



# حركة العدالة والبناء

## MOVEMENT FOR JUSTICE & DEVELOPMENT

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[www.ForSyria.org](http://www.ForSyria.org)

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### EXPOSING THE MYTHS



Ibrahim Al-Meriy

There are Western policy-makers who believe that the time is ripe to start serious engagement with Syria.

They say that by talking to Bashar, Syria would be decoupled from Iran, the Islamist drift in the region would be checked and Israel would enjoy security on its northern borders.

Examining the logic behind such thinking reveals that despite years of dealing with the Ba'athist regime, a number of myths surrounding Syrian power and influence still persist. At a time when the world considers its response to the challenge posed by Bashar, it is of critical importance that facts are laid bare and myths debunked.

One of the most widely accepted myths is that engagement with Ba'athist Syria will deliver long-term peace and stability. The problem with this is that the regime simply does not do peace and stability. A nasty dictatorship which lacks legitimacy and is deeply unpopular with its people is inherently unstable. In a natural state it would implode or be overthrown. To prolong its life, the Syrian regime has resorted to acquiring international support by appearing as an indispensable crisis-solver. In reality the regime simply engineers crises, then "solves" them by manipulating terrorist groups and conflict situations

The Syrian regime cannot be trusted to change its behavior. Over a 40 year period it has consistently and recklessly gambled on the stability of the region.

It has been aided by an international reluctance to stand up to Assad's bullying tactics. At critical junctures, and using the euphemism of "engagement", clandestine deals have been struck which have rewarded the Ba'athists of Syria with enough political capital to keep them afloat. Enough that is until the next crisis and the next round of "engagement".

Another myth that should be exploded is that Syria's alliance with Iran can be broken. The alliance between the regimes of Tehran and Damascus was not formed one or two months ago. It is a deep, strategic and committed relationship. The bond is hardened by sectarian, economic and political factors which have developed over decades. Experience has shown that at critical moments the Assad regime has only one true friend: Iran. In comparison, whatever the West could ever hope to offer Assad will appear plain and flimsy. Syria might therefore make an apparent compromise with the West to weather the storm of isolation, but that will not pry it away from Iran's embrace because the Assad regime has long-term strategic plans which say that a good relationship with Iran is more important than anything else.

The regime has spread some of its own myths. A very popular one is that Syria is a secular country. Nothing could be further away from the truth.

While the regime may appear on paper to espouse secular ideals, it has in reality exploited and manipulated religion for its own ends. Through a dedicated ministry and a secret police network, the regime tightly controls mosques and imams, making sure they peddle the official line. Christian as well as Muslim religious figures are forcibly co-opted to legitimize the regime's rule and to dampen popular dissatisfaction. Perhaps the most flagrant breach of secularism is the regime's sectarian policy. This more than anything else has eaten away at pretensions of national unity and is a main reason why real democratic reforms have not been forthcoming. Moreover, while Assad views Islamic fundamentalists as a political threat to his power at home, he happily encourages and supports them abroad. The threats to the stability of neighboring countries such as Lebanon and Iraq can be directly linked to extremist groups sponsored by Syria. Such actions would not be expected of a truly "secular" country.

The scenario painted by those advocating dialogue with Assad is at the very best optimistic, and at the very worst tantamount to appeasement. Unfortunately, a great deal of the analysis on Syria in the Western and Arab media has accepted certain notions without serious critical examination. This has led to dangerous conclusions being fashioned, which if implemented could undermine vital interests in the Middle East and setback democracy there for many decades.

# THE MJD ONE YEAR ON



Anas Abdah

It has not been an easy 12 months, but it has been a labour of love. The Movement for Justice and Development that I am proud to lead is one year old.

Already it has made serious in-roads in Syrian politics and broken new ground for the democratic opposition, relying on its young membership to make the impact.

Like anything new, there had to be the detractors. There were those who wrote us off from day one. We heard comments to the effect that we would not last beyond a few months before in-fighting or apathy would wear us down. Thankfully we did not succumb to either. Flippancy turned to hostility as we proved our detractors wrong time and time again. A year on we have earned the respect of all concerned because we proved that we are serious, tireless and professional.

During the past year we have carried out political actions marked by a new and creative approach. One of the first was the Syrian Exiles and Refugees Campaign launched in June 2006 at the UN High Commission for Human Rights in Geneva. The aim of the campaign was to increase awareness of the difficulties faced by Syrians who cannot return to their country for fear of persecution, and who are denied basic rights by the Syrian regime. The campaign also sought to galvanize the considerable Syrian émigré community behind the MJD and opposition politics. In this the campaign proved to be more than successful. One of the key highlights was helping to save hundreds of Syrian refugees in Baghdad who had

been abandoned to the violence. By pressuring the UN High Commission for Refugees we were able to secure their relocation to a safe area.

Given that the struggle for democracy in Syria also requires regional and international action, we have exerted extra effort to establishing a strong network of Arab and Western contacts. We have successfully approached organizations, parliamentarians, decision-makers and academics to rally support for our cause in Syria. One of the many successes in this field was establishing a working relationship with prominent EU officials, which afforded us the opportunity to address the parliamentary committee on EU-Syrian relations. There we put across our view that a partnership treaty with Syria is desirable if it meant greater EU pressure on issues such as human rights and freedom of expression. We have used these contacts to lobby on behalf of illegally imprisoned pro-democracy activists in Syria, such as Anwar al-Bunni, who had been sentenced to five years on trumped-up charges.

