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Syria and the Abraham Path Initiative (API): The Intersection of Religion and Tourism with Do- mestic and Regional Politics under Bashar al-Asad

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Syrian President Bashar al-Assad early in his tenure in power bemoaned his frustration on one occasion to academic David Lesch over having signed a hundred decrees, but only a handful were actually implemented.² In what at the time was an inert Syrian system, replete with corruption and a labyrinth of bureaucratic sinecures, Assad often had to negotiate, bargain, and manipulate in order to get anything of note accomplished. He recalled the relative simplicity of being an eye surgeon, in that before a procedure a patient could not see, yet after the surgery he or she could.³ Politics, Syrian style, was much less clear.

Think, then, about the challenges that a group of Westerners, mostly Americans, encountered trying to establish a transnational tourism program in Syria based on the presumed travels of a revered religious figure, Abraham (*Ibrahim*). It was an uphill battle from the very beginning that in some ways went farther than we had any right to expect, yet in other ways did not go far enough. By 2009, our efforts in Syria ceased and the program was placed in hibernation. The effort itself, however, provides some unique insights into how the Syrian system under Bashar al-Assad worked—or didn't work for that matter. It also places in relief the different layers of support and opposition from indigenous elements that revealed the complexities of trying to get things done in Syria. We think of Syria under the Asads, father and son, as having been an authoritarian, neo-

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patriarchal structure in which all flows from the top down. In some important ways this was true. There are also a number of studies written describing the so-called parallel or shadow state in Syria, comprised of obscure figures in the military-security apparatus as well as officials in the Baath party regional command who wielded power over most government ministers in connivance with Assad and his inner circle of advisors.⁴ We experienced first-hand, however, the myriad of ways that various pockets of power navigate shifting political space to influence the leadership—as well as life in general—in Syria. In the end, we could relate to Assad’s frustration.

The civil war that ravaged Syria since 2011 prevented any resuscitation of our efforts. With the surprising advance from Idlib into Damascus of the HTS-led opposition against Syrian government forces that led to the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, the conflict environment has abated significantly. This may present an opportunity for the API to try again, especially with a new government in power attempting to portray itself as inclusive, moderate, and non-sectarian to Syrians and the international community. With the passage of time and the hoped-for improvement in safety and stability in Syria, perhaps the Abraham Path Initiative can act as a healing mechanism for a country that will be in the throes of rebuilding, both physically and emotionally. We can then bring with us the lessons learned from this first experience.

The Abraham Path Initiative (API)

The API is a route of cultural and religious tourism through the heart of the Middle East. The route is centered on the long distance walking trail that follows the purported journeys made by the Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim)—the common patriarch of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The API is a long-term project that endeavors to become something similar to the Camino de Santiago in Portugal and Spain.

According to the API literature, the Abraham Path's mission statement is to inspire cross-cultural exchange and mutual understanding; to promote sustainable tourism and economic development; to help preserve the region's historic sites and natural environment; and to generate positive media coverage that highlights the hospitable people of the Middle East and the shared heritage of the "children of Abraham." It aims to "connect the human family."

The path got started in Harran, Turkey, where Abraham, according to religious tradition, heard the call of God to "go forth." From southern Turkey, the path was intended to traverse Syria into Jordan. From there the path enters Palestine/Israel, and through Jerusalem, it ends up at Abraham's tomb in Al-Khalil/Hebron. Since these early days, the path has expanded to include northern Iraq (the Zagros Mountain Trail) as well as a trail in the Sinai peninsula in Egypt. The total distance is over 2200 kilometers, linking historic sites, holy places, and unique landscapes into a single itinerary journey. It is hoped that in the near future the route will be extended further into Egypt, as well as into Saudi Arabia (for Muslims), Lebanon, and the rest of Iraq. Over time it is envisioned that the Abraham Path will become a permanent way of pilgrimage and tourism, open to people of all faiths and attracting travelers from around the world, especially those who want to see the Middle East in a manner that is far different from and more intimate than the usual guided tourist trip.

The API is an international affiliation of scholars, religious leaders, businesspersons, and tourism experts that exists to support the creation and maintenance of the trail. Hosted by Harvard University and sustained by a worldwide network of supporters, especially in the Middle East, the Abraham Path Initiative is a not-for-profit, non-political organization which honors all faiths and cultures.

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The Abraham Path Initiative began officially in 2004 under the leadership of Harvard professor, Dr. William Ury, one of the top conflict resolution specialists in the world and co-founder of the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School. The first phase of the project lasted from 2004 to 2006 and was focused on studying and testing the feasibility of the Abraham Path (indeed the feasibility of using the name “Abraham”). The Global Negotiation Project at Harvard conducted a study on the political, security, and logistical challenges of the Path, as well as its economic, cultural, and political ramifications. A segment of the Path was first mapped in Jordan, utilizing topographical maps supplied by the Royal Jordanian Geographical Society, GPS locator technology, and geographic information system (GIS) software with a field computer. Extensive consultations were conducted in the Middle East and around the world, culminating in the first study tour in November 2006. Twenty scholars and leaders from ten countries in what was called the Harvard Study Tour traveled from Harran to Al-Khalil/Hebron mostly by walking it, meeting along the way with government and community leaders, religious leaders from all three faiths, and non-governmental organization (NGO) figures. The goal was to find local partners who could help in the development of their portions of the Path.

But one only has to look at a map to easily grasp the fact that, by far, the longest segment of this iteration of the Abraham Path goes through Syria. Because of this, in many ways Syria is the most important segment. The Path was first (and still is) up and running in the countries and areas of northern Iraq (Zagros Mountain Trail in the Kurdish autonomous zone), Turkey, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine, but there is obviously no contiguity to the Path without Syria. So while efforts in any country encounter a number of local, political, and religious challenges, everyone knew that Syria would be the hardest nut to crack in this regard because of the population’s and leadership’s long-standing

suspicions of the West, in part due to the fact that it was on the “other” side of the Arab-Israeli conflict and superpower cold war following World War II. Turkey, Jordan and Israel have been traditional allies of the West, in particular the United States. Syria was definitely not under the Assads. It also had an entrenched authoritarian governmental structure that endeavored to control most aspects of civic life in the country. The group assigned to the task of establishing the Abraham Path in Syria, therefore, would have to tread very carefully indeed.

First Attempt in Syria⁵

Even though the API was not officially established until 2004, the idea began to take shape in discussions in 2003 between William Ury and Elias Amidon, a seasoned traveler to the Middle East who became a wonderful—and unofficial—ambassador for the API in the years to come. In late 2003 Amidon subsequently visited Syria and discussed the idea with his colleague and friend, Father Paolo Dal’Oglio, the abbot of Deir Mar Musa monastery in Syria dedicated to improving Muslim-Christian understanding. With Father Paolo’s intercession, Amidon also met with the Grand Mufti of Syria, Shaykh Salah Kufaro. In addition, Amidon met with local tour operators to discuss many of the practical steps toward establishing a touristic walking trail in Syria. All were enthusiastic about the proposed venture and agreed to form a host committee of the Abraham Path that would act as a loose, in country organization through which the API could work. Despite the general enthusiasm, there were notes of caution voiced. Stephanie Saldana, an API official who had spent some time in Syria, warned in an email to Ury that, “I can tell you from my own experience there that an official American presence does not seem to be welcome,” and that Syrians are resistant to take advice from outsiders; therefore, she suggested, “that it is vital that it is not outsiders, but locals, who carry this initiative forward.” As events would show, her advice was well-founded.

After a couple of years of forming the organizational structure of the API and, importantly, acquiring adequate funding to move forward, the aforementioned Harvard Study Tour, representing the API, traveled to Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine in March-April 2006 to introduce the project to government and religious leaders and explore how the mapping of the walking trail could proceed collaboratively. While in Syria, API representatives (Amidon and Daniel Adamson, who was the Director of Path Development) along with the host committee met with the minister of tourism, Dr. Saadallah Agha al-Kalaa. Dr. Saadallah offered the cooperation of his ministry, but some of the first signs of discomfort by Syrian officials made themselves apparent in the minister's stated concern that Israel might use the project to further its agenda. He did not elaborate, but the fact that the Abraham Path would at least geographically link Syria with Israel indirectly through Jordan, with the two countries officially still at war and diplomatically jostling over the Golan Heights, raised an immediate red flag to Syrian officials. Nevertheless, everyone agreed to a study tour and consultation meetings to take place in Syria the following November.

Syrian suspicions of the API were apparent again immediately following the April trip when Ury received a letter from an official in the Syrian embassy in Washington, DC asking which organizations were supporting and funding the API, which countries would be part of the Path, and what were the positions regarding Syria and the Arab-Israeli conflict of the governments involved in the project. Ury, in turn, hoping to assuage Syrian concerns, penned a letter back to the Syrian embassy outlining a set of guiding principles, reiterating that the API respects all faiths and that it was not making any sort of political statement nor was it a tool of any government.

