



## Interview with former US Ambassador to Syria Robert S. Ford

*By Seth J. Frantzman, executive director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis*

- Ambassador Robert S. Ford is a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington and Kissinger senior fellow at Yale's Jackson Institute for Global Affairs. Ford retired from the US Foreign Service in 2014 after serving as the US Ambassador to Syria from 2011 to 2014. He had a 30-year career with the Peace Corps and the US Department of State.

**SF: It's great to speak to you today, for many of us who remember when the rebellion broke out in 2011 you were an inspirational voice.**

RF: Back then these poor people were in the [Syrian] Intifada uprising, it was hard not to condemn the Syrian government for its repression, it was black and white.

**SF: In a piece at [MEI on July 9, 2018](#) you mentioned Tanf and the idea that the US might suggest withdrawing the garrison there in relation to some sort of agreement of Iran withdrawing forces from Syria as well. Now, with the recent developments in southern Syria, including the recent attack on Suwayda, and the Helsinki meeting, can you discuss what might come of Tanf?**

RF: I have two thoughts on it. It's important because it is a road junction, between Iraq, Jordan and Syria. It is located out where those countries come together. I personally think the Americans won't be able to change anything. I think this argument that they need to stay there to block an Iranian land bridge is

just silly for two reasons. [First], the Iranians don't need a land bridge. They have been doing just fine flying stuff in for a long time and they have done that for many years. The Iranian forces in Syria that are upsetting to the Israelis or US government, they came in by air from Tehran.

The second point is there are other roads the Iranians can use from Albukamal and then across to Deir ez Zor. You don't have to go through Tanf. So Personally I think it's overrated and the US administration's thinking they can trade withdrawing American soldiers on the ground in Tanf for concessions on Iranian forces withdrawing is going to prove mistaken.

I'll be frank, when I raised this growing Iranian presence in Syria in 2013 with senior officials in the Obama administration and in particular at the US State Department, [I said] if we are serious we have to find ways to shut down the Iranian air bridge between Tehran and Damascus. I said we could exercise pressure on Iraq to stop giving over-flight clearance or facilitate Syrian rebels to hit Damascus airport with stand-off weapons such as mortars or rockets. I said otherwise Iran will keep building up through Damascus and that is an escalation. I said if we are serious about Iran we have to look at that, and the Obama administration people shrugged and they didn't want to deal with it.

**SF: With the defeat of the rebels in Dara'a and Quneitra, do you think that the Syrian civil war and the rebellion is basically at an end insofar as large states (the US, Turkey, Russia, Iran etc) now play the major role in the east and north?**

RF: I think the Syrian war is changing quite a bit. The violence is localized now because the government holds more territory. In places where there was fighting before; such as Homs, Damascus, the Rif Damashq and [the south](#) around Dara'a, the Syrian government has retaken them and they are quiet. I don't think it's about a growing role of foreigners. The government has a lot of agency. I don't think the Russians can control everything the Syrian government does or Iran can. They have influence. They have a lot of influence, but do they have perfect control, I don't think so. I noticed Syrian officials got angry when Ali Akbar Velayati [former Iranian foreign minister and special envoy for Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei] took credit for saving the government and the Syrian government official said Velayati is speaking out of place. He said, "we got help from Iran but it wasn't them who saved us, it was the Syrian government that saved itself." And the Syrian government has ignored or subverted Russian efforts to get humanitarian aid to places release political prisoners or receive

delegations about the constitution or refused to write a new constitution with Russians; I don't think the Russians control everything Damascus does.

On the other side Turkey has struggled to control what the opposition groups do in northern Syria with mixed success.

The Americans hardly control the SDF. They had to shut down the offensive against ISIS and the anti-ISIS campaign was delayed [due to Turkey's Afrin offensive in January 2018], so it would be a misreading of the Syrian conflict as solely a proxy conflict among foreign states. Unquestionably foreign states play a role and there is an element of a proxy role but there are other areas where Syrians have agency.

