspects, the analytical emphasis on "resistance" to foreigners rather than reform at home builds on a very strong foundation: A half-century-long indoctrination overwhelmingly dominating Arab discourse that all the problems of the Arab world are caused by Israel, America, and the West. A third factor is simply that the noble resistance concept does make people feel good. It is an opium for the masses, especially those masses who can vicariously experience battle by watching others—Iraqis, Israelis, Lebanese, and Palestinians—getting killed as a result.

A second aspect of revitalizing long-held positions that eroded somewhat in the 1990s, is the claim that Israel, America, and the West are really weak. If Arabs and Muslims are willing to sacrifice themselves and their societies as martyrs, they can achieve victory. In this respect, Hizballah leader Hasan Nasrallah, Palestinian Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sound eerily like Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, and Syrian Presidents Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Asad in the 1960s and 1970s. It was this kind of thinking, for example, that led to the Arab defeat in the 1967 War and a number of wars thereafter.

As a result, conclusions were being drawn in the 1990s, that this kind of strategy did not work. "We had given up on the military option. We believed this

belonged to history," stated Hani Hourani, head of the New Jordan Research Center. Yet by 2006, most notably in regard to the Israel-Hizballah war of that year, that thinking was either forgotten or deemed to have been wrong. In Hourani's words, "Hizballah created a new way of thinking about the whole conflict in the region: Israel is not that invincible. It could be beaten. It could be harmed.... Hezbollah, even if we don't agree with its ideology, was suggesting a different option to the Arab people."⁶

There were specific cases cited to make this claim, but upon examination, the data did not support that conclusion. The Palestinian intifada of 2000 to 2005—like its predecessor of 1979-81—did not gain a Palestinian state, much less destroy Israel. Its main effect was to wreck the infrastructure on the Gaza Strip and West Bank, causing massive Palestinian casualties and a loss of international support. For Fatah, the group mainly responsible for these events, that strategy brought its downfall. Unless one's goal was to "hurt" Israel regardless of the cost, this was not an attractive example.

The second situation cited was that of Iraq. Again, while some Americans were killed, the great majority of the victims were Arab Muslims. Iraq's society and economy were driven into the ground. As if that were not enough, communal hatreds were heightened to the point of civil war, a war which the Sunni Arab insurgents would not only lose eventually, but one that could cause the massacre of their own community. Again, as with the September 11 attacks, if the goal was to hurt Americans, then some success was achieved. Yet the cost to Afghanistan and Iraq were much higher.

As the final and most important example, the 2006 Israel-Hizballah war was

cited. Yet it is easy to see in the 2006 Lebanon War that Israel basically won militarily. It did not feel the need for a quick ceasefire and captured the battlefield. On the negative side, Israel suffered damage from rocket attacks—though this was in no way disabling—and military casualties, which happened in all wars including those that saw its biggest victories. Yet the common Arab perception was that a military option against Israel was viable, something widely doubted in the 1980s and even more so in the 1990s.

What is most amazing about this and similar statements is that other than the massive use of rockets against Israeli civilians—which had no impact on the military situation—there was absolutely nothing new in Hizballah’s approach. Similar tactics had no real effect during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War or when Iraq fired missiles at Israel during the 1991 Kuwait War.

The 2006 Lebanon War merely succeeded in re-convincing many Arabs of the merits of an otherwise rightly discredited strategy that would not work except to make them feel good about supposedly making their enemies feel bad. That is hardly the basis for a serious or successful political strategy. It certainly is no substitute for social progress or economic development. In the absence of material victory, one is left hoping for miracles—the intervention of God or of a demi-god in human form.

This leads into a third element that repeats itself from the past: the belief in a political superhero who will lead Arabs and Muslims to victory. In the 1950s and 1960s, there was Nasser; in the 1970s, Arafat and Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad, Bashar’s father; in the 1980s and 1990s, it was Iraqi President Saddam Hussein; and then Usama bin Ladin. All failed, all were defeated. The

outcome, however, has not been to reject this spurious hope, but rather simply to seek another candidate for the job.

Iran’s President Ahmadinejad in 2006 is a resurrected Nasser from 1966, threatening the West, confidently predicting Israel will be wiped off the map, and toying with war as a way of achieving a quick, easy victory. Bashar is not a brash young man of gangly frame and failed moustache but a champion of resistance. Hamas leader Nasrallah, a client of Syria, and Hamas head Khalid Mashal, a resident of Damascus, are the ideal of Arab manhood. They promise to achieve the impossible and persuade millions of people that they will do so.

