

**Letter From The Middle East
With U.S. in Neighborhood, Syria Eases Its Grip
By Dexter Filkins
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DAMASCUS, Syria — Before the war in Iraq, one of the oft-heard arguments put forth by the war's proponents was that an invasion of Iraq would break governments like this one.

The government of President Bashar al-Assad, the scion of a party dynasty that has ruled this country for 40 years, was not freely elected. Human rights groups say its prisons contain hundreds of political prisoners. The American government says it sponsors terrorism.

Put 150,000 American troops and a democracy in Iraq, the argument went, and leaders like Mr. Assad, whose country sits on Iraq's western border, would quickly conclude that they needed to loosen their grip.

It is not easy to take the measure of public opinion in a society as closely watched as this one, but most Syrians heard the recent American demands made on Syria. One Damascus businessman, who said he routinely paid bribes to secure government contracts, said he thought the government had begun to reform itself here in part to keep the Americans at bay.

"When the Americans are breathing down your neck, you start moving," he said.

But the reality in Syria is perhaps more complicated than mere cause and effect, and the future may hold something less than a democratic contagion. Take the recent experience of two men, Ali Firzat and Haitham Maleh.

In January, Mr. Maleh, a longtime human rights campaigner who spent seven years in prison in the 1980's, was charged with a number of politically related crimes. The charges, including forming an illegal organization and printing without a license, seemed intended not so much to crush him as to harass him. None carried a sentence of more than three years.

In the seven months that followed, and as the Americans moved to destroy the government of Saddam Hussein, the Syrian government began a number of political and economic changes. Leaders of the all powerful Baath Party ordered their members to stay out of the day-to-day running of the bureaucracy. Mr. Assad ruled that Syrians

could hold foreign currency. He even chucked the military uniforms worn by Syrian schoolchildren in favor of pink and blue ones.

"It is Bashar's perestroika," said Walid Jumblatt, a veteran Lebanese political leader and an ally of the government. "He knows he has to change."

Mr. Maleh, 72, was quick to seize on one of the most significant decrees, an amnesty for anyone charged with a crime that carried a sentence of less than three years. Although the decree seemed aimed at freeing petty criminals, Mr. Maleh argued that he qualified, too.

Ever fearless, Mr. Maleh stood before an anonymous judge seated on a high bench in a Syrian military court and made his case.

"The law requires that the charges against me be dropped," he said.

The judge, a uniformed officer with a short mustache, offered no comment. But he considered Mr. Maleh's argument, nodded and, last Tuesday, threw out the case. Mr. Maleh walked free.

But even Mr. Maleh did not take his victory as a sign that a new era was dawning. "All these changes are cosmetic," he said.

Syrian officials insisted that the changes ordered by Mr. Assad, as well as the dropping of Mr. Maleh's case, had nothing to do with the recent American pressure on Syria or the invasion of Iraq.

"Americans tend to see things only in their own terms," Bouthaina Shaaban, a government spokeswoman, said in an interview. "These changes would have happened anyway."

In fact, the limits of the Syrian experiment are already becoming clear. The hypersensitive atmosphere created by the war appears to have prompted the Syrian government to crack down on at least some of its enemies.

For years, Mr. Firzat's political cartoons survived despite their merciless — and often hilarious — ridiculing of Syrian officialdom. He managed this by fashioning his cartoons deftly enough to make their point, but obliquely enough to allow him to deny any ill intent. Syrians got the joke.

But the Syrian government's tolerance for Mr. Firzat, 51, came to end, as did his newspaper, *The Light Holder*, when he took up the subject of the American invasion of Iraq.

The trouble began on March 29, Mr. Firzat said, when

New York Times, concluded

he published a cartoon showing a man clearly intended to be a hysterical Mr. Hussein trying to rally a crowd of Iraqis. The Iraqis standing before him were hungry, tattered and afraid.

"They want to steal your palaces!" the man is shouting, "your companies, your wealth and your oil!"

That same week, the Syrian foreign minister, Farouk al-Sharaa, said publicly that he wanted America to lose the war, and as the cartoon appeared, American soldiers were moving toward Baghdad.

Three days after the cartoon appeared, Tishrin, a government newspaper, published an extraordinary attack on Mr. Firzat. "Have dollars and dinars become more valuable than the blood and tears of children?" the headline asked.

Soon demonstrators were gathering outside Mr. Firzat's office, and the people who printed The Light Holder began, one by one, to refuse. A handful, intimidated, said they would consider doing so only if Mr. Firzat obtained a letter from the Syrian officials authorizing it.

"It was every man for himself," Mr. Firzat said. "People were afraid."

After weeks of haggling, Mr. Firzat said the government finally agreed to give him such a letter but would only guarantee that the newspaper would be printed a week after it was ready. Mr. Firzat, realizing there was little point in trying to sell a newspaper that was a week old, finally gave up. He has not printed since.

"I don't succumb to political pressure," Mr. Firzat said, "but I couldn't get the paper printed."

Ms. Shaaban, the Syrian government spokeswoman, rejected Mr. Firzat's story, asserting that The Light Holder went out of business because Syrians did not like it.

"I really didn't read it," she said. "It was shallow."

In the same interview, Ms. Shaaban offered a clue to Syria's future and possibly to the futures of Mr. Firzat and Mr. Maleh. The model was not Europe or America but, Ms. Shaaban said, China, a place where the economy was increasingly market oriented but where one party still held absolute power.

"We will take the lead," Ms. Shaaban said of the Baath Party.

Her reasoning came as no surprise to Mr. Maleh. As long as one party retains all the power, he said, it will always be

free to go back on its promises, whether they are codified in law or not.

"There is no law here," he said. "Only the dictators."