

Ziad Adwan

# The Opera House in Damascus and the 'State of Exception' in Syria

In this article Ziad Adwan examines the relationship between the Opera House in Damascus and the Al-Assad dynasty. Hafez Al-Assad ordered the building of the Opera House but it remained unfinished at his death. His son Bashar opened it after three decades of construction. Leaving the institution unfinished was, it is argued here, due to uncertainty regarding its identity, place in the bureaucratic hierarchy, and meaning in a totalitarian regime. Theatre institutions were driven to take oppositional positions against one another, and the Opera House intensified the enmity. No theatres were built during the reign of Hafez Al-Assad, and while the Opera House was a hope for many Syrians, it also played a role in dividing them. Adwan concludes that the exceptional design features and location of the Opera House have marked its activities and that in relation to the Al-Assad dynasty it has become a critical focus in the Syrian war. Ziad Adwan is a theatre practitioner, who completed his PhD in Theatre Studies at Royal Holloway, University of London. He taught at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus (2009–2013) and has acted in plays and films, as well as working as a director. He was the artistic director of *Invisible Stories*, a series of street theatre events in different places in Damascus. Adwan is currently affiliated with the Global Theatre Histories research project at Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich.

*Key terms:* Al-Assad dynasty, censorship, performance spaces, spatial politics.

ON 12 JUNE 2005, the Pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat* published a petition signed by a number of Syrian artists and intellectuals, appealing to the Minister of Culture to dismiss Nabeel Al-Lau from his directorial position at the Opera House in Damascus. The petition came in response to an altercation between the Opera House ushers and a group of prominent Syrian writers and directors. The incident had been covered in many newspapers and blogs, and both sides more or less agreed on what had occurred. After the screening of a movie at the Opera House, the group had remained inside the building to meet a Russian friend, also a film director, and had passed the time by taking pictures of the Opera House's interior when ushers and receptionists asked them to leave so they could clean and close up. The situation escalated and blows were exchanged.

The poet Hala Muhammad, one of the four people in the group, published articles in many blogs criticizing the Opera House's indifference to an occasion charged with

emotion – the meeting of an old friend – and concludes that the ushers' physical violence was a message to Syrian artists and writers that this institution was founded to insult them.<sup>1</sup>

Those siding with the Opera House accused the group of 'systematically provoking disorder'.<sup>2</sup> The Opera House administration issued an official document that listed the members of the group by name, and accused them of reacting violently to the ushers' request and of being old-fashioned, ill-mannered, and fake intellectuals.

I can recall many physical altercations in theatres in Damascus, but only a few have drawn the attention of the press and the public. Certainly, the prominence of the group in the Opera House fight was a factor, as was the fact that it was unusual to see people in their fifties and sixties becoming involved in a brawl. However, the brawl provoked debates on the position and ownership of this institution in Syrian life. Was it for the service of the public, for entertainment

and intellectual interaction, or was it just another Al-Assad property?

The decision to build the Opera House was taken by Hafez Al-Assad himself, and the chosen space was Omayyad Square, a place of considerable political significance. The construction process began in 1971 but the building was not finished until 2004, when Bashar Al-Assad, who inherited power from his father in 2000, performed the official opening. From the 1970s to the 1990s it was frequently affirmed that the building would remain incomplete for ever. The Opera House is both a product and a victim of the ongoing 'state of exception' in Syria, which has been the country's norm for as long as most Syrians can remember.<sup>3</sup>

### The 'State of Exception' and the Theatre

Edward Ziter describes Syria as having been in a 'state of exception' for decades.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on Carl Schmitt's and Giorgio Agamben's writings, Ziter defines a state of exception as a system of sovereignty in which certain groups or individuals are permitted to transcend written laws. If a state of exception was the norm of Syrian life even before the current war, then the question needs to be asked how this manifests itself in the theatre on an institutional level.

In this article I want to examine the position of theatre institutions under the Al-Assad dynasty; how the regime has bureaucratized theatres, thereby stifling their calls for diversity in a totalitarian state; and how these institutions were systematized, increasing enmity and discord. I will explore how the Opera House has operated since its opening in 2004, arguing that its location at Omayyad Square, one of the main squares in Damascus and the closest to the Presidential Palace, played a major role in shaping the identity of this institution, including its programming, while intensifying the prevailing enmity as it has continued into the current war in Syria.

