

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<https://www.counterpunch.org/2017/09/07/russia-us-iran-and-israel-war-for-syria/print/>

Russia, US, Iran and Israel War for Syria

By Franklin Lamb

September 7, 2017

Editor's Note: The University of Oxford Interviews Dr. Franklin Lamb about the Future of Syria. Interview conducted by graduate students from Oxford University's Middle East Center, St Anthony's College, UK. Late August, 2017.

Question by Oxford University Interviewer: The Assad regime appears to be making significant territorial gains with Russian and Iranian help. Do you expect a reversal or will he stay in power?

Franklin Lamb: For the immediate future, yes, he will remain. Barring an alternative plan by Iran, it appears to me that he and his Baathist Alawi dominated regime will remain. Iran wants Assad in power for the time being so as to guarantee its Persian Gulf to Mediterranean Sea Shia crescent arm shipments to Hezbollah, real estate acquisitions, population transfers, and future control of Syria's economic, security and military institutions and decision making apparatus.

According to Syrian and Russian military sources in Syria with whom I have discussed this subject at length, Iran has no plans to leave Syria. It plans to stay. Given growing fatigue by opposition supporters here in the region there is not much the West wants or can do about this reality short of another long-term war in this seemingly cursed region. There is also little that the Russians can do about this reality although they are increasingly unhappy about what they are witnessing from Tehran and its Shia militia across the region. But reports that Western governments have decided that Assad will stay may be premature. One

example is France where it appears to have returned to its original position which it held until last years that Bashar Assad “cannot be the solution.” French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian declared this week that “We cannot build peace with Assad. He cannot be the solution,” Le Drian insisted that “The solution is to establish... a timeline for political transition that can lead to a new constitution and real elections, and this transition cannot happen with Bashar al-Assad.” Some western and other powers seem to believe that IS will soon be defeated in Syria leaving the country with a “single conflict, that of the civil war” pitting a more united opposition against the Assad government.

Question: How do you see the coming months unfolding in Syria? What shape are the rebels in?

Franklin Lamb: Relatively bad shape at the present it appears. In the months and perhaps years ahead it appears to me that Syria’s current government will continue its recent expansion of its authority from Damascus. Being strongly backed by Iran and Russia as both of these countries increasingly compete and position themselves to have major decision making authority once the fighting substantially ends. But major battles with countless civilian casualties loom in Idlib and Deir Ezzor and asymmetrical and guerilla warfare by the opposition will continue.

The countries that backed the rebels and opposition backers are withdrawing their support due partly to the failure of opposition political leader’s to unite with respect to strategy and allocation of foreign weapons and financial resources. As I noted in reply to your previous question, donor countries have over the past two years experienced “squabbling fatigue.” Plus as the opposition appears to cooperate with extreme jihadist groups some supporters such as Jordan and the US equivocated and then pulled back.

With respect to Turkey an early strong supporter of the opposition, their current single focus is to prevent the Syrian Kurds from achieving any kind of autonomy and much less, statehood. After ISIS retreats from Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, it’s a near certainty that Iranian militias including Hezbollah and other pro-regime forces will concentrate their firepower against the Kurds and will not respect the Rojava ceasefire. Turkey, a member of NATO will be ecstatic. I predict that Washington will not use American troops to defend the Syrian Kurds against this Iranian led alliance.

The Kurds err if they think Washington will stick by them. The American public has had enough of foreign wars and we have plenty of our own domestic problems that urgently require fixing.

But nothing is confidently predictable these days in Syria and while much of the opposition appears to be throwing in the towel, some Russian sources are suggesting that Russia, in order to counter Iran’s plans to colonize Syria, will negotiate with Washington and the West a “peaceful exile for certain Syrian leaders with some kind of an amnesty thrown in.” At the moment, Washington appears willing to go along with the Russian proposal and hand Putin the Syria file. That’s partly why the White House has cut off the rebels from previous US missiles and other weaponry.

Question: What is Israel likely to do about Iran’s apparent dominance in Syria?

Franklin Lamb: Perhaps due partly to his current domestic political vulnerabilities stemming from some apparently serious fraud charges, PM Netanyahu has been making increased threats that Israel will enter the war in Syria. For example, a senior Israeli intelligence delegation made visits last month to Washington and Moscow and according to the Jerusalem Post, Israel's Prime Minister told Russia's Putin that Israel was ready to bomb the Presidential Palace in Damascus, and to disrupt the Astana process, should Iran continue to 'extend its reach in Syria'.

