

THE DAMASCUS BLOOD LIBEL

Eyal Zisser

Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

Bashar al-Asad's accession to power in June 2000 following the death of his father, Hafez al-Asad, raised hopes in Israel and the West that the new President of Syria would lead his country along a new path of political openness, far-reaching economic and social reform, and, above all, reconciliation and peace with Israel. Much of this optimism was based on Bashar's youth and on the fact that he had spent two years in London doing an internship in ophthalmology. Besides, he was known to be a dedicated Internet surfer eager to bring the benefits of the computer to every household in Syria.

A year later, the hope that Bashar would become an updated and more vigorous version of Anwar al-Sadat appears to be without foundation. Instead, he is seen, both in Syria and abroad, as someone who cannot consolidate his position and finds it difficult to deal with the range of challenges he confronts. Furthermore, it is gradually becoming clear that in terms of his close-mindedness and prejudices, and particularly in terms of his hostility to Israel, Bashar not only follows in his father's footsteps, but in some ways outdoes him.

Over the past few months, alongside and perhaps because of his troubles at home and abroad, Bashar has resorted to increasingly

strident anti-Israel rhetoric. At the Cairo Arab Summit Conference in October 2000, Bashar called on the Arabs to force Israel to submit to Arab dictates and to impose on Israel a "peace of the strong." Six months later, at the Amman Summit Conference, he had "progressed" to the point of declaring that Israeli society was worse than the Nazis. "The difference between left and right in Israel," he explained, "is that whoever kills a thousand Arabs is a leftist, while he who kills ten thousand Arabs is a man of the right." Bashar repeated his analysis of Israeli society during a visit to Spain in April. But it was during the visit of Pope John Paul to Syria in early May that Bashar reached the peak of extremism and bigotry.

The Pope's visit was part of a kind of personal pilgrimage to the region that he has been carrying out over the course of several years. But while the message he brought was one of reconciliation and peace, Bashar received the Pope with words that bore an entirely different character:

We all know the suffering and agonies inflicted on Jesus by those who rejected the commandments of God and the human principles and values preached by Jesus – foremost along them, love, tolerance and



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equality among people. Jesus wanted his disciples to continue to spread these principles and to protect people from the suffering he had undergone. And there is no doubt, Your Holiness, that you, on the Papal throne in Rome, embody the responsibility for sustaining these values. This is enormously important because there are those who persist in keeping mankind on the path of the agony and torture [suffered by Jesus] ... We see our brothers in Palestine killed and tortured, and we see justice violated by occupation of the lands of Lebanon, the Golan, and Palestine ... We witness them [the Israelis] murdering the principle of equality by claiming that God singled them out and desecrating the holy places of Islam and Christianity in Palestine ... They are trying to damage and destroy all the principles of the monotheistic religions with the same mentality that led them to betray and torture Jesus and with the same mentality that led them to try to kill the Prophet Muhammad.

Bashar's declarations provoked a wave of criticism around the world, especially in France and the United States. In response to the protests, Bashar tried to clarify his intent, though his explanations did little to soften the effect of his words. He denied that he could be an anti-Semite by arguing that he, as an Arab, is himself a Semite. Moreover, he added, the charge of anti-Semitism is simply an Israeli plot to deter him and others from exposing the truth.

What moved Bashar to issue the kinds of anti-Semitic and racist declarations not heard from Arab leaders for many years? For one thing, Bashar is a young and inexperienced leader subjected to a host of pressures. At home, he faces demands for greater freedom and reform. In Lebanon, he faces a growing challenge to

Syria's status there, especially from the Christian camp. And the Israeli attack on a Syrian radar station in Lebanon several weeks ago provoked the charge, however muted, that he, unlike his father, is unable to defend Syria and Syrian interests. It may well be that Bashar is trying to use anti-Israel sentiment in order to deflect these challenges and strengthen his popularity in the Syrian street and throughout the Arab world.

Still, these calculations alone cannot explain the vulgar anti-Semitism implicit in Bashar's statements. Even a cursory review of the Syrian press shows that not a day goes by without some editorial comment, cartoon or report infused with hatred of Jews and Israel. Holocaust denial, for example, is a particularly popular topic for Syrian writers. Thus, anti-Semitic expressions are part of the public discourse in Syria, and Bashar, in this respect, reflects the sentiments of many in Syria, including the power elite that surrounds him and is responsible for nurturing and protecting him. A blatant example of anti-Jewish prejudice and hatred is provided by Bashar's Defense Minister and confidante, Mustapha T'las, who is also the author of a book entitled Matzah of Zion, in which it is argued that Jews use blood for ritual purposes.

Whatever his ultimate motives may be, Bashar's outbursts have caused the prospects of peace between Israel and Syria, already bleak, to recede even further. True, Bashar continues to insist that he is committed to the peace process and has even hinted that he is prepared to make a deal with Ariel Sharon, on condition that Sharon satisfy all his demands. But it seems that only a fundamental change in Syria's approach to Israel will make it possible to surmount the walls of hatred and hostility. And over the past few months, Bashar, rather than breaking or lowering those walls, has raised them even higher.