

Abstract

This research analyzes the perceptions, ideology and attitudes towards Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the Syrian public sphere under the regimes of the father and the son: Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad, presidents of Syria from 1970 to the present. During the years 1991–2000, Hafiz al-Asad negotiated a political settlement with his neighboring state of Israel, which did not materialize. The research focuses on this decade, and especially on the years since 2000 when Bashar al-Asad ascended to power following his father's death. Did the years of negotiation with Israel change the attitude of the Syrian regime towards Jews and Judaism? Is there any difference in this regard between the regimes of Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad, and what are actually their positions? This research aims to answer those questions empirically by using a variety of primary sources: Syrian media, press, and official government declarations, and secondary sources on Syria and on antisemitism in the Arab and Islamic world.

INTRODUCTION: BASHAR AL-ASAD ON ISRAEL, JEWS, AND JUDAISM

Following the events of September 2000, the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada, Israel's fast-deteriorating relationship with the Palestinians (and with the Arab world in general), and the growing tension between Syria and Israel, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad verbally attacked Israel, the Jews, and Judaism on a number of occasions. In his address to the Islamic countries' summit in Qatar, on 13 November 2000, Asad said:

This Israeli patronizing, and the unmoral deeds so far from the values and teachings of all the divine [Monotheist] religions, would not have taken place without the approval and support of many countries and factors. The Israelis kill, and the Arabs and Muslims are blamed for terrorism and antisemitism, although it is known for certain that we are the most ancient Semites. They trample over human rights, and we are censured as inhuman and primitive. They curse the old Nazis, while applying Neo-Nazism unheard of in history....

Having repeated and emphasized his country's commitment to the principle of territories for peace as one of the conditions for negotiating with Israel (among such requirements as the Palestinian refugees' "Right of Return"), Asad added: "This is our position, which we repeat over every Minbar [mosque pulpit] and at every opportunity; we are positively convinced that humanity cannot be divided at random into a chosen people and all the other

peoples, and that all human beings are chosen by the great God their creator...."¹

At the Islamic summit in Amman, on 27 March 2001, Bashar al-Asad thus described the Israelis during his address:

"We say: a racist prime-minister; we say: a racist government; we say: racist military and security [services]; yet when we get to the Israeli society, we keep quiet, by which logic? All the things I have just listed are products of the Israeli street. If so, then this is a racist society, more racist than Nazism."²

During his visit to Spain at the end of April 2001, Bashar al-Asad repeated the comparison of Israel with Nazism; and during the reception of Pope John Paul II on his historic visit to Damascus at the beginning of May, he said the following:

There are those who always seek to repeat the agony march of all the people: we see our brothers in Palestine murdered and tortured, justice trampled and lands in Lebanon, the Golan and Palestine conquered in this way. We hear them killing the principle of equality, saying that 'God has created our people separately from other peoples'; we see them mistreating the places sacred to Islam and Christianity in Palestine, violating the sanctity of the al-Aqsa Mosque, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. They are trying to kill all the values of the divine religions, with the same mentality that brought about the betrayal and torturing of Christ and in the same way that they tried to betray the Prophet Muhammad (God's prayer and peace be upon him)....³

Young Asad's words caused a chorus of diplomatic and public disapproval outside of Syria. While one could interpret this as a novice leader's slip of the tongue, neither the Syrian government nor Asad himself washed their hands of what had been said, but stood behind those words, attempting to claim that it was misunderstood. A notice by an "official spokesman" was published in Damascus, rejecting the American Department of State's condemnation as a "cover-up" for Israeli Prime-Minister Ariel Sharon's policy. The spokesman stated that Asad had not targeted Jewish believers, but rather tried to draw attention to Israel's actions against the Palestinians; he also mentioned that the Arabs are themselves Semites, and that "blaming us for antisemitism is a historically non-valid libel." During the pope's departure, Asad himself said that "in the world there are still those who are afraid of the mere

¹ See President Asad's address to the Islamic summit in Qatar, 13 Nov. 2000 on the official website of the Syrian Ministry of Information: www.moi-syria.com.

² President Asad's address at the Islamic summit in Amman, 27 Mar. 2001, a booklet published by *Tishrin* (Damascus) [enclosed with the newspaper].

³ *Al-Hayat* (London), 6 May 2001; *al-Thawra* (Damascus), 6 May 2001.

mentioning of historical facts and international resolutions and blame us, Semites, for antisemitism."⁴

Similar things were said by the Syrian president in interviews with European media during his visits to Paris and Berlin in June and July 2001, where members of the Jewish community, among others, protested his antisemitic expressions. In an interview to the German *Der Spiegel*, Asad again said that the Syrians are themselves Semite, and mentioned that Judaism is a religion "open to any race." He insisted that he simply compared the suffering of Jesus to that of the Palestinians. When the interviewer observed that mentioning Jesus' suffering implies that the Jews are to blame for it, Asad replied: "these are historical facts, which we cannot deny. But how could anyone consider me anti-Jewish, while we have Jewish citizens here in Syria, and we as Muslims acknowledge the Jewish faith?"⁵

In a prior interview for French *Le Figaro*, which was translated into Arabic and printed in part in the Syrian press, Asad used the same arguments and repeated the analogy between the suffering of Jesus and the Palestinian plight; he also explained that his reference to "betraying the Prophet Muhammad" was made in the context of "betraying the peace process." In an interview with French TV channel *France 2* on June 21, he again associated Jesus' agony with that of the Palestinians and the "plot against Prophet Muhammad and the one that Israel has been plotting since the beginning of the peace negotiations."⁶ At the end of 2003, An English-language Syrian website referred to the Pope's visit to Syria as a "grand coverage" success that has established the central status of Syria and its leader in the world media; it cited Bashar al-Asad's antisemitic public statements during the Pope's reception and departure — especially the parts comparing Jesus and the Jews with the Palestinians and Israel; these citations are considered to be at the heart of the Syrian media "high score."⁷

Who is actually Bashar al-Asad? Where do his harsh antisemitic public statements stem from? What are the perceptions, ideology, and attitudes towards Jews and Judaism held by the President of Syria, Israel's neighbor? Have he and his regime inherited these perceptions from the regime of his father Hafiz al-Asad, Syria's leader from 1970-2000, and what are the positions of both regimes with regard to Jews and Judaism? This paper aims to answer these questions empirically, focusing on Bashar al-Asad's relatively short term of government so far, and the last ten years of his father's rule. During that

⁴ *Al-Hayat*, 9 May 2001; *al-Thawra*, 9 May 2001.

⁵ *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), 9 July 2001, FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, USA), 9 July 2001.

⁶ *Tishrin*, 23 June 2001; on the France 2 interview see: *Le Monde* (Paris), 23 June 2001.

⁷ "Syria Scores it High with the World Media," in: www.syria-online.com/news_artc/pope_mediawin.html.

decade, Asad strove to reach a political settlement with Israel, which did not come into being. Did the years of negotiation with the Jewish State change the Syrian leadership's attitudes towards Jews as expressed in the Syrian public sphere? The paper uses various primary sources: Syrian media, press and official government publications, while leaning on existing research on Syria, and on antisemitism in the Middle East and in the Islamic World.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Syria and Hafiz al-Asad's regime have been investigated from various perspectives. Among the studies dealing with the Syrian government, its foreign relations and Syria-Israel relations are works by Moshe Ma'oz, Eyal Zisser, and Itamar Rabinovich (the latter headed the Israeli delegation in the 1992-1995 negotiations with Syria).⁸ Other studies, focusing on the Syria-Israel peace negotiations, were conducted by Helena Cobban, Alasdair Drysdale, and Raymond Hinnebusch.⁹

Among the studies dealing with Syria's society, economy, and the state, works by Hinnebusch and Volker Perthes should be mentioned.¹⁰ Lisa Wedeen's original study explores, from an anthropological point of view, Hafiz al-Asad's Syrian cult of personality.¹¹ There are two political biographies of Hafiz al-Asad from 1988, one by Moshe Ma'oz and another by British journalist Patrick Seale, Asad's confidant.¹² Bashar al-Asad's relatively new regime naturally has not yet been comprehensively studied, although the process of training him as his father's successor has been referred to in several works.¹³ Eyal Zisser's pioneer study dealing with Bashar al-Asad's first years in power was recently published in Hebrew.¹⁴

⁸ Moshe Ma'oz, *Syria and Israel: From War to Peacemaking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Itamar Rabinovich, *The Brink of Peace: The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Eyal Zisser, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition* (London: Hurst & Co., 2001).

⁹ Helena Cobban, *The Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks, 1991–1996 and Beyond* (U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington D.C., 1996); Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian and State Formation in Ba`thist Syria. Army, Party and Peasant* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1990); Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1995).

¹¹ Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

¹² Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad, The Sphinx of Damascus: A Political Biography* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988); Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998).

¹³ E.g., Volker Perthes, "Si Vis Stabilitatem, Para Bellum: State Building, National Security and War Preparation in Syria," in *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East*, ed.

Antisemitism in the Arab and Muslim world has been examined since the 1960s, when Yehoshafat Harkabi's pioneering work was published. Over the years studies of this topic have been published by scholars such as Bernard Lewis, Moshe Ma'oz, Ronald L. Nettle, and Emmanuel Sivan. The new wave of antisemitism in recent years brought a new crop of works, including studies by Robert S. Wistrich and Menahem Milson.¹⁵ However, attitudes towards Jews and Judaism in Syria under the Asad regimes have yet to be thoroughly investigated. There are a few publications which deal with Syrian Jewry under Hafiz al-Asad, describing how some 4,000 Jews remaining in Syria have been held hostage under various restrictions for political ends, until 1992, when Asad finally allowed Jews to emigrate. Indeed the great majority of Jews left Syria without further delay. It should be noted also that the Asad regime treated Syrian Jews as a religious community and not as a racial group, official documents referring to them as "Musawiyyun" [followers of Moses] and not as "Yahud" [Jews]. The government's translation of "Musawiyyun" is "Judists," in contrast to Jews.¹⁶ Other recent studies deal with attitudes towards Israel, Jews, and Judaism reflected in Syrian schoolbooks, which present a harsh picture, preaching militarism and hatred of the "enemy," without distinguishing between Israel and Jews. They portray Judaism as a racist religion, deny the Holocaust and claim that the Jews "exaggerated its scope"; occasionally they overtly call to exterminate the Jews.¹⁷ However, still wanting is a methodological examination of ideological attitudes towards Jews and Judaism established in the Syrian regime and accepted by its leaders and their followers.

Steven Heydemann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 156; and Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 160–67.

¹⁴ Eyal Zisser, *In the Name of the Father: Bashar al-Asad's First Years in Power* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Y. Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes to Israel* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972); Moshe Ma'oz, *The Image of the Jew in Official Arab Literature and Communications Media* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Shazar Library, 1976); Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986); Ronald L. Nettle, *Past Trials and Present Tribulations: a Muslim Fundamentalist's View of the Jews* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987); Immanuel Sivan, "Antisemitism and Islamic Fundamentalism," *Kivunim* 5, 42, (1993, 2002); Robert S. Wistrich, "Arab and Muslim Antisemitism: Britain, the Jews and Jihad." *Gesher* 147 (Summer 2003); Menahem Milson, "What is Arab Antisemitism." *Gesher* 147 (Summer 2003).

¹⁶ See, e.g., Daniel Gross, "Asad Story: The Long Captivity of Syrian Jews," *Tikkun* 7, 1 (Jan.–Feb. 1992). Out of some 4,000 Jews, over 3,500 left Syria, most of them for the United States, and from there continued to Israel. See Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 106; see also "Syria" in the Library of Congress Country Studies, data as of April 1987, at <http://geography.about.com/library/cia/blcsyria.htm>.

¹⁷ Meyrav Wurmser, *The Schools of Ba'ithism: A Study of Syrian Schoolbooks* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Media Research Institute, 2000); Arnon Groiss, *Jews, Zionism and Israel in Syrian School Textbooks* (New York: Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace, 2001).

