REPORT SYRIA

What It's Like to Meet Assad in Damascus

NOVEMBER 7, 2016 — SAM HELLER AND THANASSIS CAMBANIS

Century Foundation fellow Sam Heller returned to Beirut from Syria over the weekend, where he attended a government-backed conference—the first of its kind in years, with Western journalists, analysts and political researchers invited to hear the government's point of view. He spent a week in Damascus. Century Foundation fellow Thanassis Cambanis talks with Sam about his first impressions.

Thanassis: Welcome back from Syria, Sam. We're glad to have you back in Beirut. When was the last time you were in Syria prior to this trip?

Sam: I lived in Syria between 2009 and 2010, but I haven't been back since. I actually left Syria to do a two-year master's degree in Arabic that would have taken me back to Damascus for its second year—but that was 2011, so that obviously didn't happen.

Since I turned back full-time to researching Syria in 2013, I've devoted most of my time and energy to looking at the Syrian opposition and Syria's opposition-held areas. What I've understood about conditions inside regime-held western Syria, including Damascus, has been filtered through the media or second-hand fragments, from people who travel in and out.

But for all I've written about Idlib, I've never actually been there. It's Damascus—and, to a lesser extent, al-Hasakeh in Syria's east—that reflects my actual, lived experience in Syria. And so it's good to be back and see the situation in the part of the country I knew best, if only to further ground myself in something real.

Thanassis: What was your first impression on this trip?

Sam: I don't think this trip necessarily upturned my understanding of conditions inside. But it was useful to see things firsthand and to be able to put some meat on my existing impressions of the functioning of the regime and life in government-held areas.

And this might be shallow, but for me—as an outsider, and as someone who missed the worst years of the war in Damascus in 2013 and 2014—I was struck by how much was the same. The city and the society have obviously been militarized; Damascus is filled with checkpoints and uniformed men. And it seems like everyone, if you ask, has a story of economic hardship, displacement, or the death of friends and family. And yet, even while everything is sort of worse, much of what I knew about Damascus is still there.

It seems like everyone, if you ask, has a story of economic hardship, displacement, or the death of friends and family. And yet, even while everything is sort of worse, much of what I knew about Damascus is still there.

Thanassis: Tell us a little bit about the conference itself, which sparked some controversy among critics of Bashar al-Assad's regime, who argued that journalists shouldn't have attended. Where was it held, what was it like? Why did the Syrian government organize this conference? What was the message they were trying to send you?

Sam: Well, the Syrian government didn't technically organize the conference—it was the British Syrian Society, including Bashar al-Assad's father-in-law, Fawwaz al-Akhras. But the government was obviously heavily invested in the conference and its success, doing everything from facilitating visas at the border to waving us through checkpoints on the road into Damascus to fielding officials like Bouthaina Shaaban as conference speakers and participants. Two small-group sit-downs with Assad himself don't happen unless the Syrian state cares.

The conference itself was held in an auditorium in Damascus University's Baramkeh campus. It consisted of seven panel discussions over two days with headers like "The Media War During the Syrian Crisis," "The Reconciliation Process; Facts and Figures," and "The Effects of Sanctions on the Lives of Ordinary Syrians." Speakers included Syrian officials, local businessmen and elites, and a handful of foreigners, although journalists and most analysts kept to the audience, offstage.

I think the Syrian government saw this as an opportunity to argue its case to an audience of Western influencers and—as you can see from the panel topics—advance a few key, discrete arguments and lines of counterprogramming. It seems like the government is now confident enough to angle for a partial rapprochement with the West—albeit on the Syrian government's own terms—and it's looking for common ground on issues including counterterrorism and economic stabilization, which could stem the flow of Syrian migrants to Europe. The government, with critical assistance from its allies in Russia and Iran, now seems to be on a trajectory to grind out a good-enough victory in large sections of the country. But if the government can break the solidarity and resolve of the Western countries currently arrayed against it, and even convince some to invest in economic revitalization, it may be able to speed things along.

Thanassis: How does a Syrian event like this differ from, say, a policy conference in Washington, D.C.?

Sam: Well, most Western attendees were conscious of the line between attending the conference as a reporting exercise and participating so actively—as a speaker, for example—that they might be seen as complicit in the legitimation of the Assad regime. So that's one concern that probably doesn't come up in D.C. that much.