Despite what appeared to be a tenuous balance established with the Syrian government regarding the Path, as often happens in

the Middle East, war and/or other types of acute violence can disrupt delicate negotiations. This was no less the case for the API when the Hizbullah-Israel war erupted in summer 2006, a war that at the time was very close to pulling Syria into the conflict amid heightened belligerent rhetoric directed against Damascus from the administration of US President George W. Bush, a relationship that had been fraying ever since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. In the waning days of the 2006 conflict, the Syrian embassy wrote to Ury on August 10 relaying a message from the Ministry of Tourism effectively canceling the planned November study tour. However, the letter was not received by the API office at Harvard University (it was only referenced in a subsequent letter); therefore, an API official contacted the Syrian Ministry of Tourism inquiring about and attempting to confirm the November study tour. It was only then that the Syrian ambassador to the United States, Imad Moustapha, sent a letter to the API stating, "I regret to tell you that the Syrian Ministry of Tourism has decided, after deliberations, that this might not be the best time to join in on the Abraham Path Initiative." At about this same time, the members of the Syrian host committee informed the API officials that they were being told by security authorities (*mukhabarat*) in Syria to suspend active cooperation with the API.

The Syrian minister of tourism then sent a letter (dated October 30) to Ury reiterating what he said in his letter the previous August, but that the group was welcome to visit Syria as tourists, just as long as there were no meetings or activities related to the project. Ury responded by thanking the minister and accepting the invitation to visit as tourists in order to become better acquainted with Syria's "rich cultural heritage."

Ury, Adamson, Amidon and some others from the API did, indeed, visit Syria in November 2006. Although the delegation met with members of the host committee, the latter was told by the highest levels of Syrian security in no uncertain terms to

cease and desist cooperation with the API. One host committee member told Ury that Kuftaro was told by a friend who was close to President Bashar al-Assad, “in the name of everything between us, I beg you not to meet with this group.” It was viewed as “more than an order.” In the face of this resistance, Ury reflected at the time in his diary that, “our aim is to inspire the demarcation of the Abraham Path, which exists in the places and in the daily memories of the people of the region. The Path exists. We are here to wonder at it, marvel at its potential, and respect it.” The group even developed the motto of “less talk and more walk,” with Ury being reminded of Wittgenstein, who said, “Of that which cannot be spoken, do not speak.” Maybe with quiet and patient persistence, avoiding some of the many landmines in the Syrian political landscape, a foundation could be laid despite the high level of opposition from Syrian authorities.

So although things seemed to be at the termination point for the API in Syria by the end of 2006, all was not lost, and there was even some reason to be cautiously optimistic. At least some form of communication still existed between the API and the Syrian government, and at least API representatives could still visit the country, even if it was not in an official capacity. President Assad himself, following the perceived “victory” of his partner in Lebanon, Hizbullah, in the war with Israel, was feeling more confident and secure in power, especially as his popularity in Syria and in the Arab world as a whole soared by his association with and support for Hizbullah leader, Hassan Nasrallah. Maybe, then, the API would not be seen as a threat, especially if it could somehow get Assad onboard and acquire his personal—and public—support.

Getting Some Help

At the same time the API was taking its first tenuous steps, David Lesch was forging a path of his own in Syria. Lesch had a

long history of writing on Syria and visiting the country. After Lesch had made it known to Assad through an intermediary that he wanted to write a book on the young president, he heard from Assad in early 2004 via Imad Moustapha, the Syrian ambassador to the United States, that he would sit with the Trinity University academic for a series of interviews.

Lesch interviewed Assad extensively in 2004 and in 2005 for the book. During the course of these encounters, Lesch also met with and interviewed Syria's First Lady, Asma al-Assad, as well as a host of high level government and Baath party officials. At Assad's request, even after the book, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Assad and Modern Syria*, was published in the fall of 2005, Lesch continued to travel to Syria to meet with the president in a kind of unofficial role as a liaison between the United States and Syria. Lesch's familiarity with Assad became increasingly important as official relations deteriorated between the two countries following Syria's opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri in Beirut in early 2005, for which Washington at first held Damascus responsible.

Lesch developed a good rapport with Assad over a series of regular meetings between 2004 and 2009. A number of Syrian officials told Lesch that the president listened to him, and that on certain issues he was influential with the Syrian leader; indeed, on several occasions Syrian government ministers came to Lesch to enlist his help in championing ministerial proposals to the president, thinking that it could improve the chances of getting them approved.⁶ While Lesch would not describe his relationship with Assad as having developed into a friendship, knowing that each served a certain purpose to the other, they were indeed friendly, and Assad himself would ask Lesch's advice on certain subjects.

Joshua Weiss is the co-founder (along with Ury) of the Global Negotiation Initiative at Harvard University and a senior fellow at the Harvard Negotiation Project. He is currently on the API's board of directors; however, in the early phase of the API, he served as the director of the project and was based at Harvard University. In early 2007, Weiss had become aware of Lesch's recent work on Syria, and he reached out to see if there might be some way Lesch could lend his experience in the country to help the API get back on track.

In the first few months of 2007, Weiss and Lesch worked on the nature of their association, with the latter formally becoming a Senior Advisor to the API. In early May, Lesch visited with Ury for the first time at his home in Boulder, Colorado, to discuss the plan moving forward, in particular attempting to obtain Assad's open and direct support for the project as well as developing a network of business and religious leaders in Syria who would back the establishment of the Abraham Path in their country. Lesch planned a trip to Damascus for late May and into early June 2007, scheduling a meeting with Assad to primarily discuss the API.

Meeting with Assad in Syria

Lesch touched down in Damascus in late May 2007. As usual, he was met on the tarmac by two cars from President Assad's Office of Protocol and driven to the VIP waiting room at the airport while his passport was processed. He was then transported to the Sheraton Hotel in Umayyad Square in central Damascus, which is where he usually stayed. His meeting with Assad was scheduled for the next morning promptly at 9:00 a.m. Lesch was picked up fifteen minutes to nine at the Sheraton, where he was waiting in its VIP room with a member of the president's security team who was in communication with the Office of the President, waiting for the go ahead to drive him up to his Rowda

presidential office building, which was about ten minutes away. This was the typical procedure in Lesch's meetings with Assad.

The Rowda building was a rather modest four story structure in which Assad conducted most of his day-to-day business. The street leading to it was closed off to any but local traffic, and it had, of course, security checkpoints at the entrance. But there was very little visible security at the building itself; indeed, in all of Lesch's meetings with Assad, his carryon bag in which he kept his notebook, tape recorder, and writing implements was never checked nor did he have to go through a metal detector of any sort.⁷ Lesch was escorted up the stairs to the entrance of the building and then up another flight of stairs to Assad's office on the second floor. When Lesch approached the office, the doors swung open, with Assad appearing at the entrance to greet him. Again, this was typical of his meetings. It was all very carefully timed and choreographed. Assad's father was notorious for keeping his guests waiting interminably. The son was determined to do the opposite the moment he took office.

Lesch met with Assad for over two and a half hours, most of which was spent discussing the API in Syria. Lesch carefully described the API, its mission, goals, and potential benefits for Syria. It was also clear to Lesch that this was probably the first time Assad had heard about the API, certainly at least directly and in such detail. With Lesch backing the effort and talking directly to Assad about it, it gave the project a new life. It also most likely raised the concerns of the security establishment, which probably believed it had already successfully killed it off. It also was never particularly sanguine about Lesch's relationship with the Syrian president.

At the meeting, Assad immediately understood the potential economic benefits as well as the improved image for Syria in the West, something for which he had been longing and had taken a beating following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Hariri

assassination in 2005, and the Israel-Hizbullah war of 2006; indeed, he seemed to express sincere enthusiasm for the project. He agreed to meet with an API delegation the next time it visited the country, which Lesch thought should be very soon in order to pick up on the momentum created. Assad stated a caveat, however: the API in Syria must be supported by the Sunni religious establishment in the country, mainly Sunni religious leaders. If we obtained their support, from at least the majority of them, including the Grand Mufti, then Assad could openly back it. There was no mention of acquiring support from the *mukhabarat*.

Assad suggested to Lesch that while in country he reach out to Dr. Muhammad Habash, a parliamentarian who was also the Director of the Islamic Studies Center in Damascus. Lesch actually already knew Habash well, so this was a welcome suggestion. As the Abraham Path in Syria would also need the support of the business community in the country in terms of financial support for the Path's infrastructure, at Habash's urging, Lesch also met with a leading businessman in Damascus (for security reasons, let's call him Ahmad) who was religiously conservative and thus had good relations with some of the leading religious figures in the city, especially Sunni Sufi shaykhs, many of whom were still very influential in the country and had been particularly courted by Bashar al-Assad since he came to power.

Ahmad turned out to be very supportive of the API; indeed, he became, perhaps, its biggest champion in the country at the time. Through his intercession, Lesch met a couple of days later with a top imam and head of one of the most influential Sufi houses (let's call him Hamid) as well as twenty or so Sunni imams, to discuss the project. The meeting with Shaykh Hamid and his associates at his Islamic center went very well. It was a surreal but ultimately rewarding evening. They all chanted together, prayed together (with Lesch leading the prayers), and then ate together. Ahmad then invited Lesch to a dinner that evening at

his villa located about a half hour south of Damascus, at which Hamid, the imams, and other businessmen would be present.

After the dinner, there ensued an intense discussion about the API, with the participants peppering Lesch with questions and raising a number of concerns. They spoke about the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) and what he meant to Syrians and Muslims in general. The discussion touched a bit on the economic and touristic issues, but then it shifted to Israel and the Golan Heights, considered by Syrians to be their land and unlawfully occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The discussion also veered toward what Syrians consider to be the suffering of Palestinians under Israeli occupation. It is at this point that the conversation became very animated and emotional.

