

The 'great game' in Syria

Alastair Crooke

Alastair Crooke is founder and director of Conflicts Forum, and the author of Resistance: The Essence of the Islamist Revolution (Pluto Press). He worked for the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), and was later an adviser to the European Union's Foreign Policy Chief, Javier Solana, from 1997 to 2003.

This summer, a senior Saudi official told John Hannah¹, former United States vice president Dick Cheney's former chief-of-staff, that from the outset of the Syrian upheaval in March, the king has believed that regime change in Syria would be highly beneficial to Saudi interests: 'The king knows that other than the collapse of the Islamic Republic itself, nothing would weaken Iran more than losing Syria,' said the official.

This is today's 'great game': the formula for playing it has changed; the US-instigated 'colour' revolutions in the former Soviet republics have given way to a bloodier, and more multi-layered process today, but the underlying psychology remains unchanged.

The huge technical requirements of mounting such a complex game in Syria are indeed prodigious: but in focusing so closely on technique and on co-ordinating diverse interests, inevitably something important may recede from view, too.

Europeans and Americans and certain Gulf states may see the Syria game as the logical successor to the supposedly successful Libya 'game' in remaking the Middle East, but the very tools that are being used on their behalf are highly combustible and may yet return to haunt them – as was experienced in the wake of the 1980s 'victory' in Afghanistan.

It will not be for the first time that Western interests sought to use others for their ends, only to find they have instead been used.

In any event, the tactics in Syria, in spite of heavy investment, seem to be failing. Yet Western strategy, in response to the

continuing cascade of new events in the region, remains curiously static, grounded in gaming the awakening and tied ultimately to the fragile thread connecting an 88-year-old king to life.

There seems to be little thought about the strategic landscape when, and as, that thread snaps. We may yet see the prevailing calculus turned inside out: nobody knows. But does the West really believe that being tied into a model of Gulf monarchical legitimacy and conservatism in an era of popular disaffection to be a viable posture – even if those states do buy more Western weapons?

What then is the new anatomy of the great game? In the past, colour revolutions were largely blueprinted in the offices of the political consultancies of ‘K’ Street in Washington. But in the new format, the ‘technicians’ attempting to shape the region² hail directly from the US government: according to reports by senior official sources in the region, Jeffrey Feltman, a former ambassador in Lebanon, and presently assistant secretary of state, as chief co-ordinator³, together with two former US ambassadors, Ron Schlicher and David Hale, who is also the new US Middle East Peace Envoy.

And instead of an operations centre established in some phony ‘Friends of Syria’ organization established in Washington, there is a gold-plated operations centre located in Doha, financed, according to a number of sources, by big Qatari money.

The origins of the present attempt to refashion the Middle East lie with the aftermath of Israel’s failure in 2006 to seriously damage Hezbollah. In the post-conflict autopsy, Syria was spotlighted as the vulnerable lynchpin connecting Hezbollah to Iran. And it was Prince Bandar of Saudi Arabia who planted the first seed: hinting to US officials that something indeed might be done about this Syria connector, but only through using the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, adding quickly in response to the predictable demurs, that managing the Syrian Brotherhood and other Islamists could safely be left to him.

John Hannah noted on ForeignPolicy.com⁴ that ‘Bandar working without reference to US interests is clearly cause for concern; but Bandar working as a partner against a common Iranian enemy is a major strategic asset’. Bandar was co-opted.

Hypothetical planning suddenly metamorphosed into concrete action only earlier this year, after the fall of Saad Hariri’s government in Lebanon, and the overthrow of president Hosni Mubarak in Egypt: suddenly, Israel seemed vulnerable, and a weakened Syria, enmired in troubles, held a strategic allure.

In parallel, Qatar had stepped to the fore, as Azmi Bishara, a pan-Arabist, former Israeli parliament member, expelled from the Knesset and now established in Doha, architected a schema through which television – as various in the Arabic press have reported⁵ – that is, al-Jazeera, would not just report revolution, but instantiate it for the region – or at least this is what was believed in Doha in the wake of the Tunisia and Egyptian uprisings.

This was a new evolution over the old model: hubristic television, rather than mere media management. But Qatar was not merely trying to leverage human suffering into an international intervention by endlessly repeating ‘reforms are not enough’ and the ‘inevitability’ of Assad’s fall, but also – as in Libya – Qatar was directly involved as a key operational actor and financier.

The next stage was to draw French President Nikolas Sarkozy into the campaign through the emir of Qatar’s expansive nature and ties to Sarkozy, supplemented by Feltman’s lobbying. An ‘Elysée team’ of Jean-David Levite, Nicholas Gallet and Sarkozy, was established, with Sarkozy’s wife enlisting Bernard Henri-Lévy, the arch promoter of the Benghazi Transitional Council model that had been so effective in inflating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) into an instrument of regime change.

