

Dark Secrets – OpEd

Contributed by Lee Smith Hudson Institute via the Weekly Standard
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Syrian Intelligence, Libya's involvement in Imam Moussa Sadr's fate.

The uprisings sweeping the Middle East have started to blow down some very dark doors – the doors that lead to the dungeons and prisons where Arab security services do their work.

In Alexandria and Cairo, Egyptian protesters broke into the offices of state security, where they discovered some of the tools and torture devices used to make prisoners more pliant. Perhaps more important, they unearthed files detailing the nature of the work, and on whose behalf it was done. When the dust has settled, Washington may find its Arab allies much less willing to chase down and detain terrorist suspects, lest they be accused of collaborating with the Americans.

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But what about the dark work Arab regimes do with the aid of other Arab states? Libyan rebels last week reportedly brought down two Syrian fighter pilots flying on behalf of Qaddafi's besieged regime. Arab sources have told me there may be more than two dozen Syrian pilots flying planes in Libya – Qaddafi pays well and Damascus can use the money. Besides, the Syrian-Libyan relationship goes back several decades and the ties between their intelligence services are strong.

Those same sources explain that a delegation from Syrian intelligence services was recently dispatched to Tripoli to scrub the Libyan intelligence archives clean of all the records detailing past projects that the two countries had collaborated on, including terrorism. One Arabic-language website claimed that former Syrian vice president Abdel-Halim Khaddam was involved in these joint operations, including the "disappearance" of Moussa al-Sadr, the Iranian-born Lebanese cleric who went missing in Libya in 1978 and is presumed to be dead. A discovery that Syria really was complicit in Sadr's death could cause Bashar al-Assad's regime some trouble with Lebanon's Shia community, which revered the cleric. With Syrian officials likely on the verge of being indicted in the assassination of a major Lebanese Sunni figure, the former prime minister Rafik Hariri, Syria can hardly afford to alienate the Shia, the one Lebanese sect still unequivocally supportive of Damascus.

Khaddam sent word from Paris that he had nothing to do with Sadr's death. In Washington I spoke with Bassam Bitar, a Khaddam associate who worked in the Syrian regime at high levels. "Khaddam warned Sadr not to go to Libya," says Bitar. "Khaddam always thought Qaddafi was crazy and thought something could go wrong, but Sadr went anyway because he needed Qaddafi's money for his projects."

The point of contention between Qaddafi and Sadr was that the Libyan leader wanted the cleric to use the funds to support the Palestinian resistance against Israel, but Sadr was using it instead to build up the impoverished Shia community in southern Lebanon. "The two started to argue and it got out of hand," says Bitar. "Qaddafi told his officers to 'take him away,' which they interpreted as an order to kill him and his two associates."

That Qaddafi's court is populated with men who are likely to interpret the dictator's displeasure as a command to kill says much about the nature of the Libyan regime. When Qaddafi asked the next day where Sadr was and discovered he had been killed, he had his officer killed. "Qaddafi didn't want to have any troubles coming from killing Sadr," says Bitar. "He called the Syrians in a panic to ask for advice, and it was Damascus that told him to concoct the story that he was last seen leaving Libya for Italy, where he supposedly disappeared."

Khaddam's man in Washington explains that since the former Syrian vice president was in charge of the Lebanon file until Hafez al-Assad handed it off to his son Bashar, the future president, Khaddam had little to do with Syria and Libya's joint terror operations – like the Lockerbie bombing. It's worth recalling that long before Libyan intelligence officer Abdelbasset al-Megrahi was found guilty in the 1988 operation that killed 270 people, including 190 Americans, Syria was the prime suspect. There's been plenty of speculation that Damascus was given a free pass when the George H.W. Bush White House wanted Syrian cooperation in Operation Desert Storm and the Madrid peace talks, but Bitar and Khaddam believe that the Syrians worked alongside Libya to bring down Pan Am Flight 103. "The Syrians were handling the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Ahmed Jibril's group – that's who did it. But I am certain that Megrahi was also a part of it."

Bitar, who worked at the Syrian embassy in Paris in the '80s when Damascus was running Palestinian terrorist organizations out of the French capital, says that the intelligence officer responsible for liaison work with other clandestine services was Gen. Mohammed Khouly. "He was with air force intelligence and since Hafez was from the air force that was another reason to trust him. With Bashar all the intelligence outfits are constantly being reshuffled because he doesn't trust any of these people. That's why he's bringing back some of his father's associates, men Hafez totally trusted—like Mohammed Khouly."

Bitar suspects that it is Khouly who dispatched Syrian intelligence officers to Tripoli to clean the Libyan files. "They don't want to get on the bad side of the Americans." However, it's difficult to know what sort of extravagant mischief Damascus would have to pull to get on Washington's bad side. Both the Bush and Obama administrations have made a habit of looking the other way when it comes to Syria—whether it's support for Hezbollah and Hamas, or serving as a transit route for foreign fighters on their way into Iraq to kill American soldiers and U.S. allies, Syria has paid no price for its misdeeds. Even reports that Syria has built a second secret nuclear facility, this one on the outskirts of Damascus, have failed to sour a White House that still believes the central issue in the Middle East is the Arab-Israeli peace process. Obama—and probably Obama alone—seems to think that a deal between Damascus and Jerusalem will take the air out of Iran's balloon and calm the region down.

Even so, the furies now coursing the Middle East will not be quelled by a peace process. The real Middle East experts are in the regimes themselves and they know which way the winds are blowing, or else Syrian intelligence would not be cleaning up its files in Libya—they're hedging their bets in the fear that no matter how many pilots they rent out to him, Qaddafi's days may be numbered.

"Khaddam believes it is coming to Syria, too," says Bitar. Of course, Khaddam in exile has plenty of reason to wish for the downfall of the regime he once worked for and now loathes. The history of collaboration between Syria and Libya shows that the regime in Damascus is apt to be every bit as brutal as Qaddafi's when pushed to the wall, and someday maybe not too far in the future it will be.

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