

Veteran US Diplomat Questions Syria Storyline - Focus on Syria Derived From Iran Fixation

"Everyone, especially the media, seems to be relying solely on anti-regime activists for their information"

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The problem with US policy in the Middle East is that it now operates almost entirely at the political level: gone are the days when area experts were the heavyweights in the command center, weaving historical context, relationships and nuance into vital policy decisions.

Today you are more likely to have single-issue interest groups, commercial projects and election cycles impact key deliberations. It's a short-term view: tactical more than strategic and black and white in its approach. Like a high-octane marketing campaign, it is heavily focused on key phrases, scene-setting, and narrative building.

The spotlight on Syria in recent weeks has been intense – the spin, deafening: Regime massacres in Homs, evil Russia and China, a benevolent UN Security Council trying to save Syria, 1982's Hama slaughter resuscitated, and an American ambassador left "disgusted" at the gall of others using veto power.

But take the hysteria down a notch or two, bring the debate back into the hands of measured, experienced observers, and the storyline may be tangibly different. Over the weekend, I had the privilege of receiving an email that reminded me of a time when area experts at the US State Department delivered honest assessments of events so that wiser decisions could be taken.

The missive was from a former US diplomat with service experience in Syria who has asked to remain unnamed. I am publishing the email below in its entirety for the benefit of readers:

I have serious problems with all the talk about military intervention in Syria. Everyone, especially the media, seems to be relying solely on anti-regime activists for their information. How do we know 260 people were killed by the regime in Homs yesterday? That number seems based solely on claims by anti-regime figures and I seriously doubt its accuracy.

I served over three years in Damascus at the US Embassy and I know how difficult it is to sort fact from rumor in that closed political society. We were constantly trying to verify rumors that we had heard about assassinations, regime arrests, etc., and that included the Agency, which was just as much in the dark as everyone else. Today, we have a skeleton

embassy which I am sure is under constant surveillance and with very few personnel to go out and report on what is happening. When I was in Damascus over two years ago, I was less than impressed with the Embassy's sources and with its understanding of the dynamics of what was going on Syria. And the same is true when I talk to officials at the State Department.



U.S. Embassy in Damascus

The media, and to an extent the Administration, have personalized the conflict in Syria as being about Bashar Assad and his family. They have consistently underestimated the sectarian nature of the conflict there. It is not just Bashar Assad and his family that are hanging onto power at all costs, it is the entire Alawi system of control of the country, including the military, the security services and the Baath Party. I believe that Alawites firmly think that if they lose power, the Sunnis will slaughter them, That was one reason Hafez and his brother Rifaat were so ruthless in Hama thirty years ago. And everyone in the West conveniently forgets the campaign of assassinations and suicide bombings carried out in the three or four years before Hama by the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the country. I personally witnessed the aftermath of such bombings in which several hundred people were killed. While the State Department, the CIA and other organs of government may have short historical memories, the people in Syria do not.

There have been few good analyses of the conflict in Syria. With the exception of the journalist Nir Rosen and the International Crisis Group, most reporting has been superficial and biased in favor of opponents of the regime. This is no basis on which to base policy, especially if officials in Washington are contemplating some form of military intervention. We would be opening a Pandora's box of sectarian conflict that could easily spread to Lebanon, Israel, Kurdish areas of Iraq and elsewhere.

One irony of the current situation compared to thirty years ago is Iraq's role. Then, we had reasonably good information that Saddam Hussein was supporting the Brotherhood with arms, explosives and facilitating the smuggling of both across the Syrian-Iraqi border. Today, the Maliki government in Baghdad appears to be supporting the Assad regime. And thirty years ago, we also had information that the Brotherhood leadership was given sanctuary in Jordan by King Hussein and in Saudi Arabia.

I don't think we know how to play in this arena, just as we don't understand how to play in the Afghanistan-Pakistan arena. US military intervention, whether under the guise of NATO or some other umbrella, could have serious unforeseen consequences for the US, Europe and the region. Officials in Washington should have the law of unforeseen consequences hammered into their heads every morning.

These thoughts are from a US diplomat with direct and fairly recent experience in Syria. Why don't we ever hear similarly sober assessments from the horse's mouth in Washington? Part of the reason, of course, is the over-politicization of the policy-making process, which has long been wrested from the hands of able area experts and delivered into the arms of hawks, ideologues and politicians building campaign warchests.

It is worth mentioning that much of the US administration's focus on Syria derives from its

unhealthy fixation on Iran. In supporting Iran's worldview that US and Israeli hegemony in the Middle East must end, Syria has put itself in the crosshairs of American policy priorities.