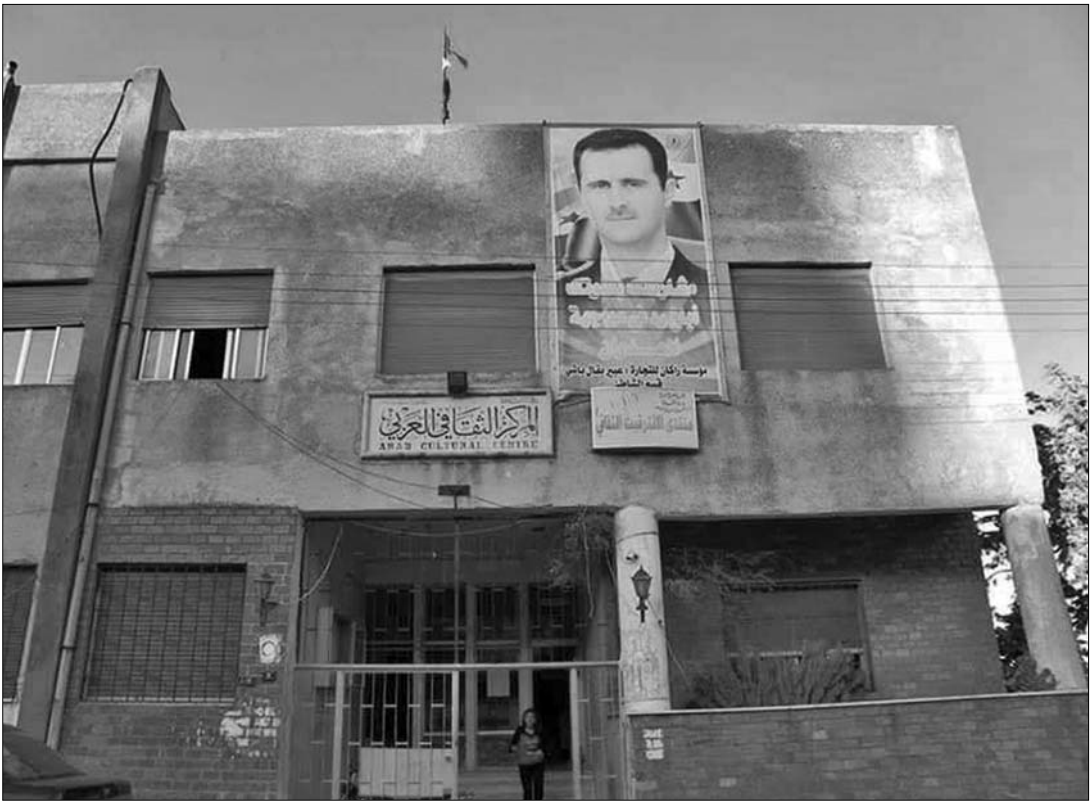
After several military coups in the 1950s and the 1960s, the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party assumed power in 1963. A state of emergency was declared, under which, among other repressive practices, assembling in public

was forbidden. Intra-party coups continued until 1970, when Hafez Al-Assad, who was Ba'athist, seized power, terminating this era. The Al-Ba'ath party became the 'leader of the state and the society' with Hafez Al-Assad as the new President, the Secretary General of Al-Baath party, and the Commander of the Syrian Armed Forces.

After eliminating political parties and civic activities, forms of public gathering were limited to sports, prayers, outdoor festivities (to glorify Al-Assad), and cultural activities. Theatre was the only forum for live intellectual exchange in which the spirit of free thinking, albeit restricted, could still be exercised. Before Hafez Al-Assad came to power, Syrian plays were highly political and Syrian theatre makers were widely respected in the Arabic-speaking countries for their brave and critical tone. The Hafez Al-Assad regime dealt with theatre (as an activity, an institution, or a building) by applying specific policies to weaken its role in Syrian life. On the one hand, encouraging theatre activity confirmed the propaganda claiming Al-Assad was 'patron of culture and intellectuals'. On the other, the diversity it offered threatened Al-Assad's determination to create a monolithic state. The regime's objective was to make theatre unappealing rather than to abolish it.

In the 1950s and the 1960s, plays were presented in Arab Cultural Centres, private theatres (which were originally cinemas), and at the National Theatre. These venues were all built and institutionalized before Hafez Al-Assad seized power in 1970. The intellectual challenge to maintain civic obedience was not confined to the capital city, but was strongly felt throughout the country.<sup>5</sup> Arab Cultural Centres were established in all cities and most towns, and essentially shared the same socialist architecture as well as activities and objectives.

An Arab Cultural Centre is a two- or three-storey building normally of concrete and painted in pale colours. Stages are poorly equipped, most not having backstage facilities. They are normally located in the centre of towns, though some Syrian cities have several such centres distributed in



Exterior of an Arabic Cultural Centre in a Syrian town. Photos for this article from the author's collection.

various neighbourhoods. Subsidized by the Ministry of Culture, they present plays, concerts, screenings, readings, and meetings with popular figures.<sup>6</sup>

Hafez Al-Assad's regime kept these Cultural Centres operating, but with a cautious selection of their managers and tighter control over their activities. Slogans on their walls glorified Al-Assad and the Al-Ba'ath party. Local intelligence sectors and/or local Al-Ba'ath party branches monitored the Centres' activities. It is quite possible that these Centres monitored people and sent reports to higher officials, identifying potential threats to the regime.

