

RELEASE IN PART
B5,B6

From: Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>
Sent: Friday, July 13, 2012 3:32 AM
To: H
Subject: Fw: Inside Syria: debrief of NBC's Richard Engel

Fyi

From: Jones, Beth E
Sent: Friday, July 13, 2012 02:28 AM
To: Nuland, Victoria J; Sullivan, Jacob J; Burns, William J; Sherman, Wendy R
Cc: Zeya, Uzra S; Lakhdhir, Kamala S; Sawyer, Julie L
Subject: Inside Syria: debrief of NBC's Richard Engel

Robert Ford got this very interesting report on the FSA atmosphere in northern Syria -- see quick debrief below.

From: Ford, Robert S
Sent: Thursday, July 12, 2012 06:57 PM
To: Jones, Beth E; Dibble, Elizabeth L
Cc: Hajjar Chemali, Hagar <[REDACTED]>; NEA-Syria-DL; Tripp, William H; Rees, Bradley L; Hof, Frederic C; simon, steven N
Subject: quick debrief - NBC's Richard Engel

B6

My old friend from Iraq, Rich Engel, called to debrief me on his 8 day trip inside northern Syria. He came out via Turkey on Saturday. For those who don't know him, Richard is pretty experienced in the Middle East. He spent lots of time in Iraq, often in places the Embassy security would never allow me to go.

Note: up front made clear I would say nothing in any way for any kind of attribution for TV, period. He readily agreed. We are old friends dating back to 2003.

- Border crossing near Hatay was very easy, very open. Lots of people going back and forth. Turks observed, did nothing. Mostly foot traffic but trucks could have passed. When I exclaimed that I wish he had taken me with him he shot back "it would be easy ! We can just go !"
- Per Engel, morale very high among FSA -- they sense they are winning.
- Syrian forces staying in their bases, occasionally shooting outside the walls to show they exist. Not patrolling. Not in control of villages/towns. Just their camps. Engel said he watched a base one night from a nearby home's rooftop in village of Marjiyan. Occasionally army fired outside, but that was all.
- Movement around was easy, with FSA flags and FSA marked vehicles.
- Engel claimed to have seen numerous new defectors each day of his visit.
- FSA not particularly well armed -- ammo short. Shortage of armor piercing weapons. (RF Comment: how then are they winning ? Is Syrian army so weak ?)

- Per Engel, FSA getting more organized – command structure. And they hate the FSA types outside (Riad al-Asad – stealing, they think), and they don't like the political oppositionists on the outside either.
- He too had heard of serious stoppage of arms over border from Turkey – thought it was true. FSA official inside with whom he spoke today said in last day it has improved. Not clear why Turks held it up. Per Engel, some speculation there was an article in the Guardian that embarrassed the Turks (???)
- Discussion he heard on the inside that towns would elect local councils, each council elect one rep to a provincial assembly and each province sending several reps to a national council, sort of like Afghanistan loya jirgha, he said. He claimed that they are starting to think about how to manage local government post-Asad, but they want their own structures, not something imposed from post-Asad govt in Damascus.
- He anticipates there will be retaliation against Alawis. Sooner the fighting ends, the fewer Alawis killed in revenge. (note: experienced journalist Nir Rosen says same thing.) Engel speculated that there could be demands to each Alawi community to turn over particular hated individuals and if those communities hesitate, massacres would ensue.
- FSA not so hostile to Christians – Engels speculated they would not suffer retaliation like Alawis.

Engel thought the regime failing fast – wasn't sure it would last more than a couple more months.

I may sit with him next week. He's also to join our focus group to get advice on how to help Syrian media sector prepare for post-Asad period.

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