## THE ZABADANI-KEFRAYA/FOUA EVACUATIONS
# LINKING THE CAPITALS OF "RESISTANCE"

It is never advisable to begin a new year by passing along bad news. Nevertheless, reporting bad news as it becomes available—whenever that may be—could help prevent the creation of even worse news later. Although Lebanon's close ties to "bad news" is nothing truly surprising, the final week of 2015 brought the Lebanese some of the year's worst news. This time, however, it was cloaked in the completion of a successful UN-sponsored humanitarian operation. On December 28, the second phase of an armistice agreement involving the Syrian cities of Zabadani and Kefraya/Foua took place. Under that deal, several hundred Shia from Kefraya and Foua (situated in the northern outskirts of Idlib) were evacuated to the Turkish border (from where they were flown to Beirut) while 126 militants and their families traveled overland from Zabadani (some 45 kilometers northwest of Damascus and less than 10 kilometers from the Lebanese-Syrian border) to Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport (from where they were flown to Turkey). According to the UN narrative:

> The United Nations (UN) in Syria, in partnership with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have successfully facilitated the evacuation of more than 450 people including the injured and their accompanying family members, following a local Agreement concerning the Syrian towns of Foua, Kafraya in Idleb and Zabadani and Madaya in Rif Damascus.

> Earlier today, the UN in Syria, SARC and ICRC carried out coordinated tasks, which led to the evacuation of 338 persons from the towns of Foua and Kafraya, and 126 people from the towns of Zabadani and Madaya. They were simultaneously evacuated by land and air through Turkey and Lebanon to the agreed final destinations where those requiring longer term medical care will receive it.

Following that astonishingly clinical description, the statement continues:

On his side, the UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura said that the UN's clear goal is to reach, as soon as possible a nationwide ceasefire. "Meanwhile, initiatives like this one bring relief to besieged or isolated communities and have great value," de Mistura said. "They help the perception that a nationwide ceasefire brokered by the members of the International Syria Support Group is doable and that the UN can and will do its part."[1]



The Zabadani-Kafraya/Foua deal also became an opportunity to highlight—yet again—Lebanon's sectarian and political fault lines. While passing through Majdal Anjar, an Islamist stronghold in the Bekaa, Zabadani evacuees aboard the buses were welcomed as heroes (*as-Safir* picture at left). In contrast, when the convoy drove along the airport road in Dahiyeh, it was "welcomed" with insults and shoes being thrown (picture at right from *Janoubia.com*).

The day after this successful humanitarian operation, al-Jadeed TV asked two Lebanese misters during an interview if they were aware of those actions. Both replied "No," immediately. One of the ministers added that he had contacted 12 of his colleagues, none of whom had any inkling of those events—despite the fact, the minister interjected, that one of them even holds a "security portfolio."[2] Interestingly, while none of those ministers had been notified about the unfolding operation, others certainly had been, as Hezbollah's *al-Manar* television (along with another pro-regime outlet) was streaming news of the developments live from Zabadani. It is also very telling that the only Lebanese security agency officially involved in the UN's operation was the General Security Directorate. Interestingly, that organization has steadily emerged as the go-to conduit for communicating with Hezbollah, and it is used even by countries that have placed Hezbollah on their respective "terrorist" blacklists.

While bitter feelings about Lebanon's dysfunctional political establishment and its unchecked loss of "independence" and "sovereignty" are simply outdated sorrows, the Zabadani-Kefraya/Foua evacuations deserve much closer analysis. After all, those actions reflect the long-term nature of developments in the region. After switching hands between regime-allied and opposition-allied forces several times over the course of the Syrian war, the latest attempt to retake Zabadani commenced in

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[1]  http://www.un.org/sg/offthecuff/index.asp?cuff=3
[2]  http://www.aljadeed.tv/arabic/news/newsintro/29122015

