

## “Israel Benefits from the Collapse of Syria”

**Dr. Samir al-Taqi from Syria  
in a special interview with Ksenia Svetlova**

In January 2014, as the second Geneva conference on the Syrian civil war was being conducted, Channel 9 and The Mitvim Institute’s Ksenia Svetlova interviewed Dr. Samir al-Taqi, a former advisor of Syrian President Bashar Assad and now a consultant to the Syrian opposition and the Director of the Orient Research Centre in Dubai. The interview was first broadcast on *Dojd*, a Russian television network, and then on Israel’s Channel 9. During the interview, al-Taqi guaranteed that the civil war in Syria has crippled the country’s ability to continue functioning as a unified state, and that Israel was one of the primary beneficiaries from its collapse.\*



**Ksenia Svetlova:** While preparing for this interview, some supporters of the Syrian regime and Hezbollah were walking along Lake Geneva. They readily identified my interviewee, a former advisor to both Hafez Assad and his son Bashar and an executive member of the Communist

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\* The interview was enabled thanks to Mully Dor and Ariel Dloomy of the Negev Institute for Strategies of Peace and Development (NISPED).

party, now an influential figure in the Syrian opposition and the director of the Orient Research Center, a think-tank in Dubai.

With three years having passed since the outbreak of this bloody conflict in Syria, many claim to have predicted this day, but Dr. Samir al-Taqi took it one step further by defecting to the West six months before the violence began.

**Dr. Samir al-Taqi:** Around April 10<sup>th</sup> 2010, my think tank submitted a report to Bashar Assad that warned that there were fourteen points of potential tension in Syria. We urged him, “You cannot handle this, as the social and political conditions are unsuitable. The only solution is to suppress the rebellion by force. But issues so deeply ingrained also cannot be resolved by force.” After filing this report, our institute was shut down and we were forced to flee.

What is taking place in Syria is not a revolution, rather the implosion of a society. In each city there are different causes. You cannot say that the conflict broke out as a result of one political decision or another. On the contrary, leadership is exactly what was missing, and in the vacuum sprung forth organizations that developed quite arbitrarily.

**Svetlova:** For many years you were a supporter of the Assad regime. Someone within the Syrian opposition said recently that the country has always been a giant prison. Were you aware of this while working for Assad?

**Al-Taqi:** Every diplomat is aware of the Syrian gulag, the Syrian prison. A man who entered at 150 kilograms would exit a featherweight. It was terrible. Sometimes, people would disappear without a trace. But there was always hope that we could change the status quo similar to how the Helsinki Accords in 1975 changed the reality in the Soviet Union.

**Svetlova:** I imagine that you once had many conversations with President Assad. Is he the kind of man who listens to the voice of reason?

**Al-Taqi:** He would listen to reason only when it ran parallel to his own logic. Assad hates intellectuals and was unable to find a common language with them. Traditionally, the intelligentsia is quite strong in Syria and tens, if not hundreds, surrounded the young president when he first came to power. They came to him from all the corners of the world. These people tried to change Syria, but Assad refused to listen to them. Many were forced to leave the country.

Assad’s biggest mistake was allowing Iran and Hezbollah to bully him into a corner. His father Hafez would never have allowed Iran to dictate his actions.

**Svetlova:** al-Taqi left Syria a little over three years ago. This did not prevent him, however, from maintaining relationships with both the opposition and members of the Assad regime, who are, according to him, preparing to abandon ship.

**Al-Taqi:** At first, it resembled the fermentations of social issues, an uprising of the middle class, the intelligentsia, and the young. But Assad's use of force transformed him into a monster that became the focus of the protests. The president's actions allowed the lower classes to hijack the leadership of the protests themselves. They pushed aside the moderate voices within civil society. This was a direct result of the international community's inaction and unwillingness to prevent Assad from slaughtering innocent young people.

**Svetlova:** Do you believe that in this vacuum al-Qaeda can rise up?

**Al-Taqi:** There will never be an al-Qaeda state within Syria. The current challenges - to sustain and feed the people Syria - is one which al-Qaeda has no prior experience. We are not speaking of semi-barbaric tribes in southern Waziristan. In Syria, everything is different. We do not grow opium.

In order to establish a functioning economy, society requires a local government that operates on some organized level. Al-Qaeda is not capable of this. Ultimately the problem in Syria is not Islamism. The real question is whether a federation will rise up from Syria's ashes. I do not think it can be preserved in its current state.

**Svetlova:** Even so, your outlook regarding Syria's future is far from optimistic.

**Al-Taqi:** The research we have conducted at my think tank in Dubai reveals that a fundamental schism has taken place in Syria. Syrian society has been critically damaged. I can no longer imagine a scenario in which an Alawite teacher would take the risk of working in the city of Aleppo (a Sunni city) at any point in the next hundred years. Or that a Sunni visit Qardaha (near Latakia). It is simply impossible. On the other hand, Damascus is no longer the economic center of the country. Our studies show that the state actually has in fact been disbanded.

**Svetlova:** But doesn't the Assad government blame you and your Saudi supporters for this?

**Al-Taqi:** When Assad decided it is more important to preserve his power than saving the country, he signed his own death sentence. Assad's regime has no chance of survival. The economy is falling apart and the state is unable to function under such conditions.

**Svetlova:** In the 1990s, al-Taqi conducted informal discussions with Israeli representatives on the future of the Golan Heights. But today he believes that Syria no longer poses a threat to the Jewish State.

**Al-Taqi:** I think that from the outset of violence in Syria, Israel was the big winner.

When Assad sent his own army to fight against the Syrian people, he was enabling the military's gradual destruction. Israel knows that when she sends her army into the West Bank, it will bring quiet. But in Syria there is complete and total anarchy as the political hierarchy has also collapsed at the village and neighborhood level.

For the next 40 to 50 years, Syria will not constitute a real threat to Israel as it did in 1973 or 2006, and Hezbollah's missiles will rust in their warehouses because without the support of the Syrian army it will never risk going to war.

The boundaries of the entire region are changing. New Yalta and Sykes-Picot agreements are just around the corner. The entire Middle Eastern geopolitical reality needs *perestroika*. I do not believe Israel can afford to watch this process take place from the sidelines.

**Svetlova:** So, on the one hand a new Middle East, and a new Sykes-Picot agreement that redesigns the region. On the other hand, the disintegration of Syria and a painful rehabilitation process that may require decades.

I asked al-Taqi if he is homesick, and received a surprising answer: "I have been back, in the liberated areas near Aleppo."