

Syria: At the Tipping Point?

After more than a decade of occupation, Syria is so entwined economically into Lebanon that separation would cause irreparable damage to the regime of Syrian strongman Basar al Assad. Though it has access to the Mediterranean, Syria relies heavily on Lebanese ports and infrastructure requirements. More importantly Syria has developed mutually dependent relationships with indigenous Lebanese groups – including terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and ethnically-based criminal gangs. So fundamental are these linkages that some speculate that abrupt, forced separation of Syrian interests from the Lebanese groups may seriously wound all concerned. In fact, syndicated columnist and astute international observer Charles Krauthammer predicted that total removal of Syrian presence from Lebanon, as called for by UN Resolution 1559, would be fatal for the Assad regime.

Syria has reeled in the aftermath to US reaction from the attacks of September 11, 2001, as have many of the Islamist and Baathist states in the region. None anticipated the ferocity and inclusiveness of the American response to the attack, nor did they realize how fast the concepts of freedom and democracy could spread among oppressed populations. Syria narrowly missed inclusion in the original Axis of Evil, though many thought it deserved a spot in that disreputable rogue's gallery. But now Assad and his coterie of Baathists are justifiably concerned. Thanks to a rapid take-down of Afghanistan and Iraq, the open revolutionary movement in Iran, the flipping of Quadafi's Libya, and reform movements in Pakistan and Egypt, freedom's crosshairs are now focusing on Syria as the next logical target for regime change.

Though small, Syria has brought much deserved international condemnation down upon itself. Its Baathist regime for decades under Hafez Assad, Basar's father, oppressed its citizens, sheltered international terrorists, gave huge support to the Hezbollah movement, attacked Israel, generated hatred for America, and attempted to procure long range missiles and weapons of mass destruction. Syria and Iraq were somewhat mirror images of equally reprehensible regimes. Upon succession, the younger Assad continued the policies of his father, despite initial hopes that he might be something of a reformer. Those hopes, albeit flimsy, were dashed by Basar Assad's interactions with Iraq.

Prior to and during the Iraqi war, Assad's Syria offered refuge and hiding for Saddam Hussein's minions. Uday and Qusay Hussein were reported to have fled initially into Syria then returned to lead an underground movement against the US and Coalition Authority forces, for example. Many former regime war criminals continue to reside openly in Syria. They direct funding, recruiting, and training from inside Syria, and exercise some degree of operational control over the anti-US, anti-free Iraq movement that is causing so much chaos inside Iraq. Rumors of millions of dollars of Saddam's ill-gotten money – initially evacuated to Syria for safekeeping - funneling back across the border from Syria to pay off terrorist insurgents were confirmed when US Marines and Army fighters in Fallujah found crisp, new \$100 bills in the possession of virtually every fighter killed or captured in the battle for that city. As has been said, the body of the insurgency lies in Iraq, but its head hides in Syria. To date Assad refuses to cooperate with authorities – UN, US, or Iraqi – in arresting and returning his fellow Baathists from their Syrian hiding places. The recent turn-over by Assad of a mid-level Saddam minion had more to do, some observers think, with a personality

conflict that a desire to do the right thing. As proof, despite that one proper act, direction of the insurgency continues openly from Syria.

On an even more disturbing note there is ample circumstantial evidence that in addition to Saddam's money, stocks of chemical and possibly biological weapons and research materials were rushed across the border for safekeeping during the buildup to war. Two spots within Syria and a third in the Bekka Valley in Lebanon are likely storage places for the chemical munitions. Lending support to this hypothesis, a foiled terrorist attack on several targets in Aman, Jordan - including the US mission - intended to use chemical munitions on top of al Qaeda-signature ammonium-nitrate homicide truck bombs. The origin of the chemical munitions was not publicly disclosed but analysts think that it was from material evacuated from Iraq and hidden in Syria.

The attack on Jordan targeted major elements of the Jordanian military and political establishment. If successful it could well have provided Syrian authorities with an excuse to move physically into Jordan under the guise of "restoring order." A similar pretext was extraordinarily successful when Syria occupied Lebanon. At that time, Syria appeared to be on the verge of launching its own offensive operations in the region, if only to defy US and Coalition Forces operating in Iraq. Today, however, that strategy seems to have degraded from one of defiance to one of survival. Under the circumstances, however, survival may not be a long-term option for Assad.

For a dictator - even one with the somewhat "soft" medical school background of Bashar Assad - to remain in power he must rule by fear. Fear controls the majority of the population, and fear is administered by a coterie of subordinates who prop up the dictator because of his lavish dispensations of wealth, power, and luxury. If Assad is unable to keep the economic machine turning at a rate necessary to produce sufficient inducements for his subordinates, they will turn on him. They are always poised for a coup, especially if they perceive weakness, because weakness dilutes the atmosphere of fear necessary to maintain control. For that reason Syria teeters on a tipping point.

The world is changing at a pace much faster than the Baathist dictatorship can react to it. Democracy, the universal antidote to the poisonous venom of dictatorship, is spreading to neighboring countries so fast and so pervasively that the rusty Syrian regime is unable to counter it. Syria relies on tired methods of repression and fear. It depends on Hezbollah surrogates, and desperately raises the tired old specter of evil Jews supported by a Satanic America as reason to exist. A deadly confrontation between democratic demonstrators and Syrian-backed Hezbollah gunmen in Lebanon risks intervention by American and European powers that are unwilling to see a return to the horror of old civil war days. Coup rumors are flying. Contagious unrest in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon might infect the oppressed population of Syria and bring them out on the streets also. An earthquake of ideas is shaking the regimes of the Middle East. Syria may well tip and fall as a consequence.

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