2010 was a good year for Ba’thist Syria’s ruling clique. A decade after he succeeded his father as Syrian president in June 2000, Bashar al-Asad could and did present himself as the top player in the eastern Arab world. The Syrian regime had weathered the storm over its near certain involvement in the February 2005 assassination of Lebanon’s Rafiq al-Hariri and other political murders in Beirut. Opposition to a resurgent Syrian regime role in Lebanon had virtually collapsed as the West’s Lebanese friends, deserted by their patrons, trekked to Damascus to reconcile with Bashar. The United States, France, and Saudi Arabia jostled to “engage” the Syrian ruler, with the fatuous idea that he might be enticed to disengage from the alignment with Islamist Iran and Lebanon’s Hezbollah that was the bedrock of Ba’thist Syria’s regional significance.

Limited liberalization of the Syrian economy enabled a multi-sectarian middle and upper bourgeoisie to prosper, giving the regime a solid social base in Damascus and Aleppo. As front man for the family firm of his mother, sister, brother-in-law, brother, and various cousins, uncles, and aunts, Bashar commanded an imposing, highly cohesive, and Orwellian security and surveillance apparatus. Alawites, Christians, and better-off Sunnis were locked into the regime base by trepidation about any alternative, and the family firm calculated that judicious flirtation with Islamic
religious sentiment would placate the Sunni Arab majority. As standard-bearer of “resistance” to Israel and to Western intrusion in the Arab world, combined with a well-dressed secular family man image in the West, Bashar al-Asad seemed to have all his bases covered.

Bashar could be and was very pleased with himself. So pleased in fact that at a February 2010 summit in Damascus with Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hezbollah chief Hasan Nasrallah he could not refrain from mocking U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s appeal to him to move away from Iran, declaring that he and his partners were assembling to sign Syria’s “distancing” agreement with Iran. The gratuitous insult to a superpower desperate to be obliging gave a revealing glimpse of Bashar. In January 2011, as the “Arab Spring” in Tunisia and Egypt was already underway, Bashar told the Wall Street Journal that such events could not touch Syria – he was at the vanguard of the Arab street and its concerns.

Indeed, no one anticipated Syria’s uprising. The wildfire spread of disturbances in down at heel provincial towns and poorer Damascus suburbs after the casual brutality of the security forces against teenage graffiti writers and their families in Deraa was a revelation. In retrospect, however, two features of the preceding decade tell us much about both the uprising and the Syrian leader’s obtuse reaction to it. Whatever happens, in early 2012 the Syria of Bashar’s apogee in 2010 has gone for good.

First, from the 1990s and especially under Bashar the regime shifted its economic priority from semi-socialism to a crony capitalism favoring the elite around the Asads and segments of the bourgeoisie. This and decay of the state’s social framework
ensured marginalization of most of the Sunni Arab two-thirds of Syria, ironically people whom Hafiz al-Asad had tried in the 1970s to build into the Ba’thist structure. Bashar took for granted the people of the Hawran, Homs, Hama, Idlib, the countryside of Damascus (Rif Dimashq), and poorer sections of the coastal towns who stood still or regressed in their material affairs while he postured on the regional stage. His opening-up of the economy to Turkey and China benefited Aleppo and Damascus entrepreneurs, but constricted small industry, wages, and employment in Rif Dimashq. Syria’s peripheries beyond Aleppo and Damascus had no chance of addressing the demographic bulge continuing to come into the labour force, and after late 2007 drought accentuated distress. Most of the Alawite population beyond the portion built into the regime’s operations shared these conditions, but the undertone of sectarian apprehension largely deterred convergence.

Second, the behaviour and personality traits that Bashar al-Asad exhibited through his initial decade in power indicated that anyone looking to him for flexibility or political imagination was wasting their time. The abrupt termination of the 2001 “Damascus Spring” accompanied by menacing presidential preaching about activists servicing Syria’s “enemies” was a bad start. The abusive behavior of Bashar and his associates toward Rafiq al-Hariri in December 2003 and August 2004 represented astonishing disrespect for the prime minister of a neighboring state. Hariri became so distressed during the December 2003 browbeating over his relations with the U.S. that he went directly to a hospital afterwards. Later, following the Hariri assassination, the German journalist Carsten Wieland reported one of Bashar’s close advisors as observing that Bashar had no need for advisors and “took the most dangerous decisions in five minutes.”
The United Nations transcript of Bashar’s discussions in Damascus with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in April 2007 provides more unsettling evidence. Apart from the bald threat that establishing the Special Tribunal for Lebanon would have “grave consequences that could not be contained in Lebanon,” the Syrian leader commented on how “the Syrian people hate the [Lebanese] 14 March movement.” For Bashar intemperate phraseology was standard fare, regularly deployed in major speeches, and the Syrian people had no reality beyond his person, his circle, and his agenda. It all foreshadowed an arrogant, absolutist response to rebellion.

