

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Will Syria become another Iran?

Military hardliners, in a coalition with Islamic fundamentalists, have started a shooting war against the Assad government.

During the first two weeks in May, the opening shots of what may become a very bloody civil war were fired in the Mediterranean port of Latakia. Syrian President Hafez al Assad is under assault from military hardliners, backed by Moscow, who are playing the "Islamic fundamentalism card" to oust him from power. If their drive succeeds, Syria could become a combination military dictatorship and "Islamic republic," to the benefit of Soviet strategic interests.

Opposing each other for the control of the strategically important port, where the Soviet Union has military facilities, were the "Defense Brigades" of Vice-President Rifaat al Assad (the president's brother) and the "Special Forces" of Col. Ali Haidar. Haidar had flown his troops in from Lebanon to prevent Rifaat from consolidating his power in that region.

Located near the Assads' home base in the Alawite tribal region, Latakia is surrounded by the Mourshidi Alawite tribe which, however loyal to Hafez al Assad, refused to support Rifaat in his battle with Haidar. More than 12,000 Mourshidi soldiers belonging to Rifaat's "Defense Brigades" had to be disarmed by the Brigade commanders, while the leader of the rebellious tribe was sent into exile.

The political survival of the Assad family is further cast into doubt by the deteriorating health of the president. Suffering from numerous heart attacks, diabetes, and other ailments, Assad cannot work more than two or

three hours a day, and his early death is an increasingly likely prospect.

In February he rejected a proposal to go to Moscow for treatment—out of fear, it was said, that the Soviets might try to kill him. Moscow generously sent to Damascus the doctors of the recently deceased Yuri Andropov.

Relations between the Assad brothers have been strained, and led to "poster wars" in Damascus earlier this year, in which brigades of Rifaat-supporters plastered the city with his portrait, only to have the posters replaced the next day with smiling pictures of the president.

But Hafez was posed with the alternative of supporting the ruthless and ambitious Rifaat or having the whole family overthrown by the military; he opted for his brother. By appointing Rifaat one of three vice-presidents in March, Hafez made it clear that he wanted Rifaat to succeed him.

The military establishment has responded by launching a bid for power. Colonel Haidar, a junior military officer, was not acting on his own when opposing Rifaat in Latakia, but on the orders of Chief of Staff Hikmat Shehabi. Backing Shehabi are several high-ranking officers such as Gen. Shafik Fayad, commander of the Syrian Third Army located in Damascus, and the very powerful Gen. Ali Duba, chief of the intelligence services. General Duba is known to be the principal liaison with the Iranian and Libyan intelligence services, as well as with the East bloc.

At the head of this coalition, however, is Gen. Mustafa Tlas, the defense minister who has been for years a close confidant of Hafez al Assad and is generally seen as the "eyes and ears" of Moscow in Damascus. Tlas also happens to be the only Sunni leader in the government (the Assads belong to the Alawite Muslim minority). It is the Sunni elites that form the core of the Muslim Brotherhood Islamic fundamentalist opposition to the Assads.

Soviet involvement in the fight against Rifaat al Assad is not yet fully assessed by observers who stress that Moscow is too preoccupied with the Gulf War and Egypt to think about playing one Syrian faction against the other.

Rifaat, unlike Tlas, is generally considered pro-Western; but Israeli sources caution against such a simplistic view, pointing out that Rifaat's main Western connections are through arms and drug smuggling, real-estate speculation in the West, including Washington, and his numerous Swiss bank accounts. Because of such operations, Rifaat is committed to a Syrian takeover of the Lebanon, if only to protect his investments and his hashish plantations.

On the other side, Shehabi's decision to withdraw Colonel Haidar's "Special Forces" from Lebanon to fight inside Syria was followed with interest by these sources as an indication that this military faction may be ready to give up Lebanon to consolidate its power in Damascus.

This has had immediate implications for the Lebanon crisis. Renewed fighting in Beirut following the Latakia clashes was considered a sure sign that the growing power vacuum has prevented the Syrian "master" from imposing the deal previously negotiated for Lebanon.