ATTITUDES TOWARDS JEWS AND JUDAISM
IN INDEPENDENT SYRIA UNTIL 1970

Syria, which had been under French Mandatory rule since 1920, officially became independent in 1943, and fully sovereign in 1946. Even as early as the Mandate period, Syrian statesmen, public figures and civilians joined the Arab world's anti-Zionist forefront. Ever since the State of Israel was founded in 1948, when Syria fought against it for the first time, Syrian statesmen and the media have shown not merely anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist approaches, but also hateful sentiments towards the Jews, particularly in times of military clashes. High-ranking Syrian leaders, including prime-ministers, publicly attacked the "evil Jews" and their "selfishness and fanaticism as enemies of the whole world," and swore to "settle the score with the Jews when the day comes."¹⁸ Israelis, Zionists, and Jews in Syria are generally treated as one and the same. For example, the following is a typical response by the Damascus-based *al-Liwa*, to Egyptian President Muhammad Naguib's paying a visit to a synagogue, to wish his Jewish fellow citizens a happy new Jewish year in 1952:

A common mistake in Arab states, is that the law regards the foreign Jews as citizens with equal rights and duties as the other nationals.... The Jew exists for his greed only, and has but one cause: to accumulate fortune by all possible means.... Many of the world's peoples have recognized that the Jews are a tumor in the body of the homeland, and that it needs to be removed. Hitler realized that the reason his country lost World War I was the Jews.... Hitler's luck betrayed him, and the Jews came back to corrupt the earth and subordinated, for their own purposes, [both] the defeated Germans and their victorious opponents. They established the State of Israel on Arab land, a land holy to millions of Muslims and Christians, and deported its original inhabitants under the UN's watch, with all its noble principles....¹⁹

This trend continued through the 1963 military coup and the foundation of the radical regime in Damascus by the Ba'th party. The founders of the Ba'th (revival) party held extreme Arab-nationalist and anti-Zionist ideologies. For example, in response to the Palestine Partition Resolution, ratified by the UN Assembly on 29 November 1947, the Ba'th party released a call to Arabs to lead a war not merely to impede the partition plan, but to "annihilate Zionism in Palestine for good."²⁰

¹⁸ Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes*, 434–35; Ma'oz, *Syria and Israel*, 31–32.

¹⁹ *Al-Liwa* (Damascus), 30 Oct. 1952, cited in Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes*, 294.

²⁰ Arab Ba'th Party communiqué, Damascus, 23 Jan. 1948, IDF Archives (Tel Hashomer), delivery 100001/1957, file 42.

The new government's loathing of Israel was reinforced by Soviet influence, support, and by a lasting rivalry and will to compete with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel-Nasser in the inter-Arab arena, as well as the need to channel inner tensions towards an external enemy — Israel. Since the Ba'ath regime is supported by a narrow social basis, it must distract Syrian public opinion by promoting anti-Zionist and antisemitic ideas. In addition to Colonialist/Imperialist stereotypes and comparisons with the Crusaders and Nazism, Ba'ath literature in the mid-1960s also employed traditional Christian and European antisemitic stereotypes. Israel was depicted as a devil-like enemy, targeting not only Arabs, but all of civilization. Based on the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (several Arabic-language editions of which have been widely spread in the Arab world) and similar European antisemitic compositions, the Jews have been described as greedy and blackmailing, killers of Christ and Christians, whose sole purpose is to eliminate Christianity and humankind "outside Zionism." In this context it has been repeatedly claimed that Judaism and Zionism are one and the same.²¹

UNDER HAFIZ AL-ASAD'S REGIME

On 17 November 1970, Hafiz al-Asad, a military officer of the 'Alawite minority sect and a long-standing member of the Ba'ath Party took over Damascus with a military coup. A capable and sophisticated statesman, Asad was the first Syrian leader in modern times to establish a strong and stable government. His rise to power entailed political and ideological shifts in Syria. These changes, and some consistencies, are manifest in regard to Israel, Jews, and Judaism.²²

Hafiz al-Asad's centralized, authoritarian regime relied on the military and the Ba'ath party, but at the same time represented Syrian society, especially the peripheral populations, better than in the past; yet the regime was personal, familial, and tribal, relying on the 'Alawites.²³

Based mainly in the northwestern region of Latakia, The 'Alawite sect is an Arabic-speaking minority, accounting for about 12-13% of Syrian population of more than 18 million people.²⁴ The religion of the 'Alawites, or Nusayris, as they were formerly called, is syncretistic, combining pagan and Islamic Shi'ite elements ("Alawite" refers to 'Ali, Prophet Muhammad's cousin

²¹ Ma'oz, *Syria and Israel*, 82–83.

²² *Ibid.*, 119–21.

²³ Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 17–22.

²⁴ Yosef Olmert, *Minorities in the Middle East* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence Publishing House, 1986), 77–81. In 2005, some 18,448,752, people lived in Syria. The natural increase was 2.45% per annum. See CIA World Fact book on Syria, at <http://geography.about.com/library/cia/blcsyria.htm>.

and son-in-law, who is revered by the Shi'ites), along with some Christian influences. Since they first appeared in the 10th century as a religious cult, the 'Alawites had been persecuted by the Muslim authorities, regarded as heretics, suffered poverty, and were at a low social level. The renowned Sunni Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyya who lived in the 14th century, even issued a religious decree ("Fatwa") branding them as "infidels worse than the Jews and Christians, worse even than many pagans." As a result of persecution, the 'Alawite religion became clandestine and withdrawn, and like the Shi'ites and other heterodox sects, its followers were allowed to conform outwardly to orthodox Islam in an hour of need ("taqiyya").²⁵ During and after French mandatory rule, many young 'Alawites chose a military career as a means of social mobility and became higher-ranking officers. Another possible path open to them was joining all-national (rather than sectarian) political parties, such as the Ba'th. This combination introduced many 'Alawite officers who were members of the Ba'th into the Syrian politico-military elite. Hafiz al-Asad was one of those officers, and the first 'Alawite to dare take the reins of government overtly into his hands to become president of Syria. Since then, many resources were allocated to develop the backward 'Alawite region, and today most of the key positions in the Syrian military and security services are held by 'Alawites, including members of the extended Asad family.

All the same, Hafiz al-Asad strove in several ways towards legitimizing his rule and making it nationally accepted: he identified himself as a Muslim, prayed in mosques, and even made a pilgrimage to Mecca (some said he had to use the "taqiyya" to do so). Asad even succeeded in having the 'Alawites acknowledged by some Shi'ite leaders as a stream of that branch of Islam; yet many Sunni Muslims in Syria (who make up 70% of the population), distrusted his claim to be a genuine Muslim, or asserted that even if Asad had *been* a Shi'ite Muslim, it still did not grant him the right to reign over a Sunni majority. Harsh hostility thus existed between the Asad regime and fundamentalist Sunnis and the Muslim Brotherhood movement, reaching a peak in a bloody internal conflict in the years 1976–1982, and ending with the massacre by the Syrian army in the Sunni city of Hama in February 1982, with an estimated 20,000 killed.²⁶

As an additional means for earning legitimacy, Hafiz al-Asad brought close a group of old comrades of Sunni origin who shared his opinions, mostly from the rural periphery, and who for decades held high positions in the Syrian political elite, forming a sort of "political cabinet." The advance of this group illustrates the effort put into winning the support of the Sunni periphery,

²⁵ Olmert, *Minorities in the Middle East*, *ibid.*; Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, transl. by Andras and Ruth Hamori (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 228–29; 19–20.

²⁶ Ma'oz, *Asad*, 21–23, 48–52, 65–67; Olmert, *Minorities in the Middle East*, 78–82.

which, similar to the 'Alawites, had been deprived for generations. Among the Sunni Muslims influencing Syrian policy and its realization were Vice-President 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Minister of Defense Mustafa Tlas, and Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara'.²⁷

Another characteristic of the Syrian regime, has been the "Asad cult" which rhetorically and visualaly encompasses all facets of public life, even after Hafiz al-Asad's death.²⁸ It has been partially passed on to his son Bashar.²⁹ The Syrian media and press, led by the dailies *Tishrin* (October, named after the October 1973 war against Israel), *al-Thawra* (The revolution), and al-Ba'th (the party organ) are entirely government-owned and official; the government uses these publications as a propaganda tool dictating the rhetoric, and even the nuances.³⁰

Ideologically, Patrick Seale says that Israel's perceived "aggressive religious racism" has played an important role in Hafiz al-Asad's political education. Following Syria's defeat and the loss of the Golan Heights to Israel in the 1967 Six-Day-War, Asad, then Minister of Defense, concluded that territorial expansion is inherent to Israel as such, and that its goal is to take over the entire region; Asad's view of the conflict tended to be Manichean, "good versus evil."³¹

Asad's anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli assertions were no more moderate than preceding Syrian leaders, and he directed the Syrian media to influence the public in this spirit. Such statements reflected the Ba'th Party ideology, as well

²⁷ Ma'oz, *Asad*, pp. 52-55 ; Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, pp. 22, 30-31, 33-35.

²⁸ Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 1988), 342.

²⁹ See Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*; Ma'oz, *Asad*, 42-45.

³⁰ For the first time in many years, a few independent newspapers have recently been permitted to operate; yet they are reported to be under strict monitoring and various restrictions, including being repeatedly shut down by court orders. See Eyal Zisser, *In the Name of the Father: Bashar al-Asad, First Years in Power* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2004); the daily *al-Ba'th* is considered the party's house organ, but in effect it doesn't differ from the other Syrian dailies, which all reflect and propagate official government opinions. For a short and concise description by a leading Syrian academic of Asad's control over the media, see Sadiq J. al-'Azm, "The View from Damascus," *New York Review of Books*, 15 June 2000, 70. Another Syrian writer presupposes that Israel's government is behind the opposition statements in the Israeli media. See Hani Muqbil, "The Impossible Israeli Illusion," *Jaysh al-Sha'b* (Damascus), 1 June 1993; similarly, Syrian diplomat Muwaffaq al-'Allaf, head of the delegation for negotiating with Israel in Washington in 1992-1996, found it difficult to believe that a highlighted news item in the Israeli press does not necessarily reflect an "order from above" (although in reaction to Israeli criticism, members of the Syrian delegation flaunted the "freedom of press" in their own country). See Rabinovich, *Brink of Peace*, 71-72.

³¹ Seale, *Asad*, 66, 145, 201; Ma'oz, *Asad*, 85.

as Asad's need to call attention to his devotion to it, to receive legitimacy from the Syrian public, to offset the Islamic resentment towards an 'Alawite government, and to prepare for war. Asad and the Syrian spokesmen have described Israel as a outpost of international Zionism and imperialism, a "racist, colonialist, aggressive, neo-Nazi entity," a "cancer" threatening the Arab world not just territorially, but also socially and culturally.³² After the 1973 Yom Kippur war, Asad attacked Zionism in an address at the Islamic Summit Conference in Pakistan, that included familiar antisemitic accusations of international subversion and of cooperation with Nazism: "Zionism distorts the divine principles and manipulates Judaism.... [I]t serves to destroy existing societies in many countries around the world.... [I]t is an accomplice of Nazism."³³

In contrast to the unconcealed antisemitism of many previous Syrian statesmen, however, Hafiz al-Asad avoided open attacks on Judaism, maintaining a distinction between Zionism and Judaism in his official statements and public appearances: "We do not hate Judaism as a religion, but we do hate Zionism as a colonialist intruder." On a different occasion, he clarified the following to an American journalist: "I do not have any hostility towards the Jewish faith, or towards a Jew as a religious person. But the Jews in Israel — that's a different issue. Those Jews are our enemies...."³⁴

This distinction was not always kept, especially when senior members of the Asad regime were concerned, rather than official spokespersons. A typical example is the book *Fatir Sahyun* (Matzo of Zion, Damascus 1984) by Mustafa Tlas, Syrian minister of defense since 1972, and one of Hafiz al-Asad's closest and highest-ranking political aides (the two had been close friends ever since the 1950s when they studied together at the military academy).³⁵ Tlas's book revived one of the most famous blood libels in modern Jewish history, the

³² Ma'oz, *Israel and Syria*, 119–21.

³³ Asad's address to the Islamic Summit Conference in Lahore, Pakistan, 22 Feb. 1974, cited in Ma'oz, *Asad*, 104.

³⁴ Ma'oz, *Asad*, 105; Bernard Lewis cited a conversation from 1974, during Lebanese leader Kamal Junblat's visit to Syria and his meeting with Asad and some senior aides. One of the hosts expressed his sympathy to Hitler; in response, Junblat seconded it and expressed his own sympathy with Nazism and its project of exterminating the Jews, while at the same time he diminished the Holocaust. At any rate, according to Lewis' source — the Beirut-based *al-Bayraq* (Beirut) — this was said *before* Junblat met with Asad and his aides, during a conversation with a group of Ba'th Party activists, of middle rank and not from Asad's close circle. See Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites*, 162; cf. *al-Bayraq*, 26 June 1974.

³⁵ Seale, *Asad*, 148–49, 181; another illustration of Tlas's high rank and Hafiz al-Asad's trust in him, is evident from his appointment as a member of the committee which temporarily governed Syria in 1983, after Asad had suffered a heart attack. See *ibid.*, 421–40.

