

Syrian geopolitics, a debate: Inter-Imperial Feuds and the Lost Revolution in Syria

Saturday 10 October 2015, by [DAHHER Joseph](#), [LOEWENSTEIN Jennifer](#), [TRNN](#) (Date first published: 2 October 2015).

Joseph Daher and Jennifer Loewenstein argue that Russian and US interests in the region must heed the domestic forces that could provide a real political solution that could benefit majority of the Syrian people - October 2, 2015.

PRODUCER, TRNN: Welcome to the Real News Network. I'm Sharmini Peries coming to you from Baltimore.

Hundreds of Iranian troops have arrived in Syria and are reportedly planning an imminent ground attack alongside Hezbollah and Syrian state forces with Russians providing air support. This comes three days after Russia launched air strikes in Syria at the request of Assad, some of that fire hitting CIA-trained militia that is fighting the Islamic State, and Assad's forces on the ground. Russia and the U.S. are also in talks over coordination of air strikes as U.S. officials along with their Saudi counterparts continue to object to Russian military presence in support of Assad in Syria, saying that supporting Assad will only worsen the situation in the country. So what we have here is a situation where Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia are supporting Assad fighting to rid the IS and the Assad opposition forces, while the United States and Gulf monarchs such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar wanting Assad deposed.

Our guests for this segment will argue that in spite of these proxy wars and developments we should not ignore the domestic forces that could provide a real political solution that would benefit the majority of the Syrian people. To discuss all of this we are joined by Jennifer Loewenstein and Joseph Daher. Jennifer Loewenstein is a faculty associate in Middle Eastern studies at Penn State University, and Joseph Daher is a Ph.D. student at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland. Thank you both for joining me today.

JOSEPH DAHER: [Good evening].

JENNIFER LOEWENSTEIN: Thanks.

PERIES: Let me start with both of your responses, your initial take on the Iranian and Hezbollah troops arriving in Syria with the Russian air support. Your thoughts on that, Joseph, let me begin with you.

DAHHER: My reaction is to be increasingly worried. Even though the Iranian presence in Syria has been the case since the beginning, nearly, of the popular uprising in Syria alongside the Assad regime to oppress the Syrian popular movement. Just as Hezbollah has been present in Syria since the beginning of 2012.

Today what we're witnessing is an increasing military presence of the allies of the Assad regime to crush completely the revolution and to consolidate the Assad regime. The message that is sent to the international community, especially the Western powers, that the solution for any kind of transition is with the Assad regime, which a section of the Western, most of the Western countries have accepted indeed, as we can see with the different [declaration]. And also a message internally to the Syrian people that they're still resisting against the Assad regime and against fundamentalist forces. That they are ready to crush them as well.

PERIES: And Jennifer, what's your reaction to all of this?

LOEWENSTEIN: I'm not surprised that Iranian troops are going to Syria, and I'm not surprised that Hezbollah has been in Syria on the side of Assad. And I'm even less surprised to know that Russia is finally taking a much more active role in what's happening in Syria and the region. What I think really bothers me is the, the alleged—first of all that the Americans and the Russians both claim that their first priority is to contain and then defeat ISIS, which I think is a reasonable goal. I'm not sure that it needed international intervention to happen. But that's where we are now.

What I find problematic is that rather than joining forces first and foremost to defeat ISIS and to help the moderate rebel forces, we are seeing some rather duplicitous actions on the part of the Americans, who are not bombing ISIS when it is fighting the Assad regime, and by the Russians who are determined to keep Assad in power, or if not, to keep the Assad regime, the state apparatus, running. I think there could be some potentially big conflicts between these two powers. I think there are proxy wars happening on a number of levels in Syria. And that these could rather swiftly escalate and get out of control, and I have to just hope that with the parties involved, primarily the United States and Russia, there is some sense of the need not to make this a broader conflict and a bigger bloodbath.

