

Kourosh Ziabari

French journalist Thierry Meyssan says Al-Qaeda and NATO are overtly cooperating with each other to destabilize Syria, and that Israel, France, Qatar and the United States are benefiting from the continued crisis in the Arab country.

"At the beginning [of violence in Syria], people from Al-Qaeda committed horrible crimes like what they did in Libya and Iraq and now they are carrying out suicide attacks. According to Council on Foreign Relations, that is, according to the U.S. itself, Al-Qaeda is now a main part of the Free Syrian Army," he said in a telephone interview with the Tehran Times that was conducted earlier this month.

Meyssan is the founder and editor of *Voltairenet.org* news and analysis website. He has been reporting from Syria since the violence started in the country in March 2011. Meyssan had sent reports on the Libyan uprising to *Russia Today* from Tripoli. He writes for the Russian weekly magazine "Odnako" and his 2002 book "9/11: The Big Lie" was received internationally.

The interview was conducted with the help of my Spanish friend Moises Herrezuelo.

Following is the text of the interview:

■ What do you think about the Syrian crisis?

The war against Syria was decided by George W. Bush in a meeting at Camp David on September 15, 2001 only a few days after the attacks on World Trade Center and Pentagon. At that time, they prepared a list of the countries they would be attacking, and now it's time for Syria. During the past 11 years, the U.S. has been trying to start a war with Syria, and you remember that they had accused President Bashar al-Assad of being responsible for the killing of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

This war against Syria began in February 2011, at the same time with the war against Libya, and many people are confused, because quite at the same moment, we have the revolutionary events in Tunisia, and some may think that the revolution in Tunisia is equal to the imperialist wars in Libya and Syria. Of course, when the U.S. sent some troops to Syria to wage a war, it didn't send men in uniform; they used secret agents to make trouble inside Syria and justify an international military action. Because Russia and China vetoed their draft resolutions at the UN, they weren't able to enter Syria with the assistance of NATO, as they did in Libya. So they choose the plan b, and this plan was to send mercenaries with the financial aid of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and destabilize the country and to provoke a military coup d'etat inside Syria, and Ms. Clinton repeatedly talked about such a coup in Syria. But as this plan failed, we saw two big operations; one being the July 18 when they bombed the residence of the main leader of the National Security Council of Syria, and also September 26 plan when they tried, but failed, to kill the chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff. A great resistance by the army hindered their plans for a military coup. So, they don't have any other solution, and probably they will accept the peace plan of Russia.

■ What is the main difference between the popular uprisings in the Middle East nations like Tunisia and Egypt and the violence which has encompassed Syria? Some say that what's happening in Syria is also a freedom movement against tyranny. Is that so?

In Tunisia, it was a real, popular revolution. All the people took to the streets to protest against the government, and Ben Ali had to go. In Syria, there was never a big demonstration against the government and I know that. The European media constantly talked about a popular revolution,

Al-Qaeda-NATO nexus destabilizing Syria, Thierry Meyssan says

500,000 people demonstrating here, 1 million demonstrating there; but it never occurred. I have witnessed all the events and can testify. When I was in Homs, Agence France Presse reported that 500,000 people took to the streets for demonstration, but it was not true. So, there's no popular uprising here. There's just mercenaries coming from outside, with the support of some people inside. These people follow the orders and motto of the armed groups. The spiritual leader of the Free Syrian Army is a Sheikh named Adnan Aeraour who has his own television station from Saudi Arabia and his motto is "All the Christians to Beirut, all the Alawites to death." So this is a sectarian conflict being fueled by the Free Syrian Army, and not a democratic movement. Nobody in this army wants democracy. They use a flag with three stars which is a French insignia. So of course this is totally different from what has happened in Tunisia, or Bahrain.

■ Some critics of President Assad have said that the government has been killing unarmed civilians and opening fire on its own citizens since the beginning of unrest in the country. Is this true?

This is absolutely wrong. During the first days of the unrest in Syria, President Assad gave the instruction to the army not to use firearms when they think they could harm the civilians and I have definitely carried out some research and conducted several interviews with different military officials in different places of the country and all of them can testify that during the first period of the unrest, the army never used firearm against the civilians; never.