In *Ambiguities of Domination*, Lisa Wedeen discusses Hafez Al-Assad's ambiguous rule in Syria, providing insight into the regime's control over symbolic systems. Discussing terms like 'spectacles', 'symbols', 'rhetoric', and 'cult', she affirms that one of the main means of influence was the regime's ability to 'compel people to say the ridiculous and

to avow the absurd'.<sup>7</sup> A survey made in 2007 revealed that there were 441 Arab Cultural Centres in Syria, whose main focus was the propagation of Al-Ba'ath and the imposition of a homogeneous Syrian identity – that is, Arab, socialist, secular, and acclaiming Al-Assad as the father of the Syrians.

### Commercial and National Theatres

Theatres as such in Damascus required a different form of control. The capital has been considered to be one of the focal points for theatre in Arabic-speaking countries since the first Arabic theatre company appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, it became a destination for several Arabic theatre makers. After the 1950s, two types of theatre, commercial and national, took root. They had public and critical renown, and a considerable reputation in the Arab world for their criticism of political and social life.

During the 1950s, private theatre groups moved to cinema theatres located in the Al-Salihyah District. Commercial plays flourished and cinema entrepreneurs found another medium to attract Damascenes to the theatre. Famous actors wrote, directed, and starred in the commercial plays, using Al-Amiya (vernacular Arabic). Posters frequently used an identical phrase for their advertisements – literally, the ‘purposeful comedy play’, suggesting both entertainment and social critique. Although tickets were expensive, these commercial theatres attracted audiences, and many commercial plays ran for years.

Private theatres were not included in the nationalizing process on which the Al-Ba’ath party embarked in 1963, but were subjected to specific bureaucratic pressure. Under the label of ‘support’, the government squeezed itself into private theatre houses by buying a one-third share of each theatre. This enabled the government to interfere in the private theatres’ policies and decision-making processes. For instance, it could prevent a private theatre from buying new equipment or refurbishing the house if government representatives would not profit financially.

The government also imposed a tax system on private theatres in which it had shares. Some theatre owners told me in confidence that this allowed governmental officials to get a percentage of import costs and personal benefits from refurbishment processes. Many private theatre owners yielded to the officials’ blackmail because not to do so meant that activities would be blocked by government bureaucracy.

Productions at the National Theatre in Damascus are mainly shown in two theatres, the Al-Qabbani Theatre, which seats 250 people, and the Al-Hamra Theatre, which seats 500. The Al-Qabbani theatre was founded and constructed as a purpose-built theatre in 1959. The Ministry of Culture bought the Al-Hamra cinema and converted it into a theatre in 1966. The two theatres were under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture and presented text-based plays written by Syrian, Arab, and international playwrights. All these plays were written

and staged in classical Arabic, a commitment stressed by Syrian theatre makers even before this became an official requirement. In addition, the Trade Union Theatre, which seats 300 people, and put on state-funded and privately funded shows.

In 1960, under the United Arab Republic (the union between Syria and Egypt, 1958–1961), the Ministry of Culture created three theatre directorates in Damascus: the National Theatre, the Folklore Theatre, and the Puppet Theatre. The directorates continued to function when Hafez Al-Assad seized power in 1970. The Ministry of Culture founded and subsidized the Touring Theatre in 1971, the Experimental Theatre in 1976, the Children’s Theatre in 1983, the Mime Theatre in 1987, and the Theatre Club in 1995. Most productions were, however, staged on the Al-Qabbani and Al-Hamra stages.<sup>8</sup> The growing number of theatre directorates generated a bureaucratic web of corruption and abusive connections in organizing the selection of productions.

### Negotiating the Censorship

It is generally believed that the Al-Assad regime represses theatre because, in Derek Hopwood’s words,

the government may fear the impact of criticism inherent in certain writing as a play publicly performed before an audience can have an immediate effect on the large group of people gathered together at one time with a shared knowledge of political and social conditions.<sup>9</sup>

In *Political Performance in Syria*, Edward Ziter discusses a wide selection of Syrian political plays that were written and staged between 1967 and 2015. These plays, as described by Ziter, showed courage against oppression and tackled several ‘forbidden topics’. However, his account does not answer the question of how and why these plays were allowed to be staged in the state’s theatre houses. He notes that Saadallah Wannus’s *Soirée for the Fifth of June* (1968) was, in 1971, permitted ‘a long and heavily attended run’ despite its ‘direct and devastating critique of the Syrian government’.<sup>10</sup>



The interior of an Arabic Cultural Centre in a Syrian town.

