



The Syrian-Jihadi 'Highway' in Lebanon

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A curious "debate" is growing rapidly among a number of Western-based analysts about the "impossibility" of the existence of Syrian Jihadi-Salafist links. More particularly, some analysts went to the extent of describing the existence of links between the Syrian *Mukhabarat* and the group *Fatah al Islam* operating in North Lebanon as "hazy."

Ironically this mounting trend meets the current Syrian diplomatic and media campaign halfway, as Damascus is deploying extensive efforts to deny "any link whatsoever" with *Fatah al Islam*. In fact, Assad shut down the passage points in northern Lebanon just a few hours after the Jihadists began slaughtering the Lebanese soldiers. Interestingly enough Syria has not closed entry checkpoints to Lebanon since 1976, even though Tripoli's skies were burning during many battles between militias and factions.

Was Assad too fast in denying his backing of *Fatah al Islam*, as with his instant denial of his regime's role in the Hariri assassination?

We'll come back to this matter later. But first let me examine the arguments in the claim stating that *Fatah al Islam is al Qaeda, and therefore it cannot be backed by the Syrian regime.*

"Intoxication"

Intelligence and Counterterrorism experts are familiar with the weapon known as "*intox*" from the root word intoxication. It is a form of deception used by powers throughout history and developed as a special skill by the Soviet KGB during the Cold war. Later on various Jihadi networks, both Iranian and Salafist, have improved this method via the use of *Khid'a* (deception) and the historically rooted

concept of *Taqiya* (dissimulation tactic).

The bottom line is that regimes and organizations, Islamist and ultra-nationalists (i.e. not sanctioned by domestic checks and balances) can use all deceptions possible and don't have to be transparent. In the War on Terror or the Terror War against Democracies, do not expect -- naively -- these radicals to tell you the real story. Hence do not expect either the Syrian regime to declare that it is supporting *Fatah al Islam* at this point, or expect the latter to declare that they are coordinating with Damascus as they are announcing they have pledged to al Qaeda. Reading short of this complex reality would only mean that you have been the victim of "intox," the enemy's *Khid'a* at its best.

Assad Regime's History

To those who cannot fathom how a Baathist secular -- and socialist -- regime engages in alliances with Islamist forces, fights them, befriends one and represses another, just review the very dense history of Hafez Assad between 1970 and 2000, and the short but bloody history of his son Bashar from 2000 until 2007.

For 37 years the Assad dynasty practiced *Taqiya* and *Khid'a* as well as cross-ideological alliances. The regime supported the PLO between 1970 and 1976, before Assad ordered the bloody conflict with Arafat in 1976. Briefly claiming coordination with Right wing Christian parties in

1976-1977, Assad bombed the PLO in 1978. Then using Amal against the Palestinians, the regime supported its own "Palestinian" factions.

Allying himself with Iran and Hizbollah in 1982, the regime wanted to contain Hizbollah in Beirut in 1986. Fighting against the Lebanese (Christian) Forces since the 1970s, the Syrians backed a faction among them (Elie Hobeika) in 1986, fought another (Samir Geagea) until 1989, claimed to befriend the latter for a short time before ordering oppression of their partisans as of 1993.

Assad fought the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, but funded the Islamists in Lebanon and Palestine. His regime claimed it was secular while becoming the single strategically ally of Iran's Islamist elite. In Lebanon and after the withdrawal of the bulk of his army, Bashar kept his entire apparatus: from Shia Hizbollah and Amal, some Druse factions, and a few Christian warlords, to a large range of pro-Sunni politicians and groupings. How can the Assad intelligence net achieve this?

That is another story about the Baathist sophistication. And as of spring 2005, a main former anti-Syrian politician was added to the panoply of Syrian (and Iranian) political assets in the country: General Michel Aoun. However, perhaps the most advantageous "grabs" by the Baathist *Mukhabarat* were Sunni Islamists, who should have been ideologically on the other side of Assad, but who, with the attraction

of a "deity" -- dollars and power -- have agreed to line up with a *Taghut* (unjust ruler in Jihadi literature).

Indeed, as of the early 1990s, Assad, the father, succeeded in recruiting Islamic (Sunni) Fundamentalists. Obviously the prime against-nature alliance was with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, both Sunni Islamists. Once that was "accomplished," other models were possible. Hence, the next wave of Sunni Islamists to be "recruited" by the Syrian intelligence were precisely those based in Tripoli and Sidon in Lebanon, for example *Harakat al Tawheed* of Shaaban and the *Gama'a al Islamiya*. And once Syrian intelligence can penetrate that far in Sunni radical land, it can naturally fund those who will at some point "join" al Qaeda.

