

CONFIDENTIAL

February 24, 2012

For: Hillary
From: Sid
Re: Syria

SOURCE: Sources with access to the highest levels of the Syrian Government, as well as Western Intelligence and security services.

The Following information was provided in strictest secrecy by a source with direct, personal access to the very highest levels of the Syrian Government. This information is particularly sensitive as it includes the personal firsthand comments of the source:

Syria: Internal

Several things that I think are important to understanding Bashar al-Assad and the uprising in Syria:

1) While the rest of the world thinks Assad has been delusional (or at the very least trying to deflect attention from the real causes of the uprising) ever since his March 30, 2011 speech when he blamed foreign conspiracies for the unrest in Syria, he and his inner circle really believe--more than most people can imagine--that there, indeed, have been foreign conspiracies from the very beginning. It is simply the very different way the Syrian leadership perceives the nature of threat based on their own history, one in which Syria has been subject to conspiracies by external enemies, just enough so to lend credence to such exhortations to many Syrians. The Syrian leadership has a different conceptual paradigm that frames the nature of internal and external threat to their country. From the point of view of the West, it appears to be extremely paranoid; from the perspective of Damascus, it is prudent and based on historical circumstances. And the violence he unleashed has helped create the circumstances in Syria whereby external forces are in fact involving themselves much more assertively at the diplomatic level if not yet in terms of direct funding and arms deliveries, so it has to some extent become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

2) The Syrian government's crackdown is a push button, convulsive response to domestic threat. It is business as usual. It is not as though Assad does not control the security forces. It is that this has been the way Syria works under the Assads. And to date, Bashar has not been willing to diminish the tremendous amount of leeway he has given the security forces to deal with threats, both domestic and foreign, with the latter often seen as causing the former. In my view this has been a dangerous abdication of power to thuggish security forces who only know one way to deal with threats. He believes it is an unfortunate necessity in a dangerous neighborhood. I told him personally after I was interrogated in a threatening manner by security forces at Damascus airport for three hours back in 2007 that he needed to get more control over the security forces, and if he didn't, it could come back to haunt him. Well, that's exactly what happened. Bashar simply went along with business as usual instead of understanding the new circumstances created by the Arab spring. In addition, the regimes of Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad simply do not make concessions from a perceived position of weakness. They will only make concessions from a perceived position of strength, so cracking down hard on demonstrators while offering political reforms are two sides of the same coin. This is very typical behavior.

3) Over the course of five years (2004-2009) of regularly meeting with Bashar al-Assad (and other leading Syrian officials), I personally witnessed him becoming more comfortable with power—or more to the point, him becoming captive to the arrogance of power. I think he was, indeed, a committed reformer in the beginning, but he soon realized what he could and could not do as president. Over the years, he started to believe the sycophants around him and the propaganda surrounding him that the well-being of the country was synonymous with his well-being. He truly believes that everything that has happened, even the violence, is ultimately for the well-being of the country over the long-term. He sincerely believes the reforms he has announced, such as the upcoming constitutional referendum, will make a significant difference and reduce the intensity of the rebellion. He probably believes that he has not received enough credit in a biased international press for the reforms he has announced and attempted to implement, which is consistent with how he has felt in the past in terms of not receiving enough credit for concessions he feels he made. Therefore, he and his supporters believe they are on their own and must do things their own way because ultimately they believe they have a better understanding of what is going on and what it will take to move forward. He is not going anywhere for the time being, and no one has a gun to his head forcing him to stay. The members of Syria's leadership class truly think they will work their way through this. They view things over the long, not the short term. The leadership believes that if they can hang on for several more years, they will outlast the protestors, outlast world attention, and eventually in ten years or so work the country's way back into the good graces of the international community. In their minds, they have survived onslaught and isolation before, following the Hariri assassination in 2005, and they emerged in an even better position. Although the current situation is fundamentally different in terms of its internal character, they think they can survive again and emerge eventually in a better position.

4) The highest levels of the regime believes the opposition in and outside of the country is to a considerable degree all smoke and mirrors in terms of its cohesiveness—and it is not altogether incorrect. It is clear that the uprising is a significant and organically home-grown rebellion in Syria that has become more widespread since April 2011. But on the ground in Syria there is no unified leadership, although there is communication between opposition groups in different parts of the country. The uprising is very localized in this sense—in terms of coordination and planning—although the general goals of the opposition elements are quite similar, thus giving the illusion of cohesiveness. The vast majority of armed opponents of the regime are civilian, not army defectors. Although the latter have increased, especially from lower level conscripts, they are not a determining factor yet—not even close. The Free Syria Army, which gets a lot of press, is not a monolithic, centrally organized group. It is very loosely organized and uncoordinated. The FSA is, for the most part, local militias, many of them civilian based, that are simply calling themselves the FSA to appear to be part of a whole. The armed resistance to the regime is not well funded or well armed. Also despite reports (usually by the Syrian government) that they are being armed by foreign countries and intelligence services, they are not receiving any significant foreign assistance except perhaps second hand from groups in Turkey or the Arab Gulf States. Much of this financing comes from Syrian expatriates, who then funnel money and aid to their compatriots inside Syria. The exiled Syrian opposition is equally divided despite the Syrian National Council being generally accepted by the Syrian protestors in Syria, and by the international community as the interlocutor of the uprising and as a potential interim governing organization that could takeover if/when Assad regime falls. There are serious differences among different groups that make up the SNC, and it has yet to articulate a vision for the future and other necessary declarations that would be more inclusive of different groups in Syria. The regime has obviously played up these sectarian differences in Syria, presenting itself as the only thing between stability and chaos. To date, important sectors of Syrian society, while not necessarily supportive of the regime, have gone along with this view and have not supported the opposition. The money is drying up as the economy deteriorates, but important businessmen, such as Rami Maklouf and Firas Tlas, have ample wells of money that they are funneling to the regime. The regime no doubt has quietly built up reserves that can be drawn upon. This is something the Syrian regime under Bashar manages quite well, given their experience with years of pressure and isolation after the Hariri assassination. The regime is also receiving funds from Iran. It is a dire economic situation, but Syria was already suffering from a myriad of economic difficulties, thus the socio-economic roots of the uprising, so the fall has not yet been cataclysmic. The situation will deteriorate quickly if all out civil war ensues.