As a result, I think it ended up a little less participatory than the organizers intended, or at least less two-directional. That is, many Western attendees—myself included—spent most of the conference sponging up speakers' presentations and poking at them with questions, not engaging more actively in a real exchange of ideas. I think many attendees were more interested in hearing perspectives from Damascus (and in staying on to report in Syria) than in participating in a dialogue.

Thanassis: Exactly a year ago I visited Syria when Damascus was still under regular attack from rebels and the government had only a tenuous hold over the capital. It sounds like nowadays the regime of Bashar al-Assad is more confident—at least confident enough to let in a group that includes some public skeptics. Could you get a sense of the government's confidence level?

Sam: Well, the fight for the capital is now close to over. The handful of encircled rebel towns in Damascus's West Ghouta countryside are now nearly all subdued. The city's main front with the rebel stronghold of East Ghouta, a northeastern neighborhood called Jobar, seems basically static, but East Ghouta is being recaptured piecemeal from its far, rural end. There are a handful of nightmarish neighborhoods in the south of the city that are controlled by the Islamic State, but they seem almost entirely penned in. None of these neighborhoods outside government control now threaten central Damascus, and, critically, none of them are regularly shelling into the city, killing pedestrians and disrupting semi-normal civilian life. The war elsewhere in the country is obviously ongoing, and it's felt in the capital. But the war inside Damascus seems nearly done.

A MIXED-GENDER RECRUITING BILLBOARD FOR THE SYRIAN ARAB ARMY, SPONSORED BY THE SYRIA CHARITY WOMEN'S GROUP. SOURCE: SAM HELLER.

But more broadly, I think the Syrian government is feeling good. That is, it obviously has a lot of war ahead of it, but things on the battlefield are going its way. It can claim to control more and more of the country's territory and people and to be waging war on a progressively more extreme rump opposition. I think the regime thinks it has a winning argument, even if it has more work to do.

Thanassis: How does that shift in regime attitude reflect itself among regular Damascenes?

Sam: Well, it's obviously difficult to gauge real sentiment among normal Damascus residents, just because it's not a place where you can speak normally and freely. In most instances when I spoke to people on the street, I had a minder assigned by the Ministry of Information over my shoulder, and I couldn't necessarily pick out when interviewees were telling me how good and normal things are for his benefit. Yet at other times, having the minder on hand actually seemed to help people open up. I speak Arabic, but my Arabic ranges from good to only serviceable, depending on how caffeinated I am; and visually, I'm pretty clearly an alien. With the minder, at least he could flash the reporting permissions from the Ministry and dip in to help set people at ease, just as two Syrians chatting and trading jokes. That

also meant, of course, that occasionally he'd chime in to remind everyone of what a great job the army is doing.

So knowing what was told to me honestly and freely is basically impossible. It's a real hall of mirrors.

The security situation is better, in that shells don't drop into intersections at rush hour, but it can't bring back people's friends and relatives who've been killed.

That said, my rough sense from talking to locals with and without the minder present is that much of Damascus has returned to a sort of normality, except worse. The security situation is better, in that shells don't drop into intersections at rush hour, but it can't bring back people's friends and relatives who've been killed. People fear and resent rebels, who, for many inside Damascus, look like a barbarian horde. The worsening exchange rate means people's savings and wages are worth a fraction of their value before the war, so people work two or three jobs to provide for themselves and their families; some collect relief. People seem exhausted by the war and ready for it to end.

It's all livable, but it doesn't seem pleasant, much less triumphant.

Thanassis: Did you have time to do anything fun? Where did you go out to eat and drink?

Sam: I went out to a handful of restaurants and bars, mostly in Damascus's Old City and the upscale Sha'alan district, and I killed some time drinking in the Sheraton basement's mock English pub. But I don't know if I was necessarily in the right mood to be fun and festive. I spent more time drinking vodka on the rocks and looking sideways at people—which, to be fair, is more or less my default bar posture.

On our first night in the city, we ended up at Abu George, a sort of classic hole-in-the-wall bar in the Old City's Bab Sharqi neighborhood. I had an old friend from my time in Damascus—well-meaning, obviously—ask if we could get a photo outside the bar, but I begged off. I've spent more time talking with people on the other side of the Jobar front inside besieged East Ghouta, at least recently. And now they're losing. So I was leery of looking like I was toasting them from some Old City party, I don't think I'd be comfortable with that.

THE NEWLY INSTALLED "I LOVE DAMASCUS" SIGN ON THE EDGE OF UMAYYAD SQUARE. SOURCE: SAM HELLER.

Thanassis: You met with Bashar al-Assad.

