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CONFIDENTIAL

May 17, 2011

For: Hillary
From: Sid
Re: Hamas, Syria, Israel, etc.

Everything is more complicated than even first-level cynical explanations. It seems likely that Syria's motive in encouraging Palestinian protestors to breach Israeli border barriers on "Nakba Day," resulting in Israeli overreaction, is not only to distract from its own internal crisis but also to undermine the Fatah-Hamas conciliation with Fayyad sustained as PM. David Lesch, professor of Middle East history at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, and author of one of the definitive books on modern Syria, "The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Assad and Modern Syria," who is probably the single American with the most personal contact with Assad, told me on May 12, directly after his meeting with the Syrian ambassador, that the branch of Hamas headquartered at Damascus had departed that city. Either it had been expelled or left on its own accord to distance itself from Assad, his troubles and potential manipulation. This information has not been reported in the press.

I have included below a private report from "Stratfor" that underscores that Syria is attacking the moderate wing of Hamas and the Palestinian accord. I have also included Lesch's most recent articles in the NYT and FT. He also privately briefed last week the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, before which he has publicly testified in the past.

Tuesday, May 17, 2011

 STRATFOR.COM  [Diary Archives](#)Israel's Post-Nakba Crisis

Though Syria initially gave the green light to Hamas to make amends with Fatah as a means of extracting Arab support in a time of internal stress, both Syria and Iran would share an interest in undermining the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation agreement and bolstering Hamas' hardliners in exile. This may explain why large numbers of Palestinian protesters were even permitted to mass in active military zones and breach border crossings with

Israel in Syria and Lebanon while security authorities in these countries seemed to look the other way.

Israel remains locked in internal turmoil following Sunday's deadly demonstrations on the Day of Nakba, or "Day of Catastrophe," a term Palestinians use to refer to the anniversary of the events that surrounded the birth of the modern state of Israel. Though the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were bracing themselves for unrest within the Palestinian territories, they were caught unprepared when trouble began on the borders with Syria and Lebanon instead. Hundreds of Palestinian refugees on Israel's northern frontier trampled the fence and spilled across the armistice line on Sunday, prompting shooting by the IDF that killed 10 Palestinians and injured dozens of others.

"With uncertainty rising on every Arab-Israeli frontier, Israel is coming face to face with the consequences of the Arab Spring."

IDF Military Intelligence (MI) and Northern Command traded accusations in leaks to the Israeli media Monday. The MI claimed a general warning had been issued to the Northern Command several days prior to Sunday, indicating that attempts would be made by Palestinians to escalate this year's protests and breach the border. However, the MI said, despite real-time intelligence on buses in Syria and Lebanon ferrying protesters to the border, the warning had been ignored by the Northern Command. The Northern Command countered that the warning by the MI was too general and the intelligence insufficient, resulting in failures by the IDF to provide back-up forces, crowd control equipment and clear lines of communication to disperse the demonstrations. Either way, much of the Nakba protest planning was done in public view on Facebook.

Israel's political leadership, meanwhile, spoke in ominous tones of a bigger problem Israel will have on its hands as the revolutionary sentiment produced by the Arab Spring inevitably fuses itself with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Israeli Intelligence Minister Dan Meridor said, "There is a change here and we haven't internalized it." Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak warned Sunday that this "may only be the beginning" of a new struggle between largely unarmed Palestinians and Israel, cautioning that "the danger is that more mass processions like these will appear, not necessarily near the border, but also other places," placing Israel under heavy pressure by allies and adversaries alike to negotiate a settlement with the Palestinians.

With the Arab Spring sweeping across the region, STRATFOR early on pointed out Israel's conspicuous absence as a target of the unrest. Indeed, anti-Zionism and the exposure of covert relationships between unpopular Arab rulers and Israel made for a compelling rallying point by opposition movements seeking to overthrow their respective regimes. When two waves of Palestinian attacks hit Israel in late March and early April, it appeared that at least some

Palestinian factions, including Hamas, were attempting to draw Israel into a military conflict in the Gaza Strip, one that would increase the already high level of stress on Egypt's new military-led government. Yet, almost as quickly as the attacks subsided, Hamas, with approval from its backers in the Syrian regime, entered an Egyptian-mediated reconciliation process with Fatah in hopes of forming a unity government that would both break Hamas out of isolation and impose a Hamas-inclusive political reality on Israel. While those negotiations are still fraught with complications, they are occurring in the lead-up to the September U.N. General Assembly when the Palestinian government intends to ask U.N. members to recognize a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Israel thus has a very serious problem on its hands. As Barak said, the Nakba Day events could have been just the beginning. Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, along with Palestinian refugees in neighboring Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt, could theoretically coalesce behind an all-too-familiar, but politically recharged campaign against Israel and bear down on Israel's frontiers. This time, taking cues from surrounding, largely nonviolent uprisings, Palestinians could wage a third intifada across state lines and place Israel in the position of using force against mostly unarmed protesters at a time when it is already facing mounting international pressure to negotiate with a Palestinian political entity that Israel does not regard as viable or legitimate.

