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Frederic Hof to Al-Jumhuriya: Trump has no Syria strategy

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Alex Rowell



The former US ambassador to Syria talks Raqqa, Russia, reconstruction, and more in this half-hour Al-Jumhuriya podcast.

Ambassador Frederic Hof was a special adviser on Syria at the State Department during Barack Obama's presidency until he resigned, in September 2012, in protest at what he saw as his administration's inaction in the face of the horrors unfolding in that country. Today, Amb. Hof is the director of the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C.

In this inaugural Al-Jumhuriya English podcast, Amb. Hof spoke to Alex Rowell and Karam Nachar for half an hour last Tuesday, saying, among other things, that the Donald Trump administration currently has no "fully-formed" strategy on Syria; that the US military has not adequately planned for a post-ISIS Syria, such that the stage is being set for a future resurgence of the group; that senior American political officials are mistakenly placing hopes on Russia coming round to Washington's perspective regarding Assad; and why, despite it all, the Syrian opposition should nonetheless pursue diplomatic engagement with Moscow, and even potentially the Assad regime itself.

Below, we present an audio recording of the conversation, as well as a full text transcript. (Credit to Yaaser Azzayyaat for editing, mastering, and uploading the audio, as well as translating its transcript into Arabic.)



Alex Rowell: First of all, then, the Syrian capital of ISIS' so-called caliphate, the city of Raqqa, is reported to be about 90% free of ISIS now, with very little territory remaining, it seems, apparently just a hospital and a soccer stadium, remaining in the jihadists' hands. So, assuming that the forces fighting them—which of course are the Syrian Democratic Forces, with US air support—assuming that they

are victorious at some point in the next days or weeks, what do you think would be the significance of that victory, and who would actually govern the city, or what's left of it?

Ambassador Frederic Hof: I believe that the Syrian Democratic Forces have established a city council. Whether or not that body will end up having the legitimacy and the ability to govern the city adequately is an open question. It's very difficult to know now what that's going to be like.

What I find remarkable from an analytical point of view is, in my discussions with senior military people, Americans, here in Washington and elsewhere, I find that they are having some difficulty answering the question you just put to me, Alex. This is, from my professional point of view as a former military officer, this is not good. This is rather troubling. Something we learned from Iraq, and again from Libya, is the absolute necessity of having post-combat stabilization plans in place well in advance; plans that can be modified if necessary to adapt to developments. When I hear senior military officers saying that they really need guidance from Washington—policy guidance, about post-combat stabilization, about the presence of regime forces in eastern Syria, the presence of Iranian-led militiamen—I find this very, very, very troubling. This military campaign has been going on for the better part of three years. These matters should have been settled long ago, at least in terms of planning.

Karam Nachar: Is it true in your opinion that the Trump administration and also the American military is leaning towards keeping the Syrian Democratic Forces in charge of even the predominantly Arab regions, like Raqqa itself?

Amb. Hof: I think the administration's view, and certainly the military's view on this is that the Syrian Democratic Forces now have a sufficient number of Arabs to be able to govern predominantly Arab areas. Whether or not this is the case; whether or not the Kurdish leaders of the Syrian Democratic Forces would try to play a direct governing role, I do not know. But what I think I know is that over the past year, year and a half, the effort to expand the SDF to have a greater Arab component has been prompted with this very much in mind, in addition to the need for extra bodies to prosecute the military campaign.

Nachar: In the likelihood that after liberating all of the Syrian territory that used to be under Daesh's control from Daesh, ending Daesh's presence in Syria, if the Syrian regime forces and the Russians were to try to attack the SDF forces, do you think the Americans have a certain scenario for how they would react in the likelihood of a clash between the SDF and the regime forces?

Amb. Hof: You know, we have a bit of a sample, I guess, from a couple of months ago, when forces that were described as affiliated with the Assad regime—I suspect that they were Iranian-led militiamen—attempted to engage American-trained forces, I believe, in the vicinity of al-Tanf. The United States reacted kinetically.

Now, in the event of some kind of Russian escalation, or intervention against American-trained forces, I think it obviously raises additional dangers, and this is why the United States has gone out of its way to try to de-conflict with Russia in the area.

Nevertheless, I personally would find it hard to believe that

the United States would simply stand by and wring its hands if American-trained and -equipped forces were to come under sustained attack.

Rowell: In a similar vein, moving a bit southeast of Raqqa, Deir al-Zor province has been spoken [about] a lot recently as a looming battleground with, again, the people we're just speaking about, the SDF backed by the US on the one hand, and the Assad regime backed by Russian airpower and Iranian militias on the other. You've written about this recently; what is the importance of this fight and how do you expect it to play out?

Amb. Hof: I think for me the importance of the fight has to do with trying to ensure that at least part of Syria does not fall under the direct governing supervision of those elements most responsible for the destruction of the Syrian state, and for the rise of extremists of a sectarian nature in parts of Syria. And of course I'm speaking namely of the Assad regime and Iranian-led militiamen who are from places as far afield as Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, et cetera.