Because of that, during this period, the army has suffered many losses and the number of army people killed was far greater than the number of army people killed during the war with Israel. So, that belief is absolutely wrong. However, things changed a little bit after the July 18 bombing of Damascus. After that, President Bashar al-Assad gave the order to army to kill the terrorists, and the army now has the mission to kill the rebels, instead of imprisoning them. So of course now, the action is now much more deadly and some civilians will naturally be killed during the fights. There's no other choice. Another point is that the strength of the national army is about 400,000 soldiers and of course there may be some war criminals inside the army; it's possible. They have to be arrested, prosecuted, condemned and put in jail. But the president has not so far given such an order, although some war criminals of the army have been arrested, but it's difficult in this situation to make the whole things clear.

■ What do you think about the possible involvement of Al-Qaeda in the unrest in Syria? You have published some articles on this question on your website. Would you please give us more details?

There is lots of evidence and witnesses showing that the members of Al-Qaeda have been here since the beginning of the events, especially, I think, since December that Ayman al-Zawahiri himself called on all the Jihadists from the whole Muslim world to come to Syria. At the beginning, they

were only the members of Al-Qaeda in Libya and of the commandment of Abdelhakim Belhadj who was the former number 3 of the Al-Qaeda and is now officially working with NATO and is the top military commander in Tripoli, Libya. He came to Syria with his troops and they organized troops from Libya and Turkey. At the beginning, people from Al-Qaeda committed horrible crimes like what they did in Libya and Iraq and now they are carrying out suicide attacks. According to Council on Foreign Relations, that is, according to the U.S. itself, Al-Qaeda is now a main part of the Free Syrian Army.

■ Do you think that the pressures which are being exerted on Syria and the operations which the insurgents are carrying out in the Syrian soil with the sponsorship of NATO are aimed at laying the groundwork for launching a military strike on Iran? I mean, are they trying to weaken Syria and then realize their ambition for attacking Iran?

Yes, in the plan which George W. Bush presented in 2001, it was said that they have to destroy different countries, and at the end, attack Iran, and of course destroying Syria is destroying the main defense line for Iran. But it's clear that as they are failing in Syria, they will not attack Iran.

■ What do you think about the assassination of Press TV correspondent in Damascus Maya Nasser and the attacks being unleashed on other journalists working in the crisis-hit Syria?

Maya Nasser was really a great journalist and I remember having some conversations with him about his ideals and his fate, and of course he was one of the big journalists reporting the situation in Syria. During the battle of Damascus in mid-July, NATO sent a special team to attack the studio of Al-Alam and Press TV and they tried to kill Maya and all the team at that time. After that, they put on some websites a list of people whom they wanted to target and kill, and Maya Nasser was on their list. He was killed on September 26 when he was reporting about the attack on the Ministry of Defense and normally the attackers thought that they can assault on the Ministry of Defense after killing the joint chief of staff and then take over the national TV on the other side of the Umayyad Square. So the second team was just back waiting to attack the national TV, and they were the ones who killed Maya Nasser by shooting him in the back.

■ In what ways do the Western governments, including the United States and France benefit from the ongoing unrest in Syria? Why have they mobilized their forces to stoke violence in the country?

There are many different reasons for that, and each member of the coalition has its own reasons. The United States military wants to continue reshaping the Middle East. Qatar wants to be present in Syria to exploit its gas, because there are huge reserves of gas in the southern Mediterranean Sea and Syria, and if Syria exploits this gas, it will be one of the main exporters in the world, after Russia, Iran and Qatar, so they want to prevent that from happening. Israelis actually want to break the axis of resistance. The French think that they can re-colonize Syria like the years between the two World Wars. Each member of the coalition has its

own reasons like that.

■ What do you think about the mission of Kofi Annan? Was it successful? You had written in one of your articles that he had predicted the overthrowing of the government of President Assad. Since it didn't happen, he resigned. Is this true?

