

What WikiLeaks Showed Us About U.S. Motivations in Syria

(From shamireaders, possibly by Saïd Zulficar)

On August 31, 2013, U.S. President Barack Obama announced that he intended to launch a military attack on Syria in response to a chemical weapons attack in Syria that the U.S. blamed on the Syrian government. President Obama assured the U.S. public that this would be a limited military action solely intended to punish the Assad government for using chemical weapons; the goal of U.S. military action would not be to overthrow the Assad government, nor would it be to change the balance of forces in Syria's sectarian civil war.

In the end, President Obama did not (directly) attack Syria, in large measure because of public and Congressional opposition. (At this writing, the U.S. has "covertly" supported armed insurgents in Syria with weapons and supplies, a military intervention in violation of the United Nations Charter, since Syria, a U.N. member state, has not attacked the U.S. and the U.N. Security Council has not approved U.S. military action.)

A key source of that opposition was U.S. public distrust of the stated motivations of the Obama Administration. Was it true, as the Administration claimed, that its motivation for military intervention was solely its belief that the Assad government had used chemical weapons? Or was it true that the alleged chemical weapons attack was primarily serving as an excuse for a military attack that had other motivations? Many Americans believed that the Administration had other motivations than those it was stating, and that despite public statements to the contrary the Administration intended to either overthrow the Assad government militarily or attempt to change the balance of forces in Syria's civil war as part of a larger struggle with Iran and Russia for influence in the Middle East. Because of these other suspected motivations, many Americans believed it likely that U.S. military intervention would not be "limited," since it was likely that these unstated objectives would not be achieved by a "limited" military intervention.

This history shows how public understanding of U.S. foreign policy depends crucially on assessing the motivations of U.S. officials. While the motivations of U.S. officials may be complex, and the "true" motivations of U.S. officials may not be knowable, it is likely inevitable that members of the public will form assessments of the motivations of U.S. officials and that these assessments will play a major role in their assessment of U.S. policy. It is likely inevitable as a result that U.S. officials will present themselves to the public as having more noble motivations than they share with each other in private, and therefore that if members of the public had access to the motivations shared in private, they would make different assessments of U.S. policy than if they made their assessments solely on the basis of public pronouncements.

This is a key reason that WikiLeaks' publishing of U.S. diplomatic cables was so important. It gave the public a recent window into the strategies and motivations of U.S. officials as they expressed them to each other, not as they usually expressed them to the public. In the case of Syria, the cables show that regime change had been a longstanding goal of U.S. policy; that the U.S. promoted sectarianism in support of its regime change policy, thus helping lay the foundation for the sectarian civil war and massive bloodshed that we see in Syria today; that key components of the Bush Administration's regime change policy remained in place even as the Obama Administration moved publicly towards a policy of engagement; and that the U.S. government was much more interested in the Syrian government's foreign policy, particularly its relationship with Iran, than in human rights inside Syria.

A December 13, 2006 cable [1], “Influencing the SARG [Syrian government] in the End of 2006,” indicates that as far back as 2006 – five years before “Arab Spring” protests in Syria – destabilizing the Syrian government was a central motivation of U.S. policy.

The author of the cable was William Roebuck, at the time Charge d'Affaires – head of the embassy in the absence of an Ambassador - at the U.S. Embassy in Damascus. The cable outlines strategies for destabilizing the Syrian government. In his summary of the cable, Roebuck wrote:

“We believe Bashar’s weaknesses are in how he chooses to react to looming issues, both perceived and real, such as the conflict between economic reform steps (however limited) and entrenched, corrupt forces, the Kurdish question, and the potential threat to the regime from the increasing presence of transiting Islamist extremists. This cable summarizes our assessment of these vulnerabilities and suggests that there may be actions, statements, and signals that the USG can send that will improve the likelihood of such opportunities arising.” [That is, the likelihood of such conflicts and threats arising.]

This cable suggests that the U.S. goal in December 2006 was to undermine the Syrian government by any available means, and that what mattered was whether U.S. action would help destabilize the government, not what other impacts the action might have. In public the U.S. was in favor of economic reform; but in private the U.S. saw conflict between economic reform and “entrenched, corrupt forces” as an “opportunity.” In public, the U.S. was opposed to “Islamist extremists” everywhere, but in private the U.S. saw the “potential threat to the regime from the increasing presence of transiting Islamist extremists” as an “opportunity” which the U.S. should take action to try to increase.

