

The Road to Latakia

By Dr. John Bruni

The week beginning December 3, 2012 is another bad news week for Syria. The White House has warned President Bashar al-Assad not to use the Syrian military's stockpile of chemical weapons against anti-government forces. The United Nations and the European Union have issued orders for all non-essential staff posted in Damascus to leave the Syrian capital which is currently under bombardment by the Syrian military. Damascus is also under increasing pressure by elements of the foreign-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA). Syrian government spokesman Jihad Makdissi was sacked by the Assad government, though there is some question whether he resigned and walked away from his thankless task. And, NATO approved the deployment of Patriot surface-to-air missile batteries to the Turkish-Syrian border.



This final point is a curious one.

While there have been some reports of cross-border fire from Syria into Turkish towns, this has been artillery fire, and, since the Free Syrian Army and other rebel groups have captured Syrian Army equipment, we still to this day have no evidence that it was the Syrian Army that was responsible for this cross-border violation. On the basis of logic alone, the Syrian military would not

want to provoke a Turkish intervention; on the other hand, the FSA and Syrian rebels would, since such a move would strengthen their hand and weaken that of the Syrian military. Patriot missile batteries in Turkey will not prevent further artillery strikes by unknown Syrian assailants using captured Syrian Army artillery. They may, however, prevent Syrian fighter aircraft from straying too close to the Turkish border. As a deterrent to prevent the Syrian Army from using ballistic missiles, especially armed with chemical weapons, Patriot missiles are not necessarily the best countermeasure. Patriot surface-to-air missiles are primarily anti-aircraft missiles. While they have been used to shoot down ballistic missiles, famously during the 1991 Gulf War, (and latter variants have been designed to undertake this role), this is a secondary characteristic of the Patriot. If the Syrian military have operational chemical weapons in their arsenal, and some reports have suggested that they have thousands of tons of mustard gas and nerve agents, much of this would be launched at a tactical level, that is, either in artillery shells fired from tanks, howitzers, or as bombs from combat aircraft. Of these launch-platforms, the Patriots would only be useful against combat aircraft. Furthermore, the ballistic missiles that the Syrian Army has, such as the Russian Scud-Ds, Iskander-Es and the Iranian Fateh-110As, they are used as 'strategic weapons' to intimidate Israel and



are unlikely to be fired against Syrian anti-government forces.

That the days of Bashar al-Assad's government are numbered is common knowledge. The Alawite core of Syria knows it. Their Christian and other minority collaborators know it. The international community knows it. And, Sunni Syria i.e. Salafists, FSA, foreign fighters, Muslim Brotherhood & the Syrian National Council know it.

Contemporary media hyperbole regarding Assad's possible use of chemical weapons against Syrian rebels makes no sense. Had Assad learnt anything from former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's playbook, he would have used Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons early on in the rebellion. This would have signalled that Alawite Syria was prepared to move brutally, rapidly and decisively to quash anti-government forces. It would have signalled to the international community that foreign military intervention would be far too costly to contemplate. It is interesting to note, that governments in the Middle East known to have had chemical and biological weapons at their disposal, such as Iraq prior to Saddam's downfall and Qaddafi's Libya, did not give the order to release such weapons against anti-government forces or the foreign forces ranged against them. This could have been due to covert action taken by Western forces disabling and disrupting military command and control. It might have been due to poor condition of the weapons themselves. It may have been a deliberate

decision by Saddam and Qaddafi to kept the door open to a negotiated settlement. What is also interesting is that this pattern indicates that Middle East dictators see WMDs as weapons of last resort, only to be used when all options – no matter how remote – are exhausted. If this is a genuine pattern of behaviour (among Middle East dictators), then it comes as no surprise that Alawite Syria has not given the order for their use. Keeping their powder dry on the chemical weapon issue indicates that these weapons might form a critical strategic reserve for an independent Latakia.



It is with a degree of certainty that the forty one-year rule of the Alawite minority over Syria will end. How? Not necessarily with the bang of foreign military intervention, but rather with the whimper of a retreat back to the Alawite stronghold of Latakia province with much of the Alawite military intact, including much of its feared ballistic missiles and chemical weaponry. But before the final call to retreat, the Alawites may quite possibly scorch the Syrian earth so badly, that it will take generations for the eclectic mix that currently constitutes the Syrian Opposition, to effectively govern a functional state. And when it does, it might not govern over the Alawites. Aware that the Sunnis, in such a scenario, will want

retribution for the mayhem caused by the Assad regime, the Alawites will most likely pull back to Latakia province and, with Russian and Chinese international support, declare their independence from Syria. This would be a masterstroke. Declaring Alawite independence would deny the Sunnis the retribution they crave. From an independent Latakia, the Alawite core would be able to maintain its links to Iran and act as a supply route for Iranian rocketry, technicians and military personnel to Iranian proxies – the southern Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah and the Gaza Strip terrorist group Hamas.

Continuing with this hypothesis, an independent Latakia would not be a welcomed entity in the United Nations. Such an independent state would be as unloved and ‘illegitimate’ as the Georgian statelets of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Nonetheless, Moscow’s recent investment in the strategic port of Tartus almost guarantees Russian diplomatic support. Located in the Tartus Governate (neighbouring Latakia), the Port of Tartus is Syria’s second largest port, the largest port being the Port of Latakia. A hostile, independent Latakia, within missile firing range of Tartus, would make the Russians particularly nervous. Making peace with the Alawites by giving them international recognition should they request it, would buy the Russians influence among the Alawites, albeit at the risk of angering a post-Assad Sunni regime. The fact that China is no fan of Western diplomatic or military interference in the affairs of fellow autocratically administered states, an

independent Latakia might very well also be guaranteed Chinese support.

The drama that is today’s Syria still has a long way to go before we see peace and stability return. Media hyperbole aside, Assad has conducted himself with brutal logic, driven by the fact that losing Syria will see the Alawite sect and all those seen to have collaborated with it, take full responsibility for Assad’s transgressions. We can only hope that the least worst option, that of Latakia’s independence, is what Assad and his inner circle are angling for. The alternative will quite possibly be a new wave of horror where Sunni Syrians transform from victim to perpetrator.

Images accessed: 05/12/2012

Jihad Makdissi image:

<http://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Guardian/Pix/pictures/2012/12/3/1354555542350/Jihad-Makdissi-008.jpg>

Patriot SAM image:

http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/02418/nato-patriot-missi_2418314b.jpg

Syrian Scud-D SSM taking position:

http://www.otyposnews.gr/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Syria_Scud_D-600x250.jpg