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Blowing off Steam

By Andrew Tabler

FEBRUARY 2006

DAMASCUS, Syria – The storming of several Western embassies in Damascus on February 4 by a mob of protesters enraged by caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed in European newspapers grabbed international headlines and TV news channels. Security forces looked on as demonstrators stoned and then burned the Danish, Swedish, Chilean and Norwegian embassies, only to repel finally an assault on the French embassy hours later. The Bush administration is holding Syria responsible for the assault [as well as similar protests across the Arab World], saying that violent demonstrations in Syria do not take place “without government knowledge and support.” The jury is still out on state culpability, but the embassies incident is an excellent case-study in how authoritarian states under external stress can use “safety valves” to let off very real internal pressures in ways that strengthen the regime’s hand.

Blow by blow

For weeks, Syrians had been talking about the 12 “caricatures” of the prophet Muhammad first featured last September in the right-of-center Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*. By the end of January, states throughout the Arab World demanded the Danish government apologize for the incident. Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen’s refusal because his government “does not control the media” as it would violate “freedom of speech” fell well short of most Syrians’ expectations. Pan-Arab Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera television began running



The storming and burning of the Danish, Swedish and Chilean embassies on February 4 brought strong condemnation from the United States and Europe.

stories of a boycott on Danish products in several Arab-Gulf countries. Student groups throughout the Arab world started protesting in front of Danish institutions, most notably embassies and cultural centers.

On the morning of February 4, banner-wielding protesters began gathering near Rouda Sqaure in Damascus for what would be the biggest diplomatic incident since the storming of the American Ambassador's residence in 2000 in response to US-coalition air strikes on Iraq. Around 3pm, demonstrators marched toward the Danish Embassy located in the adjacent neighborhood of Abu Roumanieh.

I sensed trouble, but was not sure how out-of-hand the protests would become. I have watched Syria's opposition parties show signs of life over the last few months, and spent the morning transcribing tape of my interviews with party members. Needing a break, I decided to meet my Syrian colleague, Kinda Kanbar, at the newly-opened Abu-Romanieh branch of Kentucky Fried Chicken — Syria's first Western fast-food restaurant.

As I tucked into my three-piece chicken-meal combo, I noticed a swelling crowd through the restaurant's front windows. When the demonstrations first started, uniformed security services patrolled the streets and traffic policemen directed cars across the district's main thoroughfare. Soon, however, the waves of protesters could not be controlled. Kinda and I rushed out the door to see what was going on.

The crowd was angry, but not unruly. Uniformed se-

curity agents were gathered at the far end of the boulevard, where a perpendicular street led to the three-story villa housing the Danish, Swedish and Chilean embassies. Realizing that something big was afoot, I sent Kinda ahead toward the embassy and ran back to my apartment to fetch a camera and tape recorder. Returning, I ran into two American diplomats out for a Saturday stroll, one of them being Chargé d'affaires Steven Seshe, the highest-ranking US diplomat in Syria following the departure of Ambassador Margaret Scobey the day following former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri's assassination. Seshe shook my hand, then pointed behind him where Deputy Syrian Prime Minister and State Planning Commission chief Abduallah Dardari — one of the key architects of Syria's cooperation with the European Union — was standing. Dardari just simply stared at the riot with a blank and somewhat sad expression on his face. More than anyone, he knew the implications of such protests on Syria's heavily European-supported reform programs.

As I rounded the corner of Abu Roumanieh Street, pushing my way through security forces dressed in olive green, I began to hear something that sounded like popcorn popping. About 30 yards down the street, protesters were stoning the Danish embassy. I stopped in my tracks and took a photo.

As I got closer to the embassy, calls of "Allahu Akbar" ["God is great"] were punctuated with sounds of shattering glass. Around a thousand protesters were pushing hard toward the embassies, packed into an area the size of half a football field. Flags of Hamas, Hizbollah

Unlike most Syrian protests, the English-language banners on February 4 were not hand-made, and full of the usual spelling and grammar mistakes — another indication the protests were geared for international consumption and planned well in advance.





Security forces spent their time smoking cigarettes as protesters stoned and burned the embassy complex.

and Islamic Jihad fluttered in the air. Banners with enigmatic slogans in English, such as “We are ready” printed in blood-red ink, dotted the crowd. I was a bit surprised, since Syrian protest banners are usually hand-made, full of horrible English spelling and grammar mistakes. What happened next helped me understand just what that slogan meant, a little about where it was coming from, and who was behind it.

