The first advertisement released by Bashar al-Assad during this year’s Syrian presidential election campaign was tagged with the slogan Sawa, or “Together.” It proved to be a misguided choice for a plebiscite marred by widespread ballot stuffing, choreographed pro-Assad celebrations outside the polling stations, and no votes cast by Syrians in rebel-held territories throughout the country. For the incumbent, who won an improbable 89 percent of the vote, the election was a way to demonstrate to friends and foes that he has the wherewithal to survive a civil war now in its third year, no matter the cost—which thus far includes some 190,000 deaths (a third of them civilians, according to the United Kingdom–based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights) and the devastation of much of the country’s economy and infrastructure.

The “Together” ad was a slick piece of propaganda. In it, an idealized cross section of Syrian society—children mourning fathers killed in battle, bearded old farmers in straw hats and kaffiyehs, veiled women, construction workers and, strangely, people in white lab coats—floods into Krak des Chevaliers, a massive Crusader castle twenty-five miles west of Homs. (T.E. Lawrence called it “perhaps the best preserved and most wholly admirable castle in the world.”) Over triumphal music, Syrians ascend to the ramparts and erect a towering pole for an outsized Syrian flag, which flaps in the wind, backlit by the sun. One by one, they salute it. An aerial shot shows hundreds more people gathered outside the castle walls; the day is bright and everything is green.

Perched on a precipice that commands the main route between the Mediterranean coastal mountains and inland Syria, Krak has long been a prized location. Syrian rebels held the castle and the surrounding village of al-Hosn until March of this year, when the Syrian army retook it. Shaky videos posted on YouTube show dark clouds and smoke erupting from the castle as mortars and bombs fall. The World Monuments Fund and UNESCO—Krak is a World Heritage Site—have raised alarms over photographs that show the castle walls pockmarked from shelling and a thirteenth-century Gothic loggia riddled with bullet holes and blackened by fire. But evidence of this damage cannot be gleaned from Assad’s agitprop. Krak looks to be unscathed and cleared of debris, and the ad ends with a cheery message, “Together, stronger,” followed by the president’s signature.

Assad’s staging of a soft-focus victory lap in Krak des Chevaliers represented more than a culture war unfolding in the civil war’s cross-fire. Targeting historic architecture for destruction or co-opting it for propaganda exercises are both regime tactics, to be added to an arsenal that also includes barrel bombs—metal drums filled with explosives and shrapnel and dropped from helicopters onto rebel-held territory. Many of the bombs fall on Aleppo, whose covered medieval markets were burned by regime forces in 2012. “That was totally punitive,” Amr al-Azm, an archaeologist and member of the Syrian opposition who teaches history at Shawnee State University in Ohio, told me. “When Aleppo rose up, the regime had constantly reminded and threatened the city’s merchant classes that if they did not control their local population—if they did not support suppressing any protest and the city was allowed to become a hotbed of demonstrations—there would be a great price to pay.”

As a warning in 2011, al-Azm said, the regime sent tanks into the eastern city of
Deir ez-Zor, on the Euphrates River, which has close commercial and cultural ties with Aleppo, and besieged it. “If you want to make a demonstration of force without destroying Aleppo itself, burning the commercial center of Deir ez-Zor would be a good way to remind the people of Aleppo: ‘This is what I will do to you if you also start protesting.’” When the protests finally took off there in 2012, “the regime burnt the souls down—wanton destruction just for the sake of destruction.”

It was only the start. When the eleventh-century minaret of Aleppo’s grand Umayyad Mosque collapsed from a mortar strike in April 2013, the Syrian government and the rebels traded accusations over who was to blame. Satellite images show that a corner of the mosque’s rectangular courtyard is missing. Where the minaret stood, there is only a pile of stones. But as Diana Darke states in her memoir, My House in Damascus: An Inside View of the Syrian Revolution, much of the destruction of Aleppo’s mosque involved strategic terror tactics focused on symbolic and historic places. “Before leaving, the regime soldiers scrawled the same chilling destruction just for the sake of destruction.”

Inside View of the Syrian Revolution, much of Daraa is in ruins, including another iconic minaret, that of the Omari Mosque, a dusty border town near Jordan, looks devastated and apocalyptic, with pro-Assad snipers tucking away in scarred buildings. “The day the Omari Mosque was destroyed by the regime,” one of the activists says, “we heard them over the wireless giving orders and saying, ‘Destroy their symbol!’”