Roebuck lists Syria’s relationship with Iran as a “vulnerability” that the U.S. should try to “exploit.” His suggested means of doing so is instructive [my emphasis below]:

“-- Possible action:

-- PLAY ON SUNNI FEARS OF IRANIAN INFLUENCE: There are fears in Syria that the Iranians are active in both Shia proselytizing and conversion of, mostly poor, Sunnis. **Though often exaggerated**, such fears reflect an element of the Sunni community in Syria that is increasingly upset by and focused on the spread of Iranian influence in their country **through activities ranging from mosque construction to business.**

Both the local Egyptian and Saudi missions here, (as well as prominent Syrian Sunni religious leaders), are giving increasing attention to the matter and **we should coordinate more closely with their governments on ways to better publicize and focus regional attention on the issue.**”

So, Roebuck argued that the U.S. should try to destabilize the Syrian government by coordinating more closely with Egypt and Saudi Arabia to fan sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia, including by promoting “exaggerated” fears of Shia proselytizing of Sunnis and promoting concern about “the spread of Iranian influence” in Syria in the form of mosque construction and business activity.

In 2014, the sectarian Sunni-Shia character of the civil war in Syria is bemoaned in the United States as an unfortunate development. But in December 2006, the man heading the U.S. Embassy in Syria advocated in a cable to the Secretary of State and the White House that the U.S.

government collaborate with Saudi Arabia and Egypt to promote sectarian conflict in Syria between Sunni and Shia as a means of destabilizing the Syrian government.

In December 2006, no one in the U.S. government could credibly have claimed innocence of the possible implications of such a policy. This cable was written at the height of the sectarian Sunni-Shia civil war in Iraq, which the U.S. military was unsuccessfully trying to contain. U.S. public disgust with the sectarian civil war in Iraq unleashed by the U.S. invasion had just cost Republicans control of Congress in the November 2006 election. The election result immediately produced the resignation of Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense. No one working for the U.S. government on foreign policy at the time could have been unaware of the implications of promoting Sunni-Shia sectarianism.

It was easy to predict then that while a strategy of promoting sectarian conflict in Syria might indeed help undermine the Syrian government, it could also help destroy Syrian society. But this consideration doesn't appear in Roebuck's memo at all, as he recommends that the U.S. government cooperate with Saudi Arabia and Egypt to promote sectarian tensions.

Note that while Roebuck was serving in the George W. Bush Administration, he was a career Foreign Service officer, a permanent senior member in good standing of the U.S. government's foreign policy apparatus. He went on to serve in the U.S. embassy in Iraq and the U.S. embassy in Libya, the latter as Chargé d' Affaires, in the Obama Administration. There is no evidence that anyone in the U.S. foreign policy apparatus found the views expressed by Roebuck in this cable particularly controversial; the publication of this cable did not cause scandal in U.S. foreign policy circles.

So, while the sectarian character of the civil war in Syria is now publicly bemoaned in the West, it seems a fair characterization to say that in 2006, the United States government foreign policy apparatus believed that promoting sectarianism in Syria was a good idea, which would foster "U.S. interests" by destabilizing the Syrian government.

This view of U.S. policy – happy to make common cause with Saudi Arabia in fostering Sunni-Shia sectarianism in Syria, and pre-occupied with Syria's relationship with Iran above all else - is buttressed by a March 22, 2009 cable [2] from the U.S. embassy in Saudi Arabia, "Saudi Intelligence Chief Talks Regional Security With Brennan Delegation." This cable summarizes a March 15 meeting including then U.S. counterterrorism adviser John Brennan and U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Ford Fraker with Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, the head of Saudi Arabia's external intelligence agency.

Ambassador Fraker's summary recounted: [my emphasis]

7. (C) PERSIAN MEDDLING: Prince Muqrin described Iran as "all over the place now." The "Shiite crescent is becoming a full moon," encompassing Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen among Iran's targets. In the Kingdom, he said "we have problems in Medina and Eastern Province." When asked if he saw Iran's hand in last month's Medina Riots (reftels), he strongly affirmed his belief that they were "definitely" Iranian supported. (**Comment: Muqrin's view was not necessarily supported by post's Saudi Shi'a sources.**) Muqrin bluntly stated "Iran is becoming a pain in the..." and he expressed hope the President "can get them straight, or straighten them out."

Ambassador Fraker's comment that "Muqrin's view was not necessarily supported by post's Saudi Shi'a sources" was a severe understatement. Indeed, in a February 24, 2009 cable [3], "Saudi Shia Clash With Police In Medina," Ambassador Fraker had reported in detail on the February 20

clashes between Saudi security forces and Saudi Shi'a pilgrims in Medina, without any mention of Iran. Fraker's February 24 cable primarily attributed the clashes to 1) Saudi police denying the Saudi Shi'a pilgrims access to the Baqi'a cemetery opposite the Prophet's Mosque and 2) the Saudi Shi'a community's long-simmering anger over historical grievances.