The front gate of a church adjacent to the embassy complex was open, with no signs of forced entry. A half-dozen Syrian men between the ages of 15 and 50 were trying to scale the wall of the embassy from the church garden. As the crowd cheered the climbers, I began to notice that more than 15 uniformed security agents were assembled in front of the church — smoking cigarettes. Not a single officer lifted a finger to stop the rioters, or looked at all nervous.

A number of protesters had already climbed onto apartment-block balconies across from the embassy — a perfect pitcher’s mound for the rock barrage that was still under way. A banner reading “It’s not FREEDOM that you mean, But incitement what you mean” was draped over one terrace railing. Where the stones came from was anyone’s guess, but their brown, earthen color indicated they did not come from the surrounding area, which is completely paved or covered in asphalt.

One of the climbers, a Syrian man in his early thirties with long black hair and a shortly cropped beard, finally made it onto the terrace of the embassy complex’s second floor — home to the Swedish mission. He immediately began tugging at the Seal of Denmark, a colorful

metal plate under the flagpole a floor above. Breaking it loose, he lifted it above his head and slammed it to the earth. Momentarily silenced by the spectacle, the crowd roared approval, as chants of “Allhu Akbar” [“God is great”] echoed. Unable to reach the Danish embassy on the third floor, the bearded man hoisted the green banner of Islam, on which is written “*la allah illa allah, wa muhammed ar-rusul allah*” [There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the Prophet of God], on the Swedish embassy’s flagpole. The crowd roared again.

Protesters were excited, but not full of the kind of hate that might cause them to stone a building. While my light-brown hair, blue eyes and northern-European features that day would seem to scream “hit me” [a Danish friend once told me I look very Scandinavian], I noticed not so much as a dirty look. These days, I am sporting a short-cropped beard — which could have been taken as a sign of Muslim piety. Every time Kinda called me on my mobile phone, I was sure to speak in Arabic. When a few English words slipped out of my mouth, a number of protesters looked my way, but not too hard.

Things soon turned sour. Protesters began throwing office paraphernalia from the Danish embassy into the crowd. Suddenly, black smoke began billowing, as the protesters set the first floor ablaze. I immediately looked at the security forces gathered in front of the church. They were still standing around, still only smoking cigarettes.

More flames shot out of the embassy, and the crowd erupted in approval. I tried to push my way toward Kinda, who was in front of the church beside the security services. I then spotted something square and flat

resembling a pizza box sailing through the air that looked as if it might hit me. As I ducked, the object hit a number of protesters. They tore the package apart, only to find a plastic raincoat with a company logo on the breast. People tried to rip it apart, found it too tough, stepped on it, and just let it lie on the ground.

The mob rage didn't seem too convincing. In fact, people seemed to be just enjoying the spectacle. It was hard to move through the dense crowd, but a simple pat on the back and a murmured "afwan" ["sorry"] allowed me to pass. Few, at least so it seemed, gave me a second look. When they did, they gave a little smile when I started taking photos. "They *want* me to see this," I thought.

After about ten more minutes of struggling and frantic phone calls, I finally reached Kinda in front of the church. "What's with them?" I asked.

"Come on Andrew, *mukhabarat* is controlling everything," she said, a familiar line from this 30-year-old, virulently-secular woman who has known me — and the security police — for years.

I hadn't dared talk to anyone in the crowd. But now with Kinda at my side, we could play local reporter / foreign cameraman without much trouble. Kinda began asking people questions, and I started taking photos.

"Inti Ajnabiya?" ["Are you a foreigner?"], a group of male protesters asked Kinda. Her physical features are very Syrian, including glowing, olive-brown skin and brown, curly hair, with eyes to match. Kinda was wearing jeans and a jacket, but was hardly the only one in the crowd in Western-style clothing. "Why are they asking her if she is foreign?" I thought.

"Ana Arabiya" ["I am an Arab"], Kinda replied. In Syria-speak, this means I am first an Arab, then a Syrian, then a Muslim. They then glanced at me and looked down before starting what seemed a rehearsed tirade.

"America is behind this [cartoon]," said one of the group, a 40-year-old man named Mohammed. "We are here to express our anger." He then looked at me more or less sheepishly. I snapped a photo.

"But Denmark is in Europe. The European Union helps Syrian reform. What do you think of that?" Kinda said.

"The government has its policy," Mohammed said. "The people are here to defend the prophet, and express their anger."

Pretty lame, I thought, but interesting. Mohammed was making a distinction between the state and religion. In the past, acting publicly on behalf of religious sentiments could have gotten you thrown in jail. In 1982 it also could have gotten you killed or "disappeared", when

the state bombarded the Syrian city of Hama in response to a terrorist war waged against the state by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Moving on, we stopped three other middle-aged men — including one wearing a green Islamic headband — to ask what brought them out into the street.

