

Bashar Assad in the Balance

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Syria's leader is fast losing allies, who seem to know the regime's end is near.

Barbara Walters' interview with Bashar Assad last week evoked a glib and confident Syrian president. But eight months into the popular uprising, Assad has little reason to be sanguine. Indeed, based on the actions of his longtime friends, the collapse of the regime is not far off. With the notable exception of Iran, Syria's closest allies -- terrorist organizations and states alike -- are jumping ship, or at least readying the lifeboats.

The most striking example of this trend is the Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas. In recent months, Hamas, which had been based in Damascus since 1999, has started divesting its assets and withdrawing its personnel from Syria. Last week, the group reportedly ordered most of its staff to leave and is moving its office to another Arab state, most likely Egypt. Although few Arab capitals could provide the group with the operational freedom of Syria, senior officials in Hamas clearly saw little alternative. As one unnamed Egypt-based official told the *London Times*, "they see the writing on the wall."

Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Shiite terrorist organization in Lebanon, is also taking steps to mitigate the damage of regime change next door. For decades, Syria served as a point of transshipment of Iranian weapons to the group. After Assad took power in 2000, though, Damascus started providing its own top-shelf Russian military equipment to the anti-Israel and anti-American organization. Given the importance of Syria to Hezbollah, it's not surprising that the group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has been publicly backing the Syrian regime in its violent efforts to repress the uprising.

While Nasrallah has been busy rationalizing the killing in Syria, however, he also appears to have been preparing for the regime's demise. In fact, since this summer Hezbollah reportedly has been moving its heavy weapons positioned in Syria into Lebanon, including its long-range Iranian Zilzal, and Fajr 3, 4 and 5 missiles. "There's so much stuff coming across the border," one well-informed observer of the militia told me in June during a trip to Beirut, "Hezbollah doesn't know where to put it."

Given the trajectory of developments in Syria, however, and the probability that when the Alawite -- ostensibly Shiite -- regime of Assad falls, it will be replaced by a Sunni Muslim-led government that views Hezbollah with antipathy, it's little surprise that Nasrallah would get his weapons out.

The actions of the Islamist government in Turkey would also seem to suggest a recognition that the Assad regime will soon be finished. Before the uprising started in Syria, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Assad were friends who once vacationed together with their respective spouses. In the early days of the revolt, Erdogan met with, and counseled Assad to undertake political reform to defuse the crisis. Although Erdogan later publicly criticized the Syrian president and provided refuge to thousands of Syrians fleeing the carnage, Turkey did not take steps to actively undermine the regime until November. That month, Turkey started to provide safe haven to military defectors from next door known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a policy that exponentially increased desertions and helped coalesce the force.

Erdogan no doubt is aware that this policy could provoke intensified Syrian support for the PKK, the Kurdish terrorist organization that has killed about 6,000 Turks since 1984. But Ankara is probably betting that any increase in PKK attacks would subside with the end of the Assad regime, an event that will be accelerated by supporting the FSA.

For Hamas and Hezbollah, two organizations that have little compunction about killing innocent civilians, the decision to hedge on the Assad regime's survival is purely pragmatic. Ankara's move away from Damascus may be more principled. After all, a Sunni Islamist-leaning regime can be expected to tolerate Alawites killing Sunnis for only so long. At the same time, it's difficult to imagine Turkey -- whose foreign-policy motto is "zero problems with neighbors" -- providing sanctuary and weapons to Assad opponents across the frontier without being confident that regime would fall.

Alas, judging from his megalomaniacal interview with Walters, Bashar Assad clearly hadn't internalized that even his perennial friends are deserting him. If he had, he'd be making plans for the end of the regime and a post-Syria life in Tehran, his last remaining steadfast supporter. More likely though, given his self-delusion, Assad will remain in Syria, and face the fate of Moammar Kadafi.

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