Only one Syrian play was refused permission. In 1978, massive turmoil occurred at the Al-Hamra Theatre when members of the national leadership and secret police agencies stormed into the theatre to close *Night of the Slaves* by Mamdouh Adwan, directed by Naela Al-Atrash. The play was closed for its critique of the Al-Ba'ath party, using the emergence of Islam as a metaphor.

All productions in Syria need the approval of the Censorship Committee, a body created by the Directorate of Theatre and Music, responsible for approving all plays. The committee consists of theatre makers and administrative officers, who read a submitted text. If it is accepted, they gather again at the dress rehearsal to approve the performance. The committee frequently requires theatres to delete scenes and change dialogue. This tactic influences the quality of the performances but leaves a margin for theatre makers and theatre institutions to discuss the boundaries of what is forbidden in the country. Wedeen remarks on artistic practices:

My observation of permitted comedies in Syria suggests . . . that political parodies, feature films,

and jokes are where Syrian political vitality resides and where critique and oppositional consciousness thrive. Artistic transgressions are the site of *politics*, of the dynamic interplay between the regime's exercise of power and people's experiences of and reactions to it. The line of friction between ruler and ruled – both in public among people differentially situated in the hierarchy and, as Havel teaches, internally to each person – is articulated and renegotiated in these practices.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that certain topics – different perspectives on the war against Israel, sectarianism, and Hafez Al-Assad – were not allowed to be staged or even to be thought about.<sup>12</sup> Apart from *Night of the Slaves*, and three adaptations of international plays, the state permitted texts written by such critical Syrian playwrights as Mamdouh Adwan, Saadallah Wannus, and Duraid Lahham. The critique to be had from these plays was, however, restricted to a small audience. The threat of persecution, arrest, and punishment for assembly, and the regime's frequent arrest of intellectuals, were significant deterrents. Although tickets were cheap, and sometimes made free for theatre makers and students, the National Theatre auditoriums were almost empty. This indif-

ference is related to the fact that the Ministry of Treasury gives an annual budget to the Ministry of Culture to cover the expenses of refurbishments, salaries, and productions. Theatres return box-office income afterwards to the Ministry of Treasury.

Another reason for the public's avoidance of the theatre is the design and the facilities of the National Theatre stages. Al-Qabbani and Al-Hamra theatres are in the basements, almost two floors down. Humidity and foul odours are intense, and the non-existent air-conditioning and ventilating systems turn the supposedly good-night-out activity into an exhausting and often unpleasant experience. There are no longer any cafés in these basements, thus restricting sociability.

### Enmities inside the Theatre

While commercial and national theatres, which have always been separated, aim at critiquing political and social problems in the country, gradually their criticisms of the government became nothing in comparison with their criticisms of one another. Televised interviews and printed articles provide examples of commercial theatre makers deploring plays at the National Theatre, accusing it of being disconnected from reality and of patronizing its audience. National Theatre elites accused commercial theatre of functioning as *tanfis*, literally a 'safety valve', a term commonly used to describe the way commercial theatre kept the public passive.<sup>13</sup>

Extreme levels of antagonism were reached when drama teachers at the Higher Institute of Theatre Arts in Damascus threatened students by telling them not to watch any commercial plays. But discrimination permeates the Institute itself, where the Acting and Theatre Studies Departments became embroiled in inter-departmental conflict to the extent that an acting teacher met Bashar Al-Assad to request that the Theatre Studies Department be closed down. Internal enmity also spread among leftist and liberal theatre makers. For example, Adwan and Wannous, arguably the most prominent playwrights in Syria, remained locked in dispute for no obvious reason until their death.

Theatre houses and institutions witnessed other conflicts – between teachers and students, actors and directors, stars and audiences. Physical fights were not the only symptoms of tension. Quarrels also took the form of expelling intellectuals from theatre institutions, swearing in public places, boycotting activities for personal reasons, and theatre makers sending requirements to top officials, including the President, to eliminate opposing theatre institutions. 'Enmity mentality' was also generated by numerous factors, including excessive repression, cut salaries, harassment, and state persecution, all of which has overshadowed expression.

This antagonistic scene seemed to satisfy Hafez Al-Assad's notion of keeping Syria static. So Najah Al-Attar remained Minister of Culture for twenty-four years and Asa'ad Fidda remained the director of the Directorate of Theatre and Music for twenty-five. Stasis was maintained in all Syrian sectors. Patrick Seale observes that Al-Assad

seemed extraordinarily reluctant to change the faces around him: it was in Assad's temperament to put a high price on loyalty. His personal staff at the presidency, even the clerks and coffee makers, remained unchanged year after year and repaid his trust with devotion.<sup>14</sup>

Instead of oppressing theatre, the Al-Assad regime regulated theatre houses in such a way that their practices often became self-destructive. The multiplying projects and the lack of theatre buildings, in addition to blackmail and corruption, fuelled the tension between theatre makers and institutions. In theory, the Al-Assad regime could claim that almost all plays had the chance to be staged in Syria. In practice, the regime did not build theatres, the quality of theatre activities declined, venues became unattractive, and audiences abandoned the theatre to such an extent that there could be more actors on the stage than there were spectators in the auditorium.