Apparently also discussed was the report that an Al Qaeda affiliate in Somalia has seized control of some uranium mines in Africa and will supply the material to Iran. According to a claimed diplomatic letter from the Somalia Minister of Foreign Affairs signed the letter appealing to the U.S. Ambassador to Somalia, Stephen Schwartz. Israel claims that Iran works in several ways with ISIS for mutual benefits and partly to preserve its "we vs. the terrorists" tactic to justify its occupation of Syria.

Israel's concern about Iranian presence in Syria is based on Iran having tens of thousands of pro-Iranian fighters from half a dozen countries who after the war will become Iran's "Foreign Legion" in the region which Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah recently insisted will be available to fight with it against Israel during the next war.

Israel and some of its allies in the US Congress as well as AIPIC have recently claimed that Russia has stationed S-400 batteries near Hamas to protect an area where it's claimed that Iran has built a long range guided missile factory to supply Hezbollah in Lebanon for use during its next war.

Hezbollah, which has already accumulated over 100,000 rockets, is now seeking to target specific strategic sites in Israel by growing a capacity to launch 1,500 missiles daily across Israel once the next war begins. To that end, Hezbollah has been trying to obtain long-range guided missiles by smuggling them from Iran through Syria to Lebanon but Israel is thought to have destroyed most of the transfer convoys with loss of Iranian and Hezbollah lives. The Syria army reportedly refuses to help Iran with the transfers considering participation a death sentence.

Without doubt the increasing dominance of Iran in Syria has weakened Israel's position. So have Hezbollah's deployments near its border. The increased Russian air presence as well as its combat air operations and the new surface-to-air missile batteries the Russians have deployed in western Syria including at the Khmeimim airbase. Three years ago Israel had a free hand. It no longer does as it tries to develop a strategic relationship with Moscow and by increasing joint economic projects.

Question: The Trump Administration according to Lebanon's An Nahar this week announced that it was cutting off military aid to Lebanon. But the next day a senior U.S. general claimed that military aid to Lebanon would continue. What's behind this?

Franklin Lamb: Certainly an arms cutoff would be a harsh unexpected blow for Lebanon which since 2005 has received nearly \$ 1.5 billion in US military aid and for that country's hopes of establishing a real army is shattered at least in the near term. For example, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) was expecting to receive two Super Tucano light attack aircraft in October with

another two to follow in 2018 as well as the first batch of 32 M2 Bradley armored fighting vehicles. These shipments would have made Lebanon only the third country beside the US and Saudi Arabia to have and deploy them.

The Pentagon has also ordered the battlefield retrieval of approximately 50 of its latest model tanks some of which were deployed by the LAF the weekend of 8/26/2017. Other expected shipments of aircraft, drones, and even “missile proof” watchtowers will be stopped. Will the US insist that they be pulled from that battle field where some are presently deployed near the Lebanon-Syria border?

Briefly what is behind Washington stopping military aid to Lebanon’s army is that the State Department recommended cutting aid to Lebanon in 2018 but this was advanced because the US government does not believe Lebanon’s claims this week that the LAF did not coordinated its operations along the Lebanon-Syria border with Hezbollah and Syria’s armed forces. Washington has been dismayed by Lebanon’s agreement with Syria and Hezbollah to give free passage to Islamic State militants from Lebanon’s border region to enter Iraq. Two days later the U.S-led coalition carried out air strikes to block Islamic State group fighters evacuated from Lebanon from reaching eastern Syria and entering Iraq.

To be blunt, while back in 2006 Washington believed the Lebanese government and its armed forces could be a counter weight to the rise of the Iranian backed Hezbollah but they admit they erred. Washington believes that Lebanon has essentially lost its sovereignty and that Iran through Hezbollah, which it created, arms and funds and now occupies Lebanon. Whatever Iran’s wants from Lebanon’s 28 ministries, Hezbollah will use its political power to obtain.

The same goes for Lebanon’s army which, perhaps unsurprisingly, the Israeli lobby and many in Congress consider Lebanon’s army, as does Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman merely a “subsidiary unit of Hezbollah.” Moreover, Members of the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees claim that Iran now views Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon the same and that Tehran has essentially colonized all three countries and has no intension of withdrawing any of them. It remains to be seen what becomes of future US military aid to Iraq.

