

“The IMF may demand Lebanon normalize with Israel.”

Interview with Alberto Garcia Watson

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Lebanon is a failed state economically, politically, and socially. Very little movement has occurred to help Lebanon recover from the depths of hopelessness. Steven Sahiounie of MidEastDiscourse interviewed Alberto García Watson, a Beirut-based expert in the Middle East, terrorism and Islamic radicalism as well as a television correspondent.

Steven Sahiounie (SS): Finally, after 30 years as head of the Central Bank of Lebanon, Riad Salamah has left office. He left under a cloud of accusations of very serious crimes in Europe, but has not yet been held accountable in Lebanon. In your opinion, will other political elite tied to Salameh be brought down?

Alberto Garcia Watson (AGW): Lebanon's financial elites have been fleeing the country, the economic and financial crisis has been intensified by hyperinflation of almost 200% last year, the second highest rate in the world, the sovereign debt default to international lenders in March 2020, the explosion of the Beirut port three years ago or the brutal repercussions of the pandemic, all has contributed to turning Lebanon into a financially failed state.

It would give the impression that the planets have aligned to economically sink a financial system that is trying to save macroeconomic data by further impoverishing the population by implementing harmful fiscal policies for citizens in an attempt to reinforce the country's religious-sectarian power-sharing system.

The World Bank has called it a 'deliberate depression orchestrated by an elite that has long taken over the state and lived off its economic rents'.

Lebanon ranks 138th out of 180 on Transparency International's corruption perception list

and this has been particularly contributed to by Riad Salameh who, after three decades as Governor of the Central Bank of Lebanon, is leaving office by the back door, the subject of investigations in France, Germany (which have issued arrest warrants to Interpol), Luxembourg and Lebanon on suspicion of embezzlement (for some \$330 million) and of having accumulated a millionaire's worth of real estate and financial wealth.

SS: Lebanon has been without a President for almost two years. The Parliament has voted numerous times, but no decision taken. In your view, will the Saudi-French effort be successful?

AGW: In Lebanon, this situation of presidential absence is nothing new, Lebanese presidency has been vacant on several occasions since the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), including for 29 months before Michel Aoun was elected in 2016 in a deal that saw the election of Saad Hariri as prime minister, a historic moment that I as a television correspondent for an Iranian media outlet was assigned to cover and which starred for much of the two years I spent in Beirut.

Frankly, it took me some time to understand how different politico-religious sensitivities with international derivations could politically decide the designs of a sovereign nation and how the influence of regional powers could have so much weight in deciding the election of the head of state in a nation whose presidency plays a symbolic role.

SS: Saudi Arabia, France, the United States, Egypt and Qatar recently met in Paris where they discussed how to end the political impasse in Lebanon, without finally reaching an agreement on who to support, although they do seem to have agreed on who to reject, which is none other than the candidate Suleiman Frangieh, very close to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Lebanese Shiite party Hezbollah.

AGW: However, these countries share the need to exert pressure on the Lebanese political groups so that the constitutional deadlines are met and structural reforms are implemented, an agreement with the International Monetary Fund that will mortgage the Arab country economically for life and that ends up calling into question the Lebanese sovereignty to end up demanding that Lebanon normalize diplomatic relations with the Israeli regime, if it wants to survive, something that does not seem to be going to happen.

SS: There are mounting tensions between Hezbollah and Israel, especially since the statements made by Israeli Minister Gallant and the leader of the Lebanese resistance group. In your opinion, is Lebanon and Israel on the doors of armed conflict?

AGW: Israel has been threatening Lebanon for decades with "wiping it off the map", "turning the clock back 20 years", "returning the Arab country to the stone age", but it does so because it is afraid of Hezbollah, which has already demonstrated in the past the military capacity it has and the support of the majority of political forces in Lebanon, although they may be in permanent disagreement on political issues, but when it comes to preserving national sovereignty, no matter if they are Sunni, Christian, Shiite or Druze, they all support the militia that preserves the borders from the Zionist threat as well as Wahhabi fundamentalism.

Just a few days ago, a new anniversary of the "33 Days War" was commemorated, which in 2006 led to a humiliating defeat of the Israeli army against Hezbollah.

The offensive capacity and the military capabilities that the Shiite militia has acquired through its participation in the war in Syria have provided a very important experience to an army that even the Israeli army leadership pointed out not long ago that if a military confrontation were to take place between the Israeli army and Hezbollah, it would be more than likely that the fighting would take place in Israeli territory.

Israel, frequently attacks the Gaza Strip and Syrian territory because it knows the limitations of the armed forces in both territories, but when it comes to Lebanon, it can only devote its efforts to sending threats that are more aimed at its own public and empty patriotic fervor than at a viable project.

SS: The tension between the US, and Syria and its allies, has hit a very high level after the Syrian resistance group attacked the US military occupation bases in the east of Syria. In your opinion, will we see a military conflict between the US and their Kurdish mercenaries and Syria and its allies, such as Russia and others?

AGW: It is difficult to foresee, but in my humble opinion and since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, the United States has shown great weaknesses in its proxy war with the Russian Federation.

The Russian army has military bases in Syria and Vladimir Putin's closeness to President Bashar Al-Assad is well known. At this time the hostility of the United States towards Russia will reflect a change in the Syrian military landscape.

Syria is an ally of Russia, which has been invited by the legitimate and sovereign Syrian government. Whoever attacks and plunders Syria's natural resources as the US military does with Syrian oil and grain, can only expect that the Syrian-Russian capability and alliance will result in military cooperation between the two nations.

Let us hope that this alliance will also take place when it comes to defending Syrian territory from the frequent attacks by the Israeli army and which the International Community shamefully refuses to condemn.

SS: President Erdogan of Turkey has come out with a proposal to include Aleppo with the Al Qaeda occupied province of Idlib in an effort to force Syrian refugees in Turkey back to Syrian soil. In your view, will the international community allow Erdogan to take action on this plan, and will Syrian allies take action to prevent this from happening?

AGW: The Turkish president is absolutely unpredictable, initially maintaining excellent relations with Vladimir Putin and even managing to sign an agreement for the export of Ukrainian grain, and shortly afterwards and surprisingly betraying Russia by releasing military commanders of Ukrainian neo-Nazi battalions responsible for war crimes, who should have remained on Turkish territory until the end of the war.

Subsequently, it acts like the Israeli regime, perpetuating its military occupation of Syrian territory, shielding its brotherhood and cooperation with jihadist terrorist groups, not allowing the Syrian army to liberate the city of Idlib (last stronghold of the Wahhabi militants) that have maintained in favor of the West and the Gulf dictatorships a lethal twelve-year war against the Syrian people.

Very little can be expected from the International Community, because it has never been categorical in condemning the Turkish military occupation of Syrian territory and has shown

not the slightest interest in assisting the millions of Syrian refugees of this conflict that has been used with political motivations for a failed approach to its accession to the European Union.

But what is clear to me is that if Erdogan intends to militarily force the incorporation of Aleppo to the province of Idlib to end up annexing more Syrian territory based on the excuse of mobilizing millions of displaced people, Syria will know how to defend its sovereignty with the assistance of Russia, which will not allow Turkey to install a jihadist outpost in northern Syria.

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