Years later, the Assad junta's efforts paid off. While many in the realm of Western logic cannot absorb it, the fact is that Syrian intelligence not only has a strategic relationship with Islamic Fundamentalists who are fighting a same enemy, but also has a control process over some groups who, while being attracted ideologically to al Qaeda, are enjoying the checks of the Assad regime. Hence, the odd situation of *Fatah al Islam* in their affiliation with the ideology of al Qaeda (contradictive with the Baath) and their acceptance of Syrian logistical (and binding) aid.

Jihadi Tactical History

One has also to have a solid understanding of Jihadi-Salafi tactical his-

tory. This type of movement is indeed very rigid on ideology. Its attitude towards the so-called *Kuffar* (infidels) is unshakeable: Jews, Christians, Hindus, Muslim Shiites and even Sunni "apostates" are ranked as enemy.

But the Salafi Jihadists have often used their enemies, accepted their donations and produced all the reasons for this behavior. If Wahabi Islamists have welcomed strategic assistance from American infidels in Afghanistan in the 1980s they surely would accept weapons and money from the region's Baathists. Western "experts" shouldn't have an existential crisis if the Jihadists divert a little from the books they print. Yes, even the Salafi Jihadists can be "tactical." In Tripoli's case, not only *Fatah al Islam* was encouraged by the Syrian intelligence, but a number of its leadership were jailed then freed by Damascus .

Stakes for Bashar's Regime

Another component of the "unnatural" cooperation between the Syrian regime and a more than one Jihadi group in Lebanon is the urgency for Bashar. Hafez Assad used Islamist groups in Lebanon and in Palestine during the 1980s and the 1990s for very specific reasons: control of the game with Israel and with the opponents of the Baath in Lebanon. Bashar's intelligence is using them for a higher stake: to protect the Syrian regime from collapse by ordering the crumbling of the Lebanese Government before. It centers on the Hariri UN Court and on the imple-

mentation of UNSCR 1559. Only seasoned readers of Assad politics can see it as clearly as a grand plan.

The Syrian Game Plan

It is always beneficial for commentators and analysts to look at developments involving terrorism, from historical and geopolitical angles. When *Fatah al Islam* began the attacks against the Lebanese soldiers it wasn't because of a bank robbery. The group declared last November the purpose of enflaming Tripoli, and with it a "northern front" against the Seniora Government. Reading it otherwise is a short sight watching of unfolding events.

The road to the battle of Tripoli began in April of 2005, when Bashar Assad delivered a speech in Damascus in which he declared his intention to withdraw his army from Lebanon under American, French and international pressures. A thorough reading at the time told all those connoisseurs of the Baathist regime that he was planning on pulling out the "first army" (the regular troops and tanks), but he had instructed the "second army," (Hezbollah, the pro-Syrian militias, and the Terrorists implanted within Palestinian camps) to take the offensive.

From July to December 2005, a number of Cedars Revolution leaders were savagely assassinated and bombs targeted several areas. From January to June 2006, while the March 14 (anti-Syrian) politicians were lured into discussions with

Hezbollah, the Syro-Iranians introduced weapons and terrorists through the Bekaa borders with Syria. By July, Hezbollah waged a war against Israel. As of October 2006, Nasrallah waged an urban war against the Seniora Government: A Minister was assassinated and downtown Beirut was occupied.

From January 2007 until now the Jihadi card has been used. This is the strategic context in which *Fatah al Islam* operates today: engaging the Lebanese Army in several spots, starting with Tripoli. In short, the Assad regime has no doctrinal ethics as many fooled experts believe in the West. The Syrian regime would sleep with any enemy and use all assets to reach its goal.

Bashar's war room can assassinate Lebanese politicians with the agents of the neo-Nazi SSNP, set off bombs and suppress Shiites intellectuals with Hezbollah expertise, besiege the Lebanese Church with the help of Christian feudals such as Soleiman Frangieh, disorient the Maronite masses with turncoat Michel Aoun, penetrate the Sunni community with "funded" Salafi Jihadists and thrust into the Druze clan with "paid" operatives.: And as this Terrorist architecture is set up in Lebanon, another span of "Assad Labyrinths" lures outside powers into the game.

The Syrian regime, while ally with the *Mullahcracy* in Tehran, tells the Americans it could do business with them; and, as Bashar instructs his operatives overseas to blast the

Saudi regime, he flies over to Riyadh to assure them of his friendship. Hence, a regime that can master such a diabolical engineering can easily recruit and have remote control over the little *Fatah al Islam* and place it in Assad's vast tool-set in Lebanon and the region.

Fatah al Islam: Opportunistic Jihadi Hybrid

To understand the nature of *Fatah al Islam*, one has to cross several layers of distinctions -- first between an "official chapter" of the Bin Laden organization and the other types. Shaker al Absi's group is not a chapter, yet. Then one must distinguish between those Jihadist entities fully independent from regimes and intelligence services and those "implicated" in some ways.