Question: Is there reason for optimism that the post-war government in Syria will allow the development of local autonomy as well as the formation of an active empowered civil society along with local administration and decentralization?

Franklin Lamb: As you can imagine it depends entirely on the make-up of Syria’s post-war government and to what extent Syria’s Arab Baath Socialist Party, assuming it is still in power, will allow it.

My personal sense is that significant decentralization is unlikely in Syria given the nature of Baathism in the region. At the core of Ba’athist ideology is the creation of one party strong central security states. I do not anticipate substantive changes in the elements of the security state? That does not allow for much democratic opposition. The three countries which have been governed by Baathist regimes, Iraq, Syria and Algeria, have in the main rejected political

pluralism while advocating an unspecified amount of time for the Ba'athist government to develop an enlightened Arabic society. Moreover, to date the Syrian government has made consistent efforts to limit civilian governance structures in the suburbs of Damascus including Jobar and East Ghouta.

Even though Russia's President Putin claims it will happen, and it has yet to be experienced significantly in Russia itself, I am personally dubious that effective decentralization will be achieved.

Unless there is a new post-war civil rights struggle that succeeds, I believe it is unlikely that Syria will witness meaningful decentralization, less a vibrant social society or the granting of effective local autonomy. I may be very mistaken but to date and given current trends, I do not see probative evidence that broad-based local decentralization or federalism will happen in Syria anytime soon.

Question: What is your view of the Russian promoted “de-escalation zones” as a way to end the war in Syria?

Franklin Lamb: Contrary to some political hype by Russia and Iran, they are not effective and very likely will not be.

The four zones are set up in the largely rebel controlled areas of Deraa and Coneitra along the Jordan border in South Syria, Idlib province, including the northeastern areas of Latakia province, western areas of Aleppo province and northern areas of Hama province. Also the Rastan and Talbiseh enclave in northern Homs province and the fourth is in Eastern Ghouta in the northern Damascus countryside.

These “de-escalation zones” are a political tactic to pressure the rebels into concessions—a tactical slight of hand if you will. The zones are violated constantly whenever a military advantage sought. The three ‘guarantors’ Turkey, Iran and Russia have ignored violations. Iran has no incentive to back any ceasefires, and the war has brought Iran and Syria's leadership closer. These four areas in my opinion will surely be attacked and bombarded again when resources become available and a military advantage appears achievable.

Although the de-escalation zones in Syria are also intended to bring about a cessation of hostilities and restore a sense of normalcy to the country, they lack a protective framework. The Syrian government was to allow “unhindered” humanitarian aid into rebel-held areas, and public services such as electricity and water were to be restored where they have been cut off.

For example, the agreement declares and assumes that the hostilities between the Syrian regime and rebels will end within these zones. But this has not happened as claimed and is unlikely to given that certain armed opposition groups have not agreed and this is a major stumbling block as well have seen with past agreements. The three “guarantors” claim the right to fight rebels from both ISIS and Al-Qaeda within and outside the de-escalation zones.

Question: Given the many reports and extensive documentation of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria do you anticipate that someday the victims will achieve any justice? And that the main perpetrators will be held accountable?

Franklin Lamb: I am inclined to believe that there eventually will be an Independent International Tribunal as a result of the nearly seven years of crimes against civilians that we continue to witness in Syria. But whatever justice is eventually achieved will likely be a long time coming and miniscule given the scope of the crimes.

Not since World War II has there been so much complete disregard for humanity as well as violations of international humanitarian law, such as the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which were specifically designed to protect the half million killed in Syria, the 11 million displaced and the 6 million forced from Syria into other countries as refugees.

A former Syrian government photographer known as Caesar, who was tasked with documenting victims, released 28,000 photos of deaths which showed mutilated bodies and malnourished individuals. Several other in depth judicial investigations of war crimes and crimes against humanity have been published relating to the use of deadly gas against civilians, summary executions, torture, forced disappearances, rapes, torture and killings of women and children imprisoned without trial. Tens of Thousands of documents and testimonies are being preserved by more than a dozen humanitarian organizations as they prepare cases against both sides in the civil war in Syria.

Unless there is an international amnesty, similar to the one in Lebanon following its civil war that exonerated many war criminals, presumably sponsored by Russia and Iran to protect certain allies, some of the accused in Syria will eventually be arrested or tried in absentia and held criminally responsible.