I personally believe a real opportunity has been missed for the better part of two years. I've been strongly, strongly recommending that in connection with the battle against Daesh, that the United States treat eastern Syria as a no-fly and no-go zone, and that the United States work with locals and with the Syrian opposition to set up administrative structures to replace Daesh. That recommendation has obviously been rejected, but it's not been replaced by anything. And my concern is that, I mean, I am absolutely, totally in favor of defeating Daesh militarily [laughs], no mistake about that. But we have a broader issue of trying to make sure that Daesh 2.0 or something doesn't replace it.

And permitting Assad forces and Iranian-led militiamen into the area, [it] seems to me, just sets the stage for the resurrection of extremist resistance in eastern Syria.

Nachar: So this actually dovetails perfectly with the next question, which is, basically, if we were to take a step back, and to talk about the US policy towards Syria more generally: As you know, there are now at least three different interpretations or perspectives on what the Trump administration take on Syria is. There are the people who say it's just a continuation of the Obama policy; the Trump administration has no problem handing in the Syrian file to Russia, and let Russia decide how the political settlement will actually pan out to be. You've got other people saying, well, no, they were more interventionist, and they will never let Iran take control over Syria, so there is something there which is quite different from the Obama administration's approach, but they still haven't completely shown us what this policy will look like. And then you've got this other, third perspective, which is that they've got absolutely no idea, that there's no plan, that the Trump administration is completely unclear in terms of what the next step is. What do you think?

Amb. Hof: Well, based on the testimony, going back to the answer to the first question, based on the testimony of senior American military officers, I think it's pretty clear that the Trump administration does not yet have a fully-formed, objectives-based strategy. It's just not there yet.

What I am hearing from senior American officials, and I'm not talking about military people here, but actual civilian senior Americans, is an expression of hope and expectation that the Russians at the end of the day will prove to be

useful in Syria, and constructive in Syria. The theory of the case being that a Syria that's not much more than a smoking ruin, a Syria that is divided, that is misgoverned by Assad and his entourage, can hardly be the kind of Syria that would be of any use to Russia. That Russia is pushing for large-scale reconstruction, and that surely Russia will realize that the Assad regime will have to share power in a meaningful way in order for international players, who have real resources, real money, to participate with grants, loans, and investments aimed at rebuilding Syria. One hears this all the time, and I think Mr. Putin has a vote in all of these matters, and I think it's somewhat dangerous to assume that Moscow will act in accordance with an American definition of what's good for Russia.

But my central point is that in the absence of a clear, objectives-based strategy, there is a good deal of optimistic, hopeful thinking that the Russians will be helpful here. And I just pose two questions to people. Number one: is this what Russia really wants? And, number two: if it is what Russia wants, does it have the capability to impose it? Because an operation like the Assad regime is not really suited to sharing power. And I think from the point of view of Bashar al-Assad and his colleagues, to share power is to yield power, and to give up power, and to mount the slippery slope of being ousted altogether. And I suspect they're right.

Nachar: So do you think then that this triumphalism that seems to be prevalent in Damascus, that the war is over, the Assad regime has won, you know there's already talk in Lebanon, and in most of the conferences on Syria now in the region, that who wants to talk about the war or the political settlement, this is already sort of passé, and now

everyone wants to talk about reconstruction. Does that strike you as rather premature?

Amb. Hof: I think the war, in terms of armed resistance of actual opponents of the Assad regime, and I certainly do not consider Daesh to be in that category; I think that's essentially over. The renamed Nusra Front is sort of bottled up in Idlib, that situation will continue, but I would make a distinction between the phase of armed resistance being essentially over and the question of whether or not the Syrian revolution itself, the Syrian uprising, has been defeated. The latter, I believe, is not the case. Assad and his entourage will govern Syria only to the extent that the Russians and the Iranians carry them on their backs. The regime is exhausted, the regime is splintered, the regime is essentially useless in the context of effective governance in Syria, and effective oversight of reconstruction. I think it's perfectly understandable to me that Syrians across the board are exhausted. They've been set upon systematically by this regime. Much of the armed resistance has gravitated in the direction of sectarianism, which is beyond unfortunate. And I think most Syrians really, really, really want a pause in all of this. But I doubt that Syrians in general have given up on the goals of self-government. That's what this uprising has been all about. And I don't think that Assad, or the Russians, or the Iranians, all their efforts combined, I don't think they're going to kill that.

Rowell: You touched a second ago on Idlib. And there's obviously been a conscious strategy on the part of the regime and its allies, through forced displacements and so on, to really bottle all of the remaining fighters, who as you say happen to be some of the most hardline jihadists, into Idlib. But what really is the end-game there? Surely there

can be no political settlement with Al-Nusra Front. Does that imply that it's going to be a sort of war of extermination à la Aleppo City? On such a huge scale, that also seems unfeasible. [Editor's note: The interview took place before Turkey announced its **ground intervention** in Idlib Province]

Amb. Hof: My big concern, I mean look, there are no silver bullets, there are no answers to this question. I think most Syrian civilians living in Idlib City, and in other areas of the province that are under al-Qaeda domination, are not happy with that situation. Nevertheless, if there's going to be widespread violence, my fear is that a major feature of that violence is going to be deliberate regime and Russian air assaults on predominantly civilian facilities; on hospitals, clinics, schools, mosques. You know, the regime and the Russians got quite far in Aleppo, obviously, using a military strategy that focused predominantly on civilian terror. I would hope that there would be a change of approach [regarding Idlib], but I have my doubts that that's what we'll see.

