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Article 1.

Asia Times

A golden opportunity for Assad

Sami Moubayed

30 March -- DAMASCUS - Syrians usually go out on a Thursday night, which marks the beginning of their weekend. Last Thursday, however, was noteworthy in particular, as ordinary Syrians celebrated what seemed to be the end of a crisis that had gripped the nation for a week.

Presidential adviser Bouthaina Shaaban gave a press conference at 6 pm on Thursday evening, in response to violent demonstrations in the southern town of Daraa near the border with Jordan. President Bashar al-Assad, she stressed, had given strict orders not to fire at demonstrators with live ammunition - and expressed his sorrow for the senseless loss of life in Daraa.

Shaaban, dressed in black, firmly noted that the people of Daraa "are our sons and our peoples". She promised an immediate investigation into the bloody events there, just hours after Assad had dismissed the governor of the southern city, Faisal Kalthoum, from his duties to appease the town's residents.

In addition to taking immediate action on Daraa, Shaaban promised a 30% salary increase for government employees, major judicial reforms, an end to arbitrary arrests, and a lifting of martial law, which has been in place since March 1963. The political demands of the demonstrators - not only in Daraa but in other Syrian cities as well - were legitimate indeed, she added, as long as they did not resort to violence.

This was only fair, ordinary Syrians seemed to be saying, glad to see the government responding promptly to their political demands. All topics under the sun, Shaaban added, were up for discussion so long

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as they remained in a legal, civilized and logical manner.

The smile on their faces was wiped off, however, by bloody events that took place on Friday, March 25. Violent demonstrations broke out in the midland city of Homs, in the coastal city of Latakia, and in Sanamein, near Daraa, where 12 people were killed (10 of them from the Syrian security forces). Overall estimates put at least 61 people dead in the unrest in Syria.

In Latakia, armed bandits broke into the city, snipping at locals from rooftops, while in Homs, the mob ransacked the Officers' Club, killing one civilian on duty. The mob smashed car windows, set buses and tires ablaze, and fired at locals indiscriminately. News about Syria was suddenly given top priority on TV networks around the world, trumping Yemen, Libya and Japan.

Even the Doha-based al-Jazeera, which has had good relations with the Syrian government for years, could not stay silent and immediately began covering the Syrian demonstrations, both the violent and non-violent ones, as two sides of the same coin.

The message the world seemed to be getting was that Syria was suppressing demonstrators because of political demands, ignoring the fact that while some demonstrations were indeed legitimate, peaceful and ought to be respected, others were armed and very violent.

Authorities immediately drew a clear line between peaceful political demonstrations, which they said would be tolerated, and violent ones with no specific agenda or demands, which certainly would not. No country in the world will tolerate mob rule - especially not one with a famed security reputation like Syria.

Politically, many feared that the chaos and violence of Friday would do away with the reforms promised on Thursday. When Saturday dawned, however, approximately 260 political prisoners were released from jails, followed by another 17 on Sunday. Many of them were Islamists or Kurds who had been behind bars for years.

Martial law - which authorizes arbitrary arrest without needing a warrant - will likely be suspended this week and the cabinet of Ba'athist Prime Minister Mohammad Naji al-Otari (in power since 2003) will probably be sacked. Assad is expected to give a speech this week, outlining the reforms Syrians should expect and setting timetables for their implementation.

If a law allowing for political pluralism is indeed issued, it would immediately challenge, and effectively drop, Article 8 of the constitution, which says that the Ba'ath Party is designated "leader of state and society" in Syria.

Additionally, Syrians are eyeing upcoming parliamentary and municipality elections, hoping that the pre-set quota of the Ba'ath will be done away with forever. Under free and democratic elections, the Ba'athists, or any of their socialist allies in the National Progressive Front (NPF), would fail to control the chamber.

Should the authorities decide that the Ba'ath Party is here to stay, then the 64-year old organization needs a serious and major face-lift, even by testimony of its own members. Its leaders are old and ailing; their internal politics are corrupted, their rhetoric and political programs are outdated, and they have no real power base, certainly not among the younger generation. In most cases, they are completely out of touch with the new realities around them that started in Tunisia and Egypt and are now spreading throughout the rest of North Africa and the Middle East.

