

The Shimon Post



13 October, 2011

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Article 1.

Foreign Policy

The Iranian Connection

Martin Indyk

October 12, 2011 -- While it may not be immediately obvious, there is an important connection between the two big Middle East stories that broke Tuesday, Oct. 11 -- the negotiated prisoner transfer agreement between Hamas and Israel for the release of Gilad Shalit and the arrest of Iranian Quds Force agent Manssor Arbabsiar -- a connection that demonstrates Iran's fading influence since the emergence of the Arab Spring.

Seldom is the Iranian hand in terrorism revealed as clearly as it was Tuesday in the careful details provided by the U.S. Justice Department. The Iranian regime, operating through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), does its best to operate without fingerprints as it deploys terrorism as a tool of its own brand of statecraft. But here in phone transcripts and wire transfers is evidence that "elements of the Iranian government" -- specifically senior officers of the IRGC's Quds Force -- were responsible for ordering and orchestrating a brazen terrorist assassination against the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubeir, in a downtown Washington restaurant.

The Iranian hand in Hamas's terrorist activity has also been revealed in the past, particularly in arms shipments bound for Gaza that were intercepted by the Israeli Navy. But Iran's role in Hamas's holding of Shalit has been less obvious and little remarked. The negotiations for his release have been tortuous and long-winded, mediated by German and Egyptian intelligence officials. At critical moments in the past, Iran intervened via Khaled Meshaal, Hamas's external leader, to scotch the deal. Tehran's motives were fairly obvious: The best way

for Iran to spread its influence into the Arab heartland is to stoke the flames of conflict with Israel. Any prisoner swap deal between Hamas and Israel would take fuel off the fire.

But Iran's influence over Hamas's external leadership has been slipping lately. Based in Damascus, Syria, Meshaal and his colleagues have found themselves in an awkward position as the Syrian awakening has raged around them. As kinsmen of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood whose Syrian branch has become a target of President Bashar al-Assad's Alawite thugs, they could not support the regime, even though their Iranian masters demanded they do so. Instead, as the going got tough, Meshaal got going, opening talks with the Egyptian interim military government about relocating from Damascus to Cairo (where, as a result of the revolution, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood had gained new influence). The price: reconciliation with Abu Mazen (Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas) and acquiescence in a prisoner swap deal with Israel.

The Fatah-Hamas reconciliation deal was announced in Cairo in May. In mid-July, Egyptian mediators conveyed a new, more reasonable Hamas offer to Israel that triggered negotiations that culminated in Tuesday's prisoner swap announcement. In short, the Hamas-Israel deal may be a victory for Hamas, for Egypt-Israel relations -- and for the Shalit family, of course -- but it's also a blow to Iran. It indicates that the Iranians have lost control of one of their key Arab terrorist proxies to Egypt, their archrival for influence in the Arab world.

Iran's other Arab archrival is Saudi Arabia. Americans tend to view Tuesday's revelation of an Iranian terrorist plot through the prism of a brazen attempt to promote an attack on American soil. But the IRGC clearly designed it as a twofer, assassinating a symbol of the Saudi regime at the same time as it murdered American diners in downtown

Washington. We've seen Iran do this before: The 1996 Khobar Towers bombing by Saudi Hezbollah killed 19 U.S. soldiers on Saudi soil.

What can we conclude from the byzantine connections between Tuesday's two events? Contrary to the confident predictions that Iran would be the beneficiary of the Arab Spring, its efforts to spread its influence into the Arab heartland are now in trouble. It is losing its Hamas proxy to Egypt. Its Syrian ally is reeling. Turkey has turned against it. When the Iranian regime finds itself in a corner, it typically lashes out. Perhaps that explains why Arbabsiar's Iranian handlers told him to "just do it quickly. It's late...."

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Article 2.

Wall Street Journal

When Tehran Attacks

Emanuele Ottolenghi

October 13, 2011 -- On Tuesday, the U.S. government reported that it had foiled an Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the U.S., along with planned bomb attacks against the Saudi and Israeli embassies in Washington and possibly in Buenos Aires.

The plotters are linked to the shadowy Qods Force, a special branch of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps or Pasdaran. According to an April 2010 U.S. Department of Defense report, "the Iranian regime uses the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) to clandestinely exert military, political, and economic power to advance Iranian national interests abroad. IRGC-QF global activities include: gathering tactical intelligence; conducting covert diplomacy; providing training, arms and financial support to surrogate groups and terrorist organizations; and facilitating some of Iran's provision of humanitarian and economic support to Islamic causes."