"Damascus Affair" (1840). The affair had originated from some local Christians and the French consul, but was soon widely spread. The Jews of Damascus and the heads of the community in particular, were accused of the ritual murder of a Franciscan superior, Father Thomas, and of using his blood to bake matzot (the unleavened bread traditionally eaten by Jews on Passover). This blood libel had been presented as genuine, with "evidence" presented in a historiographic paper from the early 1960s by a professor from Damascus and Amman universities. The *Matzot of Zion* repeated these accusations, linking them with Zionism, which allegedly had been active even at that early time.³⁶ The book was printed by Mustafa Tlas's private publishing house, Dar Tlas, which specializes in books deemed appropriate by the Asad administration, including a Syrian edition of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* translated into Arabic by 'Ajaj Nuwayhid, a Palestinian.³⁷

In response to a Jewish NGO's statement before the UN Commission on Human Rights, which cited from *Matzot of Zion* as an example, a Syrian diplomat appeared on 8 February 1991 before the Commission holding a copy of the book, and saying she trusted that "those who [had read] the book and learned about the circumstances surrounding Father Thomas's murder [were] well-equipped to understand the reality of racist Zionism." Following the protest started by Jewish organizations and soon joined by state representatives, mainly from the West, another Syrian delegate appeared before the Commission and returned to the Asad regime official line of reasoning, according to which Zionism and Judaism were, in fact, two "completely different things."³⁸

Matzot of Zion continues to be printed by Dar Tlas publishing house, and has even enjoyed renewed popularity among readers; it is widely referred to and cited from Syria.³⁹ In 2001, an Egyptian weekly reported that Mustafa Tlas sold

³⁶ Ma'oz, *The Image of the Jew*, 19–22 ; Mustafa Tlas, *Fatir Sabyun* (Damascus: Dar Tlas, 1984).

³⁷ Seale, *Asad*, 349; see examples of books glorifying Hafiz al-Asad published by Dar Tlas: Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 221–23; 'Ajaj Nuwayhid (translator), *Brutukulat Hukama Sabiun* [The Protocols of the Elders of Zion] (Damascus: Dar Tlas, 1984); Nuwayhid's translation was first published in Beirut in 1967. He had been the director of the Arabic-language department of the British Mandatory broadcasting authority in Jerusalem from 1940–1944. See Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes*, 518; Among the books published by Dar Tlas was that of famous Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy, *Filastin, ard al-risalat al-samawiyya* [La Palestine: terre des messages divins (Paris: Albatros, 1986)] transl. into Arabic by Qusay Atasi and Michel Wakim (Damascus: Dar Tlas, 1988). Tlas, *Fatir Sabyun*.

³⁸ David Littman, "Syria's Blood Libel Revival at the UN: 1991–2000," *Midstream* 46, no. 2 (Feb.–Mar. 2000): 3–4.

³⁹ On the success of *Matzot of Zion* at the 2002 International Book fair in Damascus, see: *al-Hayat*, 21 Oct. 2002; for references and citations, see below.

the rights to an Egyptian producer who was planning to film it as a response to *Schindler's List*.⁴⁰ In a recent interview with the London *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Tlas himself said that "the *Matzvo of Zion* took place in Damascus, I didn't make it up, and it is supported by documentation. It describes some Jewish rituals. How can the Zionists deny this reality? They do not want anyone to know about their hostile morality, so they target anyone who exposes them with this hostility...."⁴¹

Traditionally, Syrian foreign policy under Hafiz al-Asad included the main goals of preserving the status of the government from within, acquiring internal support and diverting attention away from internal problems. The Asad regime has, as a rule, avoided policies incompatible with Syrian public opinion. Asad's positions in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict usually reflected the atmosphere in the Syrian and Arab street, and were even reported to have been supported and approved. Asad's attitude towards Israel shifted between two poles: the ideological one, emotional even, that refused to acknowledge Israel and its right to exist in the region. Asad saw Israel as a threat to his government, to Syria, and to the greater Arab nation. According to this, the solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict was annihilating Israel, even if not imminently. The other pole was more moderate and pragmatic. It aimed to repossess the whole of the Golan Heights, even considering negotiations with Israel for a political settlement.⁴² Global changes since the late 1980s and American pressure had gradually brought about a change, and eventually Syria joined the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference, which was followed by direct negotiations between Syria and Israel. The negotiations met with many obstacles, but some progress was made following the establishment of the Rabin government in June 1992.⁴³

The gradual shift towards negotiating a political settlement was reflected in a slow yet systematic process of preparing the public opinion in Syria for the possibility of peace with Israel, especially during 1992–1996.⁴⁴ Despite this process, articles attacking Judaism and the Jews were still published in the Syrian press. The Syrian army gazette, *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, a biweekly with some influence on the Syrian public sphere,⁴⁵ served as the main outlet for this type of item, combined with comments on the Israeli-Arab conflict. Note that the Syrian military is highly identified with the government, and is regarded as an "ideological army," i.e., an instrument for advancing the ideology of the

⁴⁰ *Ruḥ al-Yusuf* (Cairo), 24 Feb. 2001.

⁴¹ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), 10 Aug. 2003.

⁴² Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 29–30, 70–72, 102.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 104–105.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴⁵ On the significance and influence of *Jaysh al-Sha'b* on Syrian Ba'athist public opinion see, e.g., Bernard Lewis, *Islam in History* (New York: Library Press, 1973), 13–14.

government and of the Ba'ath Party. This symbiosis between civil society and the army in Syria was advanced by the government, involving a militarization of the Ba'ath Party, and the political, social, and educational systems, introducing military values into them. Moreover, preparing the army in Syria for war with the main enemy (Israel) was used for strengthening the regime, social mobility and control, and even economic development.⁴⁶

On 1 May 1990, journalist Suhayl Fatira published an article in *Jaysb al-Sha'b* on the subject of Israel's influence on U.S. institutes for strategic studies, listing academics such as Samuel Huntington and Walter Laqueur, along with "the Jewish-American spy Jonathan Pollard, who had been recruited to work for Israel as a student at the Stanford Center for Strategic Studies." Fatira concluded with a "citation" by "former U.S. President" Benjamin Franklin, who had supposedly alerted of "the great threat to the U.S., the Jewish threat...if we do not legally prevent Jews from entering the United States, they will gain control over it within one century." The illustration showed a photograph of Meir Kahane, and at his side a Star of David superimposed on a swastika. (The "Franklin Prophecy," a classic antisemitic fabrication of the 1930s, has in recent years enjoyed a wave of media citations in the Arab world.⁴⁷)

A month later, following the assault and murder of seven Palestinian workers by Israeli killer Ami Popper (he was tried and sentenced to seven life sentences and an additional 20 years, since there is no capital punishment in Israel; it was later reduced to forty years of incarceration, a severe punishment by Israeli standards), *Jaysb al-Sha'b* said that Israeli leaders' condemnation of Popper is not to be trusted, and concluded mentioning one of the "decisions of the Elders of Zion:" a purported series of religious edicts to butcher non-Jews. Another piece which appeared in the same issue was written by Nawfal Sharif Hasan, a major in the Syrian army, and entitled "Israel — the Racist System and Jewish Superstition." Attacking Judaism and describing Israel as a racist-religious entity, this article claimed to have relied on Soviet sources from the early 1980s.⁴⁸

Even after some progress in the Syria-Israel peace negotiations following Yitzhak Rabin's willingness to retreat from the Golan Heights, the Syrian media continued to claim that Israel is "playing a two-faced game, in order to hide

⁴⁶ Perthes, "Si Vis Stabilitatem, Para Bellum," 153–54, 159–60; Perthes, *Syria Under Asad*, 146–54; on the image of the military in Syria as an "ideological army" implementing Party decisions, see Ma'oz, *Asad*, 60–61; Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 28.

⁴⁷ *Jaysb al-Sha'b* (Damascus), 1 May 1990. On the "Franklin Prophecy" and further citations of it in the Arab world, see www.AdL.org/Anti_Semitism/arab/anti_sem_myth.asp.

⁴⁸ *Jaysb al-Sha'b*, 1 June 1990; the Soviet sources cited: *Foreign Military Review* 4 (Moscow) (1983); Sergei Sidov, *Zionism and the Method of Terror* (Moscow 1984).

from the world its real intensions, which are against peace."⁴⁹ In addition, it was claimed that Israel's demand to end the Arab economic boycott is but a first stage to fulfilling "Israel's old dream of economic control over the Middle East through a combination of Zionist knowledge, [along with] Arab wealth and labor."⁵⁰

During the volatile negotiations with Syria over the years, and even during the periods of progress, Israel was accused again and again of misleading, of spreading deceptive rumors, and of nurturing illusions⁵¹; and much more so at the beginning of the process, when Hafiz al-Asad said in an interview with ABC's Dianne Sawyer on the eve of the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991, that "it has become clear to all the nations of the world that Israel is not interested in a just and comprehensive agreement.... Israel keeps putting new obstacles in the way of all peace efforts..." This was presented to the Syrian public and military not as a mere political view, but under the title "Exposing Zionist Ideology." The Madrid Conference itself was described as "a court [to judge] Israel, for falsifying history."⁵² It is certainly acceptable, during political processes and peace negotiations, to raise doubts of a partner's integrity and sincerity, regardless of whether it is done as a deliberate tactic, or as sincere distrust stemming from long years of political and military hostility. However, the repetitive nature of these allegations, along with harsh antisemitic expressions, should raise questions, since the Jews have been repeatedly portrayed as traitors, as breachers of agreements, intriguers and deceivers in the medieval religious Islamic literature up to the modern political and educational Arab literature.⁵³ Hafiz al-Asad himself said, in a message to his army on its 45th anniversary in 1991, that "Zionism acts with cunning to maneuver the changes in the world for the benefit of 'Israel' [*sic*] and to reject any sincere effort at peace."⁵⁴ Later in this message Asad returned to the longstanding favorite image of the conflict between Syria and Israel as a mythical struggle of Good and Evil: "We have been building this nation's power based on elements of good and right...while our enemy, who conquered our land, has been building its power of evil, with all the implications. How great is the difference between the power of goodness and the forces of

⁴⁹ Bassam al-Khalid, "The Miracle of Peace," 1 Oct. 1992; Nawfal Sharif Hasan, "Israeli Hypocrisy," *Jaysb al-Sha'b*, 15 Dec. 1993; Turqi Samiya, "When will Peace Loving become Love in Practice?"; Turqi Samiya, "News of the Zionist Enemy," *Jaysb al-Sha'b*, 1 Jan. 1993.

⁵⁰ Sayyah 'Azzam, "The Hot Campaign Against the Arab Economic Boycott on Israel," *Jaysb al-Sha'b*, 15 Dec. 1992.

⁵¹ See, e.g., Hani Muqbil, "The Impossible Israeli Illusion," *Jaysb al-Sha'b*, 1 June 1993.

⁵² *Jaysb al-Sha'b*, 1 Oct. 1991, 1 Nov. 1991.

⁵³ Ma'oz, *The Image of the Jew*, 11–12.

⁵⁴ *al-Ba'th* (Damascus), 1 Aug. 1990.

evil."⁵⁵ Four years later, after spending much time in the negotiations with Israel, when asked about Israel in the Egyptian *al-Abram*, Asad once more expressed his opinion: "I believe they wish for us a dark future...."⁵⁶

This opinion was backed by commentaries which presented Israel as not merely thwarting the peace process, which Asad and his aides perceived as an extension of the fight against Israel by political means, but also as the enemy of the whole of humanity:

The fight for peace...is not, as it may superficially seem, a matter between the Arabs and Israel only, but in principle a struggle of the whole world on the one hand, and Zionism and Israel on the other. The peace process bears historical significance on the international level, since success would benefit the whole of mankind, by blocking the way to the most reactionary political movement in history, and put an end to the dangers of the most aggressive state in the world.⁵⁷

And in an interview with the Gulf radio station *Sawt al-Kuwait* on 18 May 1992, Hafiz al-Asad let slip some words to dispel all doubt that he in fact equated the State of Israel and Zionism with the Jewish faith: "In Israel they see their movement as targeting all Arabs, and they say so in their books, the Torah and the Talmud. They say: your land, Israel, [is] from the Euphrates to the Nile."⁵⁸

Demonization of "World Zionism" and of the Israelis and linking their negative traits, according to the writer, to the "roots of Zionism in Judaism" appeared in Suhayl Fatira's article on "Terrorism and Murder in Zionist Thought: A Legacy Passed from Fathers to Sons." Fatira writes that "in spite of the propaganda that "Ha'Avoda" party (the Israeli Labor Party) is a left-wing party, all political parties in Israel are legally descendants of World Zionism with its racist views and aspirations to create the greater Israel. They are one body, and the only difference is whether the terror is carried out by the right hand or by the left one." In order to prove the close link between Zionism and Judaism, the writer described the religious-right wing "Gush Emunim" movement ("Bloc of the Faithful"), the right-wing "Ha'Tehiya" Party, and the far Right "Kakh" (founded by Meir Kahane, and condemned in Israel, its listing for the Knesset forbidden, and eventually outlawed altogether).⁵⁹ He topped it all with old antisemitic classic accusations against the Jews. Dr. Sayyah 'Azzam, a brigadier general in the Syrian army published an article on 1 November 1992

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ *Al-Abram* (Cairo), 11 Oct. 1995.

