

TRANSCRIPT OF e-POLICY CIRCLE 16

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RAGHIDA DERGHAM With:

HE James Jeffrey

HE Joel Rayburn;

HE Nibras El Fadel;

Youtube Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ic_BDSZm7LY

Raghida Dergham: Good Washington DC, and good afternoon Paris, and I am in Lebanon, Raghida Dergham, hosting the sixteenth e-Policy Circle of Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi. Before I introduce my guests and we engage in a conversation, I'd like to offer our condolences to the people of Kuwait, and to the AL- Sabah family, because the death of the Emir of Kuwait, Emir Ahmad Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah is really a sad occasion for a lot of us. I personally happen to know him since I was twenty-three years old, that was a long time ago, and he always asked me to call him 'Bou Nasser', so the loss of Bou Nasser is really sad for me, personally. He was a humanitarian globally, and he was an advocate for reconciliation regionally. So, this is when I ask, on behalf of Beirut Institute, and the friends and family of the Summit, we offer our condolences.

I would like to welcome with us Ambassador James Jeffrey. You are joining us today because you know who he is. And also, Joel Rayburn, and Nibras El-Fadel. I regret, actually even Staffan De Mistura, he sends his regrets that he cannot join us because of a family emergence he was not expecting, I learned about that only hours ago. So, he sends his regrets to you for expecting him to join, he cannot.

I also regret that the Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia, Sergei Vershinin, he was unable to join us to begin with, so we hope we can host him in a further for a future e-Policy Circle it would have been great had even able to come with us today is the fifth anniversary of Russia 's intervention in Syria and so it is a very opportune time to have this very important e-Policy Circle as usual I will give four minutes to each of the participants and then we engage in a conversation that we will learn further what's next, not only of what happened.

I will start with James Jeffrey, four minutes to you please.

James Jeffrey: Thank you very much Raghida, thank you very much for your Institute inviting both Joel and me to come and speak with you today. The Trump administration believes that the crisis in Syria is at the very top of the list of priorities of horrific events in the middle east that we all must work to try to solve. **It is not only the most serious**

wide-scale humanitarian disaster of the 21st century, with over 12 million people, half the Syrian population, fleeing their homes from the horrific Assad regime's behavior, but also a geostrategic challenge to all of us. There are five regular military forces operating in Syria because they believe that their security in one or another way is impacted. That's Russia, Iran, the United States and its coalition partners Turkey, and although usually not acknowledged, Israel. So, it is very very important for the security of the region and for the well-being of the over 20 million Syrian citizens to end this thing. Our goals are first of all to have a political solution under the UN's aegis, under 2254, the December 2015 Security Council resolution that moves this political process forward to see all Iranian troops out, they are the fuel the accelerants to the fire that is Syria. And finally, the enduring defeat of ISIS, which is an offshoot of the Assad regime's war on its own people, ISIS is one of the many manifestations of why this thing has to stop. Now it is not the policy of the United States to try to determine what kind of a government Syria should have. We don't have an overthrow of the government, a regime change, rather we want to see under 2254 the regime behave in a different way. That means first of all accept 2254, embrace a nationwide ceasefire. There's no sense for any further fighting, the lines are frozen. Secondly, start with the constitutional committee, release detainees and let's get moving on some reconciliation of all Syrians, whether for or against this government, that's what we need. In addition, we need, besides reconciliation we need accountability for those who committed war crimes. **We need terrorism to stop – Syria should neither support nor provide a safe haven for terrorist organizations. We need chemical weapons and other weapons of mass destruction to be ended. We need the Assad regime to be accountable for what it has done with chemical weapons and a decade earlier with a nuclear program. We need refugees to return under conditions that are dignified and are safe and voluntary. That's our policy, and we are doing everything possible to put economic pressure on the regime to support the actions for a ceasefire and to demand a diplomatic solution** and we believe that we have the European Union, the Arab League and the neighboring states and much of the Syrian people behind us. Thank you very much for inviting me today.

Raghida Dergham: I thank you very much, I have a lot of follow-ups with you, including on Russia 's role and Turkey's, and how involved are the Europeans. But I want to clarify something in what you said. You said 'we do not want regime change, we want regime behavior'. Is this a change in the US position, I mean during that time, even during president Obama's time, there was talk about 'Assad has to go'. So is this a change in the US position now you just don't care if he stays or goes?

James Jeffrey: We are not indifferent to that man, that man needs to be held accountable for his war crimes and for the way he has pursued this war. What I'm saying is it's not our job to hold him accountable, it's our job to ensure that the Syrian people have a say in who governs them and who is held accountable. We have had a lot of experience and I've been on the front lines of it intervening inside conflicts in the middle east and elsewhere. It doesn't turn out well.

Raghida Dergham: Thank you very much James Jeffrey, we will talk about the Caesars Act – which is about holding people accountable – later on in the discussion but let me go to Joel Rayburn and four minutes to you Joel.