"Down with the Ba'ath Party!" the men exclaimed. Kinda raised her eyebrows. Here in the land of the Assad family's Ba'ath Party, I knew she hadn't heard that shout before in public. They didn't seem nervous at all, and let me take their photos. When Kinda asked them their names, they just continued shouting "Down with the Ba'ath Party!" and ran off.

"Islamic protesters, openly calling for destruction of the Ba'ath Party?" I thought. Pondering the deeper meaning of what I just heard was interrupted when fire trucks turned up — much too late to save the Danish Embassy.



In addition to anti-Danish slogans, some protesters directed their fury at domestic targets, with some shouting "Down with the Ba'ath Party!"

They rolled through the crowd so lazily that they eventually coasted to a stop. No firemen were in sight. Protesters just used the trucks as observation decks for the spectacle.

A red station wagon arrived — one of the well-known "protocol" cars that direct traffic for President Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian capital. It blew its siren once, half-heartedly. The crowd quickly parted, then broke up. The fire trucks moved in, their hoses shooting water at the flames. Street gutters flowed with water like small streams. Everyone who remained stood calmly and watched the firemen do their duty.

As we walked away from the protest, we ran into a friend of Kinda, a businessman named Tarek. He was smiling, joking with several men in black leather jackets and expensive, well-polished shoes. After a few minutes, Kinda told me what I already realized — Tarek was talking to intelligence officers. Men around them with hand-held black radios



Fire trucks without firemen at the scene were used as observation platforms.

were barking orders. All held wooden batons.

“So what did you think?” Tarek asked me.

“I think it was quite a show,” I said. “People are angry, but the security services don’t seem to be doing much.”

“Yep,” Tarek exclaimed, with a grin on his face. “People are under a lot of pressure. We have the Hariri problem, and the government just raised petrol prices by 20 percent. They [the regime] are just letting off the pressure.” Tarek moved his hand as if turning a valve.

Islamic revivalism and international pressure

On the surface, Syria seems a secular society. Minority rights, religious or ethnic, are guaranteed by the state, which is dominated by the Alawites — an offshoot of Shia Islam from which the Assad family hails. The Ba’ath Party is a secular, pan-Arab party. The other political parties aligned with the Ba’ath in the “National Progressive Front” are secular as well.

Over the last five years, increased signs of Islamic sentiment in Syria have appeared. At first it showed up in terms of Islamic dress. Then mosque attendance grew,

as did Islamic study centers. In the center of this trend is a female religious leader, Mounira Kubasi, who runs an organization Syrians call “Kubasiaat” in her name.

As we walked away from the demonstration toward Tarek’s office for coffee and chit-chat, he pointed toward a new “Musali” [prayer room] constructed beside an ancient domed shrine that houses the body of a notable who had once donated that land to build an Islamic school. The school was razed long ago, but the tomb remains.

“I built this,” Tarek said. I knew he was a pious Muslim; Kinda had told me so. But on the surface, Tarek looked like a wealthy, westernized Syrian educated in the United States — which he also happened to be.

I took off my shoes and stepped inside. Tarek took me through the carpeted room to the shrine, opened the door, and showed me the sarcophagus.

“By building it next to this tomb, I get around the permits,” Tarek said. After a few words with the prayer room’s sheikh, I returned to the front door and recovered my shoes from a locker. Tarek remained to pray, and joined us later in his office.

For a secular state that arrested people for praying

in public in the 1980s, current tolerance of this religious trend has raised eyebrows. What could be pushing a non-religious state, dominated by Alawites, to openly accept growing Sunni Islamic movements? The short answer: external pressures, and the complex internal tensions they create.

Syrians I have interviewed over the last few months say that standards of living are eroding. In terms of purchasing power, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita has been declining for years, with Syria now ranking behind Egypt and Jordan in the Middle East. The reasons behind this slide are pretty clear: a general lack of investment, due largely to an extremely corrupt legal and regulatory environment, is not creating enough jobs. Exacerbating this trend is the fact that, when political tensions bubbled over in the 1980s, Syria endured one of the highest birthrates in the world. That massive demographic wave is now hitting the Syrian market in full force.

At the same time, the secular state and the ruling Ba'ath Party continue to hold up socialism as an economic ideal. The public sector's ability to create enough jobs to absorb labor market entrants is rapidly declining, however, resulting from decreasing oil production. Public-sector salaries are also much lower than those in the private sector. Pure and simple, the state is running out of ways to buy off its population and keep them complacent.