This indicates that the U.S. government knows perfectly well that the Saudi government blames Iran for things that the Iranian government has nothing to do with and is unconcerned about this. For the U.S. government's own internal information, the Ambassador wanted to make clear that as far as the U.S. embassy knew, the Medina clashes had nothing to do with Iran. But as the 2006 cable makes clear, the U.S. was happy to make common cause with Saudi Arabia in blaming Iran for things happening in Syria that aren't even true.

The next paragraph in the March 2009 cable from Riyadh is also instructive:

8. (C) WEANING SYRIA FROM IRAN: Brennan asked Muqrin if he believed the Syrians were interested in improving relations with the United States. "I can't say anything positive or negative," he replied, declining to give an opinion. Muqrin observed that the Syrians would not detach from Iran without "a supplement."

This suggests that for the U.S. government in March 2009, for Syria to be interested in "improving relations with the United States" was equal to being "weaned" from Iran. Thus, the thing that the U.S. really cared about in Syria was not, for example, the Syrian government's respect for human rights, but Syria's relationship with Iran.

Another theme that recurred in the 2006 cable that talked about Syria's "vulnerabilities" and how the U.S. should try to exploit them was that the U.S. should take actions to try to destabilize the Syrian government by provoking the Syrian government to "overreact," both internally and externally.

One of the "vulnerabilities" of the Syrian government listed by Roebuck that the U.S. should try to exploit was the Syrian government's "enormous irritation" with former Syrian Vice-President Abdul Halim Khaddam, leader of the opposition-in-exile National Salvation Front. Roebuck wrote:

-- Vulnerability:

-- THE KHADDAM FACTOR: Khaddam knows where the regime skeletons are hidden, which provokes enormous irritation from Bashar, vastly disproportionate to any support Khaddam has within Syria. Bashar Asad personally, and his regime in general, follow every news item involving Khaddam with tremendous emotional interest. The regime reacts with self-defeating anger whenever another Arab country hosts Khaddam or allows him to make a public statement through any of its media outlets.

To exploit this vulnerability, Roebuck proposed:

-- Possible Action:

-- We should continue to encourage the Saudis and others to allow Khaddam access to their media outlets, providing him with venues for airing the SARG's dirty laundry. We should anticipate an overreaction by the regime that will add to its isolation and alienation from its Arab neighbors.

Note that the goal of encouraging the Saudis and other to "allow Khaddam access to their media

outlets” was not to promote democracy and human rights in Syria, but to provoke the Syrian government to do things that would “add to its isolation” from its Arab neighbors. Of course, if the Syrian government acted in ways that would “add to its isolation,” then the U.S. could cite such actions as evidence that the Syrian government was a rogue government, unable or unwilling to conform to international norms, threatening to U.S. allies in the region, and therefore that the U.S. government had to take some action in response. But now we know that such actions by the Syrian government would not have been unfortunate developments to which the U.S. would be reluctantly forced to respond, but the explicit goal of U.S. policy.

For example, in August 2007 – eight months after the above cable - Khaddam told the Saudi daily Al-Watan that reported remarks of Syrian Vice President Faruq al-Sharaa criticizing Saudi Arabia were “part of the policy pursued by the ruling clique, which aims at severing Syrian links with the Arab world and tying it further to Iran's regional strategy, ” the Beirut Daily Star reported. [4] The Daily Star noted that the Syrian government was actually trying to “calm the spat,” saying that statements attributed to Sharaa had been “distorted.” In the context of Roebuck’s cable, these developments make sense: it was the U.S. and its ally Khaddam that were trying to inflame tensions between Syria and Saudi Arabia, not the Syrian government.

Whatever one thinks of Khaddam or the Syrian government, it’s not surprising that the Syrian government would have been provoked in 2006 by countries like Saudi Arabia giving Khaddam a media platform, given what Khaddam had used such platforms to say in the past. Note that there is no question that the Saudi government controls Saudi media for a purpose like this, exactly as Roebuck implied – indeed, the Riyadh embassy cable about the Medina clashes between Saudi police and Shia pilgrims noted that the Saudi government had successfully pressured Saudi media to suppress reports of the clashes.

Here is what Khaddam told the Saudi-owned newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat* about his goals in an interview in Paris in January 2006: [5]

Q: What are you[r] current priorities? Do you want to reform the regime, reform it, or topple it?

A: This regime cannot be reformed so there is nothing left but to oust it.

One imagines that if Iran had given a former Bahraini or Egyptian vice-president a platform to say about the government of Bahrain or Egypt that “this regime cannot be reformed so there is nothing left but to oust it,” the U.S. government would not have taken kindly to that. This was eleven months before Roebuck’s cable, and five years before “Arab Spring” protests in Syria. We are told in the West that the current efforts to topple the Syrian government by force were a reaction to the Syrian government’s repression of dissent in 2011; but now we know that “regime change” was the policy of the U.S. and its allies five years earlier.