PERIES: So Joseph, on television in the 60 Minutes program last weekend, Russian President Putin addressed why he continues to support Bashar al-Assad despite objections from the United States. Let's have a look at what he said.

SPEAKER: Assad, you support him. Do you support what he is doing in Syria? And what is happening to those Syrian people, those many millions of refugees and the hundreds of thousands of people that have been killed, many by his own force?

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN: Well, tell me, what do you think about those who support the opposition, and mainly the terrorist organizations, only in order to oust Assad without thinking about what will happen to the country after all the government institutions have been demolished? Today you have repeatedly said that Assad is fighting against his own population. But look at those who are in control of 60 percent of the territory in Syria. It's controlled by either ISIS or by others, such as al-Nusra and other terrorist organizations. They're recognized as terrorist organizations by the United States, by other states, and by the United Nations.

PERIES: Joseph, let me go to you. Your reaction to what President Putin just said.

DAHER: There's enough history to justify any kind of repression inside of Syria, or intervening in various regions. Or now in Syria justifying this by terrorism. This is not something new. Just to, to, to take seriously about the Syrian regime, the Syrian regime has been the actor that is the most responsible for the destruction of Syria, of the state apparatus, state civilian institutions, hospital, schools for the past four years. The largest mistake that had happened is that the democratic forces of Syria has never been supported by anyone. Obviously, yes, Saudi Arabia and Qatar has supported Islamic fundamentalist forces. [But not] in the view of making this popular uprising to have a victory

but to transform it into a sectarian civil war. That is completely opposite to the aims of the Syrian revolution, which began in 2011 March for democracy, social justice, and equality.

But indeed today you have two reactionary forces that are opposing each other. The Assad regime on one side and its allies, and Islamic fundamentalist forces, going to Islamic State, Jhabat al-Nusra, and [inaud.] these two forces actually spend most of their time attacking democratic forces, whether civilian or [FSA], coming to the intervention of Russia or the US.

PERIES: Now, on that point, Russia—just on that point, Joseph, Russia would not say that they are intervening. They are saying that they are there on the request of Assad, who they say is the legitimate government of Syria. What do you say to that?

DAHER: Any kind of legitimate government should have at least democratic elections, even to—not even legitimate the repressive policies of the Assad regime. What we have in Syria is a dictatorship. Everyone agrees on this. And even the Putin regime would not even try to speak about democracy inside of Syria. The Assad regime is a dictatorship that has never, let's speak honestly, had democratic elections, and honest ones. The people that checked for the last elections, for the Assad, for President Assad, were coming from North Korea, Russia, countries that are not well known for their democratic characteristics, if I may.

PERIES: And let's continue this discussion in our next segment. I will thank you both for joining us at this moment, but we will continue and take up this point about the Russian presence and now the Iranian and Hezbollah presence in Syria in our next segment.

PART II

PRODUCER, TRNN: Welcome back to the Real News Network. I'm Sharmini Peries coming to you from Baltimore. We're talking about Syria and we're continuing our discussion.

Jennifer, let me actually pose the same question to you, which is that President Putin says that he is in Syria and providing air support, and also training and equipment, and military support to the Assad government on the request of Bashar al-Assad. Your reaction to that?

JENNIFER LOEWENSTEIN: Well, I think my first reaction is to want to go back to, to history. Recent history. And remind listeners that in 2011 there were peaceful protests in the city of Dera'a, in southern Syria, by people who were demanding reforms within the Syrian government. And that these peaceful protests were met with violent and brutal military responses by the Assad regime. It was because of the consistent use of this violence that the, that people on the other side, on the reform or revolutionary side, began to take up arms. Once that happened parties from the outside were invited in. And different players started to arm different groups within Syria until you had a multitude of different groups, Islamist primarily, on a spectrum of how extreme they are one could debate. You had the moderate forces asking for democracy for a just government, and then of course you had the Syrian regime.