For instance, the Israelis had been providing quietly non-lethal help to the rebel groups near the Golan but don't control them.

**SF: So what comes next?**

RF: I think the key next part of the Syrian conflict is: how does the Syrian government work to eject Turkish and American forces in northern and eastern Syria? I have no doubt they are going to try. I don't know how they are going to do it exactly. I don't know what the Russian role is going to be. For example I cannot imagine that Russia is going to reject Assad's effort to put pressure on the Turks in Idlib. The Russian policy is based on the [sovereignty](#) of the Syrian state, for better or worse, and the rejection of western countries, including Turkey, and the West imposing change via force of arms, through intervention or helping rebels. The Moscow policy is: "We will stop the West in Damascus so we don't have to fight the west in Moscow later." So the Russians may try to broker something but the Syrian government may not go along, [it may choose to oppose Turkey's role in northern Syria via] non-traditional means, shoot and scoot rocket attacks and start pricking and poking and I don't think the Russians will take any measures against that. Regarding the Americans east of the Euphrates the Russians say the same thing regarding Syrian state sovereignty in the long term.

**SF: The long term could be a while?**

RF: 5 years. 10 years.

**SF: Given Israel's demands that Iran leave Syria and US concerns about Iran's role in Syria, do you think Washington can find a way to reduce the Iranian role in Syria?**

RF: The Iranians have said they are not going to leave. Velayeti [has said](#) that. I know the Israelis are unhappy but I don't think the Israeli Air Force can eject Iranian forces entirely. The Iranians are so deeply embedded in security force infrastructure, in the command structures including Iraqi militia commanders in Syria. We saw that in the southwest. My guess is that if the Israelis continue airstrikes, what the Iranians will do is disperse units to smaller and smaller formations making it harder for Israelis to locate and strike them.

The one time I thought the Israelis were serious is when they hit a logistics facility at Damascus airport, but it has been rebuilt on social media I saw. Even if you take out Damascus airport there are a dozen of airfields, and if you hit those then they will trickle things in via Albukamal. It's not something an air force is going to be able to accomplish. The odds of the Israelis launching aground invasion is small. The memory of the Lebanon war is present.



**SF: Right. So what is the implication of that reality?**

RF: So what might happen, is the Russians could figure out where the Iranian and Israeli red lines are and figure out where the Israelis might be satisfied by deployments by Iran that don't overstep red lines of Israel and that means they stay well back from the Golan. But they [the Iranians] aren't going to stop shipping to Hezbollah.

I met Israeli officials in Jerusalem in 2012 and I asked if they were concerned about the increasing conflict and they told me the Israeli Air Force could handle any threat on the Golan. On one level it can but it's a different mission to ask them to prevent Iranians bringing men and material from eastern to central Syria.

**SF: And at some point you have Russian air defense intervening?**

RF: I talked to them [Russia] and they aren't overjoyed by Iranian influence in Syria but their red line is if the strikes were so severe it began to threaten the slow consolidation of stability Assad is achieving. So a strike here and there is one thing but if it is so hard and turns the military balance against Assad that is too much.

**SF: What do you see going forward for the US role in eastern Syria, will it be maintained in the face of Russian or Iranian pressure? And could it be part of the rolling back of Iran in the region that the administration has talked to.**

RF: I think there are people who want it to be [against Iran]. Some are telling US President Donald Trump to leave forces there to counter Iran, but I don't think they are going to. I travel a lot in the US and give talks and I have yet to find an audience in the US [that supports conflict with Iran in Syria]. When I ask "how many want to fight a war with Iran in eastern Syria," maybe one hand or two go up. There is no public support for a war with casualties in eastern Syria. The US military has been good at avoiding casualties in Syria. They have only had 2 [killed since](#) September 2014; but if that changes and tomorrow there is a car bomb that wipes out 7-8 soldiers there will be questions in Washington and if there are several attacks and 20 to 30 dead in 2 months, people will say "what are we getting into?" There is no US strategy to get Iran out. The US doesn't have tactics. The Israelis have airstrikes and the US doesn't have more than that up its sleeve. The Trump administration is hoping the Russians will get them [Iran] out but the Russians won't get them out.

