

id:204465  
date/time:4/28/2009 13:24  
refid:09DAMASCUS306  
origin:Embassy Damascus  
classification:SECRET  
destination:09DAMASCUS129|09DAMASCUS185|09DAMASCUS272  
header:  
VZCZCXYZ0000  
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDM #0306/01 1181324  
ZNY SSSSS ZZH  
O 281324Z APR 09  
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6293  
INFO RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0537  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0506  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, DRL/NESCA  
PARIS FOR WALLER, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/28/2019  
TAGS: PHUM, PGOV, PREL, SY  
SUBJECT: BEHAVIOR REFORM: NEXT STEPS FOR A HUMAN RIGHTS  
STRATEGY

REF: A. DAMASCUS 00129  
B. DAMASCUS 00185  
C. DAMASCUS 00272

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: This cable represents a follow-up to "Re-engaging Syria: Human Rights" (ref A) and outlines ongoing civil society programming in the country, primarily under the auspices of the Bureau of Human Rights and Labor (DRL) and the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). Both MEPI and DRL fund projects on which Post has varying degrees of visibility. Some programs may be perceived, were they made public, as an attempt to undermine the Asad regime, as opposed to encouraging behavior reform. In an effort to assist any Department level discussions on the SARG's attitude toward human rights, this cable describes a possible strategy for framing the human rights discussion as an area of "mutual concern" for Syria and the U.S. END SUMMARY.

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The New Policy Front

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2. (C) As the Syria policy review moves apace, and with the apparent collapse of the primary Syrian external opposition organization, one thing appears increasingly clear: U.S. policy may aim less at fostering "regime change" and more toward encouraging "behavior reform." If this assumption holds, then a reassessment of current U.S.-sponsored programming that supports anti-SARG factions, both inside and outside Syria, may prove productive as well.

3. (C) The U.S. attempt to politically isolate the SARG raised stumbling blocks to direct Embassy involvement in civil society programming. As a result, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and the Bureau of Human Rights and Labor (DRL) took the lead in identifying and funding civil society and human rights projects. Though the Embassy has had direct input on a few of these efforts, especially with DRL, most of the programming has proceeded without direct Embassy involvement.

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DRL

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4. (C) DRL funded four major Syria-specific programs in the previous fiscal year. The grant recipients were (1) Freedom House, which conducted multiple workshops for a select group of Syrian activists on "strategic non-violence and civic mobilization;" (2) the American Bar Association, which held a conference in Damascus in July and then continued outreach with the goal of implementing legal education programs in Syria through local partners; (3) American University, which has conducted research on Syrian tribal and civil society by inviting shaykhs from six tribes to Beirut for interviews and training; and (4) Internews, which has coordinated with the Arab Women Media Center to support media youth camps for university-aged Syrians in both Amman and Damascus. In addition to these programs, the Embassy provided input on DRL grants awarded to Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), International War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), and The International Research and Exchange Board (IREX). Though Post does not directly monitor any of these programs, we have appreciated the opportunity to meet with representatives of CIPE and IWPR.

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MEPI

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5. (C) In addition to smaller local grants, MEPI sponsors eight major Syria-specific initiatives, some dating back to 2005, that will have received approximately USD 12 million by September 2010. A summary of MEPI produced material on these programs follows:

-Aspen Strategic Initiative Institute, "Supporting Democratic Reform" (USD 2,085,044, December 1, 2005 - December 31, 2009). The institute, situated in Berlin, works with indigenous and expatriate reform-oriented activists and has

sponsored conferences in international locations that brought together NGO representatives, media, and human rights activists from the Middle East, Europe, and the U.S., XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX. MEPI noted that "while this program has offered little intrinsic value and will not likely be continued beyond the terms of the grant, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.

-Democracy Council of California, "Civil Society Strengthening Initiative (CSSI)" (USD 6,300,562, September 1, 2006 - September 30, 2010). "CSSI is a discrete collaborative effort between the Democracy Council and local partners" that has produced XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX "various broadcast concepts" set to air in April.