While the regime allowed critical plays to be staged, it drove the audience to avoid theatre, and members of the audience, specifically those intellectuals who 'might share knowledge of political and social conditions',



Stairs leading down to the Al-Hamra theatre.

were arrested.<sup>15</sup> While the names of ministers and directors remained the same, theatre houses were the last choice for social gathering. Distrust of theatre institutions became the norm, and the Opera House remained unfinished, waiting for a special strategy to make it run.

### **Digression: a Fire in a Forest**

In the late 1990s, the Opera House gained an exterior, and promises began to circulate that it would open to the public in early 1999. But on 10 December 1998 a fire ravaged the building's interior, once again quashing the hopes of Damascenes and theatre makers. State media briefly covered the conflagration and published a few lines emphasizing that the cause was an electrical fault. No further official statements were released. The case was closed and Damascus went back to observing the slow process of waiting for its new cultural institution.

The fire is rarely discussed but warrants scrutiny, especially since house fires are not

a common part of Syrian everyday life. Yet burning theatres have been a frequent occurrence, not only in Syria but in most Arabic-speaking countries. The Opera House fire brought to mind the burning by religious authorities of the Abu Khalil Qabbani Theatre in 1892. Qabbani fled to Egypt, where he was well received by the Khedive and was offered a theatre, a gift that provoked jealousy among Egyptian theatre makers such as Salama Hegazi, who conspired with other theatre makers to burn down Al-Qabbani's theatre in Cairo.

In *The Theatre of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia*, Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson trace the emergence of theatre in North Africa. Recounting the history of theatre houses in these countries, the authors list a number of theatres that burned down in the late nineteenth century – Djenina in Algeria, which was burned in 1845, and Tapia, Politeama, and Paradiso, all in Tunis, which were lost in 1879.<sup>16</sup> The survey does not specify the reasons behind the burning of these buildings, although they refer to the

difficult economic and political conditions in which they came into existence.

The excuses offered by the Syrian state media echo those traditionally given by official Arab media. In 1971, the Khedivial Opera House in Cairo caught fire. The Egyptian state media attributed the incident to a fault in the electrical wiring.<sup>17</sup> Many Egyptians were unconvinced by the government's story. Public opinion viewed the fire as another incident of corruption, and pointed to stolen artefacts and deliberate vandalism. The twenty-first century has witnessed similar tragedies. Most grievous was the burning of Beni Suef Culture Palace in Egypt in 2005, in which forty-seven people died. The reason given was a dropped candle.<sup>18</sup>

Syrians and Egyptians did not consider electrical faults and dropped candles satisfactory answers. The margin of freedom in Egypt allowed many voices to accuse the government of carelessness and corruption. Syria did not enjoy this freedom of expression. As a result, Syrian public opinion, which held that the coincidence was not a coincidence, was confined to gossips and whispers. Dissatisfied with the leaked story, many Syrians assumed that the fire was arranged to remove traces of corruption. It is commonly believed that the best way to cover up corruption and theft is to burn what remains, so inspectors will find it impossible to figure out what was stolen and what was burned.

Although such corruption exists in Syria, the burning of the Opera House remains ambiguous, especially as no other buildings burned down before they were opened. In addition, the building remained incomplete for six more years, even though the government claimed that the fire was caused by a simple electrical fault. The regime seems unsure about the Opera House as an institution and how to operate it. Thus, leaving the Opera House unfinished may well suggest that the intention was to 'control the symbolic world, that is, to manipulate and manage systems of signification', as Wedeen explains,<sup>19</sup> asking whether Al-Assad's regime would complete the building and open it to 'say the ridiculous and avow the absurd'.<sup>20</sup>

## The Al-Assad House and a Failed State

Hafez Al-Assad died in 2000. The Syrian public, the media, and the international community expected to see Bashar Al-Assad inherit power from his father. Yet, there was a bureaucratic problem. The Syrian Constitution specifies that a candidate for the presidency should be over forty years of age. Bashar was only thirty-four years old, so the Syrian parliament amended the constitution, making the age of a would-be president thirty-four instead of forty.

Bypassing written laws and the official hierarchy typified the reign of the son. In the 2000s, Bashar Al-Assad and his wife Asma organized frequent informal meetings with a selection of Syrian theatre makers and artists with the purpose of discussing how to make it easier for their projects to flourish. A prominent musician confided that Asma advised them to ignore government institutions, 'as they are hopelessly corrupt and excessively bureaucratic'.<sup>21</sup> She added that artists should directly contact her (or what is called in Syria 'the Palace') if they wanted their projects to be processed.