Indeed, another of Roebuck’s proposed actions to exploit Syria’s “vulnerabilities” carried the same message:

-- Possible Action:

-- ENCOURAGE RUMORS AND SIGNALS OF EXTERNAL PLOTTING:

The regime is intensely sensitive to rumors about coup-plotting and restlessness in the security services and military. Regional allies like Egypt and Saudi Arabia should be encouraged to meet with figures like Khaddam and Rif’at Asad as a way of sending such

signals, with appropriate leaking of the meetings afterwards. This again touches on this insular regime's paranoia and increases the possibility of a self-defeating over-reaction.

According to Roebuck, if Egypt and Saudi Arabia met with Khaddam and news of the meetings were "appropriately leaked," that would send a signal to the Syrian government that these countries were plotting against Syria, perhaps trying to organize a coup.

It is revealing that Roebuck described the regime as "paranoid" for having fears that appear to have been quite rational – fears based in significant measure on the actions of the United States and its allies. The most powerful government in the world and its allies in the region aspired to overthrow the Syrian government. The U.S. has a long track record [6] of trying to overthrow governments around the world, including in the region, and as Roebuck's cable makes clear, far from trying to allay such fears, the U.S. wanted to exacerbate them. In 2014, the U.S. is arming insurgents who are trying to kill Syrian government officials. Was the Syrian government's fear of the U.S. government irrational, or was it rational?

Failure to acknowledge that U.S. adversaries' fears of the U.S. are rational suggests a world view in which U.S. threats are normal, unremarkable, an inevitable part of the landscape, which only mentally unstable people would object to, their fears serving as proof of their irrationality. During the U.S.-organized contra war against Nicaragua in the 1980s, Alexander Cockburn recounted the view of a visiting U.S. Congressman toward Nicaragua: [7]

Nicaraguans tell stories about these U.S. fact-finders with a certain wry incredulity. One congressman listened to a commandante outlining the murderous rampages of the contras and then burst out, "Suppose 5,000 contras cross your border. Suppose you are invaded by the entire Honduran army, why should you worry. Are you *that* insecure?"

Listing resistance to economic reforms as a "vulnerability," Roebuck wrote [my emphasis]:

Vulnerability:

-- REFORM FORCES VERSUS BAATHISTS-OTHER CORRUPT ELITES:

Bashar keeps unveiling a steady stream of initiatives on economic reform and it is certainly possible he believes this issue is his legacy to Syria. **While limited and ineffectual, these steps have brought back Syrian expats to invest** and have created at least the illusion of increasing openness. Finding ways to publicly call into question Bashar's reform efforts)-pointing, for example to the use of reform to disguise cronyism -- would embarrass Bashar and **undercut these efforts to shore up his legitimacy.**

Presumably, a key goal of economic reforms would have been to "[bring] back Syrian expats to invest," so if they had that effect, then they were not ineffectual. This makes clear what Roebuck was and wasn't interested in. He wasn't interested in Syrian economic reforms succeeding in facilitating private investment. He's interested in them failing. Even if they have some success, he wants to present them as a failure and "undercut these efforts to shore up his legitimacy."

The notion of "legitimacy" is a key one in U.S. foreign policy towards adversary governments in countries that the U.S. does not fear militarily (e.g. because they have nuclear weapons.) In the context of U.S. foreign policy, the term "legitimacy" is a "term of art" that has a specific meaning.

The usual notion of government "legitimacy" in international law and diplomacy, which the U.S. applies to its allies without question, has nothing to do with whether Santa has found a country's

government to be naughty or nice. Either you are the recognized government of the country, holding its seat at the United Nations, or you are not. Hardly anyone in Washington would suggest that the governments of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan, or Israel are not “legitimate” because they were not elected by all of their subjects or because they engage in gross violations of human rights. Nor would many in Washington suggest that the governments of Russia or China are not “legitimate,” however one might dislike some of their policies, their lack of democracy, or their violations of human rights; these countries have nuclear weapons and a permanent seat and veto on the U.N. Security Council, so challenging their legitimacy could have dangerous consequences; the U.S. may complain about their policies, but there is no chance that the U.S. will challenge their “legitimacy.”

Countries like Syria, Iraq before the 2003 U.S. invasion, and Libya before the 2011 U.S.-NATO military campaign to overthrow Qaddafi, on the other hand, belong to a different category. If the U.S. government thinks that their governments can be overthrown, then the U.S. might declare them to be “illegitimate.” And being declared “illegitimate” by the U.S. means that the U.S. government will likely try to overthrow your government.