Finally, the new “resistance” axis promises to solve all problems quickly and simply, albeit through large-scale bloodshed. Why compromise if you believe you can achieve total victory, revolution, and wipe Israel off the map with armed struggle and the intimidation of the West? Why engage in the long, hard work of economic development when merely showing courage in battle and killing a few enemies fulfills one’s dreams. Victory, said Bashar in the speech cited above, requires recklessness. If nobody remembers where this kind of mistaken thinking led before, they are all the more ready to embrace it anew.

In many ways, what is happening now is like the revival of a play that bankrupted its backers and ruined the reputation of all the actors involved. Yet all the old parts are cast anew with great faithfulness. Iran plays the role of revolutionary patron in 2006, which Egypt purported to do in 1966. Syria takes the part of patron of Arab nationalism and revolutionary terrorism that Syria did in 1966. Hizballah and Hamas are the new PLO, promising to destroy Israel through non-state violence.

This experience of past tragedy has not, to paraphrase Karl Marx's remark on repetition in history, discouraged the farce of this second go-round. Indeed, the sad history of such past endeavors seems to have no impact on the majority of Arab thinkers, writers, journalists, and others celebrating the revival of intransigence in search of total victory.

True, a small liberal Arab minority is horrified by the turn toward radicalism and increased confrontation with the West and Israel in the name of heroic resistance. It is both hard and dangerous for them to make the case against this world-view and strategy. Emperors do not like it when some of their subjects announce their nakedness. Societies, especially undemocratic ones, do not like to see their most cherished beliefs questioned.

More moderate, but still dictatorial, regimes want to use the radical doctrine in their own interest—rationalizing their regimes; mobilizing their people for resisting foreigners rather than reform, while also preventing it being used against themselves. At the same time, the rulers of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia also remember a great deal more about how this ideology failed in the past than they pretend.

Just as Nasser and Saddam posed threats to them in the previous era, the new tyranny of Tehran and sword of Damascus are direct challenges to their survival today. They often use and reinforce the new ideas, but also hope to blunt the edge, at least when their own interests are concerned. Yet in seeking to avoid being victims of the revolutionary tidal wave, they also play along with it.

Even the apparent threat has its advantages. They have a good reason for not making or implementing peace with Israel, which lets them use the continuing

conflict as an excuse for their domestic system. The same point applies for keeping their distance from the United States. Equally, they can eliminate the democratic challenge and repress domestic criticism since fair elections or open debate might strengthen radical Islamists.

What is this new era that sweeps all before it, at least in terms of rhetoric? Briefly, it is characterized by the following points:

- A rise in radical Islamist movements, though the Arab nationalist regimes are still holding onto power and might well not lose it.
- Growing hatred of the United States and Israel, at least compared to the levels in some places during the 1990s.
- The belief that total victory can be achieved through terrorism and other violent tactics.
- A euphoric expectation of imminent revolution, glorious victories, and unprecedented Arab or Muslim unity.
- A disinterest in diplomatic compromise solutions, as unnecessary and even treasonous. To concede nothing is to lose nothing, because you still have the claim to all you want and have thus left open an opportunity to gain everything.
- The death of hopes for democracy due to both regime manipulation and radical Islamist exploitation of the opportunities offered by some openings in the system.

The only real difference between the new and the old concepts is that what was formally expressed in Arab nationalist terms is now stated in Islamist, or at least more Islamic, ones. The idea is that

Islamism can succeed where Arab nationalism failed. Yet aside from the obvious difference in the content of the two ideologies, their basic perceptions and goals are quite parallel. First, the Arab/Muslim world faces a U.S.-Israel (or Western-Israel) or Zionist-Crusader conspiracy to destroy it. A secondary enemy is the majority of Arab rulers whose relative moderation shows them to be traitors. Only those who preach intransigence and struggle are upholders of proper Arab and Muslim values. In the 1950s and 1960s, this distinction pitted Egypt, Syria, and Iraq as the progressive states against “reactionary” Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other monarchies. Today, it is Iran and Syria against Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.

Since the main enemy is purely evil, there can be no compromise with it. By the same token, virtually all types of violence are justified. This cannot be terrorism, because the violence is defensive, responsive, necessary, and against a satanic foe. Total victory is achievable and therefore anything less is treasonous. Consequently, the people must unite under governments with the proper ideologies and that are able to mobilize the entire society, i.e., a dictatorship. The priorities for these regimes would be to destroy Israel, defeat America, and reject Western cultural and intellectual influences. As this is all so necessary and workable, anything other than struggle and resistance—such as more citizen rights, reform, modernized economic structures, etc.—would be a distraction. Only after total victory is achieved can these luxuries be arranged. In contrast, the idea of liberalism and reform is essentially a trick of the enemy.

An additional irony is that in the original Arab nationalist era, it was also hoped and expected that the radical regimes would bring rapid development and create a just,

even utopian society. The Islamists still make this claim, but the Arab nationalist rulers hardly even make a pretense on such issues any more.

