

## What the media are saying about Ali Farzat

### Where the Defense Can't Afford To Rest

By Philip Kennicott

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DAMASCUS -- If architecture can glower, the government palace of Syrian President Bashar Assad shoots daggers. Big, blank and ominous, it sits on a mountaintop overlooking this bustling city. But you don't have to lift your eyes to the mountains to pay your respects to Assad. In Damascus, a clean, modern, happening city, you can lift them to the lamppost, where, like as not, there's a picture of Bashar or his daddy, the late Hafez Assad. Images of the Assads -- both have thin mustaches and weak chins, while Hafez sports a wispy comb-over -- are everywhere in Syria, sometimes a dozen in a single city block, sometimes large and lonely, their outlines spelled out on a hillside with rocks. There's a comic vulgarity to the manic repetition of their faces.

Syria isn't officially part of President Bush's "axis of evil," but given the threatening American rhetoric in past years, it might as well be. Although the ascent to power in 2000 of the Western-educated Bashar gave hope for a more open, democratic society, the Syrian government is still filled with control-minded bureaucrats, supported by a secret police that keeps tabs on the wayward.

Especially Anwar Bounni, one of the country's most prominent advocates of human rights. Bounni, a wiry, fidgety man, is a chain-smoking lawyer (a pack and a half of Alhamraas a day) and a tireless defender of those in trouble, for political reasons, with the Syrian government. He is part of a marginal but determined group of civil society advocates who say they're preparing Syrians for a more democratic future by creating a civic environment that is not controlled by the government nor by militant Islamists. That he is alive and working testifies to some kind of change in Syria; that he relies mostly on Western media to influence Syrian justice (there's little hope, he says, of winning in a Syrian court) proves that much remains to be done.

Today Bounni will participate in a frustrating ritual, arguing the case of Kurds arrested after a series of protests in March. Bounni, 45, describes the case this way:

On March 12, there was a soccer game in the town of Qamishli, at which Kurdish Syrians, who supported one team, were taunted by supporters of another team who came brandishing pictures of Saddam Hussein (who had gassed Kurds in Iraq). Some kind of fight broke out, the police came, and Kurds started dying. News of the deaths galvanized Kurds throughout Syria, and protests, with serious vandalism, broke out. Police roundups ensued, and some 3,000 Kurds were arrested. Most were released, but according to Bounni, 200 remain in prison. Today, 15 will face the Syrian High Security Court, with Bounni defending them.

You get a clear sense of the position Kurds face in Syria -- where hundreds of thousands have been divested of basic citizenship rights, such as owning land or holding a passport -- by visiting Hajo Hamo Yousef, 59, who says four of his sons have been detained. Yousef lives in a suburb of Damascus, though slum is a better description. It is a Kurdish neighborhood of cinder block houses that climb the steep sides of the hills that surround the city. The narrow streets teem with people who look at a car filled with outsiders not with the usual Damascene benign amusement, but with something darker and more suspicious.

The authorities "broke in, they hit the kids, they abused them," says Yousef, who is lying on a mattress on the floor of an almost empty cement room, with only a few rugs, a bookshelf, a television and a single fluorescent-tube light on the wall. He is, he says, dying of cancer. There are medicine bottles and cigarettes lying at one end of his mattress.

"They took them by force," he recalls. "They didn't even allow them to put on their shoes." Saying this pretty much exhausts Yousef's energy. He moves from leaning on one elbow to lying flat on his back, staring at the ceiling. He doesn't expect to see his sons before he dies. Sitting cross-legged near him are Bounni and a Kurdish lawyer, Faisal Badr.

"The government is looking for an internal enemy," says Badr, 41, who is working with Bounni on the case. It uses the Kurds, he says, to justify the retention of emergency laws that restrict civil freedoms, and "to influence public opinion."

Not everyone feels sorry for the Kurds. Many Syrians are deeply proud of what they view as a tolerant society,

## Washington Post, continued

and they will point out that Saladin, the great 12th-century Muslim warrior, was a Kurd, and hence Kurds are more deeply woven into the fabric of Syrian life than they might appear. But others consider them a nuisance, a force for chaos in an already fractious society. The events after Qamishli did not endear the Kurds, who have long-standing grievances, to people who might otherwise be sympathetic.

