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CONFIDENTIAL

June 20, 2011

For: Hillary  
From Sid  
Re: Syria

Enclosed is an article by David W. Lesch, perhaps the U.S. expert with the closest relationship with Bashar al-Assad, developed out of my continuing correspondence with him, an edited version which I have appended.

The bottom line is that Assad's gestures at reform are delusional attempts to recreate the pattern of his own recent past when he gained a modicum of respect from the West. Likely the most important event that could alter the Syrian equation would be the fall of Qaddafi, providing an example of a successful rebellion.

## What could shake Syria's regime

*Editor's note: David W. Lesch is professor of Middle East history at Trinity University in San Antonio. Among his books are: "The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Assad and Modern Syria"; "The Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History"; "The Middle East and the United States: History, Politics and Ideology"; and "1979: The Year That Shaped the Middle East".*

(CNN) -- Of the many occasions that I met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from 2004 to 2009, this one seemed different.

He was always very affable and unpretentious, certainly not the profile of the brutal Middle East dictator that he appears to be today with the violent crackdown against Syrian protesters. But in a February 2006 meeting, he was much more confident than usual in discussing the state of U.S.-

Syrian relations; in fact, he was almost cocky.

He knew by then that he had survived the intense pressure the United States and its allies had applied on him following the U.N. investigation into the assassination the previous year of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, which initially had implicated the Syrian leadership.

His new-found confidence lasted. A few months later in a follow-up meeting, he triumphantly remarked that, "I don't want the United States. I don't need the United States."

After successfully weathering that storm, Assad and his cohorts may well believe that they can once more emerge intact from a major challenge to their regime.

Assad has an exaggerated sense of Syria's importance on several Middle East fronts, from Lebanon and Iraq to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Before policymakers in the West started thinking that Syria was too big to fail, he thought it.

To Assad's way of thinking, the enemies of Syria are at it once again in 2011, somehow transporting premeditated instability to Syria under the guise of the Arab Spring. What other delusion could have possibly led to the pathetic speech he gave on March 30 -- his initial public response to the uprising -- in which he blamed terrorists and malevolent external forces for the unrest rather than the underlying socioeconomic problems and political repression that lay at the root of the protests in other Arab countries and his own.

He had an opportunity to get ahead of the curve of the opposition; instead, he chose the too-little-too-late route of Mubarak (Egypt), Ben Ali (Tunisia), Saleh (Yemen) and Gadhafi (Libya). This is not to diminish the difficulty of initiating transformational change. There are powerful pockets of resistance to this in Syria.

But Assad thought Syria was different from the others. He was wrong, and he is probably still in a state of denial. The sad part is that he had history as a guide right before his eyes, but he chose to ignore it.

The regime has fallen into full survival mode, having retreated into an Alawite sectarian fortress. When pressured, the military-security apparatus convulsively leapt to the fore, and Assad appears to have dutifully acquiesced. He is an authoritarian ruler without absolute power, and the disconnect between him and the security forces that he allowed to fester in good times has come back to haunt him -- and many Syrians -- in bad.

With few exceptions, the international community has aided and abetted the Syrian regime's confidence that it can survive and be resuscitated. The regime has been able to act with virtual impunity because of the international community's fear of the chaos that might occur in such a strategic part of the Middle East should the central authority in Syria precipitously fall from

power.

The potential sectarian strife in Syria and spillover effects into Iraq, Lebanon and Israel are too chilling to consider. And Russia continues to protect Syria in international forums for strategic and diplomatic reasons.

One game-changer could be the fall of Col. Moammar Gadhafi in Libya. Until now, the only models for removing dictatorial regimes in the region have been mass unrest combined with the splitting of the military from the ruling circle, as happened in Tunisia and Egypt (and unlikely in Syria), or many American boots on the ground, as happened in Iraq (and is unlikely to happen again anytime soon).

If Gadhafi falls within the next few months, there will be another model for regime change: that of limited but targeted military support from the West combined with an identifiable rebellion. Not that this can be easily applied in Syria. It hasn't even been easily applied in Libya, and Syria would be a much harder nut to crack. Furthermore, the Syrian opposition is far from united or being able to establish a Benghazi-like refuge from which to launch a rebellion and to which aid can be sent.

But if there is regime change in Libya, the international community would be emboldened with the precedent, with maybe even the Russians finally getting on board, and it would give the Syrian regime something to really think about. Perhaps it would even give Bashar al-Assad the upper hand with his ruthless brother and security minders to finally do what he should have done in the beginning -- forgo violence, offer and implement real reform and enter into a national dialogue with the opposition.

The options are not pretty. The Syrian regime does not want, nor can it probably survive, long-term international pressure or isolation, but it is used to sanctions, special tribunals, the withdrawing of ambassadors and similar actions. These are marginal levers that will have very little effect on the regime in the near term.

Success for the rebels in Libya might change that.

