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Syria goes from periphery to core

By Derek Henry Flood

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For most of the past decade, Syria, a country at the political heart of the Arab world, was mostly an afterthought for journalists. Stories about Syria focused on subjects like the short-lived, 2000-2001 movement towards democracy known as the "Damascus Spring" and the influx of Iraqi refugees following the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein (and later on, the flow of jihadi fighters heading in the opposite direction to fight American troops).

The real Syria - an opaquely governed, heavily fortified security state - did not present itself the way its Lebanese and Iraqi neighbors did, with their unvarnished war wounds open for all to see.

My early jaunts into Syria had virtually nothing to do with investigating domestic politics. That's not to say that the Syria's ethno-religious mosaic wasn't immensely fascinating in its own right, but with hot wars erupting on its eastern and western flanks, and for journalists focusing primarily on kinetic conflicts, a deep examination of Syria's potential for renewed conflict remained comparatively absent.

There were stories we wanted to tell, but to outside journalists they seemed impossible to verify on Syrian soil. Did President Bashar al-Assad's regime torture "rendered" terrorism suspects after 9/11, in cooperation with the West as in the well-known case of Syrian-Canadian Maher Arar? Was Syria behind the brazen 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri in an explosion on Beirut's Corniche? Was the Assad government in the nascent stages of an allegedly North Korean-assisted nuclear program when a mysterious facility was bombed by the

Israel Air Force in 2007 as the International Atomic Energy Agency asserted? It was all talk and suspicion, with little to be unearthed by journalists in a country that was impossible to penetrate.

The Syrian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood had been locked in a low-intensity confrontation with Hafez al-Assad that had quietly persisted since 1976. By the early 1980s, the Assad dynasty had largely succeeded in suppressing any form of domestic opposition, religiously inspired or otherwise.

In central Syria, Hafez al-Assad had literally attempted to bury his war with his landed Sunni domestic challengers culminating in the notorious Hama massacre of February 1982. As many as 30,000 Syrians may have been killed in that campaign of collective punishment, which destroyed the city of Hama and sent many surviving Brotherhood leaders into exile.

While Bashar's father believed the threat of the Sunni majority to Alawite power had been largely extinguished that awful February, evidenced by no such further serious contests to his rule all the way until his death in June 2000, the successor regime helmed by his unimaginative son would face a renewed rebellion underpinned by the ghosts of Hama's sectarian dimensions that refused to go away even as the decades wore on.

Scorched-earth tactics combined with zero effort at communal reconciliation over 30 years ago only put Syria's Alawite-Sunni conflict in a state of suspended animation rather than erasing it altogether, though Hafez al-Assad likely went to his grave thinking he had. Bashar has tried the "Hama solution" writ large but has failed spectacularly at quelling a diffuse, multi-pronged insurgency which has vowed not to quit until he is out of power.

2002

It was that seemingly quiet and stable post-Hama Syria that I came to know. It served as a passageway to the places where the real action could be found, to put it bluntly. In 2002, I traveled to Damascus on a tourist visa, in hope of meeting with members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Massoud Barzani.

A nominal Western ally, the KDP controlled the border on the Iraqi side of the Tigris River that separates northeastern Syria and northwestern Iraq. Like other journalists at the time, I had hoped to gain access through Syria to the Kurdish-controlled regions of northern Iraq, to report on the pending American-led invasion as it was gathering steam.

The Kurds had been successful at achieving de facto independence from Baghdad when the Operation Provide Comfort and Operation Northern Watch no-fly zones kept Ba'athist ground forces south of the 36th parallel aided in the establishment of a semi-autonomous northern enclave. It was this armed humanitarianism dating from 1991 that prompted Syrian rebels in 2012 in Syria's Idlib governorate to insist to this reporter that they deserved the same external aerial protection bestowed upon Iraqi Kurds two decades previously so as to harden a secure buffer zone stemming southward from the Turkish border.