Joel Rayburn: Well I want to echo Raghida my thanks for the Beirut Institute for putting together this event today. I want to offer sympathies from our State Department team for all the people who were horribly affected, lost loved ones, lost their homes in the Beirut explosion of August 4th. I want to offer our sympathies to you, I know that you personally lost your home, I know that you personally came very close to having to not making it through that horrible situation and I know that there are many many people who share your situation.

Now I also, I wanted to echo Ambassador Jeffrey's comments. I want to say that the United States policy on Syria during this administration has not changed, we've been clear on our objectives from the beginning and what we're doing now follows the course that I would say president Trump first defined for us going back to even April of 2017 when he took the step to hold the Assad regime accountable for its use of chemical weapons against the Syrian people. To build on Ambassador Jeffrey's comments, we're seeking to use our various pressure tools to disrupt the Assad regime's ability to prolong what is now nearly a decade-long conflict. I want to announce here that today the administration is announcing the fourth tranche of sanctions against Bashar Al Assad and his enablers the fourth tranche since we began the Caesar Act implementation on June 17th.

Today the US government is issuing 17 sanctions designations against key individuals and entities that are facilitators and supporters of the Assad regime and its acts against the Syrian people. The designations that we're rolling out today cover the full spectrum of the way in which the Assad regime has an exploitative financial and military apparatus, and this is the apparatus that underpins Bashar al-Assad's survival in that system. In particular the United States today is designating the Governor of the Central Bank of Syria Hazem Karfoul, We're also designating the General Intelligence Directorate of the Syrian regime and specifically its Director Hussam Luka. We are also designating the Syrian regime's fifth corps of the Syrian Arab army and in particular its Commander General Milad Jadid, as well as a number of Syrian financiers and their businesses and it included among those financiers are the adult family members of Bashar al-Assad illicit financier Yassar Ibrahim who we recently designated. These individuals are all part of the Assad regime's wide network of actors who really, Raghida, they've been profiting off of the misery of Syrians and they've obstructed, they've played a key part in obstructing a resolution of the conflict.

Today we're also, a number of our designations, **we are harmonizing our sanctions program with the sanctions that our European Union partners have already issued, so we're closing the gap between US sanctions and the EU sanctions in many ways, and that's a key objective of ours and it's one that I know our EU partners share.** So to recap, in just over 100 days since the launch of the Caesar Act

implementation, the US government has now sanctioned 75 of Bashar al Assad's closest financiers, military leaders and senior government officials. And I want to say that in the coming months, we will continue this path, we plan to impose additional sanctions on individuals and businesses that support the Assad regime and that obstruct a peaceful political resolution of the Syrian conflict. Our sanctions are aimed at promoting accountability for the behavior of the Assad regime in its war against the Syrian people. I'll stop there.

Raghida Dergham: Yeah, Joel Rayburn I have a question for you. So, all the sanctions that under Caesar Act that you are planning to continue or have been implemented already, they're all on Syrian nationalities, not about others who work with the Syrian regime or whether they're working in Syria and there talk that Lebanese personalities will be under further sanctions in the future. So the Caesar Act is now confined, limited only to the Syrian nationalities?

Joel Rayburn: Oh no not at all. In fact our sanctions experts teams, you know our sanctions experts are constantly compiling the dossiers on those who are facilitating or helping to enable the Assad regime and help it to generate resources. And it's not just Syrians that are on that list of people of interest and businesses of interest and I'd also note that of the 75 designations that we've done so far, there are a number of them who have operations or interests outside of Syria. I would say that we've what we've done so far is to focus on sanctioning and making toxic if you will the core of the Assad regime and its enablers but we certainly have...

Raghida Dergham: Syrian enablers not others, not Russians, not Iranian, not Hezbollah, just Syria enablers right?

Joel Rayburn: Not so far, but there are some on the list.

James Jeffrey: Raghida, if I may jump in. **We have full authority in every intention. If you wherever you are in the world are supporting this criminal regime, we're coming after you. Just stand by, we'll get to you the problem is there is such a rich target list of Syrian officials who have done so much to deserve sanctions that we're still working our way through them but people need to be patient, we're going to take you down sooner or later.**

Joel Rayburn: Yeah.

Raghida Dergham: One last thing for Joel Raymond before I go to Nibras El Fadel. The impression here is that the US - and you James Jeffrey as well, I mean it's not only to Joel - have you decided to hold off sanctions similar to those on Ali Hassan Khalil and Youssef Fenianos or other Lebanese personalities. It's said that there was French pressure on the us administration to do so. Is this correct or not?

Joel Rayburn: No and the United States, I mean, we've made very clear that, **whether it's in Syria whether it's in Lebanon or elsewhere, we have a charge from the**

leaders of the administration, we have a charge from congress to implement our sanctions authorities and we're on a path to do that. We're not under any pressure from any from any quarter to hold off on doing that. In fact there's a there's broad consensus, I would say, in the international community that the enablers of the Assad regime that the enablers of Lebanese Hezbollah and its terrorist activities, that they need to be cracked down and that's what we're doing.