Yes, actually Kofi Annan was the architect of the agreement of Geneva. You remember that Russians had tried to organize a big peace conference in Moscow, but the U.S. stalled that, because they didn't want to have talks with Iran. So Kofi Annan organized another meeting in Geneva without Iran and without Saudi Arabia. At the end of this meeting, they had an agreement, and decided to present a peace plan. But some people in the United States disagreed with this peace plan and wanted to kill and sabotage it. They published in different newspapers such as the New York Times and European papers information about the secret involvement of the U.S. and NATO in the war against Syria. You remember that some U.S. media outlets revealed that President Obama had signed a presidential order for a secret war inside Syria. So, Kofi Annan was forced to resign after that, because it was not possible to implement the peace plan anymore. But I think this will change very soon, because there's no other solution for the U.S. other than accepting the Geneva Peace Plan. Of course this plan is not perfect, but it is the only way to end the crisis.

■ Do you have any information about the sources of funding of the Free Syrian Army?

There are lots of countries supporting the armed groups, but the main funding is mainly coming from Qatar. Actually Qatar has provided the armed groups with such a huge amount of money that it has become indebted and it is seeking help from the international markets. Israel does not directly provide them with financial assistance, but is in charge of procuring weapons. There was some interception of communication by the Syrian army showing that the Israelis are in charge of the weapon trade, so all the weapons coming from Lebanon and Turkey are provided by Israel.

■ What do you think about the role the UN in ending the crisis in Syria?

We have videos showing that some UN observers use their official cars to carry the military leaders of the Free Syrian Army. This is absolutely a violation of the international law. Some of the UN observers have been supporting and helping the armed groups. The Security Council is also facing problems as there's opposition between NATO from one side and Russia and China on the other side. So we can't find any solutions being presented by the United Nations. The UN is itself a party in the fight.

■ And finally, what's your perspective on the role of Iran in resolving the crisis in Syria? Iran, Qatar, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have established a contact group to deal with the Syrian problem. Can these countries help Iran in finding a solution to the crisis?

Everybody must understand that Iran is the main regional player and that the resistance of Syria was only possible with the technical support of Iran, on the economic and military level. Syria couldn't have resisted such pressures for a long time without the help of Iran. The Saudis are now the main culprits of the sectarian division inside Syria. They are using television channels to spread hate messages against the non-Sunnis in the country. As to Turkey, actually they hoped that they can extend their influence in the Eurasia, but now a disaster has happened to them, because with the economic crisis in Europe, the exports of Turkey has decreased by 25% and also they are facing problems with the minorities, including the Arabs and the Kurds. So, if Turkey continues its involvement in Syria, they will have a civil war inside their borders.

Hurricane Sandy kills 43 in Caribbean, heading to U.S.

Contd. from P. 1

Sandy also killed a man in Jamaica on Wednesday when a boulder crashed through his house, and police in the Bahamas said a 66-year-old man died after falling from his roof in upscale Lyford Cay late Thursday while trying to repair a window shutter. Officials at Deltec Bank & Trust identified him as Timothy Fraser-Smith, who became CEO in 2000.

One death was reported in Puerto Rico. Police said a man in his 50s was

swept away Friday by a swollen river in the southern town of Juana Diaz, where rain from Sandy's outer bands had been steadily falling.

Late Friday, Sandy was about 90 miles (145 kilometers) north of Great Abaco Island in the Bahamas and 395 miles (635 kilometers) south-southeast of Charleston, South Carolina. It was just above the threshold for being a hurricane, with maximum sustained winds of 75 mph (120 kph), and was moving north at 7 mph (11 kph).

COMMENT

Tehran to finance Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline

Contd. from P. 1

German-based firm ILF has completed engineering design of the pipeline and an interim feasibility report has put the project cost between \$1.2 and \$1.5 billion.

"If the project gets under way with the participation of the local companies, the cost will fall," said an official.

Iran has already offered Pakistan to lay the entire pipeline as the latter has been facing problems in attracting funds from countries like China and Russia.

Earlier, Russia and China expressed interest in financing the pipeline if they were awarded the contract without bidding, but no headway could be made apparently due to U.S. opposition.

A Russian delegation also came to attend a meeting of the Inter-governmental Commission in Islamabad in September, with a heavy agenda and particular focus on the IP pipeline, but to no avail.