Further underscoring Roebuck’s priorities, he advocated:

-- DISCOURAGE FDI, ESPECIALLY FROM THE GULF: Syria has enjoyed a considerable up-tick in foreign direct investment (FDI) in the last two years that appears to be picking up steam. The most important new FDI is undoubtedly from the Gulf.

Again, the increase in investment would seem to suggest that economic reforms were working to encourage investment. But Roebuck saw this as bad. If the most important FDI was from the Gulf, that suggested that contrary to the U.S. and Khaddam’s claims that Syria was trying to have bad relations with the Gulf countries, it was succeeding in projecting an image of a country that was trying to get along. But in Roebuck’s view, this wasn’t a good thing; this was a bad thing, which the U.S. should try to counter-act.

Roebuck spoke glowingly of *violent* protests against the Syrian government [my emphasis]:

-- Vulnerability:

-- THE KURDS: The most organized and daring political opposition and civil society groups are among the ethnic minority Kurds, concentrated in Syria’s northeast, as well as in communities in Damascus and Aleppo. This group has been willing to **protest violently** in its home territory when others would dare not.

The word “daring” in English usually connotes exemplary courage. U.S. newspapers, for example, do not generally describe the Palestinian use of violence against the Israeli occupation as “daring,” because while using violence in this instance obviously requires courage, the use of violence in this instance is not seen in the U.S. as exemplary.

This shows how U.S. diplomats like Roebuck see the world: if you’re protesting governments that are U.S. allies, like Bahrain, Egypt, or Israel, then your protests should be nonviolent. But if you are protesting a government that the U.S. would like to overthrow, then the use of violence demonstrates “daring.”

To take advantage of this “vulnerability,” Roebuck suggested:

-- Possible Action:

-- HIGHLIGHT KURDISH COMPLAINTS: Highlighting Kurdish complaints in public statements, including publicizing human rights abuses will exacerbate regime's concerns about the Kurdish population.

There's no pretense here that the goal of this action would be to encourage greater respect by the Syrian government for the human rights of Kurds – the goal would be to destabilize the Syrian government.

Roebuck also made clear his attitude towards terrorism in Syria [my emphasis]:

-- Vulnerability:

-- Extremist elements increasingly use Syria as a base, while the SARG has taken some actions against groups stating links to Al-Qaeda. With the killing of the al-Qaida leader on the border with Lebanon in early December and the increasing terrorist attacks inside Syria culminating in the September 12 attack against the US embassy, the SARG's policies in Iraq and support for terrorists elsewhere as well can be seen to be **coming home to roost**.

-- Possible Actions:

-- Publicize presence of transiting (or externally focused) extremist groups in Syria, not limited to mention of Hamas and PIJ. **Publicize Syrian efforts against extremist groups in a way that suggests weakness, signs of instability, and uncontrolled blowback.** The SARG's argument (usually used after terror attacks in Syria) that it too is a victim of terrorism **should be used against it to give greater prominence to increasing signs of instability within Syria.**

Note that in private correspondence, Roebuck has no problem acknowledging that Syria is the victim of terrorism and that the Syrian government is trying to take action against terrorists. But if Syria is the victim of terrorism and is trying to do something about it, according to the view that Roebuck wants the U.S. to present to the world, that is evidence that Syria is weak and unstable and is suffering "uncontrolled blowback" as its support for terrorists elsewhere "comes home to roost."

Imagine if a diplomat from a country perceived to be a U.S. adversary suggested that the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and U.S. efforts to prevent such attacks in the future, were evidence that the U.S. is weak and unstable, suffering from "uncontrolled blowback" as past U.S. support for terrorists elsewhere "came home to roost." How would this be perceived in the United States?

It's not hard to speculate. In May 2007, when Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul suggested that "blowback" from U.S. foreign policy had helped cause the September 11 attacks [8], Republican front-runner Rudy Giuliani denounced him as a conspiracy theorist. [9] When in 2010 in a speech at the United Nations the President of Iran noted the then widespread minority belief that the U.S. government was behind the September 11 attacks, the U.S. led a walkout and denounced the speech. [10]

So, it seems reasonable to conclude that if the U.S. put forward the view that terrorism in Syria is Syria's own fault, the Syrian government would be likely to perceive that as a very hostile act.