⁵⁷ Turqi Samiya, "Why Does Israel Thwart the Peace Efforts," *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, 1 June 1991.

⁵⁸ *Sawt al-Kuwait*, 18 May 1992.

⁵⁹ *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, 15 Aug. 1992.

under the title "The Dangerous Zionist Octopus: Zionism Sees in Nazi Crimes and Jewish Votes Profitable Merchandise"; he wrote as follows: "World Zionism uses the changes taking place in Europe...to strengthen its control over European governments, churches, and the media. As a result, many European organizations and parties have agreed on one goal — releasing the countries of Europe from the Imperialist Zionist octopus which is gripping Europe...." 'Azzam said that a "group of scholars and lecturers" [i.e., Holocaust deniers] have emerged in reaction to this phenomenon, and supported his arguments with facts from their "studies," such as the claim that "the number of Jews who died during World War II was no higher than 70,000." He said that "the Zionists" attempted to murder [Holocaust deniers] David Irving, Paul Rassinier, and Robert Faurisson; he also accused them of a "big Zionist media attack" against Kurt Waldheim, former president of Austria [revealed to be an ex-Wehrmacht officer], and even against French radical Right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen [who is not renowned for being pro-Arab].⁶⁰

In 1993–1996, when Israel and Syria seemed close to signing a peace agreement, the Syrian media temporarily reduced the level of its attacks on Jews and Judaism. Yet during this period, too, voices were heard from time to time, expressing the same concepts. For example, following the murder of Israeli Prime Minister Rabin by Yigal Amir, in November 1995, Sayyah 'Azzam wrote:

Fanaticism and terrorism have a long history and deep roots in Israel. Rabin's murderer claimed he had followed God's orders, as did the religious settler Baruch Goldstein before him, who in 1994 killed 29 Arab citizens during prayers. He, too, claimed he had received his orders from God. [Although Goldstein's act was glorified as heroic by some extremists, it appalled and shocked the Israeli mainstream.]... It means that fanaticism and terrorism are long-timers in Jewish history... The proportion of criminals, perverts, and suicide-committers in Israel is high, [the crime rate in Israel is considered medium-low, relative to the Western world. This statement may stem from a misunderstanding of the Israeli media coverage of negative phenomena as well, in contrast to the Syrian media, which tends to suppress them.] as a result of inner problems and racist education, based on an ideology of God's chosen people, and Jewish supremacy.⁶¹

A little time later, this concept was echoed again in an article by Lieutenant Colonel Nawfal Sharif Hasan, entitled "The Fruits of the Torah-inspired Ideology in Israel." Nawfal associated social fragmentations in Israel to its reliance on a "Torah-inspired ideology," like the concept of "God's chosen people." He determined that "there is an undoubtedly strong link between

⁶⁰ *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, 1 Nov. 1992.

⁶¹ *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, 1 Dec. 1995.

religion and Zionist ideology. The Jewish faith is the chief source of this ideology."⁶²

After IDF artillery inadvertently killed over a hundred citizens in the South Lebanese village of Kafr Qana during the "Grapes of Wrath" operation against Hizballah in April 1996, Israel apologized and stopped the military operation. Sayyah 'Azzam described this tragedy as "one of the major massacres in history, whose cruelty and methods exceeded the loathsome Nazi massacres," and added, in an assault against Jews and Judaism:

One cannot avoid mentioning that this kind of massacre is not new in the history of the Hebrew State.... Every Jewish child is educated in the Talmud. What is it comprised of? These studies teach that any crime against a non-Jew is permitted and legitimate; they also teach that an interaction with a non-Jew must be handled with cheating, forgery, robbing, and perjury.... The Talmud teaches the Jewish soldier not to show mercy to any gentile — that is, a non-Jew, be it a man, a woman, a child, or an elderly person.... Racism, which has become a moral basis for the Jews, is ancient.... The racist attitude of the Torah started with the separation of one man from his fellow, and with discrimination against the Gentiles, that is, placing the Jews over other nations and peoples. The Israelis behave as if they were masters of the world, as if the whole earth is nothing but a factory owned by a Jewish capitalist, and the whole of humanity — his workers [this seems to be an influence of Western antisemitism under Soviet guise]. When a Jew or a couple of Jews are killed, the whole world is up on its feet, but when something like the Qana massacre happens, the world scarcely budes....

'Azzam labeled Shimon Peres, Israeli Prime Minister and Minister of Defense at the time, "blood-shedder" or "murderer" [*saffah*], and described him as comparable with Adolf Hitler, and at the same time, as a cunning man, an image that probably stemmed from the old-time stereotype of the "Jew" in the Arabic-speaking Muslim world:

the treacherous aggression towards Lebanon, and particularly the Qana massacre, have exposed Shimon Peres' true face; he, who appeared as a peace activist and misled many in the world, even some of the Arab leaders [to think] that he was a man of peace. After the Qana massacre, and the tragedies of aggression, Peres is worthy to be compared to Hitler.... Golda Meir already described him once as a man with no God in his heart; the Coptic Pope Shenuda [the religious leader of the Christian minority in Egypt]

⁶² *Jaysh al-Sha'ab*, 15 Oct. 1996.

described him as a man of blood with a fake smile; and others described him as a plotter under cover.⁶³

After Binyamin Netanyahu won the May 1996 elections in Israel, and during the break in the negotiations between Syria and Israel for a peace agreement and returning the Golan Heights to Syria, attacks against the Jews and the Jewish faith in the Syrian media intensified, not distinguishing between Judaism and Zionism, and showing support for Holocaust deniers.⁶⁴

Bassam al-Khalid, in an article titled with the neologism "democradism" [*dimuqrahudiyya* — mocking democracy and Judaism], claimed that the Jewish lobby hurt democracy and basic freedoms in the West, so much so that "you are only free when you can keep away from the 'Jews' [*sic*] and from the interests and facts related to Jewish ideology." As an instance of Jewish influence, Khalid referred to the asylum given in Europe to writers such as Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasrin, who criticized aspects of Islam, compared with the "persecution" of Holocaust deniers Roger Garaudy and Paul Rassinier; the latter, Khalid maintained, was arrested with his publisher in the 1950s after printing a book which had uncovered the "lie of the 'Holocaust' [*sic*]." According to Khalid, the Jewish lobby "distorts the image of Islam in the name of democracy." To further illustrate how Jews abuse the freedom of speech, Khalid brought the example of Syrian Minister of Defense, Mustafa Tlas, the publication of whose book, *Matzof of Zion*, provoked a scandal. The Syrian media emphasized the "threats he received from Jews at the heart of the French capital, and yet not one medium in the whole West came to protect democratic thought and freedom of opinion, while no one can deny the evidence, historical facts, and documents which *Matzof of Zion* consists of."⁶⁵

Syrian political criticism against Netanyahu's policy was also full of familiar attacks on Judaism: "The policy of Netanyahu's Talmudic mind is hostile to the Arabs in particular and to the world in general, based on the lie of 'God's chosen people' [*sic*]...."⁶⁶

In an interview with the London *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Syrian Minister of Defense Mustafa Tlas himself verbally abused the Jews once more. After Jordan's King Hussein made a consolation visit to Israel following the murder

⁶³ *Jaysb al-Sha'b*, 1 June 1996. The article was published three days after Peres lost the election to Binyamin Netanyahu, but it had probably been written, and perhaps even sent to press before the results were known.

⁶⁴ For attacks on the "lexicon of the Torah," "the principles of the Torah claiming that Israel's country stretches from the Nile to the Euphrates," and the "Torah mentality," see *Radio Damascus*, 29 June 1996, 10 July 1996, 21 July 1996; "Garaudy's Facts Uncover the Myths at the Base of Israeli Policy," *Jaysb al-Sha'b*, 1 Dec. 1996.

⁶⁵ *Jaysb al-Sha'b*, 15 June 1996.

⁶⁶ Sayyah 'Azzam, "The Israeli Maneuvers and Lies Mislead No One," *Jaysb al-Sha'b*, 1 Sept. 1997.

of Israeli schoolgirls by a Jordanian soldier near the border area, Tlas said: "Why should we weep for Sara and Rachel, rather than Khadija and Fatima [stereotypical Jewish and Arab women's names, I.R.], when United States policy has put on the garments of an old Jewish Rabbi?" Here Tlas, a known lover of literature and poetry, quoted prominent Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani, one of the bluntest of protesters against peace and normalization in the Arab world's relations with Israel.⁶⁷ Tlas kept attacking the close relations between Turkey and Israel, and in this context claimed (in a classic antisemitic style) that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of Modern Turkey, and Jemal Pasha and Enver Pasha (two members of the "Triumvirate" which ruled Turkey in 1913-1918) were supposedly Jewish.⁶⁸

Another platform for attacking Jews and Judaism has been the Arab Writers Union [Ittihad al-Kuttāb al-ʿArab], based in Damascus. The policy of this association has been described by an Arab critic as an "intellectual cover for the policies and priorities of the Syrian regime." The AWU issues a weekly gazette, *al-Uṣbuʿ al-Adabi* [The literary week] and some journals, including *al-Fikr al-Siyasi* [Political thought], and a considerable number of books on various topics, both literary and theoretical.⁶⁹ The AWU chair, Dr. ʿAli ʿUqla ʿUrsan, is an extreme opponent of any normalization or contact with Israelis.⁷⁰ Israel and the Jews are central topics in AWU publications, among which are Dr. ʿAli Khalil's book, *Judaism from a Theoretical and Practical Perspective: An Anthology from the Talmud and the Torah*, which was printed in 1997, and includes, under Jewish religious studies, the "aggressive, racist orientation, treason and treacherousness: the moral deterioration." The book makes reference, inter alia, to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, to one of Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy's books, both in their Arabic-language translations, to Mustafa Tlas's *Matzga of Zion*, and to a 1969 publication by Novosti, the Soviet news agency, titled "Beware of Zionism."⁷¹ Other recent books by the AWU include *Peace in the*

⁶⁷ See, e.g., a discussion of a poem Qabbani published in 1995, "al-Muharwilun" [those who rush forward], against the peace process with Israel and against its supporters within the Arab world, in Fouad Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation's Odyssey* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 255–59. Like other Syrian intellectuals, Qabbani himself lived many years in exile in London. The abovementioned poem was published in the Egyptian *al-Ahram*.

⁶⁸ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), 1 Jan. 1998.

⁶⁹ For information on the Arab Writers Union and direct links to its publications, see website: www.awu-dam.org; Ajami, *The Dream Palace*, 253–54; Ajami relies on criticism by Ghali Shukri (an Egyptian).

⁷⁰ See, e.g., ʿAli ʿUqla ʿUrsan, "The Normalization Intellectuals from Sanʿa to Granada," *al-Uṣbuʿ al-Adabi* (Damascus), 16 Jan. 1993.