Though the Pentagon clearly sees the Qods Force as an integral part of the Iranian regime, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder yesterday suggested that "factions of the Iranian government" had directed the plot. U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein said in a statement that "we must learn how high in the Iranian government this alleged conspiracy reaches." She is right to be prudent, but the Qods Force are no more independent in their actions than the Navy SEALs would be in theirs. To doubt the Iranian regime's responsibility in the thwarted attack is to misunderstand its nature, or to somehow fall prey to the delusion that when an Iranian connection appears behind a terror plot, its perpetrators have gone rogue or are acting on behalf of some dark

faction to undermine a nonexistent "moderate" camp within the regime. Of course, the Qods Force is rogue, but no more so than the regime that directs its actions. Moreover, all members of the Iranian government are fundamentalists. The differences between them are tactical, and the only question about the thwarted plot in Washington is why the regime chose to escalate matters now—not whether the regime was behind it. Though details of the plot are still scarce, parallels with previous regime-sanctioned murders are emerging. As in the past, Tehran appears to have drafted Iranians living in the destination country, using as leverage their family connections or friendships forged during the Iran-Iraq war, the early years of the Islamic Revolution or service in the Pasdaran. The Qods Force supplies help, training, logistics and financing. And the orders come from the center of the regime itself.

As Roya Hakakian brilliantly documents in her book "Assassins of the Turquoise Palace" (Grove Press, 2011), Tehran's 1992 attack on the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin originated in the highest echelons of Iran's regime. The names of murdered Iranian dissidents over the years have turned up on a list drawn by the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, top government officials made the decisions to go after them, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei approved their decisions, and the Pasdaran worked out the logistics of each operation.

Such massacres go back almost 20 years, to an era of Iranian politics when pragmatism supposedly supplanted radicalism under the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Yet, behind this smokescreen of moderation, state-sanctioned murderers went on a rampage. The same Qods Force allegedly involved in the Washington plot also appear to have been behind two terror attacks in Buenos Aires: one against the Israeli embassy in 1992 and one against a Jewish cultural center in 1994, which left more than a hundred people dead. Argentina has indicted a handful of Iranian officials for the

1994 bombings, including current Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi, who was commanding officer of the Qods Force in 1994; then-President Rafsanjani; former Revolutionary Guards Commander and later presidential candidate Mohsen Rezai; and Ali Fallahian, who was minister of intelligence in 1994.

This time is no different. Iranian agents couldn't have carried out such an operation unless core members of Iran's leadership, likely including Khamenei himself, had given them their blessing. Every member of the Pasdaran is bound by oath to the Supreme Leader. That oath is not limited to personal loyalty. Rather, it is a solemn commitment to uphold the foundational religious doctrine of the Islamic Republic, according to which the Supreme Leader is God's shadow on earth and the final interpreter of Islamic justice. When the Qods Force carries out operations like the U.S. government reported this week, it is to fulfill its duties under that oath, not to violate it. We will learn more of this story in the days and weeks ahead. But one thing should be clear already: Responsibility lies at the doorsteps of Iran's regime and its leaders. They should be made to pay a heavy price for their murderous intent.

Mr. Ottolenghi is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and the author of "Pasdaran: Inside Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards' Corps" (FDD Press, 2011).

Article 3.

The Washington Post

Those Keystone Iranians

David Ignatius

October 13 -- When White House officials first heard an informant's report last spring of an Iranian plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to Washington, they found it implausible. They asked the same question we all have been puzzling over since the indictment Tuesday of the alleged plotters:

If the Iranians planned such a sensitive operation, why would they delegate the job to Mansour Arbabsiar, an Iranian American former used-car dealer, and a hit team drawn from a Mexican drug cartel? To say it sounded like a spy novel is unfair to the genre. The wacky plot was closer to that of an Elmore Leonard "caper" novel, along the lines of "Get Shorty."

But over months, officials at the White House and the Justice Department became convinced the plan was real. One big reason is that the CIA and other intelligence agencies gathered information corroborating the informant's juicy allegations — and showing that the plot had support from the top leadership of the elite Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, the covert-action arm of the Iranian government.