Raghida Dergham: I'm sorry your voice went off at the end. That they'll what? The enablers will what?

Joel Rayburn: That the enablers of the Assad regime and the enablers of Lebanese Hezbollah for example and its terrorist activities, that there's broad consensus in the international community that these need to be stopped, so we don't we don't feel ourselves under pressure from any quarter to stop doing what we're doing.

Raghida Dergham: Okay so you're not under pressure and there will be, you're saying, more sanctions on personalities of the level of what I mentioned Ali Hassan Khalil and Youssef Fenianos?

Joel Rayburn: It's certainly possible, yes. I'll say, there's nothing holding us back from that.

Raghida Dergham: But then why it's not happening? Something is holding you back.

Joel Rayburn: Well these things have a process, these things have, you know, there's a timeline. I know, from the outside of the machinery, it may look like we can snap our fingers and sanction whomever we want, but this, you know, we have a legal process that we go through.

Raghida Dergham: All right, okay.

Joel Rayburn: Many times, if people think there's a delay or something like it, it's just a matter of that you know we have a step-by-step process that we that we go through and you're just silence while that works.

Raghida Dergham: Yeah just before, I got to go to Nibras right now, but what happened, before I forget this point, what happened to the FBI investigation after the explosion in the Beirut airport I think there was an FBI team that came here. Have they finished their investigation? Is there is there any results and is there going to be any action, any follow-up? Have you shared it with the government of Lebanon, Joel?

Joel Rayburn: So there's a lot of this that I can't comment upon, you know, because I mean actually it's an investigation that's ongoing and so I don't want to, I don't want to bridges that investigate, I do not want to do anything to take that investigation but **the FBI has done its field work and it's continuing to analyze the results of its field**

work so they're still working very hard on that situation. So the answer is no, the investigation has not been closed the work the work is continuing in earnest.

Raghida Dergham: Okay thank you very much Joel Rayburn. Nibras Al Fadel four minutes to you and then we'll engage in other questions that are with the regional players in Syria and in Lebanon and in Iraq and the ISIS element but please Nibras Al Fadel, you've been very patient, four minutes to you please go ahead.

Nibras Al Fadel: Thank you very much. I'm really honored to be a part of this distinguished panel. I'd like to stress that I'm speaking my personal name not on behalf of any public or private entity I belong to. And I really thank you for inviting me, it's not only a courtesy, but it's genuine because usually when there is international discussions about Syria, there is no Syrian invited. So you are making here a very disruptive and innovative initiative.

If you can also allow me to maybe introduce in a different approach. We have discussed with the colleagues in this panel right away the Syrian case. I would like to take a different approach, a top-down approach. **If you can allow me and bear with me a little bit to present an overall picture of the region. We are in a region that has been in a turmoil for about more than ten years and these events, riots, deception, crisis, civil wars, many countries in the region, they were driven by structural problems in this region. And these events they did not come as a surprise. We always knew that the region is sitting on a time bomb.** If you go back to the report of the World Bank, of the IMF in the year 2005 – 2006, they all said that this region is going into a war, if we don't do anything about it. And take just one example, you know every year the region put on the markets dozens of millions of new young people looking for jobs and there is not enough jobs for everybody. There is a gap between the level of development, and the population, and the workforce. This by itself is a huge a huge problem that led to the turmoil that we have been seeing in the past ten years. Now why I'm saying this - because ten years later, none of these structural problems have been resolved. So the first point I want to make is that this region for years to come will be, is bound to be in an unstable mode, it's bound to be a source of instability, not only for the region itself but also for the for the rest of the of the world. Now if I take even one more step back and I look at the global environment, this comes at a time where the world is busy with dealing with the two major crisis, one is a big threat – a huge threat – on health, and the other is a major crisis – a major financial crisis.

Raghida Dergham: Yeah, Nibras, you're going to have one more minute left out of the four minutes, please if you want to zero in on what you want to say. You've got one minute left.

Nibras El Fadel: Okay so, **the result of this global situation is that the countries will give more priorities to their internal problems rather than to external problems. So it's going to be in the years to come much more difficult to engage countries in the world to help come and solve regional problems. Multilateralism will be under a very big stress.** In addition, you know the impact of the global financial

crisis will come to fuel and amplify the structural problem of the region and therefore will make the level of instability even bigger than before. So that's just to set up the overall framework. I just want to add one more thing...

Raghida Dergham: Yeah quickly please Nibras El Fadel.

Nibras El Fadel: ...And this will make the link to our to the focus of our session which is really Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.

Raghida Dergham: And the whole middle east and Russia and the Turks and the American...

Nibras El Fadel: My last point in this introduction is that it's very interesting for me to notice that these three countries – Lebanon, Syria and Iraq – for the past 10 years, they have known very different, they have taken very different paths, there was a very different frame of evidence in each country, but **today these three countries they are at a point of history which is exactly the same, and in all of these three countries everything needs to be rebuilt again – socially, economically, politically, etc. And one other common feature of these three countries is that you have one next to the other and the three of them are today in a situation of failed states.**

Raghida Dergham: 'Failed state', James Jeffrey, in Iraq where the US has played a big role, where the US has been present in militarily and is continues to be. Syria where also apparently some consider that what the US operationally that, what the US did in Syria, is a success story. In Lebanon, the jury is still out. But three failed states, James Jeffrey can you address this point and with the US, some sort of role there? And not as responsible for the failed state but as a contributor?