Arab backing for Assad is still strong, with the Syrian leader having received messages of support over the past 48 hours from the king of Saudi Arabia, the president of Qatar, the emir of Kuwait, and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Even the United States sees Assad in a different light to other leaders in the Arab world, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton saying this week, "There is a different leader in Syria now, many of the members

of congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he's a reformer."

Most Syrians expect Assad to be the one to launch this "correction movement" within the Syrian system. Leaders lead - it's that simple, and Assad knows what it takes to make his people happy.

Unlike in Egypt and Tunisia, Syrians see Assad as part of the solution in their country, and not, like Hosni Mubarak and Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali, as part of the problem. He is young, closer to their age than both presidents had been to young Egyptians and Tunisians, and has not been around for too long, as the case with Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in Libya or Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Additionally his positions vis-a-vis Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, two topics that are dear to the hearts of grassroots Syrians, have given him a protective shield that other Arab leaders do not enjoy. It is a golden opportunity for the Syrian president to make history - and Syrians are betting on him, rather than on mob violence, to bring change to their country.

This change, they stress, needs to be orderly and non-violent, and only Bashar al-Assad can make that happen.

Sami Moubayed is a university professor, political analyst and Editor-in-Chief of Forward Magazine in Syria.

Article 2.

NYT

The Syrian President I Know

David W. Lesch

March 29, 2011 -- WHERE has President Bashar al-Assad of Syria been this past week?

Thousands of Syrians across the country have staged demonstrations against the government, and dozens of protesters have been reported killed by security forces. The cabinet was dismissed on Tuesday, although that's a meaningless gesture unless it's followed by real reform. Through it all Mr. Assad has remained so quiet that rumors were rampant that he had been overthrown. But while Syrians are desperate for leadership, it's not yet clear what sort of leader Mr. Assad is going to be.

Will he be like his father, Hafez al-Assad, who during three decades in power gave the security forces virtually a free hand to maintain order and sanctioned the brutal repression of a violent Islamist uprising in the early 1980s? Or will he see this as an opportunity to take Syria in a new direction, fulfilling the promise ascribed to him when he assumed the presidency upon his father's death in 2000? Mr. Assad's background suggests he could go either way. He is a licensed ophthalmologist who studied in London and a computer nerd who likes the technological toys of the West; his wife, Asma, born in Britain to Syrian parents, was a banker at J. P. Morgan. On the other hand, he is a child of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the cold war. Contrary to American interests, he firmly believes Lebanon should be within Syria's sphere of influence, and he is a member of a minority Islamic sect, the Alawites, that has had a chokehold on power in Syria for decades.

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In 2004 and 2005, while writing a book on him, I had long interviews with Mr. Assad; after the book was published, I continued to meet with him as an unofficial liaison between Syria and the United States when relations between the two countries deteriorated. In that time I saw Mr. Assad evolve into a confident and battle-tested president. I also saw him being consumed by an inert Syrian system. Slowly, he replaced those of questionable loyalty with allies in the military, security services and in the government. But he does not have absolute power. He has had to bargain, negotiate and manipulate pockets of resistance inside the government and the business community to bring about reforms, like allowing private banks and establishing a stock exchange, that would shift Syria's socialist-based system to a more market-oriented economy.

But Mr. Assad also changed along the way. When I met with him during the Syrian presidential referendum in May 2007, he voiced an almost cathartic relief that the people really liked him. Indeed, the outpouring of support for Mr. Assad would have been impressive if he had not been the only one running, and if half of it wasn't staged. As is typical for authoritarian leaders, he had begun to equate his well-being with that of his country, and the sycophants around him reinforced the notion. It was obvious that he was president for life. Still, I believed he had good intentions, if awkwardly expressed at times.

Even with the escalating violence there, it's important to remember that Syria is not Libya and President Assad is not Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi. The crackdown on protesters doesn't necessarily indicate that he is tightening his grip on power; it may be that the secret police, long given too much leeway, have been taking matters into their own hands.

