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PROPRIETARY CLASSIFICATION: BUSINESS-IN-CONFIDENCE

FLASH: DAMASCUS BOMBING TRIGGERS ATTACK THREATS BY ASSAD LOYALISTS

Forecast in Part: Massive Regime "Retaliation" with New Violence in Previously "Safe" Inner Cities of Aleppo & Damascus; Assaults on U.S. Envoys; Attacks on Gulf Nations; & Invasions of Embassies.

An explosion in the Al-Midan district in central Damascus on Friday sent Assad loyalists worldwide over the edge. Set ablaze by incendiary regime provocation, **the threatening rhetoric is without precedent in the 10 months of violence in Syria.** It is being treated with utmost seriousness in the non-Syrian Arab world and deserves the same attention by the U.S. and other allies.



One of the victims of the Midan blast yesterday. The source of the photo, an Assad loyalist, accompanied the photo with this caption: **"He wanted to get his children food. Instead he was killed by Feltman's TerrorActivists."** He is referring to Jeffrey Feltman, Assistant Secretary of State (NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS).¹ Mr. Feltman was personally threatened with assassination by Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem and narrowly escaped a bombing on his final day as U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon near the PHOENICIA HOTEL in January 2008. **Bombing is a form of communication preferred by Syria and HEZBOLLAH.**² Moallem encrypted the threat, of course, in a code popular with Assad regime and their cronies: The foreign minister offered the ambassador an all-expense paid vacation in Hawaii. **When an Assad official offers to pay for your vacation, don't count on returning home.**³

¹ Representative mention: "Analysis: Serious Developments at Syria's Southern Border." Under **"Flash:** Sources say U.S. Military Forces Amassing at Syrian Border with Jordan." **FORWARD-LEARNING INSIDER** 11-173 13 December 2011. **We hold Mr. Feltman in high esteem but believe that his faith in ARAB LEAGUE monitors was misplaced. Little more than a political necessity, the monitors did not serve their purpose: to stem bloodshed. "Flash:** Cross-Border Attack Threat in Southern Israel, IDF on High Alert, Syrian Angle." **FORWARD-LEARNING INSIDER** 11-168 5 December 2011.

² References are many. Examples: "Assessment: Elocution by Explosion," under "Message-in-a-Bomb for France: Leave Lebanon." **FORWARD-LEARNING INSIDER** 11-172 9 December 2011. "Syria Speaks to Europe – by Bombing a Troop Carrier." Under "Assad Strategy for Dissident Towns: Strangulation." **FORWARD-LEARNING INSIDER** 11-067 31 May 2011. In explaining explosions as a communications tool, Damascus intelligentsia member, economic strongman and Assad cousin Rami Makhlouf was most helpful: "Lebanese Instability Hikes Importance of Israeli Military Exercise." **FORWARD-LEARNING INSIDER** 11-075 24 June 2011. The PARTY OF ALLAH has also mastered the language: "HEZBOLLAH's Lapdog Confirmed by Lebanese Parliament." **FORWARD-LEARNING INSIDER** 11-081 8 July 2011.

³ "Taking Syria Seriously." **FORWARD-LEARNING INSIDER** 09-074 20 March 2009. Read also "The Pace Quickens Where 'Death Leaves No Echo.'" **FORWARD-LEARNING INSIDER** 11-075 24 June 2011.

Blaming the explosion on everyone from the dissident FREE SYRIA ARMY to the MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD, AL QAEDA, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the U.A.E. and even U.S. envoys Jeffrey Feltman and Robert Ford by name, **Assad loyalists in the region – and those in the U.S., U.K. and Canada – have sent rhetoric through the roof. Demanding attacks and massive retaliation, they are calling not for *civil* war, but all-out war.**⁴

- **THE CRIME-SCENE AS COMMUNITY-THEATER; SIGNS OF EVIDENCE TAMPERING ON A SCANDALOUS SCALE.** Claimed by the regime as a “suicide attack,” the blast in central Damascus killed a reported 26 and injured dozens more. The bombing was reportedly the work of a suicide attacker who detonated close to two or three mini-buses. Nearby, a fourth, larger bus reportedly carrying police and other security personnel was destroyed. As if on cue, furious residents filled the streets. **Inexplicably, authorities allowed people to wander through a crime scene splashed with pools of blood. Periodically, authorities would open black plastic bags containing bodies and body parts and show them to residents – macabre ploys to fuel anger.**

After being speechless yesterday for 2 hours following the blast (read: **stoking anger in the streets, making last-minute adjustments to gambits in motion**), the Interior Ministry said Syria would “**strike back with an iron fist**,” adding predictably (*emphasis added*):

[The] *modus operandi* of the attacks and the selection of targeted areas (both of which are crowded in order to kill the biggest number of civilians possible) have the fingerprints of AL QAEDA all over them.