The Iraqi Kurdish enclave was to become a beachhead in the proposed Anglo-American invasion of central Iraq in order to depose then president Saddam Hussein. Plans were quickly frustrated

when nearly half of Turkey's parliament - supposedly wary of internal blowback and in the face of civilian protests - rejected a draft proposal to allow tens of thousands of American troops to stage themselves at military facilities on Turkish soil with Incirlik Air Base.

Last December, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan told the state broadcaster, Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, that the George W Bush administration had quietly scuttled another option that would have seen Turkish regular troops enter Iraqi Kurdistan en masse as a contingent of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Bush purportedly telephoned Erdogan to say the concept was a deal breaker for the White House's allies in Erbil and Sulaimaniyah who rued Turkish militarism with nearly equal vitriol as their Arab Iraqi enemies. Ankara feared both the consequences of a furtherance of Kurdish empowerment in Iraq in its war with Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan-PKK)-led Kurdish irredentism inside its own borders but did not want to game itself out of shaping the outcome in its own interests in a post-Saddam Baghdad.

But even well before Turkey officially refused to let the United States military use its territory at the 11th hour on March 1, 2003, it seemed the stuff of pie-in-the-sky neoconservative thinking that was typically very out of touch with ethnographic ground realities. It seemed that the only viable option for the Pentagon and Langley would be to deftly insert intelligence officers and a limited number of special operations troops who would pair up with the Peshmerga armies of the KDP and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

Short of a major ground assault, Washington sought to recreate its "Afghan model" in Iraqi Kurdistan. Modeled on its light footprint military campaign in northern Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 when it bought the loyalties of the Tajik and Uzbek ethnic militia commanders leading Jamiat-i-Islami and Junbish-i-Milli in its efforts to route Taliban, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and al-Qaeda men from their dug-in trenches, millions of American taxpayer dollars were thrown at savvy KDP and PUK leaders, thus buying their allegiance.

What complicated things for the Americans was the intricate milieu that had developed in the Kurdish enclave under the aegis of the Western-enforced no-fly zone. Kurds from Turkey, Iran, and Syria strengthened linkages with their Iraqi Kurdish brethren, and a Salafi-jihadi group called Ansar al-Islam had set up shop in mountains along the Iranian border and would have to be violently dislodged before US forces could move southward into Arab Iraq.

The KDP, then depending on Bashar al-Assad for diplomatic succor, never did arrange for me to cross that riverine northern border as promised. The Syrian government sought to undermine that of rival Saddam Hussein by letting a very limited number of approved journalists quietly trek into Iraq, but did not want its Kurdish guests to welcome too many reporters on its territory at any given time lest Syria itself become subject to too much spillover scrutiny. At the time, it was busy torturing terror suspects and constructing a nuclear reactor, so it was best that journalists crossing the territory it controlled were tightly monitored.

Arriving overland from Istanbul I checked into the down-at-the-heels al-Rabie hotel popular with Australian and Japanese backpackers on a shady sidestreet. I repeatedly phoned a number from the al-Rabie's front desk that was given to me by a KDP contact in Washington. A startled

KDP man answering in hushed tones insisted each time that he had not been notified of my impending arrival in the Syrian capital by his US-based colleagues in advance, which therefore prevented him from revealing the address of his office over the phone.

In the Middle East, even what are essentially evolved guerilla movements maintain their own arcane, state-like bureaucratic procedures to thwart penetration by rivals. The befuddled hotelier couldn't understand why someone who appeared to be a young budget tourist was whispering mysteriously into the front-desk phone each morning rather than inquiring about the best place to buy local antiques or museum hours. In the interim, I periodically popped into one of the Syrian capital's then few Internet cafes to plead with the Washington KDP office for help.

Entrepreneurial cafe operators tried to explain to me why Bashar al-Assad had had Hotmail blocked across Syria on some sort of paranoid Ba'athist whim. These clever young men had quickly found ways to circumvent Assad's clumsily imposed firewall, however, and I would fire off requests to Washington Kurds labeled "urgent", to no avail.