**SF: This sounds like we know where things are heading?**

RF: The most important thing is to understand that this was a war, and in war the military is exceptionally important. There was this long time mantra in the Obama administration that "there is no military solution" but there was. The mantra only held true if one side's escalation was matched. When the Russians escalated sharply in 2015 and the Obama administration did not respond and actually reduced its support for the opposition and undercut the Turks by working with Kurds against ISIS that flipped the balance. In 2018 that balance has tipped so far to Assad, short of massive military intervention by the US, I don't see how Assad does not gradually and slowly over the long term put

pressure on Turkey and the Americans to compel them too to withdraw. It's not like Assad's army is going to launch a frontal attack on Tanf, but arming local tribes to fight the Americans like they did in Anbar and Ninewa [is what the Syrian regime could do].

**SF: Yes, it seems the regime is already laying plans to return to places, such as in eastern Syria its intelligence apparatus and regime presence in Qamishli and other places?**

RF: The Kurds never asked them to vacate Qamishli. The Syrian intelligence is still there and the airport is open [to fly to Damascus].

Contrast it with Iraq. We were able in Iraq to turn the tribes and stabilize the situation in Iraq but we totally destroyed Saddam's intelligence service. When the US did the Surge they weren't facing a hostile intelligence service or a state organized and thinking strategically, and we didn't face that in Iraq; but in Syria we face it in spades and we face the four secret police services which are alive and well in north and eastern Syria. Jamil Hassan, Ali Mamlouk and there services are operating there. And we didn't have that in Iraq, we controlled the intelligence.

**SF: So it sounds like the regime will return?**

RF: With reduced resources and I don't think its economy will recover. I see the Russians pleading and urging the US to pay for reconstruction. There is no appetite for that. *USA Today* just ran an opinion piece saying "no way." That is one thing in Congress will agree on: No money for Assad's reconstruction. I just met Russians at a Track II event in Berlin and I told them it's not going to happen. The Russians can hold hostage refugee return but I wouldn't be surprised if the US will block the World Bank from funding reconstruction. So the Syrian government for years will have a weak economy and reconstruction will be uneven and the crony families around Assad will enrich themselves through the bits of money that come in. It will be a grim situation for the 16-17 million Syrians left in the country.

**SF: Maybe the EU will fund reconstruction, they've plowed billions into Turkey to keep refugees there? The French recently sent some medical aid.**

RF: I can imagine the Europeans might provide a few hundred million dollars.

The Russians are pushing that. The money needed is in the billions. The Europeans won't come close to that.

**SF: So the Chinese?**

RF: The Chinese don't do much foreign aid. They might do projects, but rebuilding housing for 5 million IDPs?

**SF: We've covered a lot of subjects, is there anything else you see as important to understanding the situation in Syria in the near future?**

RF: I think what's important for the US to think about going forward is not how to fix Syria. If the war isn't over, the trajectory is nevertheless clear. How do you contain whatever future extremist elements develop and there will be some. Just as ISIS is making a comeback in Iraq, groups will make a comeback in Syria. If you view that as a threat, then you have to think about how to contain them inside Syria so they don't leak out into Europe, Israel, North America; and that means working with Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, and especially Turkey.

I think the increasingly bitter dispute between Ankara and Washington is strategically a big mistake when you consider what has happened and the next steps. We want the Turks to close down the border [with Syria] but if we can't have an agreement with Turkey on what the Syrian Kurds' role in the future is, and how we will handle disputes such as a Pastor held in Turkey or a Turkish political figure in Pennsylvania, how will we work with them to shut that border down?

**SF: But Turkey has a problematic record, a kind of janus face, it has flirted with these extremist groups in the past?**

RF: We raised it with the Turks, I spoke to them in 2013 in Ankara and Washington and we told them they were playing with snakes and they didn't listen. The US sometimes thinks it can snap its fingers and others will change but that's not the case.