What's more, anti-Assad elements should be careful what they wish for. Syria is ethnically and religiously diverse and, with the

precipitous removal of central authority, it could very well implode like Iraq. That is why the Obama administration wants him to stay in power even as it admonishes him to choose the path of reform. Today, President Assad is expected to announce that the country's almost 50-year emergency law, used to stifle opposition to the regime, is going to be lifted. But he needs to make other tough choices, including setting presidential term limits and dismantling the police state. He can change the course of Syria by giving up that with which he has become so comfortable. The unrest in Syria may have afforded President Assad one last chance at being something more than simply Hafez al-Assad's son.

David W. Lesch, a professor of Middle East history at Trinity University, is the author of "The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria."

Article 3.

Brookings

The Syrian Rift

Itamar Rabinovich

March 27, 2011 - Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship is facing its biggest crisis since he inherited his father's position in June 2000. Not long ago, in a long, thrilling interview with the Wall Street Journal, Assad spoke about the stability of his regime, in sharp contrast to the crumbling Mubarak regime. But in the end, the shockwaves of the "Arab Spring" also reached Syria. The opposition is nourished by the hatred the Sunni majority in Syria feels for the Alawite regime, but also by widespread feelings that the regime is outmoded, corrupt, and is blocking Syria from entering the central stream of life in the 21st century. There is a feeling of exhaustion in Syria from the regime and the oppression that comes with it, and in Daraa and other cities there is good reason to feel ill at ease. For years, the Syrians have resigned themselves to the unwritten arrangement that the regime gave stability and took away rights and freedom. In the political climate that is being created at present in the Arab world, a large part of the Syrian public wants to cancel the arrangement.

In sharp contrast to Egypt, there is no real difference between the military and the ruling authorities in Syria. Both reflect Alawite hegemony, and the various components of the elite know full well what price they will pay if the regime falls. The oppression and slaughter of the early 1980s is having a dual effect on Syria today. The Sunni majority has a bloody account waiting to be settled with the regime, but many people fear that violent resistance will bring about another bloodbath.

At the moment, the regime has responded with an unsuccessful combination of promises for reform and concessions and violent

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oppression, but apparently this has done nothing to stem the civilian revolt. There are also signs of internal discord within the regime, between those people on the side of far-reaching reforms, and those who claim that such reforms would put the regime in danger. Assad's leadership will be tested on its ability to establish an effective policy and to enforce it on his regime.

Regime change, or an extended period of instability, in Syria would have a far-reaching impact on the Middle East and on Israel's security. First, it would be a strong blow to Iran. Up to now, Iran has mainly benefitted from the recent developments in the region.

Mubarak's fall, the events in Bahrain, and the pressure on Saudi Arabia worked to strengthen the axis of opposition and also drew international attention away from Tehran's nuclear program. Syria is the keystone of the pro-Iran axis. Weakening the Assad regime, to say nothing of its collapse, would be a blow to Iran, Hamas and Hizbullah.

Second, this situation gives breathing space to opponents of the Iranian camp, starting with the moderate camp in Lebanon, but it also creates a temptation for Syria and Iran to ease the pressure on Syria by heating up the conflict with Israel.

The continued conflicts and the possibility of violent repression have created a dilemma for the United States and its allies. The international involvement in Libya was justified by arguments that Qaddafi should not be allowed to slaughter Libyan civilians looking for freedom and democracy. Obama and his partners will be asked to explain why they are not intervening in order to prevent bloodshed in Syria.

At the moment, Israel's "Syrian option" will be shelved. This option is always hanging in the air as an alternative to the Palestinian track. In recent years, we have heard many times that the Israeli defense establishment prefers this track, because of the advantages of

speaking to a stable regime, hurting the Iranian axis and as an opening to change in Lebanon. Others, most notably the prime minister, refused to concede the Golan Heights. This camp now claims, quite rightly, that there is no sense in making a deal like that with a regime whose stability is strongly in question.