These meetings created as many controversies for Syrian artists as they resolved. While they provided direct access to a decision-maker in the country, the 'Palace discourse' emphasized the corrosion of government institutions by admitting that these institutions were 'hopeless'. To some extent, 'the Palace' has isolated Syrian artists and theatre makers from their country's national institutions, and has forced prominent artists and theatre makers to take sides against government institutions systematically, since the Palace had confirmed that such institutions opposed their projects and ambitions.

Bashar Al-Assad appeared to be the promise of a new Syria. In his first four years as president, Syria encountered several regional challenges but remained a safe country in a war zone. The state survived George W. Bush's threats after 9/11 and the Congress Accountability Act, avoided being the next target after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and eluded the international court's accusation





The Opera House in Damascus and Omayyad Square.

of the bombing of Rafiq Al-Hariri's procession in 2004. The regional challenges were accompanied by the slow pace of introducing Syria to the world of mobile phones, internet, banks, and KFC. The new president achieved two images: he was the victor regionally, and the modernizer locally.

In contrast to his father's rule, top officials and ministers were constantly changed.<sup>14</sup> In the meantime, the public sector declined rapidly and accountability was lost in the maze of bureaucracy and corruption. Mobile networks were monopolized by the ruling family, banks were insecure investments with none of note opening in Syria, and internet services were severely restricted. Much of the Syrian public, together with the country's elites, scorned government institutions while putting their trust in the young and Western-educated new president. Bashar Al-Assad confirmed the hopelessness of government institutions and assured the country that he was 'the hope', as Syrian propaganda dubbed him.<sup>22</sup>

Liberalizing the private sector launched private television stations, licensed private newspapers, and allowed more openness towards the film industry. In 2004, the Ministry of Culture opened the Al-Assad House for Culture in Latakia, a venue which seats 700 people, and hosts plays, art exhibitions, and film screenings. In 2007, the Ministry of Culture also opened the Arab Cultural Centre in Dommar in Damascus. The venue consists of a proscenium theatre that holds 360 people, and an outdoor amphitheatre seating more than a thousand. Like other Cultural Centres, these two conformed to the same regulations in terms of subsidy, the need for Censorship Committee approval, and the lack of cafés or other sociable places in the building.

Unlike his father, Bashar Al-Assad made several public appearances. With a moderate number of personal guards, he persuaded the Syrians that he shared their everyday life. He was seen driving his car, and in restaurants and theatres in Damascus and Aleppo.

He came to the Al-Hamra Theatre several times and to the Artists Corporation Theatre in Aleppo, buying his tickets and sitting in the auditorium like any other spectator. He also attended several activities at the Opera House after it was officially opened.

### **The Opera House in Operation**

On 7 May 2004, Bashar Al-Assad, accompanied by his wife Asma and in the presence of the King of Malaysia Yang di-Pertuan Agong, officially opened the Opera House. Later, in 2006, Al-Assad issued a decree establishing 'The General Association of Dar Al-Assad for Culture and Arts'. The building contains three stages: the Opera Theatre, which seats 1,335, the Drama Theatre, which seats 662, and the Multi-Function Hall, which seats 237. The Opera Theatre and the Drama Theatre have proscenium stages. The Multi-Function Hall is a studio with moveable seats that can be adjusted to meet the requirements of individual productions.

The building was designed by the British architectural firm Renton Howard Wood Levin. It was built by government organizations, using Syrian labour, at the cost of two billion liras (forty million US dollars). Although it includes some decorations in oriental style, the design of the Opera House is inspired by European eighteenth-century opera houses. The activities of the Opera House include plays, music concerts, film screenings, and workshops. Its floors are marble, and its halls are filled with precious antiques. The strict requirement of formal attire extends to the audience. Ticket prices range between 200 and 800 liras (\$4 to \$16), an affordable price for average theatregoers.

The Opera House occupies around 350,000 square metres. It faces the large Omayyad Square, a junction of many thoroughfares. Surrounding the square are important public edifices: the General Organization of Radio and TV (the military coup's main target), the national library (called the 'Al-Assad Library'), Al-Arkan (the Joint Chiefs of Staff), and the only Sheraton Hotel in Damascus. Gigantic statues of Hafez Al-Assad are found in all of these institutions, except the hotel.

Behind the the Opera House is the building of the Higher Institute of Theatre Arts and the Higher Institute of Music; a path connects them to the Opera House. Lecturers and alumni of the two institutes also form most of the Opera House's important staff. The Opera House mounts plays and concerts that satisfy the tastes of critical theatregoers, high-society people, top officials, and Bashar Al-Assad. Although tickets are considered cheap, the Opera House's audience is limited to these sectors of society.