A few unnamed local activists describe soldiers invading the mosque in 2011 (planting weapons there, the activists surmise, in order to reveal their existence on state television), and also when tanks attacked last year. They speak as the camera pans over the mosque’s courtyard, fashioned from local dark volcanic stone and littered with wreckage; in one corner stands the remains of the minaret, a craggy stump surrounded by a pile of broken stones that once formed its top half. Minarets have tactical advantages, offering visibility and a perch for both government and rebel snipers. But as Lisa Ackerman, executive vice president and chief operating officer of the World Monuments Fund, told me: “A few of the minarets and mosques that have been destroyed or damaged seem to fall into the category of letting people know that the town has fallen to one side or another.”

In the Vice video, modern, concrete Daraa, a dusty town near Jordan, looks devastated and apocalyptic, with pro-Assad snipers tucking away in scarred buildings. “The day the Omari Mosque was destroyed by the regime,” one of the activists says, “we heard them over the wireless giving orders and saying, ‘Destroy their symbol!’”

Another “Together”-themed campaign ad features children sneaking out of their beds at night to repaint a wall outside their school by flashlight. As Assad propaganda goes, it’s especially cruel. Protests erupted in Syria in March 2011 after the arrest and torture of children in the southern city of Daraa for writing anti-government graffiti on their school walls, including a slogan they saw on television from Tunisia and Egypt: “The people want the fall of the regime!” More than three years on, much of Daraa is in ruins, including another iconic minaret, that of the Omari Mosque, one of the oldest in history, built in the seventh century during the Islamic conquest of Syria. Like Aleppo’s minaret, Daraa’s was destroyed in April 2013 during fighting between the rebels and government forces—targeted, activists said, by government tanks.

The Omari Mosque served as a field hospital and shelter for protesters in the early days of the uprising, before armed rebels took up positions there. But the mosque was also a revolutionary symbol. It’s where the local sheik delivered the uprising’s first speech (according to the Local Coordination Committees, an activist network). By shelling the minaret, the LCC declared in a statement, the regime “didn’t only destroy stones, but also destroyed a religious and historic heritage that is a source of pride for the people of Syria.”

In June, Vice aired a video report from Daraa that presented the mosque as a battered but enduring emblem of Syria’s revolution. A few unnamed local activists describe soldiers invading the mosque in 2011 (planting weapons there, the activists surmise, in order to reveal their existence on state television), and also when tanks attacked last year. They speak as the camera pans over the mosque’s courtyard, fashioned from local dark volcanic stone and littered with wreckage; in one corner stands the remains of the minaret, a craggy stump surrounded by a pile of broken stones that once formed its top half. Minarets have tactical advantages, offering visibility and a perch for both government and rebel snipers. But as Lisa Ackerman, executive vice president and chief operating officer of the World Monuments Fund, told me: “A few of the minarets and mosques that have been destroyed or damaged seem to fall into the category of letting people know that the town has fallen to one side or another.”

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An Ottoman yearbook published in 1900 recorded nearly 17,000 houses in the province of Damascus, of which half still remain, according to the estimates of architectural historians—or at least they did until a few years ago. “In all the eastern Mediterranean—from Egypt to Greece—the Syrian towns of Damascus and Aleppo are the only large cities which preserve domestic architecture on such a scale,” write the architectural historians Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen and Stefan Weber. “Other important cities, such as Cairo and Istanbul, have lost…most of their residential architecture and preserved only those buildings considered historical monuments,” like mosques, schools and a few faded palaces.

Five years ago, in what seems like a different Syria, the Assad government wasn’t bombing architectural treasures into ruins; it was helping to preserve them amid a tourism boom centered in Damascus and Aleppo. Both places are ancient, among the world’s oldest continually inhabited cities, with a preserved historic fabric unique in the Middle East and the wider Islamic world. Damascus, in particular, with its cohesive urban core, unchanged for centuries—all archways, meandering alleyways and hidden courtyards—has inspired its share of chroniclers. Perhaps Graeme Wood said it best when he wrote in The New Republic in 2012 that “the Old City of Damascus has all the romance of the Old City of Jerusalem, with about a tenth the tourist traps and a seventh the eschatology.”