It was this intelligence collected in Iran — not tips from someone inside the Mexican drug mafia — that led the Treasury Department to impose sanctions Tuesday on four senior members of the Quds Force who allegedly were "connected" to a plot to murder the Saudi ambassador. The alleged conspirators included Qassem Soleimani, head of the Quds Force, and three deputies who allegedly "coordinated" the scheme.

Let's make two assumptions: The first is that the allegations made by the prosecutors about Arbabsiar are true. This seems likely, given that he's a cooperating witness. The second is that Quds Force operatives were willing to talk with Arbabsiar about a covert operation in the United States. That, again, seems pretty clear from the transcript of the Oct. 4 telephone call Arbabsiar made to his main Quds Force contact, Gholam Shakuri, under prosecutors' direction.

The puzzle is why the Iranians would undertake such a risky operation, and with such embarrassingly poor tradecraft. Soleimani and his group are some of the savviest clandestine operators in the world. In past columns, I've likened him to "Karla," the diabolically clever Russian spymaster in John le Carre's novels. Why would the Iranian Karla turn to such a bunch of screwballs?

Here's the answer offered by senior U.S. officials: The Iranians are stressed, at home and abroad, in ways that are leading them to engage in riskier behavior.

Officials say Quds Force operations have been more aggressive in several theaters: in Syria, where the Iranian operatives are working covertly to help protect the embattled regime of President Bashar al-Assad; in Iraq, where the Quds Force this year stepped up attacks against departing U.S. forces; in Afghanistan, where they have been arming the Taliban; in Azerbaijan, where they have been more aggressive in projecting Iranian influence; and in Bahrain, where their operatives worked to support and manipulate last spring's uprising against the Khalifa government. (Shakuri, who was indicted Tuesday, is said to have helped plan Quds Force operations in Bahrain.)

But why the use of Mexican drug cartels? U.S. officials say that isn't as implausible as it sounds. The Iranians don't have the infrastructure to operate smoothly in the United States. They would want to use proxies, and ones that would give them "deniability."

“They’re very willing to use all kinds of proxies to achieve specific clandestine foreign-policy goals,” says a senior U.S. official who has been briefed on intelligence reports.

It would mark a significant escalation for Iran to conduct terror operations inside the United States. But such attacks would come against the background of a secret war in the shadows that began in 1983, when the predecessor to the Quds Force recruited Lebanese Shiite bombers to destroy the U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut, killing more than 300. The organization was then known internally (by the few who knew of it) simply as “Birun Marzi,” or “outside borders.” Then it took the cover name “Department 9000,” and later, in deference to the Arabic name for Jerusalem, Quds Force. A final factor in this unlikely plot is the political turmoil in Tehran. The Quds Force is seen by analysts as the executive-action arm of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, who is in a bitter battle with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. During this feud, the Iranian ministries of foreign affairs and intelligence have increasingly been hobbled, leaving the field to the Quds Force. It’s a chaotic situation tailor-made for risk-takers, score-settlers and freelancers.

Article 4.

The Daily Beast

The Oil Wars

Andrew Scott Cooper

October 13, 2011 -- The alleged Iranian plot to blow up Saudi Arabia's ambassador in Washington made for blazing headlines even as it obscured a deeper truth: Iran and Saudi Arabia have been engaged in a different sort of war of attrition over the past few decades, with economics, not explosives, the weapon of choice. Both regimes are keenly aware that although bullets may kill, they can't bankrupt: only a sudden collapse in oil revenue can do that.

Skeptics who find it implausible that the oil markets can be harnessed as a weapon, and that oil can be turned into a financial super bomb to destabilize a national economy, should heed the words of a leading member of the Saudi royal family. Prince Turki al-Faisal, previously his country's head of intelligence and ambassador to Washington, has long enjoyed a reputation for frank talk. Three and a half months ago, he delivered an address to a select group of NATO officials at an air base deep in the heart of the British countryside. In his remarks, the prince fired a shot across the bows of the Iranian regime.

This past year, the Saudi royal family was caught off-guard by the Arab Spring uprisings and badly shaken by the overthrow of old friends and allies in Egypt and Tunisia. The Saudis blame their neighbor Iran for inciting and stoking the troubles as part of a sinister plot to divide, weaken, and eventually topple the region's conservative Sunni monarchies. Prince Turki made it clear that after six months of being on the defensive, the Saudi royal family had rallied and was about to fight its corner by unleashing the most powerful weapon in its arsenal: the kingdom's massive oil reserves.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, jeered Prince Turki, was “dysfunctional,” a “paper tiger,” though one with “steel claws” whose survival depended on its ability to cash in on high oil prices “to maintain a level of economic prosperity that is just enough to pacify its people.” The implication was that Iran’s reliance on a single revenue stream to prop up a sclerotic political structure had left the regime in Tehran vulnerable to sabotage.