Bashar Al-Assad's method of changing ministers and high-ranking officials was applied to the Opera House. Between 2004 and 2011, four officials occupied the position of General Director of the Opera House. Theatre activities differed according to each administration and no more than ten plays were presented between 2004 and 2007. In 2008, Damascus was the Arab Capital of Culture, and venues in Damascus, including the Opera House as well as alternative performance spaces, were made available for local and international plays and cultural events.

Hanan Qassab-Hassan, who was the general director of the festival and the Dean of the Theatre Institute, became the Opera House director in the following year. In 2009, the Opera House began to produce plays in collaboration with the Sida Project (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency). Qassab-Hassan's background as a theatre academic reinforced the connection with the Theatre Institute and her administration facilitated the Arab Dance Platform Festival. The Opera House also produced and co-produced several operas. Notably, theatre makers at the National Theatre and the Commercial Theatre did not approach the Opera House, either as job applicants or as spectators. The high standard of its plays deterred other theatre makers from competing. Its activities are subjected to rigorous discipline, to prevent the collapses into deadlock experienced by other national theatre houses.

The Opera House, like its Palace-connected artists, enjoys a specific sort of exemption, which is to bypass the bureaucratic hier-



Mortars hitting the Opera House in Damascus in 2013.

archy. It also enjoys an 'exceptional economic system' that allows it to obtain an annual budget acquired directly from the Ministry of Treasury. The Opera House keeps the income from its performances as a supplement to its annual budget, enabling it to extend some of its activities.

The exceptional character of the Opera House, given it by the Al-Assad dynasty, follows several historical models of the interrelationship between 'tyrants' and edifices. In *The Last Decade of Syrian History*, Muhammad Jamal Baroot provides a comprehensive analysis of Syrian economic and political structures under Bashar Al-Assad and the country's shift from autarchy to an open economy. Syria combined several economic systems under Bashar Al-Assad's reign: it remained socialist, but private companies under the ruling classes controlled investments and development.

### **The Theatre, the Family, and the City**

The public sarcastically calls Syria 'Al-Assad's farm', referring to the family's feudal

approach to the country. Although Bashar Al-Assad seeks to convince people that he shares their daily life, many institutions carry the names of members of his family. At Omayyad Square, for instance, the Public Library and the Opera House are named after Al-Assad.

In *Places of Performance*, Marvin Carlson shows how theatre houses occupy their geographical and cultural positions in accordance with the relationship between the ruler and the city, and the ruling classes and the theatre. During the Renaissance, the Palace 'replaced the cathedral as the centre of the city, and the prince became the focus of social orientation'.<sup>23</sup> The first models of operas in Berlin and then in Paris were planned to be built in the centres of the cities, facing major public squares.<sup>24</sup> Carlson also suggests that theatre houses are involved in the city's semiotic text, giving meanings to the city itself. A theatre building, he suggests, signifies and is signified at one and the same time, and it contributes to the cultural, religious, or political meaning of the city in which it is built.<sup>25</sup>

The Opera House, Al-Assad's idea, took the form of remarkable opera houses around the world, but also reflected its Syrian geographical context and changing political challenges. The building therefore served as a cultural venue for the public and as a political forum sacred within the Al-Assad cult. It bolstered presidential pride (private), and it has been a target for bombs and mortar attacks during the present conflict.

The location of the Opera House prevents the building from becoming an accessible social space in the square. Omayyad Square is signified in the collective memory as being the target of military coups, and so the square imposes its characteristics on to the Opera House, infusing it with a military aura.

The political and military significances of the square have thus made the cultural building 'a building of emergency'. Several employees have revealed to this author that they work as if Bashar Al-Assad was about to visit the building at any time; and this means that it is always ready. The Opera House imposes a security check system and theatre-goers have to walk through metal detectors. On some occasions, security guards physically search patrons.

These procedures have not been seen in any other theatre house in Syria, but it is obligatory in all government institutions on Omayyad Square. The Opera House displays other aspects of unfriendliness. Lights are switched off straight after the end of a show. Visitors are not allowed to park their cars at the venue's parking space. Taxis drop visitors quickly because they cannot stop in front of the building for long. A visitor leaving the edifice has to cross the square to catch a taxi. In addition, cafés and restaurants in the building are empty, which reflects the anti-social ambience of other theatres in Syria. Its location also affects other aspects of the interior. Balconies, for instance, are made to look on to the rear of the building, and none face the square.

Theatre makers found in the exceptional status of the Opera House a space to show their projects without bureaucratic limitations, and Opera House activities have

always received considerable admiration. The links between the 'Palace' and Omayyad Square demanded prestigious productions, and the bond with the theatre and music institutes ensured that this institution could provide quality work.

