

Syrian revolt may undo secret pact with Israel

by Robert Dreyfuss, Middle East Editor

For some time now, Syria's President Hafez Assad has been in a secret alliance with Israel to aid Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran. Assad has also mobilized his diplomacy to wreck Egyptian and Saudi peace initiatives, has tried to foment revolts in Jordan and Iraq, and has tightened links with Libya's Muammar Qaddafi and Arab terrorist organizations.

Now, domestically, despite his brutal use of armed force, Assad may not survive the spreading rebellion that began in the industrial city of Hama. The revolt, which has brought together dissident military officers, civilians, conservative Muslims, as well as Muslim Brotherhood extremists, threatens to topple the Damascus regime of the Assad brothers.

According to Arab intelligence sources, Assad and his several brothers, including the sadistic Rifaat Assad, chief of Syria's Special Forces, have recently made a bid to establish themselves as one of the premier organized-crime families internationally. Holding fortunes in Swiss banks, Hafez Assad and his associates have become part of the worldwide Dope, Inc. network, with offshoots extending into New York's underworld, southern France, Italy, and the Middle East.

The Syria-Israel

The Syrian rebellion that began in Hama at the beginning of February and reportedly spread to the towns of Aleppo, Homs, and Latakia could soon overthrow the Assad clique. If it does, that would eliminate the Syrian end of a secret Israeli-Syrian partnership dating back to 1970, when Moshe Dayan and the Israeli Mossad helped Assad stage the coup d'état that brought

him to power.

Inside Israel, a factional situation as to how to play the Syria card has reportedly emerged in the wake of the Hama rebellion. Some Israelis—a number of them close to Prime Minister Menachem Begin—are of the opinion that Assad is finished, and welcome Iran-style chaos overtaking Syria. "That would be the best thing for Israel," stated one Israeli source. "Let them all kill each other off in Syria. Such instability would make our position in Israel that much more secure, especially vis-à-vis the United States. Even if pro-Iraqi officers were to take power, that would not necessarily be worrisome, since they could last no more than a month or two before being overthrown themselves. Then the country would disintegrate into a thousand pieces, like Iran and Lebanon, and we in Israel would prevail."

Others are not so sanguine about prospects in the post-Assad era, and are reportedly taking measures to prop up the Assad regime. For example, Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon is said to be in favor of an immediate pre-emptive strike into southern Lebanon, believing that a limited confrontation there, possibly involving Syria, would divert the Syrian population from the revolt against Assad and provide the Syrian President with a military emergency around which to rally the country.

"Within the next 10 days, Israel and Syria may agree to stage what they hope would be a limited war in Lebanon," said one source.

Among their other goals, both Israel and Syria would like to eliminate the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization. In Lebanon, Israel wants to

trap thousands of Palestinians in southern towns and eliminate them in a bloody massacre. Syrian intelligence has reportedly activated plans to assassinate PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and replace him with a Syrian puppet.

Who wants to topple Assad?

Although Assad had apparently managed to quell the rebellion in Hama as of late February by leveling parts of the city with artillery and aerial bombardment, there is an across-the-board intelligence verdict that Assad's victory is merely temporary and that the forces behind the revolt have gained the upper hand.

"Rifaat Assad's Special Forces lost 2,000 dead and wounded in Hama," said one source, "and now the whole country knows that the regime is not invincible."

The coalition opposing Assad draws upon many different factions for support, ranging from the Syrian officer corps to the Muslim Brotherhood secret society, i.e., the Islamic fundamentalist drug-and-terror network that, following the Khomeini takeover in Iran, has spread like wildfire throughout the Arab world. However, governments targeted for overthrow by the Brotherhood, including Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, along with certain Lebanese factions, also support the rebels, and both the British and French intelligence services are deeply involved in aspects of the opposition. Israelis opposed to Begin's and Sharon's excesses may also be acting to bring a more moderate regime into power in Syria.

The crisis in Syria began in January with a reported Air Force intelligence coup attempt which was brutally crushed by Assad. At about the same time, a leading PLO official and adviser to Arafat, Isam Sartawi, told the French newspaper *Le Monde* that Abu Nidal, the Syrian-backed Palestinian terrorist and assassin, was an agent of Israel's intelligence agency Mossad!

The damaging revelation by Sartawi of the Syrian-Israeli connection in international terrorism coincided with hard evidence that Syria and Israel, along with Israel's Lebanese puppet, Major Saad Haddad, were collaborating to back the mullahs in Iran against Iraq.

Both the Sartawi revelations and the Israeli support for the Teheran-Damascus axis became political bombshells in Damascus. Assad's popularity, already at an all-time low, plummeted.

"The idea that the Muslim Brotherhood is the chief force behind the revolt in Syria is nonsense," said one informed Arab source, commenting on misleading U.S. media accounts of the Hama rebellion. "The Brotherhood is only one small part of the anti-Assad bloc."

In point of fact, the Assad regime often collaborates with the Muslim Brotherhood, Arab sources report, particularly in executing terrorist hits and in carrying out drug-and-gun-running operations.

"It's a mistake to talk of the Brotherhood as being the real motive force in Syria," commented another London-based source. "There are many moderate groups involved in Syria. These are the middle-of-the-road Sunnis who don't want Assad and who don't want the Brotherhood, but who are using the Brotherhood as a spearhead of the revolt." The Assads do not belong to the Sunnis but to a small Alawite minority in Syria, and have ruled for 12 years by pitting religious sects and minorities against each other.

Assad may not survive. Although London and Swiss narcotics financiers and certain Israelis who support Assad would like to preserve his regime, they are prepared to abandon him if it becomes clear that he cannot survive. They may then opt for a "scorched-earth" policy in Syria, turning it into another Iran or Lebanon. The lack of an apparent leadership opposed to Assad, combined with the role of Israel's Mossad next door, may very well lead to the scorched-earth scenario.

'The best Assad we have'

The following are excerpts from a Feb. 15 London Times editorial defense of Syrian President Assad entitled "The Best Assad We Have." Although the editorial piously bemoans the prospects of Syria's becoming another Iran (conveniently sidestepping the fact that it was the British who largely engineered the Khomeini takeover in Iran), what shines through is Britain's fear of losing Assad, especially to an anti-Brotherhood, anti-Assad military leadership.

There is a temptation to argue that since President Assad has adopted a radical stand in the Arab world and is in formal alliance with the Soviet Union, his departure from the scene might ease matters. In fact, the reverse is almost certainly the case. . . . The thought of another Khomeini in Damascus—albeit a Sunni rather than Shiite one—is enough to send shivers up Arab as well as Western spines. The probable alternative—a regime dedicated to the total elimination of the Brotherhood—is equally unpalatable, since it would involve ruthlessness and cruelty surpassing even that of the present regime.

This leaves President Assad clinging to power. . . . His record shows him to be a man of straightforward dealing and statesmanlike behavior; very far from the doctrinaire radical some imagine him to be. There are indications that, if circumstances allowed, President Assad might revert to the position he had gradually worked round to in 1977, before Camp David, and consider the terms of an accommodation with Israel.