

Beware the Al Qaeda phantom in Syria

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Abdul Hakim Belhaj an example
by some of Syrian ties to Al
Qaeda

As Hafez al Assad stares down at the rapidly deteriorating situation in Syria from that special place in heaven for Syrian dictators, surely the thought that a Libyan styled intervention happening in Syria would have crossed his mind. As much as it would make him turn in his grave, there is very little moral credit these days to staunchly deny that an imminent or at the very least a likely intervention is just around the corner.

All the quintessential elements are present and accounted for – there is a dictator with an alleged history of sponsoring terrorism who with each move he makes does no favours for himself in the eyes of the international community, there is a resilient population that knows not the meaning of being subdued, a Syrian National Council that should slowly gain momentum as things unravel in Syria and soon in the Free Syrian Army we might have a Northern Alliance. At the time of this writing, a humanitarian intervention makes sense, but what makes a moment opportune? Or more importantly is there something unseen here that ought to be?

In his recent address to the media, Mr. Bashar al Assad waved his iron fist and continued to pin the blame of instability unto the ‘terrorist’, possibly taking cue from his father and the responses meted out to the Islamists by the late Assad in the 1980’s. Quite understandably, given the impending end of this regime, the ‘blame it on the terrorists’ move is an easy card to reach out for which with it carries a certain hope of legitimation for the violence his regime continues to carry out every day. Logically, no one would say no to you when you are fighting terrorists in your own country, and who would be silly enough to get in your way if you are doing everyone a favour by making the world free of one less terrorist movement? Well, to this I say, the African National Congress were terrorists.

If we were to pause for a moment and muster in us the most minute amount of sympathy for Mr. Bashar by the mere fact that we respect the idea of an office of a president, then maybe we ought to look at certain facts and consider if there really are terrorist in Syria, and more importantly, are they the kind of fighters that we can learn to like and help or the kind that Mr. Bashar is right in blaming?

It is almost common knowledge by now that historically Mr. Bashar’s regime are bigger fans of Hezbollah and several other more nationalist oriented terror organizations than the Islamist fashioned Al Qaeda. Understandably, it might be unwise to drag Al Qaeda into yet another rapidly deteriorating complicated conflict zone, but in the light of recent reports of links between the Free Syrian Army and Al Qaeda, a thought has to be spared for the possibility that being the violent entrepreneurs they are, that there is some truth behind Al Qaeda wanting a piece of the action in Syria.

We know now that momentarily but rather thinly a few months ago America and Al Qaeda found themselves of the same side of the political spectrum for once in their long history. Although Ayman al-Zawahiri’s motives deferred greatly from America’s in that it saw the change in Syria brought by the protesters in July as yet another step towards the annihilation of America. But despite this obvious difference, it cannot be denied by a neutral observer that fundamentally, for the briefest of moments, both America and Al Qaeda agreed that the Syrian population had a cause worth supporting.

As I mentioned earlier, those familiar with Al Qaeda and who of course as a prerequisite, buy into the notion that Al Qaeda is an organization with a proper functional structure with tentacle like networks wouldn’t be surprised at the entrepreneurial reaction of Al Qaeda to the developments in Syria. A rational theorist interested in analysing Al Qaeda’s reaction would agree that it is completely understandable for Al Qaeda to be interested in ceasing the

opportunity to support a movement that quite potentially would topple a secular regime and replace it with a more theocratic one. Similarly, the same observer would understand that America and the west would see in Syria like they did in Libya an opportunity to replace a dictatorship with democracy.

But as far as Al Qaeda involvement in Syria is concerned at the moment, the link thoroughly ends at the video released by Ayman al-Zawahiri a few months ago – or at least this is how much we know about their involvement currently. Certain reports claim that towards the end of 2011 sometime in September, meetings occurred between the Free Syrian Army and Abdul Hakim Belhaj. Some might say that this is evidence that there are certain Al Qaeda elements trying to weasel their way into Syria. However, the problem with this claim lies with the mistaking of Abdul Hakim Belhaj as being Al Qaeda, for at the very least there should be a world of a difference between being an Al Qaeda sympathizer and an Al Qaeda member. Mr. Belhaj has always denied being an Al Qaeda member and moreover, the National Transitional Council in Libya has always vociferously insisted that there are no links between their revolution and Al Qaeda.

Moreover, very few out there are convinced that any Al Qaeda involvement is present at all in Syria; at least Omar Bakri is unconvinced.

In an interview conducted by Ashraq al-Awsat in January 2012, Omar Bakri is reported to have said during the interview that;

Through my study of the literature of Al-Qaeda, the Islamist movements, and the Salafi jihadi tendencies, through my following up of the reports of their activities and operations, and through my presence in Lebanon, I can say confidently (describing the reality at face value): neither Al-Qaeda Organization, nor the Salafi jihadi groups have any presence in Lebanon or Syria.

He goes on further to analyze the supposed Al Qaeda involvement in the recent Damascus explosion and comments;

“In my opinion, what the Syrian regime claims is mere falsehood that is unfounded. We have not heard at all from any of these organizations, which the regime claims to exist, an announcement of its responsibility for any operation. This is bearing in mind that Al-Qaeda Organization and the Salafi groups usually publish video tapes after each suicide operation in order to recruit youths and attract new supporters, which has not happened in any of the Syrian events.”

This alongside the insistence of the media in refusing to believe any Al Qaeda or terrorist activities are present in Syria, further bites away at the credibility of the claim that they are somehow present. Even as early as December, governments like Lebanon through their own efforts have refuted the existence of Al Qaeda in proximity to Syria. At the end of it, the terrorist that we can neither like or support nor fight against is one that Mr. Bashar al Assad and his regime only sees in their minds and on SANA. What does exist however is a rebel group that should be assisted at the very least in their efforts in providing protection for the protesters and the establishment of safe zones in Syria. Beyond that, there is very little chance that the events in Syria will solve itself unless Mr. Bashar woke up with an epiphany either to win this struggle with a much larger blitz against the ‘terrorists’ or steps down. As it stands, he remains committed to the former.

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