

As participants - including Syria - gather for the Geneva II talks on the future of the country, Nehad Ismail highlights mounting evidence of co-operation between Al-Qaeda and the Bashar al Assad regime.

The London Daily Telegraph reported on Monday 20th January 2014 that the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad has funded and co-operated with al-Qaeda in a complex double game even as the terrorists fight Damascus, according to new allegations by Western intelligence agencies, rebels and al-Qaeda defectors. Jabhat al-Nusra, and the even more extreme Islamic State of Iraq and al-Shams (ISIS), the two al-Qaeda affiliates operating in Syria, have both been financed by selling oil and gas from wells under their control to and through the regime, intelligence sources have told The Daily Telegraph.

(Note : The often-used acronyms ISIS and ISIL are in fact the same group. The first refers to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and the second refers to Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.)

Recently, according to Middle Eastern sources, the Iraqi Minister of Justice Hassan al Shammari accused high ranking officials in Iraq of playing a role in allowing al Qaeda prisoners to escape to Syria to beef up al-Qaeda's presence in Syria to help the Syrian regime and to discourage the UK and US Governments from taking a tough stance against the Assad regime.

The Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said on Thursday 9th January "the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) emerged only when the Syrian opposition groups gained ground in Syria's north". "There is a behind-the-scene partnership between them [ISIL] and the regime," the foreign minister was quoted as saying by state news agency Anadolu in its website.

A recent report in Al-Arabiya (21st January 14) stated that the largely secular Free Syrian Army (FSA), joined with other moderate rebel groups, declared a war on ISIS, accusing it of cooperating with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and of seeking to divide the rebels.

Ever since the fighting broke out many in both sides were killed or detained. Some of those al-Qaeda members who fell to rebels' hands said ISIS had ties with the Syrian regime. One example of collaboration between the regime and ISIS according to defectors from the Islamic group "ISIS was behind a bombing that destroyed Raqqa's train station last year. "We received orders to bomb the train station. We were also ordered to fire on ambulances and civilians trying to reach the victims," he said

According to defectors and moderate rebels, the regime also deliberately released terrorist prisoners to strengthen the extremist groups and to weaken the secular rebels. The regime was trying to convince the USA that the uprising was sponsored by Al-Qaeda jihadists and that the regime is fighting Islamic terrorism. Even in a cynical move the regime offered to 'resume co-operation' with the West over fighting Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups but was turned down by Western intelligence services.

A long history of co-operation:

The regime's relations with Al-Qaeda is not new. Damascus has long history of Collaboration with al Qaeda. In September 2007, U.S. forces in the northern Iraqi town of Sinjar, twelve miles from the Syrian border, discovered computers and a cache of documents that included the records of more than 600 foreign fighters who infiltrated into Iraq between spring 2006 and summer 2007. The documents show Syrian involvement in facilitating the entry of jihadists/Islamic terrorists into Iraq to frustrate what the Syrian regime dubbed as the "American Project in Iraq". Full details can be found in the Middle East Forum Quarterly Report Winter 2010 Volume XVII number 1.

It is a known fact that the Iranian and Syrian regimes have been manipulating al-Qaeda to their own advantage. During the occupation of Iraq particularly the period 2003 - 2010 Syria had been actively facilitating the entry of al- Qaeda jihadists to destabilize Iraq and kill American soldiers and Iraqis. Later at the behest of Iran and Syria al-Qaeda carried out operations in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the USA.

The Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL) are known affiliates of al Qaeda. But their agenda in Syria is so bewildering that some now suspect them of taking sides with the regime. The moderate Islamists fighting in the ranks of the opposition are Syrians, and they do

not accept foreign fighters in their ranks. However, the Al-Qaeda affiliates have in their ranks an assortment of non-Syrians, including Arabs, European Muslims and Jihadist from central Asia.

While the leaders of most of the Syrian groups are well known, no one seems to know who is running the al-Qaeda affiliates. The Islamic groups seem to be well equipped and trained. Al-Qaeda, through its offshoot "the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL)" or sometimes referred to as ISIS has succeeded in sabotaging the Syrian revolution by assassinating officers and top military commanders of the Free Syrian Army. With the help of Tehran and Damascus, the Jihadist groups have targeted the rivals of the two regimes and managed to tarnish the revolution against the Syrian regime.

The Pan Arab Asharq al-Awsat reported on 5th January 14 that " Iran provided sanctuary for al Qaeda leading figures such as Seif al-Adel, Suleiman Abu al-Ghaith and Bin Laden's sons, Nasser al Qarawwi and Majid al-Majid, al Qaeda's commander in Lebanon, who died in custody in a Beirut hospital earlier this month.

Al-Qaeda and Bashar al Assad in Cahoots:

According to Al-Ahram Weekly the respected Egyptian Newspaper (October 29th 2013): "Many in the Syrian opposition say that the al-Qaeda affiliates are now in fact doing the regime's bidding by weakening its true adversaries, those led by the FSA, and alienating Syrian civilians and the West and thus giving the regime the opportunity to claim it is fighting terrorists".

The fundamental question is this: Why the regime never bombs areas that are controlled by the al-Qaeda affiliates? Doesn't this suggest some sort of collusion or understanding between the al-Qaeda and the regime? The Free Syrian Army has identified a curious development over the last few weeks. They say "Whenever the regime is in trouble the al Qaeda affiliates start a fight with either the FSA or the Kurds, creating a side show to help the regime". This suggests that the regime has either infiltrated the al-Qaeda affiliates or they work closely with the Syrian intelligence.

It is not surprising therefore that the Syria's opposition National Coalition reacted by accusing the al-Qaeda-linked group in the country of having ties to the Syrian regime, and accused it of serving the government's interests. The murder of Syrians by this group leaves no doubt about the intentions behind their creation, their objectives and the agendas they serve, which is confirmed by the nature of their terrorist actions hostile to the Syrian revolution.

Initially the rag-tag armed opposition welcomed the arrival of jihadist fighters, who were mostly better-equipped and trained but the relations turned sour when the Free Syrian Army discovered that such groups are not interested in fighting the regime. However the regime has strived to paint all opposition with the same brush branding all those fighting against it as "terrorists".

"None of the Syrian regime's achievements matches its fabrication of the fundamentalist-terrorist groups that it pretends to fight and protect the Syrians from", opposition figure Michel Kilo wrote in the London-based newspaper Asharq Al Awsat. 4th Jan 13 The regime created Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the writer said. The ISIL has undermined the true revolution and helped the regime.

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