The survival imperative of the Asad family together with the self-righteousness of its front man established an entirely predictable, uncompromising, and unwavering policy toward the Syrian uprising from its first weeks in March/April 2011. Peaceful protestors would be shot down, represented as armed bandits organized by a conspiracy featuring Israel, al-Qa’ida, the West, the Hariris in Lebanon, and whatever Arabs dared to question to rectitude of the Syrian regime. Cosmetic reform would be offered on a timetable only determined by the regime, with “dialogue” that would never amount to other than the regime talking to itself. The highest value to be promoted was “stability” and political cosmetics were a gift to come from the leader after “terrorists” were all wiped out. As months passed and the regime faced unexpected persistence from the crowds, repression evolved into a bid to provoke armed resistance, manifestations of political Islam, and Sunni sectarian hostility to Alawites. This would enable Bashar to deploy more naked force and solidify the minorities and Damascus/Aleppo merchant class behind it, in the style of destroying the Islamists in the early 1980s. The regime has certainly been concerned about
wavering among Alawites, because Bashar put a distance between himself and much of his community after 2000. There was no such concern about most Christians.

Because of their dogmatic narrative of themselves as the model Arabs, their difficulty in conceiving a different Syria, and their command of a ruthless security machine, regime personalities had no doubt that they would prevail. They would not even admit to serious discontent and intended, through exclusion of media and manipulation of observers, to airbrush inconvenient events and people out of existence. Asked about a cease-fire in Homs in mid-February 2012, Syria’s chief UN representative claimed there was no armed conflict. Maximal ferocity and scorning of significant friends like Turkey’s AKP government demonstrated the Asads’ belief that any actual concession would be terminal for them.

Crushing what Bashar dismissed as 64,000 armed elements was always only one more military offensive away. At the outset of Ramadan in early August 2011 the Interior Minister predicted everything would be over before the end of the fasting month. That proved a disappointment but the steadfast support of Iran and Russia and the conviction that the West would only pontificate from the sidelines fed regime self-assurance that it had a free hand – a license to kill. To a hardened totalitarian state in survival and lockdown mode, its camp corralled by carefully cultivated fear, sanctions could be ridden-out and condemnations spurned. For Bashar al-Assad, the impudent Arab League would be back in Damascus in a few months to apologize for its temerity. After all, the Saudis were only half-men (Bashar’s description of them during the July/August 2006 Israel/Hezbollah fighting) and the Arab League was not
Arab without Ba’thist Syria. A few months later the Syrian president would be back on the global cocktail circuit as if nothing had happened.

Bashar al-Asad could probably have established a modus vivendi with opposition elements if he had delivered a serious opening-up of Syrian politics in the first few weeks of the uprising. However, there was never the remotest chance that either the regime or the president would oblige. The family firm and those associated with it could never endure dilution of power. The innate personal rigidity of the president, his insulation from the bulk of Syrian society, and his plainly warped interpretations of the priorities of the Syrian “street” meant that he could never appreciate the urgency of fundamental change. Bashar’s performance in three speeches in Arabic and a bizarre interview in English with Barbara Walters of the ABC network was surreal. In the face of a systematic state campaign of mass murder and bestiality documented by the UN human rights commission, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International and for which the protesting multitudes blamed Bashar personally, he blandly referred to small “mistakes” at a low command level. With a patronizing and even mocking demeanour, he spoke vaguely of limited political adjustments in a hazy future. He declared that he had no responsibility for the security forces almost in the same breath as he promised an “iron fist” against “the terrorists.” One religious sheikh reported from meetings with Bashar that the president tried to plead that his mother and aunt restricted him in dealing with family members in the security machine. Bashar oscillated between the obscene and the pathetic. As early as April 2011 the ramifying opposition was finished with him and the only outlook was demolition of one side or the other.
What of the opposition to the regime that burst onto the stage across provincial Syria within weeks of the trigger events in the Hawran? By mid-2011 the networks of local coordinating committees represented a story of courage and perseverance already unique in the whole Arab revolutionary wave. The protestors clung to their ideal of a non-violent, non-sectarian, non-Islamist upheaval aiming at a new pluralist polity. What is notable is that this came primarily from the most conservative and religiously oriented towns and suburbs in Sunni Syria. The Syrian opposition has been a fundamentally different phenomenon from the bourgeois secular, liberal vanguard in Egypt, soon swamped by political religion from the heartlands of Sunni Egypt. The internal organizers of the Syrian opposition have in the main also sought to bring over the one-third of Syria comprising the sectarian and ethnic minorities. Again the difference with Egypt, where an eight percent minority of Copts can be disregarded, is fundamental. These two differences are major reasons why Syria is ultimately more hospitable terrain for political pluralism than Egypt, provided it is not broken apart in the continuing struggle.