But other fingerprints turned up, all signs of evidence tampering. In one video, a man strolls into the crime scene, positioning shopping bags by pools of blood (YOUTUBE, 00:12), perhaps to make the carnage more personal. In that clip, the news anchor zips along in her running commentary (in Arabic) but stops abruptly **when the video shows her associate caught *in flagrante* dressing up the crime scene.** You can actually hear her gasp slightly at the stupidity of the act she and her viewers are witnessing. In another scene, one man who viewers presumed was severely wounded turns out to be an actor: once the videotaping is over (or so he thinks), he pops to his feet and blithely scoots off “the set” (YOUTUBE, 00:07).



Shabbiba #1: “See anything odd?” *Shabbiba* #2: “Nah, not me.” *Shabbiba* #3: “Just a few mangled bodies. Nothing new.” Dissidents claim that one video (YOUTUBE, 01:03) shows not just a reporter and cameraman but sizeable camera crews from the staunchly pro-Assad ADDOUNIA-TV. Assisted by *Shabbiba* (thugs), they are setting up cameras on a bridge overlooking the bombing scene *but doing so before the blast.* **It’s the video shot *after* the bombing that’s telling, a grab from which is shown above (YOUTUBE 01:12).** It shows official agents and *Shabbiba* – completely unruffled – calmly looking down on the crime scene. **Now, a bomb has just destroyed cars and busses, blasted out windows in buildings, killed dozens and filled the streets with blood and body parts of the dead and dying. Yet, just seconds after the blast, these goons look down from the bridge without the slightest hint of alarm or surprise. Perhaps that’s because they are gazing at a scene they fully expected to see.**

⁴ At 1030 EST on Friday, the regime expanded the list of guilty parties to include the CIA and the *DIRECTION GÉNÉRALE DE LA SÉCURITÉ EXTÉRIEURE* (DGSE), closest French equivalent to the CIA.

Significantly, the **FREE SYRIA ARMY (FSA)** denied any responsibility for yesterday's bombing, and it was condemned by nominal FSA chief COL Riad al-Asaad (no relation). Two hours later, the colonel went on AL-JAZEERA to reiterate his claim:

We are with the Syrian people, and we swore to protect them, and we will. The Syrian regime has begun to lose its cool when it comes to the revolution in Syria.

- **SYRIAN STAGECRAFT. ONE OR TWO BELLS. NO WHISTLES.** The last bombing in Damascus (23 December) coincided with the arrival of the first ARAB LEAGUE monitors and killed 44. Or perhaps re-killed 44. It was an attack we assessed as regime-rigged: Assad thugs planted corpses at the blast scene – dissidents they had already killed (Assad collects corpses for lesser reasons).⁵ Now, consider the two photos below of Friday's bombing. **Below left:** Back seat of the bus the regime claimed was carrying cops. **The Take-Away? No blood.** **Right:** The same seat. **The Take-Away? Lots of blood.** **What explains the riddle?** The scene at right was shot after a “crash edit.”⁶



To set the stage – **and this was a stage** – we are looking at the larger bus the regime claimed was carrying police officers. In its opening seconds, the video (YOUTUBE, 00:13) shows **no blood on the seats** – noteworthy, as forensic experts tend to agree that bombs that perforate people prompt bleeding.

There is another kink in the Syrian space-time-reality continuum: **blast vectoring**. As the Syrian cameraman walks through the bus from fore to aft, his camera documents that all the seats are miraculously blood-free. **The camera then catches men tossing police riot shields into the bus.** The viewer thinks they must have been blown *out* of the bus, but *the blast vector was inward*, toward the passengers. Now, in theater – **and this is theater** – there is a concept called “suspension of disbelief.” It dictates that audiences will believe Peter Pan *can* fly and John McClane *can* beat Hans Gruber in **DIE HARD** but still lose the 2008 Presidential Election. In short, **Assad asks us to believe that the police riot shields were blown out of the bus by a blast *into* the bus, and his thugs were merely returning shields to their rightful, pre-blast position.**