What I think is important, though, is that once arms and financial and military support started entering Syria, the conflict went beyond a local civil war that was sectarian, something that I need to remind the viewers that the United States had been stoking sectarian tensions in Syria for quite some time, in an effort to destabilize and eventually change the regime in Damascus. Now, this hasn't changed. The U.S. goal hasn't changed. It's just that it has broadened. The U.S. wants Assad out. It is also quite aware of what ISIS is, how brutal it is, and it wants to defeat ISIS.

PERIES: All right. Let me go to you, Joseph, now. What do you make of what Jennifer is saying?

JOSEPH DAHER: I tend to disagree with the comment saying that the U.S. wanted a regime change in Damascus. No, it's on the opposite. I remind everyone that Hillary Clinton in the beginning of the popular uprising in Syria characterized Assad as a reformist. And most of the deputies in the U.S. parliament agreed on this. What happened after is that U.S. policies regarding not only Syria but the whole region has been constant. What they want is a kind of a Yemeni solution. Meaning that you maybe cut the head of the regime, meaning in the case of Syria Assad, but you maintain the regime as it is. Talking about security services—.

LOEWENSTEIN: I disagree with this. And one of the reasons I disagree is because one of the many documents that was leaked to the press by WikiLeaks was a document issued by the State Department and the CIA collectively in which details about the United States' efforts to destabilize the Syrian regime came out. Details such as State Department officials literally talking back and forth about how it's important to stoke sectarian tensions, to undermine the regime, and that Islamist groups that had fled into Syria, in part as a result of the surge in Iraq where the United States utterly destroyed the state and caused problems that are still almost irreparable if not irreparable. I don't think that the United States has ever wanted Syria to stay in place unless it is, it does so with a dictator that is sympathetic to U.S. interests. [Inaud.] story.

PERIES: And Joseph—Joseph, do you agree?

DAHER: No, no. But I'm sorry. When was Assad threatening, really, the interests of the U.S.? I'll just remind that since '73 not a single bullet has been shot against Israel by the Assad regime. The Assad regime has entered Lebanon in '76 to crush the Lebanese left, Lebanese National Movement, and the Palestinian movement. Assad regime has participated in '91 in the second Gulf war, alongside the U.S., and in 2003 Assad regime following—sorry, 2001, Assad regime has participated in the war, so-called war on terror by Bush. The close relationship was with the U.S., so no, no. I disagree completely.

And talking about sectarianism in Syria, the first actor that's responsible for the rise of sectarianism in Syria was the Assad regime itself, by nurturing sectarianism for the past 50 years and by a particular repression, I must remind, and talking about Islamic fundamentalist forces, most of the heads of Islamic military forces today in Syria were all in Syrian prisons at the beginning of the uprising. And they benefited from amnesty. Whereas democratic activists were completely crushed, repressed, or put in exile.

I'll just remind, for the past, since 2014, in the year 2014 and 2015, the Assad regime offensive has, on different forces, Daesh is only 10 percent, 6-10 percent. Of the Assad regime offensive against various forces in Syria, only 6-10 percent is against Daesh, Islamic State. [Inaud.] has been [inaud.].

LOEWENSTEIN: But then why—why, if you're saying this, why does the United States want the Assad government defeated? It has been consistently against Bashar al-Assad and his government since before the Syrian civil war began. There's no question of that.

DAHER: No, no. I disagree.

LOEWENSTEIN: When, after Rafik Hariri was assassinated there was an effort, there—well, the United Nations under the leadership of the United States forced Syria out of Lebanon. This was [inaud.].

DAHER: Which is, I'm sorry, but what Syria was doing in Lebanon—.

PERIES: Joseph, just one—Joseph. Joseph, let me make a—. Let me make an intervention here.

DAHER: Sorry.

PERIES: Do you agree with Jennifer that the U.S. had destabilization plans in Syria to destabilize Assad's leadership?

DAHER: Even the U.S. newspapers, and wherever you go, has shown that the different military programs to help the democratic forces of the FSA is a complete failure. Only two groups has been trained for the past four years. One group of 50 person, and one group of 70 person.