"Shops were ransacked, cars were burned, schools were burned, hospitals were burned," Imad Moustapha, Syria's ambassador to the United States, says from Washington. "Yes, lots of people were arrested, and this is a normal reaction. It would happen everywhere in the world, including the United States itself when it had riots in its major cities. Now these people will face criminal charges, and if they are found guilty they will bear the consequences of their deeds. If not, they will be released, just like any judicial process in the world."

Bounni scoffs at the notion that they will have a fair trial, and he believes the decision about the prisoners' fate has already been made. The charges and the verdict, he says, are generally preordained -- in his words, they come "in the same envelope." And yet he keeps going to the court, keeps making efforts at defending his clients, and keeps hammering away at the maddening inconsistencies in the Syrian legal system that infuriate the lawyerly mind. Bounni apparently doesn't see this as an exercise in absurdist, knock-your-head-against-a-wall futility. Rather, he considers the Syrian problem to be basically a legal one: Through years of malignant accretion, the Syrian legal code has been warped by undemocratic, arbitrary and abusive laws.

Americans tend to imagine authoritarian countries through the prism of cliches that arose with the Cold War. Syria, we think, must be a gray, nervous place, with even the daily tasks of life fraught with cloak-and-dagger danger. But Syria has a constitution, which announces that "freedom is a sacred right," and for many people, the Syrian state doesn't impinge on daily life. Restaurants and cafes are full, teenagers throng the old city when the sun goes down, and although the government's warplanes buzzed the capital one morning, there's a lot of pride and comfort in the stability of the country. And while the system may be corrupt and sometimes cruel, it is by no means the

personal fiefdom of Bashar Assad, who doesn't have the freedom or absolute control of an imperial potentate.

Bounni works within the system because his basic objective is not revolution or change of government; it is legal reform. After the Iraq War, which most people here deplore, even the most ardent advocates of democracy in Syria are essentially incrementalists. And as much as these advocates might give an American a warm glow of historical recognition -- is this the Syrian Thomas Paine? The Damascene Jefferson? -- they want no part of such an association. The U.S. support of Israel, the war in Iraq, and hostile American criticism of Syria's occupation of Lebanon and its lax control over a long border with Iraq have driven human-rights and democracy advocates to turn to Europe for inspiration. Even the word "democracy," Bounni explains, strikes the Syrian ear with a hint of American-inspired subversion and hegemony.

Bounni's basic sense of Syria is not that far from the views of Ambassador Moustapha, who argues that Syria's legal problems stem from emergency laws passed some 40 years ago. When asked about the peculiar status of human-rights advocates, Moustapha says: "The main issue here is the emergency law in Syria. The emergency laws in Syria were primarily legislated because of our state of war with Israel. But it has been abused and misunderstood too many times." The problem in Syria, in other words, is all about the fair and consistent application of law.

Bounni knows how to pack a lot of misery into a single day. His clients include a doctor, recently released from prison, who was placed there, he says, for criticizing corruption in the government. And Farook Alhoms, who is hoping to free his brother Mamoon Alhoms, a Syrian parliament member arrested after criticizing the government during the "Damascus Spring" that broke out when Bashar Assad promised change. And Ali Ferzat, a cartoonist who began publishing a popular but short-lived independent newspaper that he says was shuttered by the government.

Ferzat still goes to the empty newspaper office. He says, wistfully, there was once a productive chaos in the now-vacant rooms, but not anymore. At least he has his cartoons, which are still seen (and win him awards) around the world. One of them, drawn well before the Damascus Spring, is based on "Waiting for Godot," the existentialist

## Washington Post, concluded

play by Samuel Beckett. It shows a man with a valise, standing at a train station in front of a short section of unconnected railroad track. It is, he says, an allegory of the lack of political change in his region.

Syrians looked to Assad for change, and Assad seems to be waiting for something, though no one knows what. Pressure from the outside, especially the United States, tends to make the Syrians recoil; no international pressure, however, helps the status quo. The legal system, and the bureaucrats who enforce it, has grown into a big, ugly habit that no one can quite shake. A sense of futility takes root. But even Syrians who openly criticize the government don't place the country on our axis of evil, but see themselves simply as a society that has been on the wrong track for a long time. Not irreparable, exceptional or beyond the pale. Just debilitated. As Vladimir says in "Waiting for Godot," "At this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not."