2006

In July 2006, with the Israeli offensive in Lebanon raging, I once again applied for a visa at Syria's Washington embassy on a shady side street north of Dupont Circle. (Syria's UN Mission in New York did not have the authority to issue visas and they generally could not be acquired on arrival at border crossings unless one's home country lacked a Syrian embassy altogether).

With the Israeli air and sea blockade underway that summer, traveling overland through Syria was the only viable way to reach the turmoil in Lebanon. I feigned having absolutely no interest in Syria's frozen political scene in order to travel to Lebanon without delay, and I was swiftly issued a double entry visa.

I travelled this time to the coastal city of Latakia en route to Beirut via a series of shared taxis beginning in Antakya, Turkey. In the lobby of my hotel one humid evening, the spaced was lined with portly men in traditional crisp, white *dishdasha* robes and ghutra headaddresses, flipping rosaries end over end in their taught fists. A hotel staff member informed me that these men were tribal sheiks from Iraq's devastated al-Anbar Governorate who had fled to the Syrian coast at the height of that country's anti-occupation insurgency and nihilistic war against apostasy sparked by the Jordanian jihadi Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Though Zarqawi had been assassinated in an American missile strike the previous month, Iraqis were still fleeing a pre-"surge" Iraq to Syria in droves.



In July 2006, as an Israeli offensive was underway in Lebanon's South Governorate and in Beirut's southern suburbs, Bashar al-Assad's Alawite power base of Latakia was plastered with visual propaganda depicting an unshakable bond between the Syrian regime and Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah's Twelver Shia Hezbollah movement. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the Syrian regime considered itself the last flag-bearer of Arab nationalism, which may partly explain why Iranian imagery was absent from such displays.

Here were these Sunni Iraqi notables who had been run out of their homes in Iraq toward shelter in a Syria that was egging on a Shi'ite resistance movement against Israel and endeared toward Iran. Latakia that night felt like the quiet eye of a horrific religio-political storm that was engulfing the entire Levant.



If and when Damascus ultimately falls, coastal Latakia with its coveted harbor may very well be where Assad will make his last stand. Latakia could also provide a potential escape route to nearby Cyprus in the event of a total regime collapse. As overwhelmingly Sunni rebels advance southward from the Turkish border, fleeing Alawites have reportedly been heading to Latakia - which contains a Sunni demographic majority - and the port city of Tartus, where they live in fear of coming sectarian retribution. Credit: Derek Henry Flood

Due north from Lebanon's Tripoli, coastal Syria appeared to gearing up for a Hezbollah rally judging by the number of flags, posters, and stickers blanketing the city. An essential part of the Assad's deflective strategy was to direct public discontent toward Israel rather than chance that

the disenfranchised citizenry harness their resentment toward a minority government whose ruling Alawite clique and Sunni and Christian allies presided over a stagnant command economy. In 2002, the Palestinian flag was displayed in equal numbers with the Ba'athist Syrian tricolor. In 2006, the same could be said for Hezbollah's yellow banner. From Latakia, I headed by a series of taxis toward Tartus and the Lebanese border.



On July 29, 2006, Al-Jazeera airs a defiant speech by Hezbollah Secretary-General Seyyid Hassan Nasrallah on the group's al-Manar TV channel as seen in Latakia, Syria. Nasrallah told viewers that evening: "When the people of this tyrannical state [Israel] loses its faith in its mythical army, it is the beginning of the end of this entity." Credit: Derek Henry Flood

2012

Six years on, the Syria I knew had vanished. To see it this time, I began networking among members of the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). In January 2012, after the revolt in Syria had been underway for many months, I found myself among the civilian network operating in Turkey's Hatay Province, along the Syrian frontier. To cross the Yayladagi border post through the Alawite Mountains as in years past, I found myself on foot, sloggling along mud-slicked smugglers' tracts and fording waist-deep streams swollen with snow melt amid a thick cover of pine trees, hoping to avoid an encounter with regime forces.