On the media front, we have been particularly successful and creative in the way we disseminate our message. We have been able to convince well-established and highly popular Arab satellite networks to carry our news and to cover our events. Our launch party received considerable coverage, as did a number of talks on Syrian issues that we helped organize. We have broken the English language barrier by getting a fluent speaker to comment on the shambolic Syrian parliamentary and presidential elections on an English-language news channel – a first for the Syrian opposition which has been virtually non-existent in the Western media. We have also been keen to foster positive relations with the hugely influential British and American press. This paid-

off handsomely in the shape of several of our stories being covered by top journalists. To reinforce our international outlook, our English website will soon be launched in the next couple of days, to be followed by a French version. Suffice to say it will be quite different to anything already out there. I am glad to say the Movement for Justice and Development as a political force has expanded considerably in the last year. Starting off with just two centres, the UK and Syria, we now have over ten centres across Europe, North America and the Middle East with activists working in every centre.

We are proud signatories of the Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change; a Damascus-based umbrella group which best personifies the pro-democracy struggle in Syria. Our membership of the Declaration has given it added impetus, and we feel confident that it is moving towards a more robust and dynamic future under the leadership of veteran politician Riyadh Saif. Those who had been disillusioned by the setbacks of the past, and who have grown wary of political involvement, are now joining us in droves. They have been impressed by our resolve and hard-work, and by our professionalism in the way we play the art of politics despite the MJD's tender years. Above all, they have been impressed by the maturity of our outlook, and the cautious pragmatism which characterises our political decisions.

A thousand miles. That is how long the journey to democracy in Syria feels like. But the first leaps in that journey have been taken. They have been solid, confident leaps radiating positiveness and dynamism. I believe that with more work, dedication, support and resources at our disposal, we can reach that goal.

## Press Release

# SYRIAN AUTHORITIES BAN OPPOSITION LEADER RIYAD SAIF FROM SEEKING MEDICAL TREATMENT

Two months after tests confirmed an advanced form of prostate cancer, and after having confirmed that no effective treatment can be obtained in Syria, prominent opposition leader Riyadh Saif submitted a request to the Syrian authorities to travel abroad to seek medical treatment. The authorities have only procrastinated and put-off his request, while Mr. Saif's condition is worsening by the day.

Riyad Saif has endured similar treatment when he sought permission to travel for heart treatment. He had suffered serious heart problems while in prison

which required open-heart surgery, and following his release on 18 January 2006, he sought to undertake the operation at specialist hospitals abroad. His request was turned down.

We in the Movement for Justice and Development demand the authorities in Syria to respect the civil rights of Mr. Saif, who is an exceptional and dedicated national figure. We demand that the Syrian law and constitution be respected and that he be allowed to travel freely where and when he wished.

This demand is part of our wider call for the recognition of the rights of all Syrians everywhere.

The ban on foreign travel imposed on opposition activists by the Syrian regime must be lifted. The regime must also end its illegal practices towards Syrians including its refusal to issue identity and travel documents to Syrian refugees and exiles. The flagrant breaches of personal freedoms, civil and human rights can no longer be tolerated.

In this regard, we call on all Arab and international human rights organizations to assign this issue its due importance and help save the life of a brave and outstanding Syrian pro-democracy leader.



## MJD in Chatham House

The MJD was formally invited by the Royal Institute for International Relations, Chatham House, to participate in the launch of its latest Middle East research paper. *"The Special Tribunal for Lebanon: The UN on Trial?"* was authored by Dr. Nadim Shehadi and Elizabeth Wilmshurst, and is the latest publication on the subject of Lebanon and the quest for justice for the late Rafiq Hariri.

The paper highlighted a number of precedents which the Tribunal has set, including an end to the 'forgive and forget' formula of conflict resolution in Lebanon, and the manner of its creation and its nature. The paper added that despite the intervention of the Security Council, which overrode Lebanese constitutional procedures, the Tribunal

may still provide an opportunity for Lebanon to move towards the rule of law.

The paper stressed the high stakes involved in a strong UN involvement in Lebanon, not least because Syria and Iran view international organizations with suspicion and actively work to undermine them. The authors came to the conclusion that failing to set up the Tribunal would have been interpreted as a green light for assassinations and terrorism to continue with impunity, and that any political cost involved in setting up the Tribunal will be offset by the higher cost of not doing so.

The paper was well-received by invitees, who consisted of ambassadors, ministers, academics and representatives of various institutions and official bodies. The launch panel was chaired by Dr. Rosemary Hollis the director of research in Chatham House.

The MJD was represented by its Head of the Media and Public Relations Office

## IN NUMBERS POVERTY IN SYRIA\*

- **12%** of Syrian population could not obtain their basic needs (less than \$2 a day).
- **32%** overall poverty in Syria, representing almost **5.7** million individuals.
- **63%** of poverty comes from rural areas.
- The poorest **20%** of the population consumes only **7%** of all expenditure in Syria, and the richest **20%** consumes **45%**.
- **59.4%** of the poor in Syria live in just the North-Eastern region.

\*UNDP Report on Syria 2006

Ausama Monajed, who utilized the occasion to build ties with influential commentators on Syrian and Lebanese affairs.