In this situation, Israeli policy requires a correct analysis of developments in Syria. [It also requires] security readiness, conversation and strong coordination with the United States and other allies, but also an open mind [to capitalize] on the opportunities presented by the new situation.

Itamar Rabinovich was the Israel ambassador to the United States from 1993 to 1996. He was then the President of Tel Aviv University. He is currently a visiting professor at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Article 4.

The New Republic

Why Has the U.S. Been So Soft on Bashar Assad?

Martin Peretz

March 29, 2011 - I don't know where to begin. So let me start with Bashar Al Assad—whose father, Hafez, Jimmy Carter wrote he had higher regard for than any other leader in the Middle East. Barack Obama never said anything quite that hagiographic about the son. But Hillary Clinton, his pliant chief diplomat, told “Face the Nation” on Sunday that the Syrian president was considered by members of Congress from both parties to be a “reformer.” How many senators and representatives will own up to Hillary's characterization? It is hokum. The hokum started long ago. One can locate it in time: June 14, 2000, in a New York Times article by Susan Sachs headlined, “The Shy Young Doctor at Syria's Helm.” Doctor this and doctor that. And, of course, “Dr. Bashar.” There is nothing like a first name to humanize a tyrant. “Fidel,” for example. And more: general practitioner, ophthalmologist, director of the Syrian Society for Information Technology. Most Syrians have expressed public confidence in Dr. Assad, even while conceding that he is young and inexperienced. They know him as the director of the Syrian Scientific Society for Information Technology, which offers computer courses, though only a small percentage of Syrians can afford luxury items like computers. Thanks to an orchestrated campaign in the state news media to credit him with fighting corruption and promoting a more open economy, Dr. Assad also is seen as a beacon of hope for a new, more relaxed Syria. He recently told The Washington Post that he

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personally favored lifting all of hidebound Syria's restrictions on what people read, watch on television or discover on the Internet. "As a point of principle, I would like everybody to be able to see everything," he was quoted as saying. "The more you see, the more you improve." But others, Dr. Assad added, have their reservations. It went on more or less like this for maybe seven or eight years when the reality purveyors suddenly caught on that the dictator's boy was a dictator himself. Until, that is, this last weekend with the aforementioned discovery of the secretary of state that he was a "reformer." The president must have felt similarly because he constantly pressed on Israel the view that Assad was a reasonable and trustworthy man. Or was it that he believed the United States and the Jewish state were so tainted by their histories of haughty dealings with Arabs that Israel certainly needed to take the first perilous steps to conciliate its northern neighbor? I am inclined to the second explanation. In a way, though, he'd boxed himself into a corner. Having forced both Israel and the Palestinian Authority into the cul de sac of settlements as the pivotal issue among the parties (a matter already implicitly but not definitively resolved between the two antagonists), the president needed another key to unlock and unblock the conflict. No scenario looked especially hopeful, not at least to true realists. But the White House thought it had insufficient cachet with the Damascus dictator. So, rather than pressing Syria to stop its arms deliveries to Hezbollah, it began to press Israel on the Golan. Why Obama thought the Golan Heights could be the big opener in the peace process is anybody's guess. The fact is that the Palestinians do not care a fig for the Golan, and an Israeli concession on it would not be seen as—and would not be—a concession to anyone but the Ba'athists. Who, of course, cannot be trusted on anything. Which is one reason why Jerusalem was not inclined to experiment on a big swath of high ground that had been the source of death and

