

Iran fears being left out

Dr. GLEN SEGELL | Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies, University of Haifa. | October 14, 2018, 9:28 PM

American sanctions and the potential of an Israeli preventive and preemptive strike gets the usual response of Iranian holler and hollow rhetoric. However, the potential massacre of civilians while trying to retake the last major stronghold of anti-government militants in Syria, namely Idlib Province, has become Red Line for Iran, says the Iranian chief negotiator in the peace process for Syria.

A Red Line? Surely this is a George Bush expression? And what exactly is Iran going to do? And why do they care about Syrian civilians after what they do to their own civilians? And surely the forces that are going to attack Idlib are Syrian forces backed by Iran? That means the civilians that might be killed are most likely going to be killed by Syrian forces backed by Iran! Let's look at the holler and hollow Iranian rhetoric about this Idlib Red Line to see what is really happening.

It all started on Wednesday, October 10 when Hossein Jaber Ansari, a senior assistant to the Iranian foreign minister on special political affairs, told Iranian Press TV's website in an exclusive interview that Idlib had a special status and had to be dealt with accordingly. He said armed and terrorist groups have blended into a large civilian population there, which makes a retake of the region complicated and, in Iran's viewpoint, eliminates the possibility of a quick fix. He called the situation in Idlib "the epitome of the complexities of the Syrian conflict."

So, what is new? Any civil war conflict has a blend of civilians and combatants. There are always combatants that are not wearing uniforms. There are always combatants that live where the combat is, and therefore they are fighting. They are fighting for their families and homes.

Nevertheless, he has some very interesting information to provide because Iran has according to him undertaken authoritative research. On the eve of the battle for Idlib and the eve has been with us for some months now without battle erupting, he explains that there are three million people settled in Idlib but half of these are displaced persons from other areas. Amazing isn't it! A small region has managed not only to have doubled its population in seven years of civil war but is also able to sustain the newcomers in housing, food and employment. That is one million five hundred thousand new residents. Who are they?

The answer shows why and how they are living in Idlib. According to this authoritative Iranian research only some are normally displaced by the war, yet others are the families of armed Syrian government

opponents who have, along with their men, migrated there as part of previous deals. What does that mean: Previous deals? Does it mean that the Syrian and Iranian governments have agreed to make Idlib the concentration point of numerous armed and terrorist groups?

Surely then the Red Line that mustn't be crossed by having so many civilians and so many civilians mixed with combatants in Idlib was created by the Syrian and Iranian governments! Ahh! Now we know what is happening. Iran is apprehensive that if the Syrian government forces it backs kills these civilians then it, Iran, will be blamed for these deaths. So here we have it. The Iranian preemptive propaganda apparently says "Hey, guys, we are humanitarian, peace loving Shi'a and we ask you all not kill these civilians"

Not the case at all. A brief look in the background of the Syrian conflict shows that Iran is not really cared about the civilians of Idlib but more so to its own future in Syria, should the civil war end. Looking back since the conflict erupted in Syria in 2011 on the wave of the Arab Spring unrest that beset the entire region shows who is living in Idlib and why. Back in 2011 it was only a small group of opposition forces that took up arms against Damascus. Not to different from other dictatorial states facing the Arab Spring. And not to different from other states such as Libya soon a mixture of international terrorists and paid mercenaries mingled with and then largely sidestepped the armed local opposition groups. Effectively like in Libya, Syria is a battlefield for many local and foreign forces.

The difference between Libya and Syria has been Russian and Iranian intervention. Unlike Libya the incumbent dictator has not been toppled. Moreover, the Syrian military, with help from Iran and Russia including a Russian aerial bombardment campaign has retaken control of much of the country leaving Idlib as the last rebel stronghold region. Rebel? Well, there are many rebel groups so there is no chance of dealing with the matter straightforwardly such as reaching an agreement,

In military terms, all such rebel forces in Idlib could be dealt with very swiftly with a full military assault including a Russian air campaign. So why not? Does Iran really care about the massive collateral damage? Not really! The real issue is that once Idlib is taken by Syrian government forces then Iran is not going to have a role in Syria.

An ongoing war in Syria means Iran can increase forces and influence in Syria and entertain international negotiations with Russia and Turkey in the Astana process - a peace initiative for Syria launched jointly with Russia and Turkey. An ongoing war means that Iran can call itself a regional actor and sit at the international table of rogues! So, the battle for Idlib and a massacre there leading to the end of the Syrian civil war would have grave humanitarian and moral, as well as political costs.

At the end of a summit in Sochi on September 17, Moscow and Ankara agreed on, among other things, establishing a demilitarized zone in Idlib that would cover an expanse of 15-20 kilometers of land. Militants would have to entirely clear that area by October 15. That is tomorrow! So, what is going to happen?

Well, if all works out well in Idlib without a battle then the civil war is over. And, if Syrian forces take Idlib by force then the civil war is over. Oh dear, now we see all the Iranian fuss about Idlib – they fear being left out! They fear having to return to Iran. They fear being sent back to the barracks. They fear the reality of not being a regional actor. They fear facing reality, of what they really are, namely a small insignificant impoverished state that hollers with hollow rhetoric.