In general, though, while Islamists and Arab nationalists compete for power, sometimes even violently, they simultaneously mutually reinforce the intellectual system and world-view that locks the Arab world into the very problems they purport to remedy.

One feature of the new era very similar to that of the 1950s-1980s period is the expectation of imminent transfiguration, a millenarian sense that dramatic change is about to happen. The idea is that the future will defy the past, that such things as balance of forces or politics as the “art of the possible” will be overcome by the hand of God, the proper ideology, or the right military strategy.

This idea was very much in evidence during the period beginning with the 1952 coup in Egypt and particularly after the 1956 Suez War, which catapulted Nasser into being the closest thing there has ever been to a leader of the Arab world, the hero able to unite all the Arabs. Soon he had followers in every country. Nasser asserted Egypt's pride and strength; ridiculed Western powers; smashed Islamist rivals and the Marxist left at home; intrigued the intellectuals; and intimidated Arab regimes that opposed him. “We would clap in proud surprise,” recalled Tawfiq al-Hakim, “when he delivered a powerful speech and said about [the United States] which had the atomic bomb that ‘if they don't like our conduct, let them drink from the sea,’ he filled us with pride.”⁷

Hakim made a devastating critique of the original resistance mentality:

Are the people made happy because they hear socialist songs although

they are submerged in misery which everyone sees?.... Masses of people wait for long hours in front of consumer co-operatives for a piece of meat to be thrown to them.... Or take Arab unity.... Did the revolution succeed in bringing it about by political means? Did it bring it closer and strengthen it, or rather did it scatter and weaken it by policies which included intervention, pretension to leadership, domination, influence-spreading, showering money in the planning of plots, fomenting coups d'état, and in the Yemen war inducing Arab to kill Arab, and Arab to use burning napalm and poison gas against Arab?⁸

At the time, though, few paid attention to this kind of critique. This particular emperor's nakedness was only revealed in the 1967 defeat and more particularly, after his death in 1970. Hakim's book was entitled, *The Return of Consciousness*. Today, however, it seems as if the age of the coma has returned since now many have forgotten this outcome. It is also instructive to recall that Nasser's victorious reputation rested mainly on the 1956 Suez War, which was actually a military humiliation for Egypt. Only American and Soviet diplomatic intervention saved Nasser—a situation paralleling the Lebanon war “victory” of Nasrallah, rescued by international pressure for a ceasefire that left Hizballah armed and in place.

Ignoring all this history, supporters now make the comparison of Nasrallah and Nasser in a positive sense, often playing on the similarity of both men's names to the Arabic word for “victory.” In Cairo, their pictures have been carried in demonstrations together, though their views

on Islam in politics were opposite. It was also noted that the Lebanon “victory” took place on the fiftieth anniversary of the Suez one. What was not mentioned was that a half-century after Nasser first took power has not brought much progress in Egypt. Even getting back the Sinai Peninsula captured by Israel in 1967 had not been achieved by struggle, but rather through friendship with America and a peace treaty with Israel.

Another revived concept is that the balance of forces or technology—military, industrial, or electronic—is not really important, but that spirit overcomes all these things. As early as 1947, Fawzi al-Qawukji, commander of the Syrian-backed People's Army fighting to prevent Israel's creation, explained that the Arabs would win by saying, “More than the arms I value the people who will be conducting this holy war”⁹ In the rhetoric of a 1960s' radical slogan, “The power of the people is greater than the technology of the man.” This is the idea behind the celebration of Hizballah and Hamas, the Iraqi insurgency, of the suicide bomber and the rock thrower as capable of achieving victory against apparently overwhelming odds.

Arab nationalists, aside from their own past exploits, looked to the Cuban and Chinese revolutions as well as Vietnam for proof that the weaker side could win through determined resistance and steadfastness. It was all very 1960s retro. “Long live the victory of people's war,” said the Chinese, while the Cubans had their “Year of the Heroic Guerrilla.” These ideas live on in the Arab world as if in a time capsule.

Nasrallah is now, as Arafat once was, compared to Che Guevara, the romantic but failed Cuban revolutionary leader, who like Nasrallah did not overthrow any governments, but has many t-shirts

dedicated to him. Islamists pointed to such examples as the victory over the Soviet superpower in Afghanistan (forgetting the U.S. role in helping that campaign) and such “successes” as September 11 or the Iraqi insurgency. They also claim Israel’s withdrawal from south Lebanon and the Gaza Strip as triumphs. The Iranians can add their own revolution, the U.S. embassy hostage crisis and their standing up against Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War, which they nonetheless really lost.