*The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of David W. Lesch.*

Find this article at:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/OPINION/06/16/lesch.syria.repression>

David: Hear anything about these divisions? Sidney [This is an article below from Le Monde reporting on rebellious sentiment within the Syrian army.]

2011/6/13 <sbwhoeop [redacted]>

[http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2011/06/13/syrie-des-temoins-evoquent-des-dissensions-dans-l-armee\\_1535361\\_3218.html#ens\\_id=1481132](http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2011/06/13/syrie-des-temoins-evoquent-des-dissensions-dans-l-armee_1535361_3218.html#ens_id=1481132)

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-----Original Message-----

From: David Lesch <[redacted]>

To: sbwhoeop [redacted]

Sent: Mon, Jun 13, 2011 9:31 am

Subject: Re: David: Hear anything about these divisions? Sidney

I've been seeing reports like this the last few days, especially, as the article says, with refugees crossing over into Turkey and reporting what is happening. The army seems to want to crush Jisr al-Shahgour as a deterrent lesson to its own military as much as to the opposition. In addition, I think it desperately wants to prevent any "Benghazis" being established, i.e. safe haven where foreign powers can send aid, military and intelligence support, and where opposition elements can flee in relative safety. The rank and file of the army, who are mostly Sunni, may defect more and more, especially as the govt relies more on Maher al-Assad and his mostly and all Alawite divisions to spearhead the crackdown.

See where Jordan's King Abdullah announced sweeping reforms. At least he has the good sense to try to get ahead of the opposition curve.....Bashar on the other hand.....

I really wonder if he is in total control. The two pronged policy is fairly typical for Syria, i.e. repression and national dialogue feelers being sent out more, but it almost seems like he was forced to cave on the nature of the crackdown and was "allowed" to try to bring about a political solution, which can't happen while the regime is butchering people. Almost seems like a more intense version of the Damascus spring then winter that followed shortly after Bashar came to power in 2000.

-----Original Message-----

From: David Lesch <[redacted]>

To: sbwhoeop [redacted]

Sent: Mon, Jun 13, 2011 9:53 am

Subject: Re: David: Hear anything about these divisions? Sidney

From the beginning you've said that Qaddafi's fall would be a huge factor in all this. As the Syrian situation is shaping up, I think you are right. Till now it has only been US boots on the ground that have forcibly removed regimes that stayed fairly united and did not want to give up power. If Qaddafi falls, there is now another successful model of regime change that, while there are differences in Syria and probably a more difficult nut to crack, has got to worry the regime that seems to be thinking primarily in a military, strategic sense and not in terms of

political solutions. So, if this is correct, then, yes, I agree with you: the repression, in its whack a mole approach with Maher, will intensify.

-----Original Message-----

From: David Lesch [redacted]  
 To: sbwhoeop [redacted]  
 Sent: Mon, Jun 13, 2011 10:16 am  
 Subject: Re: David: Hear anything about these divisions? Sidney

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Agreed. I said a while back that Bashar's playing into the opposition's hands with the repression route, especially as the regime seemed to be trying to calibrate just enough repression to quell the uprising w/o attracting international attention--and possible military action in some form. Maybe too late for that b/c once you unleash the hounds.....

I still think Bashar feels he can emerge from this down the road intact as he has in the past after Hariri, etc. Someone needs to tell him that he won't this time.....heads will have to roll, and probably his if this continues.

On Tue, Jun 14, 2011 at 8:16 AM, <sbwhoeop [redacted]> wrote:  
 What effect would an ICC referral have?

Lesch: At a policy level probably not much in the near term. The big thing for them is the UNSC, and as long as Russia and China aren't playing along, the Syrians feel somewhat protected (same thing happened in Dec 2005 when Russia refused to support a US-sponsored UNSC resolution on more sanctions against Syria in wake of Hariri assassination). Bashar and others prefer looking to the West, but they have also always left open the option (and some have preferred it although not Bashar) of looking eastward (Russia, Iran, India, China). Not as viable, but they do think this it is a real option (economically and politically) if they feel forced into it. Also, having re-directed and apparently survived for now the Special Tribunal in Lebanon on the Hariri, again they feel they can re-emerge out of these types of international constraints, although the ICC is a different animal in many ways, especially if Bashar himself is indicted.

At a personal level, however, if it is referred and Bashar is indicted, it has to be personally devastating to him and his wife, Asma. They both, especially Asma, see themselves as cosmopolitan, internationally oriented, love to travel together internationally, etc. They also believed they were finally emerging out of the Bush shadow into international acceptability, even respect. That would all officially end with an indictment--and certainly a conviction.

It is another level of pressure, but I think it is something of a point of no return in the long term and in a brutally ironic way, may free up the regime to do more b/c it has nothing to lose w/o really gaining anything in return. The possibility of an ICC referral and indictment I think would be more psychological to Bashar and some of his inner circle than anything else, which may be more potent than the actual thing. So I think public discussions about the possibility are useful, but at some point, regime brutality may leave us with no choice but to refer it.