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CONFIDENTIAL

December 14, 2011

For: HRC  
From: Sid  
Re: Syria Intel

The report below comes to me only from my friend, David Lesch, leading Syria expert in the U.S. Whether or not the suggestions of the Syrian ambassador to the U.K. can produce any positive outcomes, they are reflective of a high diplomat of the regime claiming to speak frankly.

*From David Lesch:*

Returned from my trip to London yesterday. I met with the Syrian ambassador to UK, Sami Khiyami, but I was not able to meet with Asma's father.

Sami is a very interesting person. He is secular Sunni, very straightforward and forthright (for a Syrian official), and not a member of the Ba`th party. He was pretty frank with me, and I got the impression he believes he and his government could be on their way out, so no harm in telling it like it is. He was critical of Bashar al-Asad, although he still supports him as the best alternative, and he was incredibly critical of, even dismissive, of the security services, who he essentially said were too stupid to do anything right.

I asked him if he could tell President Obama or Secretary Clinton one thing, what would it be? His response was interesting. He said that he would vigorously ask the US to stop supporting groups such as the Syrian National Council b/c they have very little legitimacy or popularity in Syria. He strongly recommended showing outward support for the serious and respected Syrian opposition elements in Syria itself, people such as Michel Kilo, Riyad Seif, Louay Hussein, etc. In his view, these are people of substance who have been both jailed and part of the government apparatus, so they are generally respected in both circles (govt and populace). They are the only ones who can lead the country through a transition period toward a more democratic system. Of course, he recognized, as I told him, the difficulty in getting Syrian govt support for this. Bashar tried half-heartedly in the summer to do this through a national dialogue, but it did not

go anywhere (and as Sami told me, the govt did not handle it very well). It might be that the govt might be more amenable to such an approach now b/c of growing difficulties. Sami said that it would not eliminate all of the opposition, since there are many wedded to the fall of the regime no matter what, but that it would draw enough support to isolate the radicals, who would wither away eventually, and create a critical mass to force the regime to follow through (especially with regional and international pressure holding its feet to the fire) and transition toward sharing power.

Although it may be a bit self-serving, I happen to agree with him. The SNC and other opposition groups have very little if any traction inside Syria. Need to get guys like Kilo and Seif and the Local Coordination Committees in Syria on the same page with some sort of govt sanction, in combination with an end to violence. I think it is the only way this doesn't end up in a bloody civil war. Not easy to say the least, first and foremost b/c you have to get Bashar and his cronies to go along with it--tough sell. In addition, Syrian opposition elements in the country may not go with it. It may be past the point of no return. He also added one more request: get the Qataris to stop causing so much trouble in Syria in a way that is leading toward militarization of the crisis.

He said he would make a formal request to Bashar for me to see him within the next month or so. Yale University Press has asked me to write a very quick 100-120 page book on Syria and the Arab spring and Bashar al-Asad, with the final draft due in April, so it is under this pretext that I would be going. Not holding my breath on this, although Bashar seems more willing to talk to people now.