My aim was to reach an isolated group of rebel fighters, encamped in an abandoned Ba'athist officer's home within the sights of pro-Assad snipers. Arriving in a hamlet devoid of civilians, it became clear to me that Syria was not in the midst of an "uprising" or a "crackdown", as many outlets reported for months on end. Syria was undeniably in the throes of very violent civil war. The fighters I encountered were not nihilistic Salafi-jihadis armed to the teeth by the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Defense. They were ordinary men, farmers, tradesmen and the like, who barely had a rifle per man with ammunition equally as scarce, facing off against rotations of pro-regime troops with powerful Dragunov sniper rifles trained tightly on their rebel position.

I interviewed a grizzled FSA commander called Abu Muhammed, sitting on threadbare burgundy carpets beside a row of Kalashnikovs procured on the black market. Unlike Libya, Syria was not a state awash in weapons before its revolution. He told me of his desperate desire for a UN-mandated no-fly zone stemming from the Turkish border 5 kilometers southward into

Syrian territory so that his fighters could establish a cordon sanitaire to protect refugees and solidify rebel supply lines.

On the rural fringes of Idlib Governorate, the places I had known Syria for - the rocky, azure coves of Latakia and the smoky teahouses of Damascus's Old City - seemed an eternity away.

Syrians were dying by the tens of thousands, making volatile Iraq and periodically unstable Lebanon look tame by an order of magnitude. In the face of a deeply divided international community, both the rebels and regime believed they would eventually prevail. A once quiescent Syria is now the strife-torn locus of global attention.



A unit of the Free Syrian Army in northern Syria in 2012, in an area that tightly controlled by the mukhabarat police state was once the safest place in the region so long as one played by the rules set out by the regime. Credit: Derek Henry Flood

For decades, Syria had been a topic of intrigue about its intelligence services meddling in the internal affairs of neighboring countries and its overt support for regional militant movements from Hezbollah to the PKK. Now, that passe narrative has been turned on its head. The Syrian war has pulled in the interest of every nearby state - contiguous and not - and sub-state/non-state actors in the Middle East.

The fluid power dynamics in the Levant are evolving so quickly it's difficult to keep pace. Ankara, terrified at the idea of a recently reinvigorated PKK firming up its hold on territory in Syria evacuated by retreated pro-Assad forces has pragmatically made its nemesis Abdullah Ocalan suddenly relevant again. The Erdogan government now hopes to use talks with the long-imprisoned Ocalan as a lever in its containment policy toward the widening of open PKK activity.

No longer confined to its base in Iraq's Qandil range from where it can train and plan coordinated cross-border attacks on Turkish security forces, the PKK is now freely roving in parts of northern Syria and strengthening ties with the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat-PYD), the PKK's Kurdish affiliate movement in Syria.

In contrast, Hezbollah leader Nasrallah, who, besides Assad himself, individually has perhaps the most to lose in the reordering of the regional power structure, realizes that the end of his state sponsor is near and has been humbled in a feat of Levantine realpolitik. Nasrallah has been an outspoken advocate of Beirut's so-called unrealistic and somewhat callous "dissociation policy" with regard to the catastrophe across the border in Syria.

Hezbollah's leader can no longer keep up the pretension that his movement is on the sidelines of the Syrian war. Stating the now obvious to a Shi'ite religious procession in Baalbek, Nasrallah, according to the New York Times, told his followers: "Lebanon must exert pressure for a political solution and a political dialogue in Syria. If military operations continue in Syria, it will be a long and bloody battle."

Despite the increase of international interest in Syria, and the change in terminology describing the conflict from a "crackdown" to a less than classically defined "civil war", there appears to have been no marked improvement for average Syrians trapped inside the conflict's expanding boundaries nor appetite for any form of armed intervention.

UN-sponsored initiatives have been a dead end. Civilians continue to be killed in the hundreds and thousands as each month passes. Foreign jihadi elements, once a boogeyman for anti-interventionist pundits, have become a reality on the ground. Highly localized, disparate, indigenous insurgent groups have multiplied in the absence of effective top-down leadership within what we call the Free Syrian Army.

And that no-fly zone Abu Muhammed pleaded for on that pockmarked, muddy hillside a year ago? It has never materialized. Syria, once on the opaque periphery of war reporting, is now at its very core.