⁷¹ ʿAli Khalil, *al-Yahudiyya bayna al-Nazarīyya wa-l-Tatbiq: Muqtatafat min al-Talmud wa-l-Tawrah* (Damascus: Ittihad al-Kuttāb al-ʿArab [Arab Writers Union], 1997); Zubayr Sultan Qaduri, *al-Salam fi al-Mashruʿ al-Sahyuni (Misr Namudhaia)* (Damascus: Ittihad al-

Zionist Project (Egypt as a Case Study) by Zubayr Sultan Qaduri, which blames Zionism for spreading HIV and promoting Satanism in Egypt, among other things; and *Racism and Mass Destruction in Zionist Thought and Activity* by Dr. Ghazi Husayn. The AWU gazette and journals do not lag behind the books in this respect; thus, for instance, in the article "The New York Shylock and the Death Industry" (published in *al-Ushbu' al-Adabi* towards the end of 1999), Jabara al-Barghuti accused Israel, Jews in general, and the Jewish faith of "classical" antisemitic allegations, such as misanthropy, aiming at world control, and idolatry, and he even added some blood libels, all of which originate from the "Commandments of the Talmud," and are supported by the United States.⁷²

Another article combining demonization of Israel and Zionism and presenting it as a global conspiracy, accompanied by familiar antisemitic and Holocaust-denying cartoons, was published in the same gazette by Husayn Hamawi at the beginning of 2000. One image Hamawi described was that of a

huge black spotted Zionist rope, like the skin of a cobra. Long claws move the rope.... [T]hey pass the great distances between oceans and continents, encouraging separatists movements and ethnic civil wars in various places. They take part in evaporating some superpowers..., and manipulate the political decisions in others.... The power, influence, and dangers of this movement hurt not only the Arabs, but the whole world.... In 1947, by means of the Partition Plan [of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state, by the UN Assembly], the limbs of the Zionist Octopus were wrapped around the Arabs' neck, and it began to sink its toxic teeth into soft, young flesh everywhere in the world.... Why are superpowers so afraid...of the [Zionist] dragon, that they wish to befriend it and please it? Could they really believe its deceptions, its lies and its false claims, that it was the victim of the Nazis' ovens and incinerators?"⁷³

The *al-Fikr al-Siyasi* journal has also published articles indiscriminately attacking Israel together with the Jews and the Jewish religion, including a recent one by Muhammad Ratib al-Hallaq, "From Jehovah to Sharon — The Founding Legends of Zionist Terrorism," and another by Dr. Ghazi Husayn (author of the aforementioned book), "The Israeli Army and the Holocaust

Kuttab al-'Arab [Arab Writers Union], 2002); Ghazi Husayn, *al-'Unsurriyya wal-Ibada al-Jama'iyya fi al-Fikr wal-mumarasa al-Sahyunyya* (Damascus: Ittihad al-Kuttab al-'Arab [Arab Writers Union], 2002).

⁷² *Al-Ushbu' al-Adabi*, 27 Nov. 1999.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 24 Feb. 2000.

Versus the Palestinian People"⁷⁴ [note that the accepted Arabic word for the Holocaust is *Karitha*, not the foreign term which was used here].

After the Monika Lewinski affair became well-known world-wide, the Syrian press referred to it as an Israeli-Jewish conspiracy, aimed to neutralize the U.S. president's influence:

Monika is a Jew, the lawyers who volunteered to represent her are Jews, Monika's friends who recorded her hot phone calls with President Clinton were Jews, and the *Washington Post* which first made it public is a Jewish newspaper.... The plot has been well-planned right from the beginning. Its goal was to embarrass President Clinton, to blackmail him and to weaken his status when he is faced with the Netanyahu government.⁷⁵

As demonstrated above, it is very clear that the attacks on Jews and Judaism continued after Ehud Barak was elected prime minister in May 1999 and the two states resumed negotiations. An analogy was drawn between the "expanding Zionist policy" and "Nazi geopolitics of *Lebensraum*."⁷⁶ Israel's national school curriculum was accused of distorting the human image of the Arabs, Arab history and culture, and Islam; the curriculum was compared to "[didactic] schools of a totalitarian ideology, such as the Fascist, Nazi, and Communist schools...." It was even claimed that kindergarten children in Israel sing "unanimously, guided by their teachers" a rhyme wishing the Arabs dead.⁷⁷

In the summer of 1999, articles were published in Syria which argued that Zionism and Judaism are behind "Satanism." Bassam al-Khalid was prominent among them, when he published on his regular column in *Jaysh al-Sha'b* a piece bearing the title "al-Sahyunariyya" [a neologism combining the words *Sahyunariyya* and *nar*, *Zionism* and *hell*]. According to him, a new book was published under this title, and he interviewed the author, who explained to the journalist that the "name given to the most dangerous movement founded by the Jews, is based on a meeting of the Rabbis and Elders of Zion, who convened to clandestinely establish a satanic alliance whose name derives from Lucifer, who is Iblis [one of the Islamic names for Satan, i.e., "Diabolis."]. Global Zionism today is based on the old notion of Zionism and the new

⁷⁴ Muhammad Ratib al-Hallaq, "Min Yahwe ila Sharun — al-Asatir al-Muassasa lil-Irhab al-Sahyuni," *al-Fikr al-Siyasi* 16 (Spring–Summer 2000); Dr. Ghazi Husayn, "al-Jaysh al-Isra'ili wa-l-Holocaust 'ala al-Sha'b al-Filastini," *ibid*.

⁷⁵ *Tishrin al-Ushu'i* [*Tishrin's Weekly Supplement*], 24 Aug. 1998; cf. Husayn Hamawi, "The Spotted Zionist Rope," *al-Ushu' al-Adabi*, 24 Feb. 2000.

⁷⁶ Lieutenant Colonel Hasan Ahmad Hasan, "The Expanding Zionist State — Inheritor to Nazi Geopolitics," *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, 1 July 1999.

⁷⁷ Lieutenant Colonel Akram al-Shibli, "Aggressive Cultural Perceptions in Curricula for Israeli Children," *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, 1 Aug. 1999. The writer cites a so-called Israeli kindergarten rhyme, in faulty, misspelled Hebrew: "A-tu-tu-tu, Ha-Aravim yamut", i.e., "A-tu-tu-tu, the Arabs will die."

notion of Satanism [*nawranīyya*].” Khalid concludes with a question: “is there anything uglier than the devil, apart from Zionism?”⁷⁸

In another article in this newspaper, the writer claimed that Zionism and antisemitism are only seemingly in conflict, but in fact cooperate: Zionism reignites antisemitism every time it fades, using it for its own purposes. The attacks targeting Jewish institutes around the world are not carried out by the locals, but by “Zionist agents and the Ben-Gurion youth”; “when a serious and neutral investigation is conducted into the bombing of the Jewish community house in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1994, it will definitely be discovered that the planners and operators of the bombing are Zionist agents.” This piece, too, relied on a Soviet source.⁷⁹

Those attacks climaxed in the culture and media with an op-ed published in one of the principal platforms of the Syrian public arena — the official daily *Tishrin*. Editorials published in this newspaper directly reflect the opinion of the heads of government, to make them publicly known. In this article, Muhammad Khayr al-Wadi, then editor of *Tishrin*, blamed “Zionism” of purposely having the Nazis’ non-Jewish victims forgotten, claiming that the leaders of Zionism terrorized the Jews and cooperated with the Nazis in order to encourage them to immigrate to Palestine. He also said that

Zionism is hiding the dark episodes of its black history and covering them up. It makes up stories about the Nazi Holocaust, of which the Jews suffered, and inflates them to astronomical dimensions.... Israel and the Zionist organizations aim at achieving two goals: first, to obtain additional funds from Germany and other states and institutes in Europe; and second, to use the myth of the Holocaust like a sword suspended over the necks of all opponents of Zionism, who are thereby directly accused of antisemitism.... The world’s countries which so strongly condemned Nazi crimes must strongly resist the plague of the epidemic of the Neo-Nazi plague nesting in Israel, spreading its poisons and dangers everywhere it can reach. This type of ideological and physical terrorism was unknown in Europe [even] in the darkest centuries. While the Nazis’ actions have already disappeared in history, the Zionist terror actions are at the peak of their activity.... This is the plague of the twentieth century, which

⁷⁸ Akram al-Shibli, “The New Religions,” *Jaysb al-Sha’b*, 15 Aug. 1999; Bassam al-Khalid, “al-Sahyunariyya” [the Zionism-hell], *Jaysb al-Sha’b*, 15 Sept. 1999.

⁷⁹ Nawfal Sharif Hasan, “Zionism and Antisemitism,” *Jaysb al-Sha’b*, 15 Oct. 1999. The Soviet source: *Zionism and Fascism* (Moscow 1975). The writer also relied on an Egyptian source, *al-Yahud wal-Yahudiyya* [Jews and Judaism] (Egypt: Dar al-Akhbar, 1997), and he also claims to have used unspecified “archive documents.”

has been transferred into the third millennium, spreading damage and destruction wherever it turns.⁸⁰

BASHAR AL-ASAD: FROM CHANGE TO CONTINUITY

On 10 June 2000, Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad died, after thirty years in power. Forty days of public mourning were announced, while at the same time speedy steps were taken to appoint Bashar al-Asad, the deceased president's son, to inherit the various roles his father formerly filled: president of Syria, commander general of its armed forces, and leader of the ruling Ba'ath Party.⁸¹

In his thirties, Bashar al-Asad was chosen to succeed his father, after his elder brother Basil, the designated heir, died in a road accident in 1994. Basil, Hafiz Asad's firstborn, had always been perceived in Syria as the talented one, his father's beloved and favorite son. Like Hafiz al-Asad, his military career, too, had been cultivated as a basis for a future political calling. Basil was reportedly popular in Syria as a well-educated, handsome, athletic young man, who declared war against corruption. For the Asad family and the 'Alawites in general, Basil had been the guarantee for their continued reign over Syria; for a considerable part of the remainder of the public, Basil had been the promise of continued political and economic relative stability in Syria, and even an extension of his father's recent political line: moving closer to the United States of America and Western countries, and joining the peace process with Israel. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians attended his funeral, led by his father the president, who was described to be bewildered and anguished, and even broke into tears.⁸²

In contrast with Basil, Bashar al-Asad, an ophthalmologist by profession, had never been designated for any political role, and as far as we know, had had no ambitions in this direction. When his brother died, Bashar was getting his subspeciality training in Britain; he was immediately summoned back to Syria, and from that time on until his father's death, he was trained as successor, in order to enable him not only to step into his father's large shoes, but also to effectively take Basil's place.⁸³ Bashar was quickly led through the ranks of the military track, and his public appearance was transformed from that of a civilian to an army officer. At the same time he was politically coached, and gradually started to take on political responsibilities.⁸⁴ It remains unclear what

⁸⁰ Muhammad Khayr al-Wadi, editorial, *Tishrin*, 31 Jan. 2000.

⁸¹ *Tishrin*, 11 June 2000, 16 June 2000, 6 July 2000, 12 July 2000; *al-Hayat*, 11 June 2000.

⁸² Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 158–60.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 174–75; Perthes, "Si Vis Stabilitatem," 156; Helena Cobban, *The Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks: 1991–96, and Beyond* (Washington, D.C. 1999), 45.

⁸⁴ Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 160–61.

his ideological training consisted of, but his father Hafiz al-Asad, made a non-equivocal statement in an interview to the French television in July 1998: "I desire my successor to adhere to [the same way and values] to which I adhere...."⁸⁵ A public image was concurrently developed for Bashar of a well-educated, open-minded young man involved in technological innovations and aspiring to promote the use of information technology and access to the internet in Syria, as chairman of the Syrian Computer Society.⁸⁶ This fitted image, along with his education and training in the West, led to great expectations at home and abroad that Bashar would carry out major reforms towards democratizing and liberalizing the Syrian government system, as well as the economy and improving relations with the United States and the West, and perhaps also reaching a peace agreement with Israel.⁸⁷

With such a background, it is not hard to understand how great the disappointment was shortly after Bashar Asad finally took over the reign. True, at first he took some reformist steps, canceled some of the restrictions on the freedom of speech established in Syria, and released political prisoners; but soon he resumed the hard-line policy typical of his father Hafiz al-Asad, resumed strict control over freedom of speech, and even re-incarcerated some of the very same political prisoners who had been released. Even access of Syrian citizens to the World Wide Web, the ostensible apple of his eye, remained significantly limited, in contrast with other Arab countries. By the end of 2003, only a few Syrian websites remained (almost all of them state-owned or controlled), most of them low-grade both technically and in content, and not up-to-date.⁸⁸ Syria has one of the lowest Internet penetration rates in the region, with only 250,000 subscribers in the early 2000s, yet Internet cafes thrive in the major cities, and some Syrians use an Internet connection through

⁸⁵ The interview was broadcast on Syrian television on 15 July 1998, and cited in Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, Hebrew ed. (Tel Aviv 1999), 187.

⁸⁶ See, e.g.: "Dr. Bashar al-Asad's Speech as Chairman of the Syrian Computer Society, at the Opening of the Second Syrian Conference on Computers, April 1999," on the Syrian Computer Society website at www.scs-syria.org/conf/99/speech.htm; "Bashar al-Asad Calls Arabs to Arabize Computers and Databases," *Alamuna* (Beirut) (Jan. 1997); interview with Bashar al-Asad, *al-Hayat*, 12 Oct. 1997, cited in Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 161.

⁸⁷ For a taste of Syrian public opinion and expectations of Bashar as expressed by a renowned scholar from the old Damascus elite, see Sadiq J. Al-'Azam, "The View from Damascus, Continued," *New York Review of Books*, 10 Aug. 2000; on Bashar's image in Israel until he succeeded his father as president, see various articles in Hebrew in *Haaretz*, *Yedioth Aharonoth*, and *Maarin*, 11–16 June 2000. The Israeli press in this case reflected the common views of Bashar found in the American and Western media.