But there's more: A split-second after a riot shield lands on the back seat, the video suffers a telling “crash edit” and – *Voilà!* – the next frame shows blood and broken glass strewn on the back seat that, just a nano-second earlier, was free of blood. **Assessment:** Compared to the 23 December staged bombing, the Assad propaganda team is getting better, but not by much. **Like the bombing two weeks ago, yesterday's bombing was regime-rigged.**

- **THE SYRIAN DIASPORA – THE EMERGING THREAT.** Supporters of Bashar Al-Assad within Syria have always rejected Western media accounts that the regime are responsible for the last 300 days of detentions, torture, rape, mutilation and murder. **With Friday's bombing in central Damascus, however, it's the Syrian diaspora that has moved center-stage.** Syrians in England, the U.S. and the U.A.E. are voicing some of the gravest threats in the torrent of rage unleashed in the last ten months of conflict and slaughter.

→ From them, we learn that Turkey, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the U.A.E. have conspired against “the people of Syria” (meaning Assad). Notable, hatred for “Arabs” by Assad loyalists has eclipsed that of “Israelis.”

⁵ The regime has found body-snatching helpful in obliterating evidence of atrocities; blowing up the corpses of dissidents was a variation on the earlier theme: See photo/caption page 4 (“Invasion of the Body Snatchers”), **FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER** 11-173 13 December 2011. See also “Tactical Notes” under “Assad Loyalist: Homs Is Just a Movie Set.” **FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER** 11-172 9 December 2011. “Assad Has ‘No More than a Few Weeks’ – French Role Surges As Predicted.” **FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER** 12-001 3 January 2012.

⁶ Filmmaking and video jargon for an abrupt, sloppy and unprofessional edit.

→ Highest on the hit list of loyalists? “Gulf terrorists.” Pro-Assad forces contend that Gulf nations are funding most of the “mischief” with U.S. backing a mere token measure.

→ Not surprisingly, loyalists are staunchly pro-Iran. One loyalist assured a woman from Dubai yesterday that she cannot rely on her vaunted U.A.E. special forces, because they are “infiltrated” by Iran’s REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS. U.A.E. would soon be destroyed, she is told. “U.A.E. special forces ride on donkeys ... The future of the Gulf belongs to Persians. Learn *Farsi*.”

→ Finally, Assad loyalists are calling for strikes on “Doha, Riyadh and Dubai” by name – and these calls originate far from Syria’s borders. Openly discussed among the most strident of Assad backers are attacks by missiles with “VX warheads” (Syria has stockpiles of mustard, Sarin and VX nerve agents).



For a regime that was speechless for two hours after the bombing, the Damascus government was quick to grease access to the crime scene and (above) the hospital with the sounds of detonation still ringing in their ears. Another sign of planning: within minutes of the blast, ARAB LEAGUE monitors were whisked to the crime scene by their regime handlers who for two weeks had failed to take them to numerous appointments in other cities.⁷ Funeral arrangements were also lickety-split, with processions and burials arranged just hours after the bombing. **The procession will begin tomorrow at AL-HASSAN MOSQUE in Midan. Choice of that site puts the regime right in the face of the opposition, because that mosque has been the springboard for many anti-Assad demonstrations in the city – and it could serve as the flashpoint for violence by *Shabbiha* (regime thugs) whose anger reaches fever-pitch with little provocation. **LATE-BREAKING: Assessment Confirmed: a new pro-regime group attended the funeral in Al-Midan with the stated intention to “cleanse” the neighborhood of “Gulf terrorists.”**** (Regime propaganda photo. For more gruesome photos, **LOOK FURTHER.**)

• **CAUTIONARY NOTE: FUNDAMENTAL FLAWS OF THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION PERSIST. Dragging the Syrian problem further into the ground and complicating any Western response is the grave incompetence of the opposition.** Exiled in Silver Spring, Maryland, Syrian freedom advocate Ammar Abdulhamid is saying it is “imperative” that the SYRIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL either “elect new leaders or risk becoming completely irrelevant.” **Still problematic is the abjectly poor communication and coordination between the SYRIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL and the FREE SYRIA ARMY.** Moreover, there are indications of poor communication up and down whatever chain of command may exist between FSA and groups of defectors who can only loosely be described as FSA “units” – all this despite assurances made last month by both entities of better communication.⁸ **The dissidents do not need boots-on-the-ground as much as they need schools-on-the-ground – guidance on coalition-building, grassroots, basic organization, protocols for cross-talk between the military and diplomatic spheres (not a natural skill) and communication within the military ranks. With Assad support deteriorating in his own capitol, lack of these fundamentals is a serious problem that should be addressed immediately.**

⁷ ARAB LEAGUE monitors seem to be hell-bent on complicity, if not infamy. When Syrian Air Force General Afif Suleiman of Hama defected yesterday with 30 of his soldiers, he said he had made repeated requests of LEAGUE monitors, urging them to accompany him to known mass grave sites. They ignored his requests.