James Jeffrey: Thank you. First of all Syria is beyond a failed state, it's hard unless you look at Rwanda or Bosnia at its very worst to find a situation as bad as that. I would say in both Lebanon that you know of course far better than I, and in Iraq, we have states that are risking failure. What is common in all of them? What is the point that Nibras is making? I go back over 15 years to an audience with the King of Jordan in Oman where he told me the Shia crescent – watch this. **What you have is Iran, and it isn't a religious thing, it is a power political hegemonic drive by Iran to expand its influence in the region. Unfortunately, it's three favorite target states – we'll leave Yemen and Afghanistan out – are Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.** Obviously, the whole region, as Nibras pointed out, beginning with and I think the core document is the UNDP's 2002 report in the Arab world.

Obviously, the region has problems, but the region is working out its problems in most places from Egypt to Jordan, to the Gulf, to Tunisia, to Morocco. There are ups and downs. What makes these three countries different, along with Yemen? Iran. This is a regional struggle. The charm of the Trump administration with its national security strategy is not to focus on the manifestations of problems, trafficking in people and chemical weapons here, and a plutonium plant and terrorists popping up, but rather

what's behind that, why can't these societies and states deal with those problems? The answer is because they're being driven, either directly or indirectly by Iran. **Iran didn't create ISIS, but ISIS, which its precursor Al Qaeda in Iraq we were dealing with it in 2012, it was a handful of people under Al-Baghdadi in West Mosul, it was Iran's actions through its agents Maliki and Assad that created that movement that dominated nine million people in an area as big as England within two years. That's the problem we have.**

Raghida Dergham: Is Iran winning over the US in terms of its strategy in Iraq, or in Lebanon, or in Syria?

James Jeffrey: Absolutely not. In Lebanon, I'll leave that to my colleague Joel because by the way we organize ourselves I don't do Lebanon, I do Syria and the ISIS hats and Iraq and defeat ISIS in Iraq. We see considerable pushback by the Hawza in Najaf under Ayatollah Al-Sistani even, although he's no friend of ours, he moved to Al-[inaudible] against Iran in the Shia community, in the Sunni community, in the Kurdish area, in the north and in the current government under [inaudible] we see a lot of pushback. It's a struggle because Iran and its militias are deeply embedded in that area. So, we are pressing the government with the threat of reducing our presence in the embassy to take more action. We are hopeful that that will happen. No it's not a failed state, but we have got to work to ensure it won't become one.

Raghida Dergham: Is it true, James Jeffrey, that US military presence in the region now is much larger than it was than at the beginning of the Trump administration. Well go ahead, address that and then I have the other question, go ahead.

James Jeffrey: No. First of all, there has been a major withdrawal from Afghanistan with it soon being down to just a few thousand troops from close to twenty thousand. We had in Iraq and in Syria well over ten thousand troops fighting ISIS at the beginning of this administration. The president actually reinforced those forces, gave them new authorities, lifted limits on them, which is why they were so effective, but now as we announce we will be down to 3 000 troops in Iraq very soon and the same handful of troops, under 1000, in Syria. In the rest of the region, the numbers are about the same, Gulf, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt.

Raghida Dergham: So how does one expect that you can sort of win over in this battle with Iran over places as Syria as Iraq with such a small number of troops when they are absolutely mobilized?

James Jeffrey: Well first of all, the number of troops is about probably 60-70 000 counting a naval contingent, so it is not small. Secondly, it is the idea of doing this by, with, and through. **We defeated ISIS not with American infantry divisions, but with the Iraqi army, with Iraqi local police with the counterterrorism force with the Peshmerga, with the Syrian defense forces in northeast Syria. We're using partners, that's what we're doing through the region. We're using our partners in**

the fight against terror, we're using partners to stand up against Iran, and that's the best way forward that's what the American people will support.

Raghida Dergham: So also is it true again, people are saying here that 'never mind this apparent confrontation between the United States, between the Trump administration and Iran, a deal is in the making in the background'. Please address that, well.