Israel does not only need to worry itself with Palestinian motives, either. Syria, where the exiled leaderships of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad are based, could use an Israeli-Palestinian conflict to distract from its intensifying crackdowns at home. Iran, facing obstacles in fueling unrest in its neighboring Arab states, could shift its efforts toward the Levant to threaten Israel. **Though Syria initially gave the green light to Hamas to make amends with Fatah as a means of extracting Arab support in a time of internal stress, both Syria and Iran would share an interest in undermining the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation agreement and bolstering Hamas' hardliners in exile. This may explain why large numbers of Palestinian protesters were even permitted to mass in active military zones and breach border crossings with Israel in Syria and Lebanon while security authorities in these countries seemed to look the other way.**

The threat of a third Intifada carries significant repercussions for the surrounding Arab regimes as well. The Egyptian military-led government, in trying to forge reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, is doing whatever it can to contain Hamas in Gaza, and thus contain Islamist opposition forces in its own country as it proceeds with a shaky political transition. The Hashemite kingdom in Jordan, while dealing with a far more manageable opposition than most of its counterparts, is intensely fearful of an uprising by its majority Palestinian population that could topple the regime.

With uncertainty rising on every Arab-Israeli frontier, Israel is coming face to face with the consequences of the Arab Spring. As the Nakba Day protests demonstrated, Israel is also finding

itself inadequately prepared. A confluence of interests still needs to converge to produce a third intifada, but the seeds of this conflict were also laid long ago.

The New York Times

March 29, 2011

The Syrian President I Know

By DAVID W. LESCH

San Antonio, Tex.

WHERE has President Bashar al-Assad of Syria been this past week?

Thousands of Syrians across the country have staged demonstrations against the government, and dozens of protesters have been reported killed by security forces. The cabinet was dismissed on Tuesday, although that's a meaningless gesture unless it's followed by real reform. Through it all Mr. Assad has remained so quiet that rumors were rampant that he had been overthrown. But while Syrians are desperate for leadership, it's not yet clear what sort of leader Mr. Assad is going to be.

Will he be like his father, Hafez al-Assad, who during three decades in power gave the security forces virtually a free hand to maintain order and sanctioned the brutal repression of a violent Islamist uprising in the early 1980s? Or will he see this as an opportunity to take Syria in a new direction, fulfilling the promise ascribed to him when he assumed the presidency upon his father's death in 2000?

Mr. Assad's background suggests he could go either way. He is a licensed ophthalmologist who studied in London and a computer nerd who likes the technological toys of the West; his wife, Asma, born in Britain to Syrian parents, was a banker at J. P. Morgan. On the other hand, he is a child of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the cold war. Contrary to American interests, he firmly believes Lebanon should be within Syria's sphere of influence, and he is a member of a minority Islamic sect, the Alawites, that has had a chokehold on power in Syria for decades.

In 2004 and 2005, while writing a book on him, I had long interviews with Mr. Assad; after the book was published, I continued to meet with him as an unofficial liaison between Syria and the United States when relations between the two countries deteriorated. In that time I saw Mr. Assad evolve into a confident and battle-tested president.

I also saw him being consumed by an inert Syrian system. Slowly, he replaced those of questionable loyalty with allies in the military, security services and in the government. But he does not have absolute power. He has had to bargain, negotiate and manipulate pockets of resistance inside the government and the business community to bring about reforms, like allowing private banks and establishing a stock exchange, that would shift Syria's socialist-based system to a more market-oriented economy.

But Mr. Assad also changed along the way. When I met with him during the Syrian presidential referendum in May 2007, he voiced an almost cathartic relief that the people really liked him. Indeed, the outpouring of support for Mr. Assad would have been impressive if he had not been the only one running, and if half of it wasn't staged. As is typical for authoritarian leaders, he had begun to equate his well-being with that of his country, and the sycophants around him reinforced the notion. It was obvious that he was president for life. Still, I believed he had good intentions, if awkwardly expressed at times.

Even with the escalating violence there, it's important to remember that Syria is not Libya and President Assad is not Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi. The crackdown on protesters doesn't necessarily indicate that he is tightening his grip on power; it may be that the secret police, long given too much leeway, have been taking matters into their own hands.