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destruction for first two decades of statehood. I believe that it would actually be more difficult for international interlocutors to persuade the Israelis to give up the Heights than to relinquish parts of east Jerusalem, one reason being that this territory is and was virtually without Syrians, except Syrian soldiers, in 1967: a few Druze, yes; two tens of thousands of Israelis now, yes. Here the principle must be, like the principle from all just wars, that to the aggressed-upon victor belongs the spoils. In any case, Assad's always shaky rule over Syria is now exposed as just that. And just that because it is not based on anyone's consent but on coercion and domestic terror. The governing 12 percent minority of the Alawite sect is Syria's equivalent to Saddam Hussein's clan of Tikriti Sunnis, both having ruled cruelly and bloodily. Indeed, the Assads have nursed a particular grudge against the Palestinians, almost all of them. They had little truck with Arafat and sided in the intra-Palestinian wars with the secular "socialist" schismatics who'd headquartered themselves in Syria's capital. This did not preclude the first family from enabling the internal sectarian bloodletting that is the program of both (Sunni) Hamas in Gaza and (Shia) Hezbollah in Lebanon, which incidentally Damascus still deems its own. I have not mentioned the ambitions of these terrorist groups against Israel. In a tangled Sunday dispatch from Washington, Mark Landler reports that the "deepening chaos in Syria ... could dash any remaining hopes for a Middle East peace agreement, several analysts said." In truth, however, there was almost no hope for such an agreement even before the challenge in the streets. Anyway, which seasoned analysts? The one he quotes is Martin Indyk, who almost always believes that tout va bien, but especially when things are going horridly. Well, we don't really know how badly or, for that matter, how well things are going. Still, there is something exhilarating in the Libyan rising against one of the two or three leading political

crackpots of the age. And the support of that rising by Western democracies through NATO. That Obama was less than resolute in this enterprise is something we have come to expect. Of course, liberal Democrats have tried to make a virtue of the failing. The National Security Network issued an exemplary statement: "The effective handoff to NATO command and growing Arab state participation show that the United States can lead by letting others out in front." This is double talk ... or maybe agitprop. The Arab League actually beat a hasty retreat from its much publicized endorsement of a no-fly zone over Libya. As for "growing Arab state participation," all that this means is Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Hey, let me admit, that's still more than anyone had reason to expect. A cool accounting of what's been accomplished through "Odyssey Dawn" can be read in yesterday's PolicyWatch by Jeffrey White, published by the Washington Institute. As for Egypt, I cling to the hope that its people will realize social and economic progress with some political and legal justice. But if the new government is overwhelmed by the Muslim Brotherhood, neither of these (in any case) dicey hopes will be realized. The Brotherhood is actually a movement of the restoration of ideals and policies, some more than a millennium old, others going back only centuries, which either way inhibited education, industry, gender equality, elementary fairness. The Shia revolution in Iran is the very model for its Sunni enemy on the Nile. If Cairo reneges on its treaty with Israel, Egypt will find itself in another drama out of which it will not emerge either victorious or prosperous. An article by Barry Rubin in Monday's Jerusalem Post argues that "another Israel-Hamas war is inevitable" precisely because the theology of Egypt itself will be transformed under Islamist rule. Just yesterday I received an e-mail from a dear (and brilliant) Moroccan friend in Marrakech musing on the present or rather future state of Arab affairs. He writes: "If they don't care

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about Israel as their disciplined and civilized neighbor they will, as usual, accomplish nothing.” Of course, independent Arab intellectuals are a rare species in the world they inhabit. So this is not a widely held point of view. And it is sparsely held especially in Syria where the Muslim Brotherhood has deep and broad rooting. Take your choice: Assad is allied with Hezbollah and Iran, militant Shi’ism on the march. Assad’s embittered enemies are soldiers of the Sunni sword. Obama tried his luck with Assad as, forgive the recollection, he also did with Dr. Ahmadinejad. The president then followed the Saudi monarch, King Abdullah, in his royal bankrolling effort to lure the eye doctor away from Nasrallah. Even the dynast’s billions couldn’t do the trick. Barack Obama will not reflect on how in just a bit over two years he got himself and America into this fix. POST-SCRIPT: Yes, it is remarkable how President Assad has eluded the opposition of the big powers to his actually frantic efforts to secure an atomic arsenal. The only European power that has any historic interest in Syria is France. When the Brits established their 20th century empire in Iraq, France did it in Syria (and Lebanon). In any case, Sarkozy plays his hands very carefully and chintzily. Libya is all it can handle now and, of course, Libya is also closer to home. .. but not as close as it is to Italy. (You may remember that the island of Lampedusa, now in the news so much as the destination point for bedraggled Libyan refugees, was the home of Giuseppe de Lampedusa, the author of the novel *The Leopard* and the setting for Visconti's film of the same name, starring Alain Delon, Claudia Cardinale and Burt Lancaster. Ah, those were the days!) No such romance associated with Syria, a dure and bitter place always.

