

Tougher tactics would have ended Syrian war, claims the country's top intelligence general

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It's not every day that you come face to face with the commander of the most powerful, ruthless – and undoubtedly most feared – security agency in all of Syria. The very words “Syrian Air Force Intelligence” are enough to stop any conversation in its tracks. The “moderate” Free Syrian Army famously reported the assassination of this most loyal and ferocious of presidential protectors four years ago and even Wikipedia still refers to him in the past tense. But I can assure you that 63-year old General Jamil Hassan is very much alive.

His handshake is vice-like, and his eyes – which stare at you like an angry interrogator when he speaks – fixed their gaze upon me like a lighthouse beam when I asked him if he was a cruel man. His voice combines a lion's roar with the slow deliberation of an intelligence boss who is fast running out of patience.

This is not a man to be crossed. “In the Western media, I am a war criminal,” he growls at me. “So I'm not sure your article about me will be allowed in *The Independent*. I am ready – even if they take me to the War Crimes Tribunal – to continue with my work. Because Syria deserves the sacrifice.”

General Hassan is slightly exaggerating his notoriety. No war crimes court has sought his arrest. But the EU has condemned him for his “involvement in the repression against the civilian uprising” in Syria in 2011, imposing both a travel ban and a freezing of his financial assets.

The US Treasury, after threats by President Barack Obama against the Syrian regime, has imposed its own sanctions upon the general “for engaging in the commission of human rights abuses.” The Americans stated that Syrian Air Force Intelligence – whose name derives from President Bashar al-Assad’s father Hafez, who was a Syrian air force officer – killed at least 43 demonstrators in April 2011. Of which, more later.

Throughout our astonishing three-hour interview, General Jamil Hassan ducked no questions, even about his own prisons, and while repeatedly declaring his loyalty to President Bashar al-Assad, made it perfectly clear that a more ruthless reaction to the first hints of revolution in Syria in 2011 might have crushed all armed opposition to the regime at once.

He even referred to the crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood revolt in Hama in 1982, when thousands of civilians and fighters were slaughtered after the Brotherhood went on a murderous rampage against Ba’ath Party members in the city.

General Hassan was a junior security officer at the time, serving Hafez el-Assad’s government. “I was a very young man,” he said. “There were exaggerated media reports [of the casualties]. [But] if we did what we did in Hama at the beginning of this crisis, we would have saved a lot of Syrian blood.” I was also briefly in Hama during the 1982 revolt: I recorded at the time that fatalities might have reached 20,000.

It was a strange, unexpected – and unsought – meeting with one of Syria’s most powerful figures. Outside the general’s office hung one Syrian and three Russian flags. He knew his history books, and he lit a Churchill cigar as he spoke of Hitler, Rommel, Montgomery and Churchill. But there was no doubt in his mind as to just who was to blame for Syria’s tragedy.

Boy asks if he will die after alleged chlorine attack in Aleppo

“The West conspires against Syria,” he almost shouts at me. “First Israel, the head of the snake and all who support its policies, along with the Arab regimes, led by Saudi Arabia – I’m not talking about the Saudis as a people, but the King and the royal family – this selfish and narcissistic family which has a very dirty attitude towards the Arab people, especially a country like Syria, which has a disciplined [sic] rule and a young leader...who is very intelligent and knows the interests of his people and even the interests of the whole Arab world.

“The Israelis and the dirty rulers of Arab peoples are not interested in these attitudes. They need agents to execute their own agendas...need to execute their agendas – because they know that the strength of Syria is in its unity. So they do all this to divide Syria. They encourage extremist ideology. The big role in this was that of the Wahabis and al-Qaeda and their black doctrines. From this, they launched their plans to divide Syria.”

I restrained myself from telling General Hassan that the last time I heard such condemnation of the Saudi autocracy, it came from the mouth of Osama bin Laden, talking to me in Afghanistan of his wish to destroy the Saudi regime.

But later, the general spoke of bin Laden as a “very intelligent man”. During our long interview, the general seemed to divide his life in two: his first twenty years as a young and, his critics would say, very brutal security officer, and the rest as a father figure, encouraging his young protégé Colonel Suheil “Tiger” Hassan (no relation) in his battle against Islamist extremists, while praising Bashar al Assad – even though he clearly thought that Hafez dealt more firmly and harshly with his enemies.

