



Diwan

Syria in Crisis

Dangerous Liaisons

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Arab and Western intelligence officials are said to be normalizing relations with the Assad regime, and that is worrisome.

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Comments (1)

In recent months, Western and regional intelligence chiefs seem to have engaged in a rapprochement with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Their main contact person has reportedly been Ali Mamlouk, the head of the National Security Bureau.

Mamlouk, an Assad confidant, is said to be spearheading the regime's effort to normalize relations with the world. Last week, *Al-Akhbar*, a Lebanese newspaper close to Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, reported that Mamlouk had recently visited Rome, where he met with Marco Minniti, the Italian interior minister, and Alberto Manenti, the director of the Agency for Information and External Security, Italy's foreign intelligence service. Two years ago, Manenti had met Mamlouk and Assad in Damascus.

For the Syrian regime, Italy is viewed as a gateway to Europe, and intelligence sharing provides a perfect pretext for a gradual normalization with European governments. This may seem far-fetched on the diplomatic front, especially in light of the European Union's sanctions against the Assad regime. However, as the intelligence-based rapprochement takes root, the momentum for normalization may grow. That is what Syria is wagering on, at least, in its diplomatic waiting game.

In a similar vein, in a recent interview Bruno Kahl, the president of Germany's Federal Intelligence Service, underlined the need for contacts with Syria to gain information on the Islamic State and Al-

Qaeda.

This echoed reports from last November, also first mentioned in *Al-Akhbar*, that a U.S. intelligence official had visited Damascus to meet with Mamlouk. According to the paper, the two sides discussed security matters and missing American citizens in Syria. Whether the visit actually happened remains unclear, particularly as the Syrian regime and its allies have an interest in making it appear that foreign governments are in contact with Damascus. In an article that picked up on the *Al-Akhbar* report, Reuters cited a "regional official" close to Damascus, who described the visit as the highest ranking visit to Syria by a U.S. official since the start of the war in 2011.

While such meetings, if confirmed, are preliminary and it is hard to predict their results, Mamlouk's earlier efforts enjoyed some success. The Syrian intelligence chief is credited with reestablishing security relations with Egypt under President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi. Cairo's rapprochement with the Syrian regime represented a golden opportunity for Assad. In return for sharing intelligence on hundreds of Egyptian jihadists in Syria, Damascus found itself with an Arab foothold after years of Arab diplomatic isolation.

Indeed, after 2015 Mamlouk visited Cairo on a number of occasions to meet with Khaled Fawzi, the former head of Egypt's General Intelligence Directorate. Fawzi, who was recently removed from his position, reciprocated with a trip to Damascus last year. Although official diplomatic relations remain on hold, the Egyptian intelligence service is said to maintain a busy office in Damascus, participating in ceasefire and deescalation zone agreements and exchanging information on jihadi groups.

Mamlouk is also said to have reestablished intelligence ties with Turkey, the major backer of anti-regime Syrian militants. Media reports in Arabic, including one in the Turkish opposition online publication *Zaman*, which is close to a political foe of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have claimed that earlier this year Mamlouk met with Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization, at the Russian Hmeimim military base in Syria.

It remains difficult to corroborate such reports, particularly when they are published in outlets that have a political agenda. However, in Turkey's case, a statement by Ibrahim Kalin, an advisor to Erdogan, lent the reports some credibility. Kalin admitted last month that "the intelligence agencies of Turkey and Syria are in contact whenever situations in Syria necessitate it."

Prior to the Syrian uprising in 2011, Mamlouk had also played an integral part in reviving security relations with the United States, in return for political normalization. At the time, Washington had not had an ambassador in Syria for several years. In a February 2010 meeting in Damascus with Daniel Benjamin, then the State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism, Mamlouk spoke of the regime's willingness to achieve progress under a "political umbrella." This included political relations between Syria and the United States and a lifting of U.S. sanctions on Syria. The contents of the meeting were revealed by Wikileaks, and Mamlouk, in presenting his security strategy with regard to militant Islamists, was quoted as saying: "In principle, we don't attack or kill them immediately. Instead, we embed ourselves in them and only at the opportune moment do we move." Mamlouk's message couldn't have been clearer. If the United States gave Syria a political incentive to act against the jihadis, it would do so. If not, they might slip away across the border.

Mamlouk's previous successes notwithstanding, the regime's decision to appoint him to lead negotiations constitutes a cynical attempt to whitewash human rights violations under the pretext of international security. Mamlouk has been implicated in the crackdown on dissidents in Syria. According to a Human Rights Watch report from 2012, Mamlouk oversees six detention centers housing thousands of detainees, all of whom, including children, have been electrocuted, sexually abused, beaten, maimed, or, on many occasions, killed. In other words Mamlouk heads an empire of torture. Normalizing with Syria in exchange for information only breathes new life into the torture chambers.

On top of that, Mamlouk has been the target of a Lebanese arrest warrant. In August 2012, the Information Branch of Lebanon's Internal Security Forces arrested Michel Samaha, a former minister and staunch ally of the Syrian regime. To the astonishment of many Lebanese, national television networks broadcasted footage of 24 bombs found in his home. Both audiovisual evidence and Samaha's own confession revealed that Mamlouk had personally supplied Samaha with the explosive devices, in order to assassinate a Sunni politician in a public gathering, as well as a senior Christian cleric during a planned visit to northern Lebanon. The plot was aimed at destabilizing Lebanon.

Two months later, Wissam al-Hassan, the head of the Information Branch credited with being behind the arrest, was killed in a car bomb explosion in eastern Beirut. While the investigation never reached a conclusion, Lebanese politicians pointed fingers at Mamlouk as the perpetrator.

Exactly a year after Samaha's arrest, a bombing targeted two Sunni mosques in Tripoli during Friday prayers, killing 50 civilians and injuring 800. One of those arrested revealed that Ali Mamlouk was his contact in Syria. This is the same man who reportedly visited Rome to meet with his Italian counterpart last month.

Information sharing could enhance Europe's security, some European intelligence chiefs would argue. However, such a choice should be weighed against other risks. Turning a blind eye to the crimes of the Syrian regime would normalize the very practices that brought the terrorist threat to the continent's doorstep in the first place, alongside a few million refugees.

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