

Phares Podcast: "Iraq Withdrawal Can Only Work With Pressure On Iran and Syria"

Contributed by Walid Phares
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Iran, Syria and al Qaeda plans after US withdrawal

Phares on 850 AM WFTL in Palm Beach: President Obama's plan to withdraw would work if pressures are applied on Iran and Syria

Dr Walid Phares was interviewed on 850 AM WFTL radio in Palm Beach, Florida on President Obama's plan to withdraw from Iraq: "It would work if pressures are applied on Iran and Syria." [PODCAST]

Now that President Obama and his aides have announced their plan for U.S. withdrawal from Iraq by August 31, 2010, they must consider what the forces engaged against the Coalition and Iraqi Government plan to do in this time. For the Iranian and Syrian regimes, as well as al Qaeda and other Jihadist groups, can affect the U.S. withdrawal plan.

Per senior U.S. officials, the Iraq war will unilaterally come to an end on August 31, 2010 unless dramatic developments force another strategy. As President Bush declared "mission accomplished" after the removal of Saddam in 2003, President Obama has now declared the end of "all counter-insurgency missions," by 2010. After that date, from the 142,000 Marines and Army personnel, some 35,000 to 50,000 troops will remain and would be ready to deploy in counter-terrorism missions. Under the "Status of Forces Agreement" with the Iraqi government, all American forces must be removed by December 31, 2011.

After August of next year the mission of U.S. (and possibly some coalition) forces will be to:

- 1) Train, equip and advise Iraqi security forces.
- 2) Support civilian operations in Iraq aimed at reconstruction, redevelopment and political reconciliation.
- 3) Conduct targeted counter-terrorism missions.

At first sight, the plan seems sound and answers a main requirement of U.S. strategy: Maintaining political gains made by the Iraqi political process and pursuing the fight against al Qaeda and other terror groups.

But the public and legislators should realize that for the next stage to be successful, Iraq must be able to withstand any future pressures by the "enemy."

If the terrorist forces operating against the Coalition and the Iraqi Government are to vanish as soon as the U.S. pulls out, the withdrawal plan (any version of it) will be smooth and successful. It would be merely a question of logistical management.

But any strategist must ask: what if the other side won't cooperate? What if al Qaeda and its Salafist ilk, as well as the Pasdaran, the Quds force, Hezbollah, and the intelligence services of Tehran and Damascus decide otherwise? What if they will continue the operations from now till August 2010, and after that date, endlessly?

A logical U.S. response would be to focus on enabling Iraqis to fight the counter insurgency war against the "foes" and grow their capacity until withdrawal D-Day 18 months from now. By the magical date of August 31, 2010, Iraq's own forces should be able to control their county. The role of the U.S. expeditionary force should be to wage counter terrorism missions in support of the Iraqi armed forces if the insurgency will continue pass that date.

It is very hard to predict what all of our "foes" in Iraq will do. The easiest guess is about al Qaeda and the other Jihadists. All their literature and statements, as well as actions on the ground, show that these forces will continue their attacks regardless of both American and Iraqi planning. The Salafi combat groups, despite their containment by the Sahwa campaign and by counter insurgency activities, have the Sunni Triangle in sight for as long as the "will of Allah" prevails. Hence their aggression against Iraq's population and institutions is expected to last as long as their ideology and ideologues would also last.

Just as important to the Jihadists are their strategic lines into Iraq. The Jihadists are crossing the Syrian borders constantly and they are backed by ideological and financial circles inside Iraq's southern neighbor, Saudi Arabia. Thus the success of the Obama plan will hinge on the capacity of his Administration to stop the flow of Jihadism from

Syria and Saudi Arabia.

A more complex prediction is about Iran's plan for a post U.S. withdrawal. Many in Washington today are excited to report that realism will prevail in Tehran as soon as the Obama Administration will "sit" with the Mullahs' regime and "talk" – some even say "listen." In short, somehow the group coined recently as the "Iran Lobby in the U.S." is arguing that withdrawal plans will get no opposition from Iran. Everything will go smoothly and Iraq will be able to control its eastern border, pro-Iranian groups notwithstanding.

I believe otherwise. Iran's leadership will sit down, talk, and sometimes listen – but it will at the same time continue its actions on the ground until it fulfills its own "mission." What is that mission? To penetrate, influence and seize 60% of Iraq from Baghdad to Basra as U.S. forces are withdrawing and certainly after the pull out. They will use all the power elements at their disposal: special groups, the Mahdi Army, assassinations, infiltration in Government, etc. Ironically, the pro-Iranian action against U.S. presence will intensify further after August 2010 to hasten the final withdrawal of counter insurgency forces left behind. So in a sense the success of the Obama plan will hinge on the American ability to deter Iran – and its ally Syria – from surging against Iraq's Democracy while the U.S. is organizing its departure.

Is the 2010 plan doomed? Not at all: It is actually a challenging one and could be successful but is conditioned by the greater context. Withdrawing the bulk of U.S. forces from Iraq after five years of deployment is long overdue, especially if the troops will be used on other fronts. Vice President Biden recently said the Iranians may be surprised where many of these forces would be used. The Obama plan can work if his Administration will move quickly to deter both Tehran and Damascus from filling the void in Iraq. This is the secret equation hovering over all three plans the President has to choose from. If asked, I would advise the shortest stay for the bulk of U.S. forces in Iraq so that they can be engaged in other spots, not only in Afghanistan.

The worst course of action would be to diminish the force in Iraq while encouraging Iran and Syria – directly or indirectly – to "assume responsibilities" on Iraqi land. This would be known by historians as suicide. In the end, all is in the hands of President Obama. If he has a global plan to restlessly wage campaigns against Jihadi powers and forces around the world while winning a war of ideas, the 2010 plan for Iraq will be a stunning move. But if all efforts of the Administration are to pull out from the confrontation with the Jihadists, following the advice of the failed academia of the past, the announced plan will be no more than the beginning of the retreat. I truly hope the vision in the oval office will meet the harsh realities of today's world.

Dr Walid Phares is the Director of the Future Terrorism Project the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies and the author of *The Confrontation: Winning the War against Future Jihad*.