James Jeffrey: Well gee, **we have until the election, we have roughly a month and so we're four years minus a month in the Trump administration, if a deal is coming, it has very little chance. The Trump administration has been clear it has multiplied by many times our pressure against Iran, this was my biggest complaint against the Obama administration, I went on record much when I was outside of government on that. This administration is taking the Iranian threat seriously and look at the results, we see this not just in what's happening in Syria where we have essentially affected a countrywide ceasefire. Assad's not taking any more territory, he's going to have to deal sooner or later. In Iraq, we're pushing back we push back against Qasem Soleimani, we push back against the people attacking us. We will continue doing so, we're working to help the people in Lebanon and throughout the region we believe that we are bringing together alliances, we're integrating to the best we can Turkey, which is a difficult and important partner, Israel, which is a special role in the middle east with the gulf states and others. You see this every day.**

Raghida Dergham: Speaking of Israel, Joel Rayburn, the Prime Minister of Israel, Netanyahu, in his speech in front of the United Nations actually scared the living light out of the Lebanese because he's speaking about another explosion expected in an area in the Beirut neighborhood of Janah. The last time he spoke about such a potential explosion, he spoke of the port of Beirut, does that mean that the Israelis are up to something? Are they going to target these facilities that they're saying – they're claiming – that Hezbollah is hiding weapons and having secret arms depot? Joel Rayburn.

Joel Rayburn: Well I can't speak for Prime Minister Netanyahu, but I, as an observer of it, no I think what he is saying is something that we on the US side have been saying, both publicly and privately for years now, which is that **Hezbollah by its activities, outside and inside Lebanon is recklessly putting the Lebanese people at risk, and doing it without their knowledge, doing it without their input. Hezbollah has basically engaged as a full party in a regional conflict, and then has brought the conflict back home to Lebanon in a way that we all know the Lebanese people do not want, they wouldn't support, if they had the chance.** In fact, when they go out in the street I think the Lebanese people make themselves very vocally heard about that, about their wish not to get drawn up into the regional conflict that Hezbollah is trying to bring them into.

Raghida Dergham: Yeah but also Joel there's a part of the Lebanese people who say that it is that pressure by the United States on Hezbollah that is driving them against the

world, that is painting them in a corner and that Hezbollah is going to revenge, locally and against the Lebanese. Therefore, they claim that it is the American maximum pressure policy that is leading to the collapse of Lebanon and they say – I am conveying to you a point of view – that they're afraid of a civil war, they're just saying that, you know, Hezbollah would probably come in with their weapons and they have no weapons, they've known civil war, they're scared of a civil war and they're also saying finally that don't trust the Americans, that they'll support you now and the legacy of betrayal follows them all the time. Joel?

Joel Rayburn: Well I think the lesson of the last few years is that you can't just ignore Hezbollah's activities which are constantly aggressive, they're constantly seeking to control as much of Lebanon as they can. You can't just ignore that and hope that Hezbollah will, you know, in its beneficence just keep things quiet. Hezbollah doesn't keep things quiet, they're a foreign legion for the Iranian regime and the IRGC force, they put themselves in the service of Qasem Soleimani and they ranged all around the region. If ten years ago, if we had said things like you know Hezbollah will be helping the Iranians fire ballistic missiles against Riyadh from Yemen, what possible interest do Lebanese have in having Lebanese Hezbollah and Yemen? If I'd said to you, Raghida, ten years ago, 'hey you know, ten years from now, just a few years from now, Hezbollah will be invading Aleppo' you would have looked at me like I was a lunatic. That that is what Hezbollah has been doing.

Raghida Dergham: Right but if the Lebanese stand up, they're saying – some of the Lebanese, not all – if they stand up to Hezbollah, they risk a civil war and they don't trust you as the US to come to their aid.

Joel Rayburn: I think actually the message that we've been sending in Beirut, both publicly and privately, I mean privately for a long time but publicly recently, it is not that outsiders want to see the Lebanese people go into another civil war, a civil war for example against Hezbollah, I think the thing that we've been saying is 'don't help Hezbollah', it's one thing to, let's say, to stay inactive, it's another thing to actively help the adversarial side Hezbollah, what we're finding over and over again, which you will have seen in the in the sanctions we did against Ali Hassan Khalil and Yusuf Fenianos is that you have non-Hezbollah politicians and businessmen, and so on, who are in business with Hezbollah, they're helping to make Hezbollah stronger. That's the thing that the United States, the message from the United States now is that that's not acceptable. And to be honest with you, the Lebanese people have already been saying that for a long time, the Lebanese people know exactly what's going on in Lebanon.

Raghida Dergham: I'm going to expand this when I go to Nibras, I'm going to be talking about Russia, whether it's one in Syria, and it pocketed Syria, and what does that mean, and I'm going to go to Nibras first on that one. But I also want to point out to you, and it's been said by Hezbollah that really, they're turning eastwards, and China is the main player now in Lebanon, in particular. So I want to do that and that the China element, while China would welcome to come to put a foothold in Lebanon, right on the Mediterranean, in the ports, etc. Why wouldn't the US consider that a threat to its

interest? This is a question to all three of you, but I want to start out and please do come back to me on the China thing, but I want to start with Russia, and I want to go to Nibras El Fadel, ask Nibras, do you think Russia has now won Syria, and it's good for Syrians, this is what they want? Or do you think the jury is still out, and unfortunately, the war is to continue in Syria? Nibras El Fadel.