⁸⁸ See, e.g., the websites mentioned in previous footnotes, which in turn refer to additional links; for information on human rights in Syria, see *Human Rights Watch World Reports 2000–2003, Syria*, at www.hrw.org.

ISPs in neighboring countries.⁸⁹ Recently the first blog censorship in Syria was reported, as the access to the Syrian Arabic *Domari* blog was blocked by none other than the Syrian Computer Society, formerly headed by Bashar al-Asad himself.⁹⁰

In politics, and especially where foreign policy was concerned, Bashar seemed to be under the influence of his father's circle of old friends. That circle included Vice President Khaddam (until his retirement in 2005, and his recent campaign from Paris against Bashar's regime), Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara' (appointed in February 2006 as Vice President, to replace Khaddam), and Minister of Defense Tlas, who retired in May 2004 (but, according to some reports, still serves as a key consultant "behind the scenes").⁹¹ Of the three of them, Tlas's opinions certainly need not be repeated; Khaddam, reputedly, maintains extreme stances against Israel⁹²; and while al-Shara', like Hafiz al-Asad, does not tend to openly speak against Judaism and the Jews, he presents a hard-line, even physical repulsion towards Israel and the Israelis.⁹³

Some assume that it was under the influence of the "old guard" that Bashar took such an extreme anti-American stance during the U.S. war in Iraq and removal of Saddam Hussein from power in 2003, unlike his father who seemingly supported the first Gulf War against Iraq in 1991.⁹⁴ This assumption

⁸⁹ *Country Profile: Syria, April 2005*, Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁰ "First Report of Blog Censorship in Syria," www.damasceneblog.com

⁹¹ Regarding their involvement and influence, see, e.g., *al-Thawra*, 18 July 2000; for evaluations, see Alan Makovsky, "Syria Under Bashar Al-Asad: The Domestic Scene and the 'Chinese Model' of Reform," *Policywatch* 512, 17 Jan. 2001; cf. Moshe Ma'oz, "Young Leadership and Old Structures in the Middle East — The Case of Syria" (in Hebrew), in *Israel, The Middle East and Islam: Weighing the Risks and Prospects*, eds. Oded Eran and Amnon Cohen (Jerusalem: Truman Institute, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2003); on Tlas's resignation and its implications, see *Haaretz*, 13 May 2004; in June 2005 Khaddam announced at the Ba'th Party convention that he meant to quit his "official positions." See *al-Abram*, 9 June 2005. As for his recent campaign against the Asad regime from his exile, see his 31 Dec. 2005 interview with *al-Arabiya* television network, at www.alarabiya.net/Articles/2005/12/31/19936.htm; On al-Shara's promotion, see *Yedioth Abaronoth*, 12 Feb. 2006.

⁹² Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 123.

⁹³ During the Shepherdstown summit in January 2000, with the participation of President Clinton, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and al-Shara', the latter refrained from shaking hands with Barak, or even looking directly at him. See the Shepherdstown summit log in *Haaretz*, 4 Jan. 2000; al-Shara' explained that he did it because "Israel does not respect Arab civilization." See *al-Safir* (Beirut), 12 Feb. 2000.

⁹⁴ See, e.g., editorial in *Tishrin*, 22 Mar. 2003; interview with Bashar al-Asad, *al-Safir*, 27 Mar. 2003; interview with Bashar al-Asad, *Newsweek*, 19 May 2003; Faruq al-Shara', for his part, labeled the Bush administration the "most aggressive and the most stupid." Ibrahim Humaydi reports from Damascus, *al-Hayat*, 28 July 2003.

may be true, but in spite of the known old hostility between the two Ba'ath regimes in Damascus and Baghdad, in 1991 Hafiz al-Asad called Saddam Hussein to withdraw from Kuwait, but at the same time promised to support Iraq, if it should be attacked afterwards; in the beginning of 1997 he renewed economic ties with Iraq, and since the beginning of 1998 has unequivocally stood by its side in the conflict with United States on the issue of keeping Iraqi weapons of mass destruction under international supervision.⁹⁵ Bashar al-Asad, then, is loyal to his father's way in this issue as well. The consistency of Syrian foreign policy is especially clear when Israel is concerned.⁹⁶ Similar to his father, Bashar encourages the "refusal organizations" calling for a "comprehensive and just peace" with Israel, in exchange for returning the Golan Heights to Syria up to the 4 June 1967 borders, although in the context of the second Intifada he demanded a parallel solution on the Palestinian track as well, including a resolution to the refugee problem.⁹⁷ Yet in a March 2003 interview for the Lebanese *al-Safir*, Bashar said that "Israel has an anomalous structure, a state with only one shade, a religious one, and its democracy is within that color, and not within the state borders. So, even if the peace process succeeds, it is impossible that Israel should be a legitimate state, since its structure is anomalous in the region, perhaps in the whole world."⁹⁸ But this statement, too, intended for current drifts in certain circles, is not very far from Hafiz al-Asad's view of the conflict in terms of "good versus evil," and of the peace process as "continuing the struggle in different ways."⁹⁹ Like his father before him, Bashar also makes a point of appearing to be a good Muslim.¹⁰⁰ His marriage to Asma al-Akhras, a well-educated British-Syrian young woman was politically significant, which clearly bears on his father's political heritage: although her close family lives in London, Akhras' comes from the Sunni elite of the peripheral city of Homs. This marriage reinforced Bashar's public image as the "hope of the younger generation," and at the same time demonstrated a façade of National-Islamic, 'Alawite-Sunni unity, upgrading the government's ties with the Sunni periphery, which Hafiz al-Asad had nurtured.¹⁰¹ It seems that Bashar's controversial speech at Pope John Paul II's reception in

⁹⁵ Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 58, 73; cf. Najib Ghadbian, "The New Asad: Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Syria," *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 4 (Autumn 2001): 630; accusations were made recently that Iraqi WMD, or at least part of it, had been hidden in Syria prior for the 2003 Iraq War. However, an American official report asserts that no WMD had been officially transferred from Iraq to Syria. See *Haaretz*, 27 Apr. 2005.

⁹⁶ Ghadbian, "The New Asad," 626–27.

⁹⁷ Interview with Bashar al-Asad, *al-Sbarq al-Awsat*, 8 Feb. 2001.

⁹⁸ *Al-Safir*, 27 Mar. 2003.

⁹⁹ Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 115.

¹⁰⁰ See, e.g., his speech at the Qatar Islamic summit on 13 Nov. 2000, note 1.

¹⁰¹ Makovsky, "Syria Under Bashar Al-Asad."

Damascus, that sought to foster a Muslim-Christian unity versus the Jews, should be seen in the same context.

Even on the ideological level, and contrary to general expectations, Bashar seems to be a good disciple of his father. Bashar was brought up in Syrian schools under his father's regime, where the curriculum was, as mentioned above, militarist, anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish.¹⁰² During his studies Bashar joined the Ba'ath party youth movement, and later became a regular member of the Party. His medical studies were conducted at Damascus University, while his training as an ophthalmologist in London lasted only a short period of two years or less, interrupted by his brother Basil's death. Apparently most of Bashar's social contacts in London were Syrian emigrants, who sympathized with the Asad regime, among them his father-in-law to be, cardiologist Dr. Fawaz al-Akhras, who headed an organization of Syrian expatriates, and whose wife was a diplomat at the Syrian embassy.¹⁰³ Bashar's actual view of human rights and freedom of expression was suggested in an interview to the London-based *al-Hayat* in October 1997, when he explained that while he recognized the importance of Syria's joining the World Wide Web, he felt he should advise against uncontrolled surfing, which might be a threat to Syrian citizens' values.¹⁰⁴ Following his father's explicit wish for his inheritor to stick to his values, Bashar presents himself as his father's pupil and faithful successor, both ideologically and in practice, not only in the Syrian public sphere, but also in interviews to the Western media.¹⁰⁵

It is plain to see from the above that Bashar al-Asad's antisemitic public statements are embedded ideologically in a creed he acquired under his father's regime. Such antisemitic views have been expressed time and again in the Syrian public sphere, by intellectuals, military officials, journalists, columnists, and high-ranking regime spokesmen, as well as in the education system. And while Bashar al-Asad is not known to have verbally abused Jews and Judaism since July 2001, he has continued his father's line of harsh attacks on Israel. One assumes that Asad is aware of the international criticism against these statements, and it seems that the timing for his 2000–2001 antisemitic attacks was not chosen at random, but aimed to take advantage of the anti-Israeli, and even anti-Jewish atmosphere in the Arab and Muslim world, which reached one of its peaks at the beginning of the "al-Aqsa Intifada." As a rule, Hafiz al-Asad acted not as one who means to shape public opinion in his country and in the

¹⁰² For studies dealing with the Syrian school curriculum, see n. 17 above.

¹⁰³ Richard Beeston, "Blair Attempts to Win Asad with London Summit," *The Times* (London), 29 Nov.2002; Zisser, *In the Name of the Father*, 31-35.

¹⁰⁴ *Al-Hayat*, 12 Oct. 1997, cited in Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 183.

¹⁰⁵ See, e.g., interview with Bashar al-Asad in *Der Spiegel*, 9 July 2001, cited in: *FBIS*, 9 July 2001.

Arab world, but as wishing to reflect and express it.¹⁰⁶ It can be similarly inferred that Bashar, too, tried to "ride the wave" in the Arab and Muslim world, and even outside of it, in order to earn credit and prestige with the public in Syria, and generally in Arab countries, as an heir worthy of his father. The Israeli air force strike against a Syrian radar station in Lebanon on 16 April 2001, as a response to Hizballah attacks on Israel (a Lebanese organization working under Syrian auspices), caused Asad and officials in his government rage and frustration, wanting an option of a direct Syrian military action (due to the weakness of the Syrian army and fear of a general clash with Israel).¹⁰⁷ These sentiments could be the catalyst that pushed Asad's antisemitic statements to such extremes during the Pope's visit, but it should be noted that the beginning of these statements had preceded the Israeli air force operation.

UNDER BASHAR AL-ASAD'S REGIME

Besides Asad's own antisemitic statements, other verbal attacks against Jews and Judaism were heard in the Syrian public sphere under his rule. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's slandering of the Arabs was compared to Nazi ideology, and following Ariel Sharon was elected Prime Minister in March 2001, it was associated with the Israelis collectively:

Sharon's troubles become more and more serious, and the day is not far when Israelis will wonder if they haven't been dangerously unwise in electing a criminal for government, when they reach that stage that Rabbi Ovadia Yosef has just reached, calling to eliminate the Arabs by missiles... that is, total racists and murderers, the same way the Hitlerian Nazis had been.¹⁰⁸

Minister of Defense Mustafa Tlas told the London-based Arabic newspaper *al-Majalla*, on the eve of the Pope's visit to Syria in May 2001, that "the Israeli people is against peace, and is more extreme than the Nazis."¹⁰⁹ Dr. Nadia Khawast, a columnist in *Tishrin*, described a conference of the Association of Arab Writers in the same month. During the conference the participants watched a television debate in Qatar on the analogy of Zionism

¹⁰⁶ Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 71–72, 120.

¹⁰⁷ *Haaretz*, 16 Apr. 2001.

¹⁰⁸ *Tishrin* editorial, 8 Apr. 2001; Brigadier General Dr. Sayyah 'Azzam, "Israel Continues Attempts to Judaize Arab Land," *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, 1 Sept. 2000, where Rabbi Ovadia Yosef is said to have "attacked the Palestinians and Arabs in an unprecedented racist hostile spirit. Don't these immoral spirit and hostility surpass [in their severity] the Nazis' spirit and hostility?"; see also Second-Lieutenant Dr. Husayn Talal Muqlid, "The Geneva Convention and Israel's Violations of It," *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, 1 Feb. 2002, where he argues that these violations indicate that Israel is, supposedly, "recreating Nazism."