Victory is said to be inevitable. An Egyptian Islamist writes that the Americans are cowards while the Muslims are brave: “The believers do not fear the enemy.... Yet their enemies protect [their] lives like a miser protects his money. They... do not enter into battles seeking martyrdom.... This is the secret of the believers' victory over their enemies.” Indeed, the fact is that it is the infidels’ cowardice that leads them to “bolster their status by means of science and inventions.”¹⁰ The fact that this statement was published in a state-controlled Egyptian newspaper, *al-Gumhuriya* on October 7, 2001, as a reaction to September 11, shows how Arab nationalist institutions collude to promote “Islamist” ideas, which feed the resistance mentality.

Yet in fact these alleged victories are illusory ones. And this doctrine prompts the aggressive violence and rejection of peace, which produces the casualties in Lebanon, Iraq, and among the Palestinians that furnish the alleged need for resistance in the first place. There is, however, a good reason why weaker states usually avoid provoking or going to war against stronger ones: They lose. History is full of examples of high-spirited, ideologically motivated states that simply could not overcome the odds of reality and ended up with their own cities in ruins. One of the most obvious examples

was World War II, when the relatively mighty Japanese were defeated despite their suicidal kamikaze pilots and soldiers?

In this light, the Arab memory of losing so many wars and conflicts in the past is not a sign of cowardice, but a valuable political experience which should be heeded. Having spent so many years of suffering, dictatorship, and squandered resources in the second half of the twentieth century should have been used to teach the lesson that intransigence and violence did not work, that extreme goals brought about far-reaching disaster.

When in the 1990s, Arabs faced this sad story more honestly and directly, they were inclined toward rethinking their future. Knowing what doesn’t work tells you what needs to be done. If Israel could not be destroyed and the conflict was so costly, perhaps it was better to make peace. If America was so powerful than it would be better to get along with that country than to fight it. If the Arabs were falling behind in every economic, scientific, and social category, comprehensive reform seemed necessary. If terrorism abroad turns on you and poisons your own society, reject this path. The idea of change was on the agenda, challenging all the assumptions that had been made, pursued, and found wanting.

Now, however, this process has gone down the memory hole. A new generation—which does not remember history and has no one to remind it—and a different ideology, which discounts Arab nationalism's dreadful experience as not applying to itself, repeats all these mistakes. In Bashar’s version, three generations of Arabs fought Israel and lost, leading to the expectation that the desire to fight would decrease over time. However, Bashar said, now a fourth generation was ready for battle and the desire for struggle was in fact increasing over time.¹¹

The Arabs did not make mistakes, they explain, but simply did not struggle enough or follow the proper ideology. It is as if someone has been hitting their head against a brick wall, momentarily considered the possibility that this was not beneficial behavior, and then after brief consideration concluded that they simply had not been bashing their head hard enough against the obstacle.

“Oh, Master of Resistance,” the Syrian state-run newspaper *Tishrin* on August 3, 2006 intoned in an ode to Nasrallah, the man who set Lebanon back 20 years:

You have cloaked yourself in honor merely by writing the first page in the book of deterring and defeating the Zionist-American invaders, along with all those who are hiding behind them. No one thinks that the [war] will be won today, tomorrow, or [even] next year—but it is the beginning of the end, and the road towards victory has begun...¹²

And so we are at the start of a long, long road of conflict, just as Arabs stated in the 1950s. Perhaps some time around 2035, we will be due for another round in the peace process. Once this memory of experience has been shredded by the resistance mentality, it may be necessary to go through the entire, decades-long, generational swallowing ordeal all over again before real progress can be made on the basis of new defeats, failures, and shortcomings.

An assessment of the balance of forces should show that conflict with the West is a big mistake since it is so much more powerful in military and technological terms. However, what if this is an illusion, if Muslim spiritual power or Arab courage can triumph? In other words, America is a

paper tiger; the West is beatable. This contest does not necessarily require war, indeed if the United States and West are so weak, they will back down if faced with the threat of war. As Winston Churchill said of Soviet methods in his 1946 speech noting the beginning of the Cold War, “I do not believe that Soviet Russia desires war. What they desire is the fruits of war and the indefinite expansion of their power and doctrines.”¹³

For the West in general and America in particular is perceived by Syria not only as too craven to fight, but so stupid as to be easily outmaneuvered. Experience also gives them reasons for thinking this way. Still, this is the mistaken argument Saddam Hussein made from the late 1980s, through the 1991 Kuwait crisis, and up to the moment he was overthrown in 2003, and the one that Usama bin Ladin said was proven by the success of the September 11, 2001 attacks before he was driven into hiding. Doesn't the story's outcome disprove this conception? Not if it is ignored. The fate of Iraq's dictator has not prevented Ahmadinejad from calling America a “superpower made of straw”¹⁴ or the head of the powerful head of the Iranian Council of Guardians, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, saying that America “is weaker than a spider web.... If the Islamic countries act like Hizballah, and stand up to America like men, America will be humiliated....”¹⁵