Enter external pressures. Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, relations between Syria and the United States have rapidly deteriorated. Because of what Washington claims to be Syrian support for the Iraqi insurgency, as well as for radical Palestinian groups based in Damascus, US sanctions on Syria were considerably tightened in 2004. Thus far, those sanctions have been effective only in interrupting international involvement in boosting Syrian oil production — the state's lifeblood.

While the US continues to talk about spreading democracy in the Middle East — something Syrians do not necessarily oppose — bloody television images of US forces waging war on insurgents in Iraq have also turned Syrian popular opinion against the United States, and its "democracy agenda." After all, the majority of Iraqi insurgents are Sunni Muslims — a minority in Iraq, but a majority in Syria.

Over the last year, Syria's rapid withdrawal from Lebanon following the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri, as well as the subsequent investigation into his death, have put the state under tremendous international pressure. Trade, both formal and informal, between Syria and Lebanon has been drastically interrupted, impacting the livelihood of an unknown number of Syrians and Lebanese.

As the investigation into Hariri's death focused its attention on Damascus, the Syrian regime has hunkered down preparing for a siege, including possible UN sanctions. It is also trying to reform its economy by reducing state subsidies. So instead of sharing some of the wealth

generated by record-high oil revenues over the last year, the state increased salaries by only 5 percent in January — far short of the 20 percent increases in 2004 and 2002, respectively. Gasoline subsidies were also recently slashed, which caused a 20 percent increase in prices at the pump. Inflation is currently running at an estimated 15 percent. Syrians are feeling the economic pinch of reform and external pressure at the same time.

The Specter of the Islamic threat

At the same time that Syrians were up in arms over cartoons of the prophet, Western diplomats in Damascus were asking everyone in sight the same question: What is the strength of political Islam in Syria? Their reason for asking is apparent: Policymakers in Washington and Paris are wondering if the very pressures they are currently orchestrating will push Syria into the hands of political Islam — from which support for Islamic terrorist groups is highly suspected — or into the sectarian political chaos, like that in nearby Iraq.

Answers to this question vary. Everyone notes increased Islamic sentiments. But it is unclear how much this trend has entered the political sphere. Religious parties are banned by Law 49 of 1980, which makes membership in the Muslim Brotherhood punishable by death.

Gauging Brotherhood strength is difficult. The organization's leaders remain in exile, and members inside Syria moved underground long ago. By and large, however, many Syrians, including Sunni Muslims (the religious base of the Brotherhood) shun the organization due to its bloody history in Syria.

One independent MP, Mohammed Habbash, who runs Damascus' Islamic Studies Center, often speaks to the press on behalf of an amorphous, Islamic trend in society and among some clergy members. Just how many Syrians follow Habbash is hard to determine, but the regime seems to put up with Habbash because of his open tolerance for other religions and sects. He also speaks English and can offer journalists, diplomats and US politicians [he recently refused an invitation by Senator Hillary Clinton to attend the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington] a kinder, gentler face of Islamic politics that the regime would like to promote, and the West would like to see.

So without legal or even tolerated political parties with a religious bent in Syria, observers are forced to study political events where religion and politics overlap and make their best guesses.

Evidence of armed Islamic groups in Syria has been growing since April of 2004, when authorities foiled an attack on an abandoned UN building in Mezzeh, a modern district of Damascus. According to a January 2006 report by Ibrahim Hamidi, the well-connected Damascus bureau chief of the pan-Arab daily, *Al-Hayat*, three of the



Independent MP Mohammed Habash is the premier contact for Westerns curious about political Islam in Syria.

four assailants had gone to Iraq to fight US forces in the days before Saddam's fall. Many observers (including myself) and diplomats doubted the authenticity of the attacks, since they came while Washington was making a decision in how to apply the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSA), which was signed into law in December 2003 but had a six-month window of implementation.

Then, in May 2005, the authorities announced that it had broken up a "terrorist cell" in the Damascus neighborhood of Daf al-Shawq. As Syrian TV showed footage of the cell's arms depot, the state announced that the cell was but part of a larger organization, the *Munazama Jund al-Sham l'wahda wa jihad* (The Soldiers of Damascus Organization for Unity and Jihad). Subsequent reports indicated that the group was well organized, and was distributing propaganda throughout Syria. According to Hamidi's analysis of the group's pamphlets, the group seeks to a "establish an 'Islamic Emirate' or 'caliphate' in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq."