Nibras El Fadel: I think first of all, that the relations between Syria and Russia are very very old and the presence of Russia in Syria has taken many forms over the past, you know, 40 years. I think, you know, **in the Syrian case, the equation is to put it simply, like this: you cannot have a ceasefire in Syria without Turkey, you cannot have a political transition without Russia, and you cannot have a reconstruction without the United States. So that's the equation, and that's why the only way forward for Syria is that these three countries come together and agree on a road map and on a plan, and just get it executed. I think the most important characteristics of Syria today is that Syria has been for a long time a major player in the region, but Syria for the past 10 years, it switched from a player to a playground.** There are five armies, Syria is disintegrated dislocated into many zones. On each zone there is a dominant player, whether it's regional or international, so that's the situation where we are in. But again...

Raghida Dergham: But you didn't mention Iran, I noticed that you said Russia, plus Turkey, plus the US, but without Iran although it is on the ground in Syria, please Nibras El Fadel, address why did you do that.

Nibras El Fadel: I meant to only mention these three countries because I put Iran on a different basket. **The problem with Iran is not Syria, the problem with Iran is regional about the Islamic Republic who has a certain view of the world and who has represented a threat to its neighbors and who is using non-state entities to destabilize other countries in the region. That's the problem with Iran and it's dealt with on a regional basis.** But in the Syrian case, despite the very important presence of Iran at very at all levels in Syria, I think that the bulk of the Syrian equation sits in between these three countries, the United States, Russia, and Turkey.

Raghida Dergham: You know Nibras El Fadel, if you take a look at what's happening between Russia, and Turkey, and you know better than me, but they're really not doing that well, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, they really don't love each other that much and they have been having serious problems and I think, when James Jeffrey will come in he will explain to us that Kurdish element, not only the Turkish element, but you know how do you expect that that is going to be the way out when you're talking about two players who don't trust each other? You know Idlib is still out there, we don't know what's happening, so how to explain and why would you exclude Iran although it is a player on the ground, together with the government, with the regime of Bashar al-Assad?

Nibras El Fadel: I think, you know, first of all we are here not in an aesthetic situation, we are in a dynamic situation. Things are changing day to day, month to month, etc. We

have seen intersection of interests in the Syrian case between the players, on the ground, and these intersections of interest generate agreement and a modus operandi between countries who are not necessarily the friendliest countries in the world. **There is intersection of interests between Turkey and Russia in the northern part of Syria and we have seen a manifestation of this in a number of agreements recently. We have seen also the fact that, you know, the Iranian and Russia presence in the southern part of Syria is generating some kind of competition, and some kind even of rivalry so this is what is happening. But it's important to really see the dynamic of the situation on the ground, to see the specific role that each player is having on the ground, and then to try to converge to a common path.**

Raghida Dergham: Okay thank you very much. James Jeffrey, rivalry between Russia and Iran or cooperation? There are allies on the ground, you know, operationally there are allies in Syria. So rivalry, is this sort of organized dance, preconceived dance, or is it true that there is rivalry? And on the fifth anniversary of Russian intervention, or Russian probably success story from their point of view in Syria, is Russia, did it win Syria? I mean we know what happened diplomatically all over the United Nations, together Russia and **C**hina were the supporters or the protectors rather of any accountability against the region, against the Syrian government. Can you address that on the fifth anniversary on all points, if you don't mind James Jeffrey?

James Jeffrey: Thank you, because next to the Iranian or Shia Crescent principle, I think this is the other really new and big thing in the region that challenges our – and most regional countries – quest for stability. In contrast to Russia's activities in Georgia, Crimea, Chechnya, eastern Ukraine, Syria is not in its near abroad, it was not acting defensively really when it went into Syria in a big way in 2015. Rather, what it was doing was protecting its sunk costs, a 30-year relationship with the Syrian state and particularly the Assad family, and its base structure there. But very quickly, because the Obama administration was particularly feckless, you remember the President's words 'Russia will be getting into a quagmire', and his own people in their memoirs who have repeatedly said they realize this was their biggest mistake in that administration, of not responding in an adequate way Russia soaring new opportunity. And that gets to your question with Iran. Friction with Iran is both a reality, but it is a function of the system Russia wants. **Russia cannot, unlike Iran, have ambitions to set up a regional security system that will replace the one that we, and our Arab, Turkish, Israeli and other friends have been running in this region since the 1970s. Rather, what Russia can do is drag us all back to the 19th century where the regional great powers that is Russia, the United States, Iran, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, maybe on the margins the European Union, dictate to everybody else what things will happen.** And just like in the 19th century, between the Ottomans the Imperial Russians, the Prussians, French and British, the Austrians, these will all form alliances and bang up against each other in their border areas. That's what Russia is trying to do, but they have not won because they have not succeeded. To succeed, what they have to do is to show that their security model, their pacification of Syria, like their pacification of Bulgaria in 1876 seizing it from the Ottoman empire that that will work and serve as a

model, and they have cited this Vitaly Naumkin in his writings, about a Gulf security arrangement that Russia would lead. **What's happened in Syria is an example of the Russian approach to security, and nobody in the region is buying it because Syria actually now is a quagmire and we are going to ensure that it stays that way until we get a political process that will save the Syrian people and provide security to Syria's neighbors and to the region.**

Raghida Dergham: Very interesting, and you don't call that even a regime change. I don't know whether this is a bigger regime change. Tell me about China.