⁸ “Follow-Up: Homs Crackdown, Tension in North, NATO Non-Involvement.” **FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER** 11-171 8 December 2011.



The Russian destroyer ADMIRAL CHABANENKO (D 234234), accompanied by the frigate YAROSLAV MUDRY (F 727), were scheduled to moor in the PORT OF TARTOUS today as a “show of force” and a demonstration of support for President Bashar Al-Assad’s government,” according to Russia’s state-run ITAR-TASS news agency. The two surface combatants are known to be operating with ADMIRAL KUZNETSOV, but the Russians say their only aircraft carrier will not make a port call in Syria, at least not now. CHABANENKO and YAROSLAV MUDRY were with the carrier when she sought shelter from the storm near Scotland’s Firth of Moray last month.⁹ In the photo above, taken in 2007 during a combined exercise involving France, the U.S., the U.K. and Russia, readers can identify ADMIRAL CHABANENKO by looking for a sign of the Russian Navy’s signature materiel readiness challenges.¹⁰

(Public domain photo by MC3 Kenneth Hendrix, U.S.N.)

- **ANALYSIS: NEW MOVEMENT IN THE MIDDLE-CLASS AND THE GHOST OF HAFEZ.** Dissidents maintain that the regime staged Friday’s bombing to suppress protest in central Damascus and create a pretext for a more violent, widespread crackdown. **Weren’t the “business-class” districts of Aleppo and Damascus Assad-friendly and insulated from the more restive suburbs and rural outskirts in which the opposition held sway? Yes, but the inner-cities are now changing.**

Covered by fear, cronyism and corruption, the middle- and upper-classes have remained silent and sat out the “revolution” for months, as we assessed in July,¹¹ because they feared Western intervention and civil war far more than they did Assad’s brutality. This condition persisted through September when AL JAZEERA’s Nir Rosen visited both cities and found that the opposition had failed to attract the comfortable class.¹²

Exiled in Maryland, Syrian freedom advocate Ammar Abdulhamid has documented that regime control of the inner city has been slipping for weeks (*emphasis added*):

[The] story of Damascus is no longer one of restive rural suburbs, rather, it’s a saga of **restive neighborhoods and districts within Damascus proper**. For this reason, the Assad’s War on Damascus is now unfolding and promises to be quite bloody.

LOOK FURTHER. It is that loss of control that has led to “Homsification”—Abdulhamid’s term for the regime’s “iron fist” policy—the hammer it is bringing down on its once-solid inner cities—the same wrath, torture, shelling and gunfire that it unleashes on Homs, Hama or in villages along the Orontes River Valley, the region we’ve dubbed “the rebel corridor.”¹³

⁹ Photo/caption page 5, *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-174 15 December 2011.

¹⁰ In the photo, we have the French stealth frigate LAFAYETTE (F 710) in the upper left, USS LABOON (DDG 58) in the van, and off LABOON’s starboard quarter, HMS PORTLAND (F 79).

¹¹ In late July, we assessed that, among other factors in the regime’s favor, “**Damascus has not risen in open, unbridled revolt**” (“Assad Regime in Jeopardy: Split in Army Ranks, HEZBOLLAH Moves Weapons” *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-091 27 July 2011). Days later, the protestors adopted that same theme, slamming the business class in Damascus and Aleppo by chanting “Your Silence is Killing Us” (“Syria,” under “*Snap!* Security in Seconds” *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-092 29 July 2011).

¹² “Opposition Fails to Win Middle-Class, Sectarian Violence Peaking.” *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-125 23 September 2011.

¹³ The key to understanding the hatred of the regime lies on the banks of the Orontes River that courses north from the city of Hama, scene of the slaughter of 1982. (The Orontes is called *Nahr Al-Asi*—the “Rebel River”—because unlike every other river in the region, it flows south to north.) The people along the Orontes have a long-standing spirit of revenge when it comes to the Assad regime. They are the families, tribesmen and offspring of the victims of the **Hama Massacre of 1982** who were tortured, slaughtered, gassed, run over by tanks and burned alive at the order of Bashir Assad’s father, Hafez. “*Flash*: Northwestern Town Braces for Massacre Reminiscent of Hama Massacre of 1982.” *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-070 8 June 2011.