Martin Peretz is the editor-in-chief emeritus of The New Republic.

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Article 5.

Agence Global

Guts and Guns and Values

Rami G. Khouri

30 Mar 2011 - ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates -- Three things happened simultaneously this week that point the way to a looming new era in the Middle East: U.S. President Barack Obama's speech Monday laying down the reasons for American military involvement in Libya, the involvement in that campaign by Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the continued spread of Arab citizen revolts. All three are significant historical developments in their own right. Together, they usher in important possibilities for change in the Middle East that could positively impact the entire world.

The most fascinating of the three developments may be the involvement of the UAE's and Qatar's military in the Libyan no-fly zone. This coincides with the UAE and Saudi Arabia sending troops to neighboring Bahrain, to help quell the demands of citizens there for equal rights and constitutional change. For three of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries moving their troops around the region is a novel development. The contradiction that these troops in the case of Bahrain aim to stop the citizen revolt for human and civil rights, while in Libya they aim to support a similar revolt for equality, dignity and credible constitutionalism, is probably a sign of political maturity -- because all governments act in inconsistent and hypocritical ways when it comes to defending what they see as their national interest.

I am writing this during a working trip to Dubai and Abu Dhabi, where the prospects of a citizen uprising similar to the ones unfolding across the region is zero, though various degrees of agitation in GCC compatriot states like Saudi Arabia, Oman and Bahrain is already a

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reality. For the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to be moving and using their troops in other countries across the Middle East and North Africa will spark serious debates for a long time to come. There is no doubt, though, that these moves represent a historic turning point, and probably mark the birth of GCC countries trying to actually forge tangible foreign policies in which they use their assets to back their principles -- however contradictory the two may be in the Bahraini and Libyan arenas. That Qatar recognizes the transitional national council in Libya as the sole legitimate representative of the Libyan people is part of this process.

These decisive moves mark a step forward for these three GCC states' advance on the path towards real statehood, but they also raise two nagging issues. The first is how deep or satisfying that statehood is when the citizens of those countries have no direct input into such foreign policies that are carried out in their name. The second is the glaring contradiction in the use of military power to simultaneously suppress and to support Arab citizen uprisings in different places. These are questions that the countries themselves must grapple with. For the meantime, it is heartening to see them become more self-assertive, after decades of docility and apparent acquiescence to the policy priorities of foreign powers.

President Obama's speech about the events in Libya was an important and welcomed corrective to previous American policies, and also struck a refreshing balance between guts and guns -- the reference to core American principles and the implementation of actual foreign policies on the ground (or mostly in the air, in the Libyan case). Obama struck the right tone between the idealism of seeing America's national interest as stopping a potential massacre that would have "stained the conscience of the world," on the one hand, and mustering Arab-international military action to prevent what he called a looming genocide in Benghazi. He also

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acknowledged the dangers of moving in to remove Muammar Gaddafi from power, noting correctly that, “To be blunt, we went down that road in Iraq...regime change there took eight years, thousands of American and Iraqi lives, and nearly a trillion dollars. That is not something we can afford to repeat in Libya.”

It is refreshing to see the United States using its diplomatic and military power in congruence with Arab states and international legitimacy, as manifested in UN Security Council resolutions. If Washington continues to act in a manner that can be interpreted as supporting the expanding pan-Arab citizen revolt, and assists those brave Arab men and women who risk their lives to demand their citizenship and human rights from their autocratic governments, we may be witnessing the birth of an exciting new era in which Arab and American values actually converge, for the best interest of both parties.

The air remains clouded with hypocrisy and double standards for now, and perhaps some conflicting interests when it comes to issues like Israel and Iran. Decades of incompetence and self-destructive policies by Arabs and Americans will not change overnight. This week, though, we may have glimpsed the first signs that such a change is possible.

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Article 6.

