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The Struggle for Influence in Syria

Saudi Arabia and Qatar

by ERIC DRAITSER

July 09, 2013

This week's resignation of Ghassan Hitto, the so-called "Prime Minister in waiting" of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, coupled with the July 6th election of Ahmed Assi al-Jarba to head the umbrella coalition of US-supported proxy groups attempting to topple the Assad government, has revealed further cracks in the edifice of the imperialist assault on Syria.

Qatar's Man in the Middle

Ghassan Hitto, the Syrian expatriate and technocrat from Texas, was seen by most informed observers as the darling of the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar. As noted by AFP shortly after Hitto's election:

Some coalition members described Hitto as a consensus candidate pleasing both the opposition's Islamist and liberal factions. But some of the 70-odd Coalition members withdrew from the consultations before the vote could take place, accusing opposition heavyweight Muslim Brotherhood of imposing Hitto as a candidate.

Indeed, the imposition of Hitto as the political face of the foreign-backed opposition was seen by many inside the opposition and around the world as a power-play by Qatar to control the direction of the conflict in Syria and establish Doha as the real center of power in a post-Assad Syria.

This connection between Hitto, the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar was the source of much tension within the opposition. The NY Times reported that:

[Hitto] faced several challenges: he was seen by some rebels and activists as out of touch with the country, and some members of the often-squabbling coalition complained that he was a favorite of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and of its main foreign backer Qatar. Many in the opposition say Qatar wields too much influence in the movement.

What became clear during the course of Hitto's short tenure as the public face of the foreign-backed opposition was that he was less a political leader than a proxy of Qatar and the United States. This despite what can only be called competition between its allies in Doha and Riyadh who at times collaborate and at other times compete for power and influence among the extremist jihadi elements throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Essentially then, Hitto must be understood as a placeholder, a man whose responsibility was not to lead, but simply to act as a foothold for the al-Thani regime and the Muslim Brotherhood within the leadership of the opposition. The goal was of course to have Hitto in place for the potential fall of Assad, so that Qatar could immediately secure its control over the country in a post-Assad scenario.

Saudis Reclaiming Dominant Role?

Hitto's resignation places even more significance on last week's election of Ahmed Assi al-Jarba as head of the Syrian Opposition Coalition. Whereas Hitto was understood to be a proxy of Qatar, Jarba can be correctly characterized as a proxy of Saudi Arabia. As McClatchy News explains:

Jarba is a chief of the Shammar tribe, one of the Arab world's most powerful clans with members stretching from southern Turkey to Saudi Arabia...He was jailed early in the revolt against Assad...After being released from prison in August 2012, he fled to Saudi Arabia where his tribal connections put him into close touch with senior members of the Saudi intelligence services.

It should be noted that the innocuous-sounding phrase "close touch with senior members of Saudi intelligence" is a euphemism for *Saudi agent*, which is precisely what Jarba is. Note the fact that, like Hitto, Jarba has already stated publicly his opposition to peace talks with the Assad government, thereby perpetuating the cycle of violence that benefits Riyadh and Doha and costs more innocent Syrians their lives.

Jarba has said that "Geneva in these circumstances is impossible." However, one must consider precisely which "circumstances" he was referring to. Keen political observers who have been following events in Syria for some time understand the "circumstances" to be the continued military defeats of the foreign-backed rebels and jihadis by the forces of the Assad government. Jarba and his Saudi handlers understand quite clearly that they must first achieve substantive military victories on the ground before they can even pay lip service to peace talks.

It is precisely this desperate need for tactical victories by the rebels that has driven Saudi Arabia to become even more involved in fomenting this war. Using Jarba as their proxy, the Saudis have

attempted to launch a new and perhaps even deadlier phase of the war against Syria. In his first two days as head of the coalition, Jarba has already announced that the rebels will soon receive “a new shipment of sophisticated weapons from Saudi Arabia” as well as proposing a truce during Ramadan.

However, these announcements should be interpreted as cynical ploys designed to buy time for Saudi arms to reach their destination and for the rebels to train in their use. Jarba said as much when he proclaimed to Reuters, “I will not rest until I procure the advanced weapons needed to hit back at Assad and his allies. I give myself one month to achieve what I am intent to do.” So, while proposing a one-month truce under the cover of religious piety in the observance of Ramadan, Jarba gives himself exactly that same one month window to procure advanced weapons. The hypocrisy and duplicity needs no further explanation.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have a complicated relationship, at times friendly and at other times acrimonious. Throughout the course of the destabilization and subversion of Syria, the two countries have collaborated in the funding, arming, and importation of jihadi elements from throughout the Muslim world. They have both been linked to intelligence agencies of the imperial Western powers while maintaining close contact with terror networks foreign and domestic. As such, both countries have played the indispensable role of intermediary between these disparate forces. However, now that the threat to their terrorist proxies in Syria is an existential one, and Assad victories become ever more decisive, it seems the bond between the monarchies is fraying. The recent changes in the political leadership of the so-called opposition merely reflect this.