

Syria Countdown: an Update from Damascus

By Franklin Lamb



Aftermath of Israeli strike. Naturally no one in the American establishment criticizes Israel for warmongering and general banditry in its foreign policy. In a powder keg of a region, Israel is the permanently lit fuse.

Washington's ill-considered criminal attack will aid and abet these largely Gulf financed militia and provide justification, in their minds for literally hundreds of often competing jihadist groups to spread carnage across Syria. The innocent in the USA and the West will also eventually suffer a severe pay back price as was the case on 9/11/2001 and a decade later on 9/11/2011. And on and on it goes.

Damascus – The morning following President Obama's announcement he would not bomb Syria immediately, the streets of Damascus were packed with shoppers and employees heading to their jobs. Several reasons for this were mentioned by my friend, Eyman. Some Damascenes who had fled their homes last week had returned, and a palpable sense of at least temporary relief pervades much of this capital city. It is also the

first of the month. In Syria, government and other employees have just received their monthly paychecks and need to stock up on food, particularly now, upon entering this most uncertain month.

Adding to the uncertainty are people's plans for the immediate future. Many of those who fled and returned following Obama's deferral to Congress, are planning to leave again before next weekend's possible attack. Others, due to conditions for refugees they discovered in Lebanon, have decided to stay, essentially playing a game of Russian roulette with death as they await their fates in their beloved Syria.

At any rate, in Damascus this morning citizens can be seen scurrying to workplaces, feeling safe enough, at least for now, to go grocery shopping and do errands. Even the gunmen who man electronic "frisking" equipment just outside my hotel, and who search all wishing to enter, seem genuinely relieved, happy and unusually friendly, as do the army troops on downtown Damascus streets. Friends in Damascus, both in government and private citizens, talk of an "uncertain relief" since last Sunday night, though it is a relief combined with an awareness that a terrible event of some sort may be on the way. Still others, aware of what seems to be increasing opposition to military action amongst the American public, think the attack may be delayed again.

Perhaps most surprisingly, local news outlets are reporting this morning on the results of a new poll showing that 60 percent of the Syrian people think the US *will not attack at all*. As for the Syrian government, it has been nearly mute internationally, not wanting to provoke the White House, while at the same time assuring the public here that Syria can face all challenges and that history and God are with its people.

The weather here has changed since my visit last month. While

the days will stay oppressively hot for another month, the early mornings have turned cool with refreshing soft breezes. Doves and pigeons in the park opposite the National Museum on Beirut Street coo and enjoy the large green space next to the Four Seasons Hotel, the same hotel which the UN CW investigators just vacated as they prepare their report for UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon.

Given that an American attack, should one occur, may well open the gates of hell, this observer is constantly amazed by the mundane, everyday things one is still able to observe around here. For example, last Friday afternoon I watched transfixed from a park bench as two public works employees weeded a few errant dandelions and weeds that had dared invade a beautiful manicured garden-park in downtown Damascus. This struck me as a bit bizarre, given the then widely-held belief that a US missile blitz might light up Damascus that very evening. On the scale of things these days, I doubted that a few weeds sprouting in a city park were of great import. Or were they? Perhaps carrying out one's individual duty and work assignment these days is a wholly interconnected part of the nation's overall resistance to foreign invasions, and is congruent somehow to what seems to be a pervading attitude—of people wanting to carry on with, or at least simulate, their pre-crisis lives and routines, their accustomed simple pleasures. And so maybe weeding gardens in Damascus makes perfect sense these days.

A Palestinian family from Latakia refugee camp up north who had fled their homes last December, joining thousands who have come to Damascus seeking safety, were visiting with me this morning. When I asked how their beautiful three and five year old children were adjusting to the crisis atmosphere in their new surroundings, the mother replied, *"When the bombing started over a year ago the children could not sleep well because they were frightened by the loud noise. But over time they got used to it and slept fine. But last night they could*

not sleep because there was no shelling and it was too quiet for them. So what are we to do”? And she laughed.

It is true that there was no shelling and bombing here in Damascus during the night of Sunday, September 1, which the lady was referring to. And this fact is significant. Informed sources report to this observer that the government decision not to bomb the suburbs including East Gouta, which normally occurs nightly, was taken at the highest level in order to send a reply message from Syria to America and personally to President Obama. The latter’s speech, just hours earlier in Washington, contained several messages for the leadership in Damascus. What the Syrian government was signaling, some claim, was its willingness to join Tehran, Moscow and Washington in finding a peaceful solution to Syria’s crisis, starting with Geneva II.

Meanwhile, the ever-rising cost of living for Syria’s population, due in large measure to the US-led economic sanctions, continues to devastate many families here. Those sanctions are designed by the US Treasury Department’s Office of Financial Assets Control (OFAC), and they intentionally target Syria’s civilian population in an effort to get the population to break with its government, thereby facilitating the US goal of regime change in Syria and Iran. This observer, with two student friends, yesterday visited a government owned supermarket called *“Marazaa Government Supermarket”*—one of approximately one hundred government-operated grocery stores in central Damascus. We compared prices by also visiting the privately owned *“Supermarket Day by Day”* in the Sabah Bahar neighborhood, also in central Damascus, and found that government-owned grocery stores average 5-15 percent lower prices, depending upon the item. The private grocery chains tend to be frequented by those with more money and who might seek European products and a wider product selection. Government stores, on the other hand, sell only Syrian products.