July 2015 as a joint action involving Hezbollah and the Syrian army.[3] Despite the advances it made, Hezbollah fighters reportedly sustained "significant" losses.[4] Since word spread that "dozens" of fighters had been killed in the melee, those casualties prompted Hezbollah head Hassan Nasrallah to assuage concerns in a September speech.[5] In apparent retaliation for the assault on Zabadani, fighters with *Jaysh al-Fateh* (a coalition of Islamist opposition groups) tightened their siege to include the Shia pockets/villages of Kefraya and Foua.[6] Following approximately three months of fighting and negotiations, an unusually wide-ranging ceasefire agreement was reached September 24 between Iran, Turkey and *Jaysh al-Fateh* (though the chief coalition participant appears to have been the *Ahrar ash-Sham* group), in talks facilitated by the UN.[7]

Until direct Russian intervention began in Syria on September 30, 2015, it was still possible to speculate that "if it holds, the agreement [between the Assad regime and Islamist rebels who took control of the Idlib area in March 2015, it] will in effect cede sovereignty of the city of Idlib, create a de facto no-fly zone, and freeze the conflict in several hotspots."[8] Though the situation has changed dramatically because of Putin's presence, the conditions of the ceasefire remain in effect: the ultimate evacuation of some 10,000 Shia residents of Kafraya and Foua and relocating them to regime-controlled areas, and a similar relocation of Sunni residents of Zabadani to areas controlled by the opposition.[9] This sectarian-oriented population transfer is perceived by some as a means to permit Iran to retain its most important assets should Syria ultimately be partitioned, as it would encourage the regime to consolidate its support in its most secure sectors (particularly since they enable

[3] http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/hezbollah-announces-truce-covering-syrian-towns-150926033153112.html

[4] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/brief-truce-holds-in-3-syrian-towns-following-talks-between-iran-rebels/2015/08/13/a6d1f421-c72f-4d38-a4d6-29a068f4aa60_story.html

[5] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/will-a-un-backed-agreement-end-fighting-in-parts-of-syria/2015/09/26/6e578d8a-63c8-11e5-8475-781cc9851652_story.html

[6] http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/hezbollah-announces-truce-covering-syrian-towns-150926033153112.html

[7] For Ahrar ash-Sham participation in negotiations, see for example http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/middleeast/2015/08/syrian-deal-population-swap-ethnic-cleansing-150815160046670.html and https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/brief-truce-holds-in-3-syrian-towns-following-talks-between-iran-rebels/2015/08/13/a6d1f421-c72f-4d38-a4d6-29a068f4aa60_story.html. For UN oversight of talks see: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/will-a-un-backed-agreement-end-fighting-in-parts-of-syria/2015/09/26/6e578d8a-63c8-11e5-8475-781cc9851652_story.html

[8] http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/26/syrian-rebels-and-assad-regime-agree-ceasefire

[9] For 10,000 figure, see: http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/hezbollah-announces-truce-covering-syrian-towns-150926033153112.html. Regarding the transfer of Sunnis from Zabadani to rebel-held Idlib, there were suggestions that only fighters would withdraw from Zabadani, thus implying that Sunni *civilians* would remain. However, other suggestions hold that sectarian-based civilian evacuations were probably planned for Zabadani as well despite Nasrallah's denial (see for example: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/will-a-un-backed-agreement-end-fighting-in-parts-of-syria/2015/09/26/6e578d8a-63c8-11e5-8475-781cc9851652_story.html and http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/middleeast/2015/08/syrian-deal-population-swap-ethnic-cleansing-150815160046670.html)

passage to Lebanon).[10] Others have suggested that the initiative is an Iranian attempt to create a Shia "stronghold" in Syria that would bear a strong resemblance to its bases in the Lebanese Dahiyeh (southern suburbs of Beirut).[11] Despite the historically "tiny minority" of Shia within Syria (not including Alawi), Damascus has historically been a destination for Shia pilgrimage due to the religious importance of shrines such as the Sayyida Zaynab example. In fact, the area surrounding this was reportedly being considered by Iran as a destination for many of the Shia residents of Kefraya and Foua who were evacuated.[13, 14]