Fatah al Islam is Salafi Jihadist, regards Bin Laden as an ideological leader, but also happens to be on the receiving end of Assad's payroll. In short, not all Jihadi groups are perfect. So, at the end of the day, the Nahr al Bared based Salafi Terrorists are Jihadi in nature and tied to Syrian intelligence per needs. They could be seen as "Opportunistic Hybrid Jihadis." They can adapt to future situation in the future, if they survive as an organized networks.

Some Terrorism commentators in the West and in the US spoke of an "elusive *Fatah al Islam*." Unfamiliar with the Levantine nature of the phenomenon, those commentators still struggle with what they describe as "speculation" over the

group's "real motives," as if they haven't captured the equation behind *Fatah al Islam*. These commentators base their inability to define the group on classical ethnocentric errors in analysis. First, they conclude that this group can't have ties to Damascus because the Syrian regime executed four members of the group. Ironically, the news came from the Syrian intelligence itself, which means that the Assad regime can go as far as killing operatives to intimidate the rest of the group, and on top of it, "sell" the news to the world as an "an anti Qaeda" activity, which by the way would be bought by US officials.

It would take a world, and many books to explain the twisted -- but successful -- mind of the regime in Damascus. "Killing" Islamists at the hand of the Syrian soldiers is another form of taming wild activities and raining in. And for those who can't fathom this behavior, just remember how in 1987, Syrian special forces slaughtered a number of Hezbollah fighters in Beirut even when Syrian intelligence was coordinating with Iran. Each blood shed, has a specific reason in this business.

The analysts who can't absorb the Syrian-*Fatah al Islam* form of cooperation often cite statements made by al Qaeda in Iraq's past commander attacking the Shiites, and hence the Alawite regime. But what escapes commentators is that theological and ideological principles can be selectively applied, so that strategic goals can be reached. The

"principles" are never forgotten but the roads to attain them can be full of blind spots. And just as a reminder, it was Ayman Zawahiri, al Qaeda's number two, who asked Zarqawi to forget about the Shiia apostates in Iraq until time opportune comes. So, statements made by a few hot-headed Jihadi commanders in Iraq won't stop pragmatic Jihadists in Lebanon from receiving aid from Alawi apostates.

There is something called *al Darura* that escapes many on-the-spot analysts as they navigate in the highly intricate world of the Jihadists: it translates into "necessity." If it is deemed necessary by the Emir of a group to use the goodies of an infidel party to fight the other infidel party, it will be selected comfortably. Remember how the Wahabis of the 1980s used all resources from a far-Infidel power, the United States, to fight a close infidel enemy, the Soviet Union, and learn from that example.

Seeing Beyond "Intox"

Once more, the unseen tie between the Assad regime and the Terrorist Jihadi groups is in the center of international and US scrutiny. The Iraq debate in 2002-2003 fell short of reading the type of "links" that existed between the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. Most observers missed the actual state of those relationships that existed. From my reading of 42 pages of Iraqi intelligence (in Arabic) from the 1992-1994 years, I saw clearly how both sides were exploring the

potentials. From my previous observation of Saddam's symbolic metamorphosis in the 1990s towards a higher use of Islamist symbols I understood that he wanted to have this dimension at his disposal, without changing his regime's doctrine deeply.

It was the level of *darura* again. But in Assad's case, the *darura* is high: The regime depends on arming Jihadists (even if they could sting you later) and sending them off to Iraq, and now to Lebanon.

The Salafi Jihadists are like a dangerous chemical weapon that you'd want to throw on your foe while knowing it can come back at you. But guess what? It is more important for the Assad regime to crumble the Seniors Government now and crush future Salafi backfiring later. The Syrian intelligence is expert at eliminating their past tools, even if they were Syrians as well.

What the expert community in the West and in the US must do is to see beyond the analytical "intoxication" unleashed by the regimes and organizations in the region, and expanded by their advocates in the West. Just keep in mind that the Iranian-Syrian axis is spending millions of dollars on one of the most sophisticated PR campaigns aiming at blurring the vision of their foes.

If you investigate thoroughly the grapevines, you'd be able to find out that most of the "arguments" made in our public space about the types of relationships that "can" exist, and

those that "shouldn't," are manufactured in Tehran and Damascus. Subconsciously or not, many in the West parrot the claims made by Middle East dictatorships, Jihadi strategists and al Jazeera commentators, unfortunately weakening democracies' stand in the War of Ideas.

At the end of the day, as I try to argue in my latest book, the ultimate strategic goal of the enemies is to force the West to see wrongly and act accordingly. In the case of *Fatah al Islam's* battling in Tripoli, the aim

of the Syro-Iranian propagandists is to camouflage what is obvious for as long and thick as they can: That the Syrian regime not only has established ties to some Jihadist groups, but has in fact paved a "highway" in their direction, with the goal of using them as one of the defense lines for the regime. Hence, it is up to the public and the policy makers in the West to thrust through the deceptive "intoxication" tactic by Damascus and Tehran, to see clearer, and only then, to act accordingly.

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