Early last December, security forces attacked a "takfiri cell" — a group that unilaterally declares other Muslims apostates. Members of such groups have been known to inflict their punishment by, among other things, strapping on explosive belts and walking into western hotels in the region. While the attack got some play in the Syrian media, Hamidi told me privately at the time that the attack was the first instance the authorities used helicopters against civilians in Syria since the state's bombardment of Hama in 1982. In his subsequent article, Hamidi cited "informed sources" who said that when the security forces surrounded the cell's hideout, its members refused to give up prior to the government's air raid. They also accused the security forces of being "infidels."

Playing on the West's worst fears

When we met Tarek in his office after his prayer, he looked relaxed and at ease. We had a glass of tea, talked

over a bit of business, and went on our merry way.

But the fun was not over. We soon learned that the demonstrators had moved on to the Norwegian embassy and burned it as well, since two of that country's newspapers had reprinted the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons. A couple of phone calls confirmed what we anticipated — the riot was now moving to the French Embassy. The French newspaper *France Soir* had also run the caricatures.

It was dark when we arrived in Jisr al-Abyad, the Damascus neighborhood that is home to the French Embassy. Security forces had finally assembled themselves in force. Kinda continued to shout "sahafa" ["journalism"] as we approached the uniformed security agents. They let us through without batting an eye. When some plain-clothed security agents tried to stop us, she just repeated "sahafa" and they moved away.

At the French Embassy, it was far from high-tension. Police and soldiers mixed freely before the mission's stone walls, joking and smoking cigarettes. Two fire trucks were out front, this time complete with firemen in full uniform. They were adjusting the water cannons and firing up the trucks' compressors. Out in front of the fire engines, about 20 yards down the street, a wall of uniformed security agents donned what looked like old green football helmets and grasped clear-plexiglas riot shields.

I took photos for a few minutes before the police told me to step back. Water shot out of the lead cannon for about 30 seconds, filling the air with a heavy mist. When the firemen turned the cannon briefly to the left, I was caught in the jet stream. I hid behind a tree to dry off and braced myself for another soaking.

It never came, however. The so-called "Muslims on a rampage" gave up without much of a fight. Kinda and I walked back to the main street and headed to the nearby Damascus Journalist Club for some oriental salads and a good stiff drink.

But wheels inside my head were already spinning. Why would Syria's security apparatus, which as one civil-rights activist told a journalist friend, "sends ten agents for every protester at a human rights march," stand back and do little to stop the burning of a number of European embassies? The answer seemed simple: the Bush Administration's Middle East "democracy agenda" has run into unexpected problems, and the Syrian regime knows it. The Muslim Brotherhood scored well in last fall's Egyptian elections [and probably would have done better without widespread government vote-rigging], Shiite parties dominated December's elections in Iraq, Fatah was routed by Hamas in January's Palestinian legislative elections, and Hizbollah remains a part of the current Lebanese government.

Direct regime involvement in the embassies incident

is hard to determine. The state did issue a permit for a peaceful demonstration. According to student activists in Islamic centers in Damascus — which are not owned by the state — they received instructions from the centers' sheikhs to organize protests against the cartoons, as well Denmark in general, on January 3. The call to protest was conducted by the Short Message Service (SMS), known as "text messaging" in the United States.

In front of the Danish embassy, many protesters carried a letter in their pockets, which they had found on their front doorsteps and car windshields. The letter said the following:

1. Copy this letter.
2. SMS your friends about the demonstrations on February 4.
3. Don't buy Danish goods.

The following afternoon, as much more violent protests raged outside Denmark's embassy in Beirut, the Syrian state news agency released a statement confirming that one armed Islamists had been killed in a security raid outside Damascus that lasted 90 minutes. As journalists combed the streets of the Syrian capital seeking evidence of state involvement in the riots, as well as authenticity of that day's shootout, a larger and more complex question remained: Are the West's pressures on Syria really weakening the regime and spurring the country toward liberal democracy, or simply pushing Syrians with growing Islamic sentiments toward the Syrian state and strengthening its grip on power?

"Now the war is a war of words," said a 34-year-old Islamist television producer who went to Iraq in the waning days of Saddam Hussein to wage jihad against US forces. His uncle was one of the thousands of members of the Muslim Brotherhood who disappeared in 1982. "I am a Sunni. While the leader of my country might be an Alawite, he is a Muslim. I do not know anyone else suitable to be president than Bashar al-Assad." □



Photocopied letters urging Syrians to come out in support of the protests appeared on doorsteps and car windshields in the days leading up to the protest.

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