



# Road to Damascus

## Learning to love America while traveling in Syria

Story and photos by Kera Abraham

*EDITOR'S NOTE: National award-winning reporter Kera Abraham, who has a master's degree in journalism from UO, left EW in January to join the staff at Monterey County Weekly. The California paper printed a shorter version of this story June 7.*

**A** month ago I had only impressions of Syria. In my media-influenced mind, I saw Syrians angry with the U.S. — for supporting Israel as it occupies the Golan Heights, for positioning military bases in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, for starting a war that has inundated their nation with 1.2 million Iraqi refugees. When President George W. Bush added Syria to the “axis of evil” in 2002, I wondered how the insult sat with the country’s populace.

But in the part of my brain that wraps childhood memories in a hand-knit blanket, I coddled completely different impressions of Syria — the warm stuff that trickled, like honey in layers of philo dough, through four generations. My paternal great-grandparents immigrated to the U.S. from Syria’s predominantly Christian northwest mountains in the early 1900s, and while their language was lost to me, my family retained some of their religious and culinary traditions. In the personal realm, thoughts of Syria evoked my grandmother’s sweet Arabic bread and lemony dolmas, which she made with leaves from the grape vine in my grandfather’s garden and served at her Orthodox church.

For years I had wanted to reconcile these two visions by visiting Syria, but fear froze me. Syria’s government is secular, but international human rights groups have criticized it for oppressing free speech and political expression. Would secret police detain and torture me? Would terrorists kidnap me? (Ironically, I didn’t have the same worries about visiting my mother’s ancestral homeland even though Ireland has seen more than a dozen terrorist attacks in the past 25 years and Syria about four.)

Months ago, a good friend of mine moved to Damascus to study Arabic. A journey to explore my heritage began to seem possible.

Around the same time, Syria began showing up in the news. Washington, it seems,

is officially struggling over how to treat the country sandwiched between Iraq and the hard places of Lebanon and Israel. President Bush condemns Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism and has refused to talk to its leaders, yet the bipartisan Iraq Study Group recommended greater dialogue with Damascus. Between December and March, relations warmed considerably when Syrian President Bashar al-Assad met separately with the U.S. assistant secretary of state, several Republican congressmen and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Suddenly, Syria had become enough of a buzzword that most Americans had now heard of it. And just as suddenly, it felt like time for me to go. I flicked off my fears, drew a sharp breath and booked a plane ticket.

**U**pon arrival in Damascus, I was promptly greeted by President Assad himself. His face — high forehead, small blue eyes under a slightly knit brow, narrow nose, trimmed mustache over a tight mouth and weak chin — was everywhere. Over the next two weeks I saw his likeness plastered on billboards, city walls, store windows, telephone poles. Assad airbrushed and looking concerned; Assad wearing a vacant expression behind aviator sunglasses; Assad toothy in an army cap; Assad waving in a business suit. One poster triangulated his mug with

the smiling, disembodied heads of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.

My buddy, whom I’ll call Reza, told me that while the Assad propagand machine is always running, it was on steroids leading up to the “presidential election” scheduled for May 27. (International media described the event more accurately as a referendum, only offering voters the option to vote “yes” or “no” on Assad’s inevitable second seven-year term, with no opposition candidate.)

The posters bore handwritten phrases, which tended toward the emotional rather than the practical. “Dear leader, we love you!” “From the heart, Yes!” and so forth, with no mention of policies or promises. I couldn’t read the Arabic newspapers, but the graphics got the message across. Page after page carried photos of crowds rallying for Assad; Assad smiling with his wife; a portrait of Assad in front of a Syrian flag-colored thumbprint, symbolizing a vote.

I tried to imagine Bush-Cheney ’04 posters with W’s face in the center of a heart, surrounded by the slogan “Beloved leader! Yes, yes, YES!”

**B**ashar al-Assad assumed the presidency in 2000, succeeding his father, Hafez, who had ruled from his post-coup “election” in 1971 until his death in June 2000. Hafez’s secular socialist regime was known for bloody repression of political opponents, especially Muslim fundamentalists; enmity with neighbors Israel and Iraq; and the occupation of Lebanon, which the U.S. permitted as a tacit reward for Syria’s aid in the Gulf War.

Bashar, a British-educated ophthalmologist, was groomed for the presidency after his older brother Basil died in a suspicious car crash in 1994. After his father’s death, Bashar freed hundreds of political prisoners and pledged to modernize the country, prompting some Western pundits to speculate he’d lead Syria toward democracy. Subsequent crackdowns on political dissidents soon quashed that hope.

After hearing from several locals that “there are eyes and ears everywhere,” I kept my own conversations and emails sanitized of subjects such as sex, drugs and politics.

The many foreigners living in Damascus — I met mostly Europeans studying Arabic, a few Asians and only two Americans — rolled their eyes at the speech restrictions but seemed to adhere to them, or at least to approach risky topics in hushed voices. A young Spanish woman interning with the U.N. refugee office joked that the taboos left her with nothing interesting to discuss with her Syrian friends — just the weather, food, family and Allah.

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