Maktab Anbar is one of the Old City’s largest mansions; a wealthy Jewish merchant, Yusuf Anbar, bankrupted himself to build it in the 1880s. The local Ottoman authorities assumed control from Anbar and turned the building into a prestigious boys’ school that educated generations of elite Damascene sons. After Syrian independence in 1946, the place fell into disrepair, like many houses and mansions in the Old City. In the 1980s, during the rule of Hafez al-Assad, Bashar’s father, the Syrian Ministry of Culture restored it. By the 2000s, the government had made Maktab Anbar into the headquarters of the various architects—Syrian and foreign, government-backed and from nongovernmental organizations—who oversaw and regulated the dozens of restoration projects bringing new life and money into the Old City.

On a hot spring day in 2009, above one of Maktab Anbar’s courtyards, thick with orange trees and bougainvillea, I met Naim Zabita, a Syrian architect who consulted for a local EU-funded initiative, Municipal Administration Modernisation, which was creating a master plan for the Old City. In a cool second-floor room, shaded from the desert sun as its nineteenth-century architects intended, Zabita expressed ambivalence and cautious skepticism, familiar among architects and historians in Damascus at the time, about the city’s transformation. “We should keep considering Old Damascus as a living city,” he told me, “not as a place only for visitors to come and see.”

Many restorations were done hastily, with preservation principles ignored in order to turn a quick profit. As with many government-sanctioned cultural projects elsewhere in the Middle East, particularly Egypt, concrete was the material of choice, used to repair the cracks in old wood-and-mud-brick frames or to replace them.
altogether. The style of most developers, Zabita said, owed much to Syrian soap operas, many of which were set in grand Old City houses with a pastiche of Orientalist styles. The government loved it.

“With too many tourists, we will lose the soul of the city,” said May Mamarbachi, who renovated and restored the Old City’s first boutique hotel, Beit al-Mamlouka, speaking with me that same spring. She pointed out how the walls in the courtyard and the room around us, uncharacteristically straight, had clearly been restored with cement rather than the traditional mud brick and wood. More regulation was needed, she cautioned, with a view to what the city would become in the future. She cited the government’s rumored plan to build a highway through the historic districts just outside the Old City’s northern walls; UNESCO was opposed and threatened to revoke the city’s status as a World Heritage Site if the highway went forward. Mamarbachi said something that no one, in the boom days of 2009, would have thought ominous: “If you just leave it to the people, they will go completely wild and we will destroy Old Damascus.”

Earlier that year, the Associated Press had caused a stir among preservationists and historians when it described the restoration craze in Damascus as an “entrepreneurial onslaught,” reporting that licenses had been issued for fifty hotels and 120 restaurants in the 316-acre Old City. “Among the many up and running are some shoddy imitations of traditional Arab architecture,” the AP reporter noted. The story quoted Hakam Roukbi, a developer who was carefully restoring Beit Farhi, once the palace of another wealthy Jewish family. As a twenty-two-room hotel, the building would cater “to VIP guests of the government,” who, Roukbi suggested, “would be people who appreciate the strict attention to detail in the restoration.”

But even if high-end travelers delighted in Beit Farhi’s revival, they were not the preferred clientele. It wasn’t hard to see who was behind some of the projects, or who benefited most from the good press they produced: the Assad regime. The quality of the workmanship was almost beside the point. As one foreign architect told me regarding the restorations of the markets and storefronts along the biblical Straight Street, which cuts an east-west line across the center of the Old City, worrying about shoddy or superficial work was pointless: the project to beautify Straight Street had come straight from the government. “Bashar al-Assad, when he toured the area, remarked on what a fine job they had done,” the architect said. “So that was the end of it.”

The tourism boom tied to restoring Damascus’s old houses coincided with a round of crony economic “reforms” that privatized banks and businesses, mostly for the benefit of Assad’s allies, like his cousin Rami Makhlouf, who seemed to own everything new and profitable in Syria, from a telecom company to duty-free shops and hospitality businesses. Things were looking up, for some, and the regime was on a roll. Four times as many tourists visited Syria in 2010 as had in 2005. As more and more historic houses were repurposed as restaurants and hotels, each courtyard seemingly more idyllic than the next, and the view of Assad’s Syria softened, at least in the international-travel and style sections. There were lengthy, glossy spreads in British Vogue (“The Road to Damascus,” with an English model wandering the old markets, posing in courtyards and keeping a diary) and Conde Nast Traveler (“Dawn in Damascus,” which noted how “the Syrian capital is celebrating a cultural and economic rebirth—despite authoritarian rule”). In Aleppo, in the summer of 2009, I met Christian Louboutin, the French shoe designer; Assad’s wife Asma was known to be a fan. Louboutin had just bought two sprawling, ramshackle eleventh-century houses and had big restoration plans.