This cable shows that in December 2006, the man in charge of U.S. diplomacy in Syria believed that the goal of U.S. policy in Syria should be destabilizing the Syrian government by any means available; that the U.S. should work to increase Sunni-Shia sectarianism in Syria, including by aiding the dissemination of false fears about Shia proselytizing and stoking resentment about Iranian business activity and mosque construction; that the U.S. should press Arab allies to give access in media they control to a former Syrian official calling for the ouster of the Syrian government; that the U.S. should try to strain relations between that the Syrian government and other Arab governments and then blame Syria for the strain; that the U.S. should seek to stoke Syrian government fears of coup plots in order to provoke the Syrian government to over-react; that if the Syrian government reacted to external provocations, that proved that the regime was paranoid; that the U.S. should work to undermine Syrian economic reforms and discourage foreign investment; that the U.S. should seek to foster the belief that the Syrian government was not legitimate; that violent protests in Syria were praiseworthy and exemplary; that if Syria is the victim of terrorism and tries to do something about it, the U.S. should exploit that to say that the Syrian government is weak and unstable and is experiencing blowback for its foreign policy.

We further know that in the eyes of the U.S. embassy in Riyadh, Syria was interested in improving relations with the United States if and only if it was interested in being “weaned” from Iran.

From other cables, we know that the U.S. was funding Syrian opposition groups. The U.S. government acknowledged this funding after the cables were published by WikiLeaks. [11] The U.S. had previously announced funding to “promote democracy” in Syria, but what was not previously publicly known was the extent to which the U.S. was engaged in funding opposition groups and activities which the U.S. government had internally conceded would be seen by the Syrian government as proof that the U.S. was seeking to overthrow the Syrian government.

A February 21, 2006 cable [12] noted:

Post contacts [i.e., U.S. embassy contacts in Syria] have been quick to condemn the USG's public statement announcing the designation of five million USD for support of the Syrian opposition, calling it "na[i]ve" and "harmful." Contacts insist that the statement has already hurt the opposition, and that the SARG will use it in the coming months to further discredit its opponents as agents of the Americans.

The cable also noted:

Several contacts insisted that the initiative indicated the U.S. did not really care about the opposition, but merely wanted to use it as "a chip in the game."

Judging from the December, 2006 “vulnerabilities and actions” cable, it is hard to dispute this conclusion of the embassy’s Syrian contacts.

The February 2006 cable elaborated:

Bassam Ishak, a Syrian-American activist who ran as an independent candidate for the People's Assembly in 2003, said that the general consensus among his civil society and opposition colleagues had been that the USG is "not serious about us" and that the public announcement was "just to put pressure on the regime with no regard for the opposition." "We are just a chip in the game," he asserted.

Note that the view that there could be severe negative consequences from U.S. funding of opposition groups, including by helping the government de-legitimize opposition groups and

individuals as agents of foreign powers, was shared by many of the embassy's own contacts in the Syrian opposition. Some of the people who were delegitimized in this way might otherwise have been credible interlocutors in negotiations towards more inclusive governance; thus, the strategy of funding opposition groups could have the effect of foreclosing diplomatic and political options. Some of the criticism expressed of the U.S. announcement was that it was done publicly; but as the cables themselves demonstrate, it was likely that the Syrian government would find out what the U.S. was doing in the long run, and therefore, in the long run, the distinction between secret and public was not meaningful.

Another critic noted that the U.S. was already secretly funding the Syrian opposition:

MP Noumeir al-Ghanem, a nominal independent and chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament, dismissed the funding plan as a stunt, saying the amount of money was small and that the U.S. had already been funding the opposition secretly, without impact. The new initiative would make no real difference. In his view, the announcement angered most Syrians, who viewed it as interference in the internal affairs of Syria, something that the U.S. always insisted that Syria should not do regarding Lebanon.

Al-Ghanem said the U.S. should engage in dialogue with the Syrian regime and work for a stable, slowly democratizing country that could further U.S. interests in the region, instead of putting up obstacles to such dialogue.

An April 28, 2009 cable [13] ("Behavior Reform: Next Steps For A Human Rights Strategy") – from a period of "policy review" in which the new Obama Administration was exploring a less confrontational policy towards Syria - outlining U.S. – government funded "ongoing civil society programming" in Syria acknowledged that

Some programs may be perceived, were they made public, as an attempt to undermine the Asad regime, as opposed to encouraging behavior reform.

The cable also acknowledged:

The SARG [Syrian government] would undoubtedly view any U.S. funds going to illegal political groups as tantamount to supporting regime change. This would inevitably include the various expatriate reform organizations operating in Europe and the U.S., most of which have little to no effect on civil society or human rights in Syria.

The cable noted that the State Department's U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) had sponsored

eight major Syria-specific initiatives, some dating back to 2005, that will have received approximately USD 12 million by September 2010.

