Embattled Assad Enjoys a Stroke of Luck

By Patrick Seale
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A public dispute between two prominent Islamic fighting groups – one in Syria, the other in Iraq -- has given Syria's President Bashar al-Assad a moment of much-needed relief. Although it is too early to say for certain, we may be witnessing a crucial moment in his battered fortunes. Fears about the sort of regime that might come after him seem to have aroused doubts among his Western critics about the wisdom of overthrowing him – at least for the time being.

As the armed struggle in Syria enters its third year, Assad's most dangerous opponent is undoubtedly Jabhat al-Nusra, a highly-disciplined Islamic force several thousand strong which, since its formation early in 2012, has scored notable victories in the north and east of the country under the leadership of its shadowy commander, Abu Muhammad al-Golani. One of its recent successes has been to capture Raqqa in eastern Syria, the first capital of Syria's fourteen governorates to fall to Islamic rule.

Jabhat al-Nusra has emerged in recent weeks as the most ruthless, the most disciplined and – because of its devotion to Islam -- the most ideological of Assad's opponents. It has inspired great fear in the population by slaughtering prisoners and carrying out dozens of devastating suicide bombings, including several in central Damascus itself.

This fighting group was long suspected of closely resembling Al-Qaida, the radical and violent Islamic movement which, since the death of its founder Osama bin Laden, has fallen under the control of one of his former colleagues, the Egyptian physician Ayman al-Zawahiri. In recent months, Al-Qaida managed to establish a clandestine branch in Iraq where – with the evident blessing of Al-Zawahiri himself -- it assumed the ambitious name of the 'Islamic State in Iraq', under the leadership of a certain Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Needless to say, Iraq's embattled Shia prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, has no tolerance whatsoever for such an overt challenge to his authority and is evidently committed to rooting out all such threats, especially when they come from dangerous Sunni terrorists in his domain.

Such was the situation when, to universal surprise, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced on April 9 that his Iraqi Islamist movement had merged with Syria's Jabhat al-Nusra to form a new grouping to which he gave the ambitious name of 'Al-Qaida in Iraq and the Levant.' He even went so far as to claim that the ties between the two movements were of long standing, since they had been formed by men -- many of them Syrian *jihadis* -- whom the Assad regime had encouraged to go to Iraq to fight American troops there from 2003 to 2011. Once the Americans had departed, some of these men had made their way back to Syria, where they formed Jabhat al-Nusra, turning their guns on their former benefactors in Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Indeed, to demonstrate the close bonds between the Syrian and Iraqi Islamic fighters, Al-Baghdadi went on to say that Al-Qaida in Iraq had been making a monthly contribution to Jabhat al-Nusra's budget in Syria, and had itself chosen Abu Muhammad al-Golani to lead it, after advising him on the plans and strategy needed to defeat Bashar al-Assad.

This announcement from Iraq has clearly come as a most unwelcome shock to Jabhat al-Nusra. While admitting its allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Syrian opposition movement has hurried to make clear that it had no prior knowledge of Al-Baghdadi's announcement and that it had not been consulted or briefed about it. Evidently deeply embarrassed, it insisted that it totally rejected the notion that Syria and Iraq form a united Islamic state under a single Islamic ruler. In continuing the fight against Bashar al-Assad, it was evidently determined to use its own name and its own flag – and avoid being tarnished by too close an association with Al-Qaida.

Jabhat al-Nusra's leader, the mysterious Abu Muhammad al-Golani, is clearly well aware that the statement by Iraq's Al-Qaidi leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has done him no good at all. To be labelled an Al-Qaida affiliate in today's climate is by no means an asset. On the contrary, it has served to alert the Western world that Al-Qaida is the hidden force behind the Syrian uprising and that it stands to benefit – and perhaps even come to power – if and when Bashar al-Assad were to fall. This realisation seems to have caused the United States and its Western allies to pause in their campaign against Assad's regime. In other words, Al-Baghdadi seems inadvertently to have done Assad a great service.

The crisis has demonstrated that many of Assad's opponents in Syria have no intention to be cast as hard-line Islamists. Indeed, Moaz al-Khatib, leader of the Syrian National Coalition and a former Imam of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, was quick to declare on Facebook that 'The bottom line is that Al-Qaida ideology does not suit us'. He seemed to be saying that, while a majority

of Syrians wanted freedom, they had no wish to replace Assad's authoritarian but essentially secular rule by that of an ultra-fundamentalist Islamic dictatorship.

A recent study by Yezid Sayegh, of the Carnegie Middle East Centre, has shown that 'significant swathes of Syria's 1-1.5 million civil servants, 2-2.5 million members of the ruling Baath Party, and the 2.5-3 million strong Alawi community who provide the backbone of the security services and armed forces' are far from ready to abandon the Assad regime. Syria's minorities -- Alawis but also Christians, Druze, Ismailis and other smaller communities -- make up some 30 per cent of the population. The prospect of an Al-Qaida victory arouses fears among many of them that their lives would be in danger. But it would also be unwelcome to many Sunnis, especially the more liberal among them – including prominent men such as Moaz al-Khatib himself.

For peace to return to Syria, some reconfiguring of power relationships between its different communities will evidently be necessary. The intelligence services and officer corps, dominated by Alawis over the past several decades, will need to be restructured so as to give moderate Muslims a greater share of power. External powers, Arab and non-Arab, will need to put their ambitions and rivalries aside and join forces in presiding over a Syrian settlement, which will keep fanatics of all communities at bay. Ancient minorities will need to be protected. The more than one million Syrian refugees that have fled the country will need to be brought home and rehoused. Massive financial aid, very probably from oil and gas-rich Gulf States, will need to be provided to rebuild Syria's shattered towns and villages.

It will evidently require statesmanship in Washington and Moscow, as well as in overheated European and Middle Eastern capitals, to bring the slaughter in Syria to an end and rebuild the country as a peaceful haven for its rich mixture of communities. For the moment, however, this vision remains little more than a dream.