Finally, President Barack Obama delegated Turkey⁶ to play point on Syria’s border. Both of the latter components, however, are not without their challenges from their own security arms, who are sceptical of the efficacy of the Transitional Council model, and opposed to military intervention.

The Turkish leadership, in particular, is pushed by party pressures in one direction⁷, whilst at another there are deep misgivings about Turkey becoming a NATO ‘corridor’ into Syria. Even Bandar is not without challenges: he has no political umbrella from the king, and others in the family are playing other Islamist cards to different ends.

In operational terms, Feltman and his team co-ordinate, Qatar hosts the ‘war room’, the ‘news room’ and holds the purse strings, Paris and Doha lead on pushing the Transitional Council model, whilst Bandar⁸ and Turkey jointly manage the Sunni theatre in-country, both armed and unarmed.

The Salafist component of armed and combat experienced fighters was to have been managed within this framework, but increasingly they went their own way, answering to a different agenda, and having separate finances.

If the scope of the Syria ‘game’ – for let us not forget the many killed (including civilians, security forces, and armed fighters) make it no game – is on a different scale to the early ‘colour’ revolutions, so its defects are greater too. The National Transitional Council paradigm, already displaying its flaws in Libya, is even more starkly defective in Syria, with the opposition ‘council’ put together by Turkey, France and Qatar caught in a catch-22 situation. The Syrian security structures have remained rock solid⁹ through seven months – defections have been negligible – and Assad’s popular support base is intact.

Only external intervention could change that equation, but for the opposition to call for it would be tantamount to political suicide, and they know it. Doha and Paris¹⁰ may continue to try to harass the world towards some intervention by maintaining attrition but the signs are that the internal opposition will opt to negotiate.

But the real danger in all this, as John Hannah himself notes on ForeignPolicy.com¹¹, is that the Saudis, ‘with their back to the wall’, ‘might once again fire up the old jihadist network and point it in the general direction of Shi’ite Iran’.

In fact, that is exactly what is happening, but the West does not seem to have noticed. As *Foreign Affairs* noted recently, Saudi and its Gulf allies are ‘firing up’ the Salafists¹², not only to weaken Iran, but mainly in order to do what they see is necessary to survive – to disrupt and emasculate the awakenings which threaten absolute monarchism.

Salafists are being used for this end in Syria¹³, in Libya, in Egypt (see their huge Saudi flag waving turn-out in Tahrir Square in July)¹⁴ in Lebanon, Yemen¹⁵ and Iraq.

Salafists may be generally viewed as non-political and pliable, but history is far from comforting. If you tell people often enough that they shall be the king-makers in the region and pour buckets-full of money at them, do not be surprised if they then metamorphose – yet again – into something very political and radical.

Michael Scheuer, the former head of the Central Intelligence Agency Bin Laden Unit, recently warned¹⁶ that the Hillary Clinton-devised response to the Arab awakening, of implanting Western paradigms, by force if necessary, into the void of fallen regimes, will be seen as a ‘cultural war on Islam’ and will set the seeds of a further round of radicalization.

Saudi Arabia is America’s ally. The US, as friends, should ask them if the fall of Assad, and the sectarian conflict that is almost certain to ensue, is really in their interest: do they imagine that their Sunni allies in Iraq and

Lebanon will escape the consequences? Do they really imagine that the Shi'ites of Iraq will not put two-and-two together and take harsh precautions?

One of the sad paradoxes to the sectarian 'voice' adopted by the Gulf leaders to justify their repression of the awakening has been the undercutting of moderate Sunnis, now caught between the rock of being seen as a Western tool, and the hard place of Sunni Salafists just waiting for the chance to displace them.

This article was first posted on Asia Times Online, 22 October 2011. It is reprinted with the author's permission.

www.conflictsforum.org

Notes

1 See shadow.foreignpolicy.com

2 See thecable.foreignpolicy.com

3 See www.champress.net and www.haaretz.com

4 See shadow.foreignpolicy.com

5 Qataris seeking alternative for Waddah Khanfar to manage Al-Jazeera, Al-Intiqad, 20 September 2011.

6 See www.foreignaffairs.com

7 See en.rian.ru

8 See shadow.foreignpolicy.com

9 See www.joshualandis.com

10 See euobserver.com

11 See shadow.foreignpolicy.com

12 See www.foreignaffairs.com

13 See euobserver.com

14 See www.washingtonpost.com

15 See www.foreignaffairs.com

16 See nationalinterest.org