The Saudis, continued Prince Turki, were quite prepared to use their swing power as the world’s biggest oil producer to “squeeze” the Iranian economy. They could presumably do this by opening the spigots to flood the market with cheap oil, enough cheap oil indeed to force prices down and deprive Iran’s rulers of billions of dollars in government revenue necessary to buy social tranquility at home. Flooding the market is economic warfare on a grand scale, the oil industry’s equivalent of dropping the bomb on a rival. The prince’s threat sounds like a diabolical plot best suited for a novel--holding the world economy to ransom by manipulating commodity prices to settle scores with a neighbor--until you realize it’s been done before. Thirty-five years ago the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries was paralyzed by a dispute over whether to approve a big increase in the price of oil. At that time, Iran and not Saudi Arabia dominated the cartel’s decision-making process, and Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi favored a double-digit oil price increase against the express wishes of the Ford administration in Washington.

Recently declassified U.S. government documents reveal that in the summer and fall of 1976, in the midst of the Ford-Carter presidential campaign, President Gerald Ford’s economics’ advisers worried that another big surge in fuel costs might trigger a global financial collapse. Three years earlier, the shah had engineered the “oil shock” that saw oil prices rocket to new highs and shook the foundations of

Western prosperity. To pay their exorbitant oil bills, countries in southern Europe took out huge loans from private lenders and banks on Wall Street, including Bank of America, Citibank, Chase Manhattan and Morgan. The banks lent so much money so quickly that by late 1976 they were dangerously overextended, even as European governments were pushed closer to insolvency. The fear of Alan Greenspan and others in the administration was that Portugal, Italy, and Spain might default on their debt repayments and unleash a devastating financial contagion.

When the shah refused to forgo OPEC's proposed end-of-year oil price increase—Iran's economy was hurting too, and a fresh infusion of oil revenue was needed to help the government pay its bills—the White House turned to the Saudis for help. In return for a series of favors, the Saudis agreed to undercut the higher price offered by the shah and the rest of OPEC by flooding the market with cheap oil. It was a tactic that amounted to a hostile takeover of the cartel and one with devastating consequences for Iran's limping economy.

The Saudis wanted to teach the shah a lesson—they feared his military and nuclear ambitions—but they got more than they bargained for when the abrupt collapse of Iran's oil revenue in early 1977 destabilized the country's economy, caused a financial crisis, and shook the political foundations of the Pahlavi regime just as popular discontent against the shah was cresting. "We're broke," the shah lamented when Iran's oil production collapsed 38 percent in just nine days, the staggering equivalent of 2 million barrels of oil a day. The causes of the 1979 Iranian revolution were complex and cannot be simplified in conspiratorial terms or explained away by one or two trigger causes. Still, the Saudi oil coup against the shah was a contributing factor in the collapse of popular support for the Pahlavi dynasty and it provided a template for today's threats and machinations.

The Saudis have always understood what we in the West cannot comprehend, which is that oil is a weapon as well as a commodity. For the Saudis, oil creates wealth, develops the economy, and preserves the power of the royal family. But oil is also their primary tool of national self-defense, a potent weapon of offense, and the key to their continued security and survival.

The International Energy Agency reported that in August 2011 Saudi Arabia was pumping more oil into the system than at any time in 30 years, a record 9.8 million barrels a day. Production fell slightly in September to 9.59 million barrels because of reduced industrial demand. What do the Saudis want? Will they keep pumping? Are they putting the brakes on? How will the alleged assassination plot influence their next move? More to the point, will President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad heed the lessons of history—or will he share the fate of the shah, the man he helped overthrow?

*Andrew Scott Cooper is the author of *The Oil Kings: How the United States, Iran and Saudi Arabia Changed the Balance of Power in the Middle East* (Simon & Schuster 2011).*

Article 5.

TIME

The Arbabsiar Case: Could Rogue Elements in Iran Be Behind It?