The “Tiger” fought to clear the military desert road to relieve the siege of western Aleppo last year, but the general revealed that the “Tiger” had been in action against Islamist suicide bombers in Idlib province in Syria in 2005 – six years before the world realised the extent of the government’s war against its armed opponents.

He was interested in talking about this earlier history; there were times, indeed, when I thought that General Hassan, like many older men, was beginning to care less what his critics and supporters thought about him now – but more what posterity might say about him later.

This is the first time he has ever spoken to a Western reporter – indeed, to any reporter at all. Thus he combined his harsh view of the Arab world with talk of his own failings and of the “mistakes” of his intelligence agency.

But his remarks on the start of the Syrian war in 2011 were even more revealing. “Unfortunately, some of our illiterate Syrian people participated or conspired with these dirty extremist Islamists and pretended that there was a revolution. Beginning in March 2011, the Qatari regime – which has good links with the Muslim Brotherhood represented by Sheikh [Yusuf] Qaradawi – was encouraging sectarianism.

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Islamist extremists and Zionist extremists met with one purpose and decided to divide Syria. As evidence, [I ask] why is the Jabhat al-Nusra coordinating with the Israelis on Golan and [why is Israel] giving health care and treatment to the militias? Even when Isis captured a few kilometres near the Israeli border, Israel didn’t attack them.”

“So what did this mean? This is a very important matter...Britain, France, and America and Israel and the Saudis decided to divide Syria, even though they have very opposing interests. Syria is a very big country for [all of] them to come together. If they were real friends they would [want to] make the sectarian differences smaller. I believe that European people will be [the] most damaged if Syria collapsed...The Americans and the Europeans are like the shepherd who allows the wolf into his home – this wolf will eventually eat all the chickens and the sheep.”

And so to the bloodbath of Hama in 1982. “If the tactics used at Hama in 1982 had been used here, we would have ended this war,” General Hassan said uncompromisingly. “I was in Hama in 1982 and I was fighting the extremists then in tunnels under the ground. At the time of Hafez el-Assad’s rule, I was a lieutenant security officer, and the extremists received a painful blow in the 1980s and it was almost a final blow. I felt this was a very intelligent decision at that time. There was a different environment at that period.

"It was very hard for President [Hafez] al-Assad. In this present era – today – if we did this, we would end this war now. The present strategy is a decision of our present leadership. I have a different opinion. The Chinese students staged their demonstration in Tienanmin Square [in 1989], they wanted to change China. If the Chinese government hadn't ended this thing, where would China be now?"

In the 1980s, General Jamil Hassan reminisced, Turkey was "intellectual" rather than the "very cruel Islamic Turkey" which exists today. "The supporters of terrorism then were Saddam Hussein of Iraq and King Hussein of Jordan. Saddam Hussein didn't support terrorism in Syria because he liked Islam – but because he wanted to anger Hafez el-Assad. Saddam Hussein supported Islamists, though he was not an Islamic extremist himself.

"Even King Hussain [of Jordan] didn't like Islamists – but [used them] because he wanted to challenge Hafez el-Assad...and use the Muslim Brotherhood." There were times, I have to say, when General Jamil's voice sounded to me a little like that of Hafez al-Assad."

He spoke of "brainwashing" and ideological pressure on Syria's rural poor in the early years of the present war. Acts by Al-Qaeda [which now calls itself Jabhat al-Nusra] had been "encouraging this ideology and cruelty inside the hearts of the people – it's the fruit of ten [sic] years of ideological brain-washing. I follow them very closely." It was the Western states, General Hassan said, who gave weapons to radical Islamists.

"I know of a village where the people were forced to fight us. The people were forced into different traditions, even their clothes. Eighty per cent of the people of eastern Aleppo want to leave and come to the area [of western Aleppo] under the control of the government. The only solution is that the Western states stop supporting the terrorists."