One of those initiatives was:

-Democracy Council of California, "Civil Society Strengthening Initiative (CSSI)" (USD 6,300,562, September 1, 2006 - September 30, 2010). "CSSI is a discrete collaborative effort between the Democracy Council and local partners" that has produced a secure Damascus Declaration website (www.nidaasyria.org) and "various broadcast concepts" set to air in April.

A February 7, 2010 cable [14] ("Human Rights Updates -- SARG Budes On TIP, But Little

Else”) indicates that "various broadcast concepts" referred to Barada TV, a London-based Syrian opposition satellite television network. The February 2010 cable referred to Barada TV as “MEPI-supported,” and said:

If the SARG establishes firmly that the U.S. was continuing to fund Barada TV, however, it would view USG involvement as a covert and hostile gesture toward the regime.

But while the April 2009 cable had noted that “The SARG would undoubtedly view any U.S. funds going to illegal political groups as tantamount to supporting regime change,” the February 2010 cable shows that such funding continued, even though the April 2009 cable had identified “how to bring our U.S.-sponsored civil society and human rights programming into line [with] a less confrontational bilateral relationship” as a “core issue” facing a U.S. human rights strategy for Syria.

The April 2009 cable had argued:

The majority of DRL [the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Affairs] and MEPI programs have focused on activities and Syrians outside of Syria, which has further fed regime suspicions about U.S. intentions. If our dialogue with Syria on human rights is to succeed, we need to express the desire to work in Syria to strengthen civil society in a non-threatening manner.

But, it appears, the shift argued for in the April 2009 cable never occurred.

This apparently remained true even as the U.S. embassy became increasingly aware of evidence that the Syrian government knew about the activities funded by the U.S. that the April 2009 cable had warned that the Syrian government would see, if they knew of it, as evidence of a regime change policy; and that would likely, if known, undermine U.S. efforts to engage the Syrian government.

A July 8, 2009 cable [15] on rifts in the Syrian opposition (“Murky Alliances: Muslim Brotherhood, the Movement For Justice and Democracy, and the Damascus Declaration”) noted in its summary:

More worrisome, however, is recent information suggesting the SARG may already have penetrated the MJD [Movement for Justice and Development] and learned about sensitive USG programs in Syria.

The July 2009 cable elaborated:

MJD: A Leaky Boat?

8. (C) [Damascus Declaration member Fawaz] Tello had told us in the past (ref B) that the MJD ... had been initially lax in its security, often speaking about highly sensitive material on open lines... The last point relates to a recent report from lawyer/journalist and human rights activist Razan Zeitunah (strictly protect) who met us separately on July 1 to discuss having been called in for questioning by security services on June 29.

9. (S/NF) Zeitunah told us security services had asked whether she had met with anyone from our "Foreign Ministry" and with anyone from the Democracy Council [recipient of the U.S. grant for the MJD to run Barada TV.] (Comment: State Department Foreign Affairs Officer Joseph Barghout had recently been in Syria and met with Zeitunah; we assume the SARG was fishing for information, knowing Barghout had entered the country. Jim Prince was in Damascus on February 25, and it is our understanding he met with Zeitunah at that time, or had done so on a separate trip. End Comment). She added that her interrogators did not ask about Barghout by name, but they did have Jim Prince's. [Jim Prince is the head of the Democracy Council.]

[...]

11. (S/NF) Comment continued: Zeitunah's report begs the question of how much and for how long the SARG has known about Democracy Council operations in Syria and, by extension, the MJD's participation. Reporting in other channels suggest the Syrian Muhabarat may already have penetrated the MJD and is using MJD contacts to track U.S. democracy programming.

A September 23, 2009 cable [16] ("Show Us the Money! SARG Suspects "Illegal" USG Funding") gave further evidence that Syrian authorities were increasingly aware of what the U.S. was funding:

1. (S/NF) Summary: Over the past six months, SARG security agents have increasingly questioned civil society and human rights activists about U.S. programming in Syria and the region, including U.S. Speaker and MEPI initiatives (ref A). In addition to reported interrogations of the Director of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression and employees of USG-supported Etana Press, new criminal charges against detained human rights lawyer Muhanad al-Hasani for illegally receiving USG funding reflect the seriousness with which the regime is pursuing these "investigations."

The September 2009 cable elaborated:

2. (S/NF) Over the past six months, civil society and human rights activists questioned by SARG security have told us interrogators asked specifically about their connections to the U.S. Embassy and the State Department. As previously reported, Razan Zeitunah (strictly protect) recounted a June interrogation during which she was questioned about MEPI-funded Democracy Council activities as well as visiting State Department officials (ref A). Kurdish Future Movement activist Herveen Ose (strictly protect), brought in for questioning in August, was also asked about funding from "foreign embassies." MEPI grantee Maan Abdul Salam (strictly protect) recently reported one of his employees was called in on September 4, at which time security agents zeroed in on her participation in a MEPI-funded People In Need (PIN) seminar in Prague approximately eight months earlier.

