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Remarks by Bush aides worry Syria Ordinary people fear their nation could be target of 'regime change'

Friday, April 11, 2003

San Francisco Chronicle

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[Juliette Terzieff, Chronicle Foreign Service](#)

Damascus, Syria -- A sense of gloom-tempered defiance hangs over this capital city as President Bashar Assad's stand against U.S. policies in the Middle East pushes this hard-line Arab nation toward the top of the Bush administration's radar screen.

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Hostile remarks about Assad's regime, including hints that Syria will be the next American target of "regime change," have emanated in recent days from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, his deputy Paul Wolfowitz and Secretary of State Colin Powell.

On Wednesday, Reps. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y., and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Fla., said they would seek action on legislation authorizing President Bush to impose economic and military sanctions on Damascus, and to restrict Syrian diplomats' travel in the United States.

"Now that Saddam Hussein's regime is on the precipice of defeat, it is time for America to get serious about Syria," Engel said.

The messages have reinforced a sense of isolation and menace among ordinary Syrians as well as the Assad government, and they are being interpreted as yet another sign of Bush's determination to install U.S. dominion over the Middle East.

"So many of the leaders of our Arab brothers have sold their countries to America in exchange for their own political survival," said Ahmad Mahmood, a 45-year-old electrician who recently participated in several anti-war demonstrations in Damascus.

"Those who have not become targets. Anyone who stands against American hegemony is attacked."

Though Syrians have no love for tyrannical regimes like those of Hussein and the Taliban, they have virulently opposed post-Sept. 11 military actions by the United States, fearing they are a prelude to a 21st century neocolonialism driven by U.S. and Israeli interests.

"Who gave Bush the right to march his army into any country and change whatever he wants? Any human being who values his or her rights would oppose such a thing," said Mohammed Al-Ibrahim, an analyst based in Damascus.

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The versions of the Baath Party that have ruled both Syria and Iraq for three decades didn't always see eye-to-eye, though their repressive style of rule bears many similarities. But they long found common cause in their hatred of Israel, hostility toward the United States and economic self interest.

A U.N. sanctions-busting pipeline has pumped out 130,000 barrels of oil a day from Iraq to Syria in recent years, providing more than \$10 million a month in profits to both countries.

The loss of that trade due to the war and the thought of 200,000 American troops next door give Syrian leaders the jitters.

"Syria's most concrete worry is that they're next, and that has been driving their bilateral and international relations since the campaign against Afghanistan began," said a U.S. diplomat in Damascus.

Relations between Washington and Damascus have long been strained due to U. S. support of Israel and Syria's backing for the Lebanese-based Hezbollah militia and other radical Palestinian groups. Washington also accuses Assad's government of pursuing weapons of mass destruction.

"Whatever help Syria has provided in tracking down al Qaeda elements, the country is well aware that it still remains on the (State Department's) list of states that sponsor terrorism," the diplomat said.

Assad has struggled to emulate the stature achieved by his father, Hafez Assad, over three decades of authoritarian rule. But the war on Iraq has handed him an opportunity to step up as the Arab world's most vociferous opponent of the conflict.

Unlike Iraq's other neighbors, Syria has kept its borders open to all, allowing hundreds, if not thousands, of volunteers eager to aid the Hussein regime to cross into Iraq while permitting Iraqis fleeing the war to enter Syria -- including some Hussein cronies, according to Rumsfeld.

Assad and his government have issued daily condemnations of the war, labeling it the first active expression of President Bush's controversial doctrine of pre-emptive strikes against U.S. foes. Assad even went so far as to publicly state he hoped the coalition would lose the war.

The moves have served to mask the failure of the 36-year-old leader to institute widespread reforms, as he promised to do upon succeeding his father. In a clever twist for a regime that rarely permits expression of political opinion, Assad opened up the streets to daily protests that snarl traffic in Damascus's city center.

"He's playing to the streets, hedging his bets, trying to turn the anger of the average Syrian away from the

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government here and direct it solely at Washington," said the U.S. diplomat.

For the time being, Assad's risk-filled strategy seems to be working.

"This may be the best thing he's done as president," said political analyst Al-Ibrahim. "Someone has got to take stand against these evil American and Israeli designs."

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