And in remarks sure to enrage the US administration of Barack Obama – if not of his successor Donald Trump – the general added that "it is quite ridiculous for the Americans to say that there is a 'moderate' opposition. It is a disgusting thing. I am astounded that the US and UN make all this effort [over eastern Aleppo] just for this very small district.

"The only dirty game played in Aleppo is played by the Americans. If they stop their supply of weapons, everything will end...Why do the Western governments not care about the shelling of [government-controlled] western Aleppo where many people are killed?...I will fight to defend Syria to the last minute of my life."

Assad believes video of boy covered in rubble is fake

And so we reached the sensitive matter of Daraa, where the Syrian war began in 2011 and whose citizens' deaths were claimed to be the reason why General Hassan was sanctioned by Washington. "In the beginning of the crisis, they said a security man took the finger nails of children out," the general said. "This is just rumour – but even the people who were for the President were coming to believe this because of the media. In reality, it was very planned propaganda..."

The story of the Daraa children is by now well known. At least fifteen, accused of spray-painting the words “The People Want the Fall of the Regime” on a wall in the southern Syrian city in early 2011, were reportedly tortured by state security police, an act which prompted widespread demonstrations in April, the deaths of dozens of protestors and Syrian soldiers and the dismissal of the local governor by President Bashar himself.

General Jamil Hassan’s next words to me must therefore be read with both care and reservation. “The people who made these plots [against us] used weapons from the beginning but accused the government of using them,” he said. “From the beginning, when the demonstrators were in the streets, the security apparatus were prevented from having weapons...The people who made these plots [against us] used weapons from the beginning, but accused the government of using them.”

The armed opponents of the government, General Hassan repeated, “targeted Syria’s united society. The security apparatus are the ones responsible for this unity...so they were the new targets.”

But then the general added: “This does not mean there were no mistakes made by them. During my long career I don’t remember insulting anyone for the sake of insulting him. Maybe I was at fault in misunderstanding some of my deeds...I spent 40 years in security.”

At this point, there was a considerable pause in our conversation. I asked the obvious question of this much feared officer: Are you a cruel man? “I am cruel towards the issues which relate to my country,” he replied sharply – and not without some ambiguity. “In my relations towards my people, I am not cruel, and the people like me...” He was a man without pretence, the general said. Why, in 2009 a “wise man” came to his office when he had become head of Air Force Intelligence “and told me to take care not to lock up an innocent man.”

General Hassan had a story to tell. “At the time, I didn’t think about this advice until some corruption occurred in one of my prisons...then I made an investigation and I fired a lot of the prison guards and I requested the leadership to arrest many officers – but I requested that I myself should be at the top of the list of those who must be punished.

“And I was told that the leader [Bashar al-Assad] was very much astonished at this request – but he ended this matter and gave me another chance, because he knew I was a straight and true man. ‘Every man has a fault,’ he said. ‘Let us give Jamil this chance and we shall punish the ones who did these deeds, because he has no role in this corruption.’ After this day, I have checked every day what happens in the prisons...”

This was an important episode in the general’s life – albeit not fully explained. He went on to speak of how he orders his men “not to kill terrorists but to bring them in alive because we are in need of their information and to know what they carry in their minds.” He even orders his men, he says, to bring the bodies of foreign fighters to Damascus for examination “to gather all their nationalities and details”.

UK Ambassador gives damning speech to UN after Russia's security council veto over Syria

One of his prisoners, a Tajik, had a son of six who was found holding a weapon. "I told one of my [security] employees to take the boy to his home and bring him up and I gave my man a salary and for his wife who became a stepmother. After six months, the boy became another person."

Now came a moment not to be missed. I have myself twice interviewed General Jamil Hassan's foreign prisoners in the Mezze military jail in Damascus: inmates from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, France... Would the general, I asked, give me his word that none of these prisoners, indeed not one of the men in his prisons, would be executed?

"We will not execute them," he replied. Then he added: "We will do our best. I will recommend that they not be executed. But the final decision is up to the tribunal and court."

Now I doubt very much if the Syrian judiciary, however independently it claims to function, would deny a letter of recommendation from so formidable a figure as General Jamil Hassan. So his prisoners will be spared. I must accept that the general is a man of his word. Readers, as they say, will be kept informed.