Praised for its foresight in recognizing the economic and social benefits of preserving the country’s rich urban heritage, the Syrian government shed its pariah label; but this was the same regime that, in 1982, under Hafez, had pursued urban renewal of a different sort, leveling the historic center of the city of Hama, killing perhaps as many as 30,000 people, to put down a Muslim Brotherhood–led uprising there. In 2010, the architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff, writing in The New York Times, described a restoration project centered around Aleppo’s ancient Citadel—which was being directed at the Syrian government’s behest by GTZ, a German development organization, and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture—as “one of the most far-thinking preservation projects in the Middle East, one that places as much importance on people as it does on the buildings they live in.” Ouroussoff marveled in particular at “the sense of shared ownership and belonging. The poor seem as comfortable strolling along the Citadel’s paths as the rich, which is all the more striking given that Syria is controlled by the authoritarian government of Bashar al-Assad and the ruling Baath Party.”

For al-Azm, there was no sense of shared ownership at play, since on “just about every single major public monument, on the outside, on the facade, there’s a big picture of Assad.” It’s not for nothing that when you enter Syria by land, you’re greeted by a billboard welcoming you to “Assad’s Syria.” That iconography reflects more than a cult of dictatorship; it proclaims that the Assad family and Syria’s cultural heritage must be seen as one and the same.

In May, in an area adjacent to Aleppo’s Citadel, Syrian rebels from the Islamic Front blew up the Carleton Hotel, which had been converted from a nineteenth-century hospital. The Syrian army was using the luxury hotel as a base; the Islamic Front claimed that it killed fifty soldiers in the attack. The Citadel itself, including its mighty Mamluk door, has been damaged in rebel attacks, as well as by government shelling. Some of the worst attacks on heritage sites have come from the brutal jihadist groups that have gravitated to the chaos, most of all the Islamic State (formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS), which has managed to alienate even the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra. Both groups have reportedly desecrated churches in eastern Syria, along with statues of early Islamic leaders like the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid and even a medieval Syrian poet. In January, ISIS fighters blew up a Byzantine mosaic near the city of Raqq, east of Aleppo, the first of Syria’s provincial capitals to fall into rebel hands. The Islamic State took over Raqq from the Free Syrian Army last year and has made the city into its stronghold and self-declared capital; in May, ISIS fighters there used a German-made Hydrema bulldozer to smash two ancient statues of Assyrian lions from the eighth century BCE.

Emma Cunliffe is an English researcher who had used satellite images before the war to monitor the damage done to archeological sites—“through farming, what have you”—in Syria. The war has given that research new meaning and importance, and Cunliffe has worked with a number of international groups to document the damage done by artillery barrages—as well as the growing international effort to keep a record of what is being lost. There are currently at least thirty-eight groups inside and outside Syria monitoring and raising awareness about the costs of the war, not only to the Syrian people but also to its heritage. The group includes established organizations like the Boston-based American Institute of Archeology; Facebook pages by expatriate Syrians, like “Le patrimoine archéologique syrien en danger” and “Eyes to Protect Syrian Heritage”; and activist networks on the ground, like the Syrian Association for Preserving Heritage and Ancient Landmarks, in Aleppo, and the
shadow ministry of culture for the Syrian National Council, based in Turkey. But at the top of the list is the Syrian government's own Directorate General of Antiquities and Monuments (DGAM), which has been extensively documenting the damage even as the Syrian military destroys the sites.