Lesch was ready for this. Almost any discussion having even the slightest relationship to international politics inevitably turned to Israel, the Golan, and the Palestinians. It typically focused on what Syrians consider to be the grave injustices inflicted upon Syrians and Palestinians by Israel and its supporters, mainly the United States. Whatever what one might think about the validity of their arguments and level of distress, the subject matter had been woven into the fabric of Syria. So it was *de rigueur* to bring up the subject matter in discussions such as these, especially with a project that was indirectly through geography connected to Israel. Lesch was patient and carefully listened to their exhortations, which ultimately focused on the question of how Syria could engage in this while its Palestinian brethren were suffering under a brutal occupation?

Lesch had something in his back pocket, so to speak, that he was waiting to take out at just this moment. He told the gathering that, in fact, the Palestinians had already signed up for the API and were actively participating in it; indeed, with the approval of the Palestinian Authority, a Palestinian tour operating group had already mapped out and opened up a segment of the path in

the West Bank. So Lesch asked the imams and businessmen that if the Palestinians themselves found it acceptable to participate—and enthusiastically so—then the Syrians had no reason not to do so as well. Lesch then pulled out some brochures that advertised the walking trail in Palestine. Pleased with this, the imams and businessmen at the dinner overwhelmingly gave their consent to the effort and promised to do what they could to help.

Unbeknown to Lesch, however, during his meeting with Shaykh Hamid at his religious center earlier in the day, photos were taken of Lesch with the Shaykh and the imams. These photos, along with accompanying stories describing the nature of the meetings and a description of the API, appeared over the next couple of days (after Lesch departed) in *al-Baath* and *al-Thawra* state-controlled newspapers. And the *minaret* wars were on.

Moving Past the Minaret Wars

After the stories about the API appeared in the Syrian newspapers, the original host committee began to express feelings of being cast aside by the API. In a series of emails to Elias Amidon, they expressed concern that Lesch had met with Assad and others without anyone from the host committee present. However, from the perspective of Lesch and the API leadership, the host committee was already somewhat radioactive stemming from the prior warnings from the *mukhabarat*. Reconnecting with them, especially when planning a meeting with Assad, may have put a meeting with the Syrian president and the chance at any immediate progress at risk. It was a delicate balancing act that in retrospect probably could have been handled better by all parties involved. And Amidon did his best to assuage the host committee that this was simply a temporary and necessary step to get the project going again, and that it was best for the time being for the API “internationals” to try to garner formal Syrian government support. Lesch also believed that Assad directly pointed the way forward in his meeting, and it would be best to

stay on that path rather than deviate from it. The clear intent was that once government support was established, then perhaps the project could reconnect with the host committee. As Amidon emailed Father Paolo, “Father Abraham’s tent is open to all.” In an email to the API leadership, Lesch stated the following: “I am convinced we are riding the correct horse right now to get this thing punched through, but it cannot be a horse exclusive of others because the carriage is too heavy and has too many wheels to be drawn by a single beast of burden.”

But the damage had already been done in an *al-Thawra* editorial written by someone from one of the Islamic centers in Damascus connected to the host committee. The article was entitled, “The Abraham Path (Upon Him Peace): A Big International Project or a Dangerous Jewish Pilgrimage.” A summary of the article was sent to us. Its focus was Lesch’s visit with Shahkh Hamid (but not with Assad), and how Syrian authorities to date had blocked the API in Syria because of the “dialectic interaction of the Jewish, Israeli, and Zionist unclear elements,” and that “it was a Jewish pilgrimage that bypasses deeply the Israeli-Arab conflict.” The author closed by asking whether or not there was discrimination by API representatives in siding with certain religious institutions over others. As it turned out, all of this just greased the wheels of the *mukhabarat* to continue—indeed intensify—its opposition to our efforts.

After Lesch returned, he recommended to Ury, Norris, Amidon, and Weiss that he make another trip to Damascus as soon as possible, this time accompanied by the API leadership in order to help cement the foundation laid on his previous trip. In early July 2007, Lesch, Ury, Amidon, and Norris did indeed fly to Damascus, with the intent of meeting with Assad but also getting together with other Syrian officials and leading imams and businessmen in order to cast a wide net of support that could hopefully offset or mitigate expected resistance from the *mukhabarat*.

The group arrived in Damascus in July. They were informed shortly thereafter that President Assad would not be able to meet with them. The group was unsure how to take this. On the one hand, perhaps it was a good sign in the sense that obtaining Assad's support was unnecessary because the project already had it. This line of thought was boosted by the fact that the Office of the President set up meetings with the Minister of Tourism and other officials, as it wanted this ministry to take the lead in working with the API. On the other hand—and perhaps more in retrospect—maybe it was an early sign that Assad was backing away a bit from his earlier enthusiastic response and did not want to be directly connected with the API until the project gained more solid footing with various influential groups in Syria.

Regardless of this, the group met with a number of leading officials in the Syrian government over the next few days. In addition, the group met with Shaykh Hamid and Ahmad and enjoyed a wonderful dinner at Ahmad's villa south of Damascus, at which the Shaykh and a number of other imams were present in addition to businessmen and others friendly with Ahmad. Again, just before the dinner commenced, Shaykh Hamid asked Lesch to lead the prayers. Caught a bit off guard, Lesch remembered his Catholic school upbringing and went on to recite something resembling the Beatitudes, which, of course, are the blessings enunciated by Jesus of Nazareth in his Sermon on the Mount. It was a big hit to start off the dinner; indeed, Ury leaned over to Lesch and told him how wonderful his blessings were and how did he come up with it? Lesch laughingly told him that it was not original source material!

The Ministry of Tourism agreed to an ongoing dialogue with Norris and Adamson and to another meeting in Syria soon to begin making plans for mapping out at least one small section of the projected Path in the country. The group also met for dinner one evening with General Manaf Tlas and his wife, Thala, at a top restaurant in the Old City of Damascus that was a renovated

and converted stately home, a shining example of the emphasis on upgrading Syria's tourism infrastructure under Bashar's rule. Lesch knew Tlas well and had met with him on a number of occasions over the preceding few years. Tlas was a close friend of Bashar's and commander of the elite fourth armored division in Damascus, which essentially acted as the military protector of the regime. He is also from one of the most powerful and famous families in Syria. His father, Mustafa Tlas, was the long serving minister of defense under Hafiz al-Assad; indeed, most historians point to Tlas as being a key figure in bringing Hafiz to power in the 1970 intra-Baath coup. Furthermore, he may have been the key element in making sure that Bashar came to power in 2000 following his father's death, convincing other generals and security officials that the second son of Hafiz was the best choice at the time to lead the country. Mustafa Tlas would remain in the position of minister of defense for a few years before retiring, bequeathing his family's influence in Damascus to his son, Manaf. Lesch believed that having a powerful figure such as Manaf in essence consecrating the API in Syria by having dinner in a very open manner would also help mitigate potential resistance from the *mukhabarat*. And Manaf and Thala, who is also from a prominent family in Syria, were definitely supportive of the API, and the group really appreciated them taking a stand like this on their behalf. Manaf and Thala knew exactly what they were doing.

So, things seemed to be shaping up quite nicely. The day before departure, Lesch's longtime friend, Dr. Ghias Barakat, who at the time was Minister of Higher Education and was, indeed, the person through whom Lesch communicated his desire back in 2002 to meet with Assad, invited the group to a kind of farewell lunch. It took place at a restaurant up on the side of Qassioun Mountain overlooking Damascus. In addition to Barakat, the lunch included officials Lesch knew well, such as then-Minister of Expatriates Bouthaina Shaaban (who later became the Political and Media advisor to Assad), then-Deputy Foreign Minister

Faysal Maqdad (who later became Foreign Minister), Minister of Tourism Saadallah Agha al-Kalaa, and a few others. It was quite the feast. Lesch, Ury and Norris represented the API at lunch, while Amidon instead took the time to meet with members of the original host committee to try to mend fences.

On the drive up the mountain to the restaurant, however, Barakat's driver took notice of something: a car with two *mukhabarat* was following our car. Barakat remarked that this was "very strange." Cars of security personnel were fairly easy to notice, as they pretty much drove the same type of car. On a speaking tour of Syria sponsored by the State Department in early 2006, Lesch traveled with US embassy officials throughout the country in Chevy Suburbans. The US security officers traveling with them often made it a game to figure out which cars were security following the US delegation—it was not a hard game to play.

During the lunch, several of the Syrian government officials wondered aloud why we had not yet met with the new Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun. Barakat and Hassoun were good friends going back to their days in Aleppo before joining the government. Barakat called Hassoun and strongly recommended that he meet with the API group before we departed the next day. The Grand Mufti agreed. Shortly after this, Barakat leaned over to Lesch and said, "be careful, those guys are in the kitchen." He was referring to the *mukhabarat* who followed his car, and Lesch took his warning to mean to watch out what he eats because the security guys might put something nasty, a poison of some sort, in the food, something that they were known to do from time to time. They did not want to poison the whole group at lunch, especially not the Syrian ministers, so it had to be something specific that only Lesch would consume—most likely his drink.

No doubt the phone calls were tapped, and probably one of the waiters at the table was on the payroll of the *mukhabarat*. So it is very likely that the immediate intent to meet with the Grand Mufti became known to the *mukhabarat*, something it obviously saw as problematic if the API was to receive his blessing. On a subsequent visit to Syria, one of the ministers at the July lunch told Lesch straight up that, yes, in fact he was poisoned with the sole purpose of preventing him from meeting with Hassoun.

