

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Syria: from food shortages to war?

Historic fervor and empty stomachs can make for an explosive mixture.

Although it was never officially confirmed, Syrian President Hafez al Assad made a secret visit to the Soviet Union on March 27 for emergency consultations with Soviet leaders including Mikhail Gorbachov. The visit occurred while Algerian President Chadli Benjedid was concluding his three-day official visit to the Soviet Union—the first since 1981—which may indicate that the situation in the Maghreb and the American-Libyan confrontation in the Gulf of Sidra were discussed.

However, Assad arrived with an empty stomach, as they say: Syria's economic crisis was reportedly at the center of discussions, which also reviewed the present level of military tension between Israel and Syria around the Golan Heights.

Of the many Middle Eastern countries hit by the collapse of the oil price, Syria is on the front line, and on the verge of a total economic breakdown. For the same reasons that Assad flew to Moscow on March 27, Damascus had invited Bavarian Prime Minister Franz-Josef Strauss for 48 hours on March 22 to discuss West German and Bavarian economic and industrial investments in a country whose foreign currency reserves, according to Strauss, have reached the bottom figure of \$50 million.

The economic assistance generally extended to Syria by the Gulf countries fell with the oil price. From a level of \$2-3 billion a year, this assistance may fall as low as \$570 million this year. Political blackmail or the

threat of deploying Syrian-sponsored terrorists against the Gulf countries, as has been done in the past, may bring a few hundred million more in aid, but these countries are broke. Even Syria's ability to blackmail them is going fast. For purely economic reasons, a large part of the 400,000 Syrian workers in the Gulf—many of whom work for Syrian intelligence—are expected to be laid off, just as tens of thousands of Palestinians, Jordanians, and Egyptian workers are being laid off.

The consequences have been felt within Syria. No less than 25% of the active labor force are employed in state security, be it the intelligence forces and their various militias, the national and local police, or the 450,000-man army permanently maintained in a state of war. Many of these soldiers may be able to feed themselves off the local population, especially the army of occupation in Lebanon, but they represent an economic burden that Damascus cannot afford much longer, especially as the officers and NCOs are supposed to receive special treatment in housing and food supplies.

In Syria, military service lasts three years, and no Syrian is allowed to leave the country for at least five years after his service, since he may be repeatedly called back for maneuvers. Notwithstanding, Damascus is going ahead with a plan to build its army up to 1 million.

The economic crisis is being dealt with along the lines of sectarian division of the country: The Alawites are first to be served, then comes the back-

bone of the regime, the intelligence services and the army. The rest of the population, as well as Syria's other religious minorities, are last to be served. According to witnesses recently in Damascus, people queue up for basic food stuffs some six hours a day. Meanwhile, Syria's precarious industries are barely surviving power outages between 8:00 and 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 and 5:00 p.m.

Political discontent is not immediately visible. There are more than 50,000 political prisoners in Syrian jails, and that's enough of a deterrent to quell the dissatisfaction of the larger part of the population. However, opposition seems to be taking another form. *Le Figaro* reported on April 10 that Damascus's old rival city of Aleppo may be coming out the winner. While Damascus bows under shortages of all kinds and a permanent state of martial law, Aleppo, which is considered a secondary town by the Alawites, is enjoying a freedom which is attracting business. The Aleppan bourgeoisie always enjoyed a status equal to that of Cairo or Istanbul, but was badly hit during the 1980 Alawite drive against the Muslim Brotherhood. But Aleppo's ancient elite may prove once again to be more lasting than the *nouveau riche* of Damascus.

Assad prefers to see himself as the spiritual reincarnation of Mameluk leader Saladin. Saladin was no Alawite, but Assad's philosophy on the transmigration of the soul doesn't bother with such details. Next year is the 800th anniversary of Saladin's victory over the crusaders, and, for Assad, the modern crusaders to be defeated are the Israelis. According to the Pentagon's Richard Pipes in Jerusalem April 3, "It is not clear how much control Gorbachov has over Syria."

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