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How Assad has outfoxed his foes time and again

Hassan Hassan
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I remember when I heard that Baghdad had fallen to the US-led coalition in 2003. I was on my way back to university in Damascus from a visit to my home town in Albukamal, in eastern Syria. The news came as we stopped in Palmyra for a half-hour break. For the rest of the trip, gloom and doom dominated among travellers.

For many, such feelings of deep anger and frustration later turned into action. The next time I returned home for another visit, a taxi driver told me that volunteers were flowing from Syria into Iraq. Syrian authorities, the driver said, were not stopping people. Noticing my disbelief, he said that he would drive me to the other side of the border any moment.

The story did not make much sense to me. After all, the Syrian regime was secular and would not tolerate any form of activism, much less one that was expressed in jihadi terms. I asked relatives at home about what the driver said, and they confirmed that two people in my town had travelled to fight with the Iraqi resistance. Albukamal came to be known as the gateway for jihadists pouring from the region into Iraq through Syria.

Rashad Al Kattan, a security risk analyst and a fellow with the Centre for Syrian Studies at the University of St Andrews, was a witness to this activity from his neighbourhood too. Volunteers heading to Albukamal would travel from Damascus.

"My family's house is near the US embassy in Damascus," recalled Mr Al Kattan. "A few months after the invasion, I started seeing the large green buses used for public transport parked outside the Iraqi embassy, which is opposite the US embassy. It continued for some time but the buses moved to Sumarieh coach station, on the outskirts of the capital, apparently after the Americans complained it was happening under their watch, literally."

In September 2009, former Iraqi prime minister Nouri Al Maliki said that "most terrorists came from Syria". Bashar Al Assad replied that the accusations were "immoral". Less than two years after the Damascus-Baghdad escalation, Mr Al Assad issued an amnesty for jailed jihadists a few months after the eruption of the Syrian uprising. What happened between 2009 and 2011? Did the Assad regime stop seeing jihadists as a useful tool?

I am reminded of the story after the debate that followed the release of the Iraq inquiry report in the UK. The discussions largely overlooked the cynical game played by Damascus, and seem to have learnt the wrong lessons from the Iraq war. Many of those fired up after the report's release are guilty of repeating the same mistakes that led to the unimaginable suffering in Iraq today.

For example, those who voted in favour of the Iraq war in the British parliament are arguably no worse than those who voted in the same place against punitive air strikes against Mr Al Assad's regime after it used chemical weapons against civilians several times. Ideally, the West has no business intervening in the Middle East. But the reality is that western forces are entrenched in the region and therefore have the capacity to play a leadership role. This is called leverage. Those who do not want that leverage to be utilised, in the name of anti-imperialism, are complicit. They are overcorrecting history.

The Assad regime wanted Iraq to turn into hell, and it helped achieve that. The reward the regime wanted was that foreign powers would think twice before they intervened in Syria. It won the Iraq war, with the help of jihadists. When the same regime released extremists from prisons in 2011, it wanted to pull off the same trick. As the uprising turned into a civil war, the regime forces avoided jihadists and targeted the rest. It struck deals with jihadists, and ignored the rest. It traded with jihadists and hit the rest.

The policy worked. Today, the US is seeking a formula of cooperation against those extremists with the Russians in Syria. The circle is complete. The US that failed to rule effectively in Iraq partly because of Mr Al Assad and his allies has, once again, to seek indirect cooperation with Damascus.

For Iraqis and Syrians, much of the discussion about the Iraq inquiry report is beside the point.

Many of the loudest voices after the report was released are fighting a different fight that has little to do with Iraqis. Whether leftists or anti-imperialists, they are fighting the Iraq war through Syria. They do not want to consider the differences between an invasion of a country and the use of force to put an end to continuing butchery. Mr Al Assad wanted them to think twice before intervention, but they do not want to even think about it. They blindly oppose.