The Opera House became a prestigious venue in the capital and hosted remarkable international plays. Its equipment and services rarely disappointed its elite audience and visiting international theatre makers, and it has become a source of great pride for Bashar Al-Assad himself. The building has provided another dazzling venue at which to entertain international guests such as the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Prince of Qatar, once the two closest friends to the Syrian ruling family, now Al-Assad's enemies during the current war.

When protests in Syria occurred in 2011, several outdoor activities were suspended, cancelled, or changed. The Opera House became involved in the political unrest and took part in the division that separated the Syrians. The Syrian regime insisted on keeping the Opera House and other venues running to propagate the idea that no demonstrations were taking place in the country and that cultural activities ran, as the state media described the case, 'in a normal way'.

Bashar Al-Assad gave a few formal speeches during the war, and chose the Opera House twice. Consequently, it became a target for the mortars of the armed opposition. Many assumed that the intention was to hit Al-Arkan, but mortars mistakenly fell on the Opera House.<sup>26</sup> Some rebels stated that they targeted the Opera House to send a message of condemnation for running music concerts and pretending that 'a normal Syrian life' was possible while other neighbourhoods were bombed and Syrians were killed. In return, the regime intensified cultural activities at the Opera House to stress this 'normal Syrian life', and state media abbreviated the name of the edifice to Al-Assad House, sending a clear message to the Syrians that the Opera House is Al-Assad House, and the country is Al-Assad country.

## Conclusion

The significance of the Opera House in Damascus has evolved during the reign of the Al-Assad dynasty over Syria. While the father left it incomplete, the son used it to emphasize his friendly public image. Hafez Al-Assad's regime did not build theatres but systematically drove the existing ones and related institutions towards self-destruction, intensifying enmity among theatre institutions and theatre makers. This mentality continued to operate in Syria when Bashar Al-Assad inherited power. In the 2000s, the new ruling classes, mainly the sons of Hafez Al-Assad's entourage, monopolized Syrian sources and invited intellectuals to come into and remain in their orbits.

Bashar Al-Assad was propagated as the hope of Syria, while government institutions lost their credibility with the Syrian public. After it was officially opened in 2004, the Opera House could not sustain permanent significance. External factors such as its location, its connection to the Higher Institute of Theatre Arts in Damascus, and the war have shifted its role in Syrian life. During the war in Syria, the Opera House has become one of the buildings targeted by armed opposition. The country has been cloaked by Al-Assad's name and the armed opposition aims to eliminate everything associated with his dynasty. Sadly, the Opera House is one such target.

## Notes and References

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1. <[www.syrianews.com/readnews.php?sy\\_seq=15678](http://www.syrianews.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=15678)>, accessed 19 April 2015.

2. <[www.syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy\\_seq=15970](http://www.syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=15970)>, accessed 19 April 2015.

3. The building was officially named the General Association of Dar Al-Assad for Culture and Arts when it was opened in 2004. It is often abbreviated in the state media as Dar Al-Assad (Al-Assad House), although some newspapers and intellectuals call it Damascus Opera and taxi drivers call it the National Theatre. I will use the name Opera House as it is commonly called.

4. Edward Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 1.

5. The following analysis of such theatres is based on interviews with theatre officials and directors, some of whom have requested to remain anonymous as they are still living and working in Syria.

6. Arab Cultural Centres were also consolation venues for the loss of public figures.

7. Lisa Wedeen, *The Ambiguities of Domination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 12.

8. The Touring Theatre presented plays in hundreds of Syrian villages in the 1970s, using outdoor spaces and factories.

9. Derek Hopwood, *Syria 1945–1986: Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 146.

10. Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria*, p. 9.

11. Wedeen, *The Ambiguities of Domination*, p. 89.

12. The word 'Assad' means 'lion' in Arabic. Syrian plays, cinemas, and comic acts as well as visiting plays were not allowed to mention the word 'lion'.

13. Wedeen discusses the term 'tanfis' in detail in *Ambiguities of Domination*, p. 89–92.

14. Patrick Seal, *Asad* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988), p. 179.

15. Hopwood, *Syria 1945–1986*, p. 146.

16. Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson, *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 62.

17. <<http://mmeabed.blogspot.de/2012/10/1971.html>>, accessed 19 April 2015; <<http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=54&article=647118&issue=12022#.VTkgdvCANux>>, accessed 19 April 2015.

18. <<http://onaeg.com/?p=1147704>>, accessed 19 April 2015.

19. Wedeen, *The Ambiguities of Domination*, p. 5.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

21. Asma spoke in Arabic but used the word 'hopelessly' in English.

22. Wedeen, *The Ambiguities of Domination*, p. 60.

23. Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 38.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 73–5.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

26. See for example the report in the *Daily Mail*: <[www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-2621631/Damascus-opera-suffers-mortar-strikes.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-2621631/Damascus-opera-suffers-mortar-strikes.html)>, accessed 19 August 2015.