¹⁰⁹ *Al-Majalla* (London), 6 May 2001.

and Nazism, which he supported. In the same column Khawast also covered the renewed edition published in Damascus of a memoir by Hajj Amin al-Husayni, a past Mufti of Jerusalem and leader of the Palestinian-Arab national movement in the British Mandate era, infamous for his cooperation with the Nazis. Khawast described the Mufti as one who recognized the dangers of Zionism in time, alongside its "deep connection with the Jewish religion."¹¹⁰

A week after Khawast's piece, Dr. 'Adnan Sulayman published an article in *Tishrin*, reflecting the ideology expressed by President Bashar al-Asad in his March 2003 *al-Safir* interview. Sulayman argued that Israel is "an entity in constant crisis, inherently different than the other nations in the World, leaning on Zionist capital." According to him, in order to gather 40 percent of world Jewry in Israel, Israeli leaders needed the British colonialist occupation of Palestine, the two world wars, the collapse of the USSR, and "waging tens of wars against the Arabs," therefore, gathering the remaining Jews will surely require a "World Wars III and IV, and more wars with the Arabs."¹¹¹

In September 2001, the *Syria Times*, an English-language official gazette mainly communicating the Syrian regime's position abroad, published an article, "Zionism Reproduces Nazism," which claimed, among other things, that Israel was committing genocide in the occupied territories, and that "Sharon is embodying — if not actually representing — Hitlerism." To Ariel Sharon was attributed such statements as: "If I became a prime minister, I would wipe out all Arabs, kill every newly-born Palestinian baby and knife the abdomen of every woman who is pregnant from an Arab. Those dogs should not be close to the chosen people of god." It was also claimed that Sharon promised, during his election campaign, to commit genocide on the Arabs. Later on in the article, a comparison was drawn between Zionism and Nazism, and between the Israelis and the Nazis:

Going through what the Nazis did against the Jews would reach the clear conclusion that criminal acts of the Nazis are not different from those being carried out by the racist and Zionist Israelis. Like what the Nazi ideology was based on racial superiority, Zionism based its ideology on the 'chosen people of god.' Both Nazism and Zionism represent two faces of the same coin as each derives its ideology from racism, genocide and terrorism. Both are strong advocates of racist killing and both deny basic rights of other peoples and openly disregard human principles.¹¹²

Accusing Zionism of racism allegedly stemming from Judaism has persisted in the Syrian press during President Bashar al-Asad's reign. Syrian

¹¹⁰ *Tishrin*, 21 May 2001.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 28 May 2001.

¹¹² *Syria Times* (Damascus), 5 Sept. 2001.

"experts" explained that Zionism is based on the Jewish faith, and that it is not Abraham's and Moses' religion, but a fabrication created during the Babylonian captivity, where, so they argued, the "racist notion" of the "Chosen People" originated. According to this attitude, it was this fundamental racism which turned Zionism into a racist, murderous entity.¹¹³ In this context, Israel has been constantly accused of Nazism.¹¹⁴ Israel was demonized in the same spirit in President Asad's address to the Beirut Arab League States' summit, on 28 March 2002: "'Israel' was founded in 1948 according to an international resolution, and was founded by killing, terrorism, and expanding, that is, it defined itself as an enemy state, and does not even try to present itself as an innocent state; so much so, that it announces to everyone that it is an enemy state that kills, occupies, and expands..."¹¹⁵

After the 11 September 2001 terror attack on the United States, it was claimed in the Syrian press that the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, was behind the attack or knew about it in advance and warned the "4,000 Israelis" who worked at the World Trade Center in New York (a common claim within antisemitic circles, Arab or otherwise, of an unclear origin).¹¹⁶

Caricatures in the Syrian press have always tended to represent the general opinion, including antisemitic stereotypes. On the background of the al-Aqsa Intifada, a stereotypical image of the Israeli was offered, with repetitive antisemitic motifs: a monster, an ultra-Orthodox Jew, or a soldier with a crooked nose, monstrous, cowardly, cruel, and homicidal, protected by America and controlling it, represented by a Star of David and a swastika.¹¹⁷ The IDF entering Bethlehem in April 2002, and the siege of armed Palestinians who had barricaded themselves in the Church of the Nativity, were yet again covered as

¹¹³ Bassam Muhanna, "The Hebrews-Israelis-Adherents of the Mosaic Faith-Jews," *Tisbrin*, 23 June 2001; see also Nadia Khawast, "Yes, Zionism is Racist," *Tisbrin*, 8 Aug. 2001.

¹¹⁴ See another example in *Tisbrin's* report of 16 Mar 2002: "Turkish Circles Condemn Zionist Aggression: 'Israel' [*sic*] Implements Nazism."

¹¹⁵ *Tisbrin*, 28 Mar. 2002.

¹¹⁶ "Terrorist Israel," *Jaysh al-Sha'b* (Feb. 2002).

¹¹⁷ See, e.g., *Tisbrin*, 19 May 2001 — the Israeli Labour and Likud parties portrayed as two salivating and sniggering ultra-orthodox (Haredi) Jews with *large* crooked noses, kicking around the tattered dove of peace; *Tisbrin*, 31 May 2000 — an Arab man trying to push out of a house a big monster or dragon marked with the Star of David; *Tisbrin*, 11 Aug. 2001 — on the highest stage of a winners' podium of the "crime" match, surrounded by bodies of "Palestinian People Martyrs," a Haredi Jew with horns, tail, a crooked nose, legs and a Star of David on his coat, stands, bloody scythe in hand; *Tisbrin*, 18 Apr. 2002 — a sobbing Arab calls an American to see a sign bearing a Star of David, showing him a Haredi Jew with a crooked nose who stabbed the dove of peace with a spear. The American is carried by a group of Haredi Jews all with crooked noses who peep out from under his cloak.

a repetition of the killing of Christ. *Tishrin* refer to it as the "re-killing and re-crucifying of Jesus Christ...who was a Palestinian refugee in his own homeland, in his own sanctuary, in his own church...", and accompanied it with a caricature borrowed from the Italian *La Stampa*, showing baby Jesus in the stable, faced with a tank inscribed with a Star of David, saying (in Arabic): "will they kill me once more?"¹¹⁸

The Army Gazette *Jaysh al-Sha'b* too continued its usual attacks on Jews and Judaism.¹¹⁹ Thus, for instance, Colonel Dr. Nawfal Hasan wrote in his article "Models of Behavior and Thought," towards the end of 2002:

"the Israeli media keep exposing that the rabbis [*Hakhamat*] smuggle money to overseas banks, due to mistrust of Israel's economic and political stability...or as a preparation to leave it" [Israeli media did report people transferring cash overseas, but these were wealthy citizens and business people, rather than rabbis].¹²⁰

During October-November 2003, in the Islamic holy fasting month of Ramadan, the Lebanese television station *al-Manar*, affiliated with Hizballah, broadcast a 29-part series, *al-Shatat* [Diaspora], produced by a Syrian company, portraying Jewish history as a prolonged campaign to control the entire world, orchestrated by a secret Jewish government, led since the 19th century by the Rothschild family. The Jews, according to this, were directly responsible for many crimes and catastrophes, starting with political murders and culminating, perhaps, in starting the two World Wars. Among the series' notorious characters were Alfred Dreyfus, Theodor Herzl, and Chaim Weitzmann (Zionism is portrayed as an integral part of the plot to subdue the world). While Syria denied that Syrian television was involved in producing the series, the credits at the episodes' end acknowledged various department of the Syrian government, including the Defense and Culture Ministries, the Damascus Police, and the Archaeology and Museums Administration. The series producer was a Jordanian of Palestinian origin, but the scriptwriter was Dr. Fathallah 'Umar, a lecturer at the University of Aleppo, and the historical advisor was Dr Suhayl Zakar, another Syrian. Perhaps as a result of strong international criticism, the series was not aired on Syrian television, and a Syrian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman claimed that it was a private production. Yet the Syrian government maintains close inspection and guidance over all such activities, and the

¹¹⁸ "Non vorranno mica farmi fuori un'altra volta?!" [Italian: "I wouldn't at all want them to do it to me again"]. Ahmad Sawwan, "For Whom the Bell Tolls? Bethlehem [caught] in the Circle of Fire and Siege," *Tishrin*, 11 Apr. 2002.

¹¹⁹ See, e.g., "author and scholar" Mahmud 'Abd al-Rahman, "Shedding Light on the Racist Attitudes in the Israeli School Curricula," *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, 1 Sept. 2002

¹²⁰ *Jaysh al-Sha'b*, 1 Dec. 2002.

broadcast on *al-Manar* could not be a coincidence, given the close ties between Hizballah and Bashar al-Asad's regime.¹²¹

Recently Syrian officials and journalists have demonstrated the use of "Jewish" as a term of condemnation and derogation versus their opponents. For example, following former Vice President Khaddam's interview on the *Alarabiya* television station on December 2005, in which he severely criticized President Asad and blamed him for initiating former Lebanese PM Hariri's murder, Syrian members of Parliament attacked *Alarabiya* [i.e., "the Arabic"], and called it "al-Yahudiyya" ["the Jewish"] and "al-'Ibriyya" ["the Hebrew"].¹²² On other occasions, the Syrian media vituperated Detlev Mehlis, the German former UN special investigator on the Hariri murder, as "son of a Jew."¹²³

A relatively new phenomenon, perhaps, is Iranian Khomeinist influence on Ba'athist secular Syria. Hafiz al-Asad had an alliance of shared interests and cooperation with Iran since 1979. When Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father, the character of the relationship changed. It seems that instead an alliance of equals, the more populated and resourceful Iran became the patron, and Syria the client. Iran, with its ambitions of regional hegemony and pursuit of nuclear weapons, is now offering sponsorship and protection for the smaller and weaker Syria, which feels threatened by the United States, Israel, its rivals in Lebanon, and even France.¹²⁴ In June 2006, Syria signed a defense pact with Iran. An Iranian opposition journalist (based abroad) recently expressed the view that Iran's influence in Syria has grown so deep that Shi'ite Iranian clerics are converting Syrian Sunnis and 'Alawites to Shi'ism en masse. According to that source, in the last year two *ayatollahs* of Iran once again declared the 'Alawites to be genuine Muslims (following the acknowledgment gained by Hafiz al-Asad from Lebanese Shi'ite clerics), and even authorized "theological exchanges" with them, paving the road for attempts at conversion.¹²⁵ However, this last development may be interpreted once more as Asad and the 'Alawite sect resorting again to the practice of the "taqiyya," mentioned above, which was

¹²¹ For a concise report, see www.memri.org, "Al-Shatat: The Syrian-Produced Ramadan 2003 TV special," special dispatch no. 627.

¹²² www.alarabiya.net/Articles/2005/12/31/19936.htm

¹²³ See English internet edition of *Der Spiegel*, 19 Dec. 2005: www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,391437,00.html.

¹²⁴ Itamar Rabinovich, "Courting Syria," *Haaretz*, 23 Nov. 2006.

¹²⁵ Amir Taheri, "The 'Iranization' of Syria," *Jerusalem Post*, 2 Nov. 2006. Taheri claims also that the Syrian regime was purged of Sunni elements, opposed to Iranian Shi'ism, and those elements, in turn, formed alliance with the Syrian Muslim brotherhood: he probably means former vice president Khaddam and his faction, who came close to 'Ali Sadr al-Din Bayanuni, the London-based leader of the Syrian Muslim brotherhood. However, this claim seems exaggerated, since other Sunnis like vice president al-Shara' and foreign minister Walid Mua'llim continue to play a prominent role in the regime. Even the first lady, Asma al-Asad, is a Sunni, as mentioned above.

used by heterodox sect members to publicly observe the Sunni orthodox cult. This time, perhaps, the 'Alawites are using this practice to conform with Iran as the rising regional power which seeks to foster its relations with Shi'ite communities throughout the region. Indeed, some Syrian spokesmen stated that alliance between Syria and Iran, "the odd couple," is not insoluble, and that Damascus has been pushed into Tehran's arms out of a lack of choice, as a result of American policies.¹²⁶

In this context, one can appreciate Bashar al-Asad's recent statements on the Holocaust, in an interview intended to improve his image with American public opinion, aired on PBS in 27 March 2006. The following conversation between the interviewer, Charlie Rose (a Jew) and president Asad took place during the interview, that lasted an hour:

Rose: The new President of Iran visited you here and you visited him in Tehran. What do you make of a man who says there was no Holocaust?

Asad: If you ask many people in the region they would say to you that the West exaggerated the Holocaust. People say there was a Holocaust but they exaggerated it.

Rose: You don't believe that though, do you?

Asad: It's not a matter of how many were killed, half a million, six million or one person. Killing is killing. For example, eight million Soviets were killed, so why don't we talk about them? The problem is not the number of those killed but rather how they use the Holocaust. What do the Palestinians have to do with the Holocaust to pay the price?

Rose: Even people that I know in Iran say they don't believe what the President is saying. There are people who believe it....

Asad: In my country you'd see two opinions as well.

Rose: I want to make sure I understand what you believe. You believe there was a Holocaust where the anti-Semite Nazis killed millions....

Asad: We, Arabs, are Semitic too. Definitely there were massacres that happened against the Jews during the Second World War, but I'm talking about the concept and how they use it. But I don't have any clue how many were killed or how they were killed, by gas, by shooting...we don't know.

Rose: Part of the Nazi policy was to exterminate the Jews. This is not just a massacre.

Asad: We see what's going on in Palestine the same way, but you don't see it the same way. During the Second World War we didn't live in Europe; we were far and we don't see it the way the

¹²⁶ Rabinovich, "Courting Syria."

