

id:53687
date/time:2/21/2006 14:49
refid:06DAMASCUS701
origin:Embassy Damascus
classification:CONFIDENTIAL
destination:
header:
VZCZCXYZ0001
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDM #0701/01 0521449
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 211449Z FEB 06
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7237
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0656
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PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2015
TAGS: PGOV, PREL, SY
SUBJECT: ANNOUNCEMENT TO FUND OPPOSITION HARSHLY CRITICIZED
BY ANTI-REGIME ELEMENTS, OTHERS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

1. (C) SUMMARY: Post contacts have been quick to condemn the USG's public statement announcing the designation of five million USD for support of the Syrian opposition, calling it "nave" and "harmful." Contacts insist that the statement has already hurt the opposition, and that the SARG will use it in the coming months to further discredit its opponents as agents of the Americans. We have also heard repeatedly that no bona fide opposition member will be courageous enough to accept funding. Contacts noted that the announcement could benefit the SARG, since NGO's with ties (often covert) to the SARG or its security services could be encouraged to apply for the funds. Several contacts insisted that the initiative indicated the U.S. did not really care about the opposition, but merely wanted to use it as "a chip in the game." One contact praised the funding but said the amount was paltry compared with what had been set aside for the Iranian opposition. End Summary.

2. (C) Embassy contacts expressed frustration with the USG's

February 17 public statement announcing the designation of five million USD for support of the Syrian opposition. Contacts agreed that the very public way in which the initiative was launched would hurt the opposition. XXXXXXXXXXXXX said that such funding initiatives are good but should be kept secret. XXXXXXXXXXXXX noted that the opposition is poor and mechanisms should be created to fund their endeavors; however, "we must be very careful" and if such actions are done in the wrong way, it is very harmful to the opposition's efforts. XXXXXXXXXXXXX cited the example of Rafiq Hariri's initial philanthropic work in Lebanon in the early 1990s as an intelligent, strategic means of opening the door for more political activism: "You have to find the right channel to help people."

3. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXXX related that at a February 18 meeting of about twenty Damascus Declaration participants, those assembled had decided to publicly denounce the MEPI project because they felt they had to, in order to avoid even more SARG scrutiny. XXXXXXXXXXXXX, said that the general consensus among XXXXXXXXXXXXX civil society and opposition colleagues had been that the USG is "not serious about us" and that the public announcement was "just to put pressure on the regime with no regard for the opposition." "We are just a chip in the game," he asserted.

4. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXXX claimed that the announcement made it far too risky now for anyone with any credibility or a reputation to protect to accept funding. In XXXXXXXXXXXXX view, it is much more difficult now for the U.S. to help strengthen the opposition than it was before the announcement. According to XXXXXXXXXXXXX, either the USG is naive or it doesn't care "and either conclusion is bad." When asked if XXXXXXXXXXXXX thought that anyone would apply for funds, XXXXXXXXXXXXX said that after the Damascus Declaration's participants' clear rejection of the funding initiative, it will be very hard. In addition, "who will dare to visit that website," with the SARG monitoring internet activity, he asked. XXXXXXXXXXXXX also noted that it is against the law for Syrians to accept foreign funding, a legal situation that makes it very easy for the SARG to construe the acceptance of such funds as "treason, punishable by death."

5. (C) WILL SARG HIJACK USG FUNDING? Contacts were also quick to point out that the announcement could benefit the SARG. XXXXXXXXXXXXX noted that the SARG will be able to use the MEPI funding story as a propaganda tool against the opposition. XXXXXXXXXXXXX was concerned that the SARG would attempt to hijack USG funding by encouraging NGOs with strong government or security ties to apply for MEPI funds, thus "draining" funds from more worthy and independent NGOs.

6. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXXX described the funding plan as a terrible idea that will be used by the regime to discredit the opposition, In XXXXXXXXXXXXX view, the announcement had already severely damaged the opposition, making all of them look, in the eyes of most Syrians, like agents for the U.S. And this is without any SARG exertions yet, added XXXXXXXXXXXXX.

7. (C) Warming to XXXXXXXXXXXXX subject, XXXXXXXXXXXXX called the funding plan "poorly thought out," one that will weaken the opposition in Syria and also weaken any U.S. strategy for shaking the

regime. Echoing others, XXXXXXXXXXXXX made the point that the U.S. needed to be much more secretive, or at least discreet, if it wanted to fund the opposition and civil society in an effective way. In XXXXXXXXXXXXX view the initiative would help the regime consolidate its position and would enhance, whether by design or not, "an Israeli agenda" that desired a weakened regime to stay in place.

8. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXXX, dismissed the funding plan as a stunt, saying the amount of money was small and that the U.S. had already been funding the opposition secretly, without impact. The new initiative would make no real difference. In XXXXXXXXXXXXX view, the announcement angered most Syrians, who viewed it as interference in the internal affairs of Syria, something that the U.S. always insisted that Syria should not do regarding Lebanon. XXXXXXXXXXXXX said the U.S. should engage in dialogue with the Syrian regime and work for a stable, slowly democratizing country that could further U.S. interests in the region, instead of putting up obstacles to such dialogue.

9. (C) One embassy contact, XXXXXXXXXXXXX, offered qualified praise for the initiative, saying that XXXXXXXXXXXXX was happy about the funding, but critical of the public way that it was offered. XXXXXXXXXXXXX also noted that the USG's pledge of \$75 million to the Iranian opposition largely overshadowed the \$5 million for Syrian efforts and raised questions about the US's commitment to the Syrian opposition cause. XXXXXXXXXXXXX was also quick to point out that most activists were afraid to say anything positive about the announcement. XXXXXXXXXXXXX thought that activists may apply for funding but would prefer to do it in secret, especially after the MFA's clear rejection of the USG initiative as international interference. People are afraid of being arrested, XXXXXXXXXXXXX said. In addition, XXXXXXXXXXXXX questioned why the focus was put on registered NGOs, referring to such groups as "GINGOS" (government/NGOs), because of their close government ties. XXXXXXXXXXXXX encouraged the USG to find a different way to fund opposition efforts by engaging regional, particularly Arab NGOs, to work indirectly in Syria.

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