Although the simultaneous evacuations of Zabadani-Kefraya/Foua are but one (very important) aspect of a far more complex agreement, the timing of this initiative is especially interesting.[15] The events occurred when it was becoming clear that the top priority of the Assad regime and its allies is securing greater Damascus. Further, they coincided with the fledgling negotiations which, at the time, were questioning whether the regime should retain the ability to exert full control over Syria's political capital. In fact, the UN-sponsored evacuation happened amidst attempts to secure greater Damascus, such as by stopping the relentless attacks against the Eastern Ghouta region (controlled by pro-Saudi *Jaysh al-Islam*) and assassinating its leader and several assistants. It also coincided with an agreement to evacuate the southern suburbs of Damascus (Qadam, Hajar al-Aswad and the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp) prior to the advance of Hezbollah/regime troops in the south—which were backed by Russian airstrikes.[16, 17, 18] And while it can be argued that the Russians and Iranians do not agree unanimously on all points regarding Syria (such as the fate of Assad or how the Syrian/Israeli border should be handled), it can also be argued that these differences of opinion often sort themselves out on the battlefields. Regardless, it is obvious that both parties agree on the need to secure the greater Damascus area once for all.

[10] http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/middleeast/2015/08/syrian-deal-population-swap-ethnic-cleansing-150815160046670.html

[11] http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/21/irans-shadowy-influence-in-syrias-maelstrom-fuels-paranoia-and-wariness

[12] http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/09/world/middleeast/muslim-shrine-stands-as-a-crossroads-in-syrias-unrest.html

[13] http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/21/irans-shadowy-influence-in-syrias-maelstrom-fuels-paranoia-and-wariness

[14] For a historical overview about the Sayyida Zaynab area and the efforts to turn it into a "Shia suburb," Sabrina Mervin *"Sayyida Zaynab, Banlieue de Damas ou nouvelle ville sainte chiite* ?" http://cemoti.revues.org/138?lang=en

[15] An unofficial account of the "Zabadani truce" is available at: http://www.lebanonfiles.com/news/941796

[16] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/12069257/Top-Syrian-rebel-leader-Zahran-Alloush-killed-in-air-strike-in-Damascus-suburb.html

[17] http://thenational.newspaperdirect.com/epaper/viewer.aspx

[18] http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syrian-army-advances-south-deraa-1613375366

Although the word "Hezbollah" does not appear in any of the official documents related to the evacuations, the "exclusive" pictures (published on www.alahednews.com.lb, one of Hezbollah's "official" electronic outlets) taken of key Hezbollah figures as the evacuees from Kafraya-Foua arrived at Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport from Turkey says a great deal about its role in the operation and its "partnership" with Lebanon's General Security Directorate.

From left to right, General Abbas Ibrahim, Director General of the General Security Directorate shaking hands with Hajj Wafic Safa, a senior Hezbollah domestic security official (referred to typically as head of the "Liaison and Coordination Committee"); the two men in the airport's VIP lounge awaiting the arrival of the Kafraya/Foua evacuees; General Ibrahim greeting an evacuee. To his right, Hezbollah MP Ali Ammar and Hajj Wafic Safa.

Referring to the strategic overview given above, one of the first things to be considered in this assessment is the lopsided strategic importance of Zabadani and Kefraya/Foua. While the villages of Kefraya/Foua remain symbolically important to the regime and its allies (including Hezbollah, which continues to polish its image as an organization that is always prepared to defend Shia worldwide), the eventual loss of these two villages to Sunni rebels represents neither a coup for the rebels nor much of a disadvantage to the regime and its allies, since they already control most of Idlib. In contrast, however, the same cannot be said for Zabadani, the importance of which has been explained loquaciously by many observers. But considering the many factors that make Zabadani important, the most vital is the role it plays as host to the land-based conduit between Beirut and Damascus, the existence and availability of which has never

been more important than it is today. Indeed, it must be recognized that Zabadani's loss by Syrian opposition forces is irreversible. After all, that development imposed a return to the pre-war military/ geographical situation in that part of the Lebanese-Syrian border area. Yet there is a slight difference. While the Damascus-Beirut road has long since been a critical line of communication for Hezbollah (used to stream military materiel into Lebanon from Syria), its function will likely make a 180-degree turn sometime soon as materiel is pushed to Damascus from Beirut. But the importance of the area's return to the *status quo ante bellum* is not simply a matter of logistics; rather, it demonstrates the success of Iran's policy of seizing one Arab capital after the next and then linking them geographically whenever possible (a policy Iranian officials never attempted to hide, and one about which the U.S. and its allies seem blissfully unconcerned).