What's more, anti-Assad elements should be careful what they wish for. Syria is ethnically and religiously diverse and, with the precipitous removal of central authority, it could very well implode like Iraq. That is why the Obama administration wants him to stay in power even as it admonishes him to choose the path of reform.

Wednesday, President Assad is expected to announce that the country's almost 50-year emergency law, used to stifle opposition to the regime, is going to be lifted. But he needs to make other tough choices, including setting presidential term limits and dismantling the police state. He can change the course of Syria by giving up that with which he has become so comfortable.

The unrest in Syria may have afforded President Assad one last chance at being something more than simply Hafez al-Assad's son.

Addendum from the author:

The world is strewn with unemployed dictators who blamed "a plot" and nameless "enemies" for their country's problems.

Yet when President Bashar al-Assad did just that in his long-awaited speech to the nation today, he was exhibiting a typically Syrian conspiratorial mindset, one that will sway those of his citizens who were already primed to believe him. This, however, totally denies the genuine

socio-economic, political and personal frustration of ordinary Syrians that generated the protests to begin with.

President Assad spoke of some reforms in a disappointingly ambiguous manner that is unlikely to quell the demonstrations. No one denies the difficulty of announcing, much less carrying out, serious reforms in a country like Syria. Certainly, Mr. Assad would have to bargain with a variety of the country's powerful established interests to get anything done. But he had the opportunity with this speech to build up a critical mass of public support for reform before a critical mass of opposition forms against him that would make anything he says too little, too late.

Sadly, he did not do so.

David W. Lesch, a professor of Middle East history at Trinity University, is the author of "The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria."

Financial Times

Why Assad will rise again – and then fall

By David Lesch

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Having met Bashar al-Assad, Syria's president, a number of times, I can say with confidence that he was startled when the tumult in the Arab world spread into his own country. Like so many autocrats over the years, he truly thought he was secure, and even popular.

He liked to say that his country was "different". He certainly saw it as immune to the uprisings besetting other countries. His regime's mouthpieces of course echoed this, stressing that these states' elderly rulers were out-of-touch and corrupt American lackeys. The implication was that Mr Assad, at 45 young by the standards of fellow autocrats, understood the Arab youth, having faced down America and Israel and thus brandishing credentials that played well in the "Arab street".

Only a month ago there was a debate in the west as to whether or not Mr Assad, who had long liked to present himself as different from his hardline father, would sanction a crackdown. Now, of course, that hope is over. He has relied on tanks and troops to repress protesters, killing nearly 600 people, according to human rights groups.

Given the course of the past few years this should not be a surprise. One encounter I had with him is illuminating. It was in 2007 during the referendum to determine whether or not he would "win" another seven-year term in office. (His name was the only one on the ballot.) Then, amid

parades reminiscent of the celebrations for Saddam Hussein, for the first time I felt he had succumbed to the aphrodisiac of power. The sycophants had convinced him Syria's well-being was synonymous with his and that he must hold on to power at all cost.

So he appears now close to a reincarnation of his father, Hafiz al-Assad, who sanctioned the crackdown on Islamic militants in 1982. But now that he seems more confident of restoring control I suspect he believes he can again recover from the pariah status facing him. He did after all survive the fallout of the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in Lebanon in 2005 in which Syria was implicated.

For now he has withdrawn into a sectarian fortress, apparently intent on maintaining his minority Alawite sect's hold on power. At critical times in his presidency, he has given in to the hardliners, particularly the Alawite generals who dominate the security apparatus.

So how can he manoeuvre his way back to acceptability? As the crackdown continues, the international community has given him leeway fearing what might happen in Syria and the region should he fall. He seems to be using it to buy time to quell the uprising. Should the regime survive, I expect he will try to engage in some level of reform, as the generals return to their barracks. But I fear he will continue to focus on economic reform, only throwing protesters some bones of political reform that will fall far short of their demands, and, possibly, draw closer to Iran.

If this only gets him back to where he was before the uprisings intensified, he will probably be satisfied. A classic authoritarian state is, after all, the regime's default condition. Corruption, institutional inertia and a repressive apparatus ensure that its instinct is to recoil into survival mode. Mr Assad's hope will be that repression will stamp out the fervour that removed the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia. As in the past, he will think he has made significant concessions, but this is a different Middle East today. The momentum of change is harder to reverse in the long term. He may confront a more determined opposition sooner than he realises.

He thought Syria was different but he was wrong. The true meaning of the Arab spring is that people are weary of autocrats. The west may for reasons of realpolitik have to pretend to accept his reforms but his people will not. For now he survives. But he is not leading and, eventually, he will join the list of former Arab dictators.

The writer is professor of Middle East history at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. He is author of The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Assad and Modern Syria

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