Saddam thought the same way. Speaking at the Royal Cultural Center in Amman, Jordan, on February 24, 1990, he explained that the Americans had run away from Vietnam and Lebanon (in the 1983) and abandoned the shah of Iran. He argued that they would not fight or at least would not long endure in a battle. Khomeini agreed with him on this point, if on nothing else, and famously noted on November 7, 1979

that America “could not do a damn thing” to stop the Islamist Revolution.¹⁶

Bin Ladin himself explained, “[Those] God guides will never lose....America [is] filled with fear from the north to south and east to west....[Now there will be] two camps: the camp of belief and of disbelief....Every Muslim shall...support his religion.”¹⁷ After all, the entire September 11 attack was designed to puncture the myth of American power, to show how vulnerable it was. In terms of Muslim perceptions on this point, the September 11 attack and the other acts of “resistance” achieved a great deal of success.

The basic approach of Bashar’s new Middle East permeated throughout the Arab world, from Yemen’s president advocating immediate war with Israel to Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir boasting that he would rather fight the UN than let its forces into Darfur, where his troops have been murdering ethnic minorities. “We’ve done the math.... We’ve found out that a confrontation is a million times better for us.”¹⁸

The idea of Sudan taking on the entire world does not accord with any known mathematical systems, but this is not literally Bashir’s intention any more than Bashar wants to fight a war on his own soil with his own army. Bashir’s calculation is that the world does not care about Darfur or would soon grow tired of having peacekeeping forces there (a fatigue heightened by casualties inflicted upon them) and go away.

Bashar holds parallel views about Iraq and Lebanon. Will the West give him control over Lebanon in order to buy him off in return for his restoring order there? Moreover, both Bashir and Bashar also know that this demagogic response will win them support at home as well as cheers (and

perhaps aid) from other Arab and Muslim countries. The goal is not war but the fruits of war.

Regarding Israel, though, it is not so easy to separate brinksmanship from actual fighting. The strategists of the new resistance strategy, like their earlier predecessors (after 1973, many of those forerunners had already learned a lesson) believe that big talk, attacking from third countries, firing rockets, and dispatching suicide bombers, along with pure courage will fill the gap.

Part of this calculation is a dangerous underestimate of their enemy. When Nasrallah and other extremist Islamists speak about Israel, they echo word for word what Arafat and Arab nationalists said in the 1960s. Basically, it boils down to this: If Arabs or Muslims are only ready to become martyrs and sacrifice everything in warfare, wiping Israel off the map will be easy. Israel has only continued to exist, because Arab rulers were too cowardly and traitorous up to now.

This kind of thinking produced four decades of disaster for the Arab world. It began when Arab leaders announced in the 1960s that soon they would defeat Israel and throw the Jews into the sea. In fact, it was the Arabs who suffered a humiliating loss. Thereafter, Arafat and others bragged that guerrilla warfare would do the trick, in thinking parallel to Hizballah’s strategy in 2006.

The result, however, was not Israel’s defeat, but civil wars in Jordan and Lebanon, more defeats on the battlefield, years of suffering, and the waste of billions of dollars in resources. The Gaza Strip is now being wrecked by such thinking for the third time in 15 years. The Arab states remain virtually the only place in the world exclusively ruled by dictatorships, since only authoritarian governments, it was

argued, could defeat Israel and expel Western influence; and so it went, down through Saddam Hussein's three costly wars and Usama bin Ladin, to present-day Hizballah and Hamas.

When intellectuals and leaders are irresponsible there are consequences. Zaghul al-Najjar, a columnist in *al-Ahram*—not an Iranian publication or some crackpot al-Qa'ida site, but the flagship newspaper of the moderate Egyptian government, which has had a peace treaty with Israel for more than a quarter-century—wrote on August 14, 2006:

Imagine what would [happen] to this oppressive entity [Israel] if an oil embargo was imposed on it, if its air force was destroyed in a surprise attack, and if all the Arab countries around it fired rockets on it simultaneously and decided to put an end to its crimes and its filth. [If this happens], this criminal entity which threatens the entire region with mass destruction will not continue to exist on its stolen land even one more day.¹⁹

To show that this is no fluke, the same newspaper carried a similar article by Anwar Abd al-Malek, an Arab nationalist, on August 29, 2006, about the miracle of Hizballah showing Israel was nothing and thus changing the course of history.²⁰ Does Egypt want war with Israel? No, but this kind of demagoguery, which has been going on for a long time, gives it a degree of immunity from radical criticism while reinforcing the new/old resistance ideology even further.

During all these flights of fantasy and failure what has stood out, except perhaps for brief periods in the 1990s, was

incomprehension of Israel. Since Arab nationalists and Islamists did not want Israel to exist, they decided that it was an illusion. Israel was weak, divided, and cowardly. Soon it would crumble.