Azadeh Moaveni

Oct. 12, 2011 -- In early 2009, after Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader declared that anyone killed defending Palestine would be rewarded as a martyr, hundreds of young Iranians descended up Tehran's Mehrabad airport demanding to board flights to meet their deaths. Flummoxed that Khamenei was taken so literally, the government dispatched members of parliament, mullahs, and war veterans to the departure terminal to talk the young people out of this, but the militants refused to budge. The ayatollah himself was finally obliged to issue another edict the following week thanking the youth for their zeal, but ordering them to stay home.

Policy circles in Tehran call this tendency Iran's "problem of the radicals" — essentially the way the country's zealots are imperfectly programmed to behave rashly, at times serving the regime's propaganda aims, but often requiring cooler heads to prevail. It's not just the grassroots militants (private citizens and the volunteer Basij militia) who can veer radically off message. Iran's Revolutionary Guards, whose Quds Force directs the country's activities in places like Gaza, Lebanon, and Iraq, has been split between zealous ideologues and pragmatists for at least a decade. They have often pushed positions more aggressively than the Iranian government itself, and sabotaged official policy. In the years when Iran's government sought to distance itself from the late Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against the writer Salman Rushdie, for example, zealots in the ranks of the Guards piped up to note that fatwas

couldn't be undone. Because the Quds force is known for the extremists within its ranks, the question has emerged this week whether its rogue agents might be behind the alleged plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States. If Quds rogues were at work, they were poorly-equipped to carry out the job. The plot's far-fetched contours, many analysts say, fall squarely outside the pattern of Quds Force activity. With access to unlimited cash and strong ties to regional networks in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon, the Quds Force typically operates through local proxies, leaving few fingerprints behind. One of the last times the United States detailed an indictment of Quds Force activity — in the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia — the evidence against Iran never fully came together. "It is difficult to tell if senior levels of the Iranian government authorized this alleged plot, especially given the potentially grave consequences," says Alireza Nader of the RAND Corporation, referring not only to the already moribund relations with the U.S. but the volatile rivalry with Saudi Arabia in the Gulf. The sophisticated modus operandi of the Khobar attack is a far cry from the ham-fisted approach documented in the Department of Justice's complaint against Manssor Arbabsiar, which includes a reference to weapons of mass destruction, and is premised chiefly on main suspect's confession. "The indictment reads like nonsense," says Ali Ansari, an expert on modern Iran at St. Andrew University. "If it's true we're in a lot of trouble, but we need concrete evidence before we can look at this soberly."

The almost confused international reaction to the attacks — including the United States' so far muted response, given the seriousness of the allegations — arises from the lack of sufficient motive on Iran's part. Tehran would seemingly stand to gain little and risk much by launching such attacks on American soil. General Ghassem Suleimani, the chief of the Quds Force, reports directly to Ayatollah

Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader. Analysts say it is implausible that Suleimani would sign off on a provocative plot that could unleash devastating consequences on Iran. As Nader of RAND puts it, "the Islamic Republic's top leadership is interested in power and survival. Assassinating the Saudi ambassador hurts those objectives." The debate in Arab and Iranian social media circles suggested that Iran might have been seeking to send Saudi Arabia a signal about Syria, a country roiled by protests in recent months and one where Tehran and Riyadh vie for influence. Iran guards its influence there and in nearby Lebanon jealously. The Saudi ambassador allegedly targeted by the plot, Adel Al-Jubeir, has a history of acting as close intermediary between the Kingdom and Lebanon's Sunni leaders, who Iran views as rivals to its Shi'a ally Hizballah. Information leaked in U.S. diplomatic cables by Wikileaks has only exacerbated Tehran's displeasure with al-Jubeir. The cables quoted Jubeir relaying a message from the Saudi king to top American officials at a Riyadh meeting in 2008: "He told you to cut off the head of the snake." The changing political dynamics in the Middle East have drastically altered relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia since the days of the Khobar Tower bombings. Back then Washington accused Riyadh of obstructing its investigation to shield Tehran from blame. Furthermore, the status quo in Iraq and the Gulf at the time meant neither country could do very much to jockey for influence. All that changed when the American invasion of Iraq brought that country's Shi'ites to power, and Sunni autocrats throughout the Arab world became vulnerable to popular revolutions. Iran took the upper hand in Lebanon, but Saudi Arabia crushed an uprising by Bahrain's majority Shi'ites, accusing Iran of fueling the unrest. Neither side has emerged on top in Syria, and Arabs throughout the region have reacted angrily to reports of Iranian forces assisting Syria in suppressing protests. The Tehran-Riyadh rivalry is shaping the

new Middle East, but few imagined it would erupt in the Beltway, abetted by a used car salesman from Texas.