External

1) In his time in power since 2000, Bashar al-Assad has been quite measured in his response to provocation. He definitely understands asymmetrical power, i.e. he understands that his country is relatively weak when compared to many of his neighbors and to interested external actors. For instance, his regime's responses were fairly meek following the US raid from Iraq into Syria to kill a suspected insurgent, the Israeli bombing of a suspected nuclear reactor, and the (probable) Israeli assassination of Imad

Mugniyeh in downtown Damascus, among other things. He is careful in this regard. In trying to deflect attention away from the protests by generating support against Israel, rather than lob missiles into Israel in the style of Saddam Hussein in the 1991 Gulf war, he authorized the bussing of Palestinian refugees to the Israeli border of the Golan Heights to stage protests in May and June (resulting in the deaths of 10-20 Palestinians). This action did not produce what Assad wanted, but it was fairly low level compared to what he could do. This is not to say that he might not take action on his borders, perhaps arming the Kurdish PKK rebel group against Turkey or something more dramatic aimed at Israel. His most important advisors believe that any move like this would be a clear sign of desperation, possibly opining the last stage of a successful uprising. Assad knows the Turkish Government would have no qualms about moving into northern Syria to protect their interests—as it threatened to do under Bashar's father, in reaction to Syria's support for the PKK. He will not want to give the Turks any opportunity to establish any safe zones that could be utilized by the opposition.

2) Certainly the Syrian regime wants to give the impression that it can create chaos beyond its borders, as many regime figures have openly boasted, but the regime will be very careful in this regard, particularly as the regime feels it can still outlast the protestors on the ground. In addition, the regime understands that the situation in Syria has become a function of the wider Saudi/Qatar/US/Israeli versus Iran nexus, so the leadership will be careful not to launch any actions across Syria's borders that could harm Iran and/or reduce the level of assistance Iran is providing. Having said this, I do not think it is a given that Syria would engage Israel militarily if Iran is attacked. Senior Syrian officials believe that it is much more likely that Hizbullah would engage Israel's militarily if Iran is attacked. Frankly, given the weakened condition of the Assad regime, if Hizbullah attacked Israel, the Israelis would have to think long and hard about hitting at Syria in addition to Hizbullah. After the 2006 Israel-Hizbullah war, it has been something of a given that if there is another such conflict, Syria would not be able to avoid Israeli bombardment as it did in 2006. But with the current difficulties in Syria, the Israelis may prudently demur widening any conflict to Syria and the Syrian leadership may say thank you very much and launch bombastic remarks against Israel rather than bombs. That said, one particularly important advisor to Assad warned that if the domestic situation for the Syrian regime deteriorates to the point where joining a fight against Israel may be a last ditch attempt to divert attention and rally the populace around the regime. At this time, secret sources in the Syrian military report that, there are no Iranian forces fighting with Syrian forces against the opposition, but Teheran is clearly providing funds, equipment (especially in electronic surveillance and monitoring) and maybe even some training. This reporting is borne out by rebel security forces, based on the interrogation of captured Syrian troops.

3) Again, the Syrian regime has withstood intense international pressure before. It feels it can do so again over the long term, even if it becomes the North Korea of the Middle East, although, as pointed out earlier, this situation is fundamentally different in terms of the combination of internal opposition with external pressure; after the Hariri assassination it was primarily just the latter. As such, unless there are some notable defections that bring the whole house of cards down quickly in Syria, the regime has the

repressive apparatus to hang in there for a number of months if not years. More to the point, it seems to have the willingness and belief that it can. Also, the regime might crumble, if important elements of support that have stayed loyal to this point change sides. Also, if Russia and China are persuaded to join the rest of the international community and the rising chorus of pressure and condemnation, The Assad regime will be great danger. Extremely sensitive sources at the United Nations state that if Russia gets onboard, so will the other BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.) However, these sensitive sources believe that the Russians will wait as long as possible, perhaps seeing if the new constitutional referendum and other reforms produce any sign of a weakening of the opposition. If they do not, then Moscow may press more forcefully for Assad to go and position itself as a primary player in overseeing any sort of transition. Assad and members of his family could then go into exile in Russia, Iran, or perhaps even India or Venezuela.