Lesch started to become ill on the drive over from the restaurant to the office of the Grand Mufti, a feeling similar to food poisoning. Since Lesch was known in the country and the “friend” of Assad, he was the leader of the delegation, so he could not just slouch down in the background in any meeting; he had to be upfront and lead the discussion. He was getting worse and worse, but with the help of his API colleagues, was able to make it to the Grand Mufti’s office. He somehow made it through what turned out to be a wonderful meeting, and the Grand Mufti indicated his initial approval of the project. Mission accomplished. The group made it to the elevator leaving the Grand Mufti, and once the doors closed, Lesch collapsed and had to be helped to the car by his friends. Ury called it “heroic diplomacy.” The group departed the next day while Lesch stayed behind an extra day in order to recover fully. Unfortunately, Lesch was well acquainted with food poisoning from undercooked or rancid food items over the years—that’s what a fast food diet in graduate school will do. This feeling, while similar in many ways, was also markedly different, something Lesch had never felt before. As will be seen, he would have one more occasion to confirm the differences. At the time, although there were suspicions, the API group did not yet conclude that Lesch was purposely poisoned; therefore, the group left with a clear sense of accomplishment and momentum.

Opposition Grows

The API group returned to the United States in a very positive state of mind, thinking it had Syrian government support. They needed to build upon the momentum established. It was soon planned that Norris and Adamson would return to Syria to begin to develop at least a first segment of the path in consultation with the Ministry of Tourism. This is when ambiguous signals started to be sent by various Syrian government officials, especially from the Ministry of Tourism. Norris wondered if it might be necessary for the API to go through a process of approval from the Organization of Islamic Conferences, a worldwide organization composed of Muslim countries. This would help not only in Syria but also in places such as Turkey and Jordan, where there also existed some resistance from Muslim officials. We still do not know to this day what happened between our visit in July and the events described below. We assumed that opposition from the *mukhabarat* continued, if not intensified. But we imagine so did opposition from certain Islamic centers in Syria, which, apparently, was not offset by the tacit approval of the Grand Mufti.

In early August, Dan Adamson wrote a report for the API entitled, "Islamic Endorsement for the API: Challenges and Strategies." In it Adamson outlined existing Islamist opposition to the API in Turkey, Jordan, and Syria. In Turkey a conservative Muslim journalist condemned the project as "un-Islamic." In Jordan, some Muslim supporters of the project informed Norris and Adamson that the API would draw the ire of the "more puritanical edges of Islam," in addition to the fact that the Grand Mufti of Jordan refused to endorse the Path. Adamson indicated concerns across the region among Muslims about a religiously oriented path that could be confused and/or compete with the *Hajj* to Mecca. In addition, as we encountered in Syria, there existed a good bit of political hostility and antipathy expressed through religion toward anything emanating from the West, the United States, and/or Israel and the Jews. All of this would be very difficult to overcome.

It is at this point that Elias Amidon circulated an email to the group suggesting that, perhaps, the API could be reframed as a Path with more emphasis on hospitality, respectful tourism, volunteerism, and historical and cultural interest. This is the first time we seriously discussed re-naming the path to something such as the “Path of the Middle East” or “Path of Hospitality.” Clearly, attaching the Prophet Abraham’s name to the effort complicated matters, dividing perceptions toward the API rather than uniting them. Tyler Norris then met with Muhammad Habash, who was visiting New York City in September, in order to shore up Islamic support for the API in Syria. Habash expressed some concerns, ones that obviously were more than just his own personal misgivings, that the API would put pressure on Syria to open up the country to all visitors. If Syria denied visas to certain people, such as those who had visited Israel (or what Syria called Occupied Palestine), it could cause some embarrassment for the country and could even be taken up at the United Nations. Habash suggested building up more support in Syria first, and perhaps even for the API to bring some members of the US Congress to Syria, something that would be problematic given the still inimical state of US-Syrian relations following the Hariri assassination and Hizbullah-Israel war in Lebanon.

Norris and Adamson were scheduled to visit Syria in October 2007 to meet with Ministry of Tourism officials, again primarily to discuss plans to develop a small segment of the path in the country. However, they were denied Syrian visas by the embassy in Washington, DC. Lesch then met in Washington with Imad Moustapha, the Syrian ambassador to the United States, someone the Trinity professor had known for a long time and considered a friend. He could speak frankly with him. Imad made it clear to Lesch that it was Syrian security that prevented the visas from being issued. The Syrian ambassador said that he had, indeed, spoken directly with Bashar about the API on his last trip to Damascus a month earlier. The issue of whether or

not visitors had previously visited “Occupied Palestine” (that is, Israel), which is the form in which it appeared on Syrian visa applications, came up. Although Imad told Lesch that Bashar was still supportive of the project, he received no written instructions or authorization from the Syrian president. He suggested to Lesch that he visit personally with Bashar again and get him to publicly announce his support. This would be the only thing, in Imad’s point of view, that would dampen or eliminate opposition from the *mukhabarat*. The poisoning of Lesch back in early July was, in retrospect, a clear opening salvo by the *mukhabarat* and an indication of the lengths to which it might go to scuttle the API effort. Only a direct sanction from the boss himself could possibly overcome this.

Lesch once again traveled to Damascus in early November with a confirmed meeting with Bashar al-Assad the morning after he arrived. He thought that meeting with the Syrian president before the Middle East peace talks scheduled to convene in Annapolis, Maryland, in December, sponsored by the United States and to which Syria—emerging out of the cold—was invited, would make the meeting a multi-point discussion rather than just focusing on the API. When Lesch landed at the Damascus International Airport, there were no cars waiting for him on the tarmac. There was no one from the Office of the President meeting him before customs to shepherd him to the VIP area. This was a bit surprising but not totally unexpected. It had happened about a year and a half earlier to Lesch because the president’s protocol office was busy with a foreign head of state visiting the country (Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad). Customs is usually not very busy anyhow, and Lesch typically sailed right through. Not on this occasion, however. Upon issuing his passport to the customs agent, the latter went through the vetting process, and then he picked up the phone, which to Lesch was not a good sign. The customs agent told Lesch that he was on the blacklist, i.e. a list of undesirables not to be let into the country—or worse. To

say the least, this is not a list on which a visitor wanted his or her name to appear.

Suddenly a couple of officers from Syrian air force intelligence, which controls the airport and is probably the most powerful of the myriad of Syrian intelligence agencies, collected Lesch and brought him to a small room down an adjacent corridor. Lesch immediately knew he was going to be interrogated, but he was not fearful, having gone through this process in other Arab countries and Israel from time to time. If things did not go well, he thought he might just be placed on the next plane departing the country, no matter the destination, or at worst maybe roughed up a bit and then placed on the next plane. At no time did he think he was simply going to disappear and never be heard from again.

[For this one incident, Lesch will write in the first person]. I entered the room with several officers, and we all sat down. My chair was lower than everyone else's to make sure I was looking up at the security officers. It was interrogation 101. Nothing was said for a little while until a colonel came in, who was obviously in charge. For the next three hours he kept asking me in various forms the same question: what was I doing in Syria? And for the next three hours I tried to convince him that early the following morning I had an appointment with his president. It was fairly perfunctory, except on one occasion when the colonel pulled out his pistol, placed it on the table in front of me, and then he proceeded to twirl it, like we (or just me probably) were going to play Russian roulette. It was an obvious attempt to intimidate me.

I repeatedly gave him the name and numbers of my contacts in the president's office and asked him to call one of them. After a long standoff, I finally convinced him that NOT calling the president's office and kicking me out of the country or otherwise being detained when I had an appointment with Assad in a little over twelve hours, was going to be worse for him than letting me

go. He relented and called the number I gave him. I remember vividly the look on his face, perhaps seeing his career flash before his eyes, when he learned that I was, in fact, meeting with Assad the next morning. It was almost worth the three hours of interrogation (almost). The funniest thing was that the colonel told me that the official in the president's office to whom he spoke informed my erstwhile interrogator that I was an author, wrote a book on Assad, and frequently met with the Syrian president. The remorseful colonel then asked for my autograph! He had a pen but no paper, so he gave me the sheet of paper from customs, the blacklist, which had my name on it—and I signed the back of it. Of course, I was graciously escorted out of the airport and driven by security to the Sheraton Hotel.

This episode was troubling for a variety of reasons beyond the incident itself. First of all, I had a visa, which had been stamped personally at the Syrian embassy in DC when I met earlier with Imad Moustapha. So, it was not blocked at that level, probably because I had a confirmed meeting with Assad, which supposedly superseded the blacklist. And I was well known in Syria—and certainly with the *mukhabarat*—as the American scholar who frequently met with Assad. I knew the *mukhabarat* did not particularly like my access to Assad because, as I have been told, they believed I had undue—and, I guess in their eyes, potentially pernicious—influence on the president, but I was never stopped or otherwise impeded before this happened—followed, yes; phone tapped, yes; camera in the air vent in my hotel rooms, yes; but I was never detained like this. It appears, then, that I was on the blacklist and interrogated at the airport purely because of my association with the API, which was not a good sign for our efforts. As my friend Ahmad confided in me a couple of days later, the “right hand of security often does not know what the left hand of the presidency is doing—and vice versa.”