[...]

4. (C) The ongoing case of human rights lawyer Muhanad al-Hasani took a turn for the worse on September 15 when, reportedly, the SARG introduced a new charge against him. According to a September 18 e-mail we received from his colleague Catherine al-Tali (strictly protect), the SARG accused Hasani of accepting USG funding that was routed to him through the Cairo-based Al-Andalus Center[...] Embassy Cairo also informed us that the Center was not currently receiving funding from either the Embassy or MEPI, though it

had in the past.

[...]

8. (S/NF) Comment: It is unclear to what extent SARG intelligence services understand how USG money enters Syria and through which proxy organizations. What is clear, however, is that security agents are increasingly focused on this issue when they interrogate human rights and civil society activists. The information agents are able to frame their questions with more and more specific information and names. The charge that Hasani received USG funding vis-a-vis the Al-Andalus Center is especially worrying since it may suggest the SARG has keyed in on MEPI operations in particular.

The February 7, 2010 cable [17] cited earlier (“Human Rights Updates -- SARG Budes On TIP, But Little Else”) gave further evidence that the Syrian government was pursuing the funding of Barada TV:

Barada TV: The Opposition in Klieg Lights?

9. (C) Damascus-based director of MEPI-supported Barada TV Suheir Attasi outlined the many challenges facing the channel in a December 23 meeting.

[...]

10. (C) Attasi confirmed reports we had heard from other contacts about the SARG’s interest in chasing down the financial and political support structure behind Barada. Security agents called her in for questioning in October and repeatedly asked her about her affiliations with the U.S. Embassy and whether she knew Jim Prince [...]

[...]

If the SARG establishes firmly that the U.S. was continuing to fund Barada TV, however, it would view USG involvement as a covert and hostile gesture toward the regime. Just as SARG officials have used the U.S. position on Operation Cast Lead and the Goldstone Report to shut down discussions on human rights, it could similarly try to use Barada TV to diminish our credibility on the issue.

Note that although the July 2009, September 2009, and February 2010 cables address exactly the situation that the April 2009 cable had warned about – that the Syrian government would find out what the U.S. was funding – there was no further discussion or concern expressed about what the April 2009 cable had warned would be the likely consequence of that: that the Syrian government would conclude that the U.S. government was pursuing a regime change policy in Syria, and this would undermine U.S. efforts to engage the Syrian government. Nor was there any further discussion of what the April 2009 cable had suggested: that this funding be reviewed to bring it in line with the policy of engagement.

What emerges from these cables is that while there was undoubtedly a shift between the policy of the Bush Administration after 2005 and the policy of the Obama Administration in 2009-2010 with respect to the question of regime change vs. engagement, the shift was substantially less than publicly advertised. The U.S. continued to fund opposition activities that the U.S. believed would,

if known to the Syrian government, cause the Syrian government to believe that the U.S. was not serious about shifting to an engagement policy, and it continued to fund these activities as the U.S. increasingly came to believe that the Syrian government was become aware of these activities. When these activities became public, the U.S. denied that they amounted to a regime change policy [18], but we now know from the U.S. government's internal communication that the U.S. did not think that the Syrian government would give credence to such a denial.

This leads us to question to what extent the Obama Administration really shifted to a policy of engagement, or to what extent, when Saudi Arabia and others pushed it to adopt an explicit regime change policy in 2011 -- a shift the Administration eventually did make -- these countries were pushing on an open door. The story that was presented to the U.S. public was that the U.S. had tried to engage Syria and failed; and that after Syrian government cracked down on protests in 2011, the U.S. had no choice but to abandon its efforts at engagement.

But reading the cables, it appears that the U.S. never really committed to a policy of engagement; it had one hand in the engagement policy, while keeping another hand in the regime change policy. The Iranian government cracked down on protests in 2009, but the U.S. did not completely abandon efforts to engage the Iranian government. Perhaps the danger of abandoning efforts at engagement with Iran were perceived to be higher, given Iran's nuclear enrichment program and the political pressure on the Obama Administration to use force against Iran if diplomacy failed; perhaps the belief among the U.S. and its allies that the Syrian government could be toppled by force, and the Iranian government could not, played a role.

But knowing that the U.S. never really abandoned a regime change policy in Syria informs our understanding of the question of U.S. military intervention in Syria today. It shows us how the U.S. is not an innocent victim of circumstance, having to consider the use of force because diplomacy has been exhausted; rather, the U.S. faces a situation that it helped create, by pursuing regime change for years and never fully switching to diplomacy.

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