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Once the Syrian War is Over, Qatar Could Become an Empire Again

Fresh back from Damascus, I was taking my coffee on the Beirut Corniche this week when a neat little Greek warship hove into sight. I picked up my French mandate binoculars – they must have travelled in and out of Beirut many times between 1922 and 1946 – and espied that “F465” was the frigate’s hull number, of which more later. It was stooging along the Lebanese coastline on an utterly useless task and was supposed – along with other naval vessels of the UN force – to be preventing Hezbollah from shipping weapons into Lebanon. That was the whole idea conceived by the UN back in 2006 after the latest Hezbollah-Israeli war which Hezbollah did not win and which Israel definitely lost – and which also finally did for Tony Blair the following year, we might remind ourselves – and which brought yet more international troops to Lebanon.

But for some strange reason, it was assumed back in 2006 that Iran was sending weapons to the Hezbollah across the Mediterranean, even though everyone in Lebanon knows that Iran is to the east of Lebanon and that its weapons have always reached Lebanon via Syria – which, since it is also to the east of Lebanon, makes sense. In any event, now that Syria is playing the civil war role that Lebanon played between 1975 and 1990 – with the Russians, the Americans, the Iranians, the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Iraqis, Afghan militiamen, Isis, Al-Nusrah, Kurds, Turks and Uncle Tom Cobbley all playing their various roles – it might surprise readers to know that it is to yet another country that the Syrians have recently been paying attention.

For some days ago, Bashar al-Assad held a private meeting of Syrian journalists in Damascus and informed them that relations had resumed – at a very low and humble level – between Qatar and Syria. They were not under any circumstances to quote him as saying this, nor to give any presidential credence to the story. But they could mention it in passing, stressing that this was not a resumption of relations, merely two nations maintaining contact. But it makes an intriguing story.

For years ago, nearer the start of the Syrian war, a clutch of nuns were released by their kidnapers in Syria through the joint intervention of Assad, the Emir of Qatar and General Abbas Ibrahim, the doyen of the Lebanese intelligence service. Indeed, the said nuns actually expressed their appreciation to both Assad and the Emir. Rumour had it that a lot of money was paid for their release – so much that, as I have reported before, they must have been the most expensive nuns in the world.

But it is Qatar which we should be thinking about. Qatar is great because it has oil and liquid gas and the al-Jazeera television channel. But it is alone, praying that the Saudis and the Emiratis don't invade it, a tiny peninsula containing a huge American military base but much abused by Donald Trump himself. Its royal families might be emperors but they have no empire; imagine Britain without India. But if Qatar was to rescue Syria when the war there is over – if its vast wealth could rebuild that ancient land – then Qatar would have an empire for its emperors. Not that Qatar would ever own Syria – far from it, Syrians would fight to stop that – but it would have, as we say in the Middle East, “considerable influence”. It would have power. And a power – with a Mediterranean coastline – that even Saudi Arabia doesn't have.

Is that what we are seeing the start of right now? Of course, the Russians would also be involved – and let's remember that the Saudi king was a guest of Putin not that long ago – and perhaps the Iranians, in a marginal way. The idea, by the way, that the Iranians dominate Syria is a myth, much repeated by Benjamin Netanyahu. Nor, I might add, are they terribly popular. On all my travels, I haven't seen an Iranian on the Syrian front lines for more than a year. Hezbollah, yes. And of course, the Syrian army would play a prominent part in the rebuilding of Syria. If Assad survives – and I've yet to meet anyone in Syria who thinks otherwise – then the army will survive.

Not many weeks ago, Syrian television showed troops, tanks, transporters and trucks heading south for the final battle at eastern Ghouta. It was assumed that the purpose was to frighten the remaining Islamists in Ghouta. But the real reason was quite different. The army wanted to find out how quickly it could move 25,000 troops from Aleppo and the

north to Damascus and the south. It took just 48 hours. In other words, this is not just a fighting army which has survived. It is a mobile one. Which brings us to another little point that bothers Syria.

Along its border with Israeli-occupied Golan, there are a variety of militias – some of them Islamists – who have a marginally good relationship with Israel. The Israelis have even taken some of their wounded to Israeli hospitals. The Israelis have never bombed them. They have only bombed the Syrians and the Iranians and Hezbollah. So what, if the war ended, would the Israelis do with this little cul-de sac below Golan? Watch Assad's soldiers take it back? Or try to set up a Syrian version of the occupation zone which Israel controlled in southern Lebanon from 1982 till 2000?

In other words, would Israel try to take some Syrian territory in the aftermath of the war – and claim that it was necessary to do so to keep the Iranians, the mythic Persian hordes, from the Israeli border? Now there's a thought, albeit that the wiser generals in the Israeli army would not wish to take on the most ruthless and battle-hardened army in the Middle East – which is the Syrian army.

An interesting thought to ponder as I finished my coffee on the Beirut Corniche this week and padded to my office to look up the name of Greece's frigate in the Mediterranean. Hull Number F465, it transpires, is a ship named "Themistocles". So that was the chap I was looking at. Ancient Athenian. Conqueror of the Persians, wasn't he?