Here is Arafat in 1968: "The Israelis have one great fear, the fear of casualties." This principle guided PLO strategy: Kill enough Israelis by war or terrorism, and the country would collapse or surrender. A PLO official in 1970 said the Jews could not long remain under so much tension and threat; "Zionist efforts to transform them into a homogeneous, cohesive nation have failed," and so they would leave.²¹ On September 12, 1973, just before his country and Egypt attacked Israel, the Syrian ambassador confided in a Soviet official that Arab states would need 10 to 15 years to destroy Israel, but would soon launch an attack to destroy the myth of Israeli invincibility and undermine foreign investment and Jewish immigration.²²

Yet while the Arabs did well in the war's beginning and claimed afterward that they had restored their honor, more than 30 years later, all the same issues remained: Israeli invincibility, a belief that Israeli society could be undermined, and that victory would be certain if Arab self-confidence were restored. The following are Nasrallah's words on July 29, 2006: "When the people of this tyrannical state loses its faith in its mythical army, it is the beginning of the end of this entity."²³ Yet Israel suffered far heavier losses fighting PLO terrorists in the 1960s, when the country's population was far smaller, than in the 2006 Lebanon War without political or social upheaval.

Nevertheless, Bashar and Nasrallah say, as Arafat did periodically over almost forty years, the fighting has shown, in the latter's words, Israel's army to be "helpless, weak, defeated, humiliated, and a

failure...”²⁴ Of course, this is propaganda aimed to win the cheers of the masses and the cadres' steadfastness, but the leaders, too, believe their own propaganda. After all, they base their strategy and tactics on it.

The big hope of Arafat then and Bashar, Nasrallah or Hamas now is to terrorize Israeli civilians. This is why they use terrorism, not because they are intrinsically evil, but rather because they think it will be effective. By attacking civilian targets, Arafat said in 1968, the PLO would “weaken the Israeli economy” and “create and maintain an atmosphere of strain and anxiety that will force the Zionists to realize that it is impossible for them to live in Israel.”²⁵

In short, paralyze the country, make Israelis afraid, and the end is near. Or, as an article in a PLO magazine explained in 1970, if all Israelis would be made to feel “isolated and defenseless,” they would want to leave, and Israel would cease to exist.²⁶

What Bashar, Nasrallah, and Iran say today sounds like the PLO a quarter-century ago in documents like, “Guidelines for attacking civilian targets in Israel,” which calls for, “[using] weapons in terrifying ways against them where they live,” including for example attacking tourist facilities “during the height of the tourist season,”²⁷ which is what happened in 2006. In calling for Israel's destruction, Ahmadinejad echoed what Arab leaders were saying at the time he was a mere lad, with no real success.

Similarly, the other main strategic idea of the Iranian-led alliance today is precisely the same one developed in the 1960s, in which terror-sponsoring states assaulted Israel through another country and client groups. Syria used Jordan and Lebanon for this purpose in 1947, even before Israel's creation, when Damascus wanted to hide its involvement in the fighting.²⁸ The whole history of the PLO and more than a dozen

Palestinian terrorist groups is largely based on the principle of state sponsorship and safe havens. Again, it didn't work.

Remarkably consistent—or perhaps circular—in Arab thinking has been the search for a great charismatic hero to produce victory. While there is a long historical basis for this approach—Salah al-Din and his defeat of the Crusaders is often mentioned—Nasser was the first in modern times to wear this mantle (1956-70), followed by would-be Iraqi and Syrian imitators (1960s-1980s), Arafat and Khomeini (to some), Saddam (1980-91), and now Iraqi insurgent leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Ahmadinejad, Nasrallah, and Bashar.

Of course, leaders try to persuade others that they are the anointed one, a stance useful for promoting the interests of the country or group they lead. This hero worship takes on many forms, which seem to be repeated with each new hero. To give some examples, babies are named after him; his picture is inscribed on such consumer items as key rings and necklaces; songs are written about him, and so on.

The idea of a great leader who will deliver victory on a silver platter undercuts the appeal of democracy, moderation, or pragmatism. Ironically, it also subverts mobilization, since one merely need wait for the great leader—and another country or some organization of heroes—to do all the work. However, the work does not get done. As for the last three great heroes, Saddam is in a prison cell, bin Ladin hiding out perhaps in a cave, and Zarqawi is dead. Yet the enthusiasm for the next candidate lives on.