This apparent space between the president and the *mukhabarat* has been troublesome for Syria for quite some time, i.e. the

apparent leeway given to security forces. When I saw Assad the next day, as he usually did, he asked me how my trip went. I said, “other than the three-hour interrogation at the airport, it was fine.” He expressed amazement and seemed genuinely unhappy I had to go through this ordeal. He called some people in and ordered them to find out what happened, and then he assured me this would never occur again. In response, I said, “Mr. President, if you do not get control of these guys [security], they will come back and haunt you.” I had the type of relationship at this point where I felt I could be respectfully frank with him—and after having had an evening to think about it, I was genuinely angry. My comment to him turned out to be somewhat prophetic because, as is now well known, the match that lit the fire of the uprising and subsequent civil war in Syria that began in 2011 was the *mukhabarat* acting in its typically excessive and single-minded fashion, roughing up some teenagers from Deraa for writing anti-regime graffiti on the walls of a building. The protests in Deraa against their treatment, in the hot flash of the Arab spring that had been roaring elsewhere in the Arab world at the time, launched what would soon become a countrywide uprising.

The meeting itself with Assad regarding the API went well. We mutually acknowledged the obstacles and focused on the name being the primary reason for those obstacles, i.e. the inclusion of “Abraham” in the title. The president then suggested the possibility of changing the name of the path in Syria to something less religiously volatile and more innocuous in a descriptive sense. He mentioned that in this way perhaps it could gain more acceptance by the *ulama* (religious scholars) and security. He commented, somewhat frustratingly, that this type of manipulation is often how one gets things done in Syria. It was actually an excellent idea, obviously coming from someone who had to manipulate the process over and over to “get things done.” But Bashar demurred regarding coming out publicly to support the establishment of the Path in Syria until we came up with a new name and garnered more local backing.

I was only in Damascus for a few days, but I arranged to meet with my friend, Ahmad for lunch to update him on our progress and maintain our connection to him. The night before I was to depart, he invited me to dinner at his villa. One of his sons was going to pick me up at the hotel, when Ahmad called me to inform me that he would not be able to meet with me because “something had come up.” I did not think too much of it until later that same evening when someone slipped a note under my door. It was from Ahmad, probably delivered by one of his sons, and it read the following: “The right hand is preventing me from seeing you.” As you recall, it was his comment to me at lunch, when I described my ordeal at the airport, that the “right hand” of security often does not know what the “left hand” of the presidency is doing—or vice versa. Of course, he was telling me that security stopped him from meeting me for dinner. In fact, as I learned from him on a subsequent trip, General Asef Shawkat himself, the head of Syrian intelligence, brother-in-law to Assad, and one of the most powerful people in the country, came to Ahmad’s apartment in Damascus to personally tell him not to see me. This is how high up and, apparently, important this was to the *mukhabarat*—or at least elements in it. Ahmad told me that he actually argued with Shawkat that the General was making a big mistake, that I was a friend of Syria who he was making into an enemy. The fact that I was testifying on Syria in front of the Senate Foreign Relations committee in Washington, DC the day after I returned to the United States gave Ahmad even more reason to argue with Shawkat that his opposition was misguided and counterproductive. Regardless, this high level of opposition to our plans was daunting, to say the least, and in retrospect probably meant our effort was doomed—we just didn’t know it yet. Certainly getting Bashar’s tacit support, even for a little while, gave our project some life when it was dead in the water. We held onto that reed of support, and maybe, just maybe it was enough to push this through, especially if we could re-name and re-orient the Path in Syria. [*End of first person narrative*]

Name Change

Lesch flew from Damascus directly to Istanbul, where the API was holding an annual retreat for all its staff and partners, including those working in the targeted countries in the Middle East. When discussing Syria, Lesch brought up Assad's idea to change the name of the Path. As noted earlier by Amidon, this is something the API had already been considering in terms of localizing the brand. Initially the group came up with a tentative name (Syrian National Trail), but eventually some weeks later settled on the following: Syrian Cultural Walking Trail (SCWT). This was pretty neutral yet descriptive. It was simply a walking trail that highlighted Syria's heritage and culture. Perhaps this was innocuous enough to diminish opposition from the *mukhabarat* as well as certain imams and Islamic centers. Organizationally, perhaps the SCWT could be seen as a local entity wholly owned and operated by the parent company, the API. Clearly some kinks had to be worked out in this regard, and while its relationship with the API needed to be flushed out, it became apparent that at least in Syrian eyes, the relationship was limited at best. Indeed, it was envisioned at the time that any website developed around the SCWT would not make any mention of the API. And vice versa, the API website would not make any specific references to the SCWT, as some Syrians would most definitely be checking that out to use against us if a direct link was found.

To follow up with the name change and to hopefully move the ball forward a bit further, another trip was made to Damascus in February 2008. Lesch went with Norris and Adamson on this occasion, although no meeting was set up with Assad on this trip. It was one designed primarily to establish good relations with the Ministry of Tourism, which was given the lead in the government to work with the delegation, as well as re-connect with local partners. They all arrived separately in Damascus, all

having received visas ahead of time, which was a good sign. Lesch, however, was once again stopped at customs, and despite Assad's assurances, he was still on the blacklist. Once again he was brought back to the same room where he was interrogated the previous November; however, this time the same colonel greeted Lesch with a hug, they exchanged pleasantries, and they sat down to drink some tea. A much better experience than last time! At least the *mukhabarat* (air force intelligence) appeared onboard, showing again the value of having Assad's tacit imprimatur. Lesch was escorted out and driven by security to his hotel.

Things did not go well in the first few days. The Office of the President had not set up an agenda for us to meet with Ministry of Tourism officials. We were clearly being followed, and we found recording equipment—cameras—in the vents of our hotel rooms at the Sheraton. Another dinner with Ahmad had been canceled, obviously due to pressure from security. In addition, in a meeting Lesch had with a Cabinet minister friend of his, he learned that since November there had been more than one Cabinet level meeting chaired by the prime minister to specifically discuss the API. It was concluded at those meetings that the disadvantages outweighed the advantages. He did not specify exactly what those were. Assad was not present at these Cabinet sessions. Lesch's friend also commented that Syrian security was dead set against the project in its original manifestation. The depth of their opposition was very real. Of course, Lesch retorted that that is why the name of the project had been changed, an idea that President Assad came up with himself. The Cabinet minister responded positively—how could he not—and said this might just work after all.

Things began to look up on this trip when, finally, a meeting was scheduled with the Ministry of Tourism. The tone of this meeting completely changed when the ministry staffers were informed about the name change, and, again, who had suggested

it, i.e. President Assad himself. Norris and Adamson continued to meet with ministry officials, beginning to talk about the nuts and bolts of planning a first segment of the trail in Syria. It was agreed that it would be from Deir Mar Musa to Damascus and would be called the “Monastery Trail,” since it would begin at the monastery in Deir Mar Musa. The monastery was associated with the Syriac Catholic Church and located near the town of Nabk, about eighty kilometers (fifty miles) north of Damascus on the eastern slopes of the Anti-Lebanon range. Adamson, recognizing that crossing borders could be difficult, particularly given the fluid political situation, suggested that perhaps national trails could be set up in each country operating separately, and then they could all be connected when local and regional politics allowed it. It would happen at some point. In the meantime, ninety percent of the various trails in the region would be completed, with just the last ten percent left connecting trails across borders. It was a very interesting, practical, yet novel idea, but first the group had to get this one going in Syria.

Norris returned to Damascus in April to again meet with Ministry of Tourism officials. At the meetings, it was reaffirmed that the SCWT was conceived by President Assad and was being advanced by the Ministry of Tourism. Certainly from the API point of view, they were going to push the Assad angle again and again until someone said no because it appeared as if this was the only thing keeping the project going. We were not entirely sure the Office of the President was aware that we were doing this or if the Minister of Tourism had confirmed Assad’s support for the name change, but we went with it, as that was our understanding at the time. With ministry officials, Norris was able to examine the walking routes of the pilot segment, the tourist-related infrastructure, and plan next steps, including perhaps some sort of investors forum in Damascus to provide financial support for the SCWT.

A potential hiccup occurred in June when an Arab affairs correspondent (Yoav Stern) for the popular Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* contacted the API office and asked about the project, focusing on the fact that it included trails in both Syria and Israel. This is exactly what we hoped to avoid at this sensitive moment regarding our efforts in Syria. Some references to Syria in the API website had been overlooked and not entirely removed. They certainly were removed after this. The last thing we wanted was for an article to be written that referred to even indirect cooperation between Israel and Syria. If this happened, we would have no chance for success, as certainly the *mukahbarat* would be alerted to the article, which would only increase the wind in its sails to shut us down. The API office told Stern that the API was not operating in Syria and that a stand-alone cultural trail was being established that might at some point, following a Syrian-Israeli peace treaty, have a relationship with the API. As far as we know, the article was not written—another crisis averted.

Tyler Norris traveled back to Damascus in late June to continue planning the SCWT. He once again met with the Minister of Tourism, Dr. Saadalla Agha al-Kalaa, to confirm the relationship and direction of the project, and, indeed, he received a solid commitment from the Ministry. Dr. Saadalla told Norris that “earlier problems” had been cleared up due to the changing of the name of the trail. The Grand Mufti informed Norris of his continuing support and offered any assistance he could provide. Things seemed to be moving along quite nicely.

President Carter’s Support and Visit to Syria

Former President Jimmy Carter had formally endorsed the API some years earlier. It was also known to the group that Bashar al-Assad was a big fan of President Carter due to the latter’s open criticism of Israel over the years on the Palestinian issue and what many Arab leaders believe to be Carter’s more even-handed and level-headed opinions on American foreign policy

in the Middle East. So, it seemed to be a natural fit to see if President Carter could intercede with Assad on behalf of the path in the API's never-ending quest to obtain the Syrian president's public support for the SCWT. William Ury had a long history of working with President Carter and The Carter Center. So in a call with Carter in late August 2008, Ury was able to enlist the help of the former president, especially as he was scheduled to visit Lebanon and Syria that upcoming December. The exact nature of Carter's assistance would be determined by the API leadership over the next couple of months.

