

How to give up freedom and live “happy”

Syria, the dictatorship with a human face.

The State built by Assad has never been so prosperous and powerful as now. Social fairness, economical development, balance between Islam and modernity. The "Lion of Damascus" leads a regime defined the "most autocratic of the world", though people seem to be on his side. But they talk about his succession...

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The first impact is so positive that you would move here. Nothing to do with the chaotic and sad development of Lebanon, not even with the western aggressiveness of Israel. Overcome the annoying rituals of military bureaucracy (Syrian soldiers read your passport backwards), finally entered Syria, it seems to experience the best of Middle East, the most harmonious of Arab societies. Harmony is the keyword. Social peace, balance, peaceful coexistence. It is strange because the country is considered the focus of international terrorism, always at war with Israel, always in the middle of contemporary Middle East tensions.

“Syria is a country of 17 million inhabitants, where there are no internal conflicts”, claims Antonio Napolitano – Italian ambassador in Damascus: “There is a long tradition of coexistence among different races and religions. Syrians, Kurds, Armenians, Palestinians; and from the religious point of view, Sunni, Shiite and Alawite Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Catholics of a different rite. Just like Lebanon, but in Lebanon they have tried to impose a monocultural Christianity, and that was the real origin of tragedy”.

President Hafez Assad was probably the most suitable leader to ensure the fragile Syrian balance. Originally from a poor Alawite family from the mountains overlooking the Mediterranean Sea in Latakia region, he knows what social exclusion and ethnic marginality mean. Alawites are a small minority which previously was treated with arrogance (if not with contempt) by landed aristocracy and by Sunni and Christian bourgeoisie living in the city. Farmers on their mountains, servants in the city (Alawite housemaid was a classical figure in Damascus), considered Muslims bordering heresy, the Alawites (6 percent of population) are now the Syrian elite, due to their resourcefulness and especially thanks to Assad, who has placed his clan's men in most important roles of the State (principally, Army and Secret Services).

The Assad skill in the management of power is certainly extraordinary. The Syrian history from the independence (1946) to the final conquest of power by Assad (1971) sounds like a political thriller: conspiracies, betrayals, coups, creeping anarchy. Assad, born in 1930, has lived most of this history. Air Force officer at the time of union with Nasser's Egypt, already active in the Baath (Arab Nationalist Party, Marxist, the same of rival's, Saddam Hussein), Assad participated in two following coups in the sixties, then he got rid of his fellow adventurers to stay alone on the top of the pyramid. And Syria began to grow.

A tumultuous population growth (at a rate of 3,8% per year, one of the highest in the world), with an economic development and appropriate social policies. No slums, no poverty, the education is free, the health system works well. Syrian cities are neat and clean enough, land use policies have been able to respect the character of city centers. Damascus is a peaceful and livable capital. The delays caused by a planned socialist economy were offset by a gradual opening to the private initiative (especially with the law 10 in 1990) and to the foreign capital. Italy is at the top for the trade with Syria, investments increase year by year (from Benetton to Pasta Divella).

There is no trace of religious conflicts, no fanaticism, no fundamentalism. Assad was careful not to impose secularism in a very vulnerable country in terms of religion. He returned to Christians private schools which were nationalized at the end of the sixties. Religion (Islamic or Christian) is a compulsory subject in schools, and in public competitions it is an examination subject (Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox have developed a single text). “The privileges we enjoy do not even exist in Europe”, says the Catholic Armenian bishop Boutros Marayati: “The Church does not pay taxes on

imported goods, nor municipal taxes. Water and electricity of all places of worship are free. We Christians feel protected and our dialogue is better with practicing Muslims than with the lay ones". There are two prohibitions not to violate: talking about other religions and, especially, about politics.

For a bishop like Boutros Marayati, that cannot be a problem, as in his room a picture of Assad is hung just next to the crucifix, and as he totally admires the president. For a foreigner, however, the obsessive presence of the face of Assad begins soon to become unbearable. And unbearable is also the apparent unanimity of agreement, the glorification of the Father of this happy and (politically) castrated nation. "In the Eastern mentality, the Head of the State is like a father to whom you owe respect and devotion": this is the main interpretation given to a journalist. But you are gently requested to present yourself to the Ministry of Information where they let you know you are under control. And the idyllic picture starts to become increasingly opaque. It is not only the relative wellness and the good degree of social fairness and religious tolerance to hold together the nation of Assad. The cement with which Syria was founded is called, above all, fear. Eight different departments of security services keep a tighter and continuous control of the society. A country of spies and informers. Sometimes paranoia borders on ridiculous: almost every vendor is suspect. Syria is thin and terribly "double face". The symbol of the state of Assad can be the city of Hama. A charming little town, like a picture in a travel agency brochure. The Orontes river flows through it, turning the large norias, ancient water-wheels, a kind of attraction of Hama. People walk quietly along the banks of the rebel river, "Nahr al- Assi" (this is the meaning, unintentionally symbolic, of the Arab name of Orontes). In front of An-Nuri mosque there is the huge modern and luxurious Apamee Cham Palace Hotel. Built (it is said) over the corpses of thousands of Syrians, killed in 1982 by Assad's order. Hama is (was) the stronghold of Sunni fundamentalism, the centre of Assad's enemies, the Muslim Brothers. The rebellion of the Muslims was open and violent: teacher and military bore the main brunt, as in Algeria. Assad decided to eradicate the fundamentalist focus once and for all: whole areas were razed to the ground, we will never know the exact number of victims (according to some source 25 thousand people were killed). There is no trace, today, of that carnage. For many unaware tourists, who increasingly visit Syria (from Hama the excursions to the Crac des Chevaliers start), it is impossible to believe that a so quiet place was the scene of such a violence. As it is unbelievable that Damascus was (and continues to be) a terrorist den. Never trust appearances.

Thus, even if none officially worries about the succession to Assad, it is clear that the uncertainty about the future is great. This uncertainty hangs over Lebanon, over peace with Israel, over the creation of a Palestinian State, over relations with Turkey. The most recurrent joke here is: Middle East can change in 48 hours or be the same for twenty years. Insciallah.

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