Bread was being rationed last week in government bakeries. At least one such bakery exists in every neighborhood, and a citizen is currently allowed to purchase one plastic bag with 22 loaves per day. The government plastic bag weighs three kilos (roughly 6.5 pounds) and sells for 50 Syrian lire or a bit less than USD 25 cents. This quantity, I am advised by a super market store manager, normally feeds a family of at least three for one day given that the average bread staple consumption in Syria is three loaves per person per day. Normally, even during this 30 month crisis, a citizen could purchase as much as they desired from government stores, but the American attack threat has caused yet more market complications in Syria for the average citizens.

In private bakeries, severe inflation has hit, and just seven loaves of bread, which would feed two persons for one day, now costs 150 lire or approximately 75 cents. Despite the wide price differential (the government shops have not raised their prices since the regime of Hafez al-Assad), many people are shopping at the private shops because it can take five or more hours waiting in line at the government bread shops. Before the onset of the conflict now raging in Syria, the price of eggs was 125 lira (about 25 cents) for 24 in a carton. Prior to the most recent crisis, the price was 500 lira (one us dollar) for two dozen eggs, and this morning in Damascus it is 700 lira.

In seeking to end this crisis, Syria is fortunate to have tough and resolute allies including Russia and Iran and, perhaps equally important, a skilled diplomatic corps and group of officials who have exhibited remarkable acumen and insight as well as nerves of steel—both during the crisis as a whole and especially over the past several days of brinkmanship. This observer has had the honor to meet with a few of them personally. These include Foreign Minister Walid Muallem and his [Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad](#), Information Minister Omran Zoubi and his able staff,

Presidential Adviser Dr. Bouthania Shaaban, and her dedicated office colleagues, and Parliament Speaker Mohammad Jihad al-Laham.

In this observer's view, many Syrians, perhaps a majority, do not believe that President Obama, Defense Secretary Hagel, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey, or a growing number of members of Congress, and most importantly the American public, want war. Some here are thinking, wishfully perhaps, that without a strong Congressional vote in favor of the Obama request, the president will not order a criminal attack Syria's civilian population, for if there is a US attack, that is assuredly what it will be.

Surprisingly perhaps, Obama is being praised by some for his courage in not caving to the neocons and Zionist lobby by ordering the US military to begin bombing promptly. As one Syrian journalist told this observer just hours ago, "Obama still has the opportunity to earn that Nobel Prize, which he received a few years back for I have no idea why, and secure his legacy as one of American's great Presidents—if he has the courage and vision of the late Dr. Martin Luther King."

Before ending a very long day with sleep, this observer invited the Palestinian family to dinner near my hotel as it was not apparent that they had been eating much recently. We talked about prospects for the Syrian Arab Republic, and Palestinian refugees, so many of whom have been internally and externally displaced as result of this maelstrom, and as I interacted with the wonderful children, I could not help becoming wistful as I contemplated the certainty that it is these children, and Syria's poor, who are condemned, unless the American people prevent it, to suffer the brunt of this latest US adventure—condemned as their country becomes more divided, and a new batch of terrorist groups springs up like mushrooms after a summer rain.

Washington's ill-considered criminal attack will aid and abet

these largely Gulf financed militia and provide justification, in their minds for literally hundreds of often competing jihadist groups to spread carnage across Syria. The innocent in the USA and the West will also eventually suffer a severe pay back price as was the case on 9/11/2001 and a decade later on 9/11/2011. And on and on it goes.

This observer is frequently asked these days, as the bombs and rockets hit ever nearer, if the American people have the political and moral will to take to the streets, and to the offices of their Congressional representatives whose salaries they pay, and make history—a history that will revitalize our county and its claimed democracy. Each American, and all people of good will, have the power to do this service to humanity.

And they *can* do it in the coming days. If they fail, who do we blame but ourselves? Because when it comes down to it, it's our country; it doesn't belong to the politicians or the corporations or to those who pledge fealty to a foreign occupying power half a world away. It is our constitution, and if each of us doesn't protect it we cede it to others to sully and use as they will.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR (Abridged)

Franklin Lamb is doing research in Syria. The author's most recent book: **"The Price We Pay: A quarter century of Israel's use of American weapons against the civilian population of Lebanon"** is available in Arabic and English: Expected soon, **"The Case for Palestinian Civil Rights in Lebanon: An advocacy primer"**

Background

- * Born and raised in Milwaukie, Oregon, USA
- * Home Address: 221 8th Street, NE, Washington DC, 20002
- * Languages: English, French, Russian, some Chinese

Education

* Fellow, Department of East Asian Legal Studies, Harvard Law School USA; Post Doctoral Program in International Law, Cambridge University, UK

The Hague Academy of International Law,