LOEWENSTEIN: No, see, I, I disagree with this. Because—.

DAHER: The plan that was, the plan that—the plan that was funded by the U.S. budget, five—.

LOEWENSTEIN: Why would there be secret documents that are coming [inaud.].

DAHER: Five hundred million to—sorry, five [hundred millions].

PERIES: Jennifer, just hold on, let him—let him finish his point, I'll give you an opportunity.

DAHER: By the U.S. parliament to fund so-called 5,000 to 10,000 soldiers. If you check out the text, in the text it's not to fight the Assad regime. It's only to fight the Islamic State. And to reach a kind of a negotiated solution. Never, the—never the U.S. has looked to overthrow this regime. And this has been consistent with the, also the policies of Israel regarding Syria. Just see the coordination today between Russia and Israel regarding the, the strikes within Syria. No, no. All imperialist [powers]. Whether U.S. or Russia. Or regional powers such as Saudi Arabia or Iran. And enemies of the popular revolution in Syria, and never wanted it. Let's make that, let's be very clear on this.

PERIES: Okay, let me, let—. Okay. Let's allow Jennifer to get in and give her point of view. Go ahead, Jennifer, your reaction to him.

LOEWENSTEIN: Yeah. What I was going to say is, I don't think that the Russians, the Americans, and certainly not the Assad regime itself, none of them is interested in real democratic reform. It's not in the interest of any of those parties to have democracy, liberty, justice, these ideals have any real manifestations in Syria. Unfortunately that's a very cynical interpretation, but I think it's also a realistic one.

We have, however, got documents that reveal quite serious U.S. attempts to destabilize and overthrow the Syrian government going back not only to 2006, after the Hariri assassination, but well before that. Because these powers wanted to forge some kind of alliance with Syria in the same way that it had an alliance with Egypt and Iraq, by having a dictator in power who would do their bidding.

PERIES: Joseph, one of the very important points I think that we need to understand here in this context is what are the forces in Syria that you represent, and also that you think better represent the democratic interest of the Syrian people?

DAHER: You did, just to remind, you had a fantastic popular uprising in Syria that was organized on a horizontal basis, on a very democratic basis, which was based on coordination committees in neighborhoods, villages, cities, regions, et cetera. This was crushed by the Assad regime.

LOEWENSTEIN: [Inaud.] these were wonderful. I happen to agree. These were excellent organizations that did an amazing amount of good work.

PERIES: And go ahead.

DAHER: These forces, even though have been repressed first by the Assad regime, most importantly, and secondly by different various Islamic fundamentalist forces that are also part of the counterrevolution, just as the Assad regime, are still existing despite everything. You have pockets of hope, for example, in some neighborhoods of Aleppo, despite constant bombs for the past few years against these neighborhoods such as Bustan al Qaser, Sheikh Maqsood, different areas.

You had also, we should remind, that even though we speak about loyalist region, which I completely disagree, maybe region where you did not witness demonstrations at the same scale as others. But for example in the city of [Suedha] majority composed of Jewish population, you had huge demonstrations for the past few weeks with a statue of Hafez al-Assad completely tear down. And this summer you had also demonstrations in [Latakia] to complain about an assassination of an army colonel by one of the nephew of the Assad family. The, the regime is completely, on many basis, not seen as an alternative for the future of Syria. It's a danger for the future of Syria and for the social composition of the Syrian society.

So I support all the democratic activists that are still on the ground or in exile that have a democratic speech against sectarianism for equality. And these are the people that we have to support despite so many defeats, despite the advances of two reactionary actors represented by the Assad regime and its allies, and various Islamic fundamentalist forces that also attack these democrats. But they resist. In many areas you had resistance demonstrations. Still self-organization of the people on the ground. And these are the people that I don't claim to represent, but I claim that we are bound together to build a new democratic social justice and secular Syria that would really be an example for the future, not only a [decision] for the whole world, despite this dictatorship that is a killing machine. Not only for the past four years, but for the past four decades.