In the meantime, Dan Adamson and Tyler Norris were planning to visit Syria again in late September to meet with Ministry of Tourism officials and actually explore by foot and 4X4 the expected first segment of the SWCT. As per usual, Lesch emailed his contact in the Office of the President Assad detailing the upcoming trip by Norris and Adamson in order to keep Assad's staff informed as well as continue to gain its imprimatur in meeting with other government ministries. Their trip to Syria was successful, and they received ample support from the Ministry of Tourism during their stay; indeed, a ministry official accompanied them on their mapping project.

Back in the United States, it was decided in a flurry of consultations and emails that the best thing President Carter could do for the API while he was in Syria would be to take a symbolic short walk with President Assad along an expected segment of the SCWT that was either in or not too far from Damascus. We settled on a notable short path in the Christian Arab town of Maalula, located about 55 kilometers northwest of Damascus, or about a 45-minute ride by car. Maalula is known as one of the few towns left in the world (all located in Syria) where Aramaic is still spoken. Aramaic, of course, was most probably the language of Jesus of Nazareth. It is a Semitic language, like Arabic and Hebrew, but it largely disappeared from the Middle East following the Arab conquests of the 7th century C.E. It is also a

town that the Syrian government likes to tout as emblematic of Syria's religious diversity and tolerance. Most VIP visitors, especially from the West, are taken there by Syrian officials when they visit the country. It is a unique venue, as the town of some 3000 people, mostly comprised of Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholics, is essentially built into the side of a mountain. The town would most definitely be on the SCWT. The highlight of visiting Maalula is actually walking along a narrow path that is crack or slit in the mountain overlooking the town. Anyone who has visited Petra in Jordan (or watched *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*) would be familiar with this, as the entrance into Petra is also one of these pathway/slits in a mountain; indeed, the Arabic meaning of the town's name is "entrance," as a reference to this opening or gap.

There are local variations, but as legend has it, a student of St. Paul by the name of Thecla was being pursued by Roman soldiers for having converted to Christianity. In the process of trying to escape, she became trapped against the mountain, without any way to get through. She prayed for divine intervention, and her prayers were answered, as the mountain split apart just enough for her to pass through and away from the soldiers. As such, Maalula has developed into a popular Christian religious tourist site in Syria. The pathway begins at the top, marked by the Saint Thecla Monastery, which holds the remains of Thecla, and winds down through the mountain and into the town of Maalula itself. It is a relatively short but quite beautiful and dramatic journey. It would be perfect if Carter and Assad would walk this pathway together—or at least that's what we thought at the time. Getting Assad's public blessing by walking with President Carter, along with the associated publicity, might be enough to consecrate the SCWT and shut down at least for the time being opposition from various quarters in Syria.

Lesch and Adamson were scheduled to visit Damascus in October, during which time the former would meet with Assad and

communicate to him President Carter's support and desire to walk with him in Maalula. Adamson would continue his planning with the Ministry of Tourism as well as try to broaden the support base for the SCWT in Syria. A couple of weeks beforehand, though, Lesch wrote a draft of a letter that would be from Carter, which Lesch would then hand deliver to Assad. The draft made the rounds through the API leadership, focusing on why the SCWT is significant from a geopolitical standpoint in terms of helping generate a more positive media image of Syria in the West as well as a better understanding of Syria's tolerance and religious diversity. These were all very important things to President Assad coming on the heels of the horrid publicity Syria received after the 2003 Iraq war and 2005 Hariri assassination. It was also important for a country that wanted to drastically improve its tourism footprint. The draft was sent to President Carter via his associate at the Carter Center, Bob Pastor, whereupon the former president made the final alterations to the draft. The letter was sealed and sent to Lesch.

Before departing for Damascus, Lesch met with Ambassador Imad Moutapha once again in Washington, where he received his Syrian visa, went over his itinerary, confirmed the meeting with Assad, and discussed the Carter visit and overall progress of the SCWT. Lesch met with Assad on October 20th for almost two hours, during which time a number of subjects were discussed, including the progress to date on the SCWT. He also handed Assad the letter from Carter. Assad had not yet heard of Carter's proposed trip in December, but he was, as Lesch described it, "overwhelmingly positive" about the visit, and he said he would alter his schedule accordingly in order to meet with Carter. He told Lesch that he would do "anything he [Carter] wants." Of course, this included the walk in Maalula. After meeting with Assad, Lesch then met with Bouthaina Shaaban, who had become the Political and Media Advisor to the President. Her office was located in the same Rowda building in which he met with Assad. Shaaban suggested that her office be

the direct point of contact for President Carter's trip rather than the Syrian embassy in Washington, DC. Lesch saw this as a positive development, as the Office of President would be directly involved in the planning of Carter's walk with Assad, perhaps another step toward obtaining full and public presidential support for the SCWT. Also, during the stay in Damascus, Lesch and Adamson met with someone who was essentially Asma al-Assad's chief of staff, a person Adamson knew previously. The meeting went well, and he expressed his full support for the SCWT. Again, another good sign that we hoped meant the support of the First Lady of Syria, which could only boost our efforts to acquire presidential backing.

Shortly after Lesch and Adamson returned, there was a conference call held with Carter Center officials led by Hrair Balian to brief them on the visit and begin to coordinate activities, including the planned walk in Maalula. Balian would accompany Carter on his trip. Afterward, the API feverishly began to brainstorm and imagine all sorts of issues, opportunities and challenges, from the mundane to the grandiose; ultimately, we felt we had to nail this in terms of figuring out how to best utilize Carter's visit to help cement the establishment of the SCWT. We all had to have the same vision, but there were a multitude of details to address in a fairly short period of time: organizing a press pool; maybe arranging for a youth group to meet the presidents as they emerged from the aperture; develop a plan B if it rains; having adequate funds; who to invite in and outside of Syria; having Arabic and English translators to help with the press kit; whether or not Mrs. Carter would go on the walk, perhaps with Asma al-Assad; getting an exact date and time of day for the visit to Maalula; prepping Carter's advance team; developing talking points; making sure that President Carter used the name Syrian Cultural Walking Trail and did not make any public references to the Abraham Path Initiative, etc. We also brought in Anisa Mehdi, an Emmy award winning broadcast journalist and filmmaker, to advise us on how we might possibly film the

walk, to the point of it acting as a basis for a promotional film or even a documentary on the API.⁸ We were also asked by President Carter to keep everything about his visit to Lebanon and Syria strictly under wraps until after the November U.S. presidential election, so that it would not in any way become an issue that might deleteriously affect the voting even slightly.

Despite very positive feelings in the group regarding the Carter visit and what this would mean to our achieving our immediate objectives in Syria, there were some disturbing indications that we were still far from reaching our goal. And, importantly, that we were biting off more than we could chew in planning for the Maalula walk.

During Adamson's visit to Damascus in October, some red flags appeared. In his meeting with a high level official from the Ministry of Tourism, Adamson reported that the ministry official was less than fully supportive of the SCWT, saying that there had yet been no clear green light from the president's office. At the suggestion of a prominent Syrian ex-pat who was supportive of the effort, Adamson met with the president of the Syrian Chamber of Commerce in order to get his—and the chamber as a whole—backing for the SCWT. In his description of the meeting, Adamson said that while the president of the chamber liked the idea, he was “not the least bit interested” in supporting it because there had been no official authorization for the SCWT from the government.

In early November we were informed by Shaaban's office that the point work for Carter's event at Maalula was turned back over to the Ministry of Tourism. Lesch believed this was a bad sign. Not only might it be an indication of the Office of the President backing away from its tacit support of the SCWT, but the complicated planning now rested in Syria with a ministry that

was not known at the time for being particularly efficient or responsive.

Lesch began to strongly warn the group that the whole Maalula walk needed to be kept simple, and Adamson agreed, saying that he did not want to see the event “turned into a circus.” He mentioned the goal was to acquire a Syrian stamp of approval, specifically from Bashar al-Assad, not using the Carter visit for more grandiose purposes. Lesch reiterated the strong level of paranoia in Syrian leadership circles to anything emanating from the West, typically associated in this case with suspicions that the SCWT was some sort of Trojan horse with nefarious objectives. One telling sign in this regard was when Bouthaina Shaa-ban spoke with the prominent ex-pat Syrian businessman mentioned above. He told us that she asked him, “What do they [API] really want?” Coming right after a US presidential election and now associated with a former US president, the SCWT certainly generated some questions in Damascus. In addition, there was a US military strike in Syria (the so-called Abu Kamal raid) on October 26. US special forces via helicopter crossed the Syrian border from Iraq and attacked what the US claimed was a foreign fighters network in Abu Kamal, located near the Iraqi border in northeastern Syria. The US claimed the foreign fighters were assisting and participating in the Iraqi insurgency that had been targeting the US-led coalition forces in Iraq. The Syrian government called the raid a “criminal and terrorist” attack on Syrian sovereignty. Although the Syrian government did not retaliate in any meaningful way, it certainly created a tense US-Syrian relationship and environment that did not help our efforts at all, and it only reinforced existing local suspicions of the SCWT.