*Azadeh Moaveni is an Iranian-American journalist and writer. She won a Fulbright Fellowship to Egypt, and studied Arabic at the American University in Cairo. Her first book, a memoir entitled *Lipstick Jihad*, which details her time in Iran and the quest to discover more about her cultural identity. She co-authored *Iran Awakening* with Shirin Ebadi.*

Article 6.

Carnegie Endowment

The Emerging Political Spectrum in Egypt

Marina Ottaway

October 12, 2011 -- With some fifty political parties registered by the time the election process officially opened on September 18 and more seeking to form every day, the Egyptian political spectrum is both complicated and in flux, with crisscrossing fault lines that defy easy characterization. In addition to the plethora of political parties typical of transitional elections, other political actors remain on center stage, above all the military and the protesters. There is no doubt that the Egyptian political scene is highly pluralistic. It is less certain that out of this disorderly pluralism a democratic regime can emerge in the short term.

Four different sets of players will determine the answer to that question: the political parties, the military, the former ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), and the protest movements.

Political Parties

There are broadly two categories of political parties in Egypt: those that can be considered “real” political parties even if they are weak; and those that are simply vehicles to get a specific person elected to parliament.

The second category can safely be disregarded. Experience of all countries in transition is that such parties tend to be ephemeral and rarely successful in getting anyone elected.

“Real” parties in Egypt are notable for several reasons. First, many tend to have a clear social profile and ideological line—they are Islamist, liberal, left of center, and so on. Second, each ideological

group is becoming increasingly fragmented; Islamists in particular appear to be splintering in ways that in the past were typical of leftwing parties. Third, with the partial exception of Salafi parties and some on the extreme left, they have quite similar party platforms, essentially centrist ones. Most remarkably, even Islamist parties describe themselves as civil parties and call for a civil state, while liberal and leftist parties accept Islam as the religion of the state and advocate state intervention to moderate and correct the failures of markets and to promote social justice. In other words, even parties that have clear ideological affiliations are aiming for the center of the political spectrum.

There are two reasons for this convergence. First, Egyptian law forbids the formation of political parties that make references to religion in their platforms. The Building and Development Party, formed by al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, was denied registration because its platform was too explicitly Islamist. The second reason is political rather than legal—namely the uncertainty that prevails among all political parties about where the voters stand. For decades, Egyptian voters have been offered a choice between a well-funded NDP, with its promise of patronage for supporters, tired liberal and leftist parties, and Islamists in the banned Muslim Brotherhood participating in elections through a variety of subterfuges. As a result, election participation was extremely low, possibly below 20 percent. Now, more Egyptians are expected to vote, but nobody really knows how they will respond when provided with more meaningful choices. Hence parties are going for the center hoping to appeal to a wide range of voters.

No matter how parties represent themselves, however, the public sees them as quite different from each other. Islamist parties in particular are portrayed as extremists by their opponents, while attracting supporters because they are Islamists, not because they are “civil”

parties. Nor does the willingness of liberal parties to accept Islam as state religion convince the public that they are not essentially secular in outlook.

This means that despite the similarity of the platforms, the division between Islamist and secular political parties is sharp. An early attempt to form a Democratic Alliance of essentially the pre-uprising political parties, no matter their orientation, failed. Most liberal parties have left the Democratic Alliance, joining instead the liberal Egypt bloc. The al-Wafd party has so far remained nominally in the alliance together with the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, but the compromise the two organizations reached in order to remain together voids the alliance of any meaning: the Democratic Alliance will present two lists in the parliamentary elections, one headed by al-Wafd and one headed by the Freedom and Justice party, and other parties will choose which list they want to join. It is quite likely that this tenuous compromise will not hold and that the Wafd will abandon the Democratic Alliance, sharpening the split in the political spectrum between an Islamic and a secular wing.

The Military

During the last two decades of the Mubarak regime, military officers had become much less visible than the emerging stratum of wealthy businessmen in the political inner circle and there was even speculation that the days of the military in Egyptian politics were over. Officials in the NDP counted on the military to keep them in power, but even they were convinced that the military would continue to work to prop up the party, rather than act autonomously. After the uprising, the military is playing an openly political role and the question is whether it will relinquish that role any time soon.

There is some ambiguity on this point.