-Regents of the University of New Mexico, "The Cooperative Monitoring Center-Amman: Web Access for Civil Society Initiatives" (USD 949,920, September 30, 2006 - September 30, 2009). This project established "a web portal" and training in how to use it for NGOs. MEPI noted, "this program has been of minimal utility and is unlikely to be continued beyond the term of the grant."

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-International Republican Institute (IRI), "Supporting Democratic Reform" (USD 1,250,000, September 30, 2006 - August 31, 2009). "The project supports grassroots public awareness campaigns and the conduct and dissemination of public opinion polling research. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

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-MEPI has also proposed continued programming for IRI and the CIPE, as well as supporting independent journalists through joint efforts with NEA/PI.

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Challenge Ahead: Programming In Syria  
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6. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

7. (S) Regarding the most sensitive MEPI-sponsored programs in Syria, Post has had limited visibility on specific projects, due in no small measure to SARG-imposed constraints. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX Through the intermediary operations of the Movement for Justice and Development (MJD) (ref B), a London-based moderate Islamist group, MEPI routes money XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX. Our understanding is that the aforementioned Democracy Council grant is used for this purpose and passes the MEPI grant money on to the MJD.

8. (S) XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

9. (S) XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX The SARG would undoubtedly view any U.S. funds going to illegal political groups as

tantamount to supporting regime change. This would inevitably include the various expatriate reform organizations operating in Europe and the U.S., most of which have little to no effect on civil society or human rights in Syria.

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Strategic Thinking: Next Steps  
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10. (S) The current review of policy toward Syria offers the USG an opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to human rights through the strategic and incremental opening of dialogue between the two countries. The core issues facing a human rights strategy for Syria are (1) how best to advise the SARG that its tolerating dissent will be a key issue as our bilateral relationship moves forward; and (2) how to bring our U.S.-sponsored civil society and human rights programming into line a less confrontational bilateral relationship.

11. (S) Conversations between U.S. and SARG officials have examined the parameters of what might constitute a "common interest" between the two countries, "shared concerns" upon which to center future bilateral discourse and achieve concrete results. This strategy might prove equally effective in raising human rights with the SARG by clearly articulating how recognizable and sustained behavior change in relation to human rights would enhance SARG's image, which currently represents a stumbling block to advancing bilateral relations. In the past, both the Department and the White House have made public statements condemning the SARG for its human rights record; these statements have not, unfortunately, produced positive results. Visiting Congressional delegations have also made public statements that have not been met with the desired action by the SARG. The SARG reacts defensively to public announcements, so more private channels of communication might reinforce a "common interest" theme, allowing the SARG to act without being perceived as bending under U.S. pressure.

12. (S) Should the current administration wish to send such a message, action on any one of the following five concerns might shift the SARG's image into a more positive light. (1) The release of specific imprisoned high-profile civil society and human rights activists; (2) credible movement to resolve the citizenship status of stateless Kurds; (3) loosening media restrictions, including Internet censorship; (4) lifting travel bans on Syrian citizens; and (5) following up on promises to establish a "Senate" that would create a legislative space for opposition politicians to work in.

13. (S) The perennial challenge is how to build programming in Syria without drawing SARG scrutiny to Syrian contacts and Embassy personnel. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX If our dialogue with Syria on human rights is to succeed, we need to express the desire to work in Syria to strengthen civil society in a non-threatening manner. We also need to ensure that programming here is fully coordinated, that the Embassy has the resources it needs to administer the programs, and that the programs are compliant

with U.S. economic sanctions against Syria.

14. (S) While DRL- and MEPI-funded programs have explored new areas where we can achieve results, some of our time-honored programs may also prove to be extremely effective. The attractiveness of U.S. culture is still a powerful engine for change in Syria. It is revealing that when the SARG sought to punish the U.S. for its alleged role in the October 26, 2008 attack in Abu Kamal, they avoided political targets and instead shut down the three main sources of American culture in Damascus: the American Culture Center (ACC), the ALC, and the Damascus Community School. Countering with more cultural programming, more speaker programs, and the IV exchange program remain our best tools for having a direct effect on civil society. To this end, VIPs coming to Syria might be uniquely positioned to request and receive opportunities for addressing public audiences.

CONNELLY