Sam: That was not necessarily how I anticipated spending that Monday night.

Thanassis: Tell us about the elements of the visit—flavor, tone, casual asides—that gives us a sense of Assad; the details that won't make it into everyone's formal write-ups of the discussion.

Sam: Well, Assad was waiting to greet us at the top of the stairs inside his Malki home. From there he ushered us into a smaller sitting room and, after briefly telling us how important he considered this visit, invited our questions. He was generally unassuming and welcoming, and, like a good sport, he played along with some of the more offbeat overtures from attendees, including one attendee's apparently misplaced impression that he loves video games.

But there's an obvious sort of dissonance when a friendly, solicitous Assad delivers—in soft-spoken, slightly lisping English—a basically unmodulated version of his hardest rhetorical line, complete with digressions about how "war crime" is a technical legal term and dismissals of Anne Barnard's list of nonviolent detainees as "not verified."

I think he has a talent for inviting people in and making them feel like they've been gifted with special access to the most important man in the country, that they've earned some rapport with him. And he stayed engaged and friendly, even as he deflected what I think were some hard, critical questions about the real depth of his popular support and the personality cult that surrounds him.

He's unflappable, and he's practiced. And because he knows what he's doing, the substance of what Assad says is typically one of the less newsworthy parts of any interview with him. That's not to say that what he says and thinks doesn't matter—he is, as everyone and everything in Damascus constantly remind you, the single most important figure and decision-maker in the country. But he's also the country's most prominent spokesperson, and he's constantly giving interviews to the international press; the night after we met him, he spoke to a Serbian newspaper and made many of the same points.

He has his stock themes and rebuttals, and he's ready to undercut whatever challenging line of questioning you've prepared, whether to genuinely try to trip him up or just to justify participating in the interview. He's a professional.

Thanassis: You mentioned to me that some of the most interesting revelations came not in what government officials said but in the way they presented themselves. How did foreign minister Walid Moallem open his discussion with the conference attendees?

Sam: Well, he sat down at the head of a conference table in the Foreign Ministry and told the assembled journalists he would throw the session open to questions. "But first," he said, "I have a question for you: Who can tell me—why this hysteria over Aleppo?"

That was followed, unsurprisingly, by awkward silence. Whatever the opposite of an icebreaker is, it was that.

Thanassis: What do you think that meant?

Sam: Well, the BBC's Owen Bennett-Jones asked him why Aleppo was not important. Moallem replied that it was very important, just like Mosul—but that the world was silent about the offensive on Mosul, he said, because the United States was participating.

The Syrian government and its representatives complain regularly about what they see as an impossible double standard. They argue that the Syrian government is using appropriate and necessary means to suppress an insurgency that has seized large sections of the country—including parts of its biggest cities, such as Aleppo—and that is dominated by extremist elements that, in any other conflict, would be considered entirely beyond the pale.

Later, Moallem admitted the Syrian government had made some mistakes, given the difficulty of waging the war. But when asked in a follow-up what some of those mistakes might be, Moallem said he couldn't recall.

Moallem's opener basically set the tone for a session in which he nonchalantly parried journalists' earnest questions, periodically dropping in a joke. At one point he paused the proceedings to say that this was Syria—he was going to smoke. He lit a cigarette. Most of the Syrians and several journalists on hand followed his lead. When Krishnan Guru-Murthy of Britain's Channel 4 News started to ask his third or fourth challenging question and again introduced himself, Moallem interrupted to tell him, deadpan, "I will never forget you. "

I think I'd characterize his tone as "bemused." Certainly not in any way compromising to the sensibilities of his audience.

Thanassis: A year ago, with a government visa, I spent ten days reporting in Damascus, Homs, Lattakia, and Tartous. I filed dispatches about the impressions of Syrians—some pro-government, some less so—and wrote about unexpected volunteers in the regime's fight. I've never received a response from any Syrian official to anything I've written since. I was invited to the same conference that you attended, but was told by the organizers at the last minute that I was not granted permission to attend, with no explanation why. Do you think, after everyone who took part in this conference writes up their takes, that the Syrian government will let the same folks back in?

Sam: I'm honestly not sure. Frankly, I didn't believe the visas would actually materialize until I had the stamp in my passport at the border, and I didn't believe I'd be able to stay on and report until I'd left the Syrian Ministry of Information with the relevant permits. So I'll believe it when I see people reenter.