The members of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) have stated from the very beginning that their role was purely

transitional, promising elections and a return to civilian rule in six months. In reality, the period of openly military rule is going to last much longer. Parliamentary elections are scheduled to start on November 28, and, with three rounds of People's Assembly elections and three of Shura Council elections, they will not end until early March. It will be late March by the time the two chambers of parliament can hold a joint meeting to choose the members of the committee to draft the constitution, a process likely to take months. The constitution will then be submitted to a referendum and the presidential elections will take place only after this entire process is completed. The rule by the SCAF is unlikely to end before late 2012 or, most probably before 2013.

Nevertheless, the SCAF continues to define itself as an interim body. There are indications that it is uneasy about its openly political role and would like to surrender it. It is less clear, however, that it is willing to relinquish its "behind the scenes" role. The situation is difficult to read. The SCAF has shown a propensity for making unilateral decisions without consulting political parties and civilian organizations. For example, after a referendum approved a narrow set of constitutional amendments, the SCAF took it upon itself to incorporate the amended articles with articles culled from the old constitution to produce an interim charter; in July, it amended the election law without public consultations. It is true that when political parties and movements protest, the military usually meets with them and responds to some of the complaints, but it is clear that SCAF members remain, at the heart, a military elite comfortable with issuing orders, not consulting.

Adding to the ambiguity about the intentions of the SCAF—or at least of some of its members—is the suspicion that Field Marshal Mohamed Tantawi, who heads the SCAF, is considering running for the president, perpetuating the tradition that the Egyptian president

must be a military man. In view of Tantawi's age—he was born in 1928—and his long association with Mubarak, the candidacy may appear unlikely, but the persistence of the rumor says a lot about the fears of many Egyptians that the military has no plans to relinquish its grip on power and will prolong the life of the old regime—without Mubarak and his sons.

The National Democratic Party

The possibility of a revival of the NDP worries many Egyptians—and conversely nurtures the hopes of others. The party was officially disbanded in April 2011 after two attempts to give it new credibility and keep it alive under new leadership. But up until this point, the military has not banned former members or even leaders of the NDP from political activity. The decision may be revisited: in response to repeated demands by other political parties and protest groups, Tantawi stated recently that the military is studying the possibility of reactivating a Nasser-era “treason law” to bar former NDP members or its leaders from political activity, but it is unclear what this law will entail and how far its reach will be. The old political elite are by no means out of the game yet.

The launch of new political parties by prominent members of the old NDP makes it clear that the old elite are fighting back. The return of NDP notables to politics is also facilitated by the fact that one-third of the seats in both the People's Assembly and Shura Council will be filled by a first-past-the-post system rather than proportional representation; such system is particularly favorable to independent candidates and particularly to those who have strong local ties and support in a specific constituency, as is the case with many former NDP members.

The Protesters

The role of youth organizations was key to bringing down the Mubarak regime. It was the activists of the April 6 Youth Movement

and the members of the “We are all Khaled Saeed” Facebook page and others who organized the first demonstrations on January 25. They were soon joined by youth from many other organizations. The Revolutionary Youth Council, which emerged even before Mubarak was deposed, brought together representatives from the Muslim Brotherhood, the Youth Movement for Justice and Freedom, the April 6 Youth Movement, the campaign to support Mohamed ElBaradei, the National Association for Change, the youth wings of the Democratic Front, al-Karama, Tagammu’ and al-Ghad parties, as well as independent activists. It is a loose coalition at best, since youth movements refuse strict hierarchical organization and well-defined leadership roles, but it has repeatedly proven its capacity to mobilize people.

Even as Egypt moves toward elections, the youth organizations and, more broadly, the people willing to go out and demonstrate in the streets remain an important feature of the political scene in Egypt. But the impact is unclear. At their best, protesters act as the conscience of the revolution, challenging the decisions of the SCAF and occasionally the willingness of political parties to go along with them. At their worst, protesters become a dangerous force, seeking to press the government into hasty decisions that may harm the transition. What is certain is that protesters remain an established part of the political process in today’s Egypt.

The Next Few Months

During the next several months, the relative weight of these players should become clearer, but as this happens conflict could increase in Egypt. The elections will of course provide the first indication of the support enjoyed by the various parties and put an end to endless speculation, but, if Islamists should get a high percentage of the vote, election results could also create a lot of strife in the country and possibly encourage the military to continue exercising power overtly.