By about September 2011, after almost six months of protests and murderous repression, the regime achieved some success in its effort to create armed responses and to goad Sunnis to attack Alawites, in part through its deployment of Alawite and other vigilantes (the shabiha). The regime evidently believed that precipitating hostilities and sectarian breakdown produced the most favourable environment for application of its overwhelming military preponderance. The regime that denied sectarianism and whipped up fear of Islamism was expert in manipulating sectarianism and militant Islamists; it would take Syria to the event horizon of the black hole, confident that there it would triumph. The problem was that by early 2012
the regular army was fraying, not yet critically but in a way that it had not in the previous domestic hostilities of the early 1980s that culminated in the devastation of Hama in 1982. Also in early 2012 the regime had to deal with several “Hamas” simultaneously across much of Syria, and the prevailing opposition agenda of freedom and pluralism was far more subversive than the Muslim Brotherhood agenda of 1982. Whatever Bashar might think of the Saudis, the Syrian military assault on a large part of the Syrian people proceeded in a widely hostile Arab environment completely different from 1982. Crushing some poor Sunni neighborhoods in Homs would not see off this uprising.

The rigour of repression through decades and during the 2011-2012 uprising, together with the natural diversity of Syrian society, ensured a splintered opposition movement in 2011-2012. Fragmentation has been most obvious among the fractious exiles, between the exiles and an internal opposition contemptuous of those sitting outside, and among the armed groups evolving with defections from the regular army. The local coordinating committees in different parts of Syria are of necessity decentralized. Identifiable leaders risk targeting and elimination by the regime and in any case after forty years of the father-leader these people have been understandably allergic to leaders. The main narrative of the local coordinating committees, the soul of the uprising, has consistently been that they have a coherent vision of an inclusive secular pluralist Syria and beyond that, the main priority is surviving and persisting in the long struggle to overturn the dictatorship. They vigorously assert that the Muslim Brotherhood has no serious hold among the protestors, that social conservatism does not mean Islamism. They have become associated with various armed elements only
for self-preservation. These armed elements have little coordination across different pockets of provincial Syria because of the obvious objective difficulties.

Local coordinating committees distrust the external Syrian National Council (SNC), suspecting exile pretensions, Turkish steerage, and Turkish promotion of the Muslim Brotherhood. Apart from the SNC, they are wary of the old guard of opposition personalities and leftists because they fear that such elements remain open to negotiating with the regime, which can only produce a sell-out given the bottom-line absolutism of the ruling clique. Beyond a scattering of individuals and rumors of discontent among middle-level Alawite officers and among Alawites outside the regime circle, the uprising has made no penetration of the Alawite population. The Arabist inclination of the SNC has also deterred ethnic Kurds, a tenth of the population who are sympathetic with the uprising but waiting for clear endorsement of a Syria above and beyond ethnicity. In short, in early 2012 the uprising was largely contained within Sunni Arab Syria. Conclusive repudiation of the regime by more than half the country, accepting that this still does not include the Sunni bourgeoisie of Aleppo and Damascus, is enough to make the regime ultimately unviable, but not enough to give any other indication of a new future.

At the end of February 2012, having discussed the matter with itself, the Syrian regime mobilized its crowd and its ballot box stuffers to endorse a new constitution in a pantomime referendum. Provided they were not ethnic (apart of course from Ba’thist Arabist) or sectarian, approved political parties could register for elections for a parliament that would have no influence on executive authority. The president would retain total power over the government, legislation, the judiciary, and the
security services and Bashar al-Asad could continue until 2028. The regime embedded Islamic law as a main source of state law – the same regime that told its crowd it was defending them from Islamist “terrorists.” In Homs apartment buildings were being collapsed by the regime’s 240mm mortars and artillery, swathes of northern Syria were at least temporarily liberated from Bashar, and Aleppo was restive to an extent not hitherto seen since March 2011. According to the state, all was normal apart from a few police actions against bandits. Syria’s rulers aspired to impose their script on reality in the style of Dark City and The Matrix.

In March 2012, the situation of Ba’thist Syria bears some resemblance to that of Nazi Germany in mid-1944. The regime still disposes of great capacity despite being on the road to downfall. It can therefore sustain delusional self-assurance. Like Nazi Germany looked to being saved by a breakdown of the allied coalition, Ba’thist Syria looks to being rescued by surprise Middle East regional developments, perhaps an Israeli assault on its Iranian Islamist friends. Given the irreversible hatred for Bashar al-Asad of more than half the Syrian people, the absolutism of the Asads, and the Western refusal of intervention that might swiftly crack the regime, Syria likely looks ahead to a devastating implosion with a whiff of the last months of the Nazi state. The arms will flow, the regular army will continue to fray, and its rump plus other security agencies are already short of being able to hold all the country all the time. There might be a rolling back of rebellion with extremities of brutality but this will probably only make the ultimate end of days for the regime even more apocalyptic. Aside from the crimes against humanity of the entire security machine, there is the personal historical responsibility – that of Bashar al-Asad.