NYT

Looking for Luck in Libya

Thomas L. Friedman

March 29, 2011 -- There is an old saying in the Middle East that a camel is a horse that was designed by a committee. That thought came to my mind as I listened to President Obama trying to explain the intervention of America and its allies in Libya — and I don't say that as criticism. I say it with empathy. This is really hard stuff, and it's just the beginning.

When an entire region that has been living outside the biggest global trends of free politics and free markets for half a century suddenly, from the bottom up, decides to join history — and each one of these states has a different ethnic, tribal, sectarian and political orientation and a loose coalition of Western and Arab states with mixed motives trying to figure out how to help them — well, folks, you're going to end up with some very strange-looking policy animals. And Libya is just the first of many hard choices we're going to face in the “new” Middle East.

How could it not be? In Libya, we have to figure out whether to help rebels we do not know topple a terrible dictator we do not like, while at the same time we turn a blind eye to a monarch whom we do like in Bahrain, who has violently suppressed people we also like — Bahraini democrats — because these people we like have in their ranks people we don't like: pro-Iranian Shiite hard-liners. All the while in Saudi Arabia, leaders we like are telling us we never should have let go of the leader who was so disliked by his own people — Hosni Mubarak — and, while we would like to tell the Saudi leaders to take a hike on this subject, we can't because they have so much oil and money that we like. And this is a lot like our dilemma in Syria

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where a regime we don't like — and which probably killed the prime minister of Lebanon whom it disliked — could be toppled by people who say what we like, but we're not sure they all really believe what we like because among them could be Sunni fundamentalists, who, if they seize power, could suppress all those minorities in Syria whom they don't like.

The last time the Sunni fundamentalists in Syria tried to take over in 1982, then-President Hafez al-Assad, one of those minorities, definitely did not like it, and he had 20,000 of those Sunnis killed in one city called Hama, which they certainly didn't like, so there is a lot of bad blood between all of them that could very likely come to the surface again, although some experts say this time it's not like that because this time, and they could be right, the Syrian people want freedom for all. But, for now, we are being cautious. We're not trying nearly as hard to get rid of the Syrian dictator as we are the Libyan one because the situation in Syria is just not as clear as we'd like and because Syria is a real game-changer. Libya implodes. Syria explodes.

Welcome to the Middle East of 2011! You want the truth about it? You can't handle the truth. The truth is that it's a dangerous, violent, hope-filled and potentially hugely positive or explosive mess — fraught with moral and political ambiguities. We have to build democracy in the Middle East we've got, not the one we want — and this is the one we've got.

That's why I am proud of my president, really worried about him, and just praying that he's lucky.

Unlike all of us in the armchairs, the president had to choose, and I found the way he spelled out his core argument on Monday sincere: "Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different. And, as

president, I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action.”

I am glad we have a president who sees America that way. That argument cannot just be shrugged off, especially when confronting a dictator like Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi. But, at the same time, I believe that it is naïve to think that we can be humanitarians only from the air — and now we just hand the situation off to NATO, as if it were Asean and we were not the backbone of the NATO military alliance, and we’re done.

I don’t know Libya, but my gut tells me that any kind of decent outcome there will require boots on the ground — either as military help for the rebels to oust Qaddafi as we want, or as post-Qaddafi peacekeepers and referees between tribes and factions to help with any transition to democracy. Those boots cannot be ours. We absolutely cannot afford it — whether in terms of money, manpower, energy or attention. But I am deeply dubious that our allies can or will handle it without us, either. And if the fight there turns ugly, or stalemates, people will be calling for our humanitarian help again. You bomb it, you own it.

Which is why, most of all, I hope President Obama is lucky. I hope Qaddafi’s regime collapses like a sand castle, that the Libyan opposition turns out to be decent and united and that they require just a bare minimum of international help to get on their feet. Then U.S. prestige will be enhanced and this humanitarian mission will have both saved lives and helped to lock another Arab state into the democratic camp.

Dear Lord, please make President Obama lucky.

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Article 7.