The Arab reaction to the 2006 war in Lebanon follows an old tradition in which military defeats are turned by verbal gymnastics into victories, partly based on the fact that Arab forces won some battles

and fought bravely. The 1956 and 1973 wars have been transformed in this way. A superb example of this pattern is what happened at Karama, Jordan in March 1968. Israel's army crossed the river to destroy the main Fatah camp there and succeeded in doing so. Arafat fled, leaving his men to fend for themselves. Most of the fighting was done by Jordan's army. Israel lost 21 men while Fatah had 150 killed. The battle was an Israeli victory and the main credit for resistance belonged to the Jordanian army.

Arafat, however, persuaded Palestinians and the Arab world that Karama was a great victory for Fatah, making it appear heroic next to the Arab armies' apparent cowardice and incompetence a year earlier in the 1967 War. Thousands begged to join Fatah and Nasser invited Arafat to come to Cairo and be his protégé. Arafat's career, and the next 35 years of tragedy and bloodshed, was set.

Egypt itself used the 1973 War in this manner. While the Egyptian offensive at the start of the war was indeed brilliant and its use of new antitank weapons (another parallel with Lebanon in 2006) successful, Egypt lost the war. By the end of the fighting, the international community saved Egypt, when Israeli forces were across the Suez Canal and its Third Army was surrounded. At least, Sadat used the war as a basis for his peace bid, turning the claimed victory to some productive use. Yet virtually no one in the Arabic-speaking world-views the war in that context.

A more typical case is the PLO's handling of its disastrous defeat in Lebanon in 1982, which ended with that group being driven from the country. Arafat called it a victory, and his colleague, Khalid al-Hasan, modestly proclaimed, "We should not become arrogant in the future as a result of this victory."²⁹

There was some dissent on this point. Isam Sartawi, the PLO's leading moderate, presented a different perspective, demanding an investigation of the PLO's poor performance in the fighting. He urged the PLO to "wake up" and leave the "path of defeat" that had led to the 1982 debacle. Sartawi ridiculed the wishful thinking that claimed that war to be a PLO victory. "Another victory such as this," he joked, "and the PLO will find itself in the Fiji Islands."³⁰

Yet what happened between Arafat's fantasy and Sartawi's realism? Arafat went on to lead the PLO until his death. Two months after voicing his complaints, Sartawi was murdered by Palestinian terrorists by a group headquartered in Damascus, which often served as an instrument of the Syrian regime.

Still, while imagination can persuade people that a defeat was actually a victory, imagination cannot produce future military victories.

This ideological and political system represented by the resistance mentality also has a brilliant safeguard mechanism. If anyone in the Arab world or Iran disagrees or doubts it will work, this merely proves them to be agents of the West and Zionism. Such pressure also operates very much on a personal level. As a Lebanese Shi'a wrote of this problem, "How should I react to Lebanese people... that tell me that they are ready to kill themselves, their kids, see their houses destroyed and their jobs nonexistent, while looking at me [and implying], if 'you are not willing to do the same, thus you are an American/Israeli agent?'"³¹

The same treatment is given to governments or groups if they seek outside support to protect themselves from the radicals, since that means turning to the West. Sometimes, of course, the threat is so grave that the taboo is broken—as when the

Saudis and Kuwaitis got Western help to save them from Saddam in 1990.

Yet there is a terrible reckoning afterward, since this decision was a major factor in the rise of bin Ladin's international jihadism. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat made peace with Israel in 1979 and was assassinated in 1981. The same fate befell Lebanese President Bashir al-Gemayel in 1982, and Jordan's King Abdallah in 1951 for merely attempting to make peace.

This technique of intimidation is also being used once again against countries. Bashar, for example, attacked Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian leaders as midgets who act as lackeys of the West. Such polarization stirs both inter-Arab quarrels and subversion within different Arab countries, setting back both inter-Arab cooperation and stability. No one talks more about unity and has less of it than does the Arab world.

Another old/new precept of the resistance mentality is the idea that a war has restored Arab honor. This was claimed in the late 1960s with the PLO, after the 1973 War, two Palestinian intifadas, and on other occasions. In addition, the argument was made that Hizballah forced Israel out of south Lebanon and Hamas did so from the Gaza Strip thus redeeming Arab honor.

The historical problem is that after each highly publicized restoration of Arab honor it soon seems to be tarnished, or perhaps insatiable, requiring another round of repairs. During the 1990s, it was often stated by reformers that the true way to raise Arab honor and dignity was not through fighting Israel or the West, but by putting the priority on building a productive economy, higher living standards, equality for women, a free society, independent courts, an honest media, and good educational and health systems. Yet these

things have once again been pushed off the agenda. Indeed, the philosophy of resistance breeds resistance to the changes the Arab world really needs.