One of the main challenges the API group had in handling the Carter visit was how to link the API with the SCWT in the eyes of donors and supporters outside of Syria. In other words, in order to maximize the value of this unique opportunity,

especially in terms of generating more financial support, the SCWT had to be connected to the API, yet doing so risked the opprobrium of the Syrians and possibly confirming what many in Syria already suspected, i.e. the SCWT was just a cover for the Abraham Path. In turn, this would reinforce suspicions that the whole project was some sort of devious plot orchestrated by and a conduit for Western and Israeli designs, or as one of us stated at the time, “slinking around with side agendas.” We never really reconciled these two aspects of the project in Syria, despite focused effort on trying to find the correct language that was sensitive to Syrian concerns. In fact, we sent a draft of the bridging language in mid-November to the official in Shaaban’s office with whom we were working regarding the Carter visit. We really meant it as a first draft that could be heavily amended per Syrian needs and concerns, and we sincerely asked for their input. But, perhaps in retrospect, it probably only raised more worries in the Office of the President about the real connection between the SCWT and the API becoming more public, thus placing Assad in a potentially awkward position. In the end, we never had to finalize this because the Syrian government put a halt to everything before we needed to complete the task.

Other red flags began to appear. First, Tyler Norris relayed his discussion with our main contact in the Ministry of Tourism on November 12. Apparently the MOT official said he had heard nothing about the Carter visit or associated events, despite the fact that Shaaban had told us that everything had been turned over to the ministry. The MOT official stated he needed something in writing from the Office of the President before proceeding. Of course, nothing like that would be forthcoming. It was a typical bureaucratic response, something that is universal to all bureaucracies, i.e. “I did not receive authorization.” In addition, the official in Shaaban’s office mentioned that he had no idea that the SCWT had been President Assad’s idea. In fact, he questioned whether Assad really understood the link between the API and SCWT as well as the link between the Carter visit and the

SCWT. Of course, he absolutely, positively did. This seemed to be a case of a government official doing his job in trying to distance Assad from the whole thing. This was obviously worrisome. In fact, he frankly told us that he thought the API was trying to “horn in” on the Carter-Assad walk in Maalula, when, of course, it was entirely our idea from the very beginning. In addition, he mentioned to Adamson that the API group was acting as though it was in control of the visit, was organizing way too much to be associated with the Maalula event, and greatly overstepped the bounds of proper protocol. Admittedly, in this he was partially correct.

Finally, we learned that the Office of the President had been complaining about us to the Carter Center along the lines mentioned above. As a result, we also learned from a Syrian insider that Carter (and his staff) began to downplay his interest in the SCWT. We were none too happy to hear this, but we also understood that Carter probably had other items on the agenda with Assad, and he certainly did not want something like the SCWT to sour the atmosphere between the two presidents. Lesch later learned that, in fact, Carter had been working behind the scenes at the time to facilitate a Syrian-Israeli deal on the Golan, with meetings being surreptitiously conducted by the Turks. It was actually a deal that had decent prospects of being consummated; however, another Israeli-Palestinian war in the Gaza Strip later in December ended this effort. Regardless, it is certainly understandable why the Carter Center backed away from any association with the API/SCWT. President Carter did not need anything else complicating an already exceedingly complex negotiation. Indeed, it is entirely possible the Syrian leadership was mistakenly conflating the proposed walk and SCWT in general with Carter’s peace efforts—and of course, we were completely unaware at the time of the secret Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

The symbolic coup de grace for the effort in Syria came in December when Lesch visited Damascus again. He had made

arrangements in advance to be there for the Carter visit, bringing his wife and son as well. Even though he knew the connection with the SCWT had been severed, he would go anyway more as a tourist than anything else. He did try to wiggle his way into the presidents' walk in Maalula, by himself, as a kind of lifeline to keeping the SCWT alive. Assad officials were quite gracious with Lesch in denying him this access, but it was clear they were having none of it. Indeed, officials from the Office of the President met Lesch and his family with cars on the tarmac at the airport, like the good old days, and provided a full time guide/facilitator and a security person for his entire five-day stay (before he went on to Jordan). In retrospect, however, he wonders whether the president's office was being courteous or keeping an eye on him. As will be described below, subsequent events suggest the latter. Lesch met with President Carter's point person, Hrair Balian, one evening in the bar at the Four Seasons in Damascus, where the former US president was staying. He probably wondered what Lesch was doing in Damascus. Lesch assured him he was only there as a tourist. They downed double scotch drinks for the rest of the evening, and since that time—and especially during the Syrian civil war—Lesch and Balian (and the Carter Center) have been good friends and repeatedly partners in peace efforts.

However, while in Damascus earlier in the visit, the API/SCWT's greatest Syrian champion, Ahmad, contacted Lesch by phone at the Sheraton. And, of course, the phones were most assuredly tapped. Ahmad invited Lesch to a reception at his villa south of Damascus on the night before Lesch and his family were to depart for Jordan. Lesch enthusiastically accepted. It would be a good opportunity to assess any chances of reviving the SCWT. The *mukhabarat* must have come to the same conclusion.

Lesch and his wife, Judy Dunlap, and his son, Michael, were scheduled for a long day of tourism the day prior to departure.

First they would visit the best preserved Crusader castle in the Middle East, the Crac de Chevaliers, located about halfway between Homs and the coastal city of Tartus. Then they would proceed back through Homs and eastward to the magnificent Roman ruins at Palmyra. Lesch visited each of these archeological treasures at least 7-8 times over the years. Even for his son, this would be his third time at each site. The car from the office of the president would transport them, accompanied by a protocol officer and driver. All was well until they arrive at Palmyra, when Lesch started to become ill, so sick in fact that he stayed in the car while his family toured the ruins.

They made their way back to their hotel in Damascus from Palmyra, with Lesch getting more and more ill. He literally collapsed on the bed in his hotel room. He began to recall that he was feeling very much like he had during the sickness/poisoning just prior to meeting with the Grand Mufti. And certainly Lesch's handlers had ample opportunity to slip something in the many bottles of water he consumed during the day. This time there would be no Cabinet level official confirming he had been poisoned, but it was highly suspicious, and if this was in fact the case, clearly it was an attempt to keep him from meeting with Ahmad. It appeared to work. Lesch gathered himself and called Ahmad to apologize that he would not be able to make it to his villa. Ahmad had become a dear friend, so when he practically begged Lesch to come because he had made some special arrangements, he reluctantly agreed. Lesch had to summon up all the energy he had left just to make it to the car Ahmad provided to drive him to the villa.

And special arrangements they were. As the car neared the compound, Lesch began to hear music playing. They exited the car to a phalanx of family and friends of Ahmad greeting them like kings and queens, while what in essence was an orchestra continued to play. They were led to the seats of honor at one end of a giant square of seats, a kind of diwan, surrounding a concrete

patio. Soon Lesch began to recognize that the Arabic-language songs being played were personally composed in the days prior to the reception, and they were songs in three parts, each focused on one member of his family, welcoming them, including their names in the lyrics. The one with Lesch's name also included his efforts regarding the SCWT. It was incredibly moving.

Then a troop of Sufi dancers came on in a spectacular performance that was both amazingly colorful and artistic with special props that cannot be adequately described in print. All of this certainly distracted Lesch from his sickness, but he was barely hanging on. When the feast began, Lesch retired to a nearby cabana to lay down and rest. He was sure he would probably have to stay the night and miss the flight the next morning to Jordan.

While he was lying flat on a couch in the cabana, suddenly almost everyone started coming inside, men, women, and children, for a December night in the countryside in Syria can get quite frigid. Ahmad told Lesch that he called his personal doctor from Damascus to come to the villa and see what he could do to help. During the hour or so it took for him to arrive, Lesch just laid there, barely conscious, listening to the white noise of conversation.

The doctor finally arrived and offered to give Lesch a shot in the rear to get him back on his feet. Lesch's wife, Judy, rightly expressed some concerns that this could possibly be a dose that would finish him off rather than improve his lot. Lesch, however, was desperate for relief...in one direction or the other! The physician pulled down his britches, yes, in front of all the men, women and children in the cabana, and gave him the shot. For Lesch, the promise of relief greatly outweighed modesty at that point. Remarkably, the injection—whatever it was—worked. Lesch was able to drag himself up at the end of the eventful night, return to Damascus, and, along with his family, fly to

Jordan the next morning. In a way, it was a symbolic end to the API efforts in Syria.

Conclusions and Lessons

William Ury received an email in January 2009 from a member of the original “host committee” in Syria describing—and confirming—what we already knew about the moribund state of the SCWT. Having gathered strands of information from his contacts in Damascus, he informed Ury that there was now no support for the SCWT in the Syrian government. He said that it got “caught up in a game of politics,” and that the API group would be wasting its resources if it continued to try to obtain support from anyone in the government. Outlining the objections of government officials to the SCWT, he relayed to us that many in Damascus believed it could lead to normalization with Israel (presumably before a return of the Golan Heights), land claims by Israel on the few Jewish sites in Syria (which we never really understood), and complications of Jews traveling in the country under different passports.

Dan Adamson made one last kind of “hail Mary” attempt the following April, contacting Asma al-Assad’s confidante with whom we had met in the early Fall and who was a big supporter of the SCWT. Adamson asked him if the SCWT could work in Syria under the umbrella of one of the government aligned civil society organizations, such as the Syria Development Trust or FIRDOS, the latter of which was led by the First Lady. He politely declined, saying that neither organization was taking on new projects and that the budgets had already been allocated. He suggested that the Ministry of Tourism was the best partner for the SCWT in Syria. Of course, as we learned the hard way, the Ministry of Tourism was, at least from the perspective of the API group, a giant sinkhole. Ury finally concluded that the best thing to do for now was to be patient and wait for the right time to

make another push. No one knew exactly when that might be, perhaps only after a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement, but we remain optimistic that at some point the Syrian government—especially in its post-Assad manifestation—would be more open to our entreaties. There were obviously important elements in Syria who vigorously supported the API/SCWT. We could take heart in that fact, and that we had established a bit of a foundation in the country on which to build future efforts.