James Jeffrey: Okay China very quickly. China is correctly the Trump administration's biggest concern. China can threaten all of Eurasia and thus the globe in a way that nobody else can, thus we take it very seriously. But in the middle east, China has no military presence and its economic intrusiveness is quite limited so far, it also needs, unlike Russia, China needs stability because it needs low oil prices. Russia doesn't necessarily because high oil prices, which is a product of instability in the region, is actually good for Russia. So there's a difference, but generally...

Raghida Dergham: ... I meant, if you permit me, I was talking, I had in mind the Chinese – Iranian pact, for example. That's a very new development, go ahead.

James Jeffrey: What China sees is opportunities to reinforce, in the middle east or any place else, the anti-American camp. But that's just a knee-jerk reaction, it's why China always votes with Russia in the United Nations on Syrian issues, but we see no particular juice or interest or deep engagement in Syria, in Lebanon, or in Iraq other than in the oil fields by China, and the oil fields obviously they need the oil.

Raghida Dergham: Nibras El Fadel, are you trying to comment on this issue of China, because I want to, we're going to have after this round, I'm going to give you each two minutes. And James Jeffrey try to address the issue of ISIS in the gulf when I give you the, you know, closing remarks, because I want to give Nibras the chance to respond, to comment, on something you said. Go ahead Nibras El Fadel.

Nibras El Fadel: Yeah I want to make first a comment on China. I mean obviously, you know, China brought us back to a bipolar world after 30 years of where the United States has enjoyed the position of the only superpower, but I think there is an important feature of China's strategy of international expansion that is very important. First, it's a real strategy, it's a long-term strategy. They do it in a very methodical way, and they have very strict criteria to determine their targets. Iran could fit the criteria of China as a target country. China's rationale for international expansion is to buy, it's not to sell, just to put it simply. As opposed to the US approach for international development, which is an approach to expand, to sell, as opposed to...

Raghida Dergham: So is China active in Syria?

Nibras El Fadel: As of today, we don't know whether this China – Iran deal is real, or whether it will have any chance of becoming really implemented. China is very dependent on the oil of the Gulf countries, and the Gulf countries will do something to prevent the China – Iran deal from taking place. And I think that, in an objective way, neither Syria, nor Lebanon are compliant with the criteria that China has as place of interest.

Raghida Dergham: Thank you, Joel Rayburn, will the Gulf countries really be able to prevent China of going on with its pact, a really expansive pact with Iran, because they just have good economic relations? Or is China going to say, 'listen I've got a good deal here, I've got a foothold in this, into this region and the Iranians are offering me that ports, and they're giving me even the port of Lebanon, why wouldn't I grab it?' especially if that the case continues in as far as being continued tense relations with the United States, Joel Rayburn?

Joel Rayburn: Well that question outruns my expertise Raghida. What I can't say is that, I would say, in my lane of the Levant countries that I don't see any realistic path for the Levant countries to partner with China. I mean the last thing, for example, Lebanon needs is to enter into a Chinese debt trap, and I to be honest with you, it seems to me the Chinese mode around the world is to go to places where there's a lot of wealth to be had, that the Chinese can confiscate in exchange for some kickbacks to the local political class. So the kick max might be attractive to the local political class in Lebanon, but I don't think there's anything there for the Chinese to get. Raghida, I you'd allow me, I could do my two minutes in closing now.

Raghida Dergham: Yes, please do.

Joel Rayburn: I'd like to do that by using it as a jumping off point something that Nibras said, which is that for decades, Syria was a player in the region and now it finds itself as a playground. I think another way to say that is that Bashar al-Assad and his regime have surrendered Syria's sovereignty. **They have traded away Syria's sovereignty in exchange for some tactical agreements that allow them to hold on to the chair in the presidential palace and that's it. But they've lost the country, they've given the country away. And my question, the mystery for me is why the loyalists of the Syrian government tolerate that?**

Why they continue to tolerate that? For almost 10 years now the supporters of Bashar al-Assad's government have lost their sons, literally they've lost their sons, and at the end of that sacrifice, they find other regional powers negotiating over Syrian land. I'd also note that **Assad's father used to lay down the rules for Hezbollah in the old days, Hezbollah could not take a single step in Lebanon or outside Lebanon without Hafez al-Assad's permission. But now Nasrallah dictates to Bashar al-Assad and Hezbollah does whatever it wants and goes wherever it wants inside Syria and Assad says nothing.** I also wonder for the Syrian government loyalists, why is Bashar al-Assad letting the Iranian regime import thousands of Shia militant fighters to Syria and then giving them Syrian citizenship, Jinsiyya cards? Why is Assad helping

the Iranian regime to colonize Syria? And why is the Assad regime allowing the Iranian regime to come and tell Syrians that they need to become followers of Walayat Al Fakhir? Could you imagine such a thing in Syrian society 10 years ago? The simple fact is Iran should not be controlling Syria and I don't think Syrians on any side, whether it's the government or those who oppose the government, should be supporting that.