A superb example of this thinking is provided by Youssef al-Rashed, a columnist for the Kuwaiti daily *al-Anba*, who wrote that "the Lebanese people may have lost a lot of economic and human resources [in the 2006 war]...but [aside] from figures and calculations, they have achieved a lot of gains," because Lebanon's "heroic resistance fighters have proven to the world that Lebanese borders are not open to Israeli tanks without a price. Lebanon was victorious in the battle of dignity and honor."³²

Upon examination, however, what this really says is that billions of dollars in damage, death, suffering, the return of Syrian influence to Lebanon, the rise of inter-communal tensions to the brink of civil war, and the setting back of that country's economy are all worthwhile, because it made people feel better about themselves. Even then, Rashed couldn't say that Lebanese borders are closed to Israeli tanks, it is simply that they cannot enter at no cost whatsoever.

This kind of statement is common in modern Arab political history. To choose only one example, a 1966 internal Syrian Ba'th Party document stated that the struggle against imperialism and Zionism was so important, that it was worth sacrificing everything the party and the Syrian people had achieved: "We have to risk destruction of all we have built up in order to eliminate Israel!" It was all very well, the Ba'th Party explained, to have summit conferences and make military preparations, but there had to come a moment when this plan for war would be implemented.³³ The next year, with the 1967 War, the regime got its wish.

If the priority is on resistance, reform is at best a distraction, at worst it is treason. Thus, struggle excuses stagnation. What matters is the glory of resistance rather than the banality of economic reform, improving the school system, and developing an honest media or independent judiciary. “In a state of war,” wrote the dissident Egyptian playwright Ali Salem whose works are banned in his own country, “No one argues... or asks questions.” They are told that this is not the right time to talk about free speech, democracy, or corruption, and then ordered, “Get back to the trench immediately!”³⁴

And when in March 2001, Ba’th Party members asked Syrian Vice-President Abd Halim Khaddam at a public meeting why the regime did not do more to solve the problems of corruption, incompetence, and the slow pace of reform, his answer was that the Arab-Israeli conflict permitted no changes at home. “This country is in a state of war as long as the occupation continues.”³⁵ The irony of this argument was that the regime had turned down Israel’s offer to return the entire Golan Heights a year earlier.

The regime needed the continuation of the conflict with Israel to rationalize its own dictatorship, corruption, and even continued rule. However, this allowed endless chances for posturing bravely. Bashar roared in a 2001 speech, “An inch of land is like a kilometer and that in turn is like a thousand kilometers. A country that concedes even a tiny part of its territory, is bound to concede a much bigger part in the future.... Land is an issue of honor not meters.” He added that this was his inheritance: “President Hafez al-Asad did not give in,” boasted Bashar, “and neither shall we; neither today nor in the future.”³⁶

Today, radical Islamism—with an assist from the nationalists—is recapitulating the

history of Arab nationalism in remarkable detail, including the wildly exaggerated promises of victory, the intoxication with supposed triumphs, the investment of resources into struggle instead of constructive pursuits, and so on. The old con game of offering ideology and hatred of Israel and the West as a substitute for democracy, reform, and material progress is going on with an intensity of success as if it had never been used over and over in the past.

The demonization of Israel by Iran, Bashar, and Nasrallah—which wins so much popularity—is almost precisely the same as that of past Arab nationalists who led their people into so many messes and away from peace. The same is true for the dominant view of the United States (and often the West in general) as both hostile and weak.

In some ways, as a world-view that does not correspond with reality, this is a form of insanity. However, there is much method in the “madness” of those who promulgate it. The resistance mentality is an excellent tool for regime preservation and in mobilizing support for radical Islamist movements. The main victims are peace, pragmatism, moderation, reform, and democracy, which means, in essence, that the main victims of the resistance mentality are the Arabs themselves.

For Arab reformers, this contradiction is incredibly frustrating. Wrote, Tarek Heggy, an Egyptian liberal and one of the most brilliant minds in the Arab world, “I hear people all over the Arab television stations talking about our dignity and how Gamal Abdel Nasser and Hasan Nasrallah safeguarded it.... Sometimes, I say to myself, ‘Either these people around me are all insane or it is me who is insane.’”

However, the propaganda of the resistance philosophy is so pervasive—in

schools, media, mosques, the statements of government and opposition groups, and so on—that it takes the greatest courage and strength of character to stand against it. Even then, it was hard for voices of reason to compete with the battle cries, accusations of treason, and celebrations of alleged triumphs.

There were those who believed that moderation, reform, and good relations with the West were the way to solve the Arabs' problems. Yet as Bashar told an Egyptian magazine interview in August 2006, "the resistance's firm stand [in Lebanon] and the change we see in the Arab world, due to which we can see millions of youngsters waving the Hizballah and resistance flags, have proven that this nation is on the brink of a new phase in its history."³⁷

Perhaps true, but it is the same as the old phase, and ultimately so will be its results. In the meantime, though, the Syrian regime is stable and popular. Unless he makes a major miscalculation, it is springtime for Bashar.

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NOTES

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