Under the project, Iran will supply 750 million cubic feet of gas per day (bcfd) to energy-deficient Pakistan. The volume can be enhanced to 1 bcfd later.

Many people believe that Iran's offer is the best option available amid pressure from the U.S., which has warned that those assisting the project will face possible sanctions.

State-owned National Bank of Pakistan (NBP) and Oil and Gas Development Company (OGDC) have already backed out of the project. NBP feared forced closure of its branches in different countries while OGDC bowed to the threat of U.S.-based investors, who said they would withdraw their investment in the company's shares.

According to Iranian authorities, the pipeline is expected to reach the zero point at the border in the first half of next Iranian calendar year, beginning March 20, 2013.

In a statement, National Iranian Gas Company has said work has come to an end on the 56-inch seventh gas trunk line from Iranshahr, southeast of Iran, to the Pakistan border and Zahedan.

Human rights groups tell Myanmar to protect Rohingya Muslims

Contd. from P. 1

HRW released the satellite images on Saturday which appears to show mass burnings and widespread destruction of a coastal district marred by ethnic unrest.

According to the group, a total of 811 destroyed building structures can be identified from the images of the eastern edge of Kyauk Pyu city – a predominantly Rohingya area. The destruction, it says, was likely caused by arson attacks occurring October 24.

It adds that the victims were mostly Muslim Rohingyas.

"Unless the authorities also start addressing the root causes of the violence, it is only likely to get worse," said Phil Robertson, HRW deputy Asia director.

More than 150 people, from both communities, have been killed in the state since violence first sparked in June, according to the government which has imposed emergency rule in the face of continued tension in the region.

Myanmar government spokesman, Win Myaing, said there were no immediate reports of fresh clashes between the Buddhist Rakhine and the Muslim Rohingya communities on Saturday after almost a week of deadly ethnic strife urging human rights groups to call for action to end the violence.

State television had reported Friday night that 67 people had died, 95 been injured and 2,818 houses were burned down from Sunday through Thursday in seven of the state's townships. Win Myaing had earlier stated the death toll as 112, but later explained that had been a mistaken tally.

Human Rights Watch said it believes the true death toll may be higher than that officially reported, based on witnesses' accounts and a history of government undercounting in cases that might reflect badly on it.

Amnesty International also issued a separate statement calling for more government action to protect lives.

"These latest incidents between Muslim Rohingyas and Buddhists demonstrate how urgent it is that the authorities intervene to protect everyone, and break the cycle of discrimination and violence," Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific deputy director, Isabelle Arradon, said in a statement.

In June, ethnic violence in Rakhine killed at least 90 people and destroyed more than 3,000 homes. About 75,000 have been living in refugee camps ever since. Curfews have been in place in some areas since the earlier violence and were extended in scope this past week.

Exodus of thousands after unrest

According to officials, thousands of displaced people have surged towards already overcrowded camps in western Myanmar following the recent spate of communal violence.

The unrest in Rakhine state has caused a fresh exodus of people fleeing for safety from Rohingya minority areas.

Tens of thousands of mainly Muslim Rohingyas are already crammed into squalid camps around the state capital Sittwe after deadly violence in June. Rakhine state officials said the latest bloodshed had caused an influx of boats carrying around 6,000 people to the city.

"The local government is planning to relocate them to a suitable place. We are having problems because more people are coming," said Rakhine government spokesman Hla Thein. Some of the displaced are still on boats while several thousand have docked on an island opposite Sittwe.

U.S. nuclear weapons in Turkey threatening regional peace

Contd. from P. 1

Everyone knows that the deployment of nuclear weapons is a very costly procedure. It requires a huge budget and vast technological capabilities.

It appears that U.S. officials are trying to implement their malevolent plans in the Middle East at a time when the general public's attention is focused on the U.S. presidential election.

Meanwhile, the Turkish government is facing increasing public pressure over its controversial policy toward the political crisis in Syria, and

the revelation about the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in the country will surely create more problems for Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The Muslim people of Turkey are already dissatisfied with the policy adopted by Ankara toward Syria, and if there are any new acts of adventurism by Turkish officials, popular resentment will boil over.

Hassan Lasjerdi is a political analyst and an expert on Turkish politics based in Tehran.