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## Postcard from Damascus

By Andrew Lee Butters

On any given Thursday night--the start of the weekend in Syria--Z Bar, the rooftop nightclub at the Omayad Hotel, is packed. An instant hit with Damascus' rich and restless when it opened last summer, Z Bar provides not only a place to dance on tables Beirut-style but also a commanding view of the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. "Top of Z Town" is its Pepé Le Pew--esque slogan, but everyone knows who's really on top in this town. From a hill above Z Bar, the glass façade of Bashar Assad's presidential palace looks down at his capital like an unblinking eye. And the stern portraits of Assad on every block suggest that Damascus is not party central for the Middle East just yet.

In many ways, Syria is an anachronism: governed by a totalitarian regime, managed by Soviet-style central planners and littered with the crumbling ruins of ancient civilizations. More recently, the Bush Administration has accused Syria of supporting anti-Israeli terrorists and tried to isolate the country. But with the Bush era winding down, Syria appears to have weathered threats of regime change--and is roaring back.

Two years ago, when Khaled Samawi opened Ayyam Gallery, Damascus' first major showcase for contemporary Syrian art, the city's artistic community "accused me of exporting Syrian culture," he says. "There was still this romantic idea that artists have to be poor." Not anymore: prices have risen as much as 1,000%, and top works can command up to \$200,000. Ayyam Gallery is expanding to Dubai and Beirut and has an exhibition in New York City. Many buyers aren't megarich Saudi oil princes but wealthy Syrians with newfound avant-garde tastes and an eagerness to promote their culture. "People like to say our culture is thousands of years old, but as a country, we're just about 50 years old," says Samawi. "We've had our trials and errors. Now we're starting to get it right."

The Syrian art boom is taking place amid an economic thaw. Syria began opening its economy in 2005 under pressure from U.S. sanctions; foreign investment has changed the face of the country.

Once the streets of Damascus were filled with 1950s-era American auto-mobiles, kept running by trade barriers and twine; now there's a daily traffic jam of new Asian sedans and German sports cars. Superseding the capital's dictator-chic hotels from the 1970s--massive concrete towers with prostitutes in the bars and spies in the lobbies--modern boutique inns are sprouting in renovated courtyard palaces of the Old City. Among Syria's élite, the Baathist-apparatchik look--leather jacket, bell-bottoms, cigarette holder--is giving way to skinny jeans and cappuccinos.

Beneath the froth, Syria's financial picture is still grim. Oil production--which once accounted for 90% of government revenue--is on the decline. Inflation has rendered unsustainable the food and fuel subsidies on which millions of poor Syrians depend. Enter President Assad, who Syrians hope can help attract much needed foreign investment. Once persona non grata in the West, Assad is more secure than ever at home and abroad. The violence that followed U.S. regime change in Iraq has raised his profile in a region where stability is often valued over freedom. In August, French President Nicolas Sarkozy became the first Western leader to visit Damascus in five years, a reward to Assad for launching a peace initiative with Israel in May.

But how far will Assad go? While a peace deal sweetened with Western aid would put Syria on solid economic ground, conflict with Israel has helped justify the security state that keeps him in power. And Damascus would probably have to break off its partnership with Iran, an alliance that helped it survive those years as a Western pariah. "Syria has a stark choice to make," says Andrew Tabler, a co-founder of the English-language magazine Syria Today. "They can't reconcile friendship with Iran and peace with Israel." Still, many have faith in the nation's promise. "Syria is a virgin country, like China was 20 years ago," says Nabil Sukkar, one of the country's leading economic reformers. "No matter what you do, you find gold."

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