Election results could lead protest movements to fade away, at least temporarily, or to become mobilized again if they deem that elections reconfirmed the power of the old regime.

At this point, it is clear who the participants in Egypt's political game are. It will be several more months before we understand their relative strength and considerably longer to know whether the emerging balance of power will allow a democratic transformation.

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Preventing a Syrian Civil War

Salman Shaikh

October 12, 2011 - Doha, Qatar -- LAST week, Russia and China vetoed a United Nations Security Council draft resolution on Syria, dealing a blow to the stability of the country and its neighbors. The double veto could even lead to civil war. The inability of the Security Council to act has created a dangerous political vacuum, sending a clear message to President Bashar al-Assad that he can continue to kill with impunity and signaling to Syrian protesters that they are on their own. While Russia and China have emphasized dialogue over confrontation and are proposing a more “balanced” resolution, the reality is that the Syrian street has been explicitly calling for the fall of the Assad regime for months. Russia’s and China’s actions are in many ways a response to the West’s loose interpretation of United Nations resolutions against Libya, which led to military action against Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi. While the vetoes may give some political satisfaction to Moscow and Beijing, the failed resolution has come at the expense of the people and long-term stability of Syria. This is international politics at its worst. Since the Security Council began deliberating a resolution on the crisis in Syria in August, the death toll has doubled, rising to more than 2,900, while the number of those missing or in detention has reached the tens of thousands. Susan E. Rice, the American ambassador to the United Nations, may hope that “the people of the Middle East can now see clearly which nations have chosen to ignore their calls for democracy and instead prop up desperate, cruel dictators.” Most, however, are likely to see only a collective failure on the part of the international community.

The longer the current situation lasts, the more likely it is that Syria's delicate ethnic and sectarian fabric will be torn apart. Opposition figures, including those from the Muslim Brotherhood, are fearful of increasing reprisals against the Alawite and Christian elite, which they would be unable to prevent. The government's efforts to sow strife, including a spate of assassinations of academics and a campaign of rape targeting women and girls in predominantly Sunni towns, is making nonviolent protest seem untenable to the opposition. The West's strategy at the United Nations has so far focused on opening up Syria to international scrutiny — to bear witness and report on the atrocities there. But within the Syrian National Council there is growing talk — in private for now — of the need for the protection of civilians “by any means necessary.” These means would include international monitors, but could extend to the establishment of safe zones for civilians, and if necessary the establishment of a no-fly zone, or even as a last resort, foreign boots on the ground. Washington has instead continued to pursue a strategy of “leading from behind.” It does so in part out of a belief that a more gung-ho approach may in fact deflect from efforts by members of the opposition' and paint them as the West's stooges, as the government has claimed. But as the killings mount, this policy is merely heightening suspicions that America is not serious about supporting the protests and preparing for a post-Assad Syria. This strategy is not working. America and Europe must push Syria's neighbors to support punitive measures against Assad and apply diplomatic pressure on Russia and China. Russia's warning after the United Nations vote that Mr. Assad should carry out reforms and restore peace or face “some kinds of decisions” from Russia presents an opening. Arab states were crucial in pressuring Russia and China when it came to achieving effective United Nations action in Libya and must do the same now. Washington should also encourage Turkey to play a more

forceful role; the increasingly exasperated Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, now seems more likely to do that. Specifically, Turkey should reduce trade with Syria and place targeted sanctions on the government. The United States should also recognize the Syrian National Council as the legitimate opposition leadership of the Syrian people and encourage key Arab, regional and European powers to do the same. The decision by European foreign ministers on Monday to welcome the council as “a positive step forward” is a useful riposte to Syrian threats against those who formally recognize the group, but it does not go far enough. The Syrian National Council’s 230-member body represents a broad and inclusive, if imperfect, cross-section of the Syrian opposition — including secularists, Islamists and, critically, the young generation of street protesters risking their lives. International recognition would make it more effective and send a strong signal of support to the opposition. In addition, the United States should push the Syrian National Council to be as inclusive as possible, particularly in attracting members of the Alawite and Christian communities. Determined American diplomacy can still prevent the pressing danger that these communities, unable to live with their losses and fearful of the future, will resort to violence. Syria’s combustible ethnic mix was once grounds for American hesitation in supporting the opposition; now, with violence spiraling out of control, it has become a reason for further American involvement. If the United States and its European and regional allies do not act quickly, Syria will descend into chaos.

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