Europeans see it. What happens in Palestine affects us directly, yet you do not see it the same way we see it. Six million Palestinians are outside their country and other tens or hundreds of thousands were killed in the last decades.”¹²⁷

In an even more recent interview to Italian *La Repubblica*, in which Asad called on Israel to resume peace negotiations, He repeated his doubts about the Holocaust. When asked about the Holocaust deniers' conference held in Teheran, the Syrian president replied: “Europe has a complex with the Holocaust. We don't have, we didn't perpetrate it,” and claimed that it was a matter of freedom of expression and equated the popular novel, *The Da Vinci Code* and Holocaust denial: “Is it possible to discuss about Christ, and not on the Holocaust? This is not a story of God, it is a story of human beings.”¹²⁸

Asad, who has generally refrained from antisemitic statements since the scandal following his speech during the Pope's visit to Damascus in 2001, might indeed have been influenced by Ahmadinejad's Holocaust-denial rhetoric, although, as we have seen, Holocaust denial is not new to the Asad regimes. In fact, even in the last years before Ahmadinejad was elected as president of Iran, the Syrian press published Holocaust-denying articles.¹²⁹ Whether Bashar al-Asad truly believes in his allegations on the Holocaust (which indeed are very common in the Arab and Islamic World), or merely tried to stand by his ally, it is another evidence how much such perceptions are embedded into the creed of the Syrian regime.

CONCLUSION

Since Syria became independent in 1946, anti-Israeli attitudes and even utterly antisemitic views have been common there, increasing during and following the wars with Israel, and involving a blurring of the lines between Israel and Zionism to Judaism. This trend continued and intensified after the Ba'th Party took control in 1963. In 1970 Hafiz al-Asad, an army officer and 'Alawite Ba'th member, rose to power by means of a military coup d'etat. Asad, who became president of Syria, was the first to establish a lasting, strong, and relatively stable personal regime in that country, relying on the army and the Ba'th Party, as well as the 'Alawite minority sect, in coalition with Sunni elements from the periphery. Asad's animosity to Israel and Zionism, no less than that of previous Syrian leaders, grew even stronger following his

¹²⁷ For the full interview see the web site of the Syrian Arab News Agency: www.sana.org

¹²⁸ *La Repubblica* (Rome), 15 Dec. 2006.

¹²⁹ See, e.g., Dr. Rif'at Sayd Ahmad, “The 'Truth on the 'Holocaust' [*sic*] — the proof on the false burning of the Jews in the Nazis' crematoriums,” *Tishrin*, 9 May 2004; Ghassan Mahfud, a letter to the editorial board, *Tishrin*, 9 June 2004.

experience in the wars against Israel, in 1967, 1973, and 1982. Yet Asad, unlike some of his predecessors, developed an official presidential line of avoiding explicit verbal attacks on Jews and the Judaism, attempting to distinguish between them and Israel. But over the years this did not prevent large-scale antisemitic statements by the Asad regime, from his government-controlled media to officials in his administration. In 1984, Mustafa Tlas, Syrian Minister of Defense since 1972 and a Sunni Muslim closely identified with Hafiz al-Asad, wrote and published his book *Matzoh of Zion*, which presents the 1840 Damascus blood libel as historical truth, adding to it an alleged "Zionist" touch. *Matzoh of Zion* is still printed in Syria, widely cited and is reported to be quite popular.

Even after Asad took the diplomatic track of peace negotiations with Israel in 1991 (including his demand for the return of the Golan Heights, which Syria lost in 1967), harsh antisemitic expressions continued to be heard in the Syrian public sphere. Not until the official media in Syria began to slowly and gradually prepare the public opinion for peace (in 1992–1996), that abusing Jews and Judaism, while never completely ceasing, subsided somewhat. After the peace negotiations stopped in 1996, Syrian media launched new attacks on Israel, accompanied by a new wave of antisemitism, which continued when the negotiations with Israel were resumed in 1999 (the negotiations failed again by 2000). In fact, antisemitic manifestations have never ceased to exist, and they seem to express an authentic ideology lying at the base of the Syrian regime.

After Hafiz al-Asad's death in June 2000, his son Bashar replaced him as president of Syria. Bashar, an ophthalmologist by profession, had been trained for leadership for years. As a young leader who has spent some time in the West during his professional training, many in Syria and abroad expected him to implement reforms, perhaps even progress towards peace with Israel; but Bashar proved to be a loyal disciple of his father above all, committed to continuing his policies. It seems that he felt the need to prove himself as no less strong than his father. Along with the general anti-Israel and anti-Jewish atmosphere in the Arab world, and after the al-Aqsa Intifada broke out in September 2000, with increasing tension between Israel and Syria as a result of Hizballah attacks and Israeli responses against the Syrian army — all these factors drove Bashar al-Asad to make a series of harsh public statements against Jews and Judaism, ranging from comparing Israel with Nazism at the Islamic Countries Summit, to his remarks during Pope John Paul II's visit to Syria in May 2001, when the Syrian president drew an analogy between the Israelis' behavior towards the Palestinians, the passion of Christ, and the Jews' attempt to betray the Prophet Muhammad (according to the Islamic tradition). Despite international criticism, Asad did not retract his words even in interviews to the Western media, and continued to claim that what he said was based on historical fact. He denied his identity as an antisemite, arguing that the Arabs are Semites too, and ignoring the conventional denotation of the term — hatred of Jews and Judaism. And yet it appears that since August 2001, Asad

re-adopted his father's official line: using harsh verbal attacks on Israel and Zionism, but avoiding overtly defaming Jews and Judaism. In the Syrian media, in contrast, Judeophobic expressions continue to thrive.

An analysis of its components reveals Syrian antisemitism to be a branch of modern Arab antisemitism, which has evolved mainly in the course of the conflict with Israel. As Yehoshofat Harkabi has shown, it originates in the early Islamic tradition, which perceived the Jews as low and despised, and also as cunning, treacherous, and conniving in their struggle with the Prophet Muhammad. While these stereotypes had been dormant in various periods, modern Arab antisemitism has employed them to give Judeophobia an Arab-Islamic coloring.¹³⁰ Although Syria is a relatively secular state, whose president is an 'Alawite, the Sunni fundamentalists' greatest foe, the Islamic traditional anti-Jewish stereotypes of treacherousness and conspiracy have been reflected in the Syrian government's attitude to Israel, during the peace negotiations. On the other hand, like many other Arab countries, Syria's antisemitism, too, was mainly influenced by European-Christian prejudice which entered the Arab world beginning in the 19th century. As in other Arab countries, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and their derivative anti-Jewish images are widespread in Syria. The Zionist movement and Israel are viewed as part of a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world.¹³¹ The image of the Jews as inherently blameworthy, as abnormal and naturally misanthropic, was crystallized back in the 1950s and 1960s, along with attacks on the notion of the "chosen people."¹³² Syrian antisemitism was also inspired by propaganda emanating from the USSR and the Communist bloc, which Syria looked up to as a model until it collapsed.¹³³ Indeed, many Syrian publicists who censured Jews and Judaism referred to Soviet publications among their major sources. Bernard Lewis showed that the comparison of Israel and the Nazis, which is quite common in the Arab world and in Syria, originated in Soviet propaganda.¹³⁴ Yet Western European Holocaust denial was also warmly embraced by the Arab world in general, and Syria in particular. Likewise, a perceived fusion of identity between Israel and the Zionist movement, and Judaism and the Jewish people has also taken root in Syria.

Is antisemitism prevalent not only among the regime circles, but also among the Syrian general public? The Syrian regime seems to put a great effort into spreading antisemitism using the media and education system, but in a totalitarian state it is difficult to assess what the public opinion really is. There is a small number of positive examples: despite the abysmal hostility towards

¹³⁰ Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes*, 218–23, 226; cf.: Milson, "What is Arab Antisemitism?"

¹³¹ Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes*, 212.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 226–32.

¹³³ Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 47.

¹³⁴ Lewis, *Semites and Antisemites*, 160–61.

Israel, Jews, and Judaism displayed by the Damascus-based Arab Writers Association, certain prominent Syrian writers and intellectuals, such as the poet Adonis ('Ali Ahmad Sa'id), the academic Hani al-Rahib, and the Syrian playwright Sa'dallah Wanus, have called for a dialogue with Israel, some even while residing in Syria.¹³⁵ Anthropologist Lisa Wedeen, who conducted a field study in Syria, recorded among other things the circulation of popular jokes about the regime and the president, some describing Syrian soldiers meeting Israeli soldiers on their mutual border; almost surprisingly, the Israeli soldier is described in these jokes as a human, non-threatening figure.¹³⁶

A different glimpse into Syrian society is provided by Prof. Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm, a Syrian scholar of Damascus University, who is well-known in his country, in the Arab world, and in the West. Al-'Azm is a descendant of the old Damascus elite which had ruled for hundreds of years before it was overthrown by the Ba'th revolutionaries, and subsequently by Hafiz al-Asad. Despite his academic position, al-'Azm is not affiliated with the Asad regime, and is known personally to have liberal views, including towards Israel and the Jews.¹³⁷ In 2000 he was able to publish an article in the *New York Review of Books*, in which he described the attitude of Syrian society in Damascus towards the peace process with Israel, while implicitly criticizing the regime's rigidity. Although al-'Azm explained that Syrian society is not monolithic with regard to Israel, he in fact portrayed an extremely harsh mindset against Israel in Syria, which borders on demonization. The peace process with Israel was described as "accepting an inevitable evil." Syrian society's response to the peace process being interrupted by the 1996 Israeli election and the subsequent change of leadership, al-'Azm described as "mixed disappointment and relief...relief that it was Israel which changed its mind."¹³⁸

Bernard Lewis estimated in 1987 that Islamic-Arab antisemitism was not yet endemic and set, in contrast with Christianity, which was plagued with Judeophobia almost from the beginning. Despite his concern that it could happen soon, he believed that in the meantime antisemitism was still dictated from top-down, more than a bottom-up phenomenon originating in society itself.¹³⁹ During the current wave of Arab and Islamic antisemitism, perhaps Lewis's fear is becoming a reality. Bashar al-Asad's antisemitic public statements could mean policy dictated from above, but otherwise may stem from genuine views held by the Syrian leader. On the other hand, despite what is known of him, one cannot jump into far-fetched conclusions on Asad's future

¹³⁵ See Ajami, *The Dream Palace*, 253–55.

¹³⁶ Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 124.

¹³⁷ See, e.g., Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm, *al-Naqd al-dhati ba'da al-Hazima* ["Self-criticism after the defeat"] (Acre: Dar al-Jalil, 1969).

¹³⁸ Al-'Azm, "View from Damascus," 72–77

¹³⁹ Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites*, 258–59.

development. Bashar al-Asad's repeated calls to negotiations with Israel (from the end of 2003 to the present (although combined with war threats, since the 2006 Lebanon War) may hint at a potential turning point, similar to his father's taking the diplomatic track, or even to the major shift made by Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1977.¹⁴⁰ In his recent interview with *La Repubblica*, in which he supported the Holocaust denial conference in Iran, Asad was asked whether Israel is his eternal enemy, and replied: "Syria and Israel may live side by side in peace and harmony."¹⁴¹ Such a shift might, indeed, cause a change in attitudes towards Jews and Judaism expressed by the regime; yet only time will tell if it is not too optimistic to expect that Hafiz al-Asad's successor son might follow in the footsteps of Sadat.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ There were different responses among Israeli politicians, intelligence officers, and pundits regarding Asad's calls to resume the negotiations. One view, among its adherents former Prime-Minister Ariel Sharon, current Prime-Minister Ehud Olmert and head of *Mossad* Meir Dagan, have doubted Asad's sincerity and claimed that he is merely trying to avoid American and international pressures. Others, among them the IDF intelligence branch, suggested that Syria is indeed seeking peace, and that Israel should negotiate with the Syrians, at least to find out what their intentions truly are. see, e.g., *Haaretz*, 13 Jan. 2004, 14 Jan 2004, 7 Dec. 2006, 18 Dec. 2006, 26 Dec. 2006; cf. Eyal Zisser, "Asad — a part of the problem, a part of the solution" (in Hebrew), 27 Nov. 2006, www.ynet.co.il.

¹⁴¹ *La Repubblica*, 15 Dec. 2006.

¹⁴² Bernard Lewis named Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat as an example of an Arab leader who changed his opinions from one extreme to the other. He illustrated a zigzagging sometimes characteristic of leaders in the Middle East, On Sadat, who also expressed antisemitic views before he became devoted to peace, see Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites*, 161, 259; cf. Ma'oz, *The Image of the Jew*, 20–21.