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Satire is no laughing matter for cartoonist
From Richard Lloyd Parry in Damascus

These are dangerous times for liberal Syrians such as Ali Farzat, finds our correspondent in Damascus.

UNTIL he went to sleep on Sunday night, Ali Farzat was one of the best loved, most respected and famous satirists in the Middle East.

His subtle, biting cartoons have won him prizes around the world. The weekly newspaper he founded, al-Doummari (The Lamplighter), is the Private Eye of Syria. On Monday morning, however, he woke to find his life transformed.

His secretary telephoned him with the news: that morning's issue of Tishreen, a newspaper close to the Syrian regime, contained a bitter personal attack on Ali Farzat. For two days running, an entire page contained reproductions of his cartoons, accompanied by a withering commentary.

"Is the dollar and dinar worth more than the blood and tears of children?" screeched the headline. Mr Farzat, the paper said, was an American flunky who had sold out his fellow Arabs and poured cruel scorn on the suffering people of Iraq.

Within hours, demonstrators were picketing his office, accompanied by plainclothes members of the internal security police. Canvassers in the streets gathered signatures for an anti-Ali petition. In a country as tightly controlled as this, there was no question of them being spontaneous: the articles and the protests must have been carried out with the approval, if not the direction, of the Government.

"This is the way the regime operates," says Mr Farzat in the offices of al-Doummari. "They create these little bombs and they throw them at prominent people. They just don't understand how they ruin their lives." Nowhere but in the Middle East could Ali Farzat be regarded as an ally of the US Government. Like almost every Syrian, he is appalled by the invasion of Iraq and the images of dead civilians which are shown daily on local television. But he makes a crucial distinction, which is being drowned out in the tumult of anger overtaking the Arab world: while he loathes the war, he is equally scathing about Saddam Hussein.

His cartoons depict Saddam as a bloated grotesque, posturing on the carcass of a ruined country. In one, he stands victoriously arm in arm with a poor Iraqi but the mutilated arm which he grips in triumph is coming away at the elbow. In another, he addresses a crowd, warning them that America has come to steal their riches but the Iraqis listening to him are starved, stupefied and in rags.

"I am an artist and a patriot but I am not a politician," Mr Farzat says. "I am with the Iraqi people but I am against Saddam Hussein."

The Syrian Government used to feel the same way. In 1991, the late President Hafeez al-Assad supported the American-led liberation of Kuwait. Many of the cartoons criticised by Tishreen were first published then. Today, Damascus pronounces itself against the war, for the "Iraqi people", and makes no reference to Saddam. "Eleven years ago I was a hero, today I am a villain," Mr Farzat says. "But these are the same drawings."

These are dangerous times for liberal Syrians. Ibrahim Hamidi, a journalist, faces charges of spreading "false news" which could land him in jail. Haitham Maleh, a human rights lawyer, is in court for bringing into the country magazines on civil liberties.

The attack on Mr Farzat's cartoons is just the latest in a series of troubles which he has had with his government. Recently, the Government has insisted on the right to approve al-Doummari before publication, and pages have been removed.

As he is telling his story, a young man, one of the organisers of the previous day's demonstration, arrives to apologise for the "misunderstanding". He and his friends were misled by the headline in Tishreen — it will not happen again. The dogs, it seems, have been called off as mysteriously as they were unleashed, but the damage to Ali Farzat has already been done.