The New York Times' David Sanger wrote shortly after the Arab Awakening had devoured its first two dictators, Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak:

"Every decision — from Libya to Yemen to Bahrain to Syria — is being examined under the prism of how it will affect what was, until mid-January, the dominating calculus in the Obama administration's regional strategy: how to slow Iran's nuclear progress, and speed the arrival of opportunities for a successful uprising there."

Efforts to undermine Bashar Assad's government were a longstanding policy objective, even in the years before popular revolts hit the wider Middle East in 2011. WikiLeaks has revealed a veritable goldmine of information about Washington's interventions in Syria, which include direct US financial assistance to opposition groups.

Dirty politics and geopolitical mudslinging aside, at the heart of this matter rests an issue that is fundamental to good policy-making: When do handy narratives simply become lies that spawn bad policies?

This WikiLeaks cable from 2006 illustrates Washington's efforts to identify "opportunities" to expose "vulnerabilities" in the Syrian regime and cause sectarian/ethnic division, discord within the military/security apparatus and economic hardship. How will the US achieve this? The cable lists a whole host of Syrian vulnerabilities to be exploited, and then recommends:

"These proposals will need to be fleshed out and converted into real actions and we need to be ready to move quickly to take advantage of such opportunities. Many of our suggestions underline using Public Diplomacy and more indirect means to send messages that influence the inner circle."

Propagandizing the American Public

Public Diplomacy, in effect, means propaganda – which under the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 specifies the terms in which the US government can disseminate information to foreign audiences. In 1972, the Act prohibited domestic access to information intended for foreign audiences – in other words, it became illegal for the US government to propagandize Americans.

But Washington has found many ways around this. After all, US citizens need to be "on board" the myriad overseas military adventures undertaken by successive administrations. How, then, does government stay within the confines of the law while propagandizing Americans so that they are pumped up for wars (Iraq, Afghanistan, maybe Iran), weapons sales to questionable allies (Saudi Arabia and Israel), and human rights violations (Guantanamo, drones)?

The fake story of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) targeting the US and its allies was an essential narrative in the build-up to military intervention in Iraq. Recall then-Secretary of State Colin Powell's testimony about evidence of Saddam's WMD activities and President George W. Bush's State of the Union speech when he falsely accused Iraq of procuring yellowcake uranium from Niger – the media scrutiny of these statements was wholly justified: it is illegal to lie to the American people.

When do handy narratives simply become lies that spawn bad policies?

Officials are careful about how they circumvent the restrictions of Smith-Mundt. The quickest way to feed Americans inaccurate, tainted or sometimes entirely false information is through “leaks.” Peruse any newspaper of record in Washington, New York or Los Angeles and you will see the foreign news sections chock full of leaks from “officials.”

The internet, too, is a natural playground for the dissemination of disinformation. Its vast reach across the globe, its millions of blogs with varying credibility – these lend themselves well to the game of public diplomacy.

Powell’s former Chief of Staff Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson – another ex-official who has spoken candidly about policy and process shortcomings since leaving his post – told me in April 2010: “(Defense Secretary Donald) Rumsfeld and others, for example, just ignored the law. They would put a story in a Sydney newspaper, for example, and then ‘internet it’ back to the United States. So you’re propagandizing the American people.”

Wilkerson insists: “we have a statutory divergence that needs to be fixed first – legislation that says you can’t mix public affairs, which is aimed at the American people, and public diplomacy, which is aimed at the international audience. We need to stop propaganda, period. We need to tell the truth. I understand we don’t give out state secrets, but why don’t we tell the truth?”

The problem with foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, is ultimately about the kinds of people making the decisions – ideologues with clear agendas: against Iran and for Israel; against the Syrian “dictator” but in favor of the Saudi, Bahraini, Yemeni, Qatari ones; against Iranian nuclear capability, defending 200 nukes in Israel; abusing UN veto power (80+ times), deriding others for exercising a veto (Russia, China), and so on and so forth.

“It’s broken – it’s utterly dysfunctional,” Wilkerson says about the decision-making process in government: “They put ideologues in to corral, corner, orchestrate, cajole, push, wheedle the civil servants into doing something that they think ought to be done.”

Back to Syria.

A reporter from a major western cable news network just emailed me about his visit to Syria: “I got back from Homs last month unconvinced that the country was rising up against the Assad regime, and far from convinced that there are any good guys.”

Very little is known about what’s going on in the country. And it is not necessarily because there is limited media there: the Arab League mission report lists 147 foreign and Arab media organizations in Syria. The reason we still do not know what is taking place in Homs is because there is a ferocious battle for narratives between two rigid political mindsets. And the current dominant narrative is the one coming out of Washington – which, according to Wikileaks, has been waiting for “opportunities” to seize upon “vulnerabilities” to undermine the regime of Bashar Assad.

Not give us the truth, mind you. But to pursue a policy objective that US citizens have not agreed upon because they are unaware of the facts.

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