Al-Midan, the neighborhood bombed Friday, is one of those newly restive Damascene neighborhoods. Confirming Mr. Abdulhamid's "homsification" appraisal and our assessment yesterday that the Midan strike was pretext for more bloodshed, the FREE SYRIA ARMY (FSA) said today that, based on contacts in a branch of either *MUKHABARAT* ("INTELLIGENCE") or *IDARAT AL-AMN AL-SIYASI* (POLITICAL SECURITY DIRECTORATES), the regime had advanced warning that a massive anti-Assad protest was planned for Al-Midan. FSA maintains the planned Midan anti-Assad protest was too close to the flag pole, and that prompted the bombing.

One of the most shocking appeals from loyalists yesterday was a call that Bashar Al-Assad "follow in his father's footsteps or else bring on someone who can end this terrorism with an iron fist." In short, loyalists are longing for the good ol' days when Bashar's father, Hafez, tortured, gassed, bombed, shot, ran over and bull-dozed to death tens of thousands of Syrians in the **Massacre of Hama** in 1982.¹⁴

The radicals are getting their wish. **Today, scholars and Syrians who lived through the 1982 nightmare are saying that the two Damascus bombings mirror tactics employed by Hafez Al-Assad before and during the massacre.** Yesterday's blast was "setting the stage to annihilate a couple of cities," said one who was 7 years old during the **Massacre of Hama**. Referring to bombings when he was a child: "that's what they did then." **Welcome back to 1982 and "Hama All Over Again."**¹⁵



Earlier this week. Western Pacific. An F/A-18E Super Hornet with STRIKE FIGHTER SQUADRON EIGHT ONE flies over USS CARL VINSON (CVN 70).
(Public domain photo by MC3 James R. Erans, U.S.N.)

- **ASSESSMENT:** We forecast with reasonable confidence the following developments:
 - **Syrian security and *Shabbiba* will mount a massive retaliation on Syrian civilians** with increasing forays into inner-city districts in Aleppo and Damascus. ARAB LEAGUE monitors will be transported to scenes when the regime finds them of propaganda value.
 - **Assad or his loyalists and proxies will likely mount attacks on Gulf nations** – particularly Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. We judge that Gulf nation assets on foreign shores, including the U.S., are at heightened risk.

¹⁴ Essential reading is "Assad is Trying to Out-Hitler Qaddafi." *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-058 27 April 2011. See also: "In Syria, Pre-Sighted Kill Zones: 'Hama All Over Again.'" "حملة حاكم" ("The Rule of Hama)." *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-057 23 April 2011. "Revealed: Purported Top Secret Syrian Plan to Counter the Opposition." *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-059 29 April 2011.

¹⁵ It's not like we haven't seen it coming for 300 days. "In Syria, Pre-Sighted Kill Zones: 'Hama All Over Again.'" "حملة حاكم" ("The Rule of Hama)." *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-057 23 April 2011.

→ U.S. envoys Jeffrey Feltman and Robert Ford are at greater risk of personal attack.

→ In Syria and elsewhere, Assad loyalists and proxies will “protest” embassies of nations they term “foreign hands” and seek to invade them. Targets for embassy invasions are, in the order in which they happened to be hated the most today, are: Qatar, the U.S., the U.A.E., Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, the U.K., France and Canada.

→ Finally, after months if not years of snacking, Syria will likely try to make a meal of Lebanon. Worth noting: Last month, AMB Feltman drew the line at the Syrian border, insisting that the U.S. would assist Lebanon in securing that frontier to stem a cascade of regime violence.¹⁶ His pledge will require pronounced and protracted U.S. involvement in the region that is both reasonable and appropriate.



Christmas Eve 2011. Western Pacific. Heavy Seas (a.k.a. Home-Sweet Home). The guided-missile cruiser USS BUNKER HILL (CG 52) pulls away from the aircraft carrier USS CARL VINSON (CVN 70) after taking on fuel during an UNREP (Underway Replenishment). (Public domain photo by MC2 James R. Evans, U.S.N.)

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TURN TIGHTER, GO FASTER, LOOK FURTHER™

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¹⁶ “Major Development.” Under “Late Breaking.” *FORWARD-LEANING INSIDER* 11-171 8 December 2011.