Along the way on this unique journey, we learned many things about internal politics in Syria, including about President Assad himself and the pressure groups in and outside of the government with which he had to deal during his time in power:

1) Ever since Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000 there was something of a debate on whether he was truly a reformer who simply inherited an inert system full of powerful status-quo elements who constrained or even reversed his initial tendencies. There were a number of proposed and then retracted reform efforts that tend to support this position, none more so than the so-called Damascus Spring that Assad unleashed in the months after he took office, when, among others things, private newspapers and discussion salons were established, political prisoners released, etc., allowing for an unprecedented amount of open criticism of the government. As is generally understood, however, status quo elements, especially those within the military-security apparatus and Baath party leadership, quickly determined that this new environment would undermine their rule, so they compelled the young president to reverse course and authorize a new political crackdown.

Or was he more of just the same ruthless authoritarian as his father, and that his approachable demeanor was a front—a wolf in sheep's clothing if you will. To many, as seen through the prism of the brutal Syrian civil war, particularly the fury unleashed by the Syrian government on its own population, this only

confirmed the latter. Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in between.

Lesch, however, got to know Assad better than anyone in the West and had a number of unguarded moments with him, when the talking points were exhausted and he interacted with Assad the person. He has maintained that it is more of the former, at least through the early to mid-part of the Syrian president's first decade in power. Although only one case, the API's encounter with Assad in 2007-2008 would seem to reinforce the Assad-the-intended (or luckless)-reformer notion, i.e. that he saw the value of the API in Syria, was enthusiastic about it, and gave it his tacit blessing, but status quo elements in Syria in and outside of the government quashed the effort.

The API group tried hard—perhaps too hard—to obtain Assad's open and public blessing of the SCWT. This would have significantly dampened opposition from security and religious elements. It would not have eliminated opposition to the SCWT, and it may have redirected various groups to oppose us in different, subtle ways, but we have no doubt that we would have been able to go much further in our efforts with Assad's imprimatur. Why didn't he openly support our effort if he was genuinely enthusiastic about it? The answer probably lies in a response he once gave to Lesch regarding the excesses of the *mukhabarat*, something Lesch forcefully brought up with him in November 2007 following the professor's interrogation at the airport. Assad always admitted to Lesch that the *mukhabarat* overreached at times, but he knew that in a dangerous neighborhood, one that Syrians typically view as pernicious and diabolical, he needed them despite their periodic excesses. The bottom line is that the SCWT did not cross the threshold of importance to Assad in a way that made it in his interest to publicly support it and counter the opposition of powerful elements in Syria. Assad knew the pockets of potential opposition that would have to be assuaged in Syria before he could openly support the SCWT; after all, he

had been navigating this minefield for a number of years. He patiently—and perhaps correctly—allowed our efforts to continue to see how successful we were in generating sufficient support and how much opposition we aroused. When it was clear that the latter outweighed the former, amid a wealth of other more notable events occurring in Syria and the region, he backed off. As Lesch has written and said repeatedly, many hoped Assad would change the authoritarian system in Syria when he came to power, even incrementally. But in the end, the system changed him. He ultimately assimilated into the Syrian way of governing, something Lesch observed first hand over the years.⁹

2) It was difficult to bridge the conceptual paradigm of the Syrians, one that had a very different assessment of the nature of threat. It has been a persistent feeling in Syrian society based on real and imagined subversive attacks against Syria from the outside since its independence in 1946. It is somewhat self-serving for the Syrian government to promote this paranoia, for it necessitates the continuance of the security state, but their history informs them in a very real way beyond the brainwashing by state propaganda. So any group coming in from the West was immediately saddled with suspicion and distrust that was difficult to overcome. In a way, we were in part debilitated by the Syrian experience of decades of Western imperialism. And there certainly is a built-in resentment against what Syrians believe is the white-man's burden mentality existing in the West. Who are we to come in and define for them who Abraham is and what constitutes a religiously-oriented path of tourism, walking or not? This only fed into the suspicious attitudes with which we were greeted and the traditional fear that the West is always up to something lurking just underneath what seem to be innocuous intentions.

3) In the end, the API group probably moved a bit too fast for the Syrians, especially when the effort became attached to President Carter's visit. This is not how Syria works. Under Assad,

it moved very slowly, much slower than Westerners are used to. So even though we thought we were moving judiciously to build blocks of support in Syria, it still seemed to many Syrians as if we were pressing the matter too quickly. Which, again, only fed into existing suspicions about our true intentions. Related to this, it was in retrospect probably a mistake to include President Carter. It inestimably enhanced the exposure of the project to an unhealthy level and in a way that created more space for various groups to oppose the SCWT. Indeed, anything that required the public approval of Assad automatically raised the exposure of the project to commensurate levels, thus ensuring the watchful eye of security. Stay low, stay quiet, and work slowly may have produced better results in the long-term. The “less talk, more walk” motto perhaps should have been applied more assiduously. But we were between a rock and a hard place in that it became clear we needed the open support of Assad if the project was to survive, and for a time it did with at least his tacit approval, but in the end it was not enough.

4) In an authoritarian structure with a state-controlled media, private and public entities have over the years developed well-honed techniques of registering dissent. Most of this is indirect, especially when the president of the country is involved, but sometimes even more direct measures are employed, such as poisoning one of the principles of the SCWT effort on at least one occasion. In a way, it is a measure of some success that we aroused such a high level of opposition. We were obviously considered by some to be a very serious threat.

5) This goes for almost anything in the Middle East, but especially in a country such as Syria, which has been a central player on many different fronts in the region: one can never plan for nor anticipate events that are totally out of one’s control, events that deleteriously affect a project’s momentum or status. Impacting our efforts in Syria were the Hizbullah-Israeli war in 2006, the Abu Kamal raid in 2008 and overall animus between the United

States and Syria since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and even Israeli-Syrian secret negotiations in the fall of 2008 in which President Carter was involved. All of these impeded our efforts and added to the already enormous challenges facing us to begin with.

6) Finally, the Arab-Israeli conflict still dominated Syrians' worldview at the time, where anything of international origin was perceived through the prism of six decades of war with the Jewish state. The fact that the API included Israel only increased the level of suspicion and outright opposition from Syrian sources. In the end, powerful forces in the government refused to engage in anything that could be remotely perceived as concessions to Israel before the injustice done unto them with the loss of the Golan was adequately addressed. Anything else could be seen as a sign of weakness or perhaps damage what little leverage Syria had in bargaining with Israel, especially during secret negotiations that were happening contemporaneously.

Despite our experience, the API leadership is not casting Syria aside. The civil war no doubt complicated matters in the near term, and if anything, the Syrian leadership's view of the West became much more negative. We held out hope that there was still a glimmer of the reformer in Assad's worldview, or maybe it was just snuffed out by the authoritarian system as well as over a decade of a brutal civil war? If anything, as long as Assad stayed in power, any efforts on our part would have been that much more difficult in the face of the rise of military-security elements in Assad's inner circle as a result of the conflict. At the time we figured that any effort in this regard should probably wait until the Syrian governing apparatus became more accessible and open to groups from the outside entering its political space, or perhaps is removed entirely, which has, indeed, happened. In fact, down the road maybe something like the SCWT (or will we be able to call it the Abraham Path again?) can play a positive role in healing a divided country and people—and

when the new Syrian government recognizes the potential value of this healing mechanism beyond tourist dollars and brandishing a more positive image. We still believe there will be a right time for this to happen, and under the new circumstances it may come sooner rather than later. Or it may be ten years from now or even a generation, but the Camino de Santiago did not get built in a day either; rather it took centuries. We hope we do not have to wait that long, but the spirit and meaning of Abraham in the Middle East is everlasting, so there will most certainly be future opportunities for the shared legacy of this revered prophet to mobilize cross-cultural understanding.

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² The authors would like to thank Jennifer Chiesa, the Research Coordinator for Dr. David Lesch, for collecting and organizing the materials necessary to write this article and for outstanding copy editing work.

³ For many of these personal references, see David W. Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

⁴ For instance, see books by Raymond Hinnebusch and Nikolaos Van Dam.

⁵ *Note:* For the sake of clarity, the authors refer to themselves in the third person throughout most of this article. Also, the names of certain Syrians who still may play a role in API efforts in the future are referred to anonymously or by aliases

⁶ On this regarding Lesch, see Borzou Daragahi, “How to befriend a Syrian president,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 2009, p. A1.

⁷ Interestingly, Lesch visited with Syrian government officials at the Rowda building in early 2013, during a particularly low period for the Assad government in the civil war. While there were certainly more checkpoints on the road between the Lebanese border and Damascus, in Damascus itself, and along the road leading up to the Rowda office, there was still no patting down by security or metal detectors to go through once he reached the steps of the building.

⁸ Anisa Mehdi would later serve as Executive Director of the API.

⁹ In particular, see Lesch’s recollection of his meeting with Assad upon his “re-election” in June 2007 to another seven-year term. David W. Lesch, *The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 31-33.