Nachar: Ambassador Hof, I wanted to push you a little further on this distinction that you made between the fact that the armed conflict in your opinion is over, but the Syrian revolution hasn't ended. I want to ask you what the political meaning of this is, in terms of what in your opinion the moderate Syrian opposition should do; specifically the High Commission for Negotiations. Because, if you recall, Ambassador [Robert] Ford for instance **declared** very blatantly, he said the Assad regime has won, and this was presented in a context where the Syrian opposition should just, whatever, go to the negotiation table, accept whatever is being offered by the Russians, maybe accept some

position in a transitional government under Assad, and accepting that Assad will have the right to run in the next elections. Based on your notion that the revolution hasn't ended, that the Americans are still hoping that the Russians will come to their senses and understand that the Assad regime can't really share power, what sort of advice would you give to the Syrian opposition, politically speaking, now? And do you disagree, given what you just said, with Ambassador Ford?

Amb. Hof: No, I don't have any profound disagreements with Robert Ford. My suspicion is that when Robert says things like Assad has won, what he's really reflecting is a snapshot of the military situation, and the fact that that military situation has produced a diplomatic situation in which what was anticipated back in Geneva in 2012 to be a political transition process is not possible, under current conditions. I think what's important here is to reflect on the fact that millions and millions and millions of Syrians in the course of this uprising have experienced self-government for the first time in their lives. Local councils, local civil society organizations, have operated under the most difficult of conditions, with barrel bombs, artillery, precision munitions, Sarin gas, everything being thrown at them by the regime and the regime's enablers. That experience is not going to be lost on people. I think in terms of the HNC, it definitely needs to continue to engage with the United Nations and others, at Geneva, I think it should be open to the possibility of discussions with the Assad regime. Keep in mind that it is the Assad regime that has consistently refused to engage diplomatically at a direct level in Geneva. It has not been the opposition. And I think the opposition should be open to a variety of possibilities. It should, I think, consult with counterparts in Cairo and

Moscow, and give those counterparts an opportunity—particularly the Moscow wing of the opposition—to explain its concept of how shared power would work. Of how retaining Bashar al-Assad as president of the republic would actually work, in terms of decent governance in Syria. I think this is the biggest obstacle.

And, you know, again, there is no shortage of analysts out there who have very prescriptive ideas about what Bashar al-Assad should do: he should share power with an empowered national unity government in Damascus; he should permit empowered local governance in various parts of Syria. Everybody's telling Bashar what he should do, and I think unfortunately if you look at this regime, this is not a group of people disposed to share power with anyone. And I think this is going to be an ongoing issue, and an ongoing problem.

Nachar: I wanted to just ask one more question on this point, because to be honest, for a lot of Syrians that I talk to, and I know a lot of people in the more democratic and liberal factions of the coalition in Istanbul, they would argue vehemently that the opposition should not engage in Geneva. Because, for them, if we lost the military battle, then at least we haven't lost the moral or political battle that Assad is illegitimate, that Assad is a war criminal, that Assad has committed crimes against humanity, and that for us to, after seven years, to accept to be part of a transitional government with him in power, with his intelligence apparatus intact, then we would sacrifice the one last thing that we still have, which is the narrative that this man is a war criminal, that even if he's won the war, we will continue the struggle against him, and that we will never accept to put a sort of political signature on his

victory; that he will remain illegitimate for the democratic opposition. And if the opposition doesn't do that, then the possibility of actually bringing Syrians together, whether in the diaspora now or inside the country, behind a democratic leadership, would be completely lost, and all these Syrians completely bereaved would sort of tilt more and more towards the radical voices that are, for better or worse, still fighting Assad.

Amb. Hof: Yeah, I hear you, and I understand the logic of that argument. When I suggest that the opposition engage at Geneva, and engage fully, this is not to suggest that the opposition should at the end of the day accept some kind of a political deal that leaves Bashar al-Assad, air force intelligence, the shabbiha, this whole collection of war criminals, in charge, with the blessing of the HNC. I am not suggesting that at all. And I think certainly in its work in Geneva, and in its bilateral relationship with the United States and other key states, such as France, Great Britain, Germany, and others, there should continue to be a strong insistence on full accountability and ultimate justice. All right.

My concern to be honest with you is that if the HNC simply takes a hike at this point, and says the hell with Geneva, the hell with everything, it's only going to encourage those forces in Europe and elsewhere who might be inclined to say, well, it's really all over, and all right, let's go ahead and re-open our embassies in Damascus, and do business with Bashar and his family, and, yeah, even if a percentage of what we send in for reconstruction gets stolen outright, you know, at least Bashar can keep the place quiet. I'm just afraid that if the more responsible and creative elements of the Syrian opposition walk away from engagement with the

United Nations and others, it simply cedes the deal to those cynics who would without much urging at all try to reestablish full relations with the Assad regime.