In our view, Syrians all have a shared interest in implementing 2254 because it's the only pathway, not just in the conflict Raghida, it's the only pathway to restore Syria's sovereignty.

Raghida Dergham: Joel Rayburn, thank you so very much. Stay with us because we're going to be, I'm going to take advantage of...I'm going to say to you something please, in case the electricity goes off – we are in Lebanon – stay with me, do not move, it will come back in a minute and then I'll say goodbye because I have to announce the next e-Policy Circle. So now I'm down to one and a half minutes for each person, Nibras take one and a half minutes please and make use of it because I'm going to have to be very strict on time. Please go Nibras El Fadel.

Nibras El Fadel: I'm going to try to be very quick and I'm going to try to cover, you know, a number of different points. First one and a half minutes **Syria is key to the stability of the region. There will be no stability in Syria unless we engage into a credible, political transition; there will be no stability in Syria, unless we have prosperity, development and the right for every Syrian to have a decent and dignified life.** I want to make a comment about terrorism, extremism and Daesh. The fight against Daesh is absolutely vital, but to make a parallel between COVID and Daesh, Daesh members are not the virus, Daesh members are people who are contaminated by the virus. The real virus is Daesh ideology. If you do not address Daesh ideology, there will be many Daeshis you know in the years ahead, and that's a very very important that should be integrated into the US strategy in the region. One last point, very important, is the way out for Syria. **I think we talked about the role of different players on the ground, but I think we are at a point in history where Syrians need to take ownership of the destiny of their country.** I think this famous silent majority, which is squeezed between two camps, neither of them is really representative enough of the Syrian people. The silent majority, today is the time for it to speak out and to take ownership of the destiny of Syria.

Raghida Dergham: Thank you very much Nibras El Fadel. One and a half minutes to you, James Jeffrey, please.

James Jeffrey: First of all, I agree with everything Nibras said. Let me tackle ISIS in the Gulf and throughout the region. Nibras is right, this is a philosophy that we have to get to the bottom of and that's very difficult. But it's a tough region, we have a lot of problems like ISIS that the countries of the region and the international community the US, Europe, the UN system are able to chip away at and make progress. What has turned everything topsy-turvy is the Iranian intervention in the region supported by Russia. These two countries have nothing to offer the region, where have they sunk

their roots the deepest? Libya, Syria, Yemen. Is that a model for anybody else in the region? And they're trying to drag down Lebanon and Iraq as well. They cannot build up, they can only tear down. They have to be stopped by international action, Europeans, the Arab world, other partners from Pakistan to Turkey, to Israel, the UN system, and people on the ground, be it our partners against ISIS, the SDF in northeast Syria, be it the Syrian opposition, be it those people throughout the region who stand up for dignity, for peace and for reconciliation. That's what my country is doing, that's what my country is working with all of our partners to achieve. Thank you very much for having us today.

Nibras El Fadel: I think the light went off in Lebanon because Raghida's image is frozen.

Joel Rayburn: Yeah she did warn us about that so...

James Jeffrey: Okay, I have got to run, but hey, great great great great channel

Raghida Dergham: Wait, wait wait wait, no you're not are you still on, please stay on stay on, Ambassador James Jeffrey, because I can't let you off the hook, you seem to be saying as if Turkey and Israel are innocent. Turkey is not innocent in Syria or in Libya, and Israel is not innocent in other places throughout the middle east, I am sure you don't mean to just give them a clean pass, right?

James Jeffrey: I give no one, including the United States, a clean pass. But it's not productive, it's not creative to try to list one, two, three, four bad things, one, two, three, four good things. Any country makes mistakes, any country in pursuing its own interests clashes with other countries' interests. That's normal, and we can deal with normal, not well sometimes we make mistakes, but we deal with it. It's when we have overwhelming threats to the region that then generate countervailing threats, ISIS is largely a countervailing threat to Iran's march through the levant that we are faced with very very big [inaudible – problem?]

Raghida Dergham: I apologize for all these technical problems because of the electricity situation, it really has been an amazing panel and I'm sorry that I'm always having to suffer with the electricity break down that interrupts a fabulous session. Apologies to all but let me bare with me while I announce who's going to be with me next week which is going to be e-Policy Circle 17 of Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi, and it is really an honor to have with Their Excellencies Reem Al Hashimi, she is UAE's Minister of State for International Cooperation and Managing Director for Dubai World Expo2020; we have Shivshankar Menon, Former National Security Adviser of India, former Foreign Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, former Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan, and Sri Lanka and former Indian Ambassador to China and Israel; we have Dr. Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, former Director of policy planning for the Department of State and we have Richard Grenell, Former Director of National Intelligence, former ambassador to Germany and envoy to Kosovo.

This is next Wednesday, always meet us at the same time and I thank you everyone for joining me. It's a really a learning experience. Have a wonderful day and goodbye everyone!