NYT

Why Palestinians Should Learn about the Holocaust

Mohammed Dajani Daoudi and Robert Satloff

March 29, 2011 -- Should Palestinian and other Arab schools teach their students about the Holocaust?

This is not an academic question. Many Palestinian and Arab political organizations recently pounced on reports that a new human rights curriculum being prepared for use in Gaza schools operated by UNRWA, the United Nations aid agency for Palestinian refugees, might include historical references to the Holocaust. Their reaction underscores the urgency of answering this fundamental question: Should Palestinians (and other Arabs) learn about the Holocaust? Should this historical tragedy be included in the Arab curriculum? We -- a Muslim-Palestinian social scientist and a Jewish-American historian -- believe the answer is yes. Indeed, there are many reasons why it's important, even essential, that Arabs learn about the Holocaust. And much of this has nothing to do with Jews at all. One of the sad realities of many modern Arab societies is that Arab students have been denied history, their own and the world's. For decades, millions of Arabs have lived under autocrats resentful of the legacy of the leader they replaced and fearful of the leader-to-come. Although Arabs revere the study, writing and teaching of history, and have produced many famous historians, their rulers often tend to view history as a threat. The result is that many historians in Arab countries are more like the court chroniclers of long-dead dynasties, and entire chapters of history have been expunged from the curricula that Arab governments teach their students.

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This is particularly true of the Holocaust. A world that has known terrible atrocities has seen none greater than the effort by Nazi Germany and its allies to exterminate the Jewish people. So methodical, so vicious and so exhaustive was the Nazi effort that a new word was coined to describe it -- "genocide." All genocides before and since are judged against the Holocaust. To the extent that we can prevent genocide in the future -- an uphill task, given the record of the last few decades -- understanding what gives rise to it is essential. Without discussing the Holocaust, discussing genocide is meaningless. But Palestinians, and Arabs more generally, know little about the Holocaust and what they do know is often skewed by the perverted prism of Arab popular culture, from the ranting of religious extremists to the distortions of certain satellite television channels to the many ill-informed authors. What happened to the Jews during World War II is not taught in Arab schools or universities, either as part of world history or as a lesson in genocide awareness or as an atrocity that ought not to be repeated. Arabs have nothing to fear from opening their eyes to this chapter of human history. As the Koran says: "And say: My Lord, advance me in knowledge." If Arabs knew more about the Holocaust in particular and genocide in general, perhaps Arab voices would be more forceful in trying to stop similar atrocities. Palestinians have more specific reasons to learn about the Holocaust. We do not urge Holocaust education just so Palestinians can understand more sympathetically the legacy of Jewish suffering and its impact on the psyche of the Jewish people. While it is important for both Palestinians and Israelis to appreciate the historical legacies that have shaped their strategic outlook and national identities, teaching Palestinians about the Holocaust for this reason alone runs the risk of feeding the facile equation that "the Jews have the Holocaust and the Palestinians have the Nakba." We urge Palestinians to learn about the Holocaust so

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they can be armed with knowledge to reject the comparison because, if it were broadly avoided, peace would be even more attainable than it is today. With all the suffering Palestinians have endured, their struggle with Israel is still, at its core, a political conflict, one that can end through diplomacy and agreements. Today diplomacy is deadlocked, yet the nature of politics is that tomorrow that reality may change. The Holocaust was not a political conflict: the very idea of a "Nazi-Jewish peace process" is absurd. Teaching the Holocaust to Palestinians is a way to ensure they do not go down the blind alley of believing their peace process with Israel is as hopeless as one would have been between Nazis and Jews. Discussion of the Holocaust would underscore the idea that peace is attainable. Almost two years ago millions of Muslim Arabs listened carefully when President Barack Obama, speaking in Cairo, respectfully recited sentences from the Koran and proclaimed America's endorsement of a two-state solution to achieve a durable Israeli-Palestinian peace. Few, however, remember that he also condemned Holocaust denial. Now that the Arab masses are applying the universal lessons of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in taking down their authoritarian governments, it is time they take back the learning of history, too. That includes teaching their children the universal lessons of the Holocaust.

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