My understanding is that this conference was supposed to signal new openness to Western elites, including journalists. And state authorities obviously made a priority of facilitating conference attendees' travel and reporting after the conference, even if that reporting was necessarily bounded by the limits of state-supervised movement and speech.

My understanding is that this conference was supposed to signal new openness to Western elites, including journalists.

The Ministry of Information more or less exhausted its entire roster of minders to accommodate this sudden influx of journalists. And the ministry mostly seemed to produce the specific permissions journalists wanted, even if there some delays and occasional crossed wires between government authorities with overlapping jurisdictions. I got the green light

to enter a handful of West Ghouta towns about fifteen minutes before my bus back to Beirut, which was not ideal. But I appreciate the effort, at least.

As for whether some or all of us are allowed back in, I think we'll have to see. Some journalists have written provocative reporting, including pieces filed from inside Damascus. In particular, Anne Barnard's account of the Assad sit-down was pretty clearly critical and unflattering. (It was also fair, I think.)

But on the whole, I think the government is getting some of the stories it would like to see, and so I think it will view the trip as successful overall. The international media attention paid to rebel-held east Aleppo relative to more populous government-held west Aleppo—whose civilian neighborhoods are being indiscriminately shelled by rebels—was clearly a cause for frustration and anger among Syrian attendees at the conference. Now the post-conference trip up to west Aleppo spearheaded by Aleppo industrialist and parliamentarian Fares al-Shehabi and facilitated by government forces has translated into international coverage of conditions inside west Aleppo and has brought the suffering of west Aleppo's residents to an international audience. Likewise, what the government calls the international economic "siege" on the country—that is, Western sanctions and the resulting economic hardship for ordinary civilians—seems likely to get international media attention.

A MONUMENT TO VICTIMS OF A 2014 CAR BOMB IN PRESIDENT'S SQUARE IN JEREMANA, A DAMASCUS SUBURB. SOURCE: SAM HELLER.

A lot of this has to do with the government simply opening the door. Even as these specific stories serve the government's agenda, they're also obviously real and newsworthy. Journalists are justifiably ready and willing to cover them if the government will just give them access to the country.

Thanassis: If they think they're winning and if they think they have a story to sell that helps them achieve their interest maybe as you say, they'll be open to some extent—at least open enough to repeat some of the points they've been making since 2011, regardless of how the situation unfolds on the ground. Would you like to go back soon?

Sam: Well, there's obviously more reporting to be done on the ground, which is valuable, even within the parameters imposed by the government. And it's just useful to hear from people inside Damascus and the regime-controlled west—from officials and elites to taxi drivers and passers-by—about subjects ranging from the regime's strategy and outlook to how hard it is now to get replacement phone parts. Whatever your politics as an analyst, it's important to get a fuller sense of how Syrians understand the war. And frankly, if your contacts with Syrians are limited to people sympathetic to

the opposition, I think you're prone to get a severely distorted idea of the bounds of Syrian discourse and debate. The center of gravity will be all wrong.

All you can do is talk to people, try to pick apart what's real, and contextualize and caveat your reporting how you can.

Obviously, you have to account for the fact that you're operating in an environment that is essentially un-free, and that many of your interlocutors have agendas. But while the limits on speech and the incentives to dissimulate are exceptional, nearly everyone I talk to—on all sides—has something ulterior at work, or at least a perspective. Whether it's rebels, activists, or Western officials—everyone is partially untrustworthy. All you can do is talk to people, try to pick apart what's real, and contextualize and caveat your reporting how you can.

So I'll go back if I can. That said, I'm not always great at cultivating access. Not to say I'm some brave truth-teller, but occasionally I write unflattering things. Lately, most of those unflattering things have been about Syria's rebels, just as a function of the stories that have grabbed my attention. But individual rebel commanders and factions don't get to decide whether I enter Turkey, even if I might have to periodically look over my shoulder in Reyhanli. So let's see what happens if I write something similar about a government that can turn my entrance visas on and off.

Thanassis: It's great to have you back and we're looking forward to reading more of your analysis and dispatches from the trip.

COVER PHOTO: WATCHSMART, BASHAR AL-ASSAD PROPAGANDA, SEPTEMBER 25, 2007.

Sam Heller, Contributor

Sam Heller is a Beirut-based freelance writer and analyst. He has written extensively on the Syrian war for outlets including Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor, War on the Rocks, VICE News, The Daily Beast, and World Politics Review.

Thanassis Cambanis, Senior Fellow

Thanassis Cambanis is a journalist specializing in the Middle East and American foreign policy.