In this sense, the point may be made candidly that from an Iranian perspective, one of the first outcomes of the new situation is that the linkage between Damascus, Beirut and Baghdad is now assured, and that Tehran is exerting complete control over the situation.

But the strategic value of Zabadani's return to the fold is certainly not the only victory Iran can celebrate. From a much broader perspective, Iran has sought both militarily and diplomatically to introduce and enforce sectarian kinship, genuine or contrived, which is stronger than the "neighborhood" in which its seeds have been planted. While the number of people involved under the UN agreement is perhaps too small to predict whether the outcome of other "initiatives like this one" (as explained by de Mistura) will indeed precipitate a "demographic reshuffling," it must be noted that this model, UN-brokered operation comes on the heels of a sustained sectarian cleansing effort within Syria, as well as focused, determined efforts to secure the Lebanese-Syrian border.[19] Thus, when we begin to understand (and finally accept) that Iran's policy of a steady "eastward march" is not only focused on exerting "soft" influence but also on guaranteeing the constitution of a virtual geographic continuum (the components of which can and will support each other as needed), we can also, finally, have a better grasp on the incredible nature of Lebanon's "stability."

The Zabadani-Kefraya/Foua story thus becomes a good opportunity to describe the extent of Lebanon's conceptual "stability." The notion itself rocketed to notoriety on October 22, 2012 following the assassination of General Wissam Hassan. That event propelled tensions in Lebanon to unprecedented levels and prompted a visit with President Michel Suleiman at the presidential palace by the ambassadors of the five superpowers and the permanent UN representative in Beirut. During that exchange, these "external" representatives insisted on the need to preserve Lebanon's "stability" at any price and regardless of the impacts that action would have on the country or the region. In comparison, the UN-sponsored Zabadani-Kefraya/Foua "operation" occurred thanks to a seemingly clandestine deal which circumvented any involvement by the Lebanese government. Indeed, it reduced that malfunctioning government to a role even smaller than that of a secondary actor. More importantly, the entire affair proves that when the U.S. and others prevailed upon

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[19] Of course, this is not the only example of ethnic cleansing in Syria. A significant outcome of the so-called civil war in Iraq was Baghdad's overwhelming shift to a Shiite majority! For more information, see: http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2009/11/blog-post.html

the Lebanese government in 2012 to use all means to ensure stability, that paradigm has since shifted. Today, when matters of particular gravity are at stake—such as Syria and terrorism—the real go-to organization in Lebanon is its non-state/state partner, Hezbollah.

So what are the lessons learned for Lebanon? In their most elemental form, the events mentioned herein relate directly to Lebanon's management of its domestic matters, primarily the need to elect a new president. After all, that action could help clear a path toward restoring at least some semblance of political life in the country, including jump-starting some of its chief components, such as parliament and the cabinet. From Tehran's perspective, however, the situation in Lebanon is much less dire than most Lebanese believe. On the contrary, many issues beyond the longstanding presidential vacancy in Lebanon compete for Iran's urgent attention. Essentially, therefore, Tehran is taking full advantage of Lebanon, both on a day-to-day basis and in terms of its strategic value. After all, while Lebanon will eventually become a regional "mailbox" thanks to the border it shares with Israel, the country is unrivaled in its fulfillment of *Iranian* functions, such as being a capital for Arab-speaking Shia, serving as the *headquarters* for the Iranian-led war in Syria and acting as a *showcase* for the advancing *Pax Iranica*. Simply put, the election of a new Lebanese president is certainly *not* an Iranian emergency. Moreover, while electing a Maronite as Lebanon's president will certainly produce some advantages, the individuals and organizations that would typically reap those benefits must first negotiate them with Tehran—and then pay it an appropriate tithe....