It’s delicate work in the middle of a civil war. “Rather than ascribe blame, they seem to just be reporting the damage,” said Ackerman from the World Monuments Fund. DGAM general director Maamoun Abdulkarim “has gone to extraordinary lengths to follow the procedures for notifying ICOMOS [the International Council on Monuments and Sites] and UNESCO,” she added, issuing frequent reports on confirmed damage and keeping a dedicated staff together and coordinated—just the opposite of what happened in Iraq after the American-led invasion in 2003. The work is also dangerous. In May, a DGAM employee was killed by a sniper in Bosra, a World Heritage Site twenty-five miles east of Daraa that was once the capital of the Roman province of Arabia. Months earlier, looters shot a guard at Bosra’s second-century Roman theater—the largest and best-preserved one in the Middle East—when he refused to leave his post.

Perhaps most important, the DGAM met with members of the Syrian opposition, including al-Azm, at a recent UNESCO meeting. In June, the Syrian opposition’s interim government announced the formation of a task force, chaired by al-Azm, to protect heritage sites in the rebel-held parts of the country, based on an understanding with the DGAM. “For the areas under regime control, the DGAM will continue to try and do its best to preserve and document any violations and continue to try and hold, as much as it can, the military accountable for its actions,” al-Azm said, though he acknowledged that “there’s very little they can do.” The task force, he explained, will employ people in rebel-held areas who would otherwise work for the DGAM, paying their salaries and providing “the same information, cover and protection, where possible, that the DGAM is trying to do in the areas that it controls. We will cooperate.”

They’ll have to, given the scale of destruction. Cunliffe’s report summarizing the damage for the Global Heritage Fund, a nonprofit based in Palo Alto, California, is now the dark companion to my worn copy of Warwick Ball’s Syria: A Historical and Architectural Guide, published in 1994. The book accompanied me on road trips around Syria in 2008 and 2009, in beat-up buses and rental cars, from Deir ez-Zor on the Euphrates River (its iconic pedestrian suspension bridge, built by the French in 1927, was destroyed by regime forces in 2013) to Bosra’s Roman theater. I read Ball’s exacting musings in a cavernous, vaulted cistern below the Byzantine ruins of Rasafa, home to a sixth-century cathedral to St. Sergius, not far from Raqqa; at Mari, an ancient Sumerian site on the western bank of the Euphrates near the Iraqi border; and at the top of the Krak des Chevaliers. Cunliffe lists all the same archeological sites as Ball, but her report is more like an index of destruction:

Tell Sheikh Hamad (Dur Katlimmu)—Assyrian temple collapsed after shell fire and the site was “transformed into a battlefield between deserters and army”… Mosque of Idlib Sermin (Fatimid era)… Mosque of al-Tekkiyeh Ariha—minaret destroyed… Al-Qusaayr—Great Mosque and Mar Elias monastery damaged… Mosque al-Herak in the Dara’a region… Oldest mosque in city of Sermin… Our Lady of Seydnaya Monastery—Earliest part of monastery dates to early Christian era (circa 547 AD)—shell through back wall… Tomb of the Sheikh Dahur al-Muhammad in Rity-
The Nation

October 13, 2014

Under Pressure

by BARRY SCHWABSKY

In the presence of the violent reality of war,” wrote Wallace Stevens in 1942, “consciousness takes the place of the imagination.” What the poet meant is that in wartime, “everything moves in the direction of reality, that is to say, in the direction of fact,” so that “we leave fact and come back to it, come back to what we wanted fact to be, not to what it was, not to what it has too often remained.” But this pressure toward fact and the desire to change, to remake the facts, become “overwhelming.”

It was difficult to look at “Here and Elsewhere,” the capacious exhibition of “contemporary art from and about the Arab world” (to quote from the press release), without sensing this overwhelming pressure toward fact. In part, this was a matter of timing. My first visit to the show, on view at the New Museum in New York City through September 28, took place the day after it opened on July 16, and just after Israel launched Operation Protective Edge, the attack on Gaza that killed more than 2,000 people, most of them civilians and many of them children, and left many more homeless. To encounter so much art so deeply marked by the fact of violence was hard to bear. My attention was relentlessly drawn to works like those from Lamia Joreige’s Objects of War series, begun in 1999, in which videos of people being interviewed about objects that evoke memories of the wars that ravaged Lebanon in the 1970s and ’80s are juxtaposed with the objects themselves. There was also Khaled Jarrar’s 2012 feature-length video Infiltrators, which follows the agonizing efforts of Palestinians to breach the wall separating Israel from the Occupied Territories—not to commit acts of terrorism, but mainly for economic and personal reasons. These works exhibit varying traits of formalization.

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