PERIES: Right. Jennifer and Joseph, I'm going to ask you one final question. And that is, these democratic forces that are currently trying to organize within Syria that Joseph is talking about, in terms of support for this, and the reality of it coming to any fruition, who do you think should support them? And what are the potential solutions for the Syrian question at this moment? Let me start with you, Jennifer.

LOEWENSTEIN: Well, first of all I think that the people that Joseph is talking about, the real revolutionaries who have a vision of a democratic republic of Syria, that these people are the idealists and the most humane people in Syria with a kind of vision that we can only hope to aspire to. I don't understand why anyone would reject that, on a personal, individual level. At the same time, it is the, the chances of Syria following that group of people right now, the chances of some kind of resolution in Syria that will, would take up that banner, are next to zero.

We have two forces opposing each other, the Assad regime and ISIS, and the middle that, the tiny center, of idealistic, radical hope which I agree is the most humane part of the entire country, I think that it is being squeezed out. And this is probably the biggest tragedy in the entire civil war. Neither the Assad regime nor ISIS cares about the human beings in Syria who are being displaced, who are leaving the country, who are being murdered, imprisoned, tortured, neither side cares. The United States and Russia are simply involved in this process by, by dividing the country into these two factions and practically forgetting the middle ground. The U.S. has been unbelievably incapable of working with the, the moderate forces. The so-called moderate forces.

PERIES: Joseph, let me allow you to get—.

LOEWENSTEIN: [Not even sure] that the people they're working with are moderate. I'm not sure

they're, they're armed people. And I don't think the armed conflict is a way of resolving the Syrian conflict itself. I think we have a long, long way to go before this war is over. And probably the most, the most intelligent or the most practical way of moving forward at all right now, given the present circumstances, would be for the United States and the Soviet Union—sorry, Russia, shows you my age, for the United States and Russia to sit down, to force, coerce, you know, demand that the parties involved in this bloodthirsty war sit down and start to negotiate some kind of ceasefire, some kind of settlement in which Assad can be at least transitioned out of power, in which a state of some sort remains so that we don't have another Iraq. And in which the people that Joseph emulates correctly, in my view, actually will have a chance. Otherwise I don't think they have a chance in the world.

PERIES: Okay. That is the plan that Putin's putting forward. Joseph, your reaction to what Jennifer's saying, but also the revolutionary democratic forces within Syria that you argue needs to emerge and be supported. Who do you think should be supporting them?

DAHER: Any kind of support without any kind of political condition will be welcome. Even though I don't really like the term idealist I know that will never happen, because anyone that, anyone that wants any kind of radical change is not really supported by any kind of state that exists today, [neither that] in the past. So it's just that to show also the contradictions of some countries that are playing the game of presenting themselves as so-called friend of Syria, which they are not, obviously. They are enemies of the Syrian people. As I said, no one is a friend of the, the Syrian people in their, the struggle for democracy and social justice, and equality.

But just to come back to some things, the origin of the problem in Syria is the Assad regime. Daesh, ISIS, only appeared, just to remind everyone, in 2013 Autumn. Ninety percent of the civilians killed in Syria since the beginning of the uprising, is the Assad regime. So this mean—and any kind of solution, to put an end to ISIS, is not only military. It's also political. Because ISIS, if we wanted [to know], used some certain popular frustration. Especially in Iraq, that was due to U.S. imperialism. But also the Iranian state and the Iraqi government state that was allied to the Iranians, that implemented sectarian policies towards, against the Sunnis. And again, to put an end to ISIS is also to put an end to the dictatorship of the Middle East. This means a radical change, otherwise you can have a new ISIS that will come, maybe into a fight.

