

Syria: Growing Presence of Al Qaeda Extremists Creates Fear and “Uncertainty Regarding Future of our Country”

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Global Research, December 16, 2012
[Xinhua News Agency](#)

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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Watching what happened in Iraq over the past 10 years, what is going on in Yemen now and on top of that the footage that emerges on a daily basis from places in Syria that witness a thick presence of al-Qaida fighters, Syrians started to mutter about what indeed happened and how did they get this far? DAMASCUS: With the growing presence of radical Islamists affiliated with al-Qaida in Syria, fear and apprehension have crept up among moderate Syrians, sending chills down their spines about the vague and uncertain future of their country.

As the crisis in the country is nearing entering its third [calendar] year, its complications and repercussions are also growing larger; especially now that the armed rebels' ranks are overwhelmed with radicals from the al-Nusra Front, an offshoot of al-Qaida terror network in Iraq.

Even the international community, which has for a long time blamed the Syrian administration for the bulk of the violence in Syria, has now admitted the threats from al-Qaida-linked groups in Syria. The U. S. branded the al-Nusra Front last week as a terror network, after the group has claimed responsibility for almost all explosions that rocked the government and army forces' installations over the past year.

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Some people repeat the government's line that a big foreign-backed conspiracy has been plotted against Syria since a long time ago, with the aim to destroy Syria as a country in favor of the Zionist entity next door; while others who oppose the administration say that the government's harsh crackdown on opposition activists and freedom advocates has plunged the country into this swamp and drawn in radical fighters who claim that they have come to Syria to wage jihad against the “infidel” administration of President Bashar al-Assad and to protect their fellow Sunni people.

Furthermore, some rebel battalions, especially in the northern province of Aleppo, said they want neither freedom nor democracy; they want to establish an Islamic emirate on the wreckage of the current government whose high ranks are dominated by members of the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam. But the government has pushed for a secular identity for Syria over the past 40-year-rule of the Assad family.

With all of this going on, the Damascenes, at least, have started to feel the heat and their discomfort grows higher amid reports of raging battles on the outskirts of the capital between the rebels and government forces.

Some rumors that make the rounds recently said that most of the wealthy people and those who do not want to think of the further suffering of what may come have already left the country to neighboring ones.

"Why would I stay here now that I can afford living in a neighboring country? I could save my family some avoidable consequences," Maher, a 46-year-old engineer, said.

"I don't want to see another Iraq or Afghanistan here," he said, wishing for a miracle to save Syria.

Some other Syrians firmly believe that more serious chaos would be the fate of a post-Assad era in case he decided to go.

Resentment among Damascenes has also come on the upswing with daily reports about robbery and kidnapping.

Some believe that the armed militias are prowling for wealthy Syrians for ransoms, as they are running short of funds to buy weapons and ammunition. Others suggest that gangs and thieves are capitalizing on the current chaos to make money by kidnapping rich Damascenes to demand ransom...

"Some people have become traumatized by the losses of loved ones," Asma said, trying to gather her composure and wipe away tears.

She said a relative of hers had been kidnapped and the captors called his family two days after his disappearance for ransom. "We paid one million Syrian pounds and he didn't show up," she said while choking back tears.

"Two years ago," she said, "we didn't even think or imagine that something like this would ever happen in Syria...we are in a real nightmare."

With the growing complicity of the crisis, Syrian officials still confirm that Assad still keeps a tight rein on the country and downplay rebels' accounts of achieving gains on ground.

Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mikdad told the BBC recently: "The government is strong. The Syrian army is strong, and the Syrian people are still rallying behind President Assad. That's why President Assad and the political system are still surviving and they will still survive."

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