



Robert Fisk: Riad Hijab defection drives wedge into fractured party

The increasing defection of Sunni figures drives a wedge into an already fractured Baath

Robert Fisk

Tuesday, 7 August 2012

The highest ranking-defector yet – the Syrian Prime Minister, Riad Hijab – deserted President Bashar al-Assad yesterday and headed for the highest-paying supporter of the country's rebels: the oil-stuffed state of Qatar.

In a brutal war that encompasses almost as much cynicism as it does blood, Hijab's departure – while a highly symbolic blow at the regime – does not constitute a body blow for the President.

Like the generals and diplomats who have preceded him into exile, the Prime Minister was a Sunni Muslim, and it is the Alawite minority within the Baath Party and the government upon which Bashar relies. They still stand loyally behind him.

Mr Hijab left it to his spokesman in Jordan to announce that he had "defected from the killing and terrorist regime" and joined "the ranks of the freedom and dignity revolution" and was henceforth "a soldier in this holy revolution".

Somehow, however, it seems unlikely – however "holy" the revolution – that the somewhat portly Mr Hijab will be firing an RPG-7 over the barricades of Aleppo. He is more likely to join the waffling hotchpotch of former regime "loyalists" who are now gathering around three separate and often antagonistic opposition "governments-in-exile", most of them grateful to the immensely wealthy emirate of Qatar, not to mention the profoundly "democratic" Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is backing the revolution.

The Syrian government itself hastily claimed that Hijab had already been dismissed from his job when he ran away – a statement likely to be accepted only by those who still believe in Father Christmas – but Bashar did immediately appoint a successor, Omar Ghalawanji from Tartous, who was already a minister in the administration.

Hijab's own roots, however, are very interesting. He comes from the town of Khirbet Ghazel in Deraa province, where the revolution began after government cops tortured to death an 11-year-old boy.

More important still, Hijab is a cousin of the Vice-President, Faroukh al-Sharaa, another Sunni but a most crucial member of the regime's decision-making cabal of ministers. A loyal and very effective Foreign Minister under Bashar's father Hafez, many have suspected that al-Sharaa himself might defect – his only recent statement was to the effect that he had not done so – but this seems unlikely.

After 20 years' service to the Baathists, al-Sharaa is regarded by Bashar as a very trustworthy man. Given recent defections, however, such sentences must be ended with

the words "for the moment". Hijab's runner from Damascus does constitute a much more severe blow to the ever-more tarnished reputation of the Baath party, founded as a secular institution embracing all religious groups by, among others, the Christian Michel Aflaq. The increasing defection of Sunni figures from the Syrian regime and its army therefore drives a wedge into an already fractured Baath.

According to Hijab's spokesman, whose rhetoric was not exactly matched by his credibility, the ex-Prime Minister had only accepted his elevation from Minister of Agriculture two months ago because he had been threatened with execution.

This seems to be a whopper. President Assad is unlikely to have appointed a premier at gunpoint since the poor man would most surely have defected; which is what, to be sure, Hijab did.