Here this is what happened, actually, with Al-Qaeda, that nearly disappeared in 2008, 2010 in Iraq and reappeared on a worst appearance with the Islamic State. So any kind of solution, Assad is not possible to have, realistically speaking. And not as an idealist. If you want a real solution in Syria, which I wish. Not asking to have an unending war in Syria, until the last Syrian. But any kind of real solution must take into account the will of the Syrian people. In the far majority, they don't want Assad regime. They don't want Assad to play any role in the transition. And not anyone that has blood on their hands. This means security services, et cetera. And this is the realistic transition.

PERIES: And Joseph, Joseph, what is that table—.

DAHER: This is the realistic transition towards any kind of—.

PERIES: What does that table look like, what does that table look like from your point of view, if you were to bring together a political solution to the problem of Syria? Who would be sitting around the table, from your point of view?

DAHER: You want me to speak as analysis, it's very clear who would sit around the table. You would have the U.S. and Western countries who have Gulf monarchies on one side and Russia and Iran on the other side. And as I said before, there, the differences between them are not very large. I just

remind that during the Geneva negotiations, the various ones, they agreed on the kind of transition. The only debate they had was around the rule of Assad. Otherwise they agreed on everything. Maintaining the security services. Maintaining the army as it is. Et cetera. Which is very dangerous. This means you maintained the Assad regime.

Today even the Western states arguing for rule, for Assad in the transition, which is catastrophic. This means you will have a continuation of the war, because Assad is the main actor. And not only stability, I mean for the Middle East, but stability for Europe because 90 percent of the refugees that came to Europe is because of the Assad war on its people.

So realistically, this is a realist solution. Any kind of transition must be Assad kicked out. Judged for his war crimes. And all his team with him. And I'm in favor also of judging and condemning also the war crimes of the various Islamic fundamentalist forces as well in Syria. But this is a realistic transition.

PERIES: Jennifer, last word to you. Who's sitting around the table on a political solution to the Syria question?

LOEWENSTEIN: In, in the Syrian civil war by proxy, and I think unfortunately the number of countries involved now in the Syrian civil war that have their hands or fingers in the pot, as it will, as it would be described, this is one of the problems that has exacerbated the crisis in Syria so desperately.

These forces have to withdraw. There have to be arms embargoes in place even though there are many arms now within Syria. There have to be policies put into place that can be held into place by the United Nations, by the Russians and by the United States, because it's in both of their interest to stop this kind of tumult, this, this horrible, this catastrophe that is taking place in Syria. [Inaud.]

PERIES: Jennifer, hold on for a second. We, we lost your voice.

LOEWENSTEIN: [Doesn't] want that. Russia doesn't want its own borders to blow up int—.

PERIES: We have to start that question again, Jennifer. I'm sorry, I wasn't cutting you off. It's just that we were losing your audio. So I'll give you an opportunity to respond, but I have to ask you the question again. Here we go.

LOEWENSTEIN: Okay.

PERIES: So Jennifer, who do you think should be around the table in a political solution to the Syrian question?

LOEWENSTEIN: I think that all of the countries that have been involved in Syria that had, have made Syria a proxy, that have become proxies within the Syrian conflict, all of these countries need to sit down and talk about realistic ways of stopping the civil war, which is intrinsic to Syria whether they're there or not, and getting themselves out. Again, that may be idealistic, but there's—the only way forward without continuing a bloodbath. The bloodbath that has engulfed Syria and its people is for these proxy parties to get out, to restrain themselves, to refuse to allow their foreigner, foreign fighters into the country, to do everything possible to prevent outside intervention. And then to get the most credible, if that's an appropriate word, Syrian representatives around the table, moderated probably by the UN and an equal Arab and, I have to say Iranian participation, in which this can be hashed out in a civilized way. Even if there are people shouting at each other, at least they won't be blowing each other's, the—blowing each other up.

PERIES: Jennifer Loewenstein, Joseph Daher, thank you so much for joining us today on the Real

News Network.

DAHER: Thank you.

LOEWENSTEIN: Thank you.

PERIES: And thank you for joining us on the Real News Network.

End

P